

## *Three Lives Three Worlds ~ Jasmine's Fate*

### *Zi Lan & Yan Zhi Fanfiction Vol 1*

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#### *Author's Note*

When the drama Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms concluded, Yan Zhi and Zi Lan's ending was the least satisfying of all the couples in the drama. Fanfiction came along to give closure to the audience that was left unsatisfied with the outcome. I started Zi Lan and Yan Zhi's continuation story as part of the additional couples within Mo Yuan and Shao Wan's fic on PotUP.

Who knew that after several months, their story would take a life of its own, and their journey would become far different from what I first started writing as their reunion. This story has evolved to become their second life. I am continuing their third life, the 2nd volume of their journey, on The Wolves of Mistwood. Here, I have compiled their chapters from Volume 1 of the Mo Yuan and Shao Wan fic into pdf form for your convenience.

## *Chapter 30 ~ Just a bit longer...*

Zhi Lan knew his cultivation was not at all what it used to be, but his martial arts, his speed and his stamina had all improved over hundreds of years of intensive training with the God of War himself. Shifu did not take his training lightly, for which he was forever grateful - in fact, since Zhi Lan's shameful return to the school, Shifu had become much more demanding. To regain his cultivation, he had to work much harder than before. He would not let himself be a liability to his master and his seniors.

Now, he thanked his bloody fortune that he had devoted himself to his training so much, because they were surrounded by assassins without any backup whatsoever.

It was a dire situation, but he would not fail. Shifu had taught him many things over the years, but the most important lesson was to anticipate your opponent's next move. Cultivation mattered, but strategic maneuver played an even bigger role in close contact battles.

Dodging another opponent's sword near his neck, Zhi Lan managed to stab him in the chest. Shedding blood may not be the Kunlun way, but he had no real choice in the matter - his instinct to protect exceeded his need to preserve life. Seven down... three more to go. He could feel the growing pain from their dark magic that he had not managed to dodge moments before. He took a quick glance behind him: he had to keep fighting for the ones he cared for if it cost him his last strength, his life even.

With renewed spirit, Zhi Lan faced the remaining black clad assassins. Were they demons? Ghosts? He wasn't sure. All he knew was they used sinister, dark magic and they were very good. Still, he managed to surprise his opponents by cloud jumping behind them and quickly slashing the closest assassin on his back. Once the group turned around, he somersaulted behind them again, spun to their left and slit the throat of another. He parried one assassin's weapon with his sword, near his face. Lowering himself, he swung his right leg against his opponent's, knocking him to the ground. Once he was on the floor, Zhi Lan stabbed the abdomen of the last assassin. He watched as life drained out of him. It was done. Despite the bloodbath, Zhi Lan couldn't help but feel relieved.

Breathing heavily and sweating profusely, he removed his bloody sword from the corpse. Suddenly feeling faint, Zhi Lan fell to his knees, barely holding himself up with the tip of his

sword. His adrenaline quickly subsided now that the threat was gone, and the pain from the dark magic flared up.

At least, Yan Zhi was safe. Did she look worried? The child in her arms was still crying. He realized he needed to take them to safety, quickly, before more assassins had a chance to gather. He tried to clear his head by shaking it as he pulled himself up, but darkness took over....and everything went black.

*\* Flashback \**

Just a bit longer...

Like any other night after he'd started to live in the mortal realm to monitor the Ghost Princess's movements, Zhi Lan would finish his shift and come over for a late, light dinner at her restaurant. Truth was, he wanted to be around, so he could keep unruly customers away.

It didn't happen often, but there were occasions he had to intervene. She never used her immortal powers and neither did she speak up, no matter how bad a situation she got into. He couldn't stand back and let her be taken advantage of, even though a part of him knew he should test and mistrust her. The mere thought of a man getting near her that way made his blood boil. Each time when he had to rescue her from drunken perverts, she would look at him with those wide doe eyes of hers. Si Yin and he had often joked about mortal realm heroes in white that saved the ladies, but he never thought that it would be that satisfying to do it himself.

Zhi Lan watched her serving the last customer. He ate here at night, but during the day, he was never far either. He used his magic to make sure he would be assigned near her



restaurant. He loved her cooking, despite the strange flavors she used and despite some mishaps in the kitchen. Her rice buns were horrible - dry and hard to swallow. He had to drink lots of tea between bites to force them down. And yet, he had no heart to tell her they were basically inedible. He thought it would make her sad.

When she came over to his table to pick up the dishes, she was in her alluring blue again, with her lovely braids hanging over her shoulders. He wondered what she would look like without her braids. What he would give to take them apart and run his fingers through her hair, strand by strand.

What was wrong with him? His thoughts were going to forbidden places. Ghosts and Celestials were mortal enemies, a fact that could never be changed, even with peace treaties and the likes. He had forgotten himself in the moment. Could it be her smile, or her innocent eyes? Or those numerous times she took care of those less fortunate? She continued to baffle him every day with her actions. How could a Ghost Princess be so kind and warmhearted? In the two years he had watched her, the worst she had ever done was kill a chicken for dinner. And even then, she had hesitated, not wanting to take a life.

Zhi Lan sighed as he got up. Out of habit, he helped her place the chairs upside down over the tables, so she could sweep. He had never seen anyone work so hard. He knew her brother was the Ghost King. What made her run away? Why did she pretend to be mute? She was an enigma he could not solve.

He knew he should move on, his mission was to find Si Yin and Shifu. She was the only lead he had at the moment. However, despite two years of watching her every move, there were no concrete signs she knew anything. How could he continue to stay here? Should he make her talk? But he could not bring himself to ask her, because he feared they would not be able to go back to how things had been. Maybe until Si Yin would appear? Was it possible to stay with her, just a little longer?

Crash! Yan Zhi had dropped the plates.

Zhi Lan exploded in rage. The last customer had turned into another pervert and had grabbed her wrist. Enough! With a quick sweep, he pulled her close to him, his arms draped over her shoulders possessively.

“Customer, please keep your dirty hands to yourself and get out of here now!” Zhi Lan ordered.

“What did you say? How dare you!” the drunken man yelled back.

“I’m a constable and she is my wife, so please respectfully get out now before I-”

“I...I apologize, I had too much to drink. I did not know she’s your wife!” Clearly intimidated, the man bowed and ran off into the night.

Zhi Lan felt proud of himself for a moment until he felt her shaking in his arms. Was she scared? He looked at her and her laughing face caught him by surprise.

She gestured with her hands. Pointing at the table and the direction of the man who ran away without paying for his drinks.

“Yes, I am aware of that.”

She gestured again, with her palm open, asking for money. Teasing, of course.

He laughed, then leaned his head towards her, “I can stay the night to help you clean,” he whispered.

She turned to look at him, her eyes wide. Zhi Lan suddenly became aware of how close she was. He had intended to tease her back, but he found himself held hostage by her gaze. Had he gone too far? His arm still draped around her shoulder, his chest partially against her back, he could sense her heart racing, just like his own. Her lips parted slightly. Those luscious lips of hers, close and inviting. How sinful would it be for him to press his on hers and enjoy them to his heart's content?

Her hand pushed lightly against his hand on her shoulder. Was he too close? He let go of her. Both flustered from their unexpected intimacy, they could not look at each other. She made some hand gesture he couldn’t understand before she ran straight to the kitchen. Zhi Lan swallowed, sighed and went back to stacking the chairs over the table. He continued to ask himself. Is it possible... just a little longer....?

## Chapter 30.5 ~Rice Buns...



“En Gong, you’re back, you’re back!” Qiao Er ran towards her Savior, almost stumbling in her haste. She grabbed the front of his robe and looked up at him with admiration.

He quickly put a finger on her lips, hunched down to her level and whispered: “Shhhhh.... lower your voice! Where is your mom?”

Oh, right. Quickly, Qiao Er lowered her own voice too. She had forgotten this was a game and mommy were not allowed to know when he was here. “She is preparing food inside,” she whispered back.

“Do you have them?” he asked.

“Yes! Do you have mine?” She was excited, and her tummy growled in anticipation.

“Of course.” He pulled out a small paper package. The delicious smell of the red bean buns she loved so much wafted through the air.

“Thank you, En Gong! I will get mother’s rice buns for you.” She ran to the front gate and brought back a package that she had hidden there.

“Good girl,” He fondly patted her head and took the package of rice buns from her hands.

Qiao Er did not understand why En Gong looked so happy when he took the rice buns. “En Gong?”

“Yes, little one.”

“What do you do with mom’s rice bun?” She was curious about this. They had been exchanging buns for months now. He must have a whole mountain of them in his home.

“Eat them, of course,” he answered matter-of-factly.

She couldn't believe this. “You eat them?”

He lightly pinched her cheek. “Yes, I love them very much.”

He must be joking. “You really eat them?”

He laughed. “You don't like your mom's rice buns?”

Qiao Er pulled a face and shook her head. She always avoided eating her mom's rice buns because they were so hard to eat. “They're very dry,” she declared.

“Drink tea with them,” he suggested.

“But they're really, really dry,” she emphasized the dryness by nodding her head.

His voice softened as he replied, “you are right. They are really, really...dry. But I still love eating them.”

Qiao Er stared at him. He did not seem to make fun of her? He must really like dry food then. Maybe Qiao Er could learn to make dry rice buns for En Gong when she was older, she thought. She would really like that.

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*\*\* 6 months ago, in the mortal realm \*\**

“You have to leave,” Yan Zhi's voice was flat and emotionless.

They stood outside her little skew-whiff house in the bamboo forest. Qiao Er was still sleeping inside - thankfully. It would have broken his heart to have her witness this confrontation. She called him Savior, En Gong, and he had grown extremely fond of her in a very short time. She was such a good, happy child, despite all the difficulties she had experienced in her short life.

It had taken him a full week to recover from the injury he had sustained when battling the assassins. To his great embarrassment, he had fainted in front of Yan Zhi and the little one. The Ghost Princess had moved him to the hut, had taken care of his wounds and made sure he was fed properly. And yet, she had hardly spoken a word beyond the bare necessities. What she told him repeatedly was to focus on his recovery, clearly wanting him gone and out of her house as fast as possible. He had complied with her wish, his heart aching, and had gotten better as fast as he could.

Now that he was healed, she was kicking him out. He had just suggested they should move to a safer location, but that was clearly not her intention.

“I can protect you and Qiao Er. You’re near Kunlun.”

“We don’t need your protection, I already placed a shield.”

Feeling a mix of panic and desperation, he tried to reason with her. “That won’t be enough! Assassins are after you! Your powers are limited here. Come to Kunlun, they can’t get to you and Qiao Er there.”

“No,” She shook her head, “I will tell you one last time, we don’t need protection, and most of all not from you.”

With a sinking feeling, he echoed “from me?”

“I do not want to owe you more debts. I want nothing more to do with you.”

“You never owed me,” he walked towards her, taking his chances, but she backed away, shaking her head.

“Yan Zhi, please, I only want to assure your safety,” he said anxiously.

Her eyes narrowed. “Why were you there when the assassins attacked?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“See me?” she gave a cynical laugh. “Just like that? When you shunned us all this time?”

He froze at her words. He wanted to tell her the truth, but he could not bring herself to tell her about the Sea of Innocence and his vow to spend his lifetime there. It sounded so foolish, so definite. Before he could come up with a good answer, she spoke again.

“That day at Kunlun... do you remember?”

How could he forget the day he had pushed her away? “Yes, like yesterday...” he answered, dreading her reply.

Her gaze held him hostage. “So, you remember what you said to me?”

He tried to look away, but he couldn't. He forced himself to answer despite the lump in his throat. “I told you to never come look for me again.”

“Yes. And why did you say that to me back then?” She stared at him so intently, he felt she was searching his soul.

“Because I wanted you to forget me.” Zhi Lan only gave her the half-truth, coward that he was.

But Yan Zhi was not fooled. She shook her head. “No, it was because you couldn't accept me.” She turned away from him, but he pulled her into his arms, desperately hugging her from behind, willing her to remember how they once were.

“Yan Zhi,” he begged.

She didn't even struggle, but her voice was deadly calm, with an edge of steel. “Please leave.”

Tears stung his eyes, he hugged her harder. “Yan Zhi, let me stay, please,” he begged.

“Let go of me.”

Now she pushed his arms away and turned to face him. She closed her eyes briefly and there was anguish in her voice when she spoke again. “I've shed enough tears over the years because of you. I tried to justify your decision for a long time. But I realized that you only got joy from protecting a vulnerable woman, but never wanted the true me.”

He grabbed her shoulders, shaking his head furiously. “That's not true...Yan Zhi...I..”

“Our clans will forever be enemies. While I knew that, it didn’t matter to me back then.”

“I was wrong, please let me...”

She cut him off. “You’re not wrong, we were never meant to be. You made me see that.”

Yan Zhi pushed his hands from her shoulders and took several steps back.

Her eyes glittered with unshed tears. “Fate may have brought us together, but it was you who broke us apart. Now please leave us be. I don’t want to see you again.”

And he left, hanging his head in misery and shame. He couldn’t bare to see her cry. Tears that were caused by him, because of his prejudice, his code, his stubbornness, and most of all... his selfishness.

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*\*\* Present day, in the mortal realm... \*\**

Zhi Lan watched from behind the bamboo as Qiao Er ran back into the house to her mom. It had been 6 months since the attack. Even though there had been no signs of more assassins, he felt he had to stay nearby, watching over Yan Zhi and Qiao Er from a distance, since Yan Zhi had been abundantly clear she had no wish to ever see him again. He cursed the lack of cultivation that made him basically blind to the presence of others, but at times, the bamboo forest grew suddenly quiet, eerily quiet. It was like nature stopped breathing for a time and he could not shake a feeling of impending danger.

For reasons he could only guess, Yan Zhi chose to stay in the mortal realm near Kunlun, where her powers were limited, instead of near the Ghost Realms border. It was likely that she wanted nothing to do with her tribe anymore, now that all her loved ones except for her niece were gone. Her loneliness made him very sad.

After Si Yin’s lecture that night at the festival, he had started to wonder about second chances. Or third, in his case, since he had wasted his second when he had cut off his relationship with Yan Zhi that time at Kunlun. But he dared not hope. Cowardly, he was about to resign to his eternal torment again, when Shifu had brought back their Shimu in his arms. A union

between a Demon and a Celestial was by no means easier than one between a Ghost and a Celestial, but Shifu did not hesitate for a second to enter the Demon Realm when she needed him, even if his actions could ignite a war, even if it meant getting badly hurt.

How could Zhi Lan study under his master for millennia and not understand this earlier? The God of War did not care about what others thought of him, whether they were Celestial, Demon, Fox or Ghost. He did what he considered right and would always protect those he held dear with his own life. He had brought him back from the Sea of Innocence because it did not matter to him that his own disciple had protected the daughter and granddaughter of his mortal enemy. But it mattered to him that his disciple had helped a child in need. He told him that many times, but Zhi Lan had not listened to his wisdom.

When the search party was at the gates of Kunlun, he had a vision of Yan Zhi at that very spot, the moment she walked out of his life. What a fool he had been. He left his search party soon after, making an excuse that he had urgent business to attend to. It was urgent: He had to see her again. He had to make this right.

He had spent months searching for her in the mortal realms and when fate was charitable enough to lead him to her, he had felt exhilarated. But he did not have the courage to approach her. So he had just watched her for days, her and her niece. How they went about their daily lives, quiet lives, modest lives. Princesses of the Ghost Tribe, living like mortals.

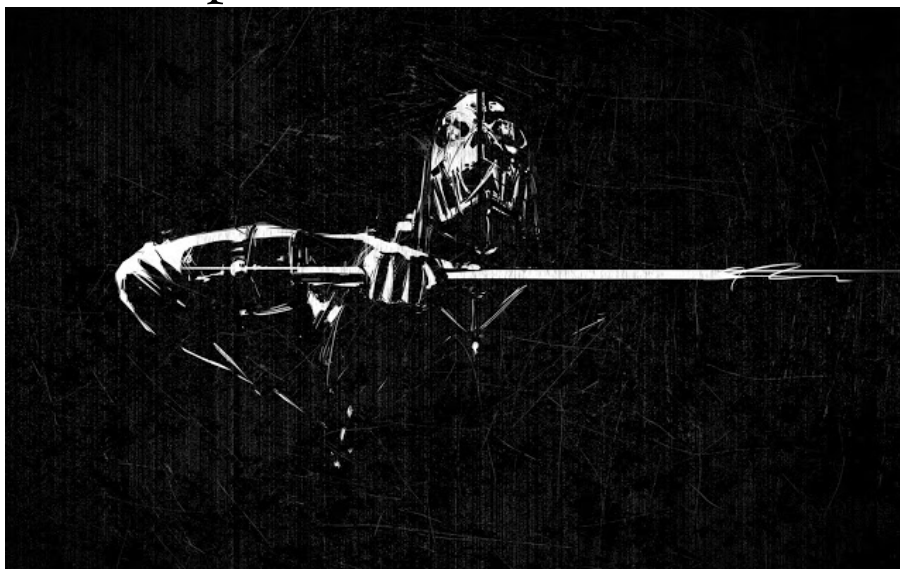
On day four, the assassins had attacked - and he was forced to make his presence known.

Now, he had to stay hidden again to continue to protect Yan Zhi and Qiao Er, because his presence no longer brought her joy, only misery. He had broken her heart with his foolishness. Yan Zhi and her niece were alone in this world, with nobody to care for them.

Back then, Zhi Lan had thought he was protecting her, but no.... he had just protected himself. He had not loved her as she deserved. He had not accepted her for who she was. He knew he didn't have the right to regain her trust, much as he tried. But his feelings were no longer the priority. Their safety was much more important than the torment he inflicted upon himself. Following her wish, he would continue to watch over her from the shadows.

Zhi Lan had realized: It was not fate that made him lose her that day, but his own doing. The paths he took, the steps he made, the words he spoke. One could continue to cowardly blame fate, but it was man's actions that sealed his destiny.

## *Chapter 33 ~ Shattered Mirror*



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As he moved closer to the mountain, Die Feng could feel waves of malevolent energy coming from the forest ahead. The Yellow Demon Princess had told him to wait, but he felt in his bones that Zi Lan was in danger, there was no time to spare.

Dread he hadn't felt in years had resurfaced the moment he saw the shattered mirror. As First disciple of Kunlun, it was his responsibility to look after his juniors. He had failed to watch over 9th and 17th when they were captured by the Ghost King. This had ignited the Ghost War, which had led not only to the death of 9th junior, but also to scattering of Shifu's soul. Though he had made the effort to search for Shifu and Si Yin all those years, it was 17th who had borne the heavy burden of bringing Shifu back to them.

Now he had failed those who depended upon him again. Although he knew Zi Lan had not been himself ever since coming back to Kunlun, and his intensive training had become a distraction to the point of obsession, Die Feng had not taken the time to look further into the matter like a good leader would have. Because he had not, his junior was now facing grave danger alone.

Silently praying it was not too late, Die Feng rushed ahead. He saw immediately that 16th was alive when he arrived - though surrounded by a multitude of black clad, masked assassins.

Heart racing, Die Feng cloud jumped between three of them and 16th, just in time to parry the deathly blow away from his junior, high kick them to the ground and then blast them away with his magic. This bought them some time.

“Senior?” 16th coughed, “I-”.

“16th, are you alright?” Die Feng asked. But 16th was not, as he saw immediately - he had sustained injuries, his shoulder and back were slashed and bloody and he was breathing heavily.

Nodding, 16th said, “I am fine, don't worry - it's not me they're after, the targets are the Ghost Princess and her child! Please help me to protect them!”

Although Die Feng had a lot of battle experience, assassins were a league of their own. They tended to fight dirty and were often specifically trained to reach their mission goal upon cost of their own lives, which made them far more dangerous than the normal soldier. Nearby, the Ghost Princess was fending off a new attack with her bow and arrows, a small, blindfolded child strapped to her back. Without another word, the two Kunlun disciples raced to her aide and thrust their swords into the assassins backs and then moved to either side of her. They were immediately surrounded by twenty men.

“I have killed a good amount already,” 16th informed Die Feng, and pointed his chin in the direction of some black-clad bodies, “but new ones keep appearing out of thin air!”

They were too vulnerable, Die Feng realized. The sheer number of the opponents was a big problem. He would have to weaken them, now, to create an opening for 16th and his charge to retreat. “Shield them,” he ordered 16th, “stay put!”

Die Feng cloud jumped outside the circle of assassins, taking down two from behind, clashing swords with a third. Die Feng turned to his side, grabbed the opponent's arm with his right hand, and hit his neck with his left elbow, knocking him out. Sensing attackers behind him, he quickly bent forward, narrowly avoiding the blades that were thrust at him, then backflipped, kicked the assailant's shins and slashed their chests upon his landing. He was drawing enough attention to himself to slowly move the assassins away, just enough for that opening 16th and the Ghost Princess needed.

The brothers made eye contact and 16th started to usher the Ghost Princess away, hacking at the enemy while retreating. Die Feng kept attacking the assassins from behind, feeling increasingly uneasy. Unlike the dark magic puppets from the Ghost realm they had fought before, who had been devoid of any emotions, these assassins were filled with unsettling blood lust. Their aura was expertly hidden, so it was impossible to say what tribe they came from, but even in the moment of their deaths, they wanted more. They had no fear whatsoever, the perfect killing tools.

Together, the two brothers managed to cut down ten more assassins, and Die Feng allowed himself to hope for the first time since his arrival that they would make it out alive, when ten additional assassins manifested in front of 16th and the Princess. She shot arrows at them, while 16th used his swords to fend them off - however, when he kicked away the assassin in front, another assassin threw a dagger at his leg from behind, hitting him square in the calf. Zhi Lan fell to the ground with a shout of pain. Before another assassin could pierce him with his sword, an arrow, delivered by the Ghost Princess, hit him in his chest and threw him backwards.

“Zi Lan!” the Ghost Princess called out and wanted to rush towards 16th, but her path was blocked by another black-clad warrior. She shot an arrow, but he parried it away; giving her the opportunity to jump forward, kick away the sword in his hand, then stab him in the chest with another arrow. She would soon be out of arrows entirely, Die Feng noticed.

The Ghost Princess ran to 16th's side to shield him and the assassins closed in on them again immediately. Panic crept up on Die Feng. No....he wouldn't allow himself any weakness. Die Feng cloud jumped in front of his junior, stabbing, slashing, killing. And yet, they were surrounded again, and 16th was heavily injured.

“16th, get up!” Die Feng ordered, “we need to get out of here.”

16th shook his head, “I cannot. Leave me, take them to safety.”

“No!” Both Die Feng and the Ghost Princess shouted.

“Senior, you have no choice, leave me!”

“Kunlun disciples do not leave anyone behind.”

Die Feng threw his sword up, like Shifu had taught him, and it multiplied into four - he had never before managed more than three in less desperate situations. The swords spun in the air, creating a strong wind. Die Feng commanded them against the assassins, killing several instantly. But that too wasn't enough, other assassins blocked and one attacked Die Feng, who had no time to summon his sword back to him. Luckily, he managed to dodge the opponent's sword, then grabbed his wrist and shoulder and smashed him to the ground. Now calling back his sword, Die Feng stabbed his opponent in the chest. Sensing danger from behind, Die Feng pulled the blade out, and spun around just in time to embed the blade into another assassin's abdomen.

"Senior! Take them to safety, please!!" 16th begged.

"16th, we are going to get out of this together," he told him, "I promise."

He would not bury another junior. Not ever again.

At that moment, two assassins came flying from above. Die Feng kicked the ground to propel himself up and managed to clash sword with one - but the second flew right past him. Seeing his own way barred by several opponents, he could only helplessly watch as 16th pulled the reluctant Ghost Princess behind him to await the inevitable. All was lost. They would die here. He had failed again. He had never imagined his death to be so pointless and unheroic.

Die Feng was about to launch forward for a last, desperate attack when suddenly, the assassin above 16th was pulled away by a chain whip around his waist and thrown into a group of assassins down below.

The Yellow Demon Princess had arrived.

"Die Feng!" she called out when she landed on her feet, sounding ... upset? Two assassins swung their swords at her, but she backflipped away from their blades.

"Princess!" Die Feng never thought the day would come he would be so delighted to see her unannounced arrival.

She whipped the chain around another assassin's neck, pulled him towards her, and kicked him away. "Didn't I tell you to wait," she accused him. Yes, she was indeed angry.

Die Feng dodged an attack, spun around, and slashed another opponent on his back. "Princess, my apologies, but could we talk later?" he asked.

"You left without me," she said as she swung the blade of her chain whip into an assassin's neck, the chain glowing white. When she pulled her weapon back, the assassin flipped forward and was instantly dead.

Die Feng kicked the opponent behind him and impaled his blade into the one in front. "This is not the best time to debate about my failure to bring you along," he tried to reason.

Four assassins thought they could attack her all at once, but the Demon Princess spun her body upwards, her chain whip propelling around her. Her whip glowing again upon her landing, she looked at Die Feng and pouted: "I was worried."

"It was not my intention to make you worry, Princess." Die Feng dodged two more blows, before he punched the assassin in the face, knocking him out.

She swung her chain whip behind her and it wrapped around another assassin's neck. "Stop calling me Princess! I have a name, and it's Li Ying!"

Pulling on her chain, she lifted the assassin over her head and slammed him into the ground in front of her, sending a wave of unprecedented white energy in all directions, knocking back the assassins in close proximity.

Die Feng froze, speechless. Equally the assassins: There was a moment of indecision when all of them froze and looked at each other... before they all cloud jumped away. By some silent magical command, all the bodies around them dissolved, including all the weapons, leaving no trace or clue.

There was no time to ponder this hasty retreat of a force that had had the upper hand. 16th was heavily injured, he might even lose the command of his leg if they did not head back to Kunlun and got the right treatment. Die Feng rushed towards 16th, but a fuming Yellow Demon Princess blocked his way.

"Zi Lan is injured," he informed her with a scowl, "he needs my immediate assistance."

He must have looked frightful or worried, because her anger quickly diminished. "Oh." She stepped aside to let him pass and followed him.

The Ghost Princess had tied a handkerchief around 16th's leg wound after stopping the bleeding with her magic. 16th face was white as a sheet - he had lost a lot of blood.

"I'm alright," he claimed as he removed the white blindfold from the child's face on Yan Zhi's back with magic.

"En Gong," the little girl cried. She tried to reach for him.

"You're safe now little one, don't cry," he wiped away the child's tears with shaking hands and looked at the Ghost Princess. "Please, I beg you, come to Kunlun with us, you too are wounded. We will protect you."

They looked at each other in silence. The Ghost Princess closed her eyes briefly, and finally nodded, bringing relief to 16th's face.

"16th, how are your injuries?" Die Feng asked, but he got jabbed in the stomach by the Yellow Demon Princess. He looked at her perplexed, was she still mad?

She pulled at his arm, lowering his ears to her lips. "They're having a moment," she whispered.

"Moment?" Die Feng asked in confusion.

"I'm alright, Senior." 16th dragged himself up with support of his sword and the assistance of the Ghost Princess, who was bleeding herself from a wound at her arm. "Let's return immediately, we don't know when the next party will arrive."

"Tell me everything."

Zi Lan did. Unknown assassins had kept attacking the last living descendants of Qing Cang's royal bloodline. For months, 16th had helped to fend off their attacks in the mortal realm. But the number of assassins had increased each time and when they had ambushed them at the teahouse, they had been completely outnumbered. So they had run to the forest.

Listening to 16th, Die Feng realized this had to be reported to Shifu immediately. Whoever was behind it, this attempt to assassinate the royal descendants of the Ghost Clan was most likely connected to the impending war Shifu was preparing for.

“Let’s retreat,” he said, “the God of War needs to know about this.”

“I’ve heard so many stories, I’ve always wanted to see Kunlun! And I can’t wait to see the Demon High Goddess again, I admire her so!” The Yellow Demon Princess excitedly announced.

Die Feng felt a new sort of panic rise. Impending war or not, he still had his own trial to deal with. The smiling Demon Princess had just invited herself to Kunlun - and they owed her multiple life-debts. He dreaded to find out how Shifu would take the news.

## *Chapter 37 ~ Lucid Dream*

NSFW

In his dream-like state, he found himself engulfed by the blazing horrors of hell. The fire in his body wouldn't subside, he could not find relief from this raging torment. He couldn't get away, powerless to move, powerless to escape. Unable to wake himself, he was condemned to endure his physical torment. Why could he not find relief? Was he dead, in the underworld? No, he realized, this was a dream - one of those that could be controlled.

It was possible to steer the mind within dreams, once one was aware of being in one. It was just like meditation and a good method of cultivation, he had learned throughout the years, to escape the construct of unpredictability, to command one's subconscious. So he concentrated, hard.... attempting to get away from the unbearable heat that threatened to engulf him.

Relief came when he forced his thoughts to more pleasant things. His body was being cooled by chill, soothing touches. But they came and went, unpredictable. He tried to concentrate harder, to make the cool relief linger. His inflamed body was still much too hot from within. He craved more of the caress, the comfort, the soothing tranquility his unconscious mind had created.

She appeared before him then, the only person who was able to sooth all his longing, his frustration, his tormented heartache. Her skin glowed radiantly, her hair flowed around her shoulders, her eyes were as dark as the night. So beautiful, he thought, no one compared to her, she, his enchantress, was the fairest of the realms. How lucky he was to conjure *her* image to sooth his torment.

He felt her hands brush over his face, his throat, and his chest, soothing his body. But though her exquisite touch chilled his burning flesh on the surface, it ignited another fire within him. Instead of finding relief, his body grew hotter with unfulfilled cravings. He yearned to touch her himself - maybe it would ease his pain? When he felt something cold brush against his lips, his instinct took over, overpowering his will. He captured her within his arms and rolled her beneath him. The feeling of soft womanly curves under his hard body was more than he would have thought possible to imagine. But he did, and she felt perfect against him.

She touched his chest lightly as he buried his face against the side of her throat. The familiar fragrance of jasmine filled his senses. He greedily breathed in the divine scent he had yearned



for, a fragrance he had caught a whiff of hundred of times before, but could never savor for long. Now, he could submerge himself in her heavenly scent. But it wasn't enough either - he wanted to taste her, to consume her. He traced his tongue along the side of her delicate neck and her chest arched as she gasped. Encouraged by her response, his lips ran over the lobes of her ear, nibbling the softness of her flesh, leaving him craving more of what her body had to offer.

As he continued to relish her slender neck, his hand slowly traveled from her waist upward until it reached the side of her breast. His thumb traced the edge, advancing slowly under the soft curves, until it reached the center of her chest. Pressing his thumb upward, he moved it in circular motion, up and down between the center of her mounds. She whimpered, and her body bucked up against his. Groaning, he

pressed back and bit the bottom of her chin, making her gasp and quiver as he continued to bite her neck, sucking on her delicate flesh.

His need to touch her bare skin became more irrepressible the more he tasted her. He wanted to feel more of her softness, he wanted to see her ravishing skin, now hidden beneath layers of silk, a barrier to his exploration. He allowed his other hand to reach for the strapping of her belt, to untie the knot, and slip it away from her waist. He started loosening her tight clothing that was an obstacle to his touch. He opened the first layer of her silk robe, then the second, exposing her transparent white undergarment underneath. When he reached for the straps on the side of the waist, he could hear her gasp. Delighted by her sound, he took his time as he pulled on the ribbon. Once, twice, the barrier was no more as he tugged at the collar of her undergarment, uncovering her pearl white slender shoulders. He traced his fingers over her delicate flesh, he caressed her shoulders to her neck, lower to her nape, then ran the back of his hand over her quivering chest.

She reached for him, pulling him down, enfolding him in her arms. Understanding her needs, he hungrily sucked on the exposed skin of her slender shoulders, delicate as they were, his greedy lips traveled from her nape to her chest, biting, licking, savoring her softness. Moving

lower, he realized another barrier was in his way. He tried to remove it, but it would not easily come off. Realizing what the obstacle was, he growled against her skin. However, nothing could stop him from devouring her.

He slipped his hand into her open robes, under her xin yi, behind her arched back, he searched for the strappings of her undergarments. But her soft silky skin distracted him from his mission. He found his hand caressing, playing, and stroking the velvet spine of her back, making her arch and squirm from his touch, her hands grasping his shoulders, until he found what he was seeking for. She jumped when he tugged at her straps, so he lifted himself up on his bent arm, looking into her eyes. Beautiful, passionate, unwavering eyes. Eyes that could enchant and take away his soul. The ones he could never look away from without feeling empty inside.

As their eyes locked, their breaths quickened. Steadily and patiently, he pulled the lower string of her knotted strap, making her quiver upon its release. Still holding her gaze, he reached for her second strap, but this time, her eyes closed, and her body began to flush with anticipation. Her jasmine fragrance filled the air around them, intoxicating his senses even more. Spellbound by her bewitching aroma, he momentarily lost track of his mission.

He came back to his senses when he felt her delicate hand caressing his cheek. He stared into her eyes and continued to pull away the delicate string that held the barrier to his gaze and touch in place. His hand shook as he slid his fingers to her back, touching the side of her xin yi - and paused. He realized he couldn't remove the barrier to her beautiful bosom. Her innocent eyes bore into him; not just yet, not like this. He needed more, much more.

He let go of her undergarment and turned away from her gaze. Patiently, he lowered his head and laid butterfly kisses on the edge of the silk barrier, causing her to squirm beneath him. He cupped her firm breast that was still covered; his hand squeezed and kneaded, and he was enjoying the sound of her moans and gasps, as his thumb encircled the hard nub under the thin layer of silk. Delighted to hear her cry his name, he now understood, even in his dreams, he wanted her body to be as desperate as his own. As much as he desired to possess her within his reverie, the need for her to beg for his touch, beg for his kisses, and beg for his embrace, overcame his subconscious control.

Invited by her moans, he slipped his hand into the opening of her robes. He cupped her buttocks. Unable to control his aching loins, he squeezed them, lifted himself up and pressed her core against his own. She cried out. Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she pressed her face against his neck and bit him, making him groan against her. She continued to bite and taste his neck, tracing her tongue to the front, following with her teeth.

He had wanted her to beg, but now it was his body doing the begging. The barrier of silk only added to the intensity of the moment. Before he could continue and take charge of his fantasy, he felt her rock against him. His body didn't need further invitation to move in response. Her arms held him as he continued to press and rub his inflamed budge against her hot damp core. Driven by instinct, her body writhed against his throbbing arousal, causing his body to shudder with unfulfilled desire to bury himself inside of her.

Pulling back slightly, he was ready to ravish her, but her undergarment had slipped, half revealing her bare breasts before his gaze, distracting him. With a shaking hand, he pressed over the soft tender curve of her breast, circling his thumb over the fragile peak under the silk fabric, until her nub hardened again. Without hesitation, he slipped away her undergarment, and pressed his lips to her pearl bright bosom, her body jolting beneath him.



She wildly pushed and pulled at his shoulders, moaning his name. Her desperation made him want to tease her more. Her breath caught when the tip of his tongue traced the circle around the edge of her pink nipple. He sucked, nibbled, and bit lightly on the edges, until she pulled his head to where she desired his attention the most. He caught her nipple with his lips, sucking it steadily, then releasing the rosy bud to blow a cool breeze on the damp breast. She gasped and sobbed until he took her nub into his mouth again, and she held his head tight against her bosom.

After he had given the same attention to her other breast, he continued to lick between her mounds. She pulled at his head and begged him to stop teasing her, begged him to be inside her, calling his name. Her cries made him want to devour what was offered before him. Who was he to deny her? Moving his body up, he watched her whimper for his touch. How beautiful, he thought.

Her face was flushed, her eyes were dazed, and her wet lips were inviting. He hadn't even tasted them yet, he realized. How callous of him not to savor them when it was all he dreamed of for years. One should not ravish a lady without tasting her sweet nectar first. His palm cupped her face, while his thumb brushed over her quivering luscious lips. He lightly rubbed his nose against hers, taking his time to inhale the aroma of her burning desire. His heart elated with pounding excitement, he was finally going to taste the rosy petals he had longed for. He could not wait any longer...eyes closed...his lips moved over hers...

"16th, I heard from our seniors you were half beaten to death because of your Princess?"

Zi Lan wanted to growl at the sound of 17th's voice and her untimely entrance into his subconsciousness. Why did 17th have to wake him up from a most delicious vivid dream?

"How are things with her? How bad is your injury? Are you really half dead as they said?"

He was so close to her lips he could almost taste it. Her fragrance still enraptured his mind, unfazed by the disturbance of reality... but when he opened his eyes.... she was still before him. His lips were still hovering above hers, barely touching. Pulling back, he saw Yan Zhi's eyes no longer filled with passion, but fright.

How was this possible? Why hadn't he woken up? No... this couldn't be real...

“My apologies,” he heard 17th continue ruefully, “I should’ve knocked. Please continue, I will make myself scarce.”

Si Yin’s words sent a splash of chilling cold water over his inflamed body. What had he done? How could he allow himself to cross such line? He had taken liberties with Yan Zhi. Zi Lan wanted nothing more than to wake up from his nightmare. He wanted to disappear, to die, anything to take him away from the reality before him.

“Yan Zhi, I...,” he couldn’t have finished because Yan Zhi pushed him off her so hard, his head and body slammed into the wall. The impact made him see stars and things went black... again.

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Before Bai Qian could leave the room, as was advised in situations such as these, the Ghost Princess had already pushed Zi Lan off herself. Yan Zhi hurriedly brought her disheveled clothes in order and ran passed Bai Qian in such haste, she was afraid the Ghost Princess might trip. Once the door slammed shut behind her, the only sound to be heard was 16th’s groaning. He had hit his head against the wall quite forcefully.

Her seniors had relayed Zi Lan’s condition to Bai Qian on her way to his chambers. 16th had been in such a dire state upon his arrival at Kunlun, they had feared they might lose him. His injuries were substantial, and he had lost a lot of blood. But thanks to 2nd’s elixirs and the hundreds of years of intensive training with Shifu, he had recovered much quicker than they had anticipated. Now, he was no longer near death’s door, be it through sheer stubbornness or desperation. Bai Qian was not surprised: she knew that 16th would not allow his weakness to keep him from protecting those he cared for, and he would not allow himself to die unless he was sure they were safe. Whether it was to protect Kunlun or a damsel in distress, he would lay his life down without hesitation.

Speaking of damsels, now that Zi Lan’s love interest had left, there was no point in Bai Qian leaving as well. She had come to check on 16th’s condition and check she would - besides, there seemed to be much for them to talk about, not least that scandalous demon woman next to Shifu. So, without further ado, Bai Qian sat down at the sitting table and poured herself some tea, watching her 16th senior sitting against the stone wall of his bed, looking dazed and shocked. After she had finished her 1st cup of tea, she decided to break the silence.

"I thought you were injured... heavily," she smiled at him.

"I am," he answered grudgingly, not meeting her eyes.

Pouring herself another cup of tea, she took a sip, then marveled at the cup in her hand. "From your display earlier, it was hard to tell. You certainly didn't wait until you recovered," she added with a smirk.

Zi Lan blushed and began to straighten his white robe that still exposed his chest.

Finishing her cup of tea, Bai Qian placed it down and turned to him. "So, my encouragement at the festival worked - you went and got your Princess back!"

"No, not even close," he said and pressed his head back against the wall behind him, closing his eyes in agony.

Bai Qian narrowed her eyes at him. "I don't understand. Then why were you two..."

Zi Lan covered his face with his hands. "I didn't know it was real," he groaned in misery.

"Excuse me?" She stood up and walked closer to his bed. "Say it again."

He rubbed his neck with his hand. "My body was burning up, it must have been that darn elixir for internal injuries that 2nd makes. I thought I was lucid dreaming just now. I must have grabbed her... and..." he could barely finish the sentence before he had to cover his face again in shame. "She'll hate me even more," he groaned.

Oh, poor 16th! Despite his womanizing ways, he was still basically an innocent in the matter of women's hearts. And yet, Bai Qian couldn't help but smile at his misery. As his (reluctant) junior, she would help him see the light in this unfortunate, yet fortunate situation he had put himself in.

"I doubt that," she told him.

"What do you mean?" He looked puzzled.

She turned around and made herself comfortable next to the table again. "Did she stop you?"

He shook his head warily. “No... I don’t know...”

Holding his gaze, Bai Qian asked: “Did she respond in this ‘lucid dream’ of yours?”

His face blushed, but Zi Lan seemed to try and recall what had happened. Looking perplexed, he finally answered: “Yes...?”

Bai Qian hit her fan on her palm. “So, there is hope.”

“Is there?” he asked, hesitantly.

“16th, if a woman didn’t desire you, she wouldn’t have let you go that far and she wouldn’t have responded. Considering you’re injured, it doesn’t take much to push you off like she eventually did. She still wants you.”

“But she cannot forgive me,” he shook his head.

Bai Qian sighed. “Give her time,” she told him softly.

“I let her wait for over 700 years.”

“Then stop making her wait.”

He closed his eyes again, unconvinced. Bai Qian shooked her head - this was much harder than she had thought. Zi Lan’s natural confidence was hindered by his guilt. He needed all the advice he could get if he was going to succeed.

“Zi Lan, we all have to wait for our fated one, whether it’s 7 years or 700 years, or even 70,000. Our time apart is a trial itself. Have faith in yourself.”

“How?” He looked at her, his eyes full of uncertainty.

“You have to fight for her.”

But Zi Lan remained silent, still full of doubt.

She shook her head at him and said: "What happened to my charming 16th in mortal realm? Remember all the women you seduced?"

"She is different from other women, I don't want to seduce her," he countered.

"No, but you can make her love you again."

Zi Lan laughed out loud.

"Why?" she asked in confusion.

"You're giving me advice?" he asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Oh yes, you need it. But *please* do not take the easy way out and die on her like my husband did, it is inconvenient and traumatizing to say the least." Bai Qian closed her eyes at the memory. Shaking her head, she continued, "and by the look of your current state, you were trying to do the same."

Maybe because Zi Lan felt the concern in her voice, he relented. "What else?"

"Ha - you're really taking my advice?"

16th waved his hand in front of him, and said, "It's not like I have other options. I am *certainly* not going to ask Shifu for advice."

Bai Qian narrowed her eyes at the mention of Shifu. "Is she giving you a hard time, this ... woman?"

Zi Lan shook her head again. "No. She is pretty preoccupied with him. And he with her. "

Bai Qian swallowed down her anger. Ye Hua had told her about the ways of the Demon Clan just now. She was completely unfamiliar with them, in fact, hadn't met many Demons before she met Shao Wan, because they had closed their borders and kept to themselves after the Demon War. They were a fierce warrior clan, men and women alike, who gained cultivation through constant fighting. Any weakness could mean death at the hand of a contender or enemy. Ye Hua had guessed that to Shao Wan, Bai Qian's relationship with Mo Yuan was a threat.

Bai Qian sighed. She would have to talk to the Demon Queen again soon to explain. And she hoped that Mo Yuan would explain from his point of view before that.

“Tell me, Zi Lan - how did this happen so quickly?” Bai Qian was curious to know the details of Shifu's romance.

“They go way back,” Zi Lan said with a shrug, “did you not see them at the Festival? The way he looked at her ... it was so obvious.”

“And she moved in here right away?”

“Ah, no. Shifu had to go to her rescue. You know how he is - he did not hesitate for a second, despite the odds. She was badly wounded when he brought her back. Did you not hear about this in the Nine Heavens?”

Bai Qian shook her head. “The gossip up there is usually far removed from the truth! There are people who claim Mo Yuan stole her away from her former lover, the Yellow Demon King. He tamed her using some tricks and made her his woman against her will.”

Zi Lan snorted. “Tamed? She is most certainly not tamed though he did have to seal her powers to help her recuperate. She wasn't happy about being his wife at first, but that has definitely changed.”

After a short break, he added: “It was his actions on top of your words that made me reconsider and go seek out Yan Zhi in the mortal realm. Without him, I would not have been there when the assassins hit. “

“So maybe you could have asked him for advice after all!”

“Never!” Zi Lan laughed.

“I think our seniors are in desperate need of women themselves. They're the last people you can go ask in such matters. I was considering asking the God of Love and Marriage to find suitable brides for them after Shifu's Wedding - well, the first wedding, but that plan was foiled because of the cancellation.”

Zi Lan grinned at her. "I didn't know you were so concerned over the state of bachelorhood at Kunlun."

"Of course I care and worry about everyone! And now, I'm particularly worried about you."

Taking a deep breath, he conceded: "What worldly advice do you have for me? I think my elixir is going to wear off soon."

"Excellent!" Ecstatic because of his willingness to hear her out, Bai Qian waved her fan, magically placing a shield around the room.

He looked at her skeptically: "Was that necessary?"

Bai Qian poured herself another cup of tea and said: "What I am about to tell you cannot leave this room."

Zi Lan stared at her. "I am beginning to regret my decision."

"Do you still want to recapture your Princess' heart?" she asked with the devilish smile she used to give him in their younger years at Kunlun.

"Yes."

"Then shut up and listen," she told him sternly.

And he did. He listened, and argued, and reflected. It was not an easy task to convince 16th to see the new light before him. But a drowning man will take any lifeline coming his way, and her advice was sound and sensible, informed by years of stories from her brothers and their spouses, from plays she had admired, and from her own experience. Thinking back, she thought she should have intervened much sooner for 16th's sake, but there was no need to dwell on what could not be changed. His Princess was now within his reach, fate had given him another chance to make amends.

His eyes were determined when she left his room. Bai Qian was glad she had come today, all things considered. There would be obstacles in Yan Zhi and Zi Lan's way, but everyone had their own trial to endure. She could only pray for fate to take pity on their years of separation,

so that they would not have to suffer long before they could find their own happiness, like she had found hers.

## *Chapter 38.5 ~It was not fate she feared most...*

At nightfall, when everyone had retired to their rooms and the only sound was the wind howling on the mountain, Yan Zhi felt confident enough to leave the comfort of her chamber. Qiao Er was fast asleep; the poor but happy child had exhausted herself under the care of Zi Lan's seniors while Yan Zhi had recuperated from her injuries. They had given Qiao Er all the attention she had never known she could get, which meant that Yan Zhi had been able to relax for the first time in what seemed forever. But this was not a time to dwell on her own needs. She had a mission tonight.

Yan Zhi walked through the dark passages. The moon was rising late tonight, it was pitch black outside - but immortals from the Ghost tribe were comfortable in the darkness. Low light had always been an advantage to her clan, especially during combat and spy missions, because they could take opponents from other clans by surprise easily. Finding what she was seeking would not be hard under these conditions. She only hoped her mission would be completed swiftly without any further incidents.

She knew she shouldn't return, but she had no other choice. What happened today was a mistake, an unfortunate incident, an embarrassment to both of them. Luckily, it was only Si Yin who had barged in. She was sure Si Yin wouldn't gossip to others about what she had witnessed. Yan Zhi couldn't have predicted that a moment of weakness would have such drastic consequences. How could she face Zi Lan now? Would he want to pursue the matter further?

With these thoughts in her head, she had to take a deep breath before she could gather the courage to enter his room for the second time today. Cautiously, she moved towards his bed within the dark, unlit room. When Yan Zhi reached the bed, she was relieved that Zi Lan was sound asleep. Now, the real mission was to find what she had left behind.

She searched the surroundings of his bed, praying for luck to be on her side - alas, she was not that fortunate. If only her powers were not suppressed on this mountain, she could have moved in and out swiftly, or could even had conjured what she sought. Turning her attention to his bed, she dreaded what she had to do next. Hovering over Zi Lan, she tried to lift the edge of his blanket, carefully, slowly.

Without warning, his hand shot out and caught her wrist. Zi Lan's eyes were wide open, staring into hers.

"Yan Zhi," he said.

This was not her day. She had made another miscalculation. She should not have returned. If only she had never entered his room earlier today, things would not have proceeded like they had. Could she turn back time, so her humiliation would be over, and her dignity was intact?

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*Earlier that day....*

For several days, Yan Zhi had inquired about Zi Lan's condition from his seniors. They had told her he was recuperating well, and there was no need to be concerned. But the memory of his collapse when they had arrived at Kunlun still alarmed her. He had been severely injured because he had taken blows that were meant for Qiao Er and herself.

She knew he had never left, the foolish man, despite her wish to sever their ties. He had been hiding in the bamboo forest, like a phantom, never straying too far in case more assassins would appear. He was forever playing the hero, a hero she could no longer accept. He had repeatedly made contact with Qiao Er, even bribed her for rice buns. Why he craved her inedible rice buns so much she would never know. She had turned a blind eye to their meetings, because it brought joy to Qiao Er. She had also tried to improve the rice buns, but in vain.

Now that he was injured, Qiao Er had asked about him daily, but he needed to recuperate more, they were told. However, it had come the time when Yan Zhi couldn't wait any longer. She had to see Zi Lan in person to assure herself his condition was stable. She had come to his room when no one was present and found Zi Lan soundly asleep. She sat next to him and checked his forehead, only to find that his skin was on fire and he was sweating profusely. Wanting to comfort him, she went and got cold water but she could not find a towel in the room. She didn't want to ask his seniors, so instead, she dipped her hands in the water, and soothed him with her touch, hoping that under her care, his suffering would lessen.

His anguished face tugged at her heartstrings. Zi Lan must be having a nightmare, she deduced. She caressed his face, and without thinking, she brushed her lips against his, wishing

the small chaste kiss would take away his demons. She realized her mistake when Zi Lan captured her in his arms and flipped her over, lying on top of her. She could feel that his body was fiery hot when he buried his face into her neck. But then, his hot breath ignited a fire within her she had thought lay dormant. Anxiously, she pressed her hands against his chest, wanting to push him away, but she felt his hot tongue tasting the nape of her neck, making her gasp.

Her will to stop him was further diminished when he caught her earlobe between his teeth. Her body shuddered in response as his mouth traveled down her neck, sucking and licking, leaving nothing untouched. Pleasure shot through her, as her body was submerged in waves of unprecedented desire. How long has it been since she had been held like this? As he felt her through the layers of silk and caressed her body that had not been touched for thousands of millennia, she could only surrender.

When he started to remove her clothes, Zi Lan went slowly, as though he had all the time in the world, while her body shook with anticipation for his touch, even when her mind told her to resist. Had he taken her by force, she could have resisted, but his slow meticulous caressing and teasing when he stripped her made her want him even more. She had pulled his mouth onto her chest, and he knew what she wanted without words and had complied by tasting her exposed skin, making her squirm with pleasure.

She heard him growl when he couldn't remove her xin yi, but it didn't stop him from exploring her backside to find the strappings soon after. With articulate skill and patience she never knew existed, he slowly removed her strappings, never taking his eyes off her, as though he needed her consent and confirmation. She could barely breathe when he finally completed his task, but he didn't remove her xin yi when it was within his reach. Instead, he continued to tease, making her beg, when his hands played with her body over her silk barrier.

She was aching and empty, so empty. She grew moist, and that's when he grabbed her bottom and pressed the ridge of his manhood against her throbbing core. She cried out, and due to her ferocious need, she clung to him, bit him, tasted him. She rocked her body against his and he responded with desperation of his own. When she thought he would finally fill her emptiness, he had pulled back and turned his attention to her breasts. She could only whimper and shudder under his care, as he laid claim to them, marking them, branding them as his own. His tongue and lips ravished her thoroughly, as she begged him to be inside her because she could no longer wait.

Her body trembled when Zi Lan released her breasts and climbed over her. His eyes filled with tenderness and care as he gazed into her eyes. He held her face in his palm as he brushed his thumb over her quivering lips. He had yet to lay claim to them - they had never kissed before, even once.

But before they could experience their first times, Si Yin had interrupted them. It wasn't the untimely intrusion that brought the biggest humiliation upon her. No - the moment Si Yin called out, Zi Lan's eyes opened, and she saw they were distressed and full of regrets; he did not intend to embrace her after all. Reality struck her as she registered what she had almost allowed to occur. Mortified, she pushed him off and ran as fast as her feet could take her. She could never face him again after the intimacy she had consented to, the intimacy he never desired. What would he think of her now? How can a moment of weakness have such dire consequences?

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*Present time.....*

"Yan Zhi."

"You're awake!" She tried to pull back, but he held on, his grip tight.

He sat up and grabbed her other wrist, holding her hostage within his grasp. "Of course, I've waited for you."

"Let me go!" she tried to pull away.

"Not until we talk," he told her firmly.

“Release me or I will...,” with enough force, she pulled her right wrist away, pulling him forward.

At the sound of his painful grunt, she stopped pulling. “Zi Lan, are you alright?” she asked anxiously, touching his chest.

Zi Lan took the opportunity to grab her waist and turn her around, pulling her down so that she sat in with her back against his chest. Hugging her from behind, he held onto her waist and arm.

“If you struggle, you’ll hurt me,” he warned her.

“You’re taking advantage of the situation,” she accused him, angry now.

“I am,” he admitted without remorse.

Still struggling and outraged, she asked, “When did you become a rogue?”

He held her even closer, his lips close to her ears. “Just now. Being a hero no longer has its benefits. And I heard you don’t like heroes,” he whispered, making her blush.

“You...” she turned her head, a mistake, because their lips nearly touched. She quickly turned away.

She heard him sigh. “I just want to talk, Yan Zhi. Stop struggling, unless you want to hurt me again. My head is still bruised from earlier.”

Although she stopped struggling, she kept silent. It was a mistake to have come here. She knew what he wanted to talk about, but she was not ready. Not tonight, not like this, not when her mind still could not comprehend what has transpired between them. She didn’t want to hear his regrets or his apologies. Her pride was already damaged enough as it is.



“Yan Zhi, I know what you’re looking for,” she heard him say. “Once we talk, I’ll give it to you,” he bargained.

Even now, he had the upper hand. When had he become this brazen? Why wouldn’t he let her have her dignity?

And he was too close, he made her unable to think straight, with his body pressed against her own in the pitch darkness of the room, engulfing her senses with his warmth. She closed her eyes in defeat. It was best to get this over with, she concluded, no matter how uncomfortable the conversation will be. “What do you want to talk about?” she asked him, even though she dreaded what he was about to say.

“How is Qiao Er?”

Her eyes opened. What?

“Yan Zhi, how is Qiao Er?” he repeated, “I have been recovering here for a few days now, how is she adjusting?”

“She’s doing well,” she told him.

“Is she still having nightmares?” he asked.

“How did you...?”

“I always knew.” Why was she surprised? Of course, he did, he had never left them. He knew all along Qiao Er had nightmares ever since the day the assassins arrived in their lives.

Feeling more at ease with the current topic, her body relaxed a little. “She didn’t have nightmares for two nights now, she’s doing better. Your 10th and 7th seniors took her to see the waterfalls to cheer her up. She loves the cranes here.”

“They did?” he laughed out loud.

Perplexed at his laughter, she asked, “Why are you laughing?”

“Nothing. What else?”

“Your 4th senior is teaching her how to count, she loves numbers.”

“4th would be a perfect Shifu for her, he is excellent when it comes to calculations! I am not surprised that he took a liking to Qiao Er. What else has Qiao Er done?”

Zi Lan continued to ask more about their daily activities. So she told him how his seniors had surprised Qiao Er with treats and tokens. Although she received many gifts from his seniors, it was 4th's gift that made Qiao Er most delighted. It was a small abacus that she now carried around, making calculations of Kunlun's inventory or whatever else caught her fancy. One senior had brought over a change of clothes for them. Though her own dress was dark blue, Qiao Er's was pure white, matching the disciples' attire. She had become a white dove at Kunlun they said, so they decided to call her “Little Dove”.

“She never had so much attention before,” Yan Zhi said, her words almost choking her.

“It's not every day we have a young beauty reside here. My seniors love to dote on children, and Little Dove is a fitting name for her.” She felt Zi Lan loosen his grip because she had relaxed against him.

“She's so happy now...,” Yan Zhi felt tears sting her eyes, but she closed them and held back the emotions that were stirring within her.

Zi Lan must have caught her tone, because he held her closer again. “Yan Zhi...,” he whispered.

“No, let me go!” she told him with a slight panic in her voice.

His head on her shoulders, he squeezed her hands. “Yan Zhi, I won't let you go again.”

She shook her head. “I don't believe you.”

“Why?”

“Because everyone I cared for has left me,” she blurted out, regretting her words as soon as they came out.

“I won’t.”

“You almost died.”

“I didn’t.”

“But you could have.”

“Yan Zhi...”

“Let’s not tempt fate,” she disentangled herself from his arms and despite of his reluctance, he let her go. Standing before him, she held out her hand. “We’re done talking.”

Zi Lan pulled out her red jasmine embroidered xin yi from under the blanket. She quickly grabbed it from him, but his hand held her wrist again.

His eyes bore into hers. “I won’t let fear of fate decide our destiny. I will never let you go. No matter where you’ll be, mortal or immortal realm.... Yan Zhi, I will always find you.”

With those words, Zi Lan let go of her wrist; allowing her to leave the darkness of his room, the warmth of his touch, the comfort of his words. It was no longer the mortification of what had occurred today that brought her discomfort, but the thoughts and words that had bared her soul to him tonight.

How could she put distance between them when he continued to capture her at her most vulnerable state? When would he realize that his attempts to make amends were guided by his guilt and duty rather than the desire of his heart? And when.... when would she learn to stop taking comfort in his presence?

It finally dawned on her, that it was not fate she most feared tonight, but herself.

## *Chapter 39 ~ The Ancestor*

Today was like any other day at Kunlun: peaceful and quiet. In fact, the atmosphere here hadn't changed at all since their arrival. The disciples had their morning chores to complete and went about their tasks cheerfully and with diligence before attending lessons in the afternoon. Yan Zhi had asked if they needed any help, but unfortunately, they had declined her offer. She was their guest here, and propriety did not allow guests to assist the host during their stay. As a result, Yan Zhi was growing increasingly impatient with the lack of activity. She was not the type to laze around for long without occupation. Ghost Tribe members had missions, practiced their martial arts, or enhanced their dark magic to gain cultivation. Even while hiding in the mortal realm, she had worked at restaurants or opened her own dining facilities. Yan Zhi had always been someone who had a purpose, but now she felt like an unmanned ship floating aimlessly, without sail or wind for guidance.



It had been a few weeks now since their arrival on the Mountain and the disciples had taken it upon themselves to watch and entertain their “little dove”. Even though Yan Zhi missed spending time with her, she didn't want to hurt Qiao Er's feelings by holding her back from adventures or by keeping her from spending time with her many shifus. Qiao Er had taken a special liking to 4th disciple, whom she followed around like a baby duckling with an abacus in

her hand. They had bonded quickly and Qiao Er took his lessons very seriously. In the process of finding such a warm welcome, the girl's nightmares had ceased. It brought great comfort to Yan Zhi to know her daughter had finally found peace at Kunlun. However, she also knew they only had a limited amount of time remaining here. What would follow filled her with slight dread.

With a heavy sigh, Yan Zhi decided to take a stroll to a forest path on the west side of Kunlun Mountain to enjoy the serenity of the greenery and the waterfalls. The forest here was bright and lively, very unlike those in the Ghost Realms. There, the forests were thick with dark vegetation and the light from the sun never quite reached the forest floor. But when night fell, the twilight gave way to the most wonderful luminescent flowers and bugs that glowed within the dark passage, guiding lost souls to their designated paths. She missed her home, a place she hadn't returned to for hundreds of years. As things were, she wondered if she could ever return.

As Yan Zhi pondered with an ache in her heart, she suddenly became aware of a commotion ahead of her. It sounded like a battle, but she could hear two women's voices. That was very unusual here, so she started running towards the noise. What she found was shocking.

A tall unknown woman just ripped away the chain whip from the Demon Princess Li Ying - the momentum strong enough to pull the princess forward, and her throat landed in the hard grip of this vicious woman.

"This is all you got? Fight me!" the woman squeezed harder, choking the princess who was turning very red in the face.

"Li Ying!" Yan Zhi threw a dagger at the woman, but she turned and caught the weapon in mid-air, effortlessly. Still, it gave Yan Zhi the opportunity to jump in and pull Li Ying away from her attacker.

"Who is this?" the woman sneered at them.

"Stay away from her!" Yan Zhi shouted, shielding Li Ying with her body.

The mystery woman narrowed her eyes. Yan Zhi realized she was fighting with suppressed powers, but she was still very strong.

“Aaahhh, you must be that Ghost Princess, the one the injured disciple pines for.”

“What do you want with Li Ying?” Yan Zhi asked, ignoring her taunt.

She gave them a laugh. “Little fool! You dare question me, the Demon Ancestor?”

Demon Ancestor? Bad! Their situation was incredibly dire! This woman with the ancient aura was the High Demon Ancestor who once ruled all of the Demon Kingdoms! Her powers were legendary throughout the realms and if only a tenth of what the ancient records and stories said was true, they were in deep trouble. They had to escape quickly before they were killed.

In desperation, Yan Zhi threw another dagger at her, but she dodged it just as effortlessly as before and came straight at them, using hands and feet, knees and elbows. Both Li Ying and Yan Zhi fought back, blocking, dodging, retreating, but even when they joined forces against the High Demon Goddess, they stood no chance. They soon found themselves flung to the ground, side by side, the Goddess' hands on their necks, now choking them both with considerable strength.

“Weak. You both don't practice close combat often, do you?” she scowled as they desperately gasped for air.

But then, surprisingly, she loosened her grip and let them catch their breath. “Ha! This was more entertaining than I thought.” The Goddess smiled at them, her demeanor changed, her lovely features accentuated.

“Entertaining?” Yan Zhi glared at her as she pulled Li Ying off the ground.

“Yes, I am in much need of some sparring partners since those virgin doves won't come near me, most likely by that Bastard's order. I am incredibly bored.” She shuddered and continued, “Since both of you seem accustomed to distant combat, I foresee much fun in teaching you and watching your progress.”

Outraged, Yan Zhi had to question her motive. “You want us to train with you? You almost killed Li Ying!”

“Killed her? Why would I kill someone who wants to train with me? You quite rudely interrupted us,” the High Goddess sneered.

What? Yan Zhi looked at Li Ying for confirmation.

"It's true," the Demon Princess said enthusiastically, "I wanted to train with the Demon High Goddess. She is one of the best! Imagine what she can teach us!"

Yan Zhi stared at her in disbelief. But Yan Zhi had come to know the Yellow Demon Princess and her eccentric personality a little since their stay here. She didn't lack intelligence, but unlike Yan Zhi, Li Ying didn't seem to be much aware of her surroundings. Naivete aside, she didn't seem to recognize danger and didn't have much of a self-preservation instinct either, given the current situation she had placed herself in.

Yan Zhi felt the need to clarify. "But .... she was choking you."

"One does not improve if one's life is not on the line," came the cheerful answer.

Yan Zhi narrowed her eyes at her, still in doubt.

The Demon Princess pulled Yan Zhi closer. "Despite her demeanor, she is generous with her teaching," Li Ying whispered into Yan Zhi's ears. "I think she likes you! It's the opportunity of a lifetime to train with the Demon High Goddess, you better take this chance to improve your martial skills."

"Are you two done whispering?" The Demon Goddess asked impatiently, rubbing her forehead in frustration.

"We..."

"You two lack skills, especially since your powers are suppressed here. Mark my words: I have recently learned that without one's powers, one has to depend on one's pure fighting skills. You can acquire these skills through diligent practice under me. This is my generous offer to you - if you are not interested, I suggest you go hide again in your rooms and die of boredom."

Yan Zhi stared at the Goddess, then looked back at Li Ying who was now nodding her head with encouragement and pushing her forward. Yan Zhi couldn't refute what either of them had said. Yes, she lacked training, due to her isolation. If she had devoted herself to regaining her cultivation rather than secluding herself in the mortal realms, assassins would not have

been able to overtake them. She only had herself to blame. She didn't know if it was because of Li Ying, the Demon Ancestor, or just her own restless self, but Yan Zhi found herself signed up for something she knew was more than she bargained for.

Bowing properly, Yan Zhi paid her respects. "It will be a great privilege to study under you, High Goddess, Shifu."

The Demon Goddess's face contorted in anger. "Don't you dare call me that! It makes me sound old and boring like that Bastard. I already get a headache from those white virgins calling me Shimu."

"Then how should we address you, please, High Goddess?" Li Ying asked cautiously.

"Ancestor will do. And now ... get ready!"

## *Chapter 40.75 ~ Like Ravens of the Night*

Ever since the day she became a disciple of the High Demon Goddess, Yan Zhi had been training from the early morning hours until late noon, while Qiao Er had her daily numbers lesson with 4th disciple; her unofficial “Shifu”. Although Yan Zhi’s recovery had sped up due to Kunlun’s energy, she knew she didn’t have time to waste: enemies were still after their lives and she would soon have to leave the sanctuary of this Mountain to face them. So, she took every opportunity to train at the top of the secluded waterfall when she was not training with the Demon High Goddess or Li Ying.

Yan Zhi had loved archery since she was a child. The bow was her favorite weapon, especially on horseback. Her archery skills far surpassed her brothers’ — even at a young age, they had to admit they couldn’t compete against her. Hitting a moving target while keeping control of her beast brought her a sense of accomplishment and control. To diversify her skills, she had taken up other weapons at Kunlun, but she still saved the first part of the day for target practice. Fruit and flower trees were abundant on Kunlun Mountain. They all had a medicinal purpose according to 7th disciple, however, Yan Zhi had decided to use them as targets. She aimed at the stems of a red spiky fruit and with each arrow, a fruit fell to the ground. She planned to collect them later as offerings for the disciples who watched Qiao Er today.



Although Yan Zhi had been reluctant to train under the High Demon Goddess initially, she now felt fortunate to have taken her offer. Demons and Ghosts were similar, but their history was full of enmity. Yet, despite her rough demeanor and crude language, the High Goddess was a talented instructor. She did not hold back in her attacks and Yan Zhi was glad she didn’t. She hadn’t trained like this for thousands of millennia and returning to harsh training condition was regenerative. Ghost Tribe members were warriors, women and men alike, like Demons. It was in their blood to become soldiers and serve their Lord. They built their cultivation through battles as well as dark magic.

The current training regimen reminded her of her past, when her father had trained her and her brothers. He had started to harshly mold his children at a young age, even allowing soldiers to attack at random times, increasing their alertness to unpredictable opponents. Their royal status had not meant they had the privilege to be pampered, quite the opposite: It meant they had to rise above their subjects, so their authority would never be questioned.

Although Yan Zhi was forever grateful for her father's attention, she knew what the real reason behind his treatment of them had been: his children got their value from being his cultivation vessels. There were many ways one could cope with the reality of such an existence. Embrace the idea but pray there never would come the day they would have to serve their purpose. Or escape the concept altogether, by finding other pleasures in life. For her part, Yan Zhi had supported her family without question, as was the way of the Ghost Tribe, to respect one's elders will unconditionally. However, much had happened since the Ghost War ... her entire family was gone now, and she had realized, she too had been blind to her reality. Craving harmony and closing her eyes from why she and her siblings existed, she had deluded herself into believing familial love existed within her family. She had ignored the hatred her brothers had had for each other, because she didn't want to face the truth.

If she had faced the truth earlier, would things be different? Did her behavior kill her brothers? If she had not run when obstacles appeared before her, would her family still be alive? To atone for her sins, she had done all she could to revive Qiao Er, even damaging thousands of years of cultivation to do so.

Qiao Er was her hope but also a reminder of guilt. Yan Zhi had devoted her life to protecting her niece and daughter, the child who was never meant to exist. Qiao Er had become the color in her life, her only blood relative left in the world. And yet, she had failed her in so many ways. Because of her stubbornness and pride, she had caused additional trauma to her innocent child, who was too young to experience the hardship before her. If only she had listened, things may not have escalated to this point.

Though she had failed, she would not let her past failures defeat her. She was her own worst enemy. And for Qiao Er, there was nothing she would not do. Qiao Er may be her weakness but she was also her strength. Strength that motivated her to train diligently each day. She had to become stronger if she was going to keep them safe from the enemies in the shadows.

After the last arrow was released and the red fruits blanketed the forest floor, Yan Zhi placed her bow down, and switched to the sword. Yan Zhi thoroughly enjoyed the serenity of sword

practice, even without an opponent. Above the waterfall of Kunlun, the mountain breeze brought peace and tranquility to her state of mind, further enhancing her ability to focus on her stance and movements. It was no wonder so many had begged for the privilege to train here. Kunlun power suppression aside, she could feel her speed and stamina increase daily. Whether it be the healing powers or the cultivation energy, being at Kunlun was more beneficial than she had previously thought.

As Yan Zhi continued to practice, a shadow flew in front of her. A blade was thrust towards her side — she blocked, retreated and distanced herself from her attacker.

It was Zi Lan.

She noticed that his color had returned; he seemed much better. He was wearing dark gray training garb, his hair tied up with black silk. She had always liked dark colors on him. His white garb reminded her of purity, virtuousness and righteousness, but even more so of the invisible physical shield between them. They hadn't seen each other since that night she'd left his room. Though she was happy to see he had recovered, she was surprised by his attack.

"What are you doing here?" Yan Zhi asked.

Zi Lan smiled at her as he spun his sword in a circular motion. "I thought joining your training is a good opportunity for me to stretch. I've been recuperating in my room for too long."

Her brows furrowed at the idea. "You can train with someone else."

He shook his head. "That won't be wise, considering I'm still not yet fully recovered. Would you want me to take on my Shifu like this?"

"Then go back and recuperate," she scowled at him.

"That won't do either, I don't want to be an invalid. Your powers are suppressed here. That should give us equal footing."

Insulted by his suggestion, she glared at him. "Equal footing?"

"To practice our martial arts skills."

“No.”

His gaze turned dark, but not sinister, something much more unsettling. “If not martial arts, we can try other physical activities.”

“You...”

“Perhaps an activity more pleasurable?” he slyly suggested, as he strolled towards her. “We can move to a more comfortable location.”

Outraged by his innuendo, Yan Zhi swung her sword at his chest, but Zi Lan met her blade with his.

Pressing her blade against his, she said, “I won’t hold back.” She glowered at him.

Glancing at their crossed blades, he grinned. “I never thought you would. Although...” he continued as his eyes danced over her body, “I would much prefer that more pleasurable activity.”

Further enraged by his gibe, Yan Zhi didn’t back down from the duel he provoked. She kicked forward so he would back away. When their swords clashed again, she realized they had never fought before. Even though she had seen his skills many times, they had never once practiced together. There never was a reason to, he had always protected her like his damsel. She now realized it was necessary for them to duel after all: She was no longer a damsel for him to boost his pride.

After over ten rounds of marital moves, he managed to spin behind her, grab her waist with his left hand, and pull her back against his chest. He caught her by surprise when his head tilted to the right side of her neck and she felt his breath against her, almost touching, nearly tasting. She elbowed him, but he moved backward quickly and blocked with his left palm. His gaze locked with hers.

“What are you doing?” she accused him.

With a nonchalant tone, he explained, “My apologies, your scent is too captivating, I couldn’t help myself.” To prove his point, he leaned in to smell her neck again.

“Stop that!” She kicked her leg back, but Zi Lan grabbed onto to her left shoulder and used her body to anchor himself as he backflipped his body over hers.

Yan Zhi leapt forward with her sword thrust at his back, but he pivoted around, countering and pressing forward. Zi Lan was strong, despite his injuries, had this all been a ploy? She attacked his calf, but he blocked her sword with his own. He leaned in, his dark eyes studied hers. Flustered, she pushed him away, but he quickly caught her waist. Pulling her close, their lips nearly met. Completely disarmed, she instinctively closed her eyes.

But the kiss never came. Her eyes opened, and she found Zi Lan's eyes staring into hers. “Beautiful eyes...like ravens of the night...how lovely,” he whispered huskily. “What I would give to gaze into them every day.”

Although Yan Zhi blushed at his alluring words, she was furious at this underhanded tactic. She bent a knee to kick his side, but he fluidly dodged to the side.

When had he become so bold? Had his head become damaged when she slammed him against the wall? Yan Zhi continued her attack, now no longer caring that he was still injured. She charged forward with her sword, only to be met by Zi Lan's blade. Their swords clashed at a standstill. Both leapt away, with their swords pointing downward, their postures mirrored as they circled each other. He was studying her movements, as she was studying his.

She spun forward to continue her assault as Zi Lan dodged to the side, dropping his sword, grabbing each of her wrists, he twisted one arm behind her back and pressed her body against his. Her movements subdued, his head arched to the side of her neck. Her body shivered when she felt him breathe in her scent. Infuriated, she tried to kick him, but he released his hold and slid away.

With casual ease Zi Lan magically recalled his sword. “If you can give me the recipe for the fragrance, I no longer have to take further liberties.”

Scarlet at his words, she shouted, “There is no recipe!”

“How fortunate...” he drawled, his gaze dark as he strolled towards her,” ...for me.”

Before he got too close, Yan Zhi spun her body with her sword swinging outward. He retreated as he blocked her continuous slashes. She wanted to take Zi Lan by surprise and somersaulted

behind him, aiming her blade at his right shoulder, but he quickly turned and dodged her blade again.

He could anticipate every move, with the ease of an assassin. Had Zi Lan always been this agile? Celestials were known to use their cultivation in fights, but he hadn't used any to his advantage yet. Then she remembered, he had always fought with his martial skills only when the assassins had attacked them. She had thought it had been because they were in the mortal realm and he had to keep his magic hidden, so as not to draw attention from the Nine Heavens. But it was not necessary now.

Zi Lan swiftly flew to her side, now being the one to attack. As Yan Zhi continued to block the thrust of his sword, she found herself retreating towards the cliff and suddenly found herself cornered at the edge of the waterfall, unable to retreat further. She nearly slipped, but Zi Lan seized her by the waist, maintaining their balance as he pressed her body against his. A moment of stillness followed, as they both caught their breaths at the edge of the cliff. Ascending mist from the waterfall surrounded them, his heated gaze locked into hers, the smell of sweat and masculine arousal engulfing her senses.

"Yan Zhi..." he whispered, but before he could capture her lips, she turned her head to the side and his lips only grazed her cheek. Undeterred, Zi Lan breathed against the sweat on her neck, causing her body to shudder again. Yan Zhi felt the tip of his tongue tasting the bottom of her earlobe, his lips tracing the edges, and a gasp escaped her. Her senses were consumed by the passionate heat of his mouth that continued to ravish the back of her ears. Nibbling, licking, tasting...the slow deliberate strokes of his tongue sent waves of pleasure through her. She whimpered when his teeth clamped down on her earlobe, then sucked on the delicate flesh. Instinctively she arched against his hard-aroused body, but Zi Lan's groan broke her trance.

Embarrassed by her response, Yan Zhi pushed hard against him with her free hand. But instead of holding on to her, he released her... over the cliff's edge of the waterfall!

Yan Zhi found herself falling down the side of the cliff. Utterly surprised by this turn of events, she tried to cloud jump, but fear struck her when she realized her magic was still suppressed. Helpless, she continued to descend at rapid speed. Suddenly, Zi Lan materialized next to her, caught her in his arms, and cloud jumped back to the edge of Kunlun waterfall.

"I got you," he told her, his smug radiant face smiling above her. Infuriated again by his obvious ruse, Yan Zhi scrambled out of his arms.

“You did that on purpose!” She accused him, putting more distance between them.

Unfazed by her reaction, his tone was as calm as before. “I assure you, it was not my intention. I was not certain you wanted a hero.”

“You’re no hero,” she shook her head.

“Good,” his eyes became dark, predatory, and with a deliberate stride, Zi Lan moved towards her like a tiger ready to pounce on its prey. “Because I never wanted to be one.”

Instinctively, she backed away from him. There was something about his tone that unsettled her very core. “We... we’re done here,” she found herself stammering.

“Yan Zhi...” her name left his lips like an enchanting spell. She would have frozen by the magic he had deliberately cast, if she hadn’t been so afraid of what she might do.

“Don’t follow me,” she ordered.

Thankfully, Zi Lan stopped before he could reach her. Yan Zhi turned and ran as fast as her feet could carry her. Away from danger of the cliff’s edge, away from their unfair duel, away from the man who continued to taunt her. Yet, she knew those were excuses. The heart in her chest continued to hammer, not because of the exertion, but because her heart was betraying her. It was wavering.

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### *Flashback with Si Yin/Bai Qian*

Despite his initial reluctance, Si Yin’s stories about her brothers and their spouses were entertaining to listen to. Given that he had secluded himself for so long, including from his favorite and only junior, he was happy they could talk like old times. Their bond had never broken despite years of separation. When Si Yin asked about their time in the Mortal Realm, he told her in detail.

She shook her head about how he had become her shadow for years, and how Yan Zhi had kicked him out after his recovery. When Si Yin spoke, her words were deliberate and concise, but hit directly and bluntly to the core.

“Unlike other women you pursued in the past, you treat her like an untouchable porcelain vase. No wonder she said you only see her as a woman who needs to be rescued, you have an affinity for damsels in distress.”

“No! I-”

She held her hand up to stop him. “Don’t even deny it.”

Zi Lan wanted to refute her claim, but it was true, he had to concede. “I didn’t know I made her feel that way.”

“16th, a woman won’t know she is desired by you if you never make an advance towards her. You love her so deeply you worship her like a Goddess from afar. But she’s not a statue nor a vase, no matter how beautiful she is in your eyes.”

“She is beautiful,” he responded immediately.

“But she’s also a living, breathing, passionate woman. There are moments when she is flawed and imperfect. If you can’t acknowledge them, how can she know you have fully accepted her?”

“I’ve already accepted everything about her,” he continued to argue.

Si Yin closed her eyes briefly, as though she was losing patience. “Then treat her like a real woman.”

*End of Flashback*

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Si Yin’s words still echoed in his head as Zi Lan watched Yan Zhi’s hurried departure. She had left her weapons behind, so he began to gather her gear, knowing she wouldn’t be back any time soon to retrieve them. When he picked up her fallen sword, he had to grin at her

frustrated anger from earlier. Her blade had intended to injure him, though she had hesitated at first. Her eyes sparked with rage. Her moves were merciless and ruthless, yet elegant and graceful. Watching the fire in her eyes as she wielded her sword with the intent to kill was addicting. His Goddess, his Queen, his Woman. Who knew she could be so ravishing when she fought. She had become more beautiful before his eyes and his body had responded eagerly.

Zi Lan had finally seen what lay hidden beneath the shy and calm demeanor. He had not known the real her. Si Yin was right, he had never looked beyond Yan Zhi's perfection. Even worse, he had not known her as the warrior princess she had used to be. The only part of her he knew was her facade he saw in his years of spying. As he picked up her bow, Zi Lan finally understood why Yan Zhi had pushed him away. Because of his desperation and self-loathing, he had not taken into account what her words really meant. She did not speak of them as lovers because he had never treated her as one. His will to draw a line between them had made her believe he did not desire her, even though he had previously confessed to her.



Now that he knew she required confirmation of his love for her, he would not let her run from him. Confessions would no longer work, because she did not believe him. Yet, her body responded each time he held her in his arms, even when her will to deny her feelings persisted. Yan Zhi had bared her soul to him, but back then, he hadn't had the courage to accept her. Now, he would not cowardly wait for her to take the first step, as he had in the past. The days of uncertainty would end. He would show her how much he wanted her, as a woman. His woman.

Meeting Yan Zhi was his fate, protecting her was his choice, but falling in love with her was beyond his control. He did not need fate's sympathy, because she could no longer escape his embrace. No...he would not let her go. He would have her tremble beneath him, whisper his name, long for his touch. He would chase her, capture her, until she was ready to see the real him; the man who loved and desired her, for all eternity.

## *Chapter 41.5 ~ I won't apologize...*

Every day at Kunlun Mountain was a wonderful day, Qiao Er had decided. She was so happy they could stay at En Gong's home, even though mother kept reminding her it was only temporary. Qiao Er was accustomed to their constant moving, but she didn't want to leave this time. There didn't seem to be any scary black clad men around, she no longer dreamt of them, and her white-clad seniors never ceased to make her laugh with their teasing.

They often gave her treats. 7th and 10th Shi Shu for example would provide her with sweets when she would accompany them to visit the waterfalls. On several occasions, they would disappear while she was busy chasing the cranes. She wondered why they were so bad with directions, when she could so easily find her way back? Qiao Er even asked 6th Shi Shu to help her draw a map of Kunlun's waterfalls. 7th and 10th Shi Shu seemed puzzled yet smiled when she gifted it to them. They assured her they loved her gift but exchanged funny glances.

They were all wonderful and allowed her to study under them. She absolutely loved to learn. They each had their own specialty they wanted to share and so the list of lessons grew and grew every day. There were times they would play rock paper scissors to determine who could teach her. 11th and 14th Shi Shu especially never stopped bickering over her lessons, which made her laugh. She would sneak away while they were absorbed debating which of their skills were more appropriate for a young lady.

However, because of her love for numbers, Qiao Er always spent the better part of her morning on lessons with her favorite, yet stern 4th Shifu. He had officially made her his disciple. He was always very serious but smiled when she completed and understood her lesson. Today though he was busy - 5th Shi Shu had taken him away for an urgent matter. With nothing to do, Qiao Er thought to visit the kitchen to see if 2nd Shi Bo was making the delicious treats again and would let her lick off the spoons. But he was not there. Only 12th Shi Shu was present, working on some sort of sweet buns! Qiao Er was delighted when he invited her to assist him, and since he had extra dough, Qiao Er asked him to help her make rice buns for En Gong.

Once the buns were done, 12th Shi Shu helped her wrap them up. She immediately headed towards En Gong's quarters, carrying them proudly. When he had finally recovered from his injuries, he had surprised her during her lesson with 14th Shi Shu, who was teaching her weapon crafting. She had run into his arms and cried, while he held her tight and assured her

he would not make her worry again. She had known it was a promise he would not be able to keep, but she hadn't argued. En Gong was well now, and that was all that mattered.

Since then, he had put himself in charge of planning her lessons and would oversee who got to teach her what. Every evening, he stopped by the room she shared with her mom to have evening tea with them and review her lessons. Mother would busy herself with polishing weapons, saying very few words. Qiao Er didn't understand why Mother was so indifferent to En Gong when she was happy and pleasant with everyone else at Kunlun. Mother had been so worried when he was injured, but now that he was well again, she was avoiding him. Qiao Er thought this odd, she knew her Mother cared for En Gong just as much as he did for her. She wondered what made them so distant, and if there was any way she could help.

"Qiao Er," En Gong's voice caught her attention and she saw he was strolling towards her.

"En Gong!" Qiao Er ran into his arms and was picked up immediately.

"Little Dove, how are your lessons today?" he asked as he rubbed his nose against her, making her laugh.

She showed him the package in her hands. "I learned how to make sweet buns with 12th Shi Shu today."

He arched his head. "You're sure it's not 2nd Shi Bo?" he asked.

She nodded her head enthusiastically. "Yes, it was 12th Shi Shu who taught me. 2nd Shi Bo had some urgent business to attend to he said."

"Urgent business?"

"His swan is missing, he's looking for her," she explained.

"Aaahh, 2nd senior has been preoccupied lately with the injured Swan he's nursing."

"She's beautiful! Her feathers are lovely, especially the red ones on her side. She let me pet her too."

"Of course she did..." he smiled at her.

“En Gong, do you want to try the rice buns I made for you?” she asked.

Qiao Er pulled out a rice bun after he nodded. He took a bite and made a face.

“Are they good?” she asked anxiously.

He coughed after he swallowed. “Yes...but are you sure 12th Shi Shu helped you make this?”

“He did, I had to insist you prefer your rice buns dry, because he was reluctant at first,” she explained.

“I see...”

“En Gong, let’s find mother, I want her to try the sweet buns.”

His eyes sparkled at her suggestion. “That’s a grand idea. Let’s look for mom.”

“En Gong, you should look for mom. Qiao Er can prepare tea by herself, 7th Shi Shu taught me how to do it the other day.”

He smiled and pinched her cheek, making her laugh in return. “At this rate, you will take after 2nd senior with all the skills you have acquired at Kunlun.”

With that statement, En Gong left in search for Mother. Qiao Er hoped her sweet buns would help En Gong and Mother to talk and resolve their issues. Qiao Er then headed straight to 7th Shi Shu quarters to ask for a tea recommendation that would go well with the sweet buns. She hoped he would help her prepare the tea as well, because she really wasn’t good at it at all.

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Zi Lan hadn't known how famished he was until today. Pure primal craving, because the feast was now within his view, within his grasp. He longed to possess, to devour, to savor the inviting flesh... the pearl white delicate skin, covered in waves of water droplets, covering her where he wanted his mouth, making him envious. No... that wasn't it, instead he wanted to devour those twinkling droplets on the delicate nape of her neck, wanted to punish them for the privilege of touching her. What would he give to caress her silky softness again? He had sampled it only once, but it was so delicious, unimaginably addictive, continuing to haunt his sleepless nights. Since then, he could only dream - but how could dreams be compared to the reality before him. And he wanted...no... *needed* to taste her again, to quash the maddening yearning and hunger that was sharper than pain and continued to torment his soul.

Yan Zhi had found the secluded hot spring after her training session and was rewarding herself with the natural wonders of Kunlun, hidden among the rocks, shrubs, and luscious greens. Her thick braids were wrapped securely on her head and still untouched by the glistening misty dew of the hot spring. He saw glimpses of her radiant youthful smile, so cheerful and unguarded. Due to the hardship she had endured, it had become a rarity. Zi Lan missed the playful teasing smile she had used to give him daily in the mortal realm.

His Queen was glowing like a fairy who had just descended from the sky to enjoy the pleasure of a spring in the mortal realm. But this was no mortal hot spring, fortunately for him, or he would not have had the privilege to stumble upon a scene only mortal man could dream of. For the short time since his arrival, Zi Lan had positioned himself comfortably on the large bedrock and continued to gaze at her back. Maybe she would not notice his presence at all but spying on a beauty stealthily was a habit of the past. No... he would not hide from her.



"Yan Zhi," he called her, barely a whisper.

She froze at the sound of his voice, then swiftly turned around. After the initial shock, her eyes soon turned cold. He continued to smile at her, which earned him a scowl in return.

“Don’t mind me, please continue...” It would be a pity if she stopped.

“What are you doing here?” she asked tersely, retreating slowly to the other end of the spring.

“I came to inform you that Qiao Er made some delicious snacks for us. She’s preparing tea at the moment. I’m here to escort you back.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I don’t need an escort. Now please leave.”

“Why? It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“You...”

“But my memories are vague, I may need a refreshment,” he teased as he moved to the edge of the hot spring. Hunching down, he swirled one hand in the water. “In fact,” he looked at her, “I didn’t have the chance to see everything last time.”

“Don’t come any closer,” she warned.

He chuckled at her threat as his eyes swept over her exposed body under the glistening water. “Yan Zhi, your body is beautiful, even more so when you blush.”

Instead of scowling at his teasing, her eyes darkened. “As I recall, you were horrified last time,” she said stiffly.

Baffled by her statement, he frowned. “What? When?” he asked. But she remained silent. No...that couldn’t be?

Understanding dawning, he shook his head in disbelief. “You can’t mean...”

“I don’t need your apologies,” she quickly replied.

“Why would I need to apologize?” he countered.

She seemed shocked at his response. They both fell silent.

Yan Zhi took several deep breaths, restraining herself. “16th Disciple of Kunlun, what would it take for you to leave?” He had to grin at her attempt to bargain. His Queen may be angry, but she knew when to back down from a battle she couldn’t win.

“An intriguing idea. I wouldn’t mind joining in the hot spring,” her eyes flashed red at the suggestion and it made him chuckle. He arched his head to the side, gazing at her. “But I’m not that much of a rogue, taking advantage of a lady in such a state, although it is tempting...”

“Then what do you want?” she asked impatiently.

Zi Lan paused. His desire must have been obvious, because Yan Zhi blushed under his intense gaze.

But no... a man still had to be patient, and he was a man with restraint. Still, even patient men have yearnings.

“Let down your hair.” Zi Lan broke their silence.

“What?” she scowled.

“Let me wash it.” He immediately stood up.

“No!”

“Then let me watch,” he bargained, “I want nothing more than to watch you wash your hair, unbraided, loose, free flowing.”

“Are you mad?” she asked, baffled by the absurdity of his request.

“I am for you,” he answered fiercely. He turned back and settled down on the bedrock again. “I promise I won’t ask anything more than this.”

“You’ll leave once I do?” Her eyes narrowed with distrust.

"On my word, I vow to uphold the deal, but you can't rush. Take your time. I want to savor each strand."

"Now, you're being ridiculous."

"Do we have a bargain, my Queen?" he asked, unable to hold back his smile.

Yan Zhi's resistance was short-lived. She began to unwrap the braids on her head. Slow and meticulous, at the pace he had demanded. She soon became scarlet. Though the act itself was innocent, it turned scandalous under his passionate gaze. Zi Lan's intention had been to reward himself, but who could have known it was to become a punishment once the beauty before him began to unbraid her hair. She was a Goddess who bloomed within the mystic pond and its ascending mist. Her fingers delved between the lush wavy silk strands of midnight blue, slowly loosening her hair like he had instructed. Hair he had longed to touch all those years. Now he found himself jealous of her delicate fingers that had the privilege to caress the beautiful strands, still forbidden to his touch.

Yan Zhi dipped her head lightly in the water, letting the strands flow freely within the shimmering waves. He wanted to run his hands in the water, to lift up the soaked dark velvet, to caress the luscious soaked silk within his palms. They soon clung to her body, over her partially exposed breasts, thick damp strands grasped her porcelain skin like images from forbidden paintings. He could hardly breathe, or swallow, he found himself gasping for air.

Before he knew it, he found himself standing in front of her, ignoring the hot water that soaked his garments. She jumped slightly and retreated back against the rock wall behind her. She did not shriek, nor did she run. If she would had fought him, he would have taken his chances, but she didn't push him away. Defiant as she was, Yan Zhi stood her ground, not maidenly shy as he had expected. Her dark unwavering raven eyes held onto his, daring him to make his move. Every fiber in his bones demanded him to take her, but he could only stare at the fierce woman, who continued to challenge him.

Zi Lan held her gaze as he placed both hands on the rock wall behind her - daring her to make her escape. But she held on. A resilient willful woman, who would not back down from a battle of will. He admired her for it. He had underestimated her strength, believing he could make her yield to him. But no... she did not yield. How wondrous to learn this about her. As

vulnerable as she was in her glorious nakedness, it was he who had yielded to her commanding presence, who was held hostage by her unrelenting eyes that continued to sparkle through the mist surrounding them. Her rose lips were plump and inviting. He soon found himself panting with desire like an untried boy.

When had the tables turned? He did not know, but what kind of Commander was he if he couldn't win a battle he had started? If he conceded now, would it mean he had lost the war? That was when he noticed her beating heart that matched his own. Her breath had quickened, her body was flushed, her eyes searched his soul. She was more affected than she appeared. Encouraged by this discovery, he slowly leaned in, barely touching, his heart hammering as her jasmine-scent enraptured his mind. He was close, so close ... his body trembled from his restraint.

"How long do you intend to play this game?" Yan Zhi's voice broke him from his trance, halted his mission. Then he saw it, her smile...the same captivating smile he had yearned for all these years had appeared.

Delighted but confounded, he pulled back. "What do you mean?"

Yan Zhi cocked her head. Her alluring gaze now captured his soul. "I've done what you asked. Now leave," she demanded. He could feel the chill from her voice.

Zi Lan took a shivering breath. "Yan Zhi," he said hoarsely, aroused and pleading. His desperate lips hovered over hers.

But she placed her fingers on his uninvited quivering lips. "We made a deal, are you going to break your vow?" Her tone was calm yet powerful, with a hint of seduction, nearly pushing him over the edge.

A low growl escaped him, and he could feel her tremors as she pulled back her unsteady hand. But she did not budge. She was determined. Eyes closed, fists clenched, and with a will of steel he never knew he possessed, Zi Lan pushed himself away from the wall, away from the temptation that was about to destroy his honorable name.

Without another word, he swiftly jumped out of the hot spring and magically dried his clothes. Zi Lan was only a few steps away when he paused. He turned back to face Yan Zhi.

They were not finished, he still had to make one thing clear.

“You may not believe me, but that day, I thought I was dreaming.” Zi Lan smiled, yet his eyes remained pained. “Dreaming of a beautiful Goddess who could take away my nightmares. It was you, the woman I adore, the only one who can sooth away my demons. And in that state, I thought I took advantage of you. I was horrified by my own actions. But no...,” he shook his head, “I will not apologize. Because my only regret is that we could not finish.”

She guarded her feelings well, but she did look puzzled by his words. He left her to ponder his confessions.

Yan Zhi may have won and left him thoroughly defeated today; but despite losing, it was no crushing defeat. Zi Lan had been awarded a glimpse of her soul within the depth of her eyes. She was not a target nor a prize to be won. He had seen her strength and determination, true to her character, the hidden fiery blue gem of the Ghost Clan. The Princess Warrior he had had the chance to admire was an opponent he couldn't wait to battle. And battle her he would - and he would be damned if he'd lose their next round too. Even though ... would losing be so terrible?

## *Chapter 44 ~ The Jasmine Hairpin*

Yan Zhi thought of herself as patient. Yes, she had been a patient person throughout her life. With her family and even her subordinates, she had shown great restraint, even when they had been selfish, cold, and ruthless. In the mortal realms, she had been patient when dealing with unruly customers or perverts. She had shown restraint when her brothers had harmed each other, while doing all she could to subdue the damage as a bystander. She found virtue and control when she was able to hold back her negative emotions and clear her head of negative thoughts. Rage did not solve anything, as she had learned from observing her father, who had been an angry hostile man, only sometimes calmed by her presence.

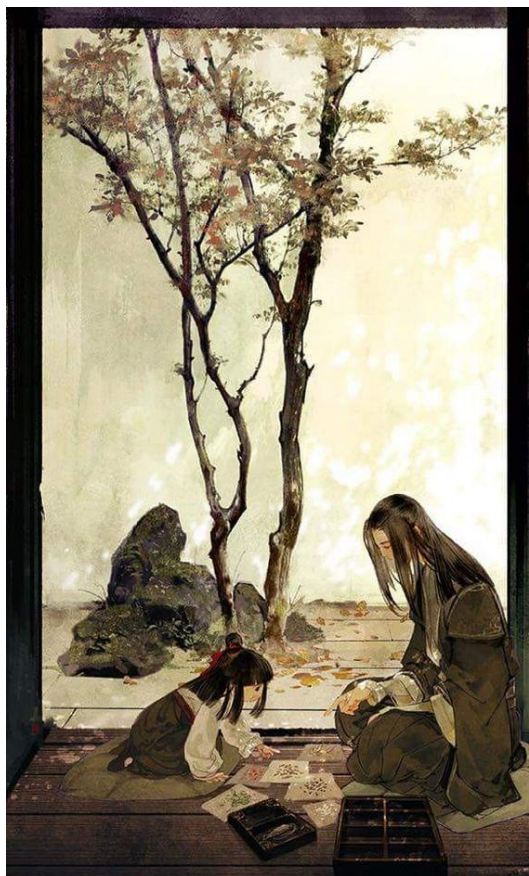
Despite being raised as the Warrior Princess of the Ghost Tribe, and personally killing thousands of immortals under her name, she had never felt rage during a kill. Adrenaline, yes, accomplishment, yes... but never anger. That emotion she found unsettling, and a weakness against opponents who did not thrive on emotions themselves. And in the years of fighting to protect herself and Qiao Er, she had found that detachment from one's kill was beneficial to one's ability to discern an opponent's next move. Remaining calm in the most dangerous situations had helped her to survive.

Today, however, she felt her Ghost blood burn in her veins - blood fueled by bloodlust and warrior's glory. Yan Zhi was ready to harm due to furious rage: today was the day she wanted to take a life. Like a thin silk thread that could no longer withstand the pressure or the lid on a teapot whose contents boiled over - her patience had run out.

And all this uncontrollable fury was because of one *man*.

The man who continued to play games with her emotions, seduce her heart, tease her body. The man who kept his mischievous smile, even when she held her blade against his throat on many occasions.

Whatever she did... he was never deterred.



For days he had been relentless. No matter how much she fought with him, he still persisted. The stubborn unforgivable man, who continued to haunt her dreams since the day he had made his intentions known, ignoring all propriety of a respectable Disciple of Kunlun. He was indeed not the man she'd known. He taunted, teased, bargained, and challenged her... no longer the noble reserved hero from before. He had not been toying with her when he had said he would no longer play the hero of her dreams.

Yet, he didn't go further when she stood her ground. Had he pushed her further, she may not have been able to resist him, but no matter how much of a rogue he had become, he would not cross the line. Yes, his tactics changed without warning daily. She could never anticipate his next move. One day he'd be flirtatious, playing the gentleman catering to her needs. The next day he'd attacked her, using the excuse of improving each other's martial arts. But worst of all, every day

he'd remain the perfect father figure for Qiao Er. They had bonded since he had come to the mortal realms to protect them, and that bond had grown ever since. Many times, had she wanted to put an end to it, but how could she when Qiao Er idolized her En Gong so much?

Today, he had been outrageous again. Yan Zhi had just finished tending to Qiao Er's hair before sending her to her morning lessons, when Zi Lan had entered their room unannounced. He had stood behind her while chatting cheerfully with Qiao Er.

"En Gong, what do you have in your hand?" Qiao Er asked enthusiastically and with anticipation.

Zi Lan smiled and opened the silk handkerchief he had in his hand. He knelt down to her level. "I went to mortal realms to have this specially made for you." He pulled out a small hairpin with a single white jasmine flower design.

"Jasmine! Mom's favorite...thank you En Gong!" She gave him a tight hug.

Zi Lan then placed the small hairpin on Qiao Er's head, the happy child falling for him even more. Yan Zhi could only watch, baffled...defeated.

"Is that one for mom?" Qiao Er's question to Zi Lan caught her by surprise. There was indeed another jasmine hairpin nestling within the silk handkerchief. A larger design, with three jasmine flowers at its end, white as snow. It was beautiful.

"Clever little one." He pinched her cheek playfully. "Do you want to see it on mom?" he asked Qiao Er but glanced at Yan Zhi with mischief in his eyes.

"Yes!" Qiao Er consented immediately.

Yan Zhi couldn't escape when he approached. Moving closer, Zi Lan did not touch her before explaining it was only to place the hairpin on her hair. When she tried to decline, Qiao Er's encouragement blocked her retreat. Relenting, Yan Zhi didn't think it would be much harm, but before she knew, it turned into an unexpectedly intimate moment, with intimacy she had not known she craved. His fingers touched her hair lightly with articulate and gentle skill, as he took his time to entice her, then he slid the hairpin into her braids. Distracted by the allure, Yan Zhi could only stare into his captivating gaze. When he tucked some loose hair behind her ear, his fingertip brushed the outer edge, tingling the surface of her delicate lobe, and hot color spread to her cheeks.

"Beautiful," he whispered, the edge of his thumb lightly tracing her jawline. Her breath caught. Yan Zhi recognized it too late as his form of seduction. She could only turn and usher Qiao Er away to get dressed for class, avoiding his gaze.

After Qiao Er was dressed and ready, she left for the lessons with scrolls in her hands. Yan Zhi sensed 16th's approach immediately after. She swiftly whipped around, pulled the hairpin from her braids, and held the sharp edge against his throat.

Surprised by her sudden attack, his brow furrowed. "Yan Zhi...?"

"How long are you going to continue your games?" she demanded icily, though flushed with anger.

Zi Lan glanced at the unexpected weapon at his throat. His usual smile did not appear, instead he frowned at her. "You are no game to me," he answered hoarsely.

"I don't believe you." She shook her head, her grip tight.

His gaze was dark yet perplexed. "Why?" he asked. He then took a step towards her, allowing the needle's edge to scrape his skin, forcing *her* to retreat. "What are you afraid of?"

Zi Lan took his chance at her momentary distraction, caught her wrist that held the hairpin, twisted her arm behind her back and pressed her against him. His lips were near her ears as she struggled against his grip. "I'm not playing games, I am dead serious."

Flushed at his response, she continued to struggle against his hard chest, but the infuriating man wouldn't budge. Zi Lan pulled back slightly, his smoky gaze held hers and continued to strip away her defenses. His silence became more maddening.

Before she could attempt to break away again, 12th Disciple entered the room.

"I apologize, I didn't mean to intrude. I'll come back later," he said, shocked yet smiling.

At Yan Zhi's continued struggling, Zi Lan reluctantly released her. She hurried towards 12th Disciple who was already about to retreat from the room.

"12th Disciple what do you need?" she asked breathlessly.

"Princess, I came to inform you that you have guests. They are waiting at Kunlun's gates."

"Thank you, I will see to my guests," she told him.

Yan Zhi was about to head out the door when Zi Lan grabbed her arm, forcing her to face him.

"You don't know who they are," he said with concern. "It could be the assassins!"

"I do," she said matter of factly. Glancing at the hand that held her arm, she coldly added, "and would you kindly remove your hand."

"I'll escort you," he insisted.

She tore her arm away from his grip. “No thank you, I feel much more comfortable unescorted,” she told him curtly.

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Since the death of Li Jing, the late and last King of the Ghost Tribe, the Ghost realm had never been the same. Without a royal heir to the throne, the new generation of young and ruthless Generals fought among themselves for hundreds of years of civil war. Nobody from another realm interfered because they either did not care, were weak themselves, or thought it beneficial to watch another clan slaughter and destroy itself.

But the destruction had never come, because the Ghost Clan remained a power to reckon with even in a time of weakness. To everyone's big surprise, the bloody civil war had ended within three days upon the appearance of mysterious shadow figures. This new powerful faction took control over the Ghost realm so quickly and swiftly that sources were unable to confirm what had really happened during those three days.

These shadow figures were called “The Elders” among their people. Little was known about them, because they had ceased to be involved in the politics of the Ghost realm many millennia ago. However, they had decided to surface to end the Ghost Clan destruction and made everybody feel the extent of their powers immediately. The Ghost Generals they selected to represent them were mere puppets who did their bidding. To everyone outside the Ghost realm, the turn of events at the time was perplexing and trustworthy information about the new holders of power impossible to obtain. A central figurehead would have been easier to assess and manage. But without the face or the name of a leader, the Ghost Clan became an enigma to them.

What Zi Lan knew was that the Elders had been observing Yan Zhi and Qiao Er. It wasn't just assassins that had come to haunt her in the mortal realms, but also a flood of messengers from her people, who had insisted Yan Zhi had to return at once. She had turned them down countless times. He was not surprised they had found her again in such a short amount of time. Ghost Clan spies were the best in all the realms.

After Yan Zhi had left, Zi Lan had quickly ascertained who those “guests” were. He had cloud jumped himself on top of Kunlun's gates and had hidden his presence, observing what was happening below. The same two generals that had brought messages before had arrived, only

this time, they did not look like they would leave easily. Their bodies were tense as they approached Yan Zhi.

“Your Highness,” they bowed respectfully.

“Generals.”

“Your Highness, we know we failed to protect you. That’s why you had to take refuge with the Celestials. We are ashamed you had to take such drastic measures,” one apologized, his bow even lower than before.

Yan Zhi sighed. “Generals, if you’re here to persuade me again, I told you, I will not return. Please tell the Elders...”

“Please your Highness, this is urgent,” the older general begged. “General Kai was murdered two days ago!”

“What? By whom?” her voice sounded alarmed by the news.

“It was an assassination, most likely instigated by the Yellow Demon King, cursed be his name. The Elders immediately ordered us to request your return. We can’t delay any longer. The longer we wait, the direr the situation will become for the Ghost realm. We fear they cannot control the situation any longer.”

She shook her head. “Generals, we all know the Elders are more capable than me in bringing peace to the Ghost realm. They have done so in the past and they can do so in the present.”

“Princess, the Elders insisted that only *you* can bring peace to our realms.”

“But I am far less powerful than they are.”

They immediately went to their knees, bowing to Yan Zhi once again. “Your Highness, it is not just the Elders who insist on your return. Your loyal subjects have waited so long for the day the Ghost realm can finally return to its former glory again,” the younger General insisted.

“Generals...”

“Please listen to us, there is more you need to know,” the older general beseeched her.

Yan Zhi was silent at first, but she soon relented to their plea. “Please continue.”

Zi Lan knew time was limited. Things had changed quite drastically in the Ghost realm as of late, they had heard. Cheng Yin was clearly the main culprit, but thanks to his slyness, his manipulations could not be tracked to him. Yet, it was him who needed a vast army and who had tried to get those who were unhappy about the rule of the Elders to join his side. Stability within the Ghost realm was not beneficial to him under these circumstances - only the dissatisfied would fight in wars that were not their own. He had taken drastic measures to sow discontent, had even tried to assassinate the legitimate heir. After the murder of one of the figureheads of the Ghost clan, The Elders were obviously in dire need of a central leader to capture the hearts of the masses and to ensure the further control of their people. That leader was Yan Zhi and her legitimacy to the throne.

Curiously, seeing how powerful the Elders were, why had they not taken the throne as their own? Were they friend or foe? Could they be trusted? Those were the questions forming in Zi Lan's head as he continued to listen to the Generals' further attempts of persuasion. He could tell by Yan Zhi's body language she was wavering, and his heart began to ache in knowledge of what was to come.

## *Chapter 44.5 ~ Ghost Generals*



Zi Lan observed how the Ghost Generals reluctantly departed. Yan Zhi remained at the gate, leaning against the door, contemplating her situation and her promise to them. He could only watch, but not interfere - the weight of her clan was on her shoulders now. His mind ran several scenarios, different paths she should take to remove herself from the dangerous and unsettling situation. But he knew she would not choose the path he would have chosen: The Warrior Princess he had come to know would never run from the danger before her. She would neither hide nor would she shrink from enemies out to do her harm. He loved and greatly admired this woman, but she also brought fear to his heart.

“You can come out now,” Yan Zhi called out to no other than him.

Zi Lan immediately cloud-jumped next to her. “You knew I was here?” he asked.

She turned to him with a rueful smile. “I’ve grown accustomed to your presence.”

His expression remained grim. “What are you going to do?” he asked, despite knowing her answer.

Eyes strained, she didn’t turn her gaze. “I still have a few days to make my decision,” she answered.

“You have already decided it seems,” he concluded.

"I told you..."

His body tensed, his fist clenched. "Don't go, it's not safe for you to go back."

Her eyes narrowed. "You already heard, Cheng Yin is suspected to have killed one of the loyal Generals. If I don't return, he will continue to assassinate those who support the Ghost Realm."

"What makes you think you are safe?" he demanded to know.

"I don't," she answered, barely a whisper.

"Then why?" he said exasperated.

"Running is no longer an answer under the new circumstances," she answered coolly.

"Qiao Er needs you."

"My people need me," she countered.

"Yan Zhi..."

"I'm tired of running," her voice cracked, "of being chased by assassins that continue to plague Qiao Er's dreams. Of being hunted by that vicious animal, who won't stop until we're dead."

"You are safe at Kunlun. We'll keep you safe."

Yan Zhi gave a cynical laugh.

"What?"

Her dark eyes glittered, and her tone changed. "I am not going to remain on this Mountain for the rest of my life, afraid of lurking monsters at its gates while my people are being slaughtered. And I don't need you to protect me like a damsel!"

"I don't mean..."

"I am the Ghost Princess, a Warrior, the last remaining pure blood descendant of the High God Qing Cang and the Heir to the Ghost Throne. It is time for me to accept my destiny," she proclaimed, commanding words so powerful it made him helpless.

"Then, let me come with you," he pleaded as he approached her.

"No," she shook her head and backed away from him.

He stopped. "Why not?" he demanded.

"You have no place in the Ghost Realm, my world, the world you despise," she replied scornfully, with an edge of anger.

"I don't...Yan Zhi...", he denied as he grabbed her wrist.

"Let me go...", she tried to yank her wrist away.

Zi Lan jerked her into his arms, his hands wrapped around her small slim waist, her softness molded against his hard body. She continued to grapple with his hold, but his grip was too tight, he couldn't let her go, no matter how much she struggled.

"Listen..." but she was beyond hearing, her fiery eyes pierced through him. He pressed her closer, felt her firm breasts pressed against him and his body started to shake from their intimate contact. She drew a startled breath and he saw the fullness of her lips part, seductive...inviting. Something primitive took over, a need so strong he could no longer hold back. He lifted her up and crushed his mouth to hers. She made a surprised sound and squirmed against his assault but soon went utterly still. Her lips felt like velvet rose petals...soft...cool yet so warm, like he had always imagined they would, but he had not taken into account how sweet her nectar would be. Hungrily, his mouth devoured her, urgent but gentle as his tongue swept over the edges of her luscious lips, tasting the sweet savory honey...addictive to his soul.

He groaned when he felt her lips move against his, her body straining upward in a helpless response. Encouraged, he slanted his head and increased the pressure of his mouth, forcing her to open hers more, making her bloom under his passionate expertise. Their tongue mated as they explored the caverns of their mouths for the first time. She gasped, quivered, and

whimpered. Her exquisite lips were so erotic and tender as she responded. Her delicate hands slid around his neck and he jerked in response to her touch. She pulled him closer, her caress burned his skin, inflamed by the unfilled desire he had held for so long. Not enough, he wanted more - his body began to throb, painfully so. Blood boiled within his veins as he held her tighter, welding her body against the hard ridge of his arousal. He felt her body shudder and then tremble when her arching body rocked against his.

“Yan Zhi...,” he groaned against her swollen lips.

But she stiffened at the sound of his voice, paralyzed, no longer responding. Zi Lan realized his mistake too late. Yet, she did not break free or resist... she was frozen in his arms.

Full of regret, he forced himself to stop, breathing heavily. He rested his head against her as they caught their breaths. Both shook from unfulfilled desire and frustration.

With shaky hands, he held her face, his tormented eyes scorching her soul. “I can’t let you go back to the dangerous territory without me. I told you, no matter what realms you’ll be in, I’ll still find you,” he pleaded, his voice raspy.

“The dangerous territory you are referring to is my home,” she stated, eyes narrowed. “A home I must return to now. I have abandoned my responsibilities to my people. I can no longer allow those who believe in me to suffer.”

“Why can’t I come with you?” he asked, his fingers brushed back her loose hair behind her ears.

“Because our fates are sealed...and it’s my destiny to return where I belong,” she answered with certainty as she struggled to regain her composure. She slowly transformed back into the headstrong cold warrior.

His gaze darkened. “Why should we care about destinies? If we have to wait for fate’s pity, we would still be separated. No...I come to you on my own. I fought for you. I’m not letting you go without a fight!” he shouted.

“Zi Lan...you’re hurting me.”

He cursed and immediately loosened his grip on her shoulders. Yan Zhi tried to turn away, but he pulled her into his arms again, embracing her tightly from behind. She didn't struggle.

"Yan Zhi..." he begged desperately, his body trembling from fear.

She squeezed the arms that held her. "Yes...you fought for me, and you came for me in the end," she said softly, her head shaking ever so lightly as she continued. "But it doesn't erase the fact that it was you who threw me out that day."

Zi Lan held her tighter as dread washed over him. "I was foolish, I promise I won't abandon you again," he swore.

"No... you won't." Her voice was barely a whisper. She pulled herself away from his arms and faced him, unshed tears in her eyes. "Because this time, I will be the one leaving," came the soft words that tore his heart out.

And he couldn't... he couldn't bear to see her cry. So, he let her leave, let her walk away from him once again. A reminder that it was he who had failed, because he could not cherish her enough. His failure to protect her had never been more obvious than now. Zi Lan had never felt so powerless as the woman he loved continued to suffer. Had they really tempted fate? Was it too late?

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It would take several days for the Ghost Army to make their way to Kunlun's gates. They would escort the Ghost Royalty back to the Ghost Realm. Their circumstances were still precarious, and the Elders did not want to take any chance with sudden attacks by assassins on the way. While waiting for their arrival, Yan Zhi had started packing their meager belongings. However, she had not breached the subject of their departure to Qiao Er just yet. Yan Zhi had decided that tonight would be the night she would explain their circumstances to her.

Qiao Er would cry and it pained her to hurt the child. But she would understand - had to. She also knew Zi Lan would not let her go easily, although he had avoided her since she had left him at the gate. She knew he was not someone who gave up when he set his mind to something, the stubborn foolish man, who still continued to plague her thoughts and dreams. She was afraid of the drastic measures he might take to stay with them.

Yan Zhi was still pondering and dreading the possibilities when 4th Disciple showed up with the sleeping Qiao Er in his arms, a grim expression on his face. At the unusual appearance, she hurried towards him. Qiao Er's eyes were swollen, she had been crying.

"How long has Qiao Er had her premonitions?" 4th asked once they had settled her in bed.

"How did you know?"

He sighed and looked at the sleeping child with concern, his large hand still holding hers. "Qiao Er told me about her dreams. In her dreams, she saw your guests arriving days ago - and they did. She dreamt she would be going to a scary world she doesn't know - and now you're leaving. She's afraid, she doesn't want to leave. She cried until she fell asleep in my arms today. When did she acquire such high powers?"

"I don't know, really, but it's probably been all her life. I didn't realize the significance until she was older and started talking about her nightmares," she answered as she touched the poor child's face.

"It must be how you knew when the assassins would appear? And why you moved so often to avoid them?" he deduced.

"Yes, but her dreams are not always premonitions, it's hard to tell the difference."

"Is it likely 16th knew as well?"

"He probably does, but of course, he never brought it up."

4th Disciple paused at the statement. His eyes searched hers before he continued, "My junior is very good at keeping things to himself. Although he is someone who seems lighthearted and likes to tease and play like Si Yin, our youngest, we have come to realize Zi Lan is a lot like Shifu."

Yan Zhi turned away from his gaze, uncomfortable now by the change of topic.

But he wasn't deterred. "Princess, I know it is not my place, and knowing 16th, he must have done or said some unforgivable things without thinking, but why can't you forgive him? Anyone here can tell both of you care for each other."

Her hands clenched involuntarily, but Yan Zhi held her composure before she answered. "Our time has passed...we are not fated and we're not his responsibility anymore."

"Do you really believe that? That he thought about both of you as his responsibility? He self-imposed his own severe punishment years ago, not once did he..." 4th suddenly cut off his sentence, realizing his mistake when he saw the confusion in her eyes.

"What punishment?" she asked, puzzled by his reaction.

"I misspoke...I have other duties to attend to, excuse me, Princess." He let go of Qiao Er's hand and headed towards the door, but she quickly blocked his path.

"4th Disciple, I know you're hiding something. Please be honest with me."

He looked at her, remaining silent. Kunlun brothers were very loyal and would even put their lives on the line for each other. She understood he didn't want to speak out of term, but she had to know. The suspicion she had felt since her arrival at Kunlun surfaced. Something was not adding up, and her instincts told her that Zi Lan was hiding something.

"What happened to Zi Lan's cultivation? I know he used some to make Qiao Er's elixir, but how much did he give up producing it?" It dawned on her that Qiao Er had grown much faster than a normal immortal child.

His eyes flashed with uncertainty. "I'm not at liberty to say...", he tried to explain.

"What punishment did you speak of?" she persisted. "What did Zi Lan do?"

"Princess..."

"What has everyone kept from me?"

"We..."

She forced him to face her. “Tell me, please. Don’t you believe it’s time for me to hear the truth? I will be leaving soon.”

His eyes were guarded, unsure. But she would not let 4th disciple leave before he spoke the truth. She was relieved when he finally nodded. But when he started speaking, 4th’s words were like daggers piercing her heart. The reality was far worse than what she could ever have imagined. Her stupid foolish man, how much had he hidden from her all this time? Would he ever have disclosed it if she had asked?

No... he would not have. Because he would never have let her know the suffering he had endured. In the end, he was true to his noble honorable self, no matter how much he played the rogue in her presence. He still wanted to be the hero...her hero. This revelation came at the worst possible timing. Then it struck her...fate was playing a joke on them.

## *Chapter 48 ~ My hero, my rogue...*



*NSFW*

It was one of those rare nights when deep darkness engulfed Kunlun Mountains, with no visible moonlight finding its way through the thick blanket of clouds. The sound of thunder could be heard from afar, bringing with it the sweet promise of thunderstorms, to ease the heat of the summer night. The pleasant cool breeze and the refreshing, life-giving rain would soon bathe the surface, a reminder that even during difficult times, change could arrive at the most unexpected moments.

Deep within the west corner of Kunlun Mountain lay the wine cellar, hidden away behind a door reachable only through a small narrow path flanked by stone walls. She had never been here before and it was not a place she would ever have ventured to on her own. Cautiously, she climbed down the stone stairs into the low-lit hall. The tunnel extended deeper into the cavern, with many individual caves appearing at both sides. Restlessly, she strolled further into the unknown depth. It was not the darkness of the night that bothered her - no, her uneasiness stemmed from the Phantom who hid himself away here. They had said he might be here, but they weren't sure. She however could no longer wait - time was not on their side, it never had been.

Finally, she saw the moving flicker of yellow light at the end of the hall. She could feel a cool breeze as she approached. This room was marginally brighter than the rest with rows of large

wine shelves in the center and with high open windows at the other end. This must be the wine tasting room - given away by the large amount of half opened bottles on the table, still fresh by the look of it. But, where was he?

Her Phantom must have heard her approach because she soon found herself seized and pinned against the stone wall. She gasped as he pressed his hard steel body against hers. The smell of intoxicating wine filled her senses. She sputtered in protest as he bent his head and put his lips against her neck. His hot breath made her shudder and squirm and he began to trace his lips over her throbbing, delicate neck. Suddenly, the tip of his electrifying tongue tingled her burning flesh, and her body jolted in response as little tremors ran through her body, inflamed by the intimate contact. She soon struggled against the solid unrelenting body, but it only made him groan, and he held her even tighter.

"I can't breathe..." she gasped, just as the first flash of lightning filled the room.

Zi Lan stiffened at the sound of her voice, his grip loosened, but he did not let her go. He lifted his head away from her neck and rested his forehead against hers.

"Yan Zhi..." he said, breathing heavily.

"Let go...go..." she tried to disentangle herself.

"Don't move!" he ordered. A flash of lightning brightened up the room once again. Fierce eyes captured hers, commanding words held her frozen. His breath was heavy, his body tense as he maintained control. Held hostage by his ominous, unspoken threats, she held back, but more for his sake than her own.

"Not yet...wait..." his harsh demand was more like a request, a plea. She could see much clearer now, because the candlelight shone brighter: his dark pupils were surrounded by a golden glow. Her tiger...he was on his last thread.

Swallowing hard, his expression turned to confusion. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you," she replied.

"Why?"

“You...you’ve been avoiding me,” she answered unsteadily.

His dark eyes couldn’t refute her statement. She felt his breath quicken. The sound of summer rain arrived outside the windows, easing the tension in the air - but not theirs. He slid his hand around her neck and his fingers delved into her hair. The atmosphere vibrated with countless emotions: desperation, doubt...passion. But most of all, desire...she could almost taste it. She wanted to purr against his exquisite touch as her eyes caught his lips. They were within reach, she could almost taste the nectar she had continued to refuse as his scent filled her nostrils, wine, sweat and a hint of mint. But instead, they stood frozen and stillness took hold of their bodies as their lurid desires slowly subsided.

Suddenly, he released her, and the room felt cold, empty...detached. Silence soon arrived, and the room grew thick with unbearable tension. Only the sound of the heavy rain reverberated outside, as the cool breeze enveloped the cavern.

When he spoke, his voice was controlled and deliberate. “You have to leave,” he demanded hoarsely.

“I don’t want to.”

His expression darkened. “I’m not giving you a choice,” he growled angrily. His wrath was so strong, she almost took a step back.

But no... she couldn’t...Yan Zhi had never seen him angry before. Zi Lan had never shown her this side of him, his flaws, his weaknesses, his fears. Intrigued by the discovery, she took a step towards him and his body tensed at her approach. She was undeterred, moving closer still because the need to heal, to soothe, it overwhelmed her judgement. The predator acted instinctively, swiftly like before, his large imposing body moving towards her like a tiger. She was forced to retreat until her back hit the stone wall behind her. Zi Lan braced his hands on both sides, imprisoning her with his powerful masculine form, his threatening eyes locked onto hers.

“Aren’t you afraid?” he whispered, his voice gentle, seductive, but carrying a warning nonetheless. The sound of the thunder and heavy rain resonated with their breaths, quickened by the awareness of their stirring passion, still unappeased to this day.

Her head shook. “No,” she answered stubbornly.

"You should be afraid," came his ragged growl - before he crushed her lips with his own. Startled, she jerked. It was not gentle, but harsh, even forceful as he laid claim to her. She instinctively fought against his grip, but to no avail. His furious lips continued to devour hers, demanding...forcing her lips apart as he drove his tongue in. Turning away in an attempt to escape his brutal assault brought no relief, he moved with her, angling his head, and, more intimately than before, ravished her like he was going to consume her. She whimpered as her heart hammered so loudly it was a deafening roar. Her body trembled, and she got light-headed because she forgot to breathe from his aggressive attack, but he caught her as her knees gave way. When Zi Lan pulled back, she saw the raw emotions in his eyes: regret, longing, anguish, and his silent plea.

Yan Zhi understood, but she couldn't do what he asked. "You can't scare me."

"I'm not going to stop," he warned with a husky ragged voice as the brightness of lightning filled the room again.

Her hands gently held his face, to ease the pain within him. His yearning, his need, his hunger, how much had he suffered in silence.

"Then don't stop," she told him.

Startled by her words, Zi Lan tried to pull back, but she wouldn't let him. Her hand gripped his neck as she forced his head down to hers, capturing his lips. He told her before, only *she* could vanquish his demons with her touch. She would not let him hide from her, nor would she allow him to escape, not tonight, no matter how *selfish* her actions had become.

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Zi Lan tried, desperately, to maintain his sanity...his honor, but he had lost the battle as soon as she captured his lips. He struggled against her hold, but she wouldn't let him go, relentless, persistent...and forever constant in her determination. Escape was no longer feasible when his Queen put her mind to it. Though intoxicated, he was not drunk. His mind demanded him to pull back, but how could he when she pressed her body against him, invitingly...willingly? His rationale slipped away. Excitement took hold as his pulse quickened and adrenaline rushed through his body. He had wanted this...no... *needed* this. He had craved her from the moment

they met. But he had been patient, waiting and longing for the day she would desire him again. Was this reality? Or was he dreaming again?

No, this was real. He knew from her reassuring touch as she turned aggressive and began to pull at his clothes. He was so enthralled by her caresses and kisses, he hadn't even realized she had already taken his outer garment off. Again, he had let his Queen do all the work, callous rogue that he was. The thought made him laugh against her passionate lips, when she had stripped away his second robe. He captured her wrists and held them over her head as he smiled at her confused look.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He chuckled at her expression. "I thought I'll be the one to ravish you, but you're already ahead of me."

"Because you're too slow," she scowled.

His smiling lips moved to her ears, he could feel her pulse quicken. "Yan Zhi.... I want to savor you slowly. You already won the battle. Let me please you..."

"No."

"Why?" he turned his head to face her.

Her expression was authoritative. "If you want to please, then put more effort into it," came the teasing yet wicked answer.

His initial intention was to be gentle, but his Queen's command awoke his primal instincts. Shocked but excited by her taunt, Zi Lan impulsively smothered her lips, devouring, tasting, and consuming her until she was out of breath. He removed her belt and began to strip her quickly, with her clawing at his clothes and skin simultaneously. Layer by layer, the garments fell to their feet. His mouth went dry at the sight of her exposed, glowing skin that he couldn't wait to ravish. Their bodies met in a full-length caress, melting together in fiery passion. He thrust his legs between hers, intimately locked, teasing her, but she squeezed her thighs against his in return. Smiling at her invitation, without pausing from his kiss, he lifted her up, with her legs wrapped around his waist.

Zi Lan gently placed her on the heavy shelf that held the large wine containers as she continued to feast on him, like he was a sacrifice to be devoured. One of his hands glided from her waist to her breast, his thumb caressed the hardened nub, making her quiver. She retaliated by biting his neck, his excitement further increasing when she traced her tongue over his burning flesh. She was on fire, and so was he. But he wanted more, more of her softness, her passion, her desire. But most importantly, he wanted to please her. Effort, she had said?

Abruptly, he stopped his embrace, her eyes narrowing at his action. Yes...the fierce blue fiery gems that continued to entice him. Smiling as he kneeled before her, he lifted her delicate thighs over his shoulders. Her body tensed, not because of shyness, but because she knew a challenge when it appeared. His Queen accepted it gracefully...like she had planned it all along, her eyes continued to command him. But it didn't matter because pleasing her was his goal. Battle or not, he would bring her pleasure.

Zi Lan breathed in her scent, absorbing the fragrance that was as life serving as mortal air itself. He began to nibble and lick on her inner thigh, tempting the exquisite flesh, which begged for his touch. When his mouth nudged the swollen folds of her sex, her body shuddered and quivered, her hands holding the shelf as her body arched in response. His tongue teasingly stroked the aching nub, making her clench, her moans music to his ears. Her folds moved against his mouth as her hips partially slipped off the shelf. She hung on, hands still holding the edge, while his hand slipped underneath her, guiding her rhythmically against his mouth as his tongue flirted with her swollen core. Her gasps and moans set his blood on fire. Wicked as he was, he did not allow her even a moment to pause. He was relentless with his assault as he continued to stroke and torment her twitching wet folds and her sensitive peak, until she cried out, her body shuddering with rapture. His mouth continued to draw every ripple of ecstasy from her body, until her weary flesh was emptied from the waves of sensation.

Pushing her hips back onto the shelf, he stood up and pulled her into a wet succulent kiss. He was ready, and so was she as they quivered from what was about to come. Her hand stroked and played with the tip of his shaft and it moistened with her touch. He gasped as she encircled her fingers over the sensitive head and his member became painfully engorged in her hands. Impatiently, he caught her wrists and placed them on the shelf above her head.

Their warring eyes locked, both refused to surrender, to submit, though the inevitable was what they both desired. He pulled her hips to the edge of the shelf, moving between her thighs. “Yan Zhi...,” he told her raspily. “Don’t let go.”

He pressed into her entrance with one swift move, pushing through her tightness towards her core. She cried out, her muscles instinctively grasped at the invasive but relentless intrusion to accommodate him. She was tight, too tight...but she did not release her grip. Her gaze was unrelenting, unyielding as primal craving took over their sanity. He withdrew momentarily, but plunged deeper, and he relished the sound of her incoherent gasp. He kissed her again, their lips mated. Hot... heavy...with the flexing of his hips, he entered swiftly and fully into her, catching her startled moan against his lips. He held her close. He told himself he was giving her time to adjust to him, but that was a lie. He didn’t want to wait, he wanted to take her fast and hard. He wanted her to moan his name repeatedly until she couldn’t cry it anymore.

Yan Zhi still held the edge of the shelf above her, her thighs against his hips. Their gaze locked passionately, he slid into her slowly and withdrew with the same slow pace, then he slammed into her core making her gasp and withdrew quickly. He then slipped into her entrance again, with the same slow, exquisite pace as before, withdrew slowly...and slowly entered...slowly pulled out, making her body shudder. Without warning, he thrust into her with two quick moves next, making her jump and cry in surprise.

Eyes still locked, he paced himself as he entered with three steady patient thrusts, then slammed into her with three quick strokes. Her body trembled from the force, her hands clenched the shelf above her. When dazed eyes narrowed at him, he gave her his devilish smile, earning a threatening expression in return. But it wasn’t just threats, it was mad yearning, vexation, and the realization that he had taken her challenge, and he didn’t take it lightly. He entered her body again, with leisurely patience as before, until the fourth count. He could hear her heart pounding, and he knew the moment she became aware of his torturous intentions. He must be a cruel man, he thought, because he smiled wickedly at her frustration and distress. Ruthlessly, he thrust hard into her entrance four straight consecutive times, her body shook, her breath caught, but she held on. His Queen wouldn’t beg, and he relished her perseverance.

Her unfaltering eyes further inflamed his passion.... again, he repeated the cycle. Slow followed by quick thrusts, again and again, increasing upon each count. The tortuous pattern he had created not only made her tremble and shudder in ecstasy, but his own body began to lose

control. The slow pace made them both quiver, their bodies begging for more, while his continuous fast thrusts shook her tight slippery core, clouding both their senses.

He lost counts of the number of cycles he had concluded, but at some point, her body continued to shudder, and she took him with her when her muscles grasped his shaft. As waves of ecstasy refused to subside, he thrust into her as many times as it took. As rapture of surging bliss consumed her body, she could no longer held onto the shelf above. He caught her before she fell backward, capturing her cries against his moan. Pressing her against his chest, her nails dug into his back as their bodies trembled, tensed, and shook and he spilled his warm essence deeply inside her.

A mixture of emotions overwhelmed, engulfed.... nearly suffocated their vulnerable spirits. Their sweaty, trembling bodies clung to each other in a protective embrace as they caught their breaths. Zi Lan pulled back and brushed her wet loose hair away from her flushed face. Her warm smile once again captured his soul. Tenderly, he carried her off the shelf, her arms draped over his shoulders intimately. He gently placed her on the soft seating area. He was about to lay her down, but her delicate but strong thighs tightened around his hip, and with one swift move, she changed their position, with her pinning him down.

“Yan Zhi...” came his ragged heavy voice. Surprised but enthralled, he could only look on, enjoying her irresistible body glowing above him in the flickering candle light.

She smiled brightly, and he saw a hint of the mischievous side he had missed so much. He wanted to capture her expression that very moment, so he tried to sit up to embrace her again, but her hand grabbed his neck and forced him back down. He couldn't rise without her tightening her hold on his throat. Yan Zhi leaned forward to capture his lips and his mouth welcomed hers. She was his whole world, strong, unyielding, even when she teasingly bit him. He loved that, he wanted to be devoured if she should choose to mark him. But she rewarded him instead, the tip of her tongue licking his wounded flesh. He moaned against her lips, his hand raising to touch her, but she grabbed his wrist, and pressed it down on the mat.

Playfully, she nipped on his chin, her other hand still tight on his neck. Her firm gaze continued to dance with merriment. “Don't move,” she ordered. Understanding dawned and he lay still at her command.

A triumphant gleam entered her eyes. Releasing her hold on his throat when she saw his compliance, she moved to his neck and inhaled his scent. Her breath made him shiver as Yan

Zhi continued to trail feather-like kisses on his body. He knew her tender touch was just a ploy. She would punish him soon enough. As if on cue, he grunted when her teeth clenched down on his shoulder, with her tongue laving soothingly over his sensitive flesh shortly after. He wondered how much she would mark him until she was satisfied. When she ground her pelvis against him, the drive to take back control nearly overpowered his senses.

But he couldn't...he wouldn't. His Queen's need, her desire, her command would not be thwarted. It was time for him to pay the *price*, though *his punishment* may be more rewarding than he deserved.

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#### *Flashback with 4th Disciple*

"After Shifu's return, Zi Lan exiled himself to the Sea of Innocence," 4th Disciple paused, followed by a sigh before he continued, "as self-punishment for creating the forbidden elixir."

"Exiled...but I don't understand," her head shook at the knowledge, "he was here when I came with Qiao Er 3 years later."

"3 years?" He asked, perplexed by her statement, but his eyes widened in understanding shortly after. "Then you must have caught him when he came back informing Shifu of the Crown Prince's awakening. He stayed a short period before his return to the Sea of Innocence."

*But he's back now...*

"How long was he at the Sea of Innocence?"

"Until Si Yin's wedding with the Crown Prince 200 years later. Shifu found out the reason behind 16th's self-exile and pardoned his actions."

*200 years...*

"His cultivation...how much did Zi Lan lose?" she asked unevenly.

“He never disclosed it to us, but from what we could tell, 16th must have used at least half for the elixir.”

“Half?” she whispered as her throat clenched.

“Yes...half. But Zi Lan has been cultivating extensively in order to recover it,” 4th disciple said reassuringly.

“He fought the assassins with just half?!”

“Princess, please don’t be distressed. Zi Lan has regained much more since his return. Shifu trained 16th himself. The God of War did not let cultivation play a role in his rigorous training and Zi Lan is persistent and headstrong. His efforts paid off because of his tenacity, his martial arts may have already surpassed ours, his seniors’.”

Her eyes closed as she reflected upon the secrets he had kept. “He never told me...” came the hoarse whisper.

“No, he wouldn’t.” 4th Disciple shook his head, he gave a wary smile. “When Shifu and 17th went missing, he alone took on the responsibility of searching for them. As his seniors, we have failed to watch over him. But, that’s our 16th, who will carry the weight and burden of those he cares for on his own. Silently...even to this day.”

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*Present time...*

Sitting up against the stone wall, lightly clothed in her undergarments, Yan Zhi gazed at the dark sky outside. The thunderstorm had passed as quickly as it had arrived. The sky had cleared, with only a half crescent moon lighting the dark cellar. The candles had burnt out, allowing darkness to descend upon them. The only sound now was the breeze of Kunlun Mountain and the whispering of waterfalls in the distance. Zi Lan was asleep peacefully with his head on her lap, her hand tenderly stroking the side of his neck, as if to chase away any nightmares that may appear.

She pulled up the blanket to cover his shoulders, the one he had conjured for them, moments before he pulled her close. With her wrapped gently in his arms, he soon fell asleep, as though all his worries had slipped away.

She didn't want this night to end. She was *selfish* once again.

As she continued to sooth and caress him with her touch, her thoughts turned to their past and their uncertain future.

*I understand now. That day...you had to let me go. You didn't want me to know about your return to the Sea of Innocence. For hundreds of years you have punished yourself...for opening your heart to the daughter of your enemy.*

Pausing in mid-caress, she smiled through her unshed tears. "As much as you tried to pretend, you have never changed."

*My hero, my rogue...my foolish noble love.*

"How much have you suffered because of me?"

Gently, yet determined, she eased Zi Lan off her lap, her body still aching and sore from their intimacy. Quietly and unwavering, she dressed herself, ignoring the lump in her throat. Once done, she kneeled next to Zi Lan, who was still soundly asleep. With the back of her hand she gently caressed his face, extremely startled when he suddenly grabbed her hand.

"Yan Zhi..." he murmured in his sleep, unconsciously tightening his hold. Her breath caught at his action.

Gathering her courage as her heart continued to ache, she slid off the jasmine hairpin from her braids and slipped it into the hand that held hers.

"Don't come for me," she whispered into his ears before slipping away, into the darkness of the night.

## *Chapter 57 ~ Ghost Realm*

### *Early Morning*

Clashing, banging, clanking.... sounds from the distant past, yet so intimately familiar. The smell of sweat, leather, and spilled blood filled the training arena, bringing back memories she had once wanted to suppress. But no more, because right now, at the Ziming Palace Arena, she felt more alive and more invigorated than before leaving this place centuries ago. Yan Zhi sat on the high podium with her trusted Generals, enjoying her breakfast, as they watched the new recruits practicing their martial arts below them at the break of dawn.

For the past three days, the warriors had arrived in large numbers from all corners of the realm. Children of Ghost Warriors were trained as soon as they could yield a dagger, it being the only life they knew. Unlike other Clans who valued individual success or enjoyed the comfort of luxuries, these things had never been of interest to the Warrior Clan. The thirst for battles, the thirst for recognition was in their blood. Born to be warriors, worshiping the old gods whose presence was still felt within them, all descendants knew they were to prove themselves to the royals and their ancestors.

By passing of the royal decree, no matter which tribe or status, they were given the opportunity to prove their worth. Selection was rigorous. The trials were overseen by General Zhao, who had become the youngest General of his generation at only 98,000 years of age. Though large, energetic and hot tempered at times - and initially reluctant to leave his own soldiers to work exclusively under Royal Command - he was hard but fair and remained steady in the training he provided.

Yan Zhi observed the sparring from her throne. The noise provided a perfect opportunity to discuss politics, since it was making it impossible for potential spies to overhear much. "The turnout is higher than I expected. I thought the war would affect the numbers negatively."

"These are the daughters of the most outstanding warriors of our time. When they heard about your decree, they rushed here to participate from all corners of our realm. Never before have we made such specific requirements, it surprised the warriors and even some generals," said General Yang, the most diplomatic of the lot.

He was from the new generation of warriors who desired change in Ghost Realm Politics, holding a strong belief in returning to the Glory Days under her father's rule. His respect for the royal bloodline and ancestry had never faltered, and he was the first General who sought her out in the mortal realm.

Yan Zhi turned to General Hu on her other side. "Continue to gather information about their backgrounds, leave no stone unturned. I don't want any surprises from our recruits."

"Yes, Your Highness, the new intel will be delivered to the palace this afternoon," he answered, while enjoying the hearty breakfast in front of him.

General Hu might look easy going, but he was a sly and cautious man, overseeing the royal family's spy network for many millennia. Himself an excellent spy in his youth, he could change his personality at will, depending on what circumstances demanded. He was a great judge of character and enjoyed finding out about the weaknesses of others, more so for personal pleasure than for the mission. He often said that there was nothing more valuable than information, and weaknesses could turn the tide of any battle.

"The other Generals, what is their status?"

"We have identified those who have an interest in siding with Cheng Yin - one of them must be responsible for ambushing General Kai. We also found out that the Demon Yellow King has delivered weapons to our border."

"Weapons?" Yan Zhi scowled. "Of course, an easy bribe for blood-lusting warriors. Cheng Yin always knows what to offer to entice people." The generals nodded in agreement. They all knew they had limited time for preparation, given the traitors had support from the outside.

She changed the topic to what they could control. "We need the tally of our breeding progress, as General Zhao suggested this morning. It is one of the few advantages we have, unless our numbers are still low."

"Using free roaming beasts is an option, but it'll take some time to tame them," General Yang added. Yes, free roaming beasts were indeed a great option. Before the Ghost Tribe started breeding their beasts, they were caught in the wild and tamed to submit to their masters. For millennia, this practice was no longer followed, although it was well known that wild beasts were much more powerful than the ones reared from birth.

"We may have to resort to that, although it would be much more dangerous. Gather the best hunters for the task," Yan Zhi ordered as she continued to observe the practice below. General Zhao had knocked down four more opponents. They got up again and renewed their efforts. "And our spies?" she asked without taking her eyes off the fight.

"They still continue to monitor the situation in the Celestial and Demon Realms. War is imminent, no doubt about it. Both sides seem to be just waiting for the opponent to light the spark," General Hu answered.

General Yang shook his head with a cynical laugh. "It no longer matters who shoots the *first* arrow, but the overall outcome will depend on *us*."

"Since the end of civil war, we have focused on amassing our powers. We've been avoiding conflict or taking sides at the discretion of the Elders," General Hu explained to Yan Zhi.

"Avoiding conflict is strange for a warrior clan. No wonder outsiders can easily manipulate us when our warriors thirst for battle," General Yang said with an edge of anger, making Yan Zhi wince inwardly.

They fell silent, General Hu glared at General Yang, who immediately realized he had misstepped.

"Your Highness, I apologize for speaking out of turn," General Yang bowed.

"No, it was I who has failed our people. The Elders can only do so much to restore our glory."

Despite everything, the Elders were correct. The Ghost realm had been damaged by several wars. Although they were powerful, their numbers had been reduced. Time had been needed to train the new generations of Ghost Warriors, and unnecessary battles would only have done more harm than good.

"Your Highness, another matter: Star Lord Si Ming has come once again to seek an audience."

Her tea cup paused halfway to her mouth before she answered. "Tell him I am unavailable."

General Hu was puzzled by her answer. Seeing that, she further clarified: “For the time being, we do not meet with messengers from the Celestial nor the Demon Realms. Not until our situation stabilizes. Our clan had enough of them pulling strings at their will.”

“Understood. But your Highness, what about an alliance in the future?”

“Whether Demons or Celestial, they will have to earn our trust if they want an alliance. We could neither...”

“Get up!” shouted the ill-tempered General Zhao from below, interrupting their discussion. General Zhao had knocked down the remaining opponents. The female warriors all grunted in pain from the impact.

“Pick up the Qiangs,” he ordered them. The recruits now trembled in fear from the large, angry, towering man, who could easily crush them.

“General, we’re not familiar with the weapon.”

“How do we compete when we’re not experts?”

“Would that matter if that were the only available weapon?” he asked the recruits.

“No.”

“Then pick up the Qiangs.”

The three reluctant young warriors did and fought with all they could, but they soon fell to the ground again, after their weapons were swiftly taken away, and thrown dangerously near their feet. Fearing for their lives, they immediately bowed.

“We apologize for our failure! We will receive any punishment, please don’t make us leave!”

“Who said for you to leave?” he asked.

They stared at him, an expression of confusion crossing their faces.

General Zhao sighed, before starting to chastise them: “An expert in any subject was once a beginner. I expect each and every one of you to excel at what you know best, but also at your worst subject. One does not improve if one does not overcome one’s failures. Do you understand?”

“Yes, General Zhao!”

“Pick up the weapon you’re most reluctant to hold. You have seven days to practice before your next exercise. And if you’re not an expert by then, I suggest you pack your bags and buzz off,” General Zhao roared so loudly, the arena went silent before everyone dropped the weapons they had in their hand and went to grab a new weapon as they had been told.

Yan Zhi observed the scene below her. She had agreed not to interfere, before the recruits’ arrival. She turned to General Hu. “I have to give you credit for recruiting General Zhao to train our special troops. But I am curious, how did you make him agree so readily, given his personality?”

“Your Highness, as you well know, nothing gets past our spies, and everyone has a weakness,” General Hu answered with a shrug.

Yan Zhi arched her brows at him and the General chuckled. “In the case of General Zhao,” he continued, his gaze now turned in the direction of the Xiu Sisters, who were training by themselves in the left corner, “I was reminded that no man can refuse a chance to be close to the one who has captured his heart.”

It took a few moments, but Yan Zhi finally noticed. It was subtle, but General Zhao did pause a few times during the training to look in the direction of the Xiu Sisters, the daughters of General Kai, who were now practicing with their Butterfly Swords. So, this was his weakness! She wondered which of the sisters he had designs for and couldn’t help but smile at the young energetic General.

A man will do anything for the woman he loves, even going against his way of life. General Zhao had always preferred to train his own warriors as he saw fit. He was what most would call a free spirited nomadic warrior, who scorned the idea of staying in the same place for too long. Who would had thought he would change his ways for a *woman*?

Still, Yan Zhi knew too well, when it came to the matters of the *heart*, a man would move mountains and rivers just for a chance to be near the woman he adored. That thought made her think of Zi Lan. She had left him without a true word of goodbye. Knowing him, he must have been furious once he found out she was gone. Yan Zhi wondered what measures he'd take once he was fully recovered, and what she would have to do to keep him away from danger.

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### *Early Afternoon*

Within the *Forest of the Dead* lay the Ghost Clan Royal Cemetery, which had not received care or the touch of kin for centuries. It was in a state of neglect, nature had taken hold, and it was barely recognizable when she arrived. Yan Zhi used her magic to clear off the weeds and other vegetation from her family's tombstones. Setting the offerings for each of the graves and burning incense for the lost souls who might still linger, Yan Zhi and Qiao Er knelt before her brother and sister in law's grave.

"Er Ge, Er Sao, we're here," she turned to Qiao Er and handed her three burning incense sticks.

"Father, mother....Qiao Er is here to offer her filial piety. Thank you for offering life to me," Qiao Er placed the incense on the ground, and bowed to her parents three times as instructed.

When Qiao Er was old enough to understand, Yan Zhi had told her she wasn't her real mother. What she hadn't expected was Qiao Er insisting on calling her Mother nonetheless, because she was the only mom she knew and loved. Thus, they remained mother and daughter to this day. The child was her light and joy, the precious gift from her brother and sister-in-law.

On the day of their return, they had been welcomed by all the Generals of the realm. An ancestral ceremony was held, with High Priests from all corners of the Ghost Realm taking part in welcoming the royal bloodline and legitimizing their rule. The land was filled with purple smoke and fire, signaling acceptance of the people.

Qiao Er was nervous at first. She had never been to the Grand Ziming Palace before, which was filled with hardy Warriors, a frightening place if one was not raised there. She feared the men in black clothing and the horns that protruded from their faces, until Yan Zhi showed her

that she too had their tribe's horns on her forehead. Qiao Er had two small ones, reminding Yan Zhi of Li Jing's. The brave child even laughed at her own unique look and accepted her title as the Ghost Princess with grace. She had soon learned to get her way with just a few witty words, which again reminded Yan Zhi so much of her brother when he was young.

Yan Zhi had been anxious about how well the child would adjust to the new environment. However, even though Qiao Er had a tendency to be over-cautious at times, she learned to adapt quickly, courtesy of the ghost blood in her: Ghosts were an adaptable clan who thrived in all environments. Her nightmares had yet to return, which was a great relief, seeing how they desperately needed to prepare or better prevent another Civil War, with enemies hiding in their ranks.

Therefore, before their situation had been sufficiently stabilized, Yan Zhi had not been able to bring Qiao Er to the ancestral cemetery. Now, they were finally here - and unchecked emotions she had wished to suppress could no longer be contained. Her thoughts turned to the last moment before Er Ge's sacrifice to stop their father, to his last words that still haunted her to this day.

*"I entrust my child to you."*

*"You'll soon be the last Royal Family Member of the Grand Ziming Palace."*

*"I also entrust the Ghost Realm to you."*

Over 700 years ago, after Er Ge had placed the sleeping spell on her, he had his Qilin and the soldiers lock her and Qiao Er up in the Arctic Land prison. During those seven days, hope and fear had intermingled. She had prayed for his success, and that no harm would come to her brother, because Qiao Er needed a father, and she too needed her only kin. But Yan Zhi also knew that the worst would come when he spoke those departing words to her. Yan Zhi had begged the soldiers to let her out, to stop her Li Jing from his suicide mission, her father was too powerful, too dangerous. But they had refused to release her, as was their duty.

Once the 7th day was reached, she had sped back home. Her world had collapsed when she had seen Er Ge's body by the ceremonial platform. She had broken down, cradling his limp body in her arms - and she knew, her father had killed Er Ge, his last and only son. The thirst for revenge had overcome his familial instinct. The realization that she had not been able to

stop her family from slaughtering each other was a crushing defeat. Who was she to rule the Ghost Realm, when she couldn't even protect her own family?

Yan Zhi had left with Qiao Er soon after she had lain her brother to rest next to his wife. She had abandoned the little Qilin, because he had made a promise with Er Ge to help her ascend the throne. But it was a throne she didn't want, nor felt suited for. But now that she was back here, Qilin, who had waited patiently for her return, had insisted to never leave her side again. Since Qilins brought fortune to those he wished to serve, Yan Zhi had assigned him to protect Qiao Er.

With three incenses in her hands, Yan Zhi knelt before her brother's grave, with Qiao Er and Qilin by her sides.

"Er Ge, forgive me, it took me so long to return with Qiao Er. You had placed your trust in me, but I have failed you. I didn't understand then, but I do now. I will protect our clan in your stead. Please rest in peace with Er Sao."

Placing the incense on the ground, she bowed before her deceased elders. She used to think the Grand Ziming Palace was where humanity was stripped away from everyone, but those days were past. This was her home, it had always been, and she would remain here until the day she died. No longer would her people kneel in front of other Clans. As the future Queen of the Ghost Realm, she would rule, lead, protect, and make her people proud of their lineage.

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### *Late Afternoon*

Yan Zhi, dressed in battle armor, climbed on her horse, with her gear secured behind her. Turning to her attendants, she looked at Qilin and the Xiu Sisters, the personal royal guards of Ziming Palace she had assigned to Qiao Er.

They were the infamous five daughters of General Kai, who sought to serve her upon the first day of their arrival, with their mother's blessing. General Kai, unlike other men of the Ghost Clan was a faithful man, who only wanted one spouse and no other consorts. Although his choice to remain faithful was often mocked by other Generals in the past, he was still highly respected due to his accomplishment in battles, his loyalty, and because his daughters were not to be trifled with.

His wife, Lady Ling, was a frail yet determined woman, who did all she could to produce a son who could one day lead his own army. But they had sired five strong warrior daughters instead, all named after the flower Hydrangea (绣 Xiu), Lady Ling's favorite, symbolizing love, gratitude, and enlightenment. Xiu Yin (银 Silver), Xiu Li (栗 Maroon), Xiu Tao (桃 Pink), Xiu Lan (蓝 Blue), and Xiu Zi (紫 Purple) were all born before the family was finally blessed with a male heir - a boy much younger than his five warrior sisters, in fact, he was near Qiao Er's age.

Yan Zhi turned her attention to the oldest, but smallest in stature compared to the rest of her siblings. "Look after the Princess. Qiao Er should continue her riding and magic lessons. I am going to see the Elders."

"Yes, your Highness," Xiu Yin bowed without further words. She had asked on several occasions to come along as her bodyguard, but Yan Zhi had firmly refused.

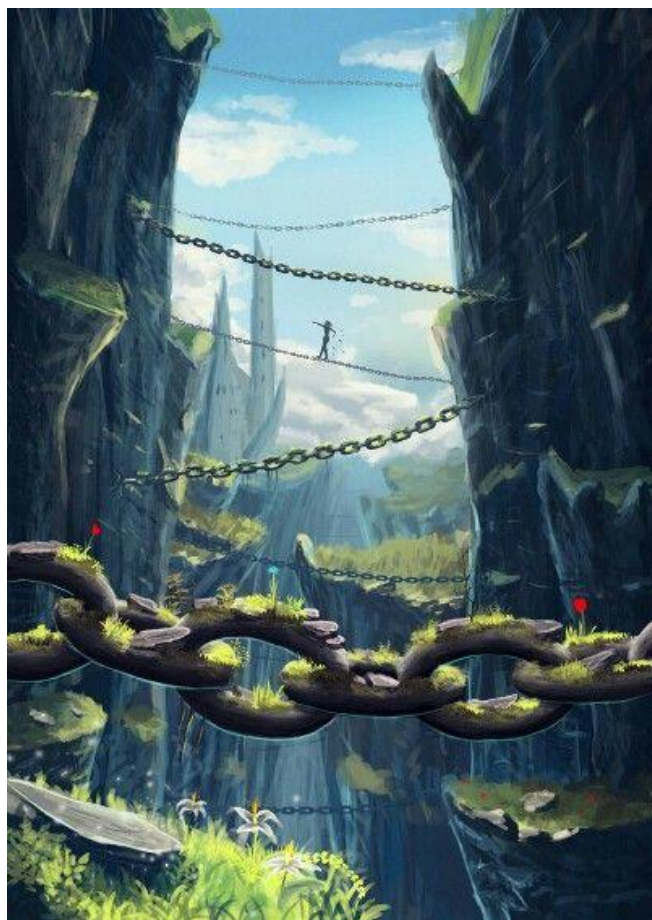
With a nod of dismissal, she galloped towards the open Valley. Upon the first five days of her arrival, she had listened to the intelligence collected about the Demons, Celestials, and Fox Clans. While the Celestials might look outwardly peaceful, they were always prepared for war. The Demon Clan was as well, itching for revenge. Cheng Yin had emerged as a figurehead of the Demon cause before even the Ancestor's return, a man very hungry for power, and quite obviously also meddling with Ghost politics. Now that Yan Zhi was back, there was no time to waste: She and her trusted allies had to stop the Ghost traitors who were amassing their own powers and might attack at any times.

She could only trust a few of the Generals, but thanks to the Elder's control, it had not gotten out of hand. If not for the Elder's intervention, the Ghost Tribe would have been wiped out when Yan Zhi had left. Whatever their demands, she felt she had to comply, because she owed a great debt to them.

Now, Yan Zhi arrived at her destination. She climbed off her horse at the entrance to the valley. Yan Zhi readied her equipment. She took her bow and plenty of arrows, tied a long dagger to her waist, and hid smaller ones on her body. Cautiously, she crossed into the hostile territory. She had not even passed twenty yards when magical vines shot out from all sides.

She jumped and dodged their attacks as she cut them down with her dagger. This, she had practiced many times before, and she easily passed through the first trap.

Not long after Yan Zhi left the magical vines' territory, large, closed mallows surrounded her path. The deadly red hibiscus soon sensed her presence, but she shot them with her arrows in every direction before they could open their petals. However, her speed was insufficient, a few managed to bloom and started to shoot out deadly darts, aimed at body heat. Leaping and jumping forward, she continued to shoot at the deadly flowers. An opening behind the trees! She swiftly leapt through, spinning around, swatting down the darts with the rotation of her bow. Too late, she noticed that one had already pierced her shoulder.



Upon landing on the edge of the water, her gaze swept over the large lotus leaves in the pond. She started to leap over, using the leaves to land her steps. Water started to shoot up like a geyser in her path. Pivoting to her left, she moved around it, but another blocked her path again, forcing her to double back, making her come upon another geyser from beneath, damaging her qi. Undeterred, she zigzagged and bounced over the lotus leaves, dodging the water expertly. Her timing had much improved, Yan Zhi managed to land her feet on dry ground again.

Next up was the silkworm maze, her favorite. Passing through such a maze required excellent balance and maneuvering skills. She had been hit thrice so far, but the injuries were manageable. The forest was still vast, and she already knew the four routes ahead. Let's see

how far she would manage today. Yan Zhi checked on her weapons one last time, before heading forward.

## *Chapter 59 ~ Foolish Man*

Once again, she was back at the entrance. Ten days...and she had not even gotten halfway. But she was fortunate, she told herself. Because of the training she had received at Kunlun with the Demon Ancestor, and because of Kunlun's power suppression that had forced her to excel, her agility and speed had improved exponentially. If not, she would never have made it this far.

The first day, when she had been completely unprepared for the ambushes, she had only managed to clear a couple of hundred yards, and then was quickly thrown back by the force of the magical vines. The shields here were so strong, cloud jumping was not an option.

Frustrated at her failure, she had thought she could make it further, maybe halfway, but it was too difficult, with the magical traps. She had to head back to cultivate her magic that night in preparation for the next day. They were testing her, her commitment, her strengths. They wanted her to prove herself to them. Ancient beings that they were, their methods were still admirable.

Yan Zhi rode her horse back to Grand Ziming Palace by nightfall and was welcomed by the unusually anxious Xiu Sisters. Fearing the worst, she hurriedly climbed off her horse and ran straight to Xiu Yin, the eldest.

"What's wrong? Is it Qiao Er?"

"The Princess is safe... but your Highness, you have a guest."

"What? Who?"

She rushed towards her throne room before Xiu Yin could answer. Dumbstruck, she found Zi Lan sitting on her throne, with a sleeping Qiao Er on his lap, while Qilin, in his true form, was lying at his feet.

Zi Lan greeted her with his usual bright smile. "Qiao Er couldn't wait anymore. We've been practicing swordplay while you were out. I must have exhausted her." His relaxed demeanor never changed, despite this being enemy territory, and his hand continued to sooth the child in his arms, "I've never been to your home before. Si Yin told me that the flora and fauna are unique."

"As I recall, you drew a magical line at the border to prevent yourself from entering some time ago." Her cold reply didn't stop him from grinning broadly, infuriating her even more. "How did you get in?"

"I have my ways," he said, caressing Qiao Er's cheek.

Her fists clenched at the display before her.

"I just had to stay at the border for several days," he shrugged. "It didn't take her long to dream of me."

"Xiu Yin, escort the Princess to her room. Dismiss the rest of the guards."

Xiu Yin immediately removed Qiao Er from Zi Lan's arms, and hurriedly left the room with Qilin. They were alone now.

"Xiu Yin should not have let you in, what did you tell her?"

Zi Lan stood up, and with deliberate but casual strides, he strolled towards her. "That I cannot take credit for. Qiao Er was very good with her words. I think 5th senior has taught her a thing or two at Kunlun. And who can say no to our lovely daughter?"

Shocked by his statement, her voice increased in volume. "She's not your daughter!"

His gaze turned possessive. "She is, isn't she? Not by blood, but she has my cultivation," he argued, with an edge of underlying anger.

Unable to refute his twisted statement, she could only give him a reproachful glare. "May I remind you, this is my home, your powers are suppressed here."

He chuckled cynically at her threat and his smile never reached his eyes as he casually picked up his sword from the table. "I'm well aware of my situation."

Yan Zhi headed to the left wall, to remove the sword on display. "I can easily kick you out, you no longer have any advantage over me." Her expression challenged him, her sword rose.

Zi Lan smiled at the sharp object now aiming in his direction. "You can try. But you cannot get rid of me that easily," he drawled.

Without hesitation, he lunged at her, but she dodged to the side. It didn't take long for them to spar like they often had at Kunlun. The man was relentless when it came to what he wanted. She had always known he would eventually find a way to enter the Ghost Realm. He was the most stubborn man she had ever known, and that was something, given that she had grown up surrounded by stubborn men. But this was her realm, her territory, her home. He could not believe he could simply barge into her life as he pleased without consequences. She wouldn't make it easy on him. As their blades continued to clash, he was surprisingly quicker and stealthier than before. Yan Zhi sped up her movements, but before she could pull back, her sword had pierced his shoulder.

"Why have you not dodged?" she cried in shock.

Zi Lan looked at his own sword, then dropped it down to his feet. "As you said, my powers are suppressed here. The odds are against me when you decide to use yours."

"So, you let yourself get hurt?" she asked in bewilderment, still stunned by his recklessness.

Zi Lan glanced at his shoulder, the white garb now bathed in crimson blood. "I may need to recuperate now," he answered matter of factly, but the teasing spark never left his eyes.

"You planned this?" she accused him. Then he did the unthinkable; he held onto the sword embedded in his shoulder with one hand as he steadily walked towards her, forcing her to retreat.

"No..." his head shook, on his face an unfazed expression that continued to threaten her composure, "but I take every opportunity that presents itself."

Her back was now against the wall, she could not retreat any further. Her trembling hand still held the sword that continued to dig into his shoulder. "You're mad."

Undeterred, his gaze unwavering, he leaned closer, ignoring the blade in his shoulder and the cuts on his hand, blood continuing to ooze from his wounds. "Zi Lan, stop..." she released her hold on the sword, it clanked to the floor.

“Yan Zhi, let me stay by your side.” His fingers brushed her loose hair behind her ears, a feathery touch of tingling sensation. “I won’t let you run from me,” his hoarse voice turned seductive, alluring, and she found herself flushed from his bewitching words.

Gathering her senses from his heated gaze, she said: “You have to leave. It’s too dangerous for you here.”

“For you as well and for Qiao Er.” His dark eyes narrowed, his demeanor changed abruptly as he placed both hands on the wall, entrapping her. “I understand you have your duties and responsibilities, your people need you. I promise to stay out of your way. I’m here to assure Qiao Er’s safety, so your mind can be at ease. You need a trusted ally, so you can focus on reclaiming what is yours.”

“I have allies.”

“But you also have unknown enemies among them. You and I both know Cheng Yin has spies, lying in wait just for the opportunity to strike. Qiao Er is your weakness, and they know that. I’ll protect her. Even as her shadow.”

“But you’re already hurt,” she countered.

Zi Lan tried to stifle his chuckle, but to no avail. “As long as you don’t injure me anymore, I think I should be fine.” She scowled at him, but that only made him smile back at her. He suddenly leaned to the side of her face, his breath close to her ear.

“I am a good spy,” he whispered, his words devilishly enticing as he continued to tempt her resistance, “I watched you for many years, unnoticed. I am a valuable resource you can use and trust.”

Yan Zhi couldn’t argue with his logic. Zi Lan would indeed make a valuable resource, not least for intel from other realms she might have missed. As she was contemplating his words, he must have taken her silence as an invitation. His gaze lowered to her mouth. His hand grazed the side of her jaw, her chin was lifted ever so lightly, the pad of his thumb gently traced her lower lip, he was leaning closer...his tantalizing mouth came close to hers.... instinctively, her eyes fluttered shut.

“I need to get out of these clothes.”

What? Her eyes opened, confused. His head rested on her shoulder. Breathing heavily, he had finally succumbed to the pain from his injury.



“Qiao Er will cry if she sees me bloody again.”

Yan Zhi didn't know whether to cry or laugh, this man continued to baffle her with his actions. She held him close, allowing him to lean against her. “You foolish man.”

“Only when it comes to you,” he muffled those ridiculous yet tender words against her throat.

Yes, he would continue to be a fool. But he was *her* fool.

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Zi Lan held the elixir bottle tightly in his hand as he observed his surroundings. Yan Zhi had taken him to her chambers an incense earlier, then sent in her healer and her attendants in her stead. As usual, she was serene even when she was distressed. His Queen never ceased to amaze him with her ability to build a wall around herself wherever she went. Every cell in his body knew she was hiding something. He had caught a glimpse of it earlier, but as soon as she had realized, her shields had gone up again.

He was angry - his temper had been kept unchecked since he had awoken without her. He had only received the letter from 4th senior after he had found out she had departed that very night with Qiao Er. However, despite his initial fury at how she had left things between them, he was impressed by her accomplishments since her return.

The warriors here were devoted to their royals, expressed in how protective they were of Qiao Er. Ghost warriors were admirable for their unsurpassed loyalty, but they also were unpredictable, depending on where their loyalty lied. Yan Zhi must have anticipated this, she had managed to create her own personal troop of royal guards. All dressed in black with scarlet red stripes, they were female ghost warriors who had not hesitated to attack him when he came within sight. If not for Fiery Qilin's intervention and Qiao Er's slyness, he may have had sustained severe injuries when he fought against them. They were very well trained, but

their spirit energy was even more exceptional. They were fighting for something, unlike other warriors before them - he wondered what it was that Yan Zhi had discovered and harnessed.

Dressed only in his white undergarments, he waited after her healer had tended to his injuries, and her servants had removed his bloody clothing. When she returned, her garment had changed into a black dress with red linings. Her hair was partially up, with one thick braid over her shoulder. She had become even more breathtaking, beautiful, and comfortable in her own realm. Her radiant aura filled the room with her presence.

“Unfortunately, white garments are hard to find here. You will have to make due with these. Also you won’t stand out here,” she explained, holding dark blue garments in her hands.

He stood up, continuing to maintain control over his emotions for the moment. “Yan Zhi.”

“Don’t get up yet,” she said, but her worried soft voice only made him more determined, “you’re still injured, I’ll help you dress.”

He approached her. “Take off your clothes.”

“What?” Blanching, she backed away from him on instinct. “No.”

“I’ll do it if you won’t.” He captured her wrist, the garments in her hands dropped to their feet.

“Let go, wait!” there was panic in her voice.

He yanked her into his arms with her back to him. She tried to struggle but stopped when he grunted in pain. “Stop struggling or you’ll open my wounds.”

“Zi Lan, please don’t!”

But he didn’t listen, he couldn’t, when his senses were now overloaded with uncontrollable rage, anger, and frustration. He had to know. Ignoring her trembling body, he pulled at the collar of her garment with one quick move, exposing her shoulders and her back. As he had suspected, her body was bruised, cut and scarred. But it was far worse than he had imagined. He froze as he stared at her once flawless porcelain skin that was now battered with injuries.

“What are these?” He released her.

She turned to face him, her face white as sheets. She pulled her clothes back into place. "Zi Lan...how did you..."

"Your room is filled with hidden elixirs. Your movements are different - maybe others won't notice but I do. Even your *scent* is gone." His body trembled, infuriated by her continued reluctance to trust him. "These are days' worth of injuries. Even while training, you shouldn't sustain this many. Who hurt you?" he demanded to know.

"It's not what you think."

"Then tell me what to think!" he grabbed her shoulders. "You've only been back for half a moon's time, and your body is now covered in injuries. Did Cheng Yin send assassins again?"

"No."

"Then who?" She turned away from his gaze, and his eyes widened with understanding. "The Elders? How could they?" Zi Lan asked in disbelief. But her silence only enraged him more. "Why would they bring you back for this?" He grabbed her arm. "Get Qiao Er, we have to leave immediately."

She pulled him back before he could drag her away. "Zi Lan, stop! I'll explain everything."

He halted at her cry. Finally, the shields lifted, a truly *rare* occasion when it came to her. He had to relent, because she was willing to talk, and he *had* to hear what she had to say. With a willpower he couldn't possibly possess under the circumstance, he nodded reluctantly.

"Three days after my return, the Elders sent me an invitation to their place. The residence is the Valley of the Blue Moths, hidden deep within the Ghost realms. The most beautiful valley one could ever imagine, but the beauty is a just a facade - it is utterly deadly. No one dares to venture there. We grew up hearing stories that those who enter may not come out, or at minimum be heavily injured if they're lucky. The Valley is filled with magical traps, set to deter visitors. I've been trying to get there ever since, today will be the tenth day."

"Why would they invite you with the traps set in place?"

"It's my trial."

“Trial...,” he echoed, “You’ve had enough of a life’s trial.”

“No, I haven’t,” she argued. Her expression was pained, her eyes haunted, but she forced herself to continue. “I abandoned my people, my responsibilities. Innocent lives were lost because of me. And more souls will be lost if I don’t become stronger to defeat my enemies. The Elders have every right to test my resolve. This is nothing compared to what my people have suffered.”

“What makes you think you won’t die from this trial they set up?” he asked incredulously.

“The Elders won’t let it kill me,” she said with confidence.

“How do you know?”

“Each time I fail, I am transported back to the entrance of the Valley,” she explained. “They also provide elixirs for my injuries. They don’t plan to let me die.”

“Even so, you don’t need to gain cultivation this way. There are other ways.”

“No, this is the only way. I have to become powerful, fast, so I can protect my people. And the Elders are willing to help me reach my goal.”

“Yan Zhi, you can’t expect me to allow this to continue.”

She stared at him and he saw the moment her poise changed, and she reestablished her shield. Controlled, her voice was as strong as steel when she finally spoke. “It is not your choice,” cold yet fierce eyes narrowed as she continued. “Earlier, you gave your word to stay out of my way. You’re only here to protect Qiao Er, so I can have peace of mind. Unless you want to recant your promise. If so, please leave. I can have my guards send you back to Kunlun to recuperate from your injuries.”

Yes, he had given his promise: Words that now haunted him. Never had he felt this helpless. His rage was not directed at her, but at himself. Because of his own weakness, she continued to suffer, and he couldn’t protect her. While she struggled to survive, he had been idling at the border. He wanted to get them out of there. To run, to avoid all the conflicts of the realms. To

live in peace with them. But instead, he swept her into his arms, ignoring the pain in his shoulder, and laid her on the bed before she could protest.

“Zi Lan?”

He went to grab the medicine left by the healer. His expression was grim when he returned to her side. “Turn around and undress, I’ll help you heal your injuries.” His tone didn’t allow further argument.

Understanding dawning, Yan Zhi turned away, and slowly removed her outer garment, exposing her days old injuries. Reigning in his anger as he stared at her festering wounds, he cursed before applying the medicinal salve. Who knew how many internal injuries she had endured.

He gave a heavy sigh. “You didn’t let anyone know, these are not yet healed.” Her back was covered in burns and needle marks. What kind of magic traps had they set up?

“It’s dangerous if words get out. Weakness does not exist in the Ghost Realm, we are a warrior clan after all. I guess that’s why the Elders provide the elixirs themselves. But those are only for internal injuries.”

“Yet, you said you have allies.” His hand paused in mid-stroke on her back before he applied more salve. “I’ll tend to your injuries from now on.”

Yan Zhi silently nodded, though they both knew it was not a question. Those ruthless Elders, who were they? He had never felt wrath to such an extent before. Hidden shadows were far more worrisome than visible enemies.

“Tell me everything,” he demanded, “to be able to protect Qiao Er, I need to know what your realm has hidden from the outside world.”

“On one condition.” Her tone was composed, yet earnest.

“Oh? Do tell.” He helped her slip into her dark robes, as he lifted her braid to the side.

“I need intel from your realm, and what you know about the Demon Clan activities.”

“When did my Queen acquire a taste for bargaining?” he teased. Clearly offended by his taunt, her elbow thrust against his chest. As he grunted in pain in between laughter, he had to give in. “Oh right, I remember now, you do like to bargain.”

She turned around to face him, her gaze serious. “We both know Information is valuable during times of war. Although Ghosts are the best spies in all the realms, there is information we couldn’t get. If you want to stay, you have to prove your worth.”

He stared at her, and his hand stroked her hair unconsciously. The Elders may have used harsh methods, but Yan Zhi had changed under their guidance. Her will to protect those under her care, no matter what she had to endure, had always been her core. But now, she had learned to use tactics to her advantage and the resources at her disposal. Although her strength and willpower were obvious, they continued to mask the softness underneath. Softness that enchanted him, more than any seduction he had known.



His hand continued to stroke down her throat, over the delicate curve of her collarbone, his fingers traced the edge of her robe. Her breath caught, pure startled eyes caught his, but Zi Lan gave her a rueful smile before pulling the collars of her robe together, covering the pearl white skin still flushed from his caress. He straightened the layers of her robes and tied her belt securely. She stared at him, perplexed by his actions. He went to pick up the garments she had dropped earlier.

He slipped into the lighter silk robe. “We can’t talk business if we’re not dressed properly. And I don’t want to be accused of seducing you for intel, with my current undressed state,” he told her, as he fastened the side of the robe.

Zi Lan bent to grab the heavy robe on the floor, when the music that could capture any man’s soul resonated in the room. His Queen had burst out laughing. The sweet sound of laughter was so mesmerizing, he almost dropped the robe from his hand, and felt light headed from

her youthful voice and the joy he saw in her sparkling eyes. Enthralled by the unexpected turn of events, the urge to embrace her again was maddening.

But no, regrettably, now was not the *time*. They had business to attend to, enemies to uncover, and battles to win. Their time would have to come.

## Chapter 69 ~ Sleep well, my Queen

*Breathe...just breathe...* A few more steps and she'd be back in her chambers and all would be well. Just a few minor halls to pass... Cautiously but purposefully, she walked through Ziming Palace, greeted by her warriors, ignoring the exhaustion, ignoring the pain that ran through her. She regretted coming back before her body had had time to heal. It was a terrible miscalculation; she had really thought her ride back would be sufficient for her body to recover. But there was no time to regret her decision now, she had to keep moving. Just a few more steps...

But bad luck would have it that General Yang was waiting for her and approached as soon as he saw her.

He greeted her with a bow. "Your Highness, may I seek your audience in private."

Yan Zhi wished she could decline, but the look on his face was determined. She would have to prevail for a short time longer. With a wave of her hand, the warriors who were present were dismissed. She took a controlled deep breath before addressing the General: "General Yang, what is so urgent you have to seek me out at this time?" Yan Zhi's voice was even and she maintained her posture. Barely.

His brows furrowed. "Your Highness, I am aware that the young princess is fond of her savior, and I do not wish to interfere with your affairs. However, I don't believe having a Celestial remaining here is acceptable at this time."

"He has given his intel, has he not?"

"That is true. He has provided everything we wanted, *all the more reason* there is no further need for his assistant." The General, forever suspicious of the other tribes, was a true loyalist, but remained conservative in his way of thinking, especially when it came to Celestials. She couldn't fault him: their people had endured so much at their hands.

"General Yang, there is more..." but her words were cut off by no other than her Phantom, who spun her around and pulled her into his arms.

"You're finally back! I've done as you instructed. Everything is prepared."

“Zi Lan...,” before Yan Zhi could find her wits to react to his actions, he had seized her lips. His ravenous kiss made her heart thunder, but it also absorbed her physical pain, as heated desire replaced the aches, allowing her muscles to shudder and relax within his embrace. With no will or strength to resist, her knees soon grew weak, but he held her steady in his arms.

He lifted his mouth slightly, his hot breath against hers: “Yan Zhi...put your arms around me,” he whispered softly. Flushed colors rose to her cheeks. Her mind was in a daze, she did what he asked, wrapping her arms around his neck. He lifted her up and strode away from General Yang, with measured, long steps. She realized too late what he had coerced her to do.

“How dare you interrupted us!” General Yang roared, rushing in front of them to block their path.

“Good evening, General Yang,” Zi Lan said cheerfully, and gave his most charming smile, which must antagonize the General even more. “I must apologize for not noticing you there.” His attention returned to her, his eyes dancing with bemusement.

“Damn you...” the General snarled, his body tensed.

Unfazed, Zi Lan looked back at the General. “Please excuse us,” he said, his voice full of feigned remorse, “I’ve already prepared a bath for Her Highness, she is in dire need of rest after a long day.”

“Celestial,” General Yang growled. He looked like he was ready to rip Zi Lan’s throat out.

Despite the obvious hostility, Zi Lan remained calm and composed as though they were talking about the weather. “I fear the water might cool before she has the chance to enjoy it - Her Highness deserves her pleasure,” he responded to the fuming man, then turned his gaze back to her.

“Don’t you agree, my *Queen*?” he asked in a husky tone, with the expression of a man who was ready to devour her on the spot. She was forced to turn her eyes away, or else she feared she would completely succumb to the temptation and make a fool of herself. In her weakened state, her mind no longer worked properly.

Voice controlled, her expression blank, Yan Zhi turned her head towards the disapproving man: "General, we shall speak tomorrow, since the matter is not urgent," she ordered coldly.

"Yes, of course, Your Highness," the General reluctantly bowed, retreating to the side to clear their path, but not before sending dagger glares towards the man who held her.

Without further trouble, Zi Lan strolled past the brooding General with a smirk. Yan Zhi wanted to scowl at him again for pulling such a stunt, but she found she couldn't, because she felt cosy and relaxed in his arms, as he headed straight to her quarters. It had been so long she'd been held like this, she realized. How easy it was to let him enter her world, as he played the hero and saved her yet again.

"Leave us," Zi Lan ordered the maids who were busy preparing the bath behind the screen. He settled her on the chaise next to the dark wooden bathtub and promptly undressed her training gear until he reached her undergarments.

His expression was no longer teasing as it had been moments ago, a cloud of darkness now covered his eyes. "Remove the rest and get into tub while it's warm. I'll grab the potions," he instructed grimly.

As Yan Zhi settled into the warm bath, Zi Lan went to grab the medicine. He had procured it a few days before, after his short return to the Celestial Realm, where he had gathered new intel. Returning to her side briefly, he poured the potion into the tub. It immediately changed to white misty smoke as the water heated and the healing could begin. He always was one step ahead of her, which made her wonder what his next plan was. Although he was an unpredictable man, his actions had always served a purpose. She failed to fully comprehend what was truly on his mind. One moment he would be the charming rogue, the next he'd be back to be her dark phantom.

"You shouldn't have aggravated him so much. The warriors will be agitated...they'll bring you trouble," she told him with her eyes closed, while she absorbed the soothing fragrance of the potion. Zi Lan remained on the other side of the screen, waiting by the bed.

"If I didn't, you would have collapsed," he answered brusquely with no sign of regret. "I will deal with them if there is a need," he added with confidence.

“Have you considered what I said this morning?” she asked, opening her eyes, turning her head to the screen.

“I have, and my answer has not changed.”

“Why?” She asked in puzzlement. *Could it be his stubborn pride?*

“I don’t need your protection, and that’s my final answer on the matter,” he declared, his tone leaving no room for argument. As she debated if she should push the issue further, she heard him give a heavy sigh before changing the topic. “What happened today? Did they not give you your elixir?”

“They did, but the residual effects were harder to handle this time,” she answered cautiously, knowing about his wrath when it came to her well-being. He had been patient; more patient than she could ask for. She feared he would snap any moment, the longer he stayed.

Surprisingly, though, he remained calm. “Tell me what happened, have they changed their tactics?”

Yan Zhi explained that she had almost reached her target this time, that she had managed to arrive at the red gate of their residence. But the sound of flute music through the gate had been very difficult to handle. The sonic waves hit her senses and pressure points, enough to throw her back. She tried to drown out the music, but she was unfamiliar with the techniques to do so. The only recourse had been to fall back before she would receive further damage.

“So you did make it to the gate?” His short laugh was heard behind the screen. His enthusiasm at her accomplishment made her smile. “But musical weapons...those were not used for millennia.”

“I’m surprised too, the ancient arts are lost, only a few High Gods used to possess such knowledge.” Yan Zhi paused, then smiled when she realized something. “The elders are full of surprises, but every setback comes with a silver lining. Since they have to use musical weapons as their last resort, they gave away their technique in the process. Still, to break it might take some time.”

“Where there is a will, there is a way,” Zi Lan said encouragingly. “I’ll research their weakness on my next outing. As you know, 8th Senior is an expert in music, he may be able to give further insights.”

Yan Zhi left the bath soon after they finished discussing martial techniques. Dressed in a red and white silk robe, she turned the corner with Zi Lan approaching at the same time. He led her to the bed, sat down with her settled on his lap, his arms wrapped around her in a gentle embrace.

She felt his warm hand caress her cold cheek. “You’re as white as sheet,” he frowned, his eyes concerned, as he soothed her with his touch. “You need more nourishment, or you won’t last. Especially now that you are so close.”

“I’m alright,” she tried to reassure him.

But Zi Lan didn’t listen. His eyes soft yet fierce, he grabbed a dagger from the bed. With a quick move, he slit his wrist.

“Zi Lan, what are you doing!” she cried in shock. She grasped his bleeding wrist, as he causally set the short dagger down.

“The potion you soaked in requires another ingredient.” He raised his wounded wrist to her mouth. “Now drink,” he commanded.

Yan Zhi shook her head, defiantly. Blood was a common ingredient for healing, but he didn’t have much to spare himself since his injury. When she did not do what he had commanded, he lifted his open wound to his mouth instead. Upon realizing his intention, she tried to escape, but his other hand firmly held the back of her neck. Unable to retreat, she whimpered helplessly as he captured her lips, forcing the hot liquid into her mouth. She struggled against his hold, but he wouldn’t allow her to escape, his grip was tight. She should’ve known not to try and fight with him when he was so set in his ways. Giving in, she drank the iron rich nourishment he provided until he released the hold on her neck, leaving her breathless.

Zi Lan regarded her with a worried expression. “My people’s blood may not be as strong as the one from other clans, but it has its special uses,” he explained.

“Your people? What do you mean by uses?” she asked in confusion.

Ignoring her questions, she saw the fleeting sign of guarded withdrawal, before he held up his wrist to her again. "Drink more," he urged.

Pushing his arm away. "Zi Lan, it's enough."

But she felt his hand slide behind her neck once again, pulling her towards him. "I see...so you prefer the other method." His expression now was heated with sensual desire. "I'm happy to oblige."

Her eyes widened. "No...that's not what I meant," she protested, but he had already taken another mouthful of the essence of his life force, and crushed his mouth to hers, savagely this time. With no strength to push him away, she could only hold onto his collar as she savored the nourishing elixir he gave without a thought.

She whimpered when he broke away, the smirk never left his face. "I didn't know you've been craving for this. Shall I continue?" Her face turned scarlet at his suggestion. The man was as ruthless as he was depraved and continued to push her over the edge of sanity. She angrily grabbed his wrist and clamped down on his wound with her mouth. His face contorted, but he didn't make a sound.



"Now you wound me, in more way than one." His taunt never ceased as he leaned closer, eyes sparkling with devilry. "Was my kiss that distasteful?" he asked. She glared back at him, her anger unconsciously causing her to take more of his blood, and he smiled broadly at her response.

"We can practice after you're done...until my Queen is satisfied," he continued to tease. "That's what you wanted, right? Your offer this morning." Infuriated by his provocation, she bit down hard on his flesh.

He let out grunt and pulled his arm away, staring at the festering wound with the additional teeth mark on his wrist. "You're going to leave a scar," he accused her with mockingly narrowed eyes.

"Good, because you deserved it!" She said between gritted teeth.

Instead of a denial, a wicked smile spread across his face. He leaned closer, their noses almost touching. Despite her rage, she found herself blushing. "Yan Zhi, I would be happy to receive more scars from you."

*This man...*

"Where do you want to bite next?" he baited, eyes teasing yet challenging, sending heated waves of tingling sensation through every nerve of her body.

She would take it back, he was not honorable, noble or righteous. He was still foremost the infuriating rogue who continued to plague her.

"Get out!" she ground out.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," she answered stubbornly, ignoring her hammering heart.

With a hearty laugh, he swept her body around and laid her on the bed. With gentle care, he tucked her in, while she pointedly turned her back on him.

*"Sleep well, my Queen."*

And with those last words, he was gone.

Yan Zhi tussled in bed, unable to sleep; she listened to the rustling leaves outside her chamber. Her consciousness kept her awake, as the back of her mind reached a startling conclusion. She sat up, staring into the darkness. Those were the *same* words. This night was a repetition of what had happened many times before. The pattern was always the same, but with different scripts and methods. Zi Lan would taunt, tease and torment her until she would kick him out. *Had he planned it all along? But why?*

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Never had Shang Ling, the 4th Disciple of Kunlun, ventured to the Ghost Realm before. Somewhat feeling nervous, he had made his presence known and was immediately granted an audience with the Ghost Princess. This was not normally the type of mission he would go on, but given the circumstances, he was best option available for its completion. *Although the lotus root may be cut, its fibers remain intact.* Despite cutting ties with the Celestial Realm, Yan Zhi had allowed him an audience - because, as expected, her Kunlun ties were not as easily severed.

As 4th entered the throne room of Ziming Palace, he immediately noticed that the Ghost Princess was no longer dressed in mortal garb. She was now wearing a midnight black dress with red stripes of feathers lining the skirt. Ghost Realm fashion had always been dark, overcast with shadows, but her pale luminous skin brightened the room. Her dark eyes that once only held sorrows were animated with vigorous energy. Though cold at first glance, her gaze was fierce, with an underlining fire, truly captivating to behold.

The future Queen of the Ghost Realm sat at her throne, flanked by her Generals, one on each side. The one on the left, the elder, had a heavy feast before him. He was grinning and paid no attention to him. The one on the right was a bit more reserved and stared at him with narrowed distrustful eyes. 4th quickly came to the conclusion that it was best to seek and consult with Zi Lan before broaching the subject of his visit. He was on unknown territory, with little knowledge of Ghost Realm culture and its people, so it was best to be very careful.

They had just completed their introductions when an anxious female warrior rushed in: "Your Highness, you have to come quickly, General Zhao is battling with 16th Disciple!"

The Ghost Princess and Shang Ling immediately and quickly headed to the arena. With them was the enthusiastic General Hu who couldn't stop chattering about the prospect of watching two great martial artists of the realms sparring, which only made Shang Ling's anxiety rise further.

Once arrived, the Princess was about to call off the fight, but the General halted her: "Your Highness, we can't!"

The Ghost Princess immediately relented and returned her attention back to the battle.

4th looked at her questioningly: “We have to stop this; his powers are suppressed here!” Looking down, he saw that Zi Lan held his own just fine despite that hindrance as they continued to spar without weapons. But the obvious hostility could not be ignored.

“Zi Lan wanted to stay here, he has to prove himself. That’s the way of the Ghost Tribe,” she explained.

“What if he gets injured again or killed!” 4th scowled.

General Hu laughed: “And risk the chilling wrath of our future Queen? They won’t kill him, they’re only testing his strength.”

“Test?” He raised an inquiring brow at the man.

General Hu turned to him. “You may not know this, but the Ghost Clan is protective of their kinswoman. Our people won’t let just anyone stay by our Queen’s side. Zi Lan knows about this.”

Shang Ling cursed under his breath. Zi Lan’s greatest advantage over his opponents had always been his speed. But this was the Ghost Realm, he couldn’t last in battle forever, with a Ghost General no less.

General Hu turned to the the Princess. “Your Highness, about my suggestion, it’s still not too late...”

“I told you it’s not an option he would take,” she said curtly as she continued to watched the fight. Both opponents managed to get a few hits in.

“Why?” he frowned. “He would be protected.”

“What are you talking about?” Shang Ling asked, taking his gaze away from the fight, intrigued by their conversation.

He could tell General Hu tried to suppress a grin. “4th Disciple, Shang Ling, I merely suggested your junior should take up the position of Prince Consort for our soon to be Queen.”

“Prince Consort?” 4th echoed in bewilderment. “Zi Lan?”

“He has already declined...twice.” Ghost Princess clarified.

“He did?” Both men looked at Zi Lan in astonishment, but then another surprise came: he had managed to out-manuever the General, who retreated from the attack. The General, though grinning, couldn't hide his strong killing intent now.

“That's unfortunate, because General Zhao has just picked up his sword. He's serious by his posture.” This time, General Hu didn't even hide his smile, as he rubbed his chin in anticipation. The Princess on the other hand lost her composure.

“General Hu, do something, anything!” she ordered, her eyes no longer cold, but anxious.

The General shook his head. “I'm afraid only 4th Disciple can do that.”

They both looked at General Hu with a puzzled expression.

“Commander Shang, do you see the warrior over there, the one wearing the silver hydrangea hair pin?” The General pointed across the arena.

4th nodded skeptically.

“Go talk to her.”

“What? Why? How would that help Zi Lan?” he asked with a scowl.

“Trust me, if you don't want your junior to lose an arm or leg today, you should do what I suggested. Just like our Princess, she is known to like Celestial men. Keep her talking until they cease fighting.”

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The battle ended with Zi Lan as the victor, which surprised everyone. General Zhao did not have a chance to use his cultivation, but it was possible he had not planned to, since a well-known warrior like him would not use unfair means in a fight. But it was obvious the General

had become increasingly distracted between the rounds of martial arts, which amazed everyone.

Shang Ling took the opportunity during the ensuing confusion to approach Zi Lan and pull him away from the crowd. They found a secluded seating area near the pond with purple water lilies of the Ghost Realm. As they settled down, servants brought refreshments, but quickly left. 4th was surprised by the formal hospitality, but kept it to himself.

“You’re not tending to your injuries? You’re going to make the Princess worried,” 4th commented with the sternness of a Senior as he helped himself to some wine.

Ignoring the obvious jibe, Zi Lan returned a half smile that did not reach his eyes. “It was just a brawl, Senior. It takes more than that for me to be injured.”

Shang Ling took a sip of the rose fragranced wine. Interesting, he observed. This was the famous three rose fragrance that was hard to find in the Celestial Realms. The flora here was indeed unique and abundant. There was a lot to learn about this realm, he concluded.

“I heard you turned down the position of Prince Consort,” 4th stated with grin that quickly turned into a smirk.

“There was no need for it,” Zi Lan answered evenly.

Shang Ling looked up from his wine cup, his eyes narrowed. “The Warriors will continue to challenge you if your position is not clear.” Even to this day, 4th could never understand Zi Lan’s insistence on taking the more difficult route. Stubbornness certainly ran through his veins.

“A great way to improve my martial arts, you know I rarely use my cultivation, and they fight differently from our people.” He shrugged, obviously wanting to change the subject of the conversation.

“Zi Lan, you understood what I am referring to, why didn’t you take the position? You’re here for her, fight for her, and protect her. An official title will be beneficial in your situation,” he questioned directly, abandoning pretense.

“Considering I’m here of my own accord, I won’t take her protection. And most importantly, I won’t use that position to sway her people,” he answered sharply. He grabbed the bottle of wine and drank directly from it. Zi Lan lifted a brow as he regards him. “And pray tell, why are you here today?” he asked.

“Can’t a shifu be concerned for his student? And my audacious junior?” 4th asked with a smile.

Zi Lan laughed and rolled his eyes at the answer. “Senior.... you’re not here just to visit Qiao Er and I. What are Shifu’s instructions?”

“You never seem to have any patience at all,” 4th sighed before he continued. “The Ghost Princess, as you know, won’t receive audience from the Celestial Clan. Star Lord Si Ming has asked for assistance on the matter from Kunlun. There are no indications which side the Ghost Clan will eventually support. Considering she owes a debt...”

“If she owes any debt, it would be to me. But since I did it with my own free will, there is no debt to repay.”

“I knew you would say that, but we *need* the alliance with the Ghost Clan. You must be aware of Senior’s disastrous wedding? The Bride was murdered, and our senior was implicated, due to his relationship with the Demon Princess. The Eastern King has evidence of their relationship. The alliance of the Water Kingdoms is as good as broken.”

Zi Lan’s head shook, his expression dark. “Marriage doesn’t seem to agree with the men at Kunlun. First Shifu, now our Senior, *we may all share the same destiny*,” he said bitterly. Upon a short reflection, his eyes changed to heavy concern. “How is Senior Die Feng?”

“When it rains, it pours. Senior is preparing for battle as we speak. At least, he has 3rd and 10th to assist him, but the numbers don’t lie. The Eastern King’s army has always been larger. If we don’t act swiftly, we will lose the war before it has even begun.” Shang Ling sighed heavily, putting down his wine. “If the Ghost Clan is reluctant to pick sides, we at least need their assistant on another matter. They are impartial. They have an excellent spy network. We kindly ask them to look for evidence that it was the Yellow Demon King that had Princess Miao Qing murdered.”

It seemed Zi Lan knew exactly what they were suspecting and why. "I can relay the message to Yan Zhi; but it will be her decision to make," Zi Lan said.

Pouring himself another glass of the rose scented wine, Shang Ling shook his head with a chuckle. "Junior, your loyalty is astounding. It is a shame you did not take the position of Prince Consort. If you're afraid of such a title, I'm sure our 17th can give advice in the matter. She's after all a Crown Princess!"

Zi Lan was about to say more, but they were interrupted by a most pleasant surprise.

"Shifu, you're here!" Qiao Er rushed towards them, with her party of attendants, including a small Qilin, right behind her.

Little Dove had changed more than he could have imagined. Dressed in red silk and black lace, with a jasmine hair pin and red feathers on her head, she looked like a miniature version of the Ghost Princess - aside from the two small horns on her forehead. Shang Ling could only suspect how much the atmosphere at Ziming Palace benefited from her presence, just as her presence had influenced the atmosphere at Kunlun. Completely absorbed by her chattering, the two men patiently listened to her recounting everything that seemed of relevance to her.

"Shifu, come with me, look at the beasts I've been tallying," she said as she pulled him up.

"Beasts?" 4th asked, until his eyes widened with understanding. "Of course, your clan are beasts breeders."

"They have so many in this realm! Qiao Er has been studying and recording them between her many lessons," Zi Lan said proudly. "Qiao Er, only take Shifu to the breeding grounds. Untamed beasts are still off limits."

"Yes, En Cong," Qiao Er timidly answered.

Shang Ling regarded his junior with renewed respect. Fatherhood agreed with him, Zi Lan was not fighting for just his Kunlun family anymore. Shang Ling could not blame him for his wavering loyalty. Indeed, Si Yin would be the best person to persuade Zi Lan to what was best for him; they were, after all, partners in crime. And maybe, Si Yin would also be able to push Zi Lan towards taking up the issue of the alliance with the Ghost Princess...

“Where are these beasts? Shifu will like to see them,” he told the child. Full of excitement, Little Dove led him away from the purple water lily pond, the hoard of attendants following them.

On second thought, there was another ally, Shang Ling pondered as he was dragged along by the child. As a famous mortal Military General once said: “*Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.*”

## *Chapter 73 ~ Fireflies*

Several things occurred in his mind when he woke up, blindfolded and bound. First, he was no longer at Ziming Palace, and he was sure he was outdoors. He could feel a nearby warmth, and the sound of flickering fire. For torture perhaps? It had been long since he experienced abduction. As he recalled, Si Yin had more experience with this than him. But he knew it wasn't by chance, because there wasn't any part of this that could have happened by chance. He had chosen a path, and he knew it would lead to a certain end.

Second, he wondered who among the Generals or Warriors despised him so much that they would risk offending their Queen. Several options came to mind, but the ones close to Yan Zhi were all loyal, despite a bit of hostility. So, it must be one of the traitors, he concluded.

Third, why wasn't he dead? He had known that sooner or later, someone would target his life. He was among enemies, he knew the risk of staying, of having all his actions scrutinized by ally and foe, especially since he purposefully made himself a target to draw attention from his Queen. It was only a matter of time until someone took action, and this would create an opportunity for them to make mistakes - mistakes that may well be worth dying for.

It didn't take long for him to contemplate these thoughts and soon, he heard the rustling noise of something moving through what sounded like grassland. Only one being, he realized. He waited, silently. This may not be an abduction that would end in his demise, but it was a battle nonetheless. He knew that when it came to interrogation, the one to speak first would be at a disadvantage.

But all remained silent until he heard a rustling that sounded like falling gear. As the person drew closer, he instantly felt a familiar presence. A hand lifted his blindfold, his eyes squinted for a moment at the bright light, then, his raven goddess appeared before him.



“Yan Zhi?” he could only manage that much before her lips came down hard against his. He almost tumbled backward, but she drew him back, settling herself on him, straddling his waist.

He was suffocated, starved for breath. He made a helpless noise of fury against her lips, but she only deepened the kiss. He instantly knew her intent when he felt her hands pulling at his garments. Her tongue swept into his mouth and his world began to spin from deep tender caresses that sapped his strength. He wanted to hold her, but he couldn't: his hands were bound behind him. As much as his body wanted this to continue, he didn't think they had time for such fleeting pleasure. They had to leave!

He managed to tear his mouth away from hers, grappling for composure. “Yan Zhi, this is not the time, we have to leave this place. You have to untie me.”

“Untie you? Why would I ever do that?” she frowned.

“You're not here to save me?” he asked in astonishment, utterly confused by her demeanor.

Her head arched with a short laugh. “That wouldn't make sense, considering I'm the one who abducted you,” she said.

For a moment, Zi Lan couldn't react, his flabbergasted expression must have delighted her, because he saw her eyes sparkle with amusement.

One thing was clear, no matter how good he was at deduction or how well he had anticipated everybody's moves, this was unexpected. He was so enthralled by her presence, he had not realized this was no hide out for an abduction. His eyes surveyed the area. He had known he was nowhere near Ziming Palace, but he had not expected them to be by the edge of the open plains with tall grass surrounding them. They were on a slope, surrounded by myriad of bright glowing fireflies that reached beyond the plains and the surrounding distant forest, eclipsing the stars above them with their light.

Yan Zhi had discarded her riding gear and was clothed only in a thin layer of soft red silk. She was a vision of delicate loveliness, with fiery shades of black and red against her radiant pearl skin. Her hair was unbraided and hung loose over her shoulders. How could he have been so slow - he sat on black pelt, with her intimately straddling his waist. This was a place of seduction. A love nest. For consummation.

When he returned his gaze to her dark yet alluring eyes, her pure smile was so captivating, he momentarily wanted to kiss her again...only momentarily, because he caught himself before he succumbed to temptation. This must be karma, a cruel twisted joke for his many misdeeds.

Suddenly, her hands grasped his neck. She leaned to the side, her lips at his ear: "You're not going to ask why?" came the voice of the enchantress.

He inhaled sharply when she licked the lobe of his ears. "I'm waiting for you to tell me." His voice quivered and he was unable to stop the rush of heat to his ears.

She turned her attention back to him, the back of her hand caressing his face. "I'm performing *Qiang Qin*," she declared promptly.

"Qiang Qin..." he sucked in his breath at the foreign words. Qiang Qin: "Abduction by Marriage". A custom used by older, mostly extinct tribes. It seemed Ghost Tribe was one of the few who still practiced it.

"I thought I had already given you my answer," he proclaimed, then stiffened when he felt her mouth on his throat, nibbling on his sensitive spot.

"Yes, you did," he felt her snicker against his skin, "that's why abduction was necessary, it is the way of my people."

Still trying to comprehend his current situation, he steeled himself when she pulled back his collar and laid feather kisses on his exposed flesh. "So the stories I heard about your father capturing his consorts and his lovers from all over the realms were true?"

"Unlike Celestials, the Ghost Tribe never asked for arranged marriage, nor are we in need of alliances with other clans through marriage. We only seek the best warriors - breeders, I might say, to enrich our bloodline." To prove her point, she pressed herself against his body. The tantalizing friction made him tremble in response.

"I did not know your tribe still practiced this custom," he said shakily, trying to keep his lucidity when control began to slip away.

“We do take tradition seriously. My mother was also captured by my father, enthusiastically so, from her recount of that night.”

“Your father lived a prolific life didn’t he?” he bit back a groan when he felt her tongue dance in his ear.

“He did. But have no fear, I won’t take other Consorts,” she teased, her hand reaching the strap of his belt.

“I swear I heard that kind of seduction line before!” He began to struggle with the rope, “Release me!”

“Zi Lan, stop struggling, I promise to be gentle,” she assured curtly with an unsettling calmness as she removed his belt completely.

Refusing to obey, he tried to push her off with his body, thighs clamped down in place. She continued to remove his clothes as he stared back at her in frustration. “Why are you doing this? You know my answer.”

Yan Zhi removed his outer robe with ease. “You refuse to listen to reason, hence, Qiang Qin is the only viable choice,” she shrugged.

“Is that the only reason why we’re here? Because you want to protect me?” he asked angrily.

Her hand paused at her task, calm eyes narrowed at him. “You continue to protect me from the shadows, but now it is from the shadows of your heart. You couldn’t trust yourself with me, as you continued to manipulate me at every turn. Please tell me how that was fair?”

“It’s not, but fate has never been fair to neither of us,” he argued without remorse.

Suddenly, she grasped the back of his head, pulling his hair, forcing him to stare into her burning eyes. “That’s why you tormented me, until I pushed you away? You still tried to deceive me, with your amorous attention. I didn’t see it at first, because I thought you were playing the rogue again. Why are you afraid of being close to me?” she demanded to know, her passion morphing into anger.

Zi Lan wanted to refute but he couldn’t. She saw through everything. “Yan Zhi...let me go.”

"No, I won't. I want you to tell me the truth." She pushed him onto the pelt and hovered over him. He felt raw rage emanating from her as she continued her attack "Why don't you want to take the position, my protection? Why is your pride more important than me?"

That's when he knew, instinctively, that she was angry and in pain. Pain that had been caused by him. If only his hands had not been not bound, he would have held her. The reason why they were here was due to his attempt to deceive her once again.

"You got it all wrong!" his body shook in denial. "My pride has never been more important than you! Yan Zhi, I want nothing more than to be by your side. I can't promise to solve all your problems, but I can promise you, you won't have to face them alone.

"Then be by my side."

"But not as your Prince! Not unless your people accept me with their free will. I won't be your hindrance when you are to become the rightful Queen of your realm," he continued to argue.

He saw the moment his words reached her, because her eyes became unfocused as understanding dawned. She sat back, then eased him back up again. But her gaze continued to be locked to his, so powerful, he couldn't look away.

"Then why do you push me away?" she asked softly. Unknowingly, those were piercing words.

Zi Lan closed his eyes as dread and uneasiness descended upon him. It had finally come, the time...he could no longer avoid the question that he was so afraid to ask. "Would you want to be with me, if you had not found out the truth at Kunlun?"

She stared back at him, an unreadable expression on her face. He had not realized he was holding his breath. When she finally spoke, her answer was not what he had expected her to say. "I want you to stay by my side."

He chuckled lightly at her evasion and closed his eyes in despair. "I refuse the title of Prince Consort," he answered evenly, unyielding til the end. "Not when I don't deserve it, not out of guilt. I don't need your protection."

"Zi Lan, I'm not asking you to be my Prince."

His eyes snapped open, his body froze, an ache grew in his chest, sudden disappointment consumed him. He had kept himself in check, because he had suspected, had surmised that she had only offered herself that night because she felt she owed him. Had she pitied him all this time?

He was about to ask, but she reached behind him, hands on the knot that bound his wrists, pulling on the ties, releasing him. His heart sunk lower for what was about to come, but her steady gaze held his, the rosiness of her cheeks owed nothing to the robe she wore. Grasping his hands, her fierce determined eyes never ceased to enrapture his mind....his Queen did nothing by half measure.

"I'm asking you to be my husband."

"Your husband..." his voice rasped, her words were so unforeseen, he could barely breath.

Eyes widening with understanding, as both delight and alarm consumed his thoughts, his head shook. "Yan Zhi...you're not playing fair."

Her smile...so radiant like the summer sun, it could warm the chill of the night. "Fate has never been fair for us, why can't we cheat, just this *once*?" What a temptation for a man who could only hope...only dream for this day.

"Cheat?" his voice was barely a whisper.

She eased forward, her delicate hands cupped his face, her head rested against his, their pulse quickened. Her voice was like silk velvet as she spoke: "*Let the stars and the sky above be our witness. We need no others, except for the fluttering fireflies of this night. That is the sacred tradition of Qiang Qin.*"

Her cheek rubbed against his ever so gently as yearning took hold. "Will you be my husband?" she asked softly, her web spun, drawing him in, as his mind absorbed the tantalizing words, so irrevocable...yet irresistible. Treacherous, trembling hands covered hers. Their breaths synchronized in harmonizing rhythm, mingling with desire ready to ignite.

*Would he dare? Dare to cheat fate?*

Dare to seize the moment...only a moment...an unprecedented decision. He should listen to his senses...but no, he couldn't. His hands delved into her silky loose hair, fragrant with the scent he craved. She may be the vision of a Goddess whom he would worship until his last breath, but she was also a woman... a woman who desired, needed, and most of all longed for him. He wanted to feel, to possess, because there was no time to debate as his soul called out to take action. Destiny and fate may rule them all, but to be fated, one had to take the risk.

He cupped her face in his hands. It was impossible not to lose himself in sheer sensation as their body sizzled with desire and awareness, longing that wouldn't subside. There were others who could take his breath away, but only *one* who reminded him to breath.

"Yes, I'll be *your* husband," he heard himself say, the impossible, the words that were foreign but so right.

He touched his mouth to hers as the binding words escaped his lips: "*In thousand of lifetimes, in thousands of worlds, in any form we shall take. I'll be your husband, and you shall be my wife.*"

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### **Warning NSFW**



Yan Zhi had been selfish, more selfish than she had ever been. She had become like her father, her brothers...maybe selfishness did run in their veins, but she didn't care. Because there was no reason for them to return to the way things had been. No...never again. She wanted him more than she wanted to breathe. She wanted him, just Zi Lan.

She didn't care how much they had had to endure for him to be here, to protect her, just to be close to her. She couldn't handle the thought of them parting. She had to bind him, in every

way possible. But was it acceptable? Could one cheat fate, when they may not be destined? When the odds were against them?

She should have seen it, his true intentions that he hid behind a facade of outrageous behavior. She understood his reservations, it was his noble honorable self again. All this time, he had believed she had offered herself out of guilt. How foolish he was...to rationalize her comfort as repayment of debt...

*He was a fool, yet he was still her fool.*

Although their vows were spoken on a whim in the heat of passion, they had come from their hearts and would forever remain true. There was no grand ceremony and attendance, but they couldn't ask for a more perfect night.

With that knowledge...she smiled brightly as she secured the knot around his wrist again.

An alert expression crossed his face. "I thought I consented."

"You did...," Yan Zhi answered calmly as she pushed him down once again, "but we still have to follow the *ritual*." She secured his hands and tied them against the post above his head.

"Ritual?" Zi Lan asked, as sudden wave of amusement washing over her as he stared up at his bound wrists.

She watched him, her tiger, vividly radiant, so golden that even the flame beside them could not compare to his fire. "The ritual of Qiang Qin, of course. You are the captured groom, you have to show some unwillingness of being captured. "

"I'm debating if I like this tradition of yours," he said. Yan Zhi suppressed her smile because he couldn't help himself pulling at the ropes holding him from above. Losing control must be driving him mad, but only excited her more. It was time for him to pay, she mused.

He stopped struggling the moment she pulled on the ties of her robe. Never taking his gaze away, he watched intently as she began to undress, slowly, deliberately, with tantalizing glimpses of naked flesh, only a little at a time. He swallowed hard, his eyes glowing with desire. Once completely nude, she crawled over him, her hands moving over his hard rigid steel body, as she worked on his clothes once more. She thought she would make it quick, but

she couldn't help herself, she had to lay kisses on his flushed flesh when it became exposed. He groaned and moaned, as though he was in agony. She stripped him as far she could, prevented from fully undressing him because of the tied wrists. Her naked, him still clothed.. It was intensely erotic to her.

Zi Lan's patience was short lived, he pulled on the rope again. "Release me....," he ordered, not pleading.

She shook her head, marveling at the sight of him, held hostage yet undefeated. Heightening her own desire, she laid claims to his lips, and he responded eagerly, gasping for more. Her lips clung to his as she ground herself against his swollen shaft. Her hand began to stroke the hard, hard muscles of his inner thighs, making him tremble. Once he was in her hand, she could hear his moan against her lips, as she stroked and caressed, feeling the hardness pulsing for more.

"Yan Zhi..." he gasped in pleasure.

Dark sensual eyes stared back at her, the heat from his body seared, burned, and consumed her, making the raw ache of arousal flooding the space between her thighs. A space that had been crying for fulfillment ever since he had crashed into her world once more. Somehow, that thought inflamed her passion further and she became slick, wet, and pulsing with desire. Easing upward, thighs open, the hot probing head poised at her entrance was a hair thread away. But as their gaze locked in heated desire, they froze. She could tell Zi Lan was battling for control: it wouldn't have been hard to arch his hip at this very moment and enter her, but he did not. Patiently, he waited for her, because he was hers to *take*.

Slowly, she lowered herself onto his engorged shaft.... spreading, filling, expanding the intimate walls, moving deeper and deeper. He was large, he was wonderful. Her head fell back in rippling ecstasy, she could feel his tense body continuing to battle for control from the exquisite torture they both had to endure. With one quick movement, she pressed down to completely sheath him, as they both caught their breath.

She tensed, relaxed, fought for control. But he wouldn't let her, the cad that he was, a sudden upward thrust from his hip sent her body vibrating in response. He was not as passive as he had let her to believe. She glared at him, his heated eyes challenging in response. Never taking her fiery gaze away, she slowly lifted herself up, inch by inch, in exquisite pace reaching the tip, just the tip, as it hovered over her entrance. Before he could react, she thrust down

without warning with one quick stroke so that his body shook from the impact. She rose again, sliding away from his length, then thrust down once more. Tightening her pelvic muscles before he could retaliate, his eyes closed in sweet agony. She had bested him.

He knew, he understood not to interfere. Her fingers drove into the hardness of his chest, she began to ride, with freedom, as she guided him to her own rhythm. Pleasure started to rise higher and higher as she evoked groans, gasps and heavy breathing from the man beneath her. As she rode him, her body began to clench in a slow steady pulse, she began to lose control, her legs started trembling, his hips moved against hers. This time, she welcomed his thrusts, taking him more deeply than she ever would have thought possible, letting him guide her body....demanding her attention. Yan Zhi felt climax rushing toward her as each hard, savage thrust sent waves of rapture through her body. Then, like a rush of waterfall, she was floating...crashing...drowning all at once, as he sent her spinning over the edge of reality. Her names burst from his lips when he exploded inside of her. Her body bucked and arched at the same moment, reaching her own ecstasy as she collapsed on him.

Once their breathing returned to normal, Yan Zhi reached above their heads and released his wrists. But Zi Lan caught her around the waist and quickly turned her on her back. His mouth clamped down on hers as he kissed her with urgency, like his life depended on it.

“Let’s make sure there is no question about my consent,” he said as he hurriedly stripped away the rest of his garments. Settling on top of her, his mouth eagerly laid claims to her lips. Fierce passionate kisses, pulsing breaths that continued to devour as she gasped in response.

Her heart hammered in her chest as she felt his mouth slide along the fragile arc of her throat, tracing the simmering pathway of nerves. She writhed against him, still helpless as her hips rose to meet his, as a brilliant bloom of heat began inside of her. A shaking moan rose in her throat. She felt him everywhere, his mouth and hands making her quiver more and more.

His lips were hot and restless, shifting over hers in sensuous coercion. She moaned and thrashed as his fingers circled her sensitive domes of flesh, caressing it, testing the nipple, until it burst into a bloom rosebud. Her eyes clamped shut. Fear...reservation...worry...all were just distant memories because she was floating within the haze of sensation, wondering if she would drown. Then without warning, his mouth fastened around her sensitive nub. As he began to suck, her body arched, her cries and moans unceasing. She forgot to breathe, because she couldn’t think beyond the sensation of his hot wet tongue sweeping over the taunted bud. The agonizing pleasure was too much, she felt like she was on fire. A fire she wanted to get

away from, but couldn't, or wouldn't, because the flames that engulfed her completely were not enough. She wanted more. Her arms wrapped around his neck, drawing him to her other breast. But the rogue that he was refused.

"Zi Lan," she begged.

"Not yet," he muttered against her flesh, as his relentless ruthless tongue continued to stroke between the space of her breasts.

"Stop teasing me," she scowled.

He gave a chuckle before he relented, drawing his lips over her neglected breast. Her mind was in the clouds again, she had no desire to escape his tormenting torture, no desire but to melt even further as the hot mouth suckled, nibbled, and kissed, her muscles tensed, as her body constricted, arched upward...then he was gone. She moaned in protest, but he had eased himself upward, to capture her lips with wet savage hunger. She thought he wanted to devour her completely, but he broke up their kiss shortly. Hovering just above her, he stared down at her.

"Yan Zhi." his hand brushed the wet tangled strands away from her face and cupped her face tenderly. Firelight illuminated his features, shining in a mysterious unearthly aura that she couldn't decipher.

His eyes were like the dark sky above, velvety black, almost mythical, the deepness that could captured her mind. "Shall I stop?" he asked, harshly.

*What? Why is he asking that now?*

"Yan Zhi, shall I stop?" he repeated. It only took a mere moment, but she knew what he wanted, he needed her words, like a spell that needed to be cast, before he could continue. He was still afraid...

"No...don't stop," she answered. Not now, when they were so close, seeking something beyond words.

He smiled triumphantly before he turned her around on her stomach. He lay down partially over her body. Sweeping her thick hair to the side, his fingers ran down her spine, his palm

smoothed over her lower back, over the curves of her bottom. Her eyes shut in anticipation. One of his hands stayed on her waist, the other moved to her inner thighs, fingers caressing the soft sensitive flesh as they glided towards her core. She was ready, more than ready when his fingers tested the hot delicate wet folds, but she bit back her moan. Then she felt it, the first, just one, but the teasing and taunting was enough to make her body shake. Her breathing quickened, her body tightened, but she couldn't let him win just yet. Then the second finger, more demanding than the first, entered deeply into her the swollen clefts, playing with her inner flesh. She couldn't see him, she could only immerse herself in the rapturing sensation. He slipped in another, then his fingers moved backward, hitting her tender spot; in her frenzy, she let out a harsh cry. Breathing became harder as her pulse fluttered in her throat, inner muscles tightening around his fingers.

"No..." she cried in frustration when he removed his hand, but Zi Lan had climbed over her, lowering himself fully. As his hot searing body scorched hers, she felt his breath on the back of her neck, one arm anchored on one side while the other was on her waist. Trembling in the suspense of the moment, she fought for control. He slightly lifted her hips, positioning her at just the right angle for the sweet invasion between her thighs. The slow penetration, a melting intimacy, sent shivers of pleasure through her body. She bit back a moan when he withdrew, but he started filling her again, in articulate slowness that was driving her mad. She wanted to scream for him to hurry, but she knew, he would only torture her more, the more she begged. So she waited for the moment he thrust into her, stretching and demanding, until she had nothing left to give, as his root completely hit the hilt, making her cry out from the delicious agonizing torment.

Zi Lan groaned against her shoulder, his hard hot tantalizing body burned her flesh. Their breaths synchronized once again. He was as lost as she was. He buried his face on the side of her neck, taking in her scent, before the all consuming exquisite strokes began. He took her, never losing control. Her body began to fill with pulses and rhythms, it no longer seemed her own, *he* set the pace, he always had. She began to sob. To thrash. To whimper as strangled noises of desire that wouldn't cease escaped her lips. But she didn't care, she let herself be fully immersed in the pleasure of ecstasy as she moved with him. Her body arched upward to meet his slow purposeful thrusts became faster and faster.

Then it happened. Mercilessly, he took her higher, her hands gripping the pelt, her body twisting helplessly beneath his. When she thought she couldn't take any more, the waves shook through her, suddenly, ruthlessly, unimaginably, making her lose the ability to breathe.

She screamed as he drove into her with a last savage thrust, reaching his own release as her body jerked and convulsed beneath his.

Panting, exhaustion, and only sweat remained. His weight on top of her was welcoming but short lived. Zi Lan lifted himself off, grabbed their garments and covered them before he pulled her into his arms. His hand smoothed away her tangled wet hair, still mingled with their passion.

Nestling in each other's arms, they watched the stars and the fireflies above...and soon, they both drifted into the oblivion of the night.

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It was near dawn, they shared a stallion as they headed back to Ziming Palace. Wrapped in her black cloak, Yan Zhi sat sideways on the horse, settling her body against his chest. Zi Lan couldn't help but feel lightened...*free*...as all burdens diminished. No matter how short lived their happiness might be - for he knew they would be facing more hardship once they returned.

"What is this place?" Zi Lan asked. They had passed through the Valley and in the distance, waves of fireflies began to disperse. A faint light hit the soft scattered clouds, bringing colors to the canvas sky of the morning dawn.

"Ying Huo Chong Gu (萤火虫谷, Valley of the Fireflies), hidden in the southern grassland of the Ghost Realm. When we were young, Er-Ge often brought me here. We would catch as

many as we could and bring them back to the Palace. Whenever I was down, he would leave a jar of fireflies for me.”

“He must have loved you very much,” Zi Lan remembered Li Jing, though faintly: The Ghost Lord may have been a weak soul, but he had not been a bad man.

“He did love me, as did De-Ge and my father. They all spoiled me. Despite everything, we were a family.”

If he would not have been holding the reins, he would have held her in comfort. Yes, despite how horrid they had been, they were still her family. *One cannot choose one's kin, blood is blood.* And with it came stories that defined one's existence.

“Zi Lan, isn't there something you need to ask me?” she said, breaking his thoughts.

His body immediately tensed. *She knew...*

“Your Senior already approached me, regarding the issue with the tribes. I spoke with General Hu, he will take care of the matter.”

Now they were back to business as usual. She never rested for long, it seemed. He sighed heavily before he spoke. “You didn't have to do that, I would have searched for the evidence myself.”

“We have a valuable network here. Besides, this is connected to Cheng Yin our foe, and Li Ying and Die Feng, our friends. But it is also for a selfish reason of mine: I don't want you to leave for intel. Don't place yourself in danger anymore, please.” Her hands tightened over his arm.

“Yan Zhi...,” he began to argue, but her hand caught his chin, she forced him to look at her, her eyes narrowed.

“Did you think you could hide your intentions from me? As for now, I won't force you to become Prince Consort, but you have to stop placing yourself as a target. Can you do that for me?”

“How did you...,” he frowned, unable to finish before she cut him off again.

"It was not hard to deduce, when I knew your weakness," she answered matter of factly. "Do I have your word?" she demanded.

Zi Lan sighed in defeat and nodded reluctantly.

A moment later, he reached into his robe and pulled out the jasmine hairpin. "You forgot this." He placed it in her hand. "I would prefer it if you didn't use it to stab me again."

"You were impertinent," she glared at him.

"Was I?" he laughed, "I thought I was charming."

"The absolute worst, audacious...rogue...brazen..." he smothered her lips with his own. He halted the horse, freeing his arms to wrap them around her. She tensed in surprise at first, but soon relaxed under his touch. When he broke the kiss, he was breathing hard. Her glow was undeniable. Had she become even more beautiful since last night, he wondered. Was that even possible?

"Zi Lan..." impulsively he couldn't stop himself from kissing her again. Like he couldn't stop his hand from moving underneath her cloak, travelling over her chest, rising to her neck, as a shudder racked his body. She gasped when his lips went to her exposed throat, grazing over the delicate pulse, as his fingers moved over her silken skin beneath her robe. Pushing the collar to the side, he dipped his head to her delicate chest and sucked on her bare pearl skin.

"What are you doing?" she gasped, breathing heavily as he licked over the red mark he had left on her porcelain skin.

"Showing how *brazen* I can be," he answered, his mouth sliding further down her chest, but her robe was making it difficult.

"Qiao Er is waiting." She tried to push at his head and shoulder, but weakly, as he noted. Encouraged by her feeble attempt, his other hand reached for the strap of her belt.

"Zi Lan!" she squirmed, her hand tightening over his. He lifted his head and stared back at her now scarlet face. Despite her calm, collected, and controlled appearance, she may seem cold at times. His Queen might never know, but her *shyness* was more captivating than any seduction known to man.

“She can wait,” he whispered softly, in rich hypnotic tone, as he resumed his attention to her flushed skin. He continued to lick her sensitive spot, as she writhed and shuddered, until her resisting hands fell away. They pulled him closer as gasps and moans escaped her lips. That was when he pulled away the strap, releasing the bind to her robe, so he could *mark* her...until the morning sun set upon them.

## *Chapter 80 ~ Zhu Long Gu*

Between the southern borders of the Ghost and the Celestial Realm lay the vast sand desert they called Zhu Long Gu (Valley of the Torch Dragon). Legend had it the old God Zhu Long took a drunken nap there in his true form for longer than he intended after the Celestial Wedding Celebration of Crown Prince Hao De and Crown Princess Hui Feng. By the time he woke from his nap one month later, his wine infused breath had torched the valley into an unrecognizable desert. Dragon fire was very potent and quite detrimental to the landscape, and thus, little growth had returned to the place since. But that was only a legend. Who knew what had really happened during those days: Records were very scarce, almost nonexistent, so unlike the meticulous record keeping of Star Lord Si Ming nowadays. When asked about this incident, he usually suggested that the God Zhu Long had been in love with the bride, and the true reason behind his month-long wine induced slumber had been a badly broken heart.



The Zhu Long Gu had not been under jurisdiction of neither Ghosts nor Celestials since the unfortunate event, seeing how the valley served no advantage to either tribe. What made this place unique was the fluctuation of immortal energy: For the residents, attempting to gain higher cultivation was not a wise choice, given the unpredictable energy concentration. However, it had also become an ideal place for those immortals seeking to engage in shady deals. The black market thrived in the makeshift city with the name Wu Ming Shi (无名市, No

Name City), which was filled with red lantern streets, taverns, and shops, containing mainly questionable merchants and customers.

Lou Jun, the 8th Disciple of Kunlun was no stranger to this place, but he preferred a more solitary location with less noise to focus on his work, one of the many things he had in common with his Junior 14th, who had resided here longer than he had at Kunlun. They were staying on the northern edge of Zhu Long Gu, in between high canyons, perfect for hiding from uninvited visitors. After the first Demon and Celestial battle, both tribes were re-evaluating their tactical plans and fighting had come to a halt. With Shifu's permission, 8th and 14th had decided to return to the Valley to check on their weapons resources. They had stayed for two nights before 14th had decided to go gather material for his experiments in the dark alleys of the city.

Lou Jun made use of his time by testing arachnid spinning thread. The producers of this rare weaving material were from the Bai Zhi Zhu Bu Lou (白蜘蛛部落, White Spider Tribe), but their supplies were limited, especially during times of war. The same could also be said for other supplies, like raw ingredients for elixirs or material for weapons. Even food prices had increased, as merchants and middlemen from all over the realms used the opportunity to gain riches in time of crisis.

Lou Jun was still in the process of weaving the spider's thread as a new material for string and ropes, when countless bells set themselves off, bringing endless ringing, extending even to the back of the cave. An uninvited guest had arrived. 8th discontinued his work within the sun-lit cavern and cloud jumped himself to the front. The identity of the intruder was a surprise indeed.

"Zi Lan, what are you doing here?" Lou Jun asked his Junior, who had disappeared for months and was now standing before him at the entrance. How did he even know about the hideout?

"I'm here for you! 14th Senior told me you'd be here, I met him in the Wu Ming Shi earlier. It took some time to track you down, since you were not at the camp."

"How did you pass all the traps?" 8th inquired. 14th had set up multiple traps, to deter uninvited guests, but most importantly, to protect their inventions.

Zi Lan, more vibrant than 8th remembered him, gave a wide smile before he answered, “You mean how I got past the now broken traps, which Senior Yan Wei conveniently failed to mention when he gave me your location. Please tell 14th Senior to redo some of his calculations if he wants to protect his assets.”

8th couldn't help but chuckle; leave it to Yan Wei to play such a trick on 16th. “I forgot, you were his unwilling test subject back in the days!” Still...16th being here was unusual. “Shouldn't you be guarding your Princess at the moment?”

At the mention of the Ghost Princess, his expression immediately changed. “She's not my princess, she's my...” Zi Lan stopped short before finishing and Lou Jun saw a hint of blushing from his Junior who obviously tried to hide his reaction.

“Your what?”

“Nevermind,” 16th answered quickly, his expression blank again.

“You could say lover,” Lou Jun suggested without hiding his smirk.

Lou Jun saw the slight hesitation in his eyes, guarded once again, but Zi Lan eventually nodded. Lou Jun wondered if he would ever succumb to the same emotional temptations as his junior, senior and Shifu. Would he ever be as lost as them, or like his own mother, who could never forget the one who had abandoned them. He had always devoted himself to one goal, the one mystery he couldn't solve. But now was not the time to be distracted, Zi Lan hadn't travelled this far for tea.

“Zi Lan, there's no need to be shy, we all know you're not the type to drag his feet,” Lou Jun stated as he guided 16th into the narrow but high tunnel towards the back of the cave. “What's the reason behind this unannounced visit?”

“Senior, how much do you know about magical weapons? Do you know how to break them?” 16th asked.

“Straight to the point as usual, you never fail to amaze me with your connections,” Lou Jun exclaimed, as they settled inside the weapons room. Lou Jun busied himself with tea preparations, but at a slower pace than he normally would.

“Is there are a way to break them?” Zi Lan repeated again. His patience was short fused, as always. Lou Jun placed the teacup down with casual ease, before he spoke again.

“Junior, it is not easy to break Musical Weapons, and those who can do it without knowing the technique require a high level of cultivation. Why do you have such strong interest in a lost martial art you’ve never taken an interest in before? You’re sure you are really talking about a Musical Weapon?” He asked, his eyes narrowed skeptically.

“It was sonic waves, no doubt about it. I came across it recently, and wish to learn more about it,” Zi Lan explained, his voice changing again, as 8th noticed. “You’ve been studying Musical Weapons for years.”

“That is correct, I have searched for users of musical weapons for thousands of years, even before my arrival at Kunlun. I thought Shifu as the God of Music had knowledge behind the lost arts, but unfortunately, he did not. The only known user used to be High God Zhe Yan before he retired, but he is not the one I’ve been searching for either - he isn’t the author of the original magical weapon manual, Harmonic Resonance. To the inexperienced, musical weapons only serve to harm. But that mysterious manual indicates that with the right notes and tone, musical weapons can also serve a higher purpose, such as healing and cultivation gain.”

“Do you know their weakness?” Zi Lan asked.

“When it comes to weakness, each weapon has a unique vibration, and the sonic waves produced have to counter act with the other. In short, the best way to counter a musical weapon is to have a musical weapon yourself. What type of instrument is it?”

“A flute.”

“Then I would suggest using a string instrument, to balance the vibration.”

“I know you and 14th senior have been experimenting. Can you produce such a weapon? ”

“We’re still at an early stage, but it wouldn’t hurt to have a test subject.”

"I can be the test subject," Zi Lan answered promptly, too quickly. 8th arched his brow at his Junior who soon realized he had misspoken. "I-I meant...I...", he stammered, but Lou Jun raised his hand.

"You don't have to explain, I now know who the weapon is for. I can produce the weapon for her, but there is a condition."

"Anything," Zi Lan agreed without hesitation.

8th sighed with a slight irritation at his Junior, who never thought twice when it came to his Ghost Princess. He wasn't sure whether to admire his devotion or curse his stupidity.

"16th, you should listen to my condition before agreeing so readily! However, we don't have to discuss it now, since it will take place in the future. Although it will take some time to produce a new weapon, especially during the time of warfare."

"Is there anything I can do to speed up the process?" Zi Lan asked impatiently.

"Eager as always," 8th teased before turning to a more serious tone. "Supplies, we are in short supplies due to the war." Lou Jun wrote down a few items on a list and handed it to Zi Lan. "If you can bring these back for me, I can work on the weapon that will fit her needs."

"Thank you, Senior," he bowed as Lou Jun placed his hand on his shoulders.

"16th," he said with a light squeeze, his narrowed eyes searching beyond the dark eyes of his guarded Junior. "Is she worth it?"

His gaze was returned, unwavering without a hint of doubt. "Yes, more than my life," Zi Lan answered.

Lou Jun gave a rueful smile. "Sometimes, I envy you."

A puzzled expression crossed Zi Lan's face, not understanding the depth of Lou Jun's words. He thought he may never experience what they did. But maybe it simply wasn't his destiny; there was a higher purpose for him to achieve. For that reason, Lou Jun would continue his search, no matter how long it may take.

Fate had always been unpredictable, because it had brought 16th here today. Lou Jun had finally found the first sign of another user he had long sought. Never would he had predicted that the answer would arrive at his doorstep.

For there is no use to rush fate - those who wait will be rewarded.

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The Ghost Warriors went through their days, purposeful, organized, and most importantly, following a well-known routine. Morning training, afternoon reports, and heavy feast by nightfall. But the past week, they had been more cautious, despite maintaining the same pattern. In time of peace, one had to prepare for war. Any day now, the storm could arrive. Every Ghost Warrior in the realm felt the clash of powers when the Demon and Celestial Tribes had their first battle. The warriors were agitated, more so because they had been training for far too long without real action, real opponents, real bloodshed. Although they were not involved in the current war, their warrior's blood could not ignore the gravitating sensation of being part of something they were born for. They wanted to fight, to test their strengths, to kill those who opposed their authority.

Yan Zhi had felt the eagerness and drive, even among the Royal Guards and also within her own blood. In the past, after the Ghost War, she had always fought to protect, but now she felt something more invigorating. She wanted to fight to win, to crush those who opposed her. The days of the Ghost Tribe glory would return, she had promised them, but it couldn't come until they first resolved the unrest within their realm.

By nightfall, she strolled alongside the water lily pond of Ziming Palace, it didn't take long for a dark presence to appear behind her. Yan Zhi whipped her dagger out and swung the blade at her target - who dodged and jumped to her side.

"Yan Zhi," the rogue smiled, but she instinctively pulled out another dagger and held it to his neck.

"Even without your magic, you still move like a phantom," she commented, eyes narrowed mockingly.

“Good...it only means you’ll always be within my sight,” he answered with a grin, then glanced at the blade against his neck. “I thought we talked about this...you shouldn’t...,” his words were cut short when she pressed the blade against his skin.

“We did, but I don’t recall I agreed to stop,” she countered, her brow furrowed at her wild tiger, debating if she should put a leash on him. “Where did you go today?”

“Nowhere far,” he answered calmly, again with the gaze she knew so well. “It wasn’t a dangerous mission.”



“Zi Lan,” she said impatiently at his continued evasion. Yan Zhi knew it would not be easy to break him from his pattern, because he was not someone who could be easily tamed. She could see in his eyes he was analyzing his next move, calculative as always. As if on cue, with the reflexive ease of a warrior, he captured her free wrist, twisted her arm behind her back, and pulled her against his chest, completely ignoring the dagger at his throat.

Face to face, he gripped her tightly, preventing her from struggling from their intimate contact, his usual tactic when he tried to rattle her composure to his advantage. “I went to consult with 8th Senior on the matter we spoke about before,” he admitted casually, but his words remained controlled as he continued, “like I said, the mission was not dangerous.”

“You went to Zhu Long Gu again,” she glowered.

Zi Lan suppressed a laugh at her accusation, infuriating her even more as he changed the subject, his lips now close to her ears. “I wonder how many spies you placed on me, I thought I lost all of them this time.”

"I didn't set any spies on you, General Yu was only thorough with his job, given your continued refusal to take the title that was offered," she answered defiantly.

"General Yu did send the best then, and I do appreciate his loyalty to you, but I am not a fan of his meddling," Zi Lan admitted, "Yan Zhi....I assure you..." but his words were cut short when she turned and captured his lips, clearly disarming him, his eyes widening in surprise.

"Yan Zhi?" he questioned breathlessly when she broke the kiss.

She smiled, but her eyes remained dark. "Are you ready?"

Grinning with understanding, he released her wrist. "When have I not been?"

"Do you want to move somewhere else?" She asked calmly. Grasping his hand, she guided it to the front of her body, the other remaining on her waist.

"No....we shouldn't make a mess in your room."

"Now you're worried about my room?"

Smiling, Yan Zhi magically cloud jumped them away, right before dark clad assassins descend from above. They now stood outside the pack of uninvited intruders, all in dark clothing, their faces hidden. Yan Zhi quickly conjured swords into their hands as she and Zi Lan faced their enemies.

"Took you long enough, any longer and I may have forgotten your existence. She happened to smell very nice today," Zi Lan taunted their opponents, fifteen of them at a quick glance.

Surprised but undeterred, the assassins attacked. Yan Zhi threw her daggers, killing the first two in front. They might seem stronger than the ones in the mortal realm, but their techniques and martial arts were similar, indicating they were in fact the same type of assassins, at the very least the same branch as the ones who had attacked them before. One should never fight too often with the same enemies, because without realizing, the assassins had given them the upperhand this way - Yan Zhi had trained to counter all their attacks at Kunlun. It didn't take long for her and Zi Lan to killed more than half the assassins. The rest tried to retreat, but Zi Lan blocked their path.

“Hey now.... don’t run yet, you haven’t disclosed your plans,” he said before attacking the remaining three. Just like her, Zi Lan had learned to counter all their martial attacks from previous sparring practice, the benefit of those who had to fight for survival. Her Royal Guards arrived just when Zi Lan had subdued the last assassin.

Yan Zhi placed a binding spell on them immediately before they could try to attempt suicide, a common last resort of well-trained assassins. “Start talking, where are the rest of you?” Yan Zhi ordered, as the guards surrounded them.

“Celestial Whore!” the assassin in the middle spat.

Zi Lan slashed his shoulders, but not deeply enough to kill him, making the assassin jerk in pain, though he did not cry. “I’m sorry, do you want to repeat that?” Zi Lan asked, his tone dangerous.

“Lying with a Celestial Commander, she is nothing but a...,” Zi Lan backhanded the assassin so hard, he fell to the floor with a groan.

“I must apologize, I may have to kill you before you finish giving us intel.”

“Even if you kill us all, you’re going to die - did you think we’re the only ones?” the other assassin muttered.

“You think we aren’t prepared?” Yan Zhi glared at them coldly. These foolish followers, their eyes were now startled at her statement.

“Aaahhh...Cheng Yin must have recruited the dumbest crew for the job. So easily manipulated, you’re nothing but sheep, no wonder you always fail. At first, I thought I should let you live a bit longer for your intel, but we’re a warrior clan. Weakness even in the mind is also a weakness we can’t afford.”

At her words, Zi Lan raised his sword, but her hand rose to stop him. It was her duty to finish the job, not his. With a wave of her hand, Yan Zhi slit all their throats with her magic, just in time to hear the sound of a battle horn on the highest peak of Ziming Palace. The battle had finally arrived.

In times of crisis, those who fought for survival were forced to bring forward hidden strengths they never knew they possessed from within themselves. Nothing could hold them back now, as her warriors were eager to show their skills. Their warriors blood boiled tonight.

*To run was to die, it was time to stand up and fight, for there is no reward for second place when it comes to war.*

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Not since the Ghost Tribe Civil War had they had such a battle on the ancestral land. Tribe after Tribe, Generals after Generals. But this time, it was different, because the surprise attack was no surprise at all. Everything was set, down to the last detail. With the collaboration of the experienced Generals, the Red Royal Army, and General Zhao's personal troop, they had planned every possible scenario. Traps had been laid, warriors hidden with their aura camouflaged, and those who had been targeted placed in secured locations- within the Breeders Den, protected by the trained beasts. The rest prepared for the attacks that had finally arrived. Nothing could possibly go wrong, because their lives depended on it.

The battle of the night lasted until dawn and ended only after the sun had reached the morning horizon, when all of General Hu Qian's warriors retreated in defeat. Hu Qian was one of the young bloodthirsty Generals, much like General Zhao - yet, unlike him, General Hu was obsessed with power and recognition. His hunger for domination never ceased, even attacking his own people, with little regard for the benefits of the Tribe. So, it was not a surprise he had joined up with Cheng Yin. The enemies had a large amount of weapons, supplied by the Yellow Demon King himself. Even though there was minimal casualty on their end, they still sustained injuries, some more serious than others.

Zi Lan, who could read her posture without fail, had insisted they leave the clean up to the rest of the Generals while they headed back to her chambers to change, before they regrouped again. Moments before, while she had been sparring with General Hu, another warrior had taken advantage and had attacked her from behind. Yan Zhi had easily dodged, but Hu Qian had used the opportunity to release his Three Petal technique, hitting her squarely on the left shoulder. Now the needles were still embedded within her. She had endured the pain, even after the enemies had retreated, although maintaining her breathing had become difficult with the passing of time.

"You can tell me if it hurts," Zi Lan told her when they reached her chamber.

"It hurts," she answered breathlessly, no longer struggling to keep her composure now that they were alone. She sat on her bed, with Zi Lan kneeling before her.

"See...that's not so hard," he smiled approvingly as he brushed the wet loose strands from her face. But his teasing expression didn't last long after he assessed her injuries, no longer hidden by her dark clothing after he removed them. "We should have asked the warrior to put a sleeping spell on you."

"No," her head shook instinctively, tightening her hold on his arm. "Anything but that," she begged, as haunting images returned.

"Yan Zhi, you can't hide from them forever," he reasoned. "This may be the first battle, but a Princess is allowed to be injured."

"I know," she admitted, but her breathing grew heavy, not helping her case. "Just a little longer...at least until I complete my training. Please, I can handle this."

Zi Lan closed his eyes briefly, and cursed under his breath, but she knew he'd relent, even if reluctantly, since he could never deny her. He stood up and left the room to grab supplies. It took longer than expected, but when he finally returned, he came back with bandages, healing salve and an unusual metal rock. Zi Lan settled himself in front of her again, a grim expression still on his face.

"Three Petal Needles are not easily removed, you have to hold on to me," he advised, as he placed her hands on his shoulders. Hands tightening, she nodded reassuringly, though cold sweat dotted her forehead. Three Petals were specially made by the Ghost Tribe to easily enter the body, but their tips had three unique hooks, made to pierce the flesh, causing excruciating pain when extracted. *How did he know?*

Zi Lan took a deep breath before placing the magnet rock over her left shoulder, the needles reacted immediately, cutting her flesh as they rose to meet the metal. Hands gripped tightly on his shoulders, Yan Zhi bit back a shout that came out as a whimper and she was unable to control the distressed expression on her face. Zi Lan stared back at her, with an even more painful and regretful expression, although he was not injured himself. She tried to give him reassuring words, but he smothered them with his lips.

Her eyes widened in surprise as she stared into his dark eyes that glowed with the fire of a fiery beast. Her nostrils filled with the fragrance of mint and earthy sweat of day old battle, mingling with blood and masculine musk. She relaxed, almost dreamlike, as her eyes fluttered closed under his gentle caress. Yan Zhi felt him hold her closer, his strong arms wrapped around her waist, while the other remained on the magnet. Her hands gripped his chest and shoulders, marveling at the feel of his hard yet comforting body, the warmth she could no longer live without. His mouth took hers with primitive hunger, slipping his tongue in the cavern of her mouth, as he explored the edges, with shallow hot laps. She began to quiver as a different fire grew within her, heightening her other senses to a lurid electrifying intensity.

Shuddering sensual desire began to eclipse the ache on her shoulder as he continued to distract her with skillful deep kisses of sweet salted nectar, clouding her mind, pulling her away from reality, further from the bitterness of the present. She responded hungrily, demanding more as her tongue met his greedily, anything to forget the sensation of piercing pain. But it was much more than the need for relief from the throbbing agony of the flesh.

Since the battle had ended, molten blood lust remained in her veins, an inner craving that had yet to cease, as her unfulfilled body demanded comfort, to bond once more. She moaned against his lips, so absorbed in the moment and dazed from tasting him, she only woke from their passionate embrace when she felt the sharp pain of cutting flesh on her shoulder. It was magnified without warning, like hot searing fire, making her cry in pain as her head jerked back in surprise, because Zi Lan had swiftly pulled the magnet away, the embedded needles along with it.

Zi Lan immediately crushed her mouth with his, desperate as he attempted to smother her senses once again, to ease away the lingering pain he had caused. She heard him drop the metal rock, and his hand with bandage cloth covered her flesh, placing pressure on her bleeding wound. But then she felt the most unsettling response of all; Zi Lan trembled as he held her, but not from desire but from *fright*.

Eyes tightening as she reflected on the man who embraced her, how it must have distressed him, this task he had taken upon himself because of her stubbornness, her *obstinacy*. She had hurt him again, *yet* he did not hesitate to do as she asked. Her face grew hot, eyes stung with tears that threatened to fall, because the intimacy, the sacrifice was more than she could have imagined.

*Her hero, her rogue, her husband...the one and only.*

His lips slid down her throat, sending tingling waves of pleasure into her body as he savored her with slow open kisses, absorbing the remaining lingering pain of the flesh. “Zhi’er,” he whispered. Her eyes fluttered open.

“What did you call me?” she asked in a quivering voice when his mouth lingered on the sensitive spot on her throat.

Lifting his head, his hand cupped her flushed face, red mystic eyes glazed passionately into hers, yet they remained serene, like untouched calm surface water of the night. “Zhi’er,” he repeated softly, the words mesmerizing to her ears.

She gave him a faint smile. Only her late mother had called her by that name. It was a distant past, a sweet but bitter reverie she had long forgotten. “I’m sorry,” she choked.

“Don’t be,” he said as he wiped away her tears. “We’ll get through this, I promise.”

Not long after, with the efficiency he had always possessed, Zi Lan changed back to his usual unruffled self as he bandaged her injuries and redressed her for the gathering of the Generals, taking place in the afternoon. They needed to regroup after the first attack. The Generals were now busy tallying the fallen, their people and their enemies. General Hu’s warriors had countless weapons, which was their advantage, but they hadn’t counted on Ziming Palace being waiting and ready for their attacks. The next battle would not be as easily won now that they knew about the preparations.

“This was not one of Qiao Er’s predictions,” Zi Lan stated as he glanced at her injury, “or she would have warned us.”

Qiao Er, the brave child, had learned to conceal her terror over her premonitions. Although her eyes widened with fright, she no longer stammered when she explained her vivid dreams. She did not cry like she used to in front of others, but only in private once her duty was completed. She understood her powers had benefited their survival. This was not a life Yan Zhi had envisioned for her niece, but they had little choice when destiny had decided her path. Today they found out the true powers of the Ghost Princess. But like her ancestors before her, Qiao Er had a role to play, most importantly, to serve her people.

“No, it was not,” she said regretfully.

“You do understand the implication of this,” Zi Lan warned.

“I do, but what other choice do we have when it is her fate?”

Without further words, he held her close, an unsettling feeling engulfing them. It was true, they had sustained the least amount of casualties, but there were casualties nonetheless. They were saved today, but what about tomorrow? They couldn't turn back now, even if they had wanted to.

*The dice had been tossed, they could only look forward to what the future may hold, for the choice they had made.*

## Chapter 85 ~ Qian Shou Shan



*Thousand Beasts Mountain, Ghost Realm*

*He didn't want to die...*

Why...had they left them here? Defenseless, taken from their homes. In this harsh, unforgiving landscape, with nothing but each other.

No creature would want to die after such a short life. He had not had the opportunity to turn into human form yet, had not yet had the pleasure of experiencing life like his other immortal siblings. The ones that survived to adulthood.

Yes...he remembered now. It was the custom of his kind. He and his siblings were left on *Qian Shou Shan* (千兽山, Thousand Beasts Mountain) when they were close to reaching immortal status. The mountain was full of fiery mythical beasts who had nothing but their claws and strength to fend for themselves. Still in their true forms, unlike other immortal children, Bai Ze Beasts did not turn to their human form until they reached 4,000 years of age.

Many mothers in his tribe had multiple litters, but not all survived to their adulthood, due to this harsh custom. But it was a necessity, because they couldn't afford to have too many of their kind roam. Only the strongest, luckiest, the ones that were destined to bring glory to their people could live. They bred only leaders.

The ancestral testing ground for his kind was not so merciful to his litter of eight: only he remained after a little more than four hundred days of being on this mountain. The first hundred days, he had watched his most eager and docile siblings become victims of a Nian (Mountain Beast). The remaining six tried to be more cautious and they worked together to endure the harsh reality that was set upon them. They stayed within their pack, huddled together, while keeping an eye out for predators that would do them harm. But the mountain was never forgiving, despite the beauty it held.

Everything was deadly, especially if one lost sight of the hidden danger behind the allure of the flora and fauna. Even the water from the river was not safe to drink, because deadly two headed serpents lay in wait for the opportunity to strike.

It was the first attack that sent chills down their spines, as they watched their eldest be strangled to death by the large two headed yellow serpents. The noisy struggle was long and agonizing. Each breath became shorter lived as the serpent tightened its hold. The desperate sibling tried to bite and claw at the unyielding beast, but to no avail. They watched her disappear under the dreadful murky dark waters. They felt fear and anger at their own helplessness, because they couldn't save her...their only sister, who had protected them since their arrival.

*And it was him.... who she had saved that day...*

Because he had not heeded her cautious words, had approached the water where the monster lurked. She gave her life as a result, took his place...because he had not listened. The funny thing about attachment was the weakness it gave one's soul. From the first moment they licked each other's wounds as cubs, their sibling connections became non-severable. If only his sister, the strongest among them, had not bonded like this with him, she would have been the last remaining.

But fate would have it, like destiny had decided before they had even stepped foot on the mountain, that it was not the strongest who would survive. Somehow miraculously, he was the only one remaining, the weakest link present on that fateful day. They had all protected him until the end, feeding him, sheltering him, and taking on all the danger that lurked in the shadows.

How was that fair, he wondered, because it was not how it was supposed to be? Only the strongest should remain breathing. But they did not care; they did anything to protect their youngest.

He did not understand the depth of their sacrifice until the day he transformed into an immortal child. His last two remaining siblings' bodies were not yet taken by the merciless world, and he did not want their bodies to be eaten by savage beasts. Nor could he built a fire to burn their corpses. So with his bare hands, he dug their graves, and laid rocks over them. He could not cry, because there were no tears left....but the heavens took pity. The sky mourned the loss of his siblings for him, covering the forest with soft rain.

The warm sweet rain continued to fall as he descended the mountain - *alone*.

Though his will to live was strong despite the horror he had witnessed, he was much weaker in human form with no knowledge of magic to protect himself. He soon found his way down the narrow path escaping the mountain, for the shield only blocked the passage of beasts. He was hungry and starving as he made his way back home, an instinct within their blood, like a beacon that wouldn't turn off. He did not stop, even though his body was merely skin and bones, because he had the will to live, to survive despite the physical suffering.

*His siblings, they had sacrificed themselves for a weakling, but even as a weakling, he would not give up. He would not let them die in vain.*

Then, one day, he finally collapsed on the high grass rocky plains of Hong Yan Gu (Red Rock Valley), midway to his home. He didn't know how long he had passed out, but he was finally awoken by the smell of freshly roasted meat, while he was covered in thick braided straw mats. The warmth that was so foreign yet comforting came from the heat of the nearby fire.

"Are you hungry?" came the youthful voice of a female, unbelievable to his ears. The situation was so strange and impossible, he almost thought he had reached the underworld.

He turned to look at a young girl not much older than himself, in dark green and black hunting gear, with a pair of thick braids, sitting next to a well-made fire. Curiously, she was all alone. He tried to speak, but no words came out, only a hoarse sound. He realized he had never used his human tongue before. Like a trained animal, he nodded eagerly, until she handed him the freshly roasted bird.

“Here, eat this.”

Desperate as he was, he did not hold back. Hurriedly he snatched the lifesaving nourishment that he had thought he'd never have the chance to taste again. Gorging the bird down, bones and all, he realized he had taken the whole bird. He looked up at her guiltily, but she only smiled and urged him to continue, as she tossed a leather bag full of water next to him. He couldn't open it, he had never seen anything like it before.

At her approach, he instinctively backed off. He was fearful of other life forms, no matter how gentle they may seem. He wanted to trust her...but his body continued to react on its own, in the defensive posture of a predator.

But she was not only kind, but also patient; cautiously, she approached him, as he bared his teeth, reverting to the beast within.

“Don't be afraid.” Fearless, her voice was calm, like the tranquility of the night. Her dark green eyes with a hint of violet glowed from the fire besides them...hypnotized, he forgot his will to escape, to attack.

Suddenly, the water bag was back in his hand, opened this time. He was so mesmerized, he didn't realize how close she was. Her serene presence was unlike anything he had known from his harsh existence. Without reservation, he drank heavily, consuming all that was given. He soon fell back asleep after he finished the rest of the meal. She was gone when he woke up. At first, he thought it must have been a dream, until he realized that she had left her water sack behind.

The next day, she had returned with another game she had caught. This time, she brought him clothes. Despite his inability to converse with her, or help her with the hunt, she always returned. His savior, his only friend, kept bringing him provisions, until he was strong enough to leave after twelve days of her continued care and company. He wanted to remain, but the call to be back with his kind was too strong. Surprisingly, she knew he had to leave, even without words.

When he left, he had vowed to find her again.

He found her 45,000 years later, at the gathering of warriors' arena festival that was held every 100 years. It was her, he had no doubt about it. She wore the same silver hydrangea

hairpin he remembered from long ago, with the same dark green eyes he could never forget. He realized he had fallen for her that moment he recognized the girl from his dreams, who had become a woman. But as fate would have it, she did not remember him, contrary to his foolish belief. But why would she, when she was the eldest daughter of a General, one of the bravest and powerful men he knew. She couldn't possibly care for a wild urchin she had saved long ago.

What was the worst was his inability to form coherent sentences in front of her, succumbing to his past handicap. He tried many times when the opportunity arose. Offending her on many occasions, his stammering wouldn't cease due to his nervousness, whenever he was in her presence.

He was no match for her, he knew; with his background, his skills, he was a nobody, the one that should not have survived. But the will to be with her was stronger than he had realized. Because he was determined, he worked harder than he ever had before. Astonishingly, he became a General himself, at the age of 66,000 years, through much hardship and perseverance. He never backed down from a challenge. He was beaten more times than he could count, but still, he stood up from every failure. He managed to become the youngest Ghost General who was not from royal blood. But that wasn't enough. He wanted to become more than just a man with powers he wanted to be a man she deserved. No matter how strong he became, he was still not at the top.

So, he had to retreat, to wait...for the day she would accept him. He could only pray for the day she would remember the wild child she had come across millennia ago.

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*Present Day, Red Rock Valley, Ghost Realm*

By the cliff side of Hong Yan Gu, Zhao Yan leaned against a red boulder, with Xiu Yin on his lap, nestled safely in his arms. He gazed at the flock of white cranes on the horizon returning home as the sun set. It was a beautiful day, gorgeous in fact. He wished for time to stop so that they could forever remain where they were.

"Xiu Yin, I always wanted to bring you back here. To show you the place we first met. But I was afraid...afraid you would reject me."

He held her closer, waiting for the moment she would respond, would speak, even her usual scowl would have been fine, but she remained silent. The irony of their situation didn't escape him, because he could speak freely without his usual stammer, while she remained in her peaceful dream.

Zhao Yan caressed her cheek, smiling as he spoke again: "Remember when you brought back that spotted rabbit? It pretended to be dead, but it soon escaped when you handed the rabbit to me. I tried to cry out but couldn't form any words. You were already busy preparing the fire. When you turned around, I had already tripped over a log trying to catch our dinner. I thought you would chastise me for losing it, but...instead you laughed at my predicament."

His thumb caressed her soft rose lips, his heart starting to ache at the memories of their youth. "I still remember your smile on that day, brighter than the stars above us. If only you could smile now like you did back then, if only fate wasn't so cruel."

Lifting her hand to his lips, he kissed her fingers tenderly. How many days had it been, he wondered. A part of him wanted to remain in this dream forever...to stay here for all eternity. But reality was not so kind, because a rustle of footsteps within the forest told him their time was up.

"General Zhao," the Celestial called out to him. The High Immortal who was a cautious man kept his distance.

Zhao Yan turned his head to the side, his eyes narrowed dangerously. "How did you find us?"

"General Yu provided your location," he answered.

"Why did they send you?" he asked in puzzlement.

The Celestial did not show any nervousness and his voice remained calm. "Considering we have been sparring partners for quite some time, you should know I am a man with no fear. And not many can counter your blows," he added.

That was true. Anyone else, Zhao Yan would have blown away with his magic; except for the Celestial, whom he had never fully understood yet was more alike him than he wanted to admit. Their unusual bond in the arena would give him pause before he delivered his attack.

"I apologize for disturbing you," he said regretfully, "but the Xiu Sisters...their family, they wanted their elder sister back."

"She is mine," Zhao Yan claimed. His grip instinctively tightened around her body- Xiu Yin who continued her eternal slumber. He had waited for a miracle these past days, for Xiu Yin to open her dark green eyes. But no matter how much he prayed, they would remain forever closed.

Days before, they had suffered another attack. Although they had prepared like they had for the first battle, fate had turned the tables on them. No one could have predicted that Xiu Yin would become a casualty of war. She took the deadly blows meant for her third sister, Xiu Tao. Zhao Yan had tried to reach her in time, but he couldn't. By the time he arrived by her side, she had already succumbed to her wounds.



He had lost his last strand of sanity as he slaughtered the remaining enemies in his vicinity, until nobody was left. What was the point of his whole existence when he couldn't protect the most precious person, the one and only pure being from his childhood? Blood lust of his kind took over as he morphed into Zai Be, increasing ten times in size, into a lion body of white fur, nine eyes and six horns. He was the beast of nightmares, killing whoever was in his path, chasing the enemy's soldiers who tried to run.

But his rage didn't cease: his powers were out of control. He had continued to pursue them, past the boundaries of their borders. General Yu had cut off his path, but Zhao Yan was beyond reason. The General chose to blast him with magic, pushing him back to their borders. Zhao Yan was no match, he knew, but he fought against the older General, enraged by his interference. But the

experienced General Yu used magic to restrain him. Using his staff, the General targeted his pressure points, forcing him back to human form. Pulling him back to his senses, his *grief*.

By the time Zhao Yan returned to Xiu Yin's side, his bloodlust was gone. It was replaced by the chill of death as numbness took over. He was thrown back to days he was on Thousand Beasts Mountain; the images of loved ones slain before his eyes filled his visions. Memories he had long suppressed resurfaced. Without speaking a word, he lifted her body into his arms and cloud jumped away from the battlefield.

He never expected they would find him so soon.

"We both know that's not true," the Celestial continued, "you've been grieving for four days now. It is time to return."

"Xiu Yin will stay here with me," he growled.

"Her sisters will disagree. Their mother wants to see her daughter. She already suffered the loss of her husband," he reasoned.

"I don't care!"

"But Xiu Yin would," the Celestial countered. True to his character from the arena, calculative...he didn't approach but settled himself on a nearby rock. He turned to look at Zhao Yan directly, his gaze hardening. "You know Xiu Yin, the most responsible and attentive of all the sisters, would want to be with her family, her loved ones. She would not want them to suffer any further, you included."

"Stop talking!" Zhao Yan roared. He lifted his hand, magic fire ready to blast, but he reigned in his urge to attack.

The Celestial was not taken aback by his anger nor his threat, he persisted. "Zhao Yan...", he said, calling him by his given name for the first time, capturing his attention once again. "I can only imagine the pain you're going through. But you have to let her go. Her soul will linger, unable to cross over if she were to remain here, away from her loved ones."

Despite his rage, his hand fell back upon hearing those piercing words.

"I know...", he mourned, he understood. But Zhao Yan didn't want to let her go. His hand smoothed over her cheek tenderly, but there was no sign of warmth, her life force was gone. No matter how much he tried to convince himself, she would not come back.

*How could the first time he held her, touched her, be when she was no longer in this world?  
Why was he being punished, when all his life he had worked to be the man she deserved?*

*Why did fate not take pity on him?*

“I was too late...,” he choked, Zhao Yan gazed at the woman he had lost, the one who had never known the depth of his devotion, his obsession. “I never had the chance to tell her. I thought I had more time.” He then buried his face into her shoulder, eyes closed, trembling, as pain seared through his body.

“Everyone knew you never took your eyes off her whenever she was present. Why didn’t you approach her?” the Celestial asked, his voice gentle, causing Zhao Yan to lift his head slightly. He tried to talk but no words came out this time, as though his voice was muted by magic.

It took a moment, or maybe it was much longer, he didn’t know. Zhao Yan couldn’t control the emotions he wished he did not possess, but they were there nonetheless, a weakness his kind had long tried to rid from their existence.

Eyes fluttered open in a daze-like dream, as memories of the past resurfaced. Visions of Xiu Yin, the first gaze she’d given him, the first smile, the first gentle touch. Her illuminated image, transformed to the moment he had met her again. Her vibrant presence capturing his dreams, an enchantment he never wished to escape from.

“I tried, many times...but I couldn’t. I was a coward...afraid,” Zhao Yan admitted, struggling to breathe as words began to spill. “Xiu Yan was the first gentle being who did not care what I looked like or what I was back then, when I came down that cursed mountain. I was hers the moment we met.”

Eyes swell with tears, but he blinked them away, surprised he still had any left. “After I found her again, the one who saved me, there was nothing in life I wanted more than to be with her. But...but she did not remember me,” Zhao Yan cried at the bitter revelation. “I was a fool, to believe she would recognize me. So I could only watch her from afar, hoping...she would remember...those days we spent together...but even if she didn’t, it did not matter. My memories were enough.”

The Celestial's eyes softened, his gaze turned to the valley before them. An expression of a man who had seen more than his share of tragedies. *"The worst tragedy of fate was the kind that never got the time to blossom. The lost opportunities, the chances, the moment within the time itself."*

"Zhao Yan, let her rest in peace."

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### *Ziming Palace, Ghost Realm*

Another battle, another win. But why did it feel so empty?

This was a war of necessity, of survival, to bring peace to a realm that had suffered more than others. The guilt remained with the leaders, as white sheets covered the dead, allies and foes alike, blanketing the field like the first scattered snow.

No ruler had the right to bring war, suffering and bloodshed upon those who followed them for their own personal reasons. Their numbers were smaller now than in their glory days, each life mattered, all lives mattered; because soldiers were not just a number, a name, but real faces showing utmost trust as they gazed at their Generals, their Leaders.

*When it comes to war, there are no winners.*

The precious lives, precious souls...warriors who died for those whom they wished to serve. Other leaders before them may not have cared. But the Generals who served under her did, for all those from the past and present who had given their lives were recognized as a true loss to their kind. Even though dying in battle was the greatest honor of all for a warrior clan, they acknowledged all soldiers had family, friends and loved ones, who wished for their safe return.

Like the sign of first snow, more deaths would come, their numbers would further dwindle if the cards were not played right. They had gambled with the powers given to their tribe. They had succeeded, the consequences compared to what they could have lost otherwise were of lesser significance. It was in fact necessary to continue, because even though there were no winners in war...there were still survivors. And survive they would.

From the moment they had stepped back onto the land of their ancestors, they were responsible for their own destiny. She would not yield to those who wanted to bring harm to her home, her people, her loved ones. Yet, as she sat alone on her throne, with no others except for the guards beyond the entrance, her heart began to waver.

“Zhi’er.”

Yan Zhi turned to the man snapping her out of her contemplation. Zi Lan had returned, standing before the entrance. Without further words, she cloud-jumped straight into his arms, her face buried against his shoulder. Yan Zhi didn’t realize she was trembling until she felt his arms around her, with hands that began to soothe her.

“I’m alright, he didn’t hurt me as I had predicted,” he said.



“Hurt you?” she asked in confusion, then realized Zi Lan thought she was worried about the confrontation. But still, now that he brought it up, Yan Zhi didn’t believe him, given his track record. Pulling back, she used her magic to check his body, thankfully there was no sign of internal injuries.

“How is he? Did you persuade him?” she asked. The Xiu sisters had begged for assistance after the grief-stricken Zhao Yan had taken their sister away.

It was the custom of the Ghost Realm that the bodies of warriors had to be taken back to their family for proper burial or cremation. The mourning period of the first forty-nine days was essential. Proper ceremonies and rituals had to take place, or the soul of the dead would be left to wander endlessly, lost without a home. For souls who still had unfinished business, they could come back to give signs and clues to their loved ones, for them to complete it in their stead.

“General Zhao Yan promised to return Xiu Yin to her family tomorrow. It doesn’t look like he’ll do anything rash for the time being,” Zi Lan answered reassuringly. Then his expression

changed as he read hers. He captured her hands, his eyes concerned. “Zhi’er, your hands are cold as ice. This is not just about the General, what’s wrong?”

Yan Zhi could only shake her head, not knowing what to say as she stared back at him. Noting her subdued response, his eyes scanned hers, but as usual, he didn’t ask further. Zi Lan settled her back on her throne, kneeling before her. He rubbed her hands in his, blowing warm breaths over them, soothing her strained nerves.

Silently, he waited for her to collect herself, while her mind remained enveloped within the complexity of their situation. The ramification of their powers had become clear as day. The price of survival, the cost for peace...would be paid with the blood of those she wished to protect.

“The one who was supposed to die was not Xiu Yin in her vision,” Yan Zhi finally said.

His hand rose to cup the side of her face, while the other grasped tightly onto hers. “Casualties of war cannot be avoided, no matter how we wish to evade it,” he explained.

“Zi Lan, we used Qiao Er’s powers...the repercussion like you said before...”

“Many deaths were prevented because we were prepared. Zhi’er, we have saved many lives. Lives of your loyal subjects. But not everyone can escape death.”

He was right, to avoid all casualty would be too greedy. And it was impossible to protect only those who were dearest to one's heart. Fate had shown them that. Her closest warrior ally, whom she had trusted with Qiao Er’s life, had paid the ultimate price.

As a leader, a ruler, she could not fall back because of the weight of guilt. *One has to bear the burden, the price for trying to control fate.*

## *Chapter 88 - Monsters*

Monsters come in many forms...

*Most are made up, of course. Parents, grandparents, and elders told us these stories when we were children, often to keep our behavior in check. Monsters will come to get you.... they often said...*

*Like folklore to remind us not to lie, to steal, or wander off with strangers; these tales are used to control the unfavorable habits in our youth, because Monsters will go after those who stray away from the rightful path.*

*There are other stories, we learned, like those about the unknown dangers lurking in the shadows. Stories that were passed down through generations, becoming folklore that never goes away, no matter how ancient it may be. These oral stories, some of which never had the chance to be written down can change over time, but never their core: the lessons remain the same.*

*What all these dark tales have in common, is the emotions they instill in the listeners. An emotion unlike any other, because it causes one to flee, to hide, or in the worst case...to freeze.*

*As one matures, these stories, tales, or folklore have less powers over the mind. We dismiss them with logic. But despite rationality, reasoning or wisdom, the same unsettling emotion will rise when we are most powerless. No... not just powerless...but vulnerable, so that who once was powerful can only quiver. A feeling that cannot be rationalized. Like when you look into a mirror, and believe you see a dark shadow from the corner of your eye. The same intuition that causes one to tremble during childhood, because of the invisible lurking monster at one's door.*

*Fear... an instinctive emotion, a survival instinct of humanity, beasts, and immortals alike.*

*The most powerful sensation, which can cause anyone to cower in fright yet can cause others to rise beyond and above one's capability.*

*If anything, he wanted it to be the latter, as they faced the Monster that was after them. The Demon who came to terrorize the innocence of the night. Ruthlessly, savagely, it killed whoever dared to block its path. It was powerful, with a killing aura that was unlike anything*

he had known. The heated dark cloud of vibrant red and black glowed, like a demonic shadow capturing the host within its grasp.

It was alarming...it was petrifying...but the most frightening thing of all was not the victims or the blood pooled at its feet. It was the Monster's murderous ferocious eyes. Eyes that certainly contained killing aura, yet the joy and satisfaction that appeared with each torturous kill set him apart from other common savage beasts. It relished the blood on its hands, tasting and smelling the fresh life essence of its victims. The Monster had no soul, no humanity.

They tried, desperately, to escape, away from the Monster that left countless deaths along its path of destruction. He knew what it wanted, but he couldn't let the Monster have what it desired.

Never would he allow it to have its way, not unless he took his last breath. Though he himself had no fear of death, his distress stemmed from his lack of power to protect what he held dear. He could not let those who had sacrificed their lives to let them escape die in vain. Their cries would forever haunt his soul. Yet, there was no one left to block its path. The Monster had caught up with them. He was at a disadvantage, because he was powerless in this realm; but he couldn't, he wouldn't back down, nor would he cower in fear.

"Take her to safety!" He yelled at Fiery Qilin. The terrified beast fled as fast as its flames could take it, with the precious cargo on its back. He had to buy them time.

He turned to face the predator, his sword rose, directed at the Demon, the very evil that passed across this land to slaughter its people. She had told him this day would come.

*It was his destiny...his fate...*



He flew up high to attack but was held back by the invisible magic shield. With a wave of the Demon's hand, he was blasted with magic, fell back on the ground. Undeterred, he immediately stood up to run at his opponent again, but the Demon pivoted back, grabbed the blade with his fingers. With ease, the sword was broken in two by the Demon, his hand quickly caught his neck, choking him. With the broken sword, the Demon stabbed his chest, making him cry out.

He was dropped to the ground. Unimaginable pain pierced his body as blood oozed from the wound. Yet, he would not yield. Though fear could paralyze, strength could emerge when protective instincts took hold. He would never let this Monster near her. He grabbed the other piece of the broken blade and tried to attack the Demon, but he saw him coming and kicked away the broken blade in his hand, then cruelly removed the embedded blade from his chest. Falling to his knees, he coughed up pools of blood. Despite knowing his end was near, he refused to give up. With all the strength he could muster, he stood up again, ready to continue to fight the Demon before him.

Dark eyes narrowed, the Demon gave a sinister laugh, amused by his stance. "Persistent, heroic, you're definitely one of his. Has the Monk taught you nothing but to seek your own demise? What purpose does self-sacrifice even serve?"

Inhaling deeply despite the pain, with a renewed sense of purpose, he spoke in a clear concise voice, ignoring the throbbing pain in his chest. "Shifu taught us plenty, but giving up was never among these things," he answered coolly, "You have to kill me first."

"Aaaahhh...so you do seek your own end, how amusing...," the Demon smiled, raising his brows at his prideful stance, his eyes lighting up with the passion of a predator once again. "But death will be too easy...boring for the likes of you. I don't normally leave witnesses, but given the amount of loyal dogs I've killed, I will make an exception tonight."

Before he could catch what, the Demon meant, a hand flew towards him like a whip, his neck was caught. He fought against the hold, but as he struggled to break free, the grip only tightened. He was pushed back until his body slammed against a tree, leaves raining down from the impact. Their bodies almost touching, their heads side by side, the Demon turned to stare into his glowering eyes. He tried to attack, but his body was held in place with magic.

A dangerous gleam came into the Demon's eyes, like a predator who was ready to devour its prey. "Let me show you what's worse than death," the Demon whispered.

Eyes widening in shock, he couldn't comprehend what the Demon wanted, but he knew it would not be pleasant. As if on cue, he felt an agonizing stabbing pain within his body, making him groan in distress. His body tried to react like an animal caught in a snare, to fight for its life, but he couldn't as he was held in place. It first started with the tip of his fingers, then grew, as the magical attack traveled through his body. The world around him was gone and he was surrounded by nothing. He heard nothing, knew nothing, but only the fire, which burned, and intense blinding agony. Unable to withstand the torturous torment, his consciousness began to slip.

But he tried to hold on, to keep himself awake despite the horror he was subjected to. Once finished, the Demon let go of his magic hold. The world began to spin, his body collapsed on the dimly lit forest floor.

Lying with piercing pain, then becoming numb, immobilized, the last frightening image before he descended into darkness was the Monster heading towards her. His mind roared with fury, but he couldn't utter the words, no sound came out.

*He had failed to protect her after all...he was fated to never see her again.*

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*He must have gone to the underworld...*

*But why...what had he done to deserve it? He didn't remember being sentenced to the depth of hell. His rational mind told him it must be a nightmare, a nightmare he couldn't wake up from, no matter how much he willed his mind.*

*Within his dark dream, the Monster appeared once more. Next to him was a child who was sobbing, begging. What was she begging for? What was she crying about? He didn't know, because he couldn't hear. He tried to get closer, but his body wouldn't cooperate. They started to move away...desperately he screamed her name, but no voice came out.*

*He had to save her...he had to protect her...they were getting away.*

*He had to go after them! But he couldn't get any closer.... their image became distant. He realized he couldn't move, why? Had the Demon cast a binding spell?*

*His mind continued to scream against the magic that took hold, but it was too late. They had completely disappeared before his eyes.*

*No...no...it couldn't be! He couldn't be too late...he had to save her...*

*He had to move!*

"Qiao Er...Qiao Er...", Shang Ling murmured, his eyes fluttering open. Zi Lan, with a concerned look, stared down from above. "16th?" he gasped.

"Senior, you're finally awake." 16th sounded relieved, yet a pained expression remained.

"Where's Qiao Er?" Shang Ling asked, then he remembered what had happened. "Zi Lan...you have to save her! The Demon King...he...he...", he tried to rise, but his breath was short. 16th laid a comforting hand on his chest.

"So it was the Demon King...", 16th expression changed to dread. "Senior...calm down, you're still in shock," 16th pleaded.

In his struggle and confusion, Shang Ling was unable to remain calm. "Where is she? Did they take her? Did they...", he was cut short due to uncontrollable coughing.

16th's eyes closed briefly as he forced himself to say the dreadful words in answer, "I'm sorry, Qiao Er isn't here...she...Senior, the Demon King took her."

*How could that be? She must be frightened, terrified. The Monster now held her within his palms. Shang Ling hadn't been able to protect her. It was his fault.*

"We have to get her back! He's a Monster! He'll kill her!" Shang Ling cried again, trying to move but he still couldn't. "We have to save her!"

"Senior! You're still injured! We will get her back, I promise you that," Zi Lan told him reassuringly, but they both knew it wouldn't be easy. The Demon Realm was not a place they

could easily enter. The Yellow Demon King was too powerful, even their Master had yet to defeat him.

"I should've protected her...I came back...I tried..." he groaned, his breath remaining labored.

"Senior why are you here?" Shang Ling heard 16th ask. "You left days ago...Qiao Er warned you to leave Ghost Realm for your protection."

Indeed, Shang Ling had left. She had warned him about her visions. Qiao Er had begged him to leave that very night after she had seen his fate. Images that had haunted her, visions that had made her cry in his arms. She had told him that as long as he stayed away from her, he'd be able to live. But every cell in his body knew she would be endangered. He couldn't sit quietly in his realm knowing she may be endangered.

"I couldn't...I couldn't leave her alone. I knew her visions, but even if I were to die, it would be my destiny."

"Did you try to change your fate?" Zi Lan asked, his voice careful, his mysterious eyes hardening with an unrelenting glare.

"It was not my intention. I only wanted to protect her," Shang Ling tried to shake his head but realized he couldn't. "The Demon King decided to spare me, but he said he wanted to show me what's far worse than death."

Zi Lan brow furrowed at his words, but he remained silent.

"16th...?" Shang Ling rasped.

An unsettling feeling began to creep through his nerves, despite the numbness that lingered. It was eating at him; all the signs were there. He had tried to rationalize, to explain away the obvious symptoms. Shang Ling realized the truth, even when his mind attempted to conceal it upon his first awakening.

Should he dare ask? To be made aware of the evidence before him? But he had to know...

"Zi Lan, why can't I move?"

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“Your Highness.” Xiu Tao, the third Xiu sister, bowed just outside the private quarters. “The Generals have arrived, they are waiting at the battle arena with the rest of the warriors. Everything is prepared.”

“Tell them I will be there soon,” Yan Zhi said curtly, as she started removing the amour she had worn for over two days. She had not slept, no one had. Changing to royal garb, she could hear the heavy commotion from the distance. Her warriors had indeed all gathered today.

Execution...no matter what society, culture or era...had always been entertainment. Nothing drew more people to the front row seats than watching another member of society at the last moment of his life. It had been highly encouraged by the past authorities for the people to watch, to witness how the lives of those who broke the laws were ended in the most dishonorable way.

Today's execution was no exception, but it also was special. Si Ma Zhijie (四马支解, Four Horse Dismemberment) was a rare occasion to behold, but what made this event like no other was the sheer number of those sentenced to death in this manner. Ropes tied to their hands and feet, the ends attached to horses, they would be torn apart into four quarters. Without an intact body, their souls would forever be damned. It was an excruciating and painful death and others who were also sentenced were made to witness.

Scheduled for the early dawn, the war horses were gathered within the battle arena. The prisoners had been stripped off their armor, because traitors did not have the right to die in their glory. No... they would die in shame for their actions - actions against their own kind.

Qiao Er, the young Ghost Princess, had been taken during the night. Not only had it been unanticipated, they had been taken off guard. The enemy had help from the inside. While her warriors were distracted by a new attack, the Demon King himself had used the opportunity to kidnap Qiao Er and had left a bloody trail of destruction in his wake. Qilin had yet to awake from his injuries, while 4th Disciple Shang Ling was left paralyzed. The Demon King had not only used but also double crossed his own puppets. His people had retreated soon after he had gotten what he had come for, leaving the decoys at the mercy of Yan Zhi's forces.

Yan Zhi had known this day would come...but this time, there was no silver lining. *Fate no longer tolerates inference.*

Their many attempts to change events had caused a chain reaction of unprecedented consequences. Predictions became harder as destiny was steered in directions that were not intended.

*This time, they had been unprepared.*

“Yan Zhi, you have to stop this!” Zi Lan, with a distressed expression, stormed into her quarters as she was about to depart for the arena. Though understanding his agitation, she was not fazed by his outburst.

“Why? I was the one who ordered the execution,” she responded calmly, “If not for them, Qiao Er wouldn’t have been taken.”

“There are better ways to end their lives, why Si Ma Zhijie?” he asked, apprehension in his eyes.

“For millennia, this has been the execution method used on traitors in our realm.” Yan Zhi shrugged coldly. “Si Ma Zhijie is more lenient than what my people would prefer. They already suggested feeding the prisoners to our beasts.”

Yan Zhi walked passed him, but Zi Lan grabbed her arm.

“If you need to execute in this manner to appease your people, then execute the leaders, the followers are innocent!” he tried to bargain, to justify. “We both know Cheng Yin manipulated them!”

Yan Zhi turned to face him, her cold eyes glowering. “Are they really innocent?” A cynical chuckle escaped her, her expression soon turned to resentment. “Were they threatened to join these so-called leaders?”

“No...but they surrendered...and gave us their intel,” he countered. “We should show leniency.” Yan Zhi snatched her arm away, cutting him off.

“Everyone makes their own choices in life, and they chose the wrong person to follow. But no one forced them to carry those weapons and to help the enemy invade the land of our people, and to take my child!” She roared, visibly quivering with rage that she could no longer suppress.

“Zhi’er, I’m sorry I did not protect her like I promised.” Zi Lan was blaming himself, as he always did. But him taking responsibility couldn’t lessen the anger within her. In fact, it infuriated her even more. His noble righteous act only inflamed her senses, heightening the dark emotions that were ready to burst forth.

“Zi Lan, you’re wrong. I am not executing them to appease my people...I’m doing this because I want to.” Her ruthless statement took Zi Lan by surprise. His body tensed, he staggered back, but she wouldn’t let him. With his collar caught in her hand, Yan Zhi pulled him towards her, fiery eyes locked onto his, wanting him to understand the choice she had made.

Her tone was fierce yet passionate, underlined with velvet iciness that could chill a person’s soul. “I want to hear their cries when they beg for mercy. To see the fear in their eyes before they are torn to pieces by the horses. The battle arena today will be bathed in the traitor’s blood.”

“Yan Zhi, this is not you...,” Zi Lan shook his head in disbelief. “Please don’t do this,” he implored.

“Me? Who am I really?” Yan Zhi demanded to know. In his eyes, she had always been pure. Zi Lan did not want to see her flaws, nor her strengths...nor the *darkness* within her wholesome appearance. Grasping his collar, she tightened her hold. “I may not be her real mother, but she took her first breath in my arms,” she whispered. At the memories, hot tears threatened to swell, but she blinked them away.

Swallowing hard, her voice quivered with the visions of the unfortunate child, who had become her whole life. “The first time her tiny hand grasped my fingers. Her first walk. Her first words...the first time she called me *mom*. She’s mine, and they helped that Monster take her!” she thundered, releasing her hold.

Yan Zhi turned to leave, but Zi Lan caught her hand in his, from behind. He squeezed lightly, a grasp of wistful yearning, his silent way of begging her to change her mind. *But...it was too late, there was no mercy left within her.* “There will be no clemency to those who betrayed our

people.” Her misty eyes closed briefly, yet there was no regret for the words spoken, “I will make them *pay*...a thousand times more than the suffering they put her through.”

“Zhi’er...I beg you, don’t let darkness take away your light,” he pleaded in despair.

“My people rose on this land from fire and smoke. *I need no light*. Don’t forget, I am the future Queen of the Ghost Tribe. I’ve been more than patient with the likes of them. All we’ve been doing is defending our borders. It’s time we stopped playing the prey. I may not have started this war, but in the name of my Ancestors, I will end it.”

Snatching her hand away, she strode passed him, pausing only at the entrance. “Zi Lan, they took Qiao Er...*our child*...my soul no longer matters. Please don’t interfere.”

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“The Yellow Demon Lord wants us to swear fealty to him,” General Yang announced loudly, with the letter in his hand, delivered by the demon warrior that morning. “Despicable, using a child as a hostage,” he seethed under his breath as he handed her the letter.

The Generals and Senior warriors were gathered within the Ziming Throne room, discussing their next course of action. The execution the day before had done nothing to improve their spirit, except for satisfying their bloodlust. Their beloved young Princess had been taken, and no one could breathe comfortably knowing they had failed to prevent the kidnapping of their royal.

General Yu shook his head, his face hardened. “Time again and again, they lost, despite the reinforcement they had. The Yellow Demon King must have lost his patience. He must have come to the realization that the incompetent puppets could not take control of the Ghost Realm. It was a drastic measure from an unstable man.”

“What he can’t have, he will destroy,” Yan Zhi stated quietly. She knew the kind of man Cheng Yin was. He was just like the men she grew up with, the ones who would rather see rivers of innocent blood, than to lose. Men like her father, who would take any measure to be on top, even throwing away kinship and humanity.

“Luckily for us, we came across a valuable intel.” General Yu said and handed a scroll to Yan Zhi to read.

"You know where the Princess is kept?" General Zhao asked the older man.

General Yu gave a heavy sigh. "Yes, but that was the only positive news."

"What is the bad news?" General Zhao asked cautiously.

Hands tightening on the opened scroll, Yan Zhi couldn't control her body so as to not tremble. "The Demon King has sealed Qiao Er at the Diushi Mogui Ta," she announced, hardly believing her words.

"Diushi Mogui Ta...", other warriors gasped in agitation, and their reaction was warranted.

Diushi Mogui Ta (丢失魔鬼塔, Lost Devil Tower), was the prison of Demon Immortals who lost their sanity and self-control when their cultivation became imbalanced - either by practicing dark arts they were too weak to handle, due to lack of understanding of cultivation energy, or when they chose to break a taboo to gain cultivation. Those who could not regain their senses were imprisoned there, away from civilized society. Qiao Er was now surrounded by those who were worse than monsters, with nothing left of their humanity, with no *sanity*.

*Her child, her only kin...her weakness...*

*As long as they both lived, Qiao Er's life would always be threatened by those who wished them harm. To submit to that Monster would do nothing to change that fact. To pay fealty to a Tyrant would never protect those she held dear, just the opposite. She may not be powerful, a High God...yet she would never give in to threats.*

*Never submit...that is the true warrior's way.*

"We will not swear fealty to the Demon. There will be no negotiation. We are not letting the Princess of our Tribe remain there as a hostage, we will get her back. The Demon Lord has made a grave error by crossing us. He has waged war upon our people," she declared.

"General Yang will remain behind in the Ghost Realm as our backup. The rest of you, ready your best warriors. You are all dismissed."

"Yes! Your Highness!"

As the warriors left, Yan Zhi gestured for General Yu to remain.

“I have a matter to discuss with you,” Yan Zhi told him quietly.

The General Yu bowed. “At your service, Your Highness.”

“Place a seal over Zi Lan’s quarters,” she ordered.

“Your Highness...?” his eyes widened with uneasiness, but quickly changed after she narrowed her eyes. “I will do as you asked.”

## Chapter 90 ~ May your words be true...

Numbness...

*Was that even the right word to use under the circumstances?*

4th Junior had been a ghost of himself when he had first come back from the Ghost Realm. Thereafter, Die Feng had been there to witness the anxiety eating away at Shang Ling day after day. And he had been present when 4th Junior had left again, with only a few words of assurance that he would return in a few days.

*How had he failed to take action, to protect his Junior once again?*

*How many more would have to suffer for this endless war?*

He tried to accept the harsh reality of their existence. He was a man who had lived through countless battles, and none had been easy.

But this time, it felt *personal*. This time, he was an integral part of this war. A catalyst, a pawn, yet an unwilling participant. No matter how much he wanted to rationalize, the unsettling guilt never subsided.

Leave it to Shang Ling to surprise them all with his actions. When they had received word of his dire condition, they couldn't comprehend how he got himself into such a predicament. 4th Junior had always been rational, calculative.... strategic...he never ventured into any situation without backup. Who would have thought that without even a plan, Shang Ling would crash into the Ghost Realm to protect his disciple, without even a thought for his own well-being. It was almost like a *deja vu* for the Disciples of Kunlun, with the difference that Shang Ling could not even use his powers properly.

Shang Ling had always been different. He had grown up privileged, more privileged than most of the Disciples of Kunlun. He was arrogant, hardly attached himself to others. A man who barely acknowledged the existence of other immortals besides his brothers in arms, a few friends and family members. For him to be this reckless for a child from another tribe was beyond anything they could comprehend. But despite the consequences...they knew they would have done the same, though admittedly with better thought-out strategy.

With the back of his hand, Die Feng grazed over Shang Ling's cheek. His Junior had fallen fast asleep after tiring himself talking endlessly about how much he had failed them, apologizing for leaving abruptly, and for not involving his brothers in the dangerous mission.

Die Feng had assured him he had done nothing wrong, and that they would bring him to High God Zhe Yan for treatment as soon as his condition improved enough for them to move him. With the war still ongoing, Die Feng couldn't bring all of his Juniors to the Ghost Realm. While 8th Junior Mei Shu busied himself with an elixir, 5th Junior Zheng You, 4th's closest confidante, was also present assisting with bandage changes. Besides, Zheng You was here because unlike them, he could still use his magic in this Realm due to his mixed demon blood.

Zi Lan was absent when they first arrived. Thankfully, the resourceful 5th had already found out 16th's quarters were sealed by instruction of the Ghost Princess, right before she and her army had departed. Gods knew what Zi Lan had done for such treatment, but they had a feeling the Princess must have her reasons and 16th probably deserved it.

But they knew, they couldn't leave him to his own devices if she was still absent when they had to leave. The Ghost Princess might hold great powers, but there were still those who wished him harm. It took them more than a day to convince General Yang Jie, who never hid his distaste for their presence, to allow them to have a short visit with Zi Lan. Unexpectedly, Zi Lan looked perfectly content. But Die Feng knew better than to trust his Junior's calm demeanor.

Deception had always been his forte.

Zi Lan grinned brightly. He was dressed in dark blue, his hair was tied back with black ties, so unlike his usual Kunlun garb. Die Feng reflected that he had missed his Junior's energy from millenia ago. 16th looked like he fit into the Ghost Realm nicely, despite the fact that he was a prisoner now. Surprisingly, his energy came alive here, even without his cultivation. "Senior, I haven't seen you for a while. How did you become worse for wear?" 16th asked dryly.

Die Feng didn't suppress his chuckle at the bait, though his tone remained stern. "For someone who is now imprisoned, you have not lost your wits. Should I even be concerned?"

16th gave a hearty laugh before he addressed the two guards beside his door. "He can't break me out, I would like some private words with my Senior." The guards looked at each other and

then accepted the reasoning without a word. They moved further down the stairs of the hut and stood a distance away, still within eyesight.

"How is 4th Senior?" Zi Lan asked as he settled comfortably on the floor. Taking the cue, the conversation would not be short, Die Feng sat down at the entrance. Their relaxed posture would keep the guards at bay.

"We will move 4th to High God Zhe Yan's place tomorrow. 7th's prognosis for 4th was grim at best for the recovery rate. We hope the High God has better methods to speed up the healing process," Die Feng explained. But something still bothered him - something was not adding up, given Shang Ling's behavior. Eyes narrowed, Die Feng asked, "I want to know, why was 4th here during the attack?"

"We did warn Senior Shang Ling to stay away, given the unpredictable Civil War, but he didn't," Zi Lan answered, with a slight hint of hidden meaning. He was talking in half-truths, as usual. Die Feng debated how far he should try to push his stubborn Junior.

"Kunlun men are a stubborn lot," 16th continued with a heavy sigh. *"Danger may call out our name, but we're the ones who choose to jump into the flames."* Without fail, he switched topics. "Of course, you are aware of that, given your recent experience."

This time, he couldn't ignore the jibe. Die Feng glanced inside the quarters before he countered. "This is more comfortable than the Arctic Dungeon of the Ghost Realm. What have you done for the Ghost Princess to seal and place you under guard?"

"Nothing yet," Zi Lan rolled his eyes at his own situation, "it's to prevent me from doing anything in the near future. You may have heard she had a hard time tying me down."

"I'm surprised your Ghost Princess really did lock you up this time, and that you allowed it without a fight," Die Feng resumed his attack.

"Didn't your Demon Princess try to keep you in the mortal realm as well? I heard you didn't put up much of a fight either," 16th countered easily.

"I thought you were too busy to notice," Die Feng responded darkly.

"I was, but 5th Senior complained about his lost bet the last time I came by," he answered with a gleam of mischief. "You should seek her out as soon as you can," 16th suggested. It sounded like a challenge.

"You're giving me advice from behind the magic seal?" Die Feng asked with astonishment, perplexed by the unrelenting confidence of his imprisoned Junior.

"She only sealed me to keep me safe, given what happened with 4th Senior. Yan Zhi...", Zi Lan paused momentarily, his eyes briefly closing, finally showing a hint of anxiety before he continued, "...is not herself right now. And given my past behavior, she won't take any chances with me going rogue without her knowledge."

"Between you and 17th, I don't know who I should be worried about more."

"Definitely 17th, given her *condition* at the moment and the powers she possesses," Zi Lan answered jokingly.

"I will have to agree with that statement," Die Feng laughed at the thought of the High Goddess' lack of restraint, then his eyes softened as a thought occurred. "When do you want me to send word to 17th?" he whispered.

"There won't be a need."

"Pardon?"

"Keep my imprisonment from Si Yin's ears and especially from other Celestials, the gossip lot. Or do you want 17th to bring an entire army to break me out of the Ghost Realm?" Zi Lan asked with amusement.

Die Feng's head shook, his gaze turned half serious. "Knowing her, Si Yin does not do anything by half measures," he admitted. "I doubt the Crown Prince could hold her back."

"We do not need additional tension between the tribes right now. Besides, I can get myself out when the time comes," 16th concluded with confidence.

"You will endure anything from the Princess, won't you?" The obvious words came out before Die Feng could take them back.

“Wouldn’t you, for her?” Zi Lan asked bluntly with a chuckle, of course 16th caught the true meaning. His attack was relentless. “Could you say no to that Yellow Demon Princess of yours?”

Die Feng flinched at the question. His silence was answer enough.

No, he couldn’t. It was because he couldn’t that he had pushed her away. He had failed her in every regard of their relationship. Now things were too late, as the war had reached the point of no return. Their affair had been impossible from the beginning. When he had seen 4th’s injuries, inflicted by Li Ying’s own blood brother, guilt consumed him.

“Senior, when did you last see her?” Zi Lan asked softly, interrupting Die Feng’s self-tormenting thoughts, his body tense.

“A few days before the Demon War started,” Die Feng answered uncomfortably, “but she wants nothing to do with me anymore after what I did. I can no longer approach her...our tribes...even Shifu and Shimu...and now 4th...”

“Why should that stop you?” Zi Lan cut him off, blocking his attempt to justify their separation.

With an expression of confusion, Die Feng said: “Didn’t I just say-”

“I heard you, but Senior, she is not her brother, even if the same blood runs through their veins. If she was, you wouldn’t have agreed to stay with her in the mortal realm before your cursed wedding.”

“I know she’s not her brother,” his head shook profusely at the knowledge he had accepted long ago, “nor is she responsible for his sins.”

“But you have not sought her out again,” 16th accused with a note of disappointment.

“It’s too late...and I have no right,” Die Feng ground out the words that were harder to say than he would have thought. A familiar ache began to grow within his chest, his breath caught at her image. She had refused to forgive his actions, and he couldn’t blame her. Li Ying had left him; her parting words would forever haunt his dreams...his conscience.

*"He who seeks is a fool for a moment, but he who does not try will be a fool forever."*

His head snapped up at the words from his Junior, who stared directly at him. Die Feng saw something within the depth of Zi Lan's eyes. *How can a man look so lost when his words were so wise?*

"Please take advice from a man who waited too long," Zi Lan advised, his gaze transfixed at past memories. His voice began to quiver, yet the tone remained strong. "No matter how short the time may seem to an immortal, even one day feels like an eternity. I am sure you feel the same at this very moment as you sit before me."

Despite his better judgement, Die Feng nodded reluctantly. But that small action alone lightened his burden. He knew he had to see her again.

*"Fate may not be kind to the men at Kunlun, but it does not mean we should fall back from the challenge."*

"Is it still possible?" Die Feng found himself asking, with the vulnerability of a man who had hurt the woman who had stolen his heart.

"Senior, it's never too late," Zi Lan said softly. "Despite my current situation, I did get Yan Zhi back."

"Thank you," Die Feng said softly, understanding the depth of Zi Lan's efforts to ease his guilt.

"Any day my dear Senior," 16th smiled broadly, knowing his words had gotten through. His expression changed again, this time his tone serious. "However, I do need a small favor."

"Have you changed your mind about your imprisonment?" Die Feng teased, though he already knew the answer.

"I already requested for better tea, so I will stay here for a while longer to enjoy it," he countered, his eyes lighting up again. "But since I am still locked up here, I need you to speak with 8th Senior on my behalf, and only you alone."

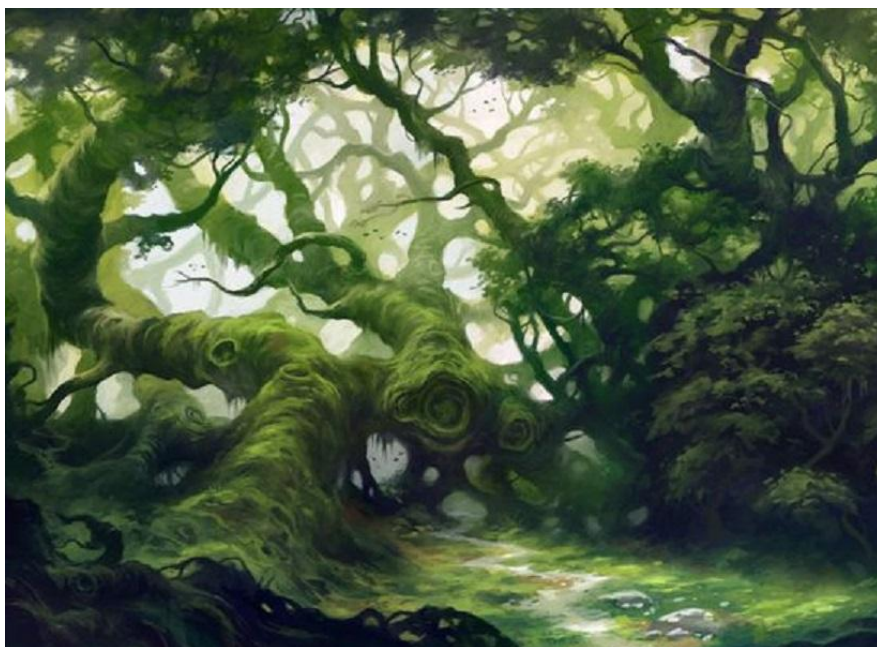
"What are you scheming this time?" Die Feng asked suspiciously.

Zi Lan's broad smile did not ease his worries. Die Feng inwardly groaned at the prospect of the errand. Even locked up, he was sure 16th could still cause trouble with no less effort than 17th.

*They were two sides of the same coin.*

\*\*\*\*

Countless arrows covered the heavy thick forest of tall trees of Qīngtái sēnlín (Moss Forest, 青苔森林). The fiery arrows came relentlessly, from all directions, lighting up the dark moss covered ancient forest. The lit arrows shone light onto the lush bright green blanket from the tip of the tree branches to the forest floor. With dark blue fiery flames at their tips, they flew like bright shooting stars, lustrous sparkles of the night. They were beautiful, magnificent - if only they were not aimed at her, she could have admired them more.



No... this was not the time to praise others when they wished to cause her harm, she kept telling herself, as she flung herself backwards to avoid more arrows. One had sliced the side of her shoulder, blue flames burning her flesh until she had put it out with magic. Myriad thoughts crossed her mind as she continued to dodge scores of arrows coming at her from all directions.

She remembered their friendly sparring days at Kunlun. They had tried their best to make the Demon Ancestor proud. But there was a difference between battling at Kunlun and the thick moss forest at the Demon and Ghost Realm borders. Their powers were no longer suppressed. Li Ying knew the few weeks at Kunlun had increased her cultivation exponentially. Her feet were lighter, her body moved quicker, even her strength had increased.

This had enabled her to sneak into the camp of her enemies unnoticed. Li Ying needed the practice, she had rationalized, but the real reason was that she no longer wanted to live in someone's shadow. She had to learn, she had to know the world that was collapsing around her.

The difference between friends and foes was just a thin line in times of war: Proven by the scene before her, as the dark clad heavy armored opponent flew from above with her sword ready to cut her down.

Li Ying turned her glowing chain whip into a sword to cross blades just in time, but not fast enough as she stumbled back, with one knee on the lush covered moss floor.

"Wait! We need to talk!" Li Ying shouted, trying to balance herself to stand up once more, but the heavy weight from above was relentless.

Yan Zhi pressed downward, her red killing aura comparable to any Demon Immortal in the battle arena. "I don't feel like talking," Yan Zhi sneered, cold ruthless eyes staring back at her. An eerie expression Li Ying could never have imagined on her friend's face.

Li Ying admitted that she was not great with tactical plans, a subject matter she had yet to delve into. Nor had she anticipated she would meet such hostility. Well...that was a lie, she had known she would be met with hostility, but she had thought she would have the chance to slow her down with a few words. She had planned to meet with Yan Zhi one on one to alleviate any hostility from her people. However, she had not taken into account the changes in Yan Zhi.

"Yan Zhi, please! I'm here because I want to help!" Li Ying pleaded, but her friend refused to listen. With no other recourse, she used her magic to blast her away.

The bright yellow light forced Yan Zhi to retreat momentarily. Li Ying flew higher up, spun, and landed right next to Yan Zhi's side. She swung her sword and clashed it with hers. Their blades continued to clank, with Yan Zhi kicking and punching, fast and hard, while Li Ying could only dodge and defend against the continuous assault.

Another variable Li Ying had not anticipated were Yan Zhi's renewed abilities. She fought differently than she had at Kunlun. Had she gained a new Shifu back in the Ghost Realm? But

it was not just the martial arts that was different. In the past, Yan Zhi had fought only to defend, and hardly attacked, much to the chagrin of the Demon Ancestor who had often bemoaned Yan Zhi's lack of killing aura. If only the Ancestor could see Yan Zhi now, she would probably be proud.

However, at the rate they were going, Li Ying knew she couldn't go on defending forever, especially against an opponent inflamed with wrath and grief. Such opponents were the most dangerous. Fighting with sheer rage to end others' lives, their emotions eclipsed their standard abilities.

Li Ying had miscalculated...or actually, she had not calculated at all.

Desperate, she blasted fire magic at Yan Zhi, who somersaulted away from the assault. This gave her an opening to jump to a nearby tree, land on the large tree branch thick with covered green moss and put a distance between them. "I was the one who gave your people the intel about Diushi Mogui Ta (Lost Devil Tower). At least, hear me out!"

Yan Zhi raised her sword. Bright blue light turned the blade to a bow once more, with three arrows magically appearing in her hands. She pulled back the strings, blue flames appeared on their ends, aiming at Li Ying's direction from below the tree.

With a voice like steel, her cold expression never changed. "Your brother took my daughter, I have nothing to say to you," she said as she released the arrows.

Li Ying whipped out her chain whip, swung it in circular motions, blocking the arrows. But too late, she realized they were just decoys when Yan Zhi appeared next to her, with a dagger at Li Ying's throat. "Give me a reason why I shouldn't kill you right now!" Yan Zhi hissed.

Cold beads of sweat began to form on her forehead, shuddering fear grew the more she stared into her eyes dark with hatred...gone was the maternal comfort Li Ying had once known. Her friend who had dressed her wounds, sewn her torn clothes, and helped her do her hair, was now ready to do her harm without remorse. This was no longer the Yan Zhi she had known, her shy gentle friend...her sparring companion at Kunlun. This was Yan Zhi, a warrior, a leader of her tribe, most importantly of all: a grieving mother who would do anything to get her child back.

*Tread carefully...*

“There are a several good reasons, but let’s start with I’m worth more to you alive than dead,” Li Ying answered, her voice more shaky than she liked.

“That I have to agree with.” Yan Zhi turned her wrist, the dagger arched like a halfmoon crescent over her shoulder. Pressing the blade upward, the sharp edge grazed the delicate skin under her chin. Yan Zhi pressed her back against the tree.

*How had it come to this?*

Li Ying stared back, she tried not to swallow too hard or the blade would surely cut her flesh. “But not as your hostage,” she argued, stubbornly.

Yan Zhi smiled, but there was no warmth, only coldness. “Everyone knows you are the most beloved sister of the Demon King, I can trade you for...”

Yan Zhi’s sentence was cut off, when the chain whip glowed brightly. Li Ying had stabbed herself with the tip of the chain whip blade, distracting Yan Zhi enough for Li Ying to grab her arm with the dagger. Straightening their arms outward, Li Ying kicked, her foot made contact with Yan Zhi’s grip, the dagger dropped to the ground below them. Her chain whip blade rose to attack, but was blocked by Yan Zhi, who backhanded her across the face. The forceful blow made Li Ying slip on the wet moss and she fell to the ground below, the moss there thankfully cushioning her fall.

Before she could gather her senses from the painful impact, the crow-like figure descended from above with a shiny object she knew so well. Crisscrossing her chain whip, the double chains spread across her chest to block the blade. Her gaze turned to fury at her old friend before she swung her knee to force her back.

With the chain whip in one hand, the other pressed to the moss floor. Li Ying propelled her lower body upward, her hand anchoring from the ground. The chain whip swung out in a circular motion, forcing Yan Zhi to retreat. Flipping backward, Li Ying landed on her knees and foot, with the glowing whip in her hand. She had managed to hit her at last.

“It won’t work even if you want me as a hostage! He won’t believe you, nor would he take you seriously. He doesn’t take anyone seriously,” Li Ying shouted.

"I can always send pieces of you to the Demon King, then he will know I'm serious," Yan Zhi suggested impassively as she sent more arrows in her direction. Swinging the chain whip to the branch above, Li Ying backflipped while pulling at her chain, and landed her feet softly on the heavy branch.

"I would advise against that course of action. My brother, the Demon King will just send pieces of Qiao Er back. Would you risk that chance?" She asked from above, unperturbed by her threats. She noted that Yan Zhi was talking despite her hostility.

"I'll risk anything to get Qiao Er back," Yan Zhi snapped.

She flung herself onto the same branch, her bow vibrant with bright blue fire as it turned to a sword once more. Prowling like a predator, the sword spinning gracefully in her hand, she took steady unhurried steps towards her prey.

With slow measured backward steps, Li Ying faced her opponent. "Hurting me is her death sentence. My brother has a temper when it comes to his possessions," Li Ying continued to warn, voice controlled, ignoring the pounding heart in her chest.

Undeterred, Yan Zhi rushed forward to attack, the blade and whip clanged and clashed until Li Ying could retreat no further. The branch they were standing on got thinner as they moved closer to the edge. Whipping her chain forward, the tip of the blade wrapped around Yan Zhi's sword.

"You need my help to get Qiao Er back! I'm your only chance to get inside Diushi Mogui Ta, an asylum where we keep our most dangerous Demon Immortals," Li Ying informed, as they both pulled on their weapons, immobilized by each other's strengths.

"I don't need your help!" Yan Zhi growled with a mix of pride and fury.

"But you do, and you know it!" Li Ying snarled. "Or you wouldn't be talking to me right now. If you had wanted to kill me, you would have done it the moment I arrived. You need me and I'm here to help you save Qiao Er."

"Why should I trust you?"

“Because you know me. We’re friends, fellow disciples of the Demon Ancestor at Kunlun,” Li Ying said exasperated. “That has never changed. If that is not enough of a reason, did you forget the the first time we met it was I who saved you and Qiao Er?”

“From your brother’s assassins!” Yan Zhi accused her, making Li Ying flinch, her argument had backfired. Taking advantage of the response, Yan Zhi grabbed the chain with her other hand, and yanked Li Ying towards her. The blade wrapped in chain turned against her throat.

Face to face, Li Ying did not retaliate. They were talking, and that was all that mattered. “I know that now, I know all that he did. I’m firmly against what my brother stands for. I don’t want any more bloodshed,” she said.

“Li Ying,” Yan Zhi called her name for the first time since their battle, her voice unexpectedly soft, making Li Ying’s chest ache. “You can’t stop bloodshed when your brother is out to destroy the realms and its people.” Surprisingly Yan Zhi fell back.

Ignoring the danger, Li Ying approached, grasping the opportunity that was given. “But it doesn’t stop me from trying. I may not be able to save everyone, but I can save the ones I can. And I want to save Qiao Er,” she pleaded.

Suddenly, without warning, Yan Zhi turned around, with the tip of the blade at her throat once more. “You’re willing to go against him, your own brother?” she asked challengingly. But Li Ying stood her ground, refusing to stagger back, as she felt the blade touch her skin.

She now understood, resistance would only be met with hostility.

Calm and collected, with unyielding eyes, Li Ying answered, “I am the only insider of my Realm you can trust. My Ge-Ge will not be suspicious of me, he thinks I am an airhead at most. I can provide you with a map to Lost Devil Tower and information on how you can pass the threshold without hurting your forces.”

“How do I know this is not a trap?” Yan Zhi asked, her gaze of mistrust remaining, even as her voice began to waver.

“I know it’s hard to believe when I have the same blood as Ge-Ge. But the crime of our kin is not ours! It was you who told me that before you left Kunlun. I didn’t understand then, but I

do now. You tried to warn me that day, now I understand the true meaning of your parting words.”

“I was wrong.”

“No, you were not,” her head shook profusely. “I won’t let my father or brother’s crimes define me, and neither should you.”

For a moment, Yan Zhi didn’t respond, the tip of the sword remained steady at her throat. Each second felt like an eternity as Li Ying held her breath. Then to her horror, Yan Zhi lifted her sword, Li Ying instinctively closed her eyes assuming the worst. Her heart beat wildly, her palms began to sweat. She flinched when the brush of air from the sword went past her head, but the blade never hit her flesh. The sword hit something else. Her eyes fluttered open, her head turned to see the vibrating blade was embedded in the tree behind her.

With a bewildered expression, she turned to look at Yan Zhi.

“Start talking,” she ordered.

Li Ying couldn’t believe her ears, her luck, her chance. She closed their distance, grabbing Yan Zhi’s arm. “You believe me?” Li Ying asked breathlessly.

Yan Zhi snatched her arm away, her anger remained, though the hostility had somewhat subsided. “If you lie, or betray us...”

“I will not,” Li Ying answered with conviction, finally able to breath with relief.

“May your words be true...because there will be no realm you can hide in if any harm comes to Qiao Er.”

## *Chapter 92- In Life or in Death*

During the dark ages when the world was freshly formed, cultivation was new and there were no controls or limits. There were no records either, no masters to teach anyone, not even the High Gods. Stabilizing cultivation was a balancing act established through trial and error and if one was not careful, it could easily lead to catastrophic results. It took millennia and thousands of innocents dying at the hands of those who had lost control over their powers for enough knowledge to be gathered, rules to be set, and records to be put in place.

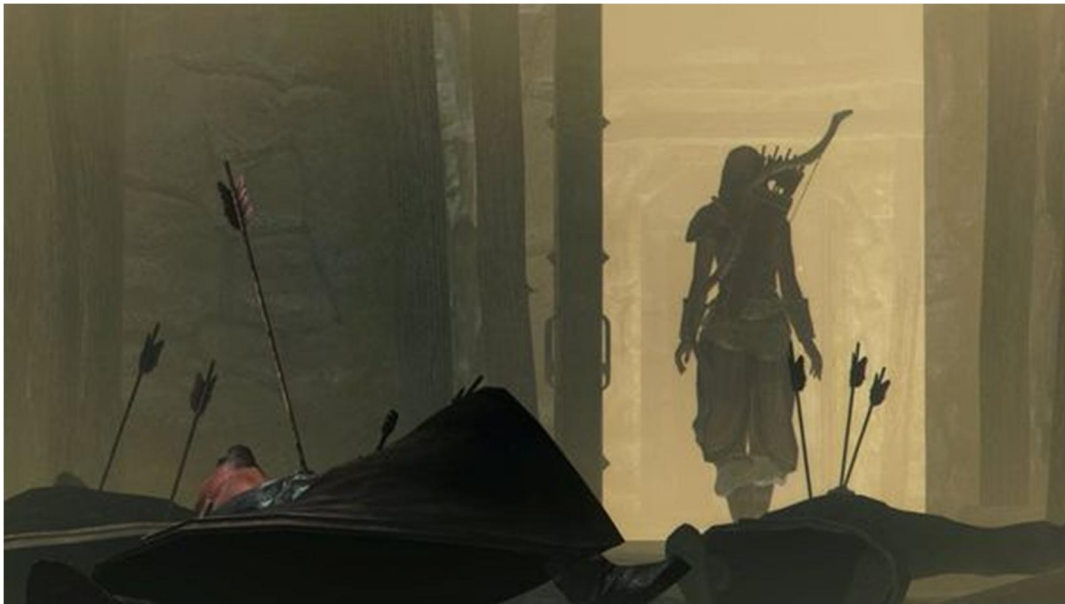
The Lost Devil Tower was created in those times, at the furthest edge of the realm, when borders had been stabilized after countless battles. It was an asylum, a prison for those who took extreme measures to gain powers and failed to control them. There were many stories of immortals, some even highly respected among their people, who succumbed to the lure of immense powers and turned to dark methods. These immortals were left a shell of their former selves after their primitive demonic side took over. They lost their control, their sanity...but worst of all, their memories. Their first victims, horrifically, were often their loved ones who were nearby when they reached the point of no return.

Many who lost their lucidity were instantly killed. But there were those who were deemed too dangerous to kill. They were the ones who were close to reaching High God powers. Although these Demon Immortals were no longer sane, their powers lay within their unstable bodies. They could burst forth at any moment, and their death would surely trigger their harnessed energies. The consequence of such a release of energy was too dangerous to even ponder. Lost Devil Tower was created to seal these unfortunate creatures. Thus, it became the most dangerous place in the Demon Realm - for within it rested hundreds of precarious energy bombs.

After the Demon Overlord burnt to ashes, Lost Devil Tower was left unattended for millennia. Throughout time, it became a legend, a myth, worse...most forgot about the dangers it held. The Yellow Demon King had chosen the perfect place to hide his hostage, because no sensible person would dare to venture into the Tower without reinforcement, without knowledge of the layout, nor the danger it held. Fortunately for them, the Yellow Demon Princess had given them sufficient information.

Each prisoner was held within their own sealed dome, tethered by energy straps on their ankles and wrists. The cord absorbed their cultivation power, and the more force the prisoner

exerted on their contraptions, the more they were held back by their own powers. A perfect mechanism to seal these powerful Immortals with near High God powers.



According to the Yellow Demon Princess, Qiao Er was held underneath the Tower, a most inconspicuous yet secured location. Breaking the seal of the dome would require high cultivation release, at least four times the cultivation powers of the prisoner held within the dome. Luckily for them, Qiao Er was young and most of her powers were still dormant. But still, they only had one chance to succeed as the break of the seal would most likely alert the Demon King to their presence.

Yan Zhi had her hands pressed against the sealed wall, suppressing her emotions to remain focused. She gazed at Qiao Er, who was asleep within the dome. Her hands and feet were tethered to the white energy, absorbing her powers. General Yu and General Zhao stood on the other side of the dome, ready for action.

“We only have one chance. Once the seal is released, take her and run,” Yan Zhi instructed Xiu Tao. Their cultivation would be damaged momentarily, but they were surrounded by her warriors, ready to battle at a moment’s notice in case Cheng Yin showed up. It was a dangerous gamble.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Xiu Tao answered and stood back cautiously.

Glancing at her Generals on either side, she signaled for them to start. The two Generals would use their powers to release the seal as planned. They would be vulnerable after the act according to General Yu, who claimed familiarity with this type of shield, so it was better for her to be their backup once the Princess was released.

As cultivation powers began to reach the weapons in their hands, the colorful flames brightened on each side in yellow and red, the colors of their spirit beasts. Their weapons blasted the shield at the same moment with their powers, draining their energy. It took longer than they had predicted, but eventually the shield gave way. Both Generals fell to the ground, their cultivation depleted.

Yan Zhi tried to reach Qiao Er, but Xiu Tao held her back. She reached for the child in her place, as was planned in case there was a trap. When the sleeping Qiao Er safely taken from her prison, there was a huge sigh of relief - but all hope for a swift rescue fell apart with the arrival of Xiu Li, the second Xiu sister, who descended from the stairs above.

“Your Highness, we have a problem!” Xiu Li shouted.

“What is it?” Yan Zhi asked, alarmed.

“All prisoners escaped their prisons. Their shields were lifted.”

“How?” She asked anxiously.

“Cheng Yin...” General Yu got up from the floor, his face pale from the spell. “He must have connected the shields. Once we broke the seal here, all the other seals broke as well.”

Dear Heavens, it was a trap! But who could possibly have guessed Cheng Yin would risk releasing unstable Demon Immortals to destroy them all. The man was insane! How could he possibly allow such a calamity in his own realm?

“I knew we should not have trusted a Demon,” General Zhao growled. “His sister led us to the trap!”

*No....it couldn't be, Li Ying could not possibly have led them to a trap! Had she really betrayed them?*

But there was no time to ponder that now, they had to find a way out. A rumbling explosion shook the ceiling above them. Tension grew as the soldiers looked at each other. Cloud jumping out was impossible due to the high concentration of Demon energy. They couldn't walk out of this place with the hundreds of prisoners free from above. The mindless immortals were ready to slaughter whomever dared to cross their paths. The explosions continued above - crashes, thumps...it sounded like the prisoners had started to attack each other. They had to find a solution quickly.

"We have to seal the princess' prison again," General Yu deduced, glancing at the ceiling out of breath from using too much of his cultivation. The tower above them rumbled again, they could hear the battle among the immortals getting louder. "All magic can be reversed. The seal here broke all the shields above. If we reseal it again, we'll have time to escape with the least amount of casualties."

Yan Zhi turned to the more experienced General, her brows furrowed. He was right, resealing might reverse the effect, the ones who were still within their cell would not be able to get out. It would be too late to reseal all the prisoners, but at least it would marginally increase their chance to escape. General Yu's gaze hardened when he continued: "But the prison won't reseal without a prisoner inside."

Eyes widening, Yan Zhi understood. There was a reason why no one had ventured to break anyone out of this prison for millennia. A *sacrifice* had to be made.

Yan Zhi turned to Xiu Tao, who held Qiao Er in her arms and General Zhao who stood by her side. "Your Highness?" Xiu Tao tightened her arms around the child.

"Generals," Yan Zhi addressed both men. "Escort the Princess out of here."

"What about you?" Xiu Tao asked.

"I will buy everyone time," Yan Zhi stated. "Our Generals are injured," she turned to the rest of the warriors. "Take them to safety, back to the Ghost Realm."

"You can't possibly..." General Yu interjected as a warrior helped him to his feet. "Your Highness! You can't!"

"I can and that is an order. Get out of here now!" She snapped impatiently, but to her astonishment, they wouldn't budge.

"But your Highness...", General Zhao shook his head.

"I told you it's an order!"

Xiu Tao shook her head as well, unlike her normal self. "No, Your Highness you have to turn around."

"What? Why?!" Yan Zhi frowned in anger and confusion. Baffled by their dismayed expressions, her body involuntary tensed and her skin shivered from instinctual fright. Had Cheng Yin arrived?

Suddenly, a bright wave of red fluttering lights surged from the floor to the walls above, signaling the magic shield was secured once more.

An eerie silence followed. Instinctively, her head snapped around.

Blood pulsed through her veins. Even the sound of the explosions above was drowned out by the fierce beating of her heart. What she saw, *felt*...that haunting moment...made her mind swim with perturbation. Her throat was paralyzed, weighed down by flashes of recent memories.

The weapon slipped from her grasp. Images of a *stolen* future rushed by, shattered by the muffled sound of the bow hitting the floor at her feet.

*No, no, no...it couldn't be! Why was Zi Lan here?!*

\*\*\*\*

It was getting harder to breath. Pain...the piercing pain was unbearable.

Yan Zhi struggled to stay above the surface of hell turned reality, but each breath was excruciating, awarding only just enough air for her to keep her sanity, her lucidity. She had to try again. No matter how many times, no matter how long it took, she had to get him out!

*Weakness...why was she so weak?*

*If she were not so powerless, would things have been different?*

*If only she possessed more power, more cultivation...intuition...foresight...*

*If only...things were different...*

But it was too late to have these useless thoughts. All she had to do was save him.

Her vision blurred from stinging tears that refused to stop. Blinking, she wiped them away with the roughness of her sleeve. Struggling, crawling, she pulled herself up, knee down, foot pressed to the ground. She barely managed to lift herself up... she had to try again. Grabbing her bow, she conjured the arrows. Eyes closed...she forced herself to relax and transferred energy to ignite the blue flames at the ends of the arrows.

Her body weakened once again from the technique she had not possessed before her training days...the gained cultivation, forever lost after each use.

The flames aimed at the transparent red glowing shield. She released her arrows, but they shattered upon impact.

Silence followed. They were alone. She had ordered her people to take Qiao Er and the Generals to safety, before the freed Demons above could make their way down here. Her people couldn't argue when she threatened capital punishment for those who refused. They hurried away, promising to return once the Princess and their leaders were safe.

Desperate words, honorable intentions, from warriors who refused defeat.

*Defeat...*the word Yan Zhi couldn't grasp as she stared at the man behind the shield. He stood there, held by tether ropes on his hands and feet, a prisoner sealed behind the magic shield. His eyes were unreadable, but they held the abyss of mysterious knowledge she had yet to decipher.

"Zhi'er," Zi Lan called out, with gentle voice that engaged her muddled mind. His hand tried to reach the seal wall but couldn't, the tethers held on too tightly. "It's no use. You have to leave now, before the tower collapses. It won't hold much longer."

As if on cue, another explosion from released cultivation vibrated from the ceiling. Dust and small rocks showered upon them. One of the Demons must have met his demise. The other Demons were taking each other out.

“No...,” she rejected, her head shook with shuddering denial, ignoring the falling rocks around her. “Not without you,” she declared. “You have to come back with me.”

“You don’t have much time,” Zi Lan urged, pleading, “before Cheng Yin finds out you’re still alive, you should leave.”

“Why are you so calm?” She screamed in fury. “Why are you not fighting?!”

Furious, Yan Zhi grabbed the sword from the floor, and ran the blade into the seal wall - but it only bounced off with the same force she exerted. She hit the shield again and again, enraged by his inaction. “Why are you not reacting?” she wailed at the unfazed man behind the shield.

Then it hit her. The truth was more merciless than the seal she was trying to break. Her attacks immediately ceased. With a trembling voice, Yan Zhi asked the question she had avoided, dreaded: “Did you know?”

“This is my destiny,” Zi Lan answered, simply, his words hollow, like he was stating a fact that was known all along.

Heavens above...the waking-nightmare wasn’t over, it had just begun. “What do you mean?” Yan Zhi asked in a harrowing, quivering whisper. The sword dropped from her hand, clanking on the floor.

Zi Lan closed his eyes briefly, his body trembling. She saw the moment his strength vanished. The willful stubborn warrior she knew was no more. A serene, yet crushed expression crossed his face as he answered: “I knew my life would end today. We have to let fate take its course.”

“No...,” her head shook in denial. Understanding dawned after the calamitous words. “It’s not true. We can change fate, we’ve done it before! We can do it again. All we need is time.”

Determined, Yan Zhi grabbed the sword on the floor and with all her might, she attacked the unrelenting shield. Frustrated by her weakness, she harnessed the powers in her hand. She

tried to blast the shield, but the energy from the blast propelled her back, sending her flying across the room. She groaned in agony from the impact.

“Yan Zhi, stop!!! Not for me, please stop,” he cried desperately, struggling against the ropes that held him.

“I don’t care if it’s your fate! I won’t let you die!” Yan Zhi shouted from across the room. Standing up once more, she ran towards him, stumbling along the way. “Zi Lan...don’t give up yet, please...I can save you, I can...,” her words were cut short as she tripped over a fallen rock.

“Please go back to Ghost Realm. Let me fulfill my destiny,” his voice broke, his head shook. “Fate won’t tolerate more interference. This calamity, one way or another, it has to happen.”

“There has to be another way,” Yan Zhi maintained fiercely. Grabbing the nearest weapon, she struggled to her feet again.

“Yan Zhi!!!”

“No!! Not you too! Not again...,” Yan Zhi argued. She refused to accept the inevitable, the destiny and her blade attacked the shield again.

*She had lost so much already. Not again!*

“You have to leave,” Zi Lan pleaded. “I don’t want you to see me like this. You already witnessed so much in this lifetime.”

“That’s not true,” her voice choked, straining to maintain her composure that was ready to shatter. “I never witnessed them....my brothers’, my father’s, even my mother’s death. They were all gone before I could reach them, could save them.”

*Their last moments were taken away...there was never a chance to say goodbye. It was not the dead one that suffered, but the one who was left behind.*

Zi Lan pulled on his chains, unable to reach the wall of his shield. “Yan Zhi, I am sorry. I know you lost everyone, but you still have Qiao Er, think of her,” Zi Lan tried to reason, calling out her weakness, the calculative man that he was.

She wouldn't listen. Yan Zhi slammed her fist against the shield, hitting it with her powers, but it blew her back, landing her on the dark damp floor. Disoriented from the impact, her body still rose. Ignoring the blood spilling from the side of her mouth, she crawled back in staggering stubbornness, until she reached the invisible wall.

Helpless, distraught...defeated...her shaking hands pressed against the shield. Subdued...her tearful gaze upon the noble man who had healed her soul yet stolen her heart.

"If I knew fate was this cruel, I would have forgiven you sooner," she whispered with chilling calmness.

His hands clenched, unable to reach the wall. Helpless, Zi Lan dropped to his knees. He didn't raise his head, but she could see his body shake, could hear the choking sound as he held back his tears.

Zi Lan tilted his head, their gaze met, like it would be their last. Those rich and dark eyes that held much, much more than the pain - regret. "Yan Zhi, before I met you, I spent thousands of years living a carefree existence," Zi Lan chuckled, with a hint of bitterness. His tearful smile squeezed her chest, choked her breath.

A soft expression of reminiscence crossed his face. "But those times...were nothing compared to a moment with you. Each day in the mortal realm...I wanted a little more time. Just a bit longer... I kept praying. I don't mind if you choose to forget me."

"I will never forget you!" Yan Zhi sobbed, her fist slammed against the damn wall that separated them. Her head pressed against the shield, "I won't leave you. Zi Lan, we will stay together...die together. I choose you...without doubt, without reservation. I have no regrets."

The ceiling above shook once more. Her eyes lit up when Yan Zhi realized there was an answer there. Struggling to rise, she turned to the stairs. Determined to do what had to be done. Treacherous the plan was, but it was their only hope. "Zi Lan, I can still save you," she whispered.

"Yan Zhi...what are you doing!"

With heavy breath, ignoring the guilt, the physical pain, as darkness descended upon her soul, she said: "I can take their powers, I can harness their cultivation!" Empowered now by the

vision, with renewed purpose, she staggered toward the stairs. "Some are still locked up there. My father was well versed in dark magic, so am I. I can get you out."

"No, no...don't!" his head shook fiercely as Zi Lan pulled at his chains. "Yan Zhi, this is taboo! You'll become one of them!"

Dark magic, stolen cultivation, the magic taboo of all realms. *It was a risk she was willing to take.*

"Nothing will happen to me, I'll be careful," she told him reassuringly, turning toward the stone stairs again. "Like you say, fate won't tolerate interference. Calamity has to be balanced. With Xiu Yin, with 4th Disciple Shang Ling. This is the price I am willing to pay. I will save you, no matter the consequences."

"Zhi'er, look at me!" his voice rose, with an expression of panic, his jaw clenched as he struggled to remain calm. "Look at me!" Zi Lan shouted. His gaze locked on to hers, capturing her attention with touching velvet words. "That night under the stars, do you remember our vows?"

"Yes...", she nodded tearfully, smiling at the heartfelt reminder. "You will always stay by my side, you promised me."

"I did...", he answered breathlessly. His gaze flickered with guilt, as regretful words escaped his lips. "But you should know...a husband will always protect his wife."

"Zi Lan...?" she asked in apprehension, alarm rang in her ears. *What was he saying?*

"Zhi'er, I'm sorry. I'm a cruel man, please forgive me."

"Why?" she cried, pulling back in panic. Before she could comprehend the depth of his words, sudden shadows of darkness engulfed her senses as she fell into a deep abyss.

All went black.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Should I tell her?*

Zi Lan had wondered when he had first understood their destiny. But he couldn't, because it would only bring her sorrow, pain, *misery*...

Knowledge can only bring suffering, he deduced.

He kept the information to himself, as long as he could. Until the calamity befell them. He would take it. He would take them all if he could...and he would. He would not let her suffer for one day, one moment. If only he could take away her pain.

However, he couldn't be too greedy. Fate would allow only so much interference. He had known, when he saw the examples, the deaths, the casualties of war when they took advantage of the power that was both a blessing and a curse.

The thing about knowing the future was the inability to control one's fate. But there were times when a human could take charge of the last moment of indecision, because, no matter how well planned destiny was, it couldn't control free will. The balance of the universe could be reversed by the slightest decision at the last moment, when humans make their own choice.

*Do we take the path that was shown, or do we lead ourselves into the unknown?*

Falling to his knees, Zi Lan bowed to General Yang, the man who had let him out of his seal the day before. He had convinced the General that only he could save Yan Zhi, because he possessed the knowledge of Qiao Er's last premonition. His loyalty to Yan Zhi taking precedence over duty, the General had reluctantly let Zi Lan go. Despite his hostility towards him, the General believed him and did everything as Zi Lan instructed.

The stage had been set for that moment; each actor had played their part within the dream of a powerful girl. General Yang had brought him to the Demon Tower, hidden them until the right moment, and sealed him within the prison before anyone realized they were there.

Nothing went amiss...he almost pulled it off.

But foolish as he was, Zi Lan had not anticipated how much Yan Zhi was willing to risk her soul to save him. His Queen, the most resilient person he knew besides his mother. A survivor, no matter the odds stacked against her. She refused to give up. If not for the General, his unlikely partner in crime, he would have lost her.

Without words, the General knew the moment Zi Lan decided to distract Yan Zhi: it would be long enough to give him the opening to cast a sleeping spell on her. Zi Lan had never imagined that his rival since the day of his arrival in the Ghost Realm would be the one to assist him in this final scheme, this lie. But the best opponents were the ones who can read you well. With only a subtle glance, the General knew what he had to do, and he had accomplished the task feared by others. He would suffer the wrath of his Princess once she awoke.

“Thank you, General Yang.” Zi Lan raised his head, then sat back as the General lifted Yan Zhi in his arms. Secure...safe...

“Call me Yang Jie. We’ve been rivals without proper address for far too long,” Yang Jie spoke as if they were old friends. With only the barrier between them, both men stared at each other with the same respect they had since the first day despite their animosity.

It was unfortunate they had never shared a drink together.

His eyes closed tightly, Zi Lan took a deep breath. “Yang Jie, when she wakes up, please tell Her Highness...” Zi Lan stopped short of the parting words, his regretful gaze turned to Yan Zhi’s sleeping face. Her tears had not yet dried. “Tell her I took her choice away. Her fate...because I was weak. Too weak to bear living without her. She can continue to hate me, curse me, forget about me. I deserve all her resentment.”

“I will relay your message, though I doubt she could forget you,” Yang Jie said softly.

“Please watch and protect Yan Zhi and Qiao Er; they have been alone all those years without the protection of their kin.” Zi Lan tore his gaze away from Yan Zhi. He glanced up at his unlikely co-conspirator. “Although the debt I owe you can never be repaid, I hope you can grant this one last wish to a man who will soon be gone from this world.”

“I swear to watch over them in your stead, at the risk of my own life. The Ghost Tribe will never let anything happen to our royals again.”

“Thank you, General Yang Jie.”

“No, our people thank you, Commander, for saving our Queen today.” With a nod, Yang Jie turned to leave with the sleeping Princess in his arms, but paused at the stairs. His head turned back. “You should know, you had my approval a long time ago.”

Zi Lan couldn't help but chuckle at the parting words as he watched them depart from the dark basement of the tower. His world began to churn like a whirlwind of emptiness - his body, his mind, his emotions.

Sitting back, it didn't take long before rocks and debris began to rain and crumble around him. He watched the ceiling as it started to give way. This was the end. Shortly, the tower would be no more. Qiao Er had said the day of the Blood Moon would be the night the Lost Devil Tower would be gone. She was right, he mused. Zi Lan could hear the explosions from above as mindless immortals, with neither sanity nor humanity, fought to their deaths. At least those dangerous beings would be no more.

Zi Lan did not fight or react, even when the bright red luminescence of explosive energy blasted from above. Even when his body began to feel the energy that broke through his shield.

*The price of fate, was a life for a life.*

*But the life was more than worth the price.*

His smile remained till the last moment.

He was done, content. *At peace.*

\*\*\*\*

*Zi Lan...*

"Zi Lan...", she repeated his name like an unending mantra, "I have to save him."

"Your Highness...Your Highness...", she heard them call out.

Begging...pleading.

The voices were all the same - concerned, distraught...afraid. When they tried to block her path, she blasted them away with her powers. When they bent their knees, she kicked them

away. When they kowtowed, she stepped over their submissive bodies. Nothing would stop her, no matter what they did.

Just mere moments before, she had fought her way back to consciousness through the fog of dreams, fears, regrets...and fragile hope. When her mind reached clarity about where she was, in the Ghost Realm, in the comfort of her own room, reality crashed down like a thundering mudslide.

Ignoring the the sea of black clad warriors, she fought through their attempts to hold her back. She had to see him, she had to save him.

“Your Highness, please listen, he’s gone,” she heard one of the Xiu sisters say.

“Demonic energy level has not subsided after the explosion, we can’t go back,” her General explained.

“Lying to the royal deserves what punishment?” she demanded to know. Her tone was icy, devoid of all emotions, making them pause and quiver. Yet, stubbornly, they wouldn’t budge, surrounding her again, bending their knees before her.

“Your Highness! The Lost Devil Tower collapsed yesterday. Zi Lan’s aura was gone, he’s no longer alive,” General Zhao recounted.

“I don’t believe you!” she roared. Her arm extended, a magical sword appeared in her hand. “He’s still alive, now get out of my way!” She slashed the General across the chest, making him fall back.

She turned slightly to walk passed them, but more warriors blocked her path. She blasted them back, her sword rose to do more harm. “I’ll cut all of you!”

The rest bent their knees before her, bowing again. “Your Highness! Please listen...the Disciple is dead.”

“No!” Yan Zhi thundered. Her head shook in denial, shuddering with painful memories. “Zi Lan.... he’s not gone...he promised me...” unable to finish, she turned to her target, General Yang, the next to block her path. “Do you want to die?” she threatened icily.

"If your Highness wants me to die, I will lay my life before you. But please, don't go back. 16th Disciple is gone. I made a promise to him to keep you safe."

"I don't need you to keep me safe!" Yan Zhi shrieked, her sword rising again. The blade nearly cut his shoulders, but a child's voice broke her resolve.

"Mother! Please don't hurt them!"

She froze, the sword dropped, and Yan Zhi turned to see Qiao Er standing right behind her. The child ran to embrace her waist. The touch brought out emotions she could no longer suppress and she almost broke - yet couldn't. Not yet. Huddling down, face to face, she saw a light at the end of the tunnel.

"Qiao Er...tell mother how I can find En Cong. Tell me where he is. You must have dreamed about this, tell me he's alive. You must have seen En Cong at the Tower?" Yan Zhi bombarded her, hopeful. But Qiao Er only gave an expression of confusion.

"But mom, I didn't have dreams about En Cong in the Dark Tower. I didn't see him there," the child answered, her awed expression making Yan Zhi grasp her arms tighter.

"I don't understand. You didn't see Zi Lan there?" Yan Zhi asked in dismay, unnerved by this.

"I only dreamed about you at the Tower."

"What do you mean? You dreamed about me?"

"In my dreams, you were behind that prison in which I was held. You were taken by the light, the fire. The tower collapsed," she said shakily. Frightened by the images, tears began to spill. "You disappeared, mother."

"Qiao Er, when did you dream about this?" Yan Zhi grasped her tighter, making the child wince. "Why didn't you tell me?!" She roared.

"En Cong told me not to tell you. I'm sorry, mother...", Qiao Er cried through her tears, trembling from fear and guilt. "He said if I told you what I saw, my dreams would come true."

For a brief moment, Yan Zhi was speechless. She released her hold, hands fell to her side.

“Why? Why would he say that?” she forced herself to ask.

“He said he can save you, but only if I didn’t tell you my dreams.”

The startling knowledge hit her like the first strike of a lightning trial and brought chills to her very bones. She could not comprehend. Callous man that he was, he had made choices for her, like everyone else before. That ruthless man.

“Mother, where is he? Where is En Cong?” Yan Zhi heard her child ask.

Like a soulless doll, Yan Zhi stood up... and staggered back, putting a safe distance between herself and everyone else. She could not trust herself, unstable as she was. Like a weeping willow plant, her body lost all strength, a mere touch would make her collapse.

At first, Yan Zhi didn’t make a single sound. Her head shook, trying to understand the words spoken by an innocent child.

*Zi Lan knew...he lied...*

*It was her calamity he had stolen.*

*It was her destiny, not his.*

*Zi Lan had taken her place.... her fate...*

Her pulse picked up speed, she forced herself to listen to her heartbeat, to drown out the ringing in her ears. But it wouldn’t go away. Tears began to fall, streaming endlessly, her breath caught from rushing raw emotions pushing to the surface.

Tattered remnants of her memories were flowing like waterfalls before her vision. Images of the life that could have been and the memories they had shared: Tender words her heart skipped to, caresses that made her blush, and his smiles that made her scowl.

The visions became more unbearable, stirring even more emotions. And then, all hell broke loose!

Dormant powers she had never known she possessed surged through her cells like racing water. They felt like blow after blow of blasted energy that burnt her flesh, her skin. Vibrating with the gush of blue fire, Yan Zhi heard herself scream when the pulsing energy escaped her trembling body. It was relentless, it felt like an eternity, until finally....darkness overtook her vision.

It was the voices that woke her up. Eyes opened once more...fluttering uneasily against the brightness of the moon from above.

She was on her knees. But something bright shone before her gaze. It wasn't the moonlight. Shakily, she grasped the strands, not yet realizing their significance. Trembling fingers delved into the loose tangles that were her own. Squinting with bafflement, confusion, she pulled her once dark luscious hair over her shoulders. She held it tightly, blinking in awe, her breath catching at the realization.

The transformation of her *shattered* spirit...of her *broken* heart.

Her once *dark* raven hair, the locks Zi Lan had cherished with his gentle caress, was no more. The silk strands had turned into the color of *jasmine*, of white snow, glimmering in the moonlight. Like her chilled heart, her soul had frozen, her body taking the toll.

But it did not matter...nothing mattered.

*A husband will always protect his wife...*

His last words resonated through the passing breeze. Her jasmine white hair flowed along with the memories that will would forever be etched into her being...her soul.

*Not only had he stolen her heart, but also her life.*



*Zi Lan...he was a cruel man, but he was hers, and hers alone.*

*Like the night under the star filled sky, witnessed by the flickering fireflies - their eternal vows would remain true, whether in life or in death.*

*There were no regrets.*

THE END

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