

Three Lives Three Worlds ~ The Dragon and the Wolf *Die Feng & Li Ying Fanfiction Volume 1*

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Author's Note

When the drama *Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* concluded, fan fiction came along to give shape to the possibilities left unexplored. The world of the drama was rich enough and the Kunlun Disciples intriguing enough to make us keep thinking about the stories untold. Die Feng (1st Disciple), in particular, stood out and we couldn't resist wondering how the uptight Sea Prince would react if a teasing Demon Princess were to chase him for candy.

We started Die Feng and Li Ying's 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 become far different from what we first intended. We are continuing the 2nd volume of their journey on *The Wolves of Mistwood*. Here, we have compiled their chapters from Volume 1 of the Mo Yuan and Shao Wan fic into pdf form for your convenience.

Chapter 20 ~ Midnight Clouds

As night fell, Zi Lan and Die Feng took to the comfort of sharing a late-night tea in their tent. Both disciples were exhausted but content from partaking in the festivities and from helping to make arrangements for the diplomatic meeting. Zi Lan felt fortunate to share a tent with his Senior, who, even though he was the 2nd Prince of the Western Sea, seemed very happy to share this space with 16th.

For the past few weeks, they had worried a lot about Shifu. Their Master had not been quite himself ever since his return to Kunlun Mountain and even less so after the Demon Goddess' awakening. Shifu spent almost his entire time meditating in the cave and became even more reserved and taciturn. It was surprising that such a thing was possible, since he had never talked much to begin with.

Luckily, things had taken a different turn this week. He had become more energized and affable, and tackled the peace talks with an iron fist. His disciples were very proud of how much the immortals at the festival were in awe of their Shifu. He did not leave Kunlun Mountain often and it was clear that many guests had come to the festival just to see him in person. However, they were far less proud of the other gossip that was spreading like wildfire: about how the God of War would rarely take his eyes off the Demon High Goddess when she was present, would seek her out when she was not present and that they had been seen together at the beach, walking with linked arms in the moonlight (among other things). The disciples were outraged at such accusations - even though they had to admit their Shifu was very aware of that woman.

Die Feng explained that Shifu must be exceptionally wary of her, seeing how they were old enemies, and how her return made a war between the Heavens and the Demons highly likely. Only ... Zi Lan had seen something different when he caught Shifu looking at the Goddess today. It wasn't wariness. It was something he was quite familiar with: longing - and the suppressed pain of a man who knew his duty barred him from obtaining sweet happiness that was within reach. Of course, Zi Lan didn't correct Die Feng's assumption, because he knew his Senior wouldn't understand. Keeping his Master's secret was the only thing he felt he could do.

As they finished their tea and were about to prepare for bed, a figure barged into their tent.

“17th!” they said in unison.

“What?” Bai Qian exclaimed, looking confused.

Both Zi Lan and Die Feng shook their heads. Of course, she just showed up unannounced and completely forgot her status here. This was their 17th after all, even if she now wore women’s clothes.

“Are you lost again?” Die Feng sighed.

“Of course not! I found this place by myself! I ... I followed your aura!” Bai Qian denied immediately.

The two students glanced at each other, both knowing she was lying.

“Really? So why are you here at this hour?” Zi Lan asked teasingly, “were you looking for Shifu? He is drinking wine with Dijun and Zhe Yan somewhere else”.

“No! I...I... I needed to talk to 16th”, Bai Qian stammered, still quite obviously lying.

“This late?” Die Feng asked amused.

“Yes, it’s an important matter I need to discuss, it cannot wait,” she said, gaining more confidence.

“What do you want to talk about?” Zi Lan prompted.

“Let’s go outside, we don’t want to disturb our Senior,” she said, flashing that smile at them that never failed to get her what she wanted.

“Very well then, let’s head outside for this important discussion you need to have with me at this hour,” Zi Lan smiled back.

He and Bai Qian were about to step out of the tent when Die Feng called “16th!”

“Yes, Senior,” they both turned around to look at Die Feng.

“Be sure to escort the Crown Princess safely back to her tent after your important talk, we don’t want the Crown Prince to search for her all night.”

“I will do so.” Zi Lan smirked at Bai Qian, “maybe he should tie a magic thread around her foot next time?”

Bai Qian gave them her dagger glare, causing them to laugh out loud. However, she did not argue as she stepped out with Zi Lan in tow, knowing as well as them that the Crown Prince would soon be seen hurrying around the encampment in search of his directionally challenged wife if she did not make it back in time. Since they always teased her mercilessly every time her husband fawned over her in front of them, Zi Lan escorting her seemed like the lesser evil.

Bai Qian and Zi Lan soon fell into a slow familiar pace as he led her back in the direction of her tent. It felt good to spend time together again, however brief. Zi Lan often fondly remembered the times he and 17th had roamed free as disciples of Kunlun Mountain. At first, he didn’t know if he could tolerate 17th, because she tried to take the senior position from him, despite arriving later than him. But 17th immediately grew on him with her wits and free spirit and he naturally ended up as her partner in crime and best friend soon after. They had snuck off to the mortal realms every time they had a chance, disguised as taoist monks to mess with the mortals. Alas, so much had changed since their carefree days ... Bai Qian was now the Crown Princess of the Celestial Tribe and would soon become the Heavenly Empress, while he would return to Kunlun Mountain to silently curse fate while he regained his cultivation. Life was so unpredictable and bitter.

Zi Lan was still reminiscing when Bai Qian broke the silence.

“What happened to your princess?”

He stopped in his tracks and looked at her. “You know?”

“Of course I know! 2nd senior told me what I couldn’t guess myself. I’m worried about you. You lost most of your cultivation for her and you have not gotten much of it back. Why haven’t you gone to her?”

He remain silent.

“You need to stop punishing yourself. Shifu told you to come, back didn’t he? He never blamed you for helping a ghost child.”

“They’re both different matters.”

“How?”

“The princess and I cannot be together.”

“Said who?”

Zi Lan closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. It was him, him alone. He knew he was to blame for his own misery, he had driven her away. He told her to never see him again. He knew he had broken her heart and had made her cry, making sure he could not ever have her.

“Remember when you said she’s more beautiful than me?” Bai Qian broke him out of his thoughts.

“Yes, I remember.”

Yan Zhi’s image appeared before him instantly. His angel, his light - yes she’s the most beautiful, inside and out. Her gentle soul and good heart protecting those she loves, unyielding, unwavering, no matter how difficult the obstacles are.

“You still claim that?” Bai Qian persisted.

“Of course! No one is more beautiful than her.”

“Then why are you not with her?” she asked.

Zi Lan turned away, to hide his emotions. Why he isn't with her is not the real question, the real question is: would Yan Zhi ever forgive him? Would she take him back after he repeatedly severed their relationship? He failed their love because he placed his duty before her. He was certain she had moved on. It was too late.

"Sixteenth..." Bai Qian interrupted him again.

"The Crown Prince will be worried if you're not back soon." he said, wanting to end the conversation that only tormented him. This was his own trial. He did not want to discuss it with Bai Qian.

"Wait..." But he kept walking, leading Bai Qian back to her tent. He quickly bid her goodnight.

Her insistence to understand why he kept waiting in misery forced him to think about his failure again. Instead of heading back to his tent, he decided to take a stroll at the beach. He had no idea how long he was out there, but at one point, he felt tears in his eyes and they wouldn't stop. He was such an idiot, he realized. Shaking his head, he laughed at himself through his tears. Yan Zhi would not want an idiot like him. Or would she? he wondered, as he stared into the night, contemplating whether he was still worthy of her, Yan Zhi, his beautiful Princess.

After Zi Lan and Si Yin left, Die Feng stretched his limbs and opened the chest at the foot of his bed. He hoped Si Yin would be able to restore some of Zi Lan's lost spirit and the two would stir up trouble like old loopy times. But that might be a futile wish. Times were changing and there was no going back. Die Feng smiled at this philosophic turn of his thoughts; apparently, he was in a contemplative mood tonight.

He changed into a plain robe and settled himself into bed with a poetry book for some light reading before turning in. Really, these state robes with layers upon layers of silk were far too stiff. It always took him a while to get used to them after returning from the simplicity of Kunlun.

Thinking of Kunlun, Die Feng sighed. The last few days had been an endless stream of guests and he was fortunate to get some time to himself. Now that older brother had returned to full health he had taken up a major portion of the kingdom's administrative duties, lessening Die Feng's workload. Die Feng had been able to spend more time at Kunlun as a result. However, as the second prince he was still expected to attend to diplomatic duties and look after the kingdom's defenses.

The king and queen were getting old and the two princes would soon have to take up the mantle. The marriage alliance with the East Water Kingdom was an important step in this direction. Once his brother was officially declared the Crown Prince, Die Feng would need to do everything in his power to assist him. The thought that he could not spend his entire life as the First Kunlun disciple had occurred to him more than once lately.

That was the reason he was so happy to have his family host the festival. Shifu was here and so were Sixteenth and Seventeenth and so, for these few days, his lives as the Second Prince of the West Water Kingdom and the First Disciple of Kunlun Mountain had seamlessly merged.

He sipped from his teacup and turned a page.

Poof!

Die Feng was jolted from his thoughts by suddenly finding himself lying under someone. A very soft, blue-robed and, going by the generous curves, female someone. He caught a whiff of basil.

Die Feng scrambled up, recognizing her from their official introduction at the start of the festival. "Princess! What are you doing here?"

Demon Princess Li Ying leaned towards him. Not sure what the etiquette was in situations where guests could jump on him, Die Feng held her gaze and waited. She drew closer, leaned towards his neck and... was she sniffing him?! He jerked back from her tickling breath. She abruptly looked up. "Here?"

Die Feng looked down into her eyes. She gazed back at him innocently. “My bed. What are you doing in my bed?”

She shook her head as if to clear it and glanced at her surroundings. “I was sleepy. The wine made me do it.”

She was drunk? “Do what?” he prompted.

“Look for a bed,” she said as if pointing out the obvious.

“But this is my bed!” his voice came out slightly higher than he liked.

“It’s still a bed, isn’t it?” she yawned, nestling into his shoulder.

Die Feng didn’t know whether to laugh. “Do you climb into bed with any man when you’re drunk?”

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. “No, I only like men who smell like honey.”

He couldn’t have heard that right. “What did you say?”

“Honey. You smell like the sweet nectar of honey bees.” She sniffed again. Her cold nose nuzzled his neck. Die Feng shivered. She was a soft, warm bundle against his chest but her hands...her hands were going through his pockets.

“What’re you doing?” he asked.

“Looking for sweets,” she poked around urgently. “Don’t you have any?”

This was ridiculous. And so many levels of inappropriate for an unmarried woman to be alone in his tent let alone paw at him in his bed that he didn’t even want to think about it. Zi Lan could come back any moment and finding Die Feng in bed with the Yellow Demon Princess was not how Die Feng wanted Zi Lan to get his spirit back.

Ignoring his pounding heart, Die Feng put down his book and gently slipped out of her arms. “Let me escort you to your tent, Princess.”

She remained kneeling on the bed, her nose in the air. “My tent?” she sounded puzzled.

“Yes. Which one is it?” he asked, hoping that she was not drunk enough to have forgotten it. If he knew her exact tent in the Demon encampment he would directly cloud jump her there.

“But I haven’t found any sweets yet,” she protested. She was now on her feet sniffing around his small table.

He caught one scroll as it rolled off. “We need to get you back to your tent. If anyone sees you here we’re both done for.”

She looked at him with an arched eyebrow, her expression laden with insinuation, “Are you expecting anyone?”

Die Feng felt his face heat, “No but-”

“Then we should be fine.” She went back to his table.

He wasn’t so sure. If she didn’t remember her tent he’d have to find a servant to escort her back. However, she couldn’t be seen emerging from his tent, even by servants. In all his 158,000 years of existence Die Feng had never caused a scandal. And he didn’t intend to start one now.

He slid back into the role of Kunlun’s senior most disciple shepherding wayward juniors and moved to the tent flap. “I’ll go check if the coast is clear. Wait here.” He stepped out. A second thought made him turn around, “Don’t make any loud sounds.”

The wind outside was chilly. The crashing waves rendered any noise emanating from the tents inconspicuous. The moon and stars were out in full force, bathing the shore in their silvery glow. Faint music and laughter could still be heard from one of the pavilions attracting revelers like moths to a single flame. The campsite was devoid of stragglers, everyone apparently in their tents, at the pavilion or at secluded rendezvous spots.

Die Feng turned to head back and bumped into Li Ying. “Princess! I told you to wait for me.”

She sniffed before holding out her palm. “I found candy.”

He remembered the candied peach blossoms, “Zi Lan must have brought some for A Li.” They set off in the direction of the Demon campsite.

“My nose is never wrong,” said Li Ying.

Die Feng smiled, “And here I thought foxes were the ones with keen senses.”

Li Ying’s tone grew thoughtful, “It is true that foxes have good hearing. And they are indeed closer in relation to bloodhounds.”

At that Die Feng burst out laughing. “Do not let High Goddess Bai Qian hear you compare her kind to bloodhounds, I implore you.”

“Oh,” Li Ying’s puzzled frown turned into a mischievous smile. “I wouldn’t dare.”

Die Feng looked down into her glinting eyes and his heart skipped a beat.

The paths between tents were lit with luminescent corals here and there. Li Ying ate, nay, devoured the peach blossoms candies as they walked. Out of the corner of his eye he followed her tongue as it licked her fingers, one by one. “This candy is exquisite,” she purred.

“I’m glad it is to your taste.”

She met his gaze and her lips lifted into a predatory smile, “It is not the only thing to my taste.”

Die Feng’s throat grew dry.

She moved forward and took a whiff. “Honey, and... sea salt,” she murmured, like a connoisseur analysing a complex wine.

Basil, Die Feng found himself thinking as he caught her scent. Caramel. She was standing so close and--What on earth? He quickly took a step back, snapping out of it.

They had neared the Demon camp entrance. He cleared his throat. "Let me find someone to escort you to your tent, Princess."

"You escorted me this far," she replied.

"I do not know which tent is yours, Princess, and you--"

"Remember the tent perfectly well."

"But you said you--"

"Needed sweets first."

He closed his mouth. She had never said she couldn't remember her tent. His brain had simply jumped to the likeliest conclusion. The Yellow Demon Princess, Die Feng was discovering, did not fit "likely conclusions". What woman finds herself in a strange man's bed in the middle of the night and rather than run to her chambers screaming bloody murder decides to snoop around for sweets? It had to be the alcohol.

He followed her past the tents until they reached a cluster marked with yellow flags. She stopped before one of the bigger tents, "Here we are."

"I will have my steward send some sweets over in the morning." He bowed.

"Goodnight, Princess."

As he straightened, she caught hold of his collar and raised herself on tiptoe to plant a soft kiss on his neck, taking one last whiff.

Die Feng stared after her, eyes wide, fingers raised halfway to his neck, as she disappeared beneath her tent flap.

Chapter 22 ~ His Name

After lingering at the palace as long as she could, watching people pay their respects to the Celestial twins, Li Ying headed back towards the Demon Tents. She felt disappointed the festivities were over. It had been so enjoyable! She had lost count of the days, had it been 6? 7? 8? but she knew - it had not been nearly long enough.

That it was possible for so many clans from different realms to come together in such a peaceful manner was baffling to her. Demon Clan festivals were always rowdy and violent, competitions to showcase one's warrior skills. Male and female warriors alike thirsted for an opportunity to increase their cultivation through bloody battles. Injuries or even the death of weaker demons were normal occurrences there.

Li Ying had never had the chance to prove herself in battle and thus, her cultivation remained lower than she wished it to be. Her dear brother had not let anyone come even close to drawing blood from her after that one incident, 80,000 years ago: A shady demon from another clan had underhandedly thrown a dart towards her neck during a fight with her brother. Furious at this breach of etiquette, her brother had blasted his opponent through several pillars at the battle arena. The man died slowly and gruesomely from a broken back. His screams, later turned to mere whimpers, had been heard for many hours until he was silent forever. From that day on, nobody had dared to come near her and all she ever got at those festivals were hateful stares, but no real fights.

In fact, to gain cultivation and skills, Li Ying had to fight with hired Demon assassins in secret. She had to pay these warriors a lot, from the money her brother gave her for clothes and other possessions, because the risk was high: If her brother caught them, death was certain. But she knew if she did not go behind his back, she would be forever dependent on him and the bodyguards he assigned to her.

Li Ying sighed. Her brother's extreme protectiveness also meant it was hard for her to make any friends among Demons. That's why she had been so delighted to meet the Demon Goddess Shao Wan back at the Obsidian Palace - she had really hoped to be able to get to know this legendary warrior better. Sadly, after disappearing overnight, the Demon Goddess had been too busy to exchange more than a few polite words with her at the Festival. In contrast to their first meeting, the Demon Ancestor also seemed much

warier of her now. Li Ying suspected it had something to do with her brother, but she could not quite figure out what their relationship was.

What was clear: Her dear brother was extremely jealous of how the Demon Goddess looked at the God of War. She had seen him fuming. Li Ying had never seen anyone like High God Mo Yuan herself. He was one of the oldest living Gods, but looked so young - exactly like his twin, even though the Crown Prince was more than 300,000 years younger than him. High God Mo Yuan's aura was very strong, but he often withdrew into himself completely, veiling his powers. She did not understand why - Demons always boasted about their prowess. A man as powerful as him would certainly be Demon Overlord in her world, but the Celestials had a different system of power, one she did not understand at all. Why would a warrior like him choose to sit on a mountain day and night and teach Taoism to only a few disciples if he could rule the world?

She had hardly ever met or seen any Celestials before, and she had been surprised by how different they were to how she had imagined them. She was particularly struck by how polite, even friendly they were to everyone - so unlike demons. Apart from that, she had mainly come to admire their ability to party. She had always imagined celestials sitting around prettily, having boring conversation over bland tea. But ye heavens, the food! She had never before tasted such exquisite delicacies. And the wine! Much more potent than what she knew from the Demon Realm, which was very surprising, considering the Heaven Tribe's insistence on propriety and appearances.

The night before, Li Ying had managed to sneak away with a bottle of Peach Blossom wine brewed by High God Zhe Yan himself. She had drunk it all down at the beach, looking at the stars and the moon, feeling heavenly. The amusing result of her drunkenness had been that she had cloud jumped into the wrong tent, into bed with a sweet tasting man.

She had craved those honey peach blossom candies all day. Just thinking about them made her salivate. They had been so delectable and exceptionally unique! The ones he had had delivered to her tent this morning was nice, but sadly not the right kind. Realizing suddenly, she and all the other people were soon going to leave this place for good, she knew she had to find that man as soon as possible, to ask where he got the original ones from.

Li Ying stopped, thinking. What was his name again? They had been introduced days ago. Wasn't he a Prince of the Western Sea? She hit herself on her forehead three times. She was so bad with names ... How could she find the candies if she didn't even know the name of the supplier? Ah, but she knew somebody who would know. Her brother! Cheng Yin's memory was superb, he would certainly know which Prince it was if she described his looks.

Quickly, she turned towards her brother's tent.

"Brother Lord!" she called out cheerfully and stepped in.

"Li Ying!"

She froze. He sounded angry and her brother's tempers were not to be trifled with. The light in the tent was quite dim, but she immediately noticed the slender female straddling her brother. Before Li Ying could turn away, mortified to have walked in on the couple, Cheng Yin pushed the woman off him and quickly put a blanket on top of her. Pulling another blanket towards himself to cover his nakedness, her Brother Lord sat up and faced his sister, one leg on the floor and the other folded so his arm would rest over his knee. He looked regal despite his rather disheveled state, she noticed.

"I am sorry for disturbing you," she said with a nod towards the female figure, who struggled a little underneath the blanket. She should have known not to enter so quickly, Li Ying thought, she should have guessed her brother would live up to his legendary seduction skills on the last night, being the most handsome and charming High God of the Demon Realm.

"Dear sister of mine, what do you need?" Cheng Yin said, showing only a little of the annoyance he must be feeling for being interrupted. Well, she did feel sorry because seeing her brother make love wasn't something she wished to see, but she also felt her request was quite urgent. If that prince got away before she found him, she would have to live without those sweets!

The lady under the blanket sneaked out a hand and began caressing Cheng Yin's stomach. Her brother's breathing quickened and he stopped the hand from going

anywhere else with a distracted look on his face. Okay, she had to leave him to it as quickly as possible, Li Ying thought. Always curious, she tried to catch a glimpse of the woman, who was herself peeking out from underneath the blanket.

It seemed to be a Celestial, Li Ying noticed, judging by the looks and the way she wore her hair. Not merely a servant either, her jewelry was too valuable. The young woman looked vaguely familiar, but Li Ying was simply too bad with names. She was sure her brother knew what he was doing, but this was a bit of a surprise. Celestial women were usually so sheltered, they were rare to come by as bed-companions.

“So, there is this prince...” Li Ying started.

“You mean Die Feng, the Second Prince of the West Sea?” came Cheng Yin’s reply immediately.

“How do you know?” her eyes furrowed.

“Wasn’t he the one who escorted you back late last night?” he asked and tried to push the lady’s arms away, which the Celestial now wrapped around him from behind, vying for his attention, “How did he taste?”

Her brother already knew everything. It probably meant he had watched her and the Prince last night, from the shadows. A strange, unsettling habit of his.

“Let me guess, honey nectar?”

She blushed. She should have known, he would not simply let her walk away after interrupting the celestial lady sampling his lotus root. Now he would tease her.

She pouted at him. “Brother!”

“Alright, alright,” he raised his hands, surrendering, “What do you need to know, my little sister?”

Li Ying already got what she wanted. “I was going to ask for his name, but you already told me. Die Feng you said? Would I find him up at the Palace?”

“You didn’t know his name?” he chuckled, “You vixen. How was your first Celestial? Any exciting pain?”

“Brother, I didn’t sleep with him!” she protested, “I just want to ask him where he procures his sweets.”

“You should take a bite next time,” he teased her again. True, she had had the same thought as well. This particular Celestial did taste really good. Honey nectar ... and sea salt. A bite or two would be worth a try.

“Try at the palace,” Cheng Yin said, and then, his voice changed and became dark and dangerous, “Unless you want to pay the God of War a visit. Your Prince is one of his disciples.”

Oh, right... she faintly remembered. But she wouldn’t dare go there. The God of War was incredibly handsome, just like his twin, but also really scary. A Kunlun disciple? How interesting.

“I suggest you should try new flavors when opportunities arise,” her brother advised, “but be careful with Celestial men. They are not to be trusted.” He turned to the Celestial woman who seemed to be feeling desperate. That was Li Ying’s cue to leave.

She quickly bid her Brother goodnight and left him alone with the lucky lady.

Maybe it was her brother’s obvious infatuation with that woman that made her think some particular thoughts about the Celestial man. Die Feng. They had been introduced at the beginning of the festival, but he had not registered, until last night. He had been very gallant! Not many men in the demon realm would have gone out of their way to escort her safely back to her tent. And it was very thoughtful of him to send her the sweets this morning.

He was cute, too - he had blushed when she had licked him. All the other men she knew would have taken the opportunity to enter her tent for a night of passion after such obvious invitation. He never even thought about it but left promptly. Were all Celestial men this honorable? Or was he immune to her charms? She would see whether she

could find out. Smiling at the thought, she headed straight to the Palace in search of her new source of mysterious sweetness and amusement.

Much as Die Feng loved Kunlun, he missed certain luxuries from time to time. A proper warm bath, for instance. Water always helped him think of new perspectives. On his last night at the palace, Die Feng wanted a good long soak. The palace attendants knew

not to disturb him; he would return to official duties later.



As a child, Die Feng had been besotted with the huge marble and coral bath chamber in the south wing. When they were children, much before Die Yong's illness, his brother would sometimes tease him and ask, "How can a child of the sea spend time in still waters?" Die Feng would solemnly say, "Even raging waves need a still shore to beat against, da-ge," making his brother laugh.

Die Feng liked walking along the beach while listening to the waves, and he enjoyed an energetic swim in the sea as much as the next water kingdom child, but the bath chamber spoke to his need for solitude and stillness. The marble walls and ceiling of the chamber were inlaid with red, turquoise and green corals depicting the transformation and

flight of Kun Peng. Beneath the corals was the enormous bath cut into the floor, with water that flowed through a spring fed cistern. The chamber was lit with night pearls enveloping it in a soft glow.

Lying back with his eyes closed, Die Feng thought of his brother. It was no secret between them that Die Yong preferred the company of men. When the wedding with the Eastern Sea Princess had been first proposed Die Feng had taken Die Yong aside and asked him if he truly wanted to go through with it. Die Yong had replied that to produce an heir he would have to marry sooner or later and it was his duty to secure the kingdom with the alliance. After the kingdom was secure, he might be able to keep a male lover or two if he was discreet. “And it is not as if I will ever be with the person I truly like,” Die Yong had sighed, referring to the Celestial Crown Prince. “Let me take responsibility this time.”

While his brother’s words were reasonable, as the time to depart for Kunlun drew nearer, the matter troubled Die Feng. When the time came, would his brother really be able to reconcile himself to the match? Was it even fair to expect him to? And what of the woman Die Yong would be marrying? Did she know what she was getting into? They had been taught since birth that the kingdom and duty came before personal desires. It was an honourable notion and it preserved peace in the realm and ensured the wellbeing of the people dependent upon their leaders. Yet Die Feng couldn’t help being afraid of seeing his family suffer.

The festival had gone on—and was about to conclude—peacefully. His parents had expected much more upheaval when guests from so many clans had accepted the invitation. However, the situation had remained under control and Shifu had successfully brokered peace for the time being. How much the peace depended on the Demon High Goddess Die Feng couldn’t say but Shifu seemed to have reached a truce with her. She was immensely powerful, he could clearly sense that from afar, and her beauty was majestic, arrogant, commanding. She certainly commanded Shifu’s attention, anybody could see that, and Die Feng approved. Underestimating your opponent was a fatal mistake and the better you knew your adversary the better your chances of winning. Shifu had lost contact with his adversary for many years, it was natural that he would seek to regain that knowledge.

Of the other Demons, the Yellow Demon Lord Cheng Yin in particular exuded danger and Die Feng was relieved that he had not caused more trouble at the festival. Cheng Yin’s sister on the other hand...she stirred up trouble all right. Die Feng smiled, remembering her drunken antics the previous night. Unlike her brother she did not have an aura of malevolence, but she was dangerous in an entirely different way. He

hoped that his gift of sweets this morning would keep her satisfied and they would have no reason to run into each other again. Now that he was safely away, her outrageous behavior was amusing. He was almost disappointed that there would be no occasion to observe her again.

With a loud splash something fell into the water. Die Feng's eyes snapped open. What on earth?

The water in front of him was undulating with ripples and bubbles. He approached cautiously. The top of a braided head broke the surface, followed by two eyes – one violet, one brown. Eyes with the same glint he had noticed when they were introduced at the start of the festival and again at the beach last night.

Die Feng fell back with a yelp, “Princess!”

Princess Li Ying was dressed in light yellow. The water had rendered her gown nearly transparent. He could see the shape of her curves, her generous bosom outlined against the fabric clinging to her body. The water drops slid down her bare white arms. Blushing, he averted his eyes.

Li Ying looked around. “Oh. So this is why the maids were calling after me.”

“You’re in my bath!” Die Feng sputtered.

“Well, it’s as good a place as any.” Li Ying shrugged. She looked at the ceiling, “The corals are lovely.”

“What are you doing here?” he almost wailed. There was an odd sense of déjà vu to the situation except he had not been nearly as flabbergasted when she dropped into his bed. He had had all his clothes on for one.

“I tripped,” she explained in the same nonchalant tone.

“You tripped.” Maybe if he repeated her words the situation would make more sense.

She lowered her voice as if letting him in on a secret, “I’m not very good at cloud jumping.”

“You don’t say.” Die Feng reached for the towel. It was too far, damn it. He edged towards it.

She eyed him with interest.

Die Feng gave up and summoned the towel with magic. After pulling it underwater and tying it around his waist, he felt somewhat calmer.

“You don’t have to worry about being deemed inadequate,” she said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You covered yourself,” she pointed at his towel clad waist. “It is mostly men who obsess about size,” she assured him. “Women don’t care so much.”

He choked, “That’s not what I-”

She smiled and went on, “But now that I’ve found you, let’s talk.”

The woman was not going to hurry up and leave? “You want to talk?”

“Yes.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

Die Feng forced his voice to be calm, “Princess, may I ask you a question?”

“But of course.”

“How much have you had to drink?”

She looked surprised, “Not a drop. Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” Die Feng bit his lip.

She had been a bit drowsy last night. Today, she was all alert. She really didn't seem drunk though going by the way she acted, it was hard to differentiate. But surely, she must have come to apologize for last night. It would be an embarrassing situation for any woman to land in. But apologizing was unnecessary, really! Indiscretions happened, he understood. She should just let it be and leave. Quickly.

As if right on cue, Li Ying began, “Last night I-”

Die Feng firmly interrupted her, “Please, don't apologies. We need never speak of it again.” The sooner this encounter ended the better.

“Who's apologizing?” said Li Ying. “I had the good fortune to find your bed.”

“That's all right, I under-” he pulled up short as her words registered. “Good fortune?”

“It led me to the peach blossom candy. I'm glad-”

“You are not apologizing?” he asked incredulously. Wasn't her behavior last night a drunken mistake?

“Why would I apologies?” she asked in surprise.

She wasn't even bothered? “You are not embarrassed?”

“What's embarrassing about it?” A line appeared between her brows as though she was confused.

Her lack of concern was beginning to bother Die Feng. Did the girl have no inhibitions? “You landed on my bed in the middle of the night.”

“So?” she asked.

“You were drunk,” he continued.

“So was everyone else,” she replied.

“You kissed me,” he relayed her final offense, his heart beginning to race. Die Feng had never imagined he’d speak of the kiss out loud, but he had to know. How thick was her skin?

“You call that a kiss?” she raised an eyebrow.

“What else would you call it?” A voice inside his head was screeching at him to back off but brazenly he plunged ahead.

“I call it a taste,” she smirked.

Die Feng couldn’t stop himself, “You greet new men by taste testing them?”

Her eyes flashed and before he could move her lips were on his neck, branding him.

“Last night was a taste,” she drew her tongue against his skin to emphasize her point. “This,” her teeth nipped at his shoulder, “is a bite.” She glanced at his lips, “A kiss would have me thoroughly devour your mouth and leave you inflamed and burning to follow me to bed.” Her eyes bore into his. Her lips drew closer, her nose almost touching his. “Like food, these are pleasures to be taken freely when the body builds an appetite,” her voice was low and warm.

Die Feng was breathing hard. Provoking the Princess had been a mistake. Demons really were open minded, he realized. He retreated from her grasp, trying to ignore the places he tingled from her touch.

“What did you want to talk about, then?” he asked, hoping it would be a safer topic.

She moved closer, “Thank you for the sweets you sent to my tent this morning. I enjoyed them.”

“It was nothing,” he said, backing.

“But I can’t stop thinking about the taste from last night,” she continued.

His face heated again. “You—”

“The peach blossom candy,” said Li Ying. “I’ve never had anything like it.”

“Oh.”

“Where did you get it? More importantly, where can I get it?” she asked eagerly.

“My 2nd Kunlun junior makes it.”

“I must find him,” she said with fervor.

Threatened by a vision of Li Ying turning up at the Kunlun gates, Die Feng hastened to say, “I can send you some when I return.”

“You’re going to Kunlun?” she asked.

“Yes, I am the 1st disciple. I live there.”

Li Ying clapped her hands in glee, “Wonderful! So, you promise to send me the candy?”

“Upon my honor,” he smiled.

Li Ying closed in. The smile froze on his face as he felt his back hit the wall. Her lips brushed against his collarbone. “Don’t run,” she whispered, her breath warm on his skin. Her tongue darted out to taste him.

The heat of her tongue was all he could feel. He groaned. Her hands were on his shoulders, holding him in place. Her breasts brushed against his bare chest, the soaked fabric of her gown a poor barrier. Without even looking, he remembered her shape outlined against the clinging material. A current jolted through him and he cursed his mind for conjuring that image.

His hands lightly curled around her back. Her wet braids had fallen forward leaving her neck bare. Die Feng nuzzled her ear, mesmerized. One by one the water droplets melted against his touch. He wanted to capture them with his mouth. Why didn't he? This was like the haze of intoxication, except Die Feng was not drunk at all. His lips parted.

Li Ying raised her head and looked into his eyes, "New men don't usually taste of sea salt." She kissed his cheek. "Goodbye."

And she was gone.

Suddenly the bath seemed too cold.

Chapter 30 ~ Candy Kiss

Die Feng could only remember a handful of times there had been such excitement at Kunlun. After Si Yin left, it'd been more than 70,000 years since the disciples had to organize a search party. The most memorable occasion was Si Yin's kidnapping, when the White Goddess took it upon herself to seek Shifu's attention by torturing his favorite disciple. And then, who could forget the time when Si Yin stole Shifu's body after getting them all drunk, sending them into a frenzy that lasted for millennia?

Since a search party was a rare event at Kunlun Mountain nowadays, Die Feng felt fortunate to be able to utilize his experience as Military Commander of the West Sea to direct his juniors to safely bring back Shifu's wife. They divided into five teams and searched the four corners of Kunlun Mountain, including the surrounding area. Die Feng, 2nd and 13th remained near Kunlun, awaiting reports from the others while searching in the closest vicinity of the mountain.

The High Demon Goddess was certainly a unique deity. She had no qualms about taking her clothes off before them, in fact, she had cunningly used their inexperience to trick them. From his recent encounters with the Yellow Demon Princess, Die Feng should have known that Demons were thick skinned, and their sense of propriety differed substantially from Celestials'. Since he was a quick learner, though probably not quick enough in this case, he instructed his juniors to expect the unexpected and be ready for anything.

Truth be told, Die Feng thought he understood Shimu. Though she intimidated them, she was weak and volatile right now. Fong Hung's transformation had taken a heavy toll on her. Everyone coped with loss differently; during the years Shifu and Si Yin had been lost to them, so soon after 9th, and his brother had been sick, Die Feng had thrown himself into work. Sitting idle, alone with his thoughts, had been torture.

The High Goddess seemed to grieve by lashing out. Her sadness tinged fury was almost palpable around her and only a few of the disciples had dared to enter her room. She mainly expressed her anger by cursing at Shifu, throwing a rich assortment of epithets at him - among other things - that had left them flustered. For his part, Shifu braved the abuse with customary calm, being neither provoked nor unsettled. Die Feng admired his poise.

To hear gossip about Shifu's scandal deeply troubled him. As a member of the host family, Die Feng felt partly responsible for the fiasco with the Yellow Demon Lord and the niece of the Lord of Numinous Treasures. But regardless of the events of the festival, Shifu still commanded the respect and admiration of countless women. Why Shifu had chosen his longtime enemy, a Demon at that, as his bride among all the eligible women was a mystery Die Feng still puzzled over, particularly since the High Demon Goddess didn't seem pleased with the idea of marrying Shifu at all. In fact, when they had addressed her as Shimu, she'd almost skinned them alive.

What he did know was that the God of War was a man of honor. Shifu would never keep a woman captive against her will - the Goddess must be mistaken about his intentions. There was undoubtedly more going on, something the disciples couldn't understand. Shifu always had a bigger strategy behind his actions, though he hardly ever talked about what it was. And of course, he must know just as well as anybody that a unity between a Demon and a Celestial was improper. There were many stories of the calamities ensuing from such dalliances. But maybe two ancient Deities like Shifu and Shimu were exempt from such things?

By now, his group had reached a clearing near the south of Kunlun Mountain. While surveying the area, Die Feng realized it was time to check in with the other disciples on their progress. He turned to his juniors to ask for the magic mirror. But before he could utter the words, a yellow figure flashed before his eyes and slammed into 2nd junior.

"You're not Die Feng," said the familiar yellow clad body lying on top of Second.

Die Feng wanted to groan at the sound of the female voice he had dreaded to hear again, so much that he had even had dreams about it. He had told himself that this was very silly - now that he was back at Kunlun, the chances of her accidentally cloud jumping on him anew were very slim. But he should have known that demon clan women were unpredictable. Nay, worse: they meant big trouble. This one also happened to be the sister of the man making trouble for Shifu and Die Feng was sure the God of War would scowl at his First Disciple's inability to keep her in check.

The Yellow Demon Princess was still lying on top of 2nd Junior, who was grunting from the pain of the impact. He had to get her off of 2nd Junior before she caused any more damage.

“Princess?”

She looked up. A bright smile spread across her face in recognition, “Oh there you are! Die Feng!” She started to lift herself off of 2nd Junior. “I finally found-”

“Owww!!!”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to hurt you,” cried the flustered Demon Princess, still struggling to get up.

Die Feng quickly pulled her off of his junior, who had now turned several shades of red as he cowered in pain only a man would know. 13th still stood in shock nearby, unable to muster a word.

But the Princess shook off his hand and hunched over 2nd Junior. “Are you okay? Let me take a look,” she tried to move his hands away, but 2nd shook his head in panic.

Look? Did the woman have no decency? Immediately, Die Feng remembered what happened at his private bathhouse. No, common sense wouldn’t work on her.

Die Feng grabbed her arm. “Princess, let him be,” he said, hoping to divert her attention away from his junior, who desperately needed time alone to recover.

“But I should help,” she insisted.

“13th will take care of 2nd; come with me please,” he started to drag her away. Thankfully, she let him take her into the forest, far enough from his juniors’ ears. Die Feng let her arm go and placed himself at a safe distance from her. This woman ... she was his trial alone, others should not have to take his calamity like 2nd just did.

Taking a deep breath, he asked, “Princess, may I inquire what you are doing here?”

“They’re gone,” she pouted.

“Gone?” he arched his eyebrow at her.

She slowly moved towards him and he found himself instinctively retreating backward at the same pace. “The candies you sent me,” she explained.

He stopped. “How?”

“I ate them.”

“But I sent you 5 boxes!” He looked at her incredulously.

“I devoured them on the first day,” she said with a sheepish smile.

“I see...” He was surprised she hadn’t gotten an upset stomach.

“I really didn’t want to bother you again so soon,” she explained. “I even went to the mortal realm near Kunlun to try other candies, hoping to find something similar. But my efforts were fruitless.”

So she had had more sweets before she set foot at Kunlun? Where did all those sweets go? he wondered, staring at her waist, measuring it with his eyes. Despite her curves, it was quite petite. Those curves, he knew them too well - but Die Feng caught himself before the image of her wet clothed body appeared in front of him again.

He looked up to find her eyes on him. Had she noticed him staring? His momentary distraction had allowed the Princess to close in. She stood right before him, her scent of basil and caramel instantly filling the air. Before he could take a step back, she captured his wrist. “Can I have more?” she looked up at him.

“More?” he whispered as he stared at her parted lips.

Her gaze mirrored his and dipped to his mouth. “The candy,” she breathed.

Die Feng made himself snap out of the enchantment and fumbled inside his sleeve. Luckily, he had backup. He had kept one for himself when he requested his junior to make the batch for the Princess, almost like a premonition. “This is the only one left

right now.” He held out the candy. She reached to take it and her fingers brushed across his palm, lingering.

Her hand had long fingers and sword calluses. It was the first hardness he had encountered on her and he was intrigued. How would she look while practising her swordplay?

Li Ying smiled - he liked her smiles, he decided, when they were not predatory - and removed her hand. Slowly, she unwrapped the candy. “I’m afraid I’m taking the last piece.”

“I kept it mainly out of curiosity,” he replied. “I’ve had peach blossom candy many times before, but I was wondering why you like it so much. I will ask my junior to make more for you.”

She regarded him for a moment and an expression he couldn’t fathom flashed across her face. He was about to take a step back, but she grabbed his wrist again. “Open your mouth,” she said.

“Why?” He scowled.

She popped the peach candy into his mouth. Confused, he stared at her, as he savored the treat. It was strange, the candy tasted different somehow, an unknown sweetness he had never tasted before. Had she added a new ingredient this time? Had the Princess enchanted it?

“How does it taste?” she smiled mischievously.

His brows furrowed, “Good...but...didn’t you want the candy?”

Her eyes grew dark. “I do want it.”

She let go of his wrist and pulled his neck down, until their lips met. Her tongue caressed his lips unexpectedly, making him gasp. Surprised, he tried to pull away, but she held on using her weight to her advantage. She slipped her tongue inside his mouth, tasting the candy with him. Heat swept through him and his eyes closed as he

leaned closer, unable to think of anything except the feel of her body against his. As her tongue danced with his own, he found himself responding instinctively. Together, they moved the sweet nectar in slow circular motions until the candy melted away. But she wasn't done; she sucked on his tongue, causing him to groan against her lips, as she absorbed all the remaining melted sweetness.

When she finally pulled back, they were both out of breath. His knees were weak and his hands, he noticed, around her waist.

She brushed her lips against his, "Are you still wondering?"

Heart hammering, Die Feng swallowed. Staring into the eyes of the trial before him, he wondered if he would survive.



Chapter 33 ~ Follow the Nose

Over the course of her 135,000-year-old life, Li Ying had learned to savor small joys. Candy. Plays. A new skill. A good reef knots. A lover's touch. Die Feng's eyes were big and warm, and his expression hovered between outrage and amusement every time she saw him. When he wondered aloud why she liked the peach blossom candy she couldn't resist. His uncomprehending expression made her want to run her hands through his hair, wipe all confusion from his face, share the candy with him, *show* him.

But as their lips parted, Li Ying's mind was reeling. When she arrived at Kunlun she hadn't planned on kissing Die Feng. And when she kissed him she hadn't planned on becoming breathless with desire. Now, for the first time she was unsure.

Sharing the candy with Die Feng had not turned out to be a small joy to be savored. It had been - how had she put it? "A kiss would have me thoroughly devour your mouth and leave you inflamed and burning to follow me to bed." Ah, yes. Except now she was the one inflamed with the desire to take him to bed. The irony was not lost on her as she watched him lick his lips. The thought that he could still taste her entered her mind and she suddenly felt light headed. As her chest rose and fell with each uneven breath, she decided that she rather liked this new intensity. And all this while, his eyes never left her face. His eyes bore into hers as if he'd figure her out if only he gazed hard enough.

The sound of a twig snapping underfoot made them spin around as Die Feng's juniors entered the clearing. The one she had fallen on still looked red in the face and she shot him an apologetic look. He kept his focus on Die Feng, steadily refusing to meet her eyes.

The other one addressed Die Feng. "Senior! We received a message from 16th on the copper mirror. He's in trouble."

Die Feng's brow furrowed, "Where is he?"

The disciple sounded worried, "Somewhere in the mortal realm."

"What? How did he get there?"

“Before leaving he told us he had urgent business to attend to. His voice on the mirror was cut off; it sounded as if 16th’s mirror was smashed.”

“That is strange,” Die Feng mused. After a moment he called out orders, “Give me the mirror; I will go to him. Gather everyone and return to Kunlun but don’t trouble Shifu with this yet. Stay alert and keep me informed.” He turned to Li Ying and bowed, “Forgive me, I must leave. We can talk next time.”

“Wait-” Li Ying’s voice rang in the air as he clouds jumped. She called the nearest cloud and jumped after him. As she caught up with his cloud, she called his name.

He looked back, alarmed. “Princess! You must head back!”

“I will be fine!” she called out. “But there are thousands of mortal worlds. How do you know which one your junior is in?”

“It is this one,” he called back and swooped down. She dove after him and together they landed. Silently congratulating herself for her clean landing, Li Ying looked around.

They were in the side alley of a small market town she recognized from previous visits. The midday sun bore down her neck and the market square a few steps away was alive with the bustle of traders and purchasers.

Next to her, Die Feng held up his copper mirror. “The mirror calls to the shards of its broken mate,” he explained. “It will lead me to 16th.”

She clapped her hands, “Wonderful! Let’s go then.”

He put out a hand to stop her, “Princess I must insist that you return.”

“Don’t be such a stick in the mud,” she pouted. “I’ve been here before, I can help.”

“You’ve been here before?” he sounded surprised.

“I play in the mortal realm all the time,” she assured him.

Against his better judgement it seemed, Die Feng relented. “All right, we must hurry. This way.”

They set off down the alley, the noise from the market dimming with each step.

Excited that she could tag along, Li Ying’s mind buzzed with possibilities. “What if your junior doesn’t have the mirror shards anymore? What if he threw them away?” she asked.

Die Feng frowned, “16th knows not to do that.”

“But what if he was attacked and did not have time to collect the shards? Or what-” Li Ying caught sight of his expression. “I’m sorry, my chatter is scaring you.”

“I’m not scared,” he snorted. “But let’s refrain from imagining the worst.” Despite his casual words, his jaw was tense.

“You’re really worried about him, aren’t you?” she asked.

Die Feng sighed, “16th used to get into trouble all the time. But he hasn’t been himself lately. This must be something serious.”

“You two sound very close,” she remarked.

He smiled, “My juniors are like my brothers. They’re my responsibility.”

“Have you known them long?”

“Countless years,” said Die Feng. “We’ve fought battles side by side and grown together.”

Li Ying sighed, “It must be nice to have companions like that. I grow bored at my palace, so I come here to play.”

Die Feng gave her a strange look. “Don’t you have friends in the Demon realm?”

Li Ying blushed. “I have a friend! The Blue Demon Lord and I have gotten drunk together during state visits,” she assured him, then paused. “But ordinary Yellow Demons are in awe of my brother. His anger can be terrifying but it’s only because he cares so much. One just has to be careful to not be troublesome.”

“I see,” he replied, looking thoughtful.

Li Ying wasn’t sure how to explain it to him. After taking the throne, her brother was left with endless responsibilities he had to handle alone. She knew she was exasperating on many counts, so she tried to make herself scarce. In the early days, she often told her brother she wished she could help him more, but he assured her there was no need. Eventually, she stopped dwelling on it, finding her books and plays more interesting than political intrigue.

Sometimes her palace felt empty. There were people around, but they answered to her brother – bodyguards to protect her, maids to look after her needs, and lovers to please her. Cheng Yin left her to her own devices as long as she did not disturb him. And the best way to not disturb him when she grew antsy was to head to the mortal realm. He found her excursions amusing and did not interfere.



After all no one in the mortal realm could do her lasting damage or forge a close relationship with her. They would long be old and dead before her next visit. So, she satisfied herself with mortal food, sweets and stories and physical pleasure. When it

was time to come home she brought back literature and paintings and little keepsakes and memories. She never brought mortals back.

To take Die Feng's (and hers if she was honest) mind off troubling thoughts, Li Ying found herself relating bits of her mortal adventures as they walked through the town. Unlike the realm of the gods, change was a constant in the mortal realm, she explained. After having explored mortal worlds for millennia she still found something new on each visit, so there was no possibility of being bored. Sometimes Li Ying made herself invisible and lived inside mortal houses, bearing witness to their lives.

"I used to make bets with myself about how the children would turn out. When I returned many mortal years would have passed."

"Did you win the bets?" he looked genuinely curious.

"Not once," she grinned. "There are so many variables with mortals that things never turn out the way you expect them to."

They were approaching a tea house. "It's not far now," said Die Feng.

"That place looks familiar," said Li Ying.

"Let me guess. You once owned that tea house?" he teased.

She laughed. "I served in that tea house, actually. They kicked me out after I spilled tea on a customer for the 9th time."

"They should have chased you out after the first two times," he said.

"You would chase me out?" she raised a brow as they rounded the corner.

"I wouldn't even let you inside my tea house," he answered as they entered the dingy alley.

Before Li Ying could reply, she was hit by the stench of blood. She scanned their surroundings. Pots, pans and vats smelling of oil and soap lay next to a washing area

behind the rear door of the tea house. Something glinted at the far end of the alley. Die Feng took off at a run towards it and she followed. There, on the ground, were shards of a broken copper mirror. Die Feng squatted to examine them. Patches of red littered the earth. Die Feng's 16th junior was nowhere in sight.

Die Feng's face drained of color as he looked at the glass shard in his hand. "Zi Lan," he said, voice low.

"I can-" Li Ying was interrupted by a sound remarkably like a sneeze. She spun around at the same moment that Die Feng drew his sword. "Who's there?"

There was a shriek as someone tried to run from behind the vats. Die Feng was faster. A few seconds and he had the young girl by the arm. "Let me go!" she squealed. "Let go!"

"Don't yell," Li Ying walked over. "We will not hurt you."

The girl looked into Li Ying's eyes and stopped struggling. The moment Die Feng released her she sprang a few steps away, poised to run. "Don't run, little girl," said Li Ying, trying to sound soothing. She fished in her sleeve, "Would you like candy?"

"Seriously?" said the girl, eyeing her suspiciously. "I'm young, not stupid."

Li Ying smiled, "Ah but what if the candy was made from sugar and oranges that impart a delightful flavour when dissolved in the bland rice porridge they feed tea serving girls here?"

The girl's eyes grew wide as Li Ying pressed the package of sweets into her hand. "We just want to ask you some questions."

The girl hesitated, then nodded.

"Did you see what happened here?" asked Die Feng.

“Men with swords attacked a woman with a little girl,” she began. “They...they appeared out of nowhere. I was out here stacking the plates,” she pointed at the soapy utensils. “Then this other man appeared. He was helping the woman.”

Die Feng held up the glass shard, “Did you see who had the mirror?”

“It was the man,” she replied, words spilling out in excitement now. “The mirror shattered sometime during the fight. It happened so fast; these people could fly, I swear!”

“What happened next?”

“When the mirror shattered it stunned the attackers. As if magic came from it. The three of them vanished in the same moment. After a while the men on the ground also disappeared. They were there one moment and the next they were gone. I’m not lying, I swear!”

“We believe you,” said Li Ying. “You can go now.” The girl eyed them for a few seconds then ran off.

“Zi Lan couldn’t have gone back to Kunlun; the juniors would inform me,” said Die Feng. “He must still be in this realm somewhere.”

Even Li Ying could tell this did not bode well. “If he’s still in this realm I might be able to track him even if he has cloud jumped,” she said.

“What do you mean?” said Die Feng.

“I told you, my nose is never wrong. It can track things better than a bloodhound.”

“Princess this is not candy-”

“Do you not know what Yellow Demons are?” she asked softly. He fell silent as realization dawned on his face. “Do you have anything of his that I might catch his scent with?” she asked.

“Sadly, I am not in the habit of carrying around keepsakes belonging to my juniors,” he replied. “Will the mirror shards do?”

The mirror shards were not ideal but the blood on them might just be enough. “I can try,” said Li Ying. “They do seem to carry his trace.”

Without ceremony, she transformed into her true form. Die Feng’s eyes widened as he involuntarily took a step back. She huffed and nudged his hand with her nose. He tentatively held out the mirror shard. She took a good whiff and nodded once. Then she turned around and set off at a trot, Die Feng’s footsteps ringing behind.

As they jogged through the streets, Li Ying’s heightened senses picked up another scent behind them. By now they had neared the edge of town. The trail led into the forested hills looming ahead. This would not do. She resumed her human form, “Wait here,” she told Die Feng. “I have to take care of something.”

“Princess-”

She had transformed and bounded away before he could say more. The less time they wasted the faster they could find his junior. She knew this detour was costing them precious seconds, but she could not lead more danger towards Die Feng.

The Demon barely had time to react before she leapt at his chest. She changed back into her human form as she pinned him down and snarled, “You are following me.”

He looked terrified as he mumbled in a shaking voice, “I was not supposed to be discovered.”

She pressed down on his throat, “Who are you? And speak fast.”

Words tripped from his mouth, “I beg pardon, Your Highness. I am only following His Majesty, your brother’s orders. He sent me to protect you.” He held up the ring on his hand, marked with the Yellow Demon Lord’s sigil.

Li Ying let him up, “How long have you been following me?”

“Since the White Rock Sea Festival ended,” he said apologetically.

“Here are your new orders: Stop following.” She turned to leave.

The man grabbed her sleeve, “Your Highness, His Majesty will skin me alive if anything were to happen to you.”

She glared at him. “I am on urgent business and if you delay me any further I will skin you right here.”

He pressed a scroll into her hands with a beseeching smile, “Your Highness, I found this copy of *The Golden Dragon and His 24 Maidens* while I traced your steps. I know Your Highness has been searching for it zealously. Please accept this and don’t tell His Majesty that I was discovered.”

She put the scroll in her sleeve, “I will be fine. Don’t come after me.” Without waiting for an answer, she transformed and loped back to where she had left Die Feng. How much time had they lost because of her fool’s errand?

When she reached the spot, Die Feng was nowhere to be seen. She raised her head and sniffed. More Demons. Die Feng’s scent led towards the forest. With a growl, Li Ying bounded after him.

Chapter 336 ~ Assassins

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 its 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 35 ~ Victory was Hers



Being the 2nd Prince of the West Sea and the Commander of his own army, very few people made Die Feng nervous – Shifu being one of the exceptions. The God of War had a commanding presence and an imposing aura. He was so intimidating that nobody dared to interrupt him when he spoke. But for Die Feng, it had always been his silences that were the most frightening. Now, Shifu had been silent for quite some time, which caused Die Feng to become more and more uneasy. Looking down to the floor as he bowed, feeling the God of War’s eyes on him, he could hardly keep himself from fidgeting.

He had already informed Shifu of the current situation with 16th and the Ghost Princess. Assassins were targeting the royal blood of the Ghost tribe and would have likely succeeded in killing the Ghost Princess and her child if not for 16th’s tenacity. As Die Feng had predicted, Shifu had no issue with the Ghost Princess residing at Kunlun temporarily, given the urgency of the situation, her wounds, and the young child who was with her. Truth was, the Ghost Princess was an important asset in this war to come and it seemed strategically beneficial not to turn her away, but to keep her close and investigate the situation.

However, there was another decision to be made. Die Feng had expected it to be a quick one, and he wanted to convey the message to the uninvited guest outside Kunlun Hall as soon as possible. But Shifu drank his tea, his face unmoving, and Die Feng waited on tenterhooks.

When it seemed like his Master had forgotten about the question entirely, Die Feng ventured a cautious “Shifu...?”

“She may stay,” the Master of Kunlun Mountains finally answered as he placed his teacup down.

Die Feng could not believe his ears. “Pardon?”

Earlier in the day...

Luckily, there was no sign of assassins tailing them on their way back to Kunlun. 16th’s strength lasted exactly until their arrival at the gate, where he collapsed. Anticipating something like this might happen, Die Feng had already alerted his juniors to await their return at the foot of the mountain and six disciples rushed towards the party as soon as they arrived.

“Senior! How is 16th...?” they gathered around, worried and anxious to know what had happened. 6th and 10th bent down and lifted 16th up, each taking one of his arms over their shoulders to carry him.

“He’s heavily injured, take him to his room,” said Die Feng. “Where is 2nd?”

“2nd senior is busy making the elixir for 16th as instructed, it will be done soon,” 4th explained.

Die Feng looked at the Ghost Princess and the child in her arms, then turned back to his junior. “4th, prepare 9th’s old room for the Ghost Princess and her child,” he ordered.

“Yes, senior.”

Die Feng turned to the Ghost Princess, "Princess, please excuse me, I have to report to the God of War, so I will not be able to help you settle in. 4th will take care of your needs."

"Thank you for your hospitality, and thank you for saving us. I didn't have the opportunity to express my gratitude earlier," she replied.

"As Kunlun Disciples it is our duty to assist those in need. However, it is 16th who had the honor of protecting you and the child," he bowed to her and turned to 4th. "4th, make sure the Princess and the child have whatever they may need. Provide food and medical supplies to the Princess's room when you settle her in."

"Leave it to me, Senior," 4th bowed.

Die Feng watched everyone leave as instructed. Then he reluctantly turned to the real problem at hand. The Demon Princess, back to her chirpy self, had followed them home, insisting she had to ensure their safe return in case of more assassins. Now that they were at the gates, she was visibly excited while Die Feng was dreading the next scene. He was really grateful for all her help; indeed, she had saved their lives in the nick of time. He never liked being rude and now the last thing he wanted to do was hurt her feelings. Yet how could he let her inside Kunlun's halls when their tribes were on the verge of war? Duty came first, always, without question. He cleared his throat.

"Princess..."

"Why are we still standing around? I want you to show me the waterfalls, they look magnificent!" She grabbed his arm and pointed at the waterfalls above.

He gently disentangled himself. "Princess, thank you for your assistance earlier in the mortal realm. It is unlikely the assassins will appear here because of Kunlun's power suppression. Your power will also be suppressed if you reside here, so it is wiser if you return to your realm."

At his distant demeanor, confusion flitted across her face for an instance before she pouted. "But the Ghost Princess is staying; her powers are similar to mine."

“That is correct, but she is injured, has a child with her, and is being targeted by unknown assassins. Also, she is a guest of 16th’s,” he explained.

“Then I can be your guest.” She smiled at her own suggestion.

“My guest?” he repeated.

She beamed innocently, “Yes! I won’t cause any problems for you at Kunlun.”

He looked at her with disbelief. How could her staying at Kunlun not cause problems under current circumstances? She could not be completely oblivious of the fact that the master of this mountain and her brother were on the brink of going to war with each other, could she? They had no idea how much she knew or where her allegiance lay. Her staying here would be unwise on so many levels. But how did one broach such a subject with someone one was in debt to?

“Why do you hesitate? I led you to your 16th junior and his princess, didn’t I? And as I recall, I saved everyone, including you.”

“Princess, I don’t think it is wise, Kunlun is not accustomed to hosting female guests.” This sounded like a feeble excuse even to his ears.

She laughed, “But the High Demon Goddess is residing here as well! We are acquainted! She can be my chaperone if you prefer.”

Shimu as a chaperone? Die Feng couldn’t think of anything less appropriate. This whole situation made his head swim. He had hoped it wouldn’t come to this but now it seemed he had no choice. He sighed, “Princess, I don’t have the authority to decide in this matter. Let me ask Shifu’s permission.”

Asking Shifu was the last resort; he was quite certain Shifu would never let her reside at Kunlun. He just hoped that when the moment came, Shifu would not look too grim and the Princess not too disappointed. She, however, was not fazed by the suggestion. “Your Shifu? The God of War? I saw him at the Festival and though he looks very scary, I’m

sure he'll let me stay, seeing that I saved his disciples. Go, ask – and then let me see the waterfalls.”

Die Feng stared at her violet and brown eyes glimmering with anticipation and wondered if there would ever be a day on which he could win against the Demon Princess.

Present time...

“Pardon?” He must have misheard, because Shifu could not have just agreed to let another questionable female from another realm, the sister of the Yellow Demon King at that, stay at Kunlun.

Shifu poured himself another cup of tea. “She has saved 16th and you. We cannot be ungrateful to those whom we owe a debt.”

Die Feng was stunned. The Yellow Princess could stay? “But Shifu, what about the tension between the tribes? The assassins...” he trailed off. “Besides, we don't have any more free rooms; I already placed the Ghost Princess and her child in 9th's old room.”

“We do not know anything for certain yet. As long as she does not venture near my chambers, political tensions should not be a problem.” Shifu's expression remained inscrutable. “Put her in 17th's old room,” he added.

“With Shimu?” Die Feng asked, stunned again.

Shifu's tea paused ever so briefly before touching his lips. “Shimu is no longer residing there.”

“Where is she residing?” As soon as he had asked, Die Feng wanted to kick himself for babbling before thinking, because the look he got from Shifu for prying was of the highest disapproval.

Die Feng understood then that Shimu must be residing in Shifu's room. That was puzzling, because before she had run away, Shimu had been raging and screaming about being the God of War's wife. It was unclear to him how Shifu had caught his runaway bride, but it seemed like he had made peace with Shimu and quickly at that; they had not been gone from Kunlun for more than two Celestial days.

"I apologize, I spoke out of turn. I will do as instructed." Die Feng turned to leave quickly, feeling very uncomfortable under Shifu's intense gaze.

"Die Feng."

He froze at the sound of his name. He turned around and bowed. "Yes, Shifu."

"She is *your* guest."

"Understood."

Relieved that the decision was done with, Die Feng hurried back to where he had left the Demon Princess. He had instructed her to stay outside of Kunlun Hall until he could inform Shifu of the situation. But when he got back, the Yellow Demon Princess was nowhere to be seen. Great. Shifu had left her under his care, and he had already lost her.

"Have you seen the Demon Princess?" he asked the disciples nearby.

"Yes, Senior," answered 7th.

"Where is she?"

"She asked to see 2nd Senior."

"What! Why?"

"We don't know, she sounded quite urgent."

Urgent? Ah, she must be low on sugar again. After seeing her fight, he understood why this woman could binge on sweets without putting on bulk – her training must be intense. Hopefully, 2nd would still have some to satisfy her. He told 7th to prepare 17th's old room for the Demon Princess before heading out to find her.

As he walked, his thoughts turned to their conversation in the mortal realm. It appeared that she had few friends and a complicated relationship with her brother. Die Feng himself could not imagine being afraid of his own brother's anger. But then his brother had never been the authoritarian type. Her stories of mortal realm shenanigans had come as a surprise – it had never occurred to him that an immortal would find it fun to spend days as a mortal.

More surprising, though, was her boldness during the battle with the assassins. He didn't have time to analyze her skills before, but now that he thought back, he realized they had been impressive. Previously, he had assumed her primary weapon was the sword. Who could have known her weapon of choice was a silver chain whip. It fit her exceedingly well—fierce, unpredictable, and vibrant. Her moves were graceful like that of a silk dancer under the stars. The chains lit up unexpectedly at certain moments, as bright as the moon, without him being able to tell what made them so. |

Die Feng had to admit, due to her lack of cloud jumping abilities he had underestimated her martial arts. She had no killing aura either, despite her body count in the short battle he had witnessed. He realized she must have hidden her abilities. But why? Weren't demons prone to bragging about their battle skills all the time? Curiously, the Princess had not brought up the subject with him once, even though she brought up countless other subjects. Something about her was strange...like she was keeping secrets.

“Die Feng!” her voice broke through his train of thought.

He turned in anticipation. She was running towards him, her whole face lit up by a smile, likely because of the candy box in her hands. The breeze flowed through the yellow layers of her soft silk dress, while Kunlun's ancient energy mingled with her essence to suddenly remind him of her true form. When she transformed in the alley behind the teahouse, Die Feng's first instinct had been to reach for his sword. But then the huge grey predator had tilted its head and his brain had recognized the wolf's

glinting violet and brown eyes as Li Ying's. As they had set off, he had barely been able to take his eyes off. Her loping strides had been all power and speed and predatory grace. The thought that there was nothing delicate about her true form had occurred to him as he had watched her muscles bunch underneath thick fur. He would not want to be on the wrong side of her fangs when they came down on her prey, he thought wryly. As she reached him, human sized and fur-less, he smiled.

“Die Feng, look at what your 2nd junior gave me.” She showed him the half eaten box in her hands.

He had to laugh. “Princess, I don't believe that will be enough to quench your appetite.”

“Of course not, he told me he'll make time to teach me how to make Kunlun candies!”

Die Feng felt an unsettling tug in his chest. “Teach you?” he asked.

“Yes, teach me. I wouldn't want to bother him every time, he has other duties to attend to,” the Princess explained.

“Oh,” he said.

She must have caught his tone. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing.” He looked away from her.

She arched her head to look at him directly. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” He assured her. Turning to the matter at hand, he added: “Princess, I came to tell you that Shifu has approved your being my guest during your stay. I had my junior disciple prepare the guest room for you.”

“Wonderful! Please thank your Shifu for me. Where will my room be?” she asked.

“On the East side of Kunlun Hall. Please follow me.” He led her in the direction of 17th's room.

“Where is your room?” she continued.

“On the West side of Kunlun Hall.”

“Can I switch?” she asked.

He stopped and looked at her. “Switch?”

“Not with you, but another disciple close to you. Shouldn’t you keep an eye on me, seeing that I’m your guest?” she asked mischievously.

He swallowed. “No.”

“Why?!”

He kept walking while she trailed behind. She gave a multitude of logical and not so logical reasons why he needed to stay close to her and he continued to refute them all. Only when he saw her grin did he realize she was teasing him.

Fine, victory was hers today. But there were many days ahead, Die Feng thought as his heart sped up and he grinned back.

Chapter 39 ~ Bonding

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!"



At the White Rock Sea Festival, Li Ying had been fascinated by the Celestials' appreciation for art and culture. There had been painting sessions and poetry composition and music everywhere. Her eyes could not be sure about which direction to turn to. Since then, a curiosity about the tribe she'd had little contact with before had steadily grown in her mind.

Kunlun was different from the West Sea Kingdom though. It was a school, sacred, a place of wisdom and tranquility for Celestials. There was more decorum, and everyone was busy. Die Feng's 2nd junior hadn't found time to teach her the peach blossom candy recipe yet. So Li Ying found herself spending time looking through the library, going for walks or chatting with

whichever disciple happened to be going about his chores nearby.

She also got to know the Ghost Princess, Yan Zhi, who was very gentle and kind, and like Li Ying, couldn't use her powers at Kunlun. One Day Li Ying had tagged along to the woods nearby with little Princess Qiao Er and Die Feng's 7th and 10th juniors. Halfway through their walk, 7th and 10th had disappeared, leaving Li Ying in charge.

The little girl had looked at Li Ying with a doubtful expression until Li Ying pointed at a blue feather nearby. That day, the two had collected Qingniao feathers until sundown when Yan Zhi came looking.

Now Li Ying couldn't believe she had been blessed with such good fortune. This morning, she finally had the opportunity to pay her respects to the High Demon Goddess, but she had found the Queen bored, irritated and edgy, without anything real to do at Kunlun. The attention they received from their hosts was expected, but Demon Immortals were not known to sit around, drinking tea and snacking. The urge to duel and fight was in all Demons' blood because they gained cultivation through battles. That is what Li Ying had been taught since childhood.

So, as soon as the High Goddess had realized that Li Ying was, in truth, as idle as herself, she had suggested they should find a secluded place to train. Li Ying could hardly contain her excitement at the suggestion. Training under the High Demon Ancestor! She never even dreamed of it! The interruption by the Ghost Princess was perfect timing, because now, Li Ying had gained a teacher and an opponent to practice with.

They trained uninterrupted until the late afternoon, with the High Goddess assessing and guiding their movements. And she sure didn't pull her punches when she fought with them. Li Ying had lost count on how many times they hit the ground. When she realized that they were both exhausted and sapped of all strength, the Demon Goddess took pity on them and ordered them to rest.

They sat on a stone ledge in the warm sun, dangling their feet, watching the clouds over the mountain tops in the distance. Li Ying wanted to groan and moan from the aches that were forming in her body, but she would never admit to her pain in front of her Ancestor.

The Demon Ancestor looked content, though she had hardly worked up a sweat.

"Tomorrow, we will meet here again," she said, rolling her shoulders. It wasn't a request. "I will try to fight with the Celestial Bastard before we meet, to copy some of his moves. Ah, sparring with him always makes me very ... damn him. So, what do *you* two see in those stoic Celestial virgins?"

“Ancestor!” They both scrambled to their feet, shocked by this rather sudden change of topic.

“They’re so monkish! And so young! How fortunate for them to acquire princesses from two different clans to teach them some bodily pleasures!”

“Ancestor, you are mistaken, I’m not interested-” Yan Zhi tried to clarify.

“Ohh please.... don’t give me that innocent look, I can smell a man on you, and I am pretty sure I know which one it is,” she countered, making the Ghost Princess blush deeply.

Seeing Yan Zhi’s great discomfort at the topic, Li Ying chimed in, “Ancestor, please consider, Yan Zhi is a bit shy. Please do not tease her.”

“Tease her? How does one come from the Ghost Clan and be easily embarrassed about sexual encounters? Wasn’t your father into both genders? I still remember his collection of conquests, the pretty boys he captured and subjugated from all the realms. Willing or unwilling ... he didn’t care.”

Yan Zhi remained silent, but Li Ying could tell she was not comfortable with the subject at all. But before Li Ying could change the topic, the Goddess turned her attention to Li Ying herself.

“And you, how long does it take *you* to bed a man? The Senior disciple, I forget his name, is still untouched, it seems.”

Now it was Li Ying who found herself speechless. She wanted to explain that it was not that easy to seduce Die Feng, even if she decided to. She had thought that spending time with him would be easier given their present proximity, but Die Feng was no longer relaxed around her like he was before, perhaps due to the presence of the other disciples. From their excursion in the mortal realm she knew he took his responsibilities seriously and she admired him for it. But since the day he led her to her room at Kunlun, he had grown more and more formal and distant and preoccupied. There were moments when she broke past his armor, teasing and bantering until he joked back, but

he'd grow reserved again soon after. She was frustrated yet she didn't want to push him too far and be kicked out.

“Aside from their stoic stick in the mud personalities, I have to admit, they are ripe for the picking. Celestial pretty boys are known throughout the realms, I can understand well why you both can't hold back from tasting the forbidden fruits of Kunlun,” the Goddess said with a smirk.

“Ancestor...”

She raised her hand to cut them off. “Fine, I shall give you a different education now. Have you two thought of contraceptives?”

“Contracep...?”

She smirked. “Ah, I see....so you want to tie them down?”

“No!” both shouted in protest immediately.

“Then I highly suggest you look into them. In fact, I have a batch to share with you. I made too much the last time, due to lack of measurement and some distraction from the Celestial Bastard.”

“But Ancestor-” said Yan Zhi.

Li Ying realized the Ghost Princess was about to reject the offer. This might anger the Ancestor, who was clearly thinking she was very magnanimous. Quickly, Li Ying grabbed Yan Zhi and forced her to bow with her. “Thank you, Ancestor! We appreciate your generosity.”

“Excellent!” said the Demon Goddess, all content. But she was not done. “Now let's talk about technique! I find myself learning new things these days. Age is no hindrance.”

“Technique?”

“You mean the Dragon claw move you showed us?”

The Goddess stared at them and shook her head. “How Qing Cang and Cheng Yin raised such an innocent daughter and sister, I cannot comprehend. Princesses, a word of advice, if you two want to survive in this world, you better stop living life with your eyes half closed.”

Some sort of understanding dawned on Li Ying and she pulled Yan Zhi close. “She means bedroom techniques,” she whispered.

“Oh,” said Yan Zhi.

“Do you understand now?”

“Yes!” they answered in unison.

They made themselves comfortable. The High Goddess began to talk about her sexual experience, lecturing them about this and that, what to do in different situations and how to make sure the man was properly submissive. As they diligently listened to her exploits, neither Li Ying nor Yan Zhi could utter a word. Not because they were themselves innocent - but because what the High Goddess disclosed was quite shocking. They looked at each other, both coming to the same conclusion simultaneously.

“Why are you both glancing at one another?” The Demon Ancestor asked suspiciously, “are my techniques too much for your innocent brains?”

They both shook their heads.

“Speak up!”

Li Ying was quite mortified. How to...? Thankfully, Yan Zhi cleared her throat.

“Ancestor, I am curious, who taught you these ... techniques?” she asked cautiously.

“I taught myself, of course, why would I need anyone to teach me? They’re tied up most of the time anyway.”

“I see.”

“What?”

“And the God of War?” Li Ying *had* to ask, despite her fear of the Ancestor, because the thought of the God of War submitting to the kind of sex the Goddess described was unimaginable.

“Only the first time, momentarily - but not since,” she answered.

“Why?” asked Yan Zhi curiously.

“He’s... different,” the Goddess shrugged and for a fleeting moment, she looked dreamy.

“Does he give you pleasure?” asked one of the princesses.

“Does he take the lead?” the other.

“Yes to both. He knows how to please me, unexpectedly, more than others.” She narrowed her eyes at them. “Why are you two asking these questions?”

Li Ying and Yan Zhi exchanged glances, then nodded in agreement.

Based on her own description, their mentor, the High Demon Goddess, Queen of her own realm, who had had thousands of lovers, was someone others would consider to be a bad...no...terrible... no...*awful* lover. The unfortunate souls that she had claimed must have experienced the worst love making of their lives. Her so called “techniques” were in-existent. She was a selfish creature beyond reckoning, completely unaware that love making was just as much about giving as it was about taking. It seemed that in her many years of existence, nobody had ever told her that.

Yan Zhi took a few deep breaths before she had the courage to speak. “Ancestor...we think it’s time for us to pay our debt for your instruction in martial arts today.”

“What do you mean?” She sounded puzzled.

“Techniques, but not the martial arts kind,” Li Ying chimed in cheerfully, encouraged by Yan Zhi’s lead.

“I don’t need to be taught techniques of that kind!” The High Demon Goddess shouted at them as she jumped up in rage.

But they were unfazed by her outburst, now that they knew her weakness.

“Goddess, good love making requires trust and both partners to reciprocate and learn from each other,” Yan Zhi explained.

The Goddess snorted.

“As you admitted, you enjoy love making more when you don’t tie your partner up and whip him,” Li Ying continued with a smile.

“Yes...but...”

“And since you haven’t been here for long, we assume you haven’t had time to adjust to this new...type of love making yet,” Yan Zhi clarified.

“We also doubt the God of War would ever point it out to you,” Li Ying looked at her sympathetically.

“Are you saying I am not...*adequate* as a lover?!”

Yan Zhi was undeterred by the Demon Queen’s rage. “Ancestor, as you stated, many of your partners died after a night with you or were severely scarred. It must have been hard for you to keep a steady partner long enough to get to know them well. The situation is understandable. But now, as long as you are here-”

She glared at them.

“Please hear us out. Like martial arts, it doesn’t hurt to learn new techniques and it takes practice. Those were your words Ancestor,” Li Ying begged.

Maybe because she couldn't refute their statements, or maybe because she was curious about what they had to say, the Goddess finally reigned in her temper and sat down again. She took a deep breath before saying, "Fine, I'll listen. I will practice with him. But if it doesn't work or he gets displeased, I'll have both your heads."

They both nodded enthusiastically at the prospect of teaching the High Goddess. The princesses found themselves spending the remainder of the afternoon sharing stories about their past lovers with the High Goddess who was both stunned and flustered, amusing the other two.

It was a different atmosphere now at Kunlun. Li Ying was happy to have found her new sworn sister and mentor. Though their time together may be fleeting like a mortal life's, Li Ying would make sure to enjoy every moment.

Chapter 39.5 ~ Love Sign

It took Chang Shan nearly two weeks to find the opportunity to teach the Yellow Demon Princess the recipe for Kunlun's Peach Candies. The inventor of the unique delicacies was 12th disciple - who was very creative in his culinary skills but only willing to cook when it struck his fancy. Thus, it fell to Second to actually *make* the candies, an activity he greatly enjoyed, and it had also fallen to him to teach their female guest.

The Yellow Princess had dropped by daily to inquire about Second Disciple's availability, but he had been uncommonly busy. But even if he had had to send her away again, he had always looked forward to her brief visits. He found her a delightful woman, whose presence had changed the serene atmosphere at Kunlun instantly upon her arrival. It was fascinating to him that the lively Princess had taken a liking to serious Senior Die Feng - who clearly enjoyed her presence as well, even though he tried to hide it. Not very expertly, truth be told, to everybody's amusement.

Although Chang Shan had kept his mouth shut about what he had witnessed out of respect for his Senior, he couldn't stop the rumors among their Juniors who were ecstatic about the occasional grins and blushes from their steadfast and serious Die Feng. They couldn't get enough of the change in their Senior, who had previously been known to have little interest in the opposite sex. The Juniors had even started to call the Yellow Demon Princess "Sao Zi", senior sister-in-law, of course only if their senior was not present, which always made her laugh.

The situation was rather different with the Ghost Princess, who was Zi Lan's love interest. She was a quiet, melancholic woman, always very friendly, but never quite happy, which was understandable given her current situation, and what she had gone through. Zi Lan had protected her and her child during his time in the mortal realm with his life, true to the spirit of Kunlun. Since Chang Shan had been the only one present when Zi Lan had sacrificed half of his cultivation to save her niece hundred of years before, he was not surprised that 16th had chosen to bring them back here: she was in danger from assassins of unknown origin and Kunlun was a very safe place. He could tell their relationship was strained though - most likely because of Zi Lan, who had recently started keeping his feelings to himself, taking after Shifu in a surprising turn of events.

The old Shifu, to be precise. Now, Shifu had taken a bride so unlike himself, it continued to baffle many of the disciples. The Goddess had scared 2nd on a number of occasions, in fact, she seemed to greatly enjoy scaring him and all the others. Chang Shan had been able to satisfy her strange appetite with fish dishes so far, but he was afraid for the cranes' lives. Whenever she strolled towards their enclosure, he dropped everything he was doing and ran after her, to prevent a potential massacre. Why Shifu had chosen such an unlikely bride, Chang Shan would never know, but there was no denying she had an invigorating effect on him. He had never seen Shifu so lively. The disciples had been worried about their Shifu's health ever since his return from the Nothingness, but after Shimu's arrival his cultivation seemed to have improved in leaps and bounds. That alone was reason enough to honor her for a lifetime.

Despite the upheaval, Chang Shan found the animated ambience of the past few weeks hugely preferable to the tension they experienced when Fong Hung first arrived at Kunlun. Even without communicating verbally, the disciples knew this was just the calm before the storm. Another war was on the horizon and it may be on par or worse than the Ghost War. This knowledge brought uneasiness to all the disciples. They may be trained to be generals, but going to war was not something they desired. Pretending the world was all sunshine and laughter as long as they could, it was no wonder the disciples found accommodating the needs of their unusual guests a good distraction.

And speaking of unusual guests, the Yellow Demon Princess was currently stirring the candy concoction they had prepared since this morning.

"How long do we stir this?" she asked.

"Another half incense perhaps, we have to make sure the candy is soft enough for molding," Chang Shan instructed as he began to tidy up the kitchen.

"Excellent! I am happy to learn the recipe for this marvelous creation. I want to thank you again for making time for me." She gave him a bow of gratitude.

"Princess, please don't thank me, I should apologize for taking so long after your arrival."

“With the additional presence of so many guests, it is understandable. I am sorry to impose on your hospitality,” she told him.

Chang Shan shook his head. “No, it is not you or the other guests here; Kunlun can handle guests just fine. It’s because of my string of bad luck these days.”

“Bad luck?” she arched her head.

He sighed as he rubbed his face. “Lately, I’ve been having a stream of bad luck when it comes to my duties. If it’s not the laundry, it’s the food preparation.”

“You’ve been having a hard time with your duties?” she asked.

“No, I still perform all my chores and duties at Kunlun with the usual excellence, but for some strange reason, I seem to have episodes of memory loss. Last week, I could have sworn I had taken the laundry out for airing, but by the time I got back, the laundry was gone! I later found it all soaked in the pool nearby.”

“Maybe it was just the wind? After all, we’re on top of a very high mountain, there is always a breeze,” tried the Princess.

“True, but there was also the time I prepared the meal for Shifu. I seasoned it precisely the way he has grown accustomed to for years. But Shifu spit out the tofu soup immediately. When I tasted it, it was overly salted...”

“Could you have accidentally added the extra salt? I am clumsy myself, it happens on occasion,” she told him sympathetically.

“No, I couldn’t have. I am the opposite of clumsy,” he shook his head.

“What other incidents?” she asked.

He sighed as he continued. “The other day I almost finished up sweeping the Cauldron room, but I had to help a junior with a task in between. By the time I got back, the floor was a mess again.”

“How long has it been happening to you?” she asked.

That was a good question, now that the Princess had brought it up. He thought about it for a few seconds. “Since I got back to Kunlun after our search for Shimu.”

“Let me read your palm.” The Demon Princes stopped stirring the pot and approached him.

“My palm?” he asked, confused.

“I’ve studied palmistry in the mortal realm. I can see if you are having bad luck.” She grabbed his right hand.

“Princess, please, I don’t think it’s appropriate.” Or accurate, he wanted to add. Mortals’ palmistry was a sham at best. Their skill levels could not be compared to those of Celestial immortals with thousands of years to practice and study.

“It’s just palm reading,” she scowled at him, trying to pry his fingers open.

Someone cleared his throat. Both turned: Die Feng stood in the kitchen doorway, his expression dark.

“Senior...I...” 2nd tried to pull his hand away from the Princess, but her grip was too tight. Beneath her soft exterior, she was strong. How 2nd had managed to get himself caught in such a predicament he did not know, but his unlucky streak was clearly not yet over.

“Die Feng! What are you doing here?” The Princess asked as she finally managed to open 2nd’s hand for scrutiny.

Senior’s brows furrowed. “Princess, I heard you have been looking for me?”

She looked at senior with a confused look. “Looking for you? No, not today that I recall,” she returned to palm reading, now tracing her finger along the palm lines, paying no heed to the man at the door.

“Senior, the princess wanted to read my fortune, because I’ve been having unfortunate luck of late!” 2nd hurried to explain, but it didn’t look like his words were getting through. Senior’s expression became darker as his eyes focused on the Princess’ fingers on his palm. 2nd turned to the princess. “Princess?”

“I’m not done yet,” she answered promptly, still closely analyzing his lines.

“How long will it take?” he asked anxiously.

“I’m new at this, it may take a while,” she told him with a grin. “In fact, we should probably sit down.”

She pulled him down to sit on one of the chairs in the room and scooted closer to him on hers. 2nd knew his head would not remain on his shoulders if she was planning to take “a while” in such close proximity. He had to get out of this compromising situation before Senior Die Feng took action. As if on cue, Senior left the doorway and came over to stand directly in front of them.

Sweat started to form on Chang Shan’s forehead, he didn’t know how long he could last under these circumstances. “Princess, the candy!” he told her, with desperation.

“Huh?” she looked up at him.

“The Kunlun candies in the pot, they’re ready for molding! They will go bad!” That finally caught her attention. She immediately let go of his hand and went to stir the liquid in the pot.

“You’re right! It’s done,” she smiled happily, “we can use the mold now.”

2nd grabbed the bamboo mold frame on the table, but Senior Die Feng snatched it away from his hand without a word.

“I’ll assist you,” Senior told her. One look was all that was needed for 2nd to step back. 2nd felt the need to give them further instructions, but he knew better than to interfere with blossoming love, especially when one of the love birds was so clearly jealous. It was quite a sight to behold.

Chang Shan bowed to the Princess. “Princess, I realized I have other duties to attend to, please excuse me. Senior Die Feng can assist you.”

Still stirring the pot gleefully, without acknowledging Die Feng who stood directly behind her, the Princess beamed at Chang Shan. “Thank you for making time for me today. Please return to your duties.”

“It was my pleasure,” 2nd turned to leave with a huge sigh of relief, wishing his unlucky star would just go away already.

“Wait!” she called after him, “I saw no sign of bad luck on your palm.”

“Oh?” Good news, thought 2nd, even if probably not true.

“It’s actually a love sign,” the Princess told him cheerfully.

Chang Shan had to frown at her deduction. “Love sign?” That was ridiculous.

“Yes, it’s a love sign. Your heart line is between your forefinger and middle finger and the line branches up into three, which indicates she is closer than you might think.”

“But that can’t be,” 2nd shook his head. The only females at Kunlun were Shimu and the two princesses, and they were obviously taken.

“Who knows?” she shrugged as she returned to stirring the liquid candy. “One never knows what fate has in store for us.” She gave him a wink.

He left immediately afterwards. Love sign? The Yellow Princess must be messing with him. How likely was it for Kunlun to have another female arrive so soon?

Chang Shan had no love interests, and he had never left Kunlun for long, even during Shifu’s 70,000 years of absence. He had no family to turn to. Thanks to the extended energy near Kunlun, he had managed to turn into human form 4,000 years after he had hatched. Shifu had picked him up as a small boy at the bottom of Kunlun Mountain. Not much later, Shifu had entrusted Kunlun’s upkeep to him. Back then, Senior Die Feng

had still been a young prince, unaccustomed to chores, so 2nd had taken it upon himself to provide a comfortable home for them. For his savior, no, his adoptive father, his Shifu for thousands of millennia, it was his honor to dutifully watch over Kunlun Mountain.

Chang Shan had always prided himself as the anchor of Kunlun. From elixir making to cooking, laundry to tea preparation, he had excelled in all the tasks handed to him, and he alone trained disciples to succeed in his stead. But it had been more than a week now with everything going wrong. He had even suspected Shimu was playing pranks on him, but that seemed too evil even for her.

With a heavy sigh he arrived at his room. *Maybe he should get some rest to clear his head, so that there is no further memory lapse.* However, his bad luck was here to stay.

When 2nd entered his room, he found smoke blanketing his quarters. Coughing from the thick smog, he could barely breathe. A fire? He quickly used his magic to clear the room. What had happened? As he scanned the surrounding area, he soon found that the source of the fire was from his bed. The sheets were all burnt, due to a candle holder that had fallen on them. Had the wind knocked it over?

2nd had to groan at the misfortune that continued to plague him. He had planned to get some rest, but now he would have to first clean the mess before him. He began to gather the burnt beddings when he heard something in the room.



“Who’s there?”

There was no answer. His eyes searched the room again and he noticed a small gray object moving in the corner near the sitting table. Chang Shan cautiously approached it, and to his great surprise it was the swan he had saved on the way back from Kunlun after his search for Shimu. He clearly recognized her because of the red stripe of feathers on one side of her. She had been attacked by a hawk at the time, but 2nd had

intervened and carefully patched up her wing before leaving her safely hidden behind the shrubs.

“How did you get here?” he asked the poor creature who was covered with soot from the fire, dirtying her beautiful white feathers.

He picked the bird up into his arms and the swan did not struggle, but just looked at him. She probably remembered him. Birds had good memories, as he knew well.

“You must have flown quite far to arrive on top of Kunlun Mountain,” he told her softly. The situation was a bit baffling. “How did you find my room?”

“Quack!”

Chang Shan gave her a serious look. “So, you’re the culprit who knocked down the candle stand. You could have become a roasted swan if I hadn’t come back in time,” he chastised.

The swan quickly hid her head under her wing, as though she was aware of her wrong doing. 2nd found himself laughing at her response to his teasing.

Tenderly, he traced the soft feathers of the swan’s neck with his fingers. “How unlucky for you to meet an unfortunate person like me,” he said softly. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell if you won’t.”

Her head came slowly out from under her wing. She seemed to understand his words. Kunlun energy must be benefitting her. He gazed at her, finding her lovely despite her disheveled state. How faithful could she be to have found him? Faithfulness was the trait of bird’s immortal. Once they found their love, they would never stop or let go, even for eternity. Without thinking, Chang Shan placed a kiss on the Swan’s head. He wasn’t sure why, but the swan pulled back hastily - and immediately fainted in his arms. She must be exhausted and hurt from the smoke, he concluded. He vowed to keep an eye on her while she recovered there at Kunlun and carried the unconscious creature outside, so he could wash the smoke off her beautiful feathers.

Chapter 40.5 ~ Kunlun Candies

While Die Feng stayed at Kunlun, he received regular reports from the West Sea regarding the kingdom's borders and neighbors. After managing his studies, his juniors' studies, the library, and practicing his martial arts, Die Feng's time was wholly engrossed by the reports. There were simply no spare moments to be spent with guests, as regrettable as that was, and he had to delegate the day to day hospitality to Chang Shan. At least, that's what he told himself.

In truth though, he found himself frequently wandering around whichever part of the castle the Yellow Demon Princess happened to be in. When she played with the little Ghost Princess or hovered over his juniors' shoulders asking about their lessons he couldn't help listening. When she visited the library to look through the books he couldn't help glancing from his desk as she flitted about the shelves. But all of that was only to keep an eye on her as per Shifu's orders. She was, after all, his responsibility.

The problem was when talking to her it was too easy to forget she was the Yellow Demon Princess, sister of the Yellow Demon Lord; a potential spy and enemy. He could remind himself to be formal and reserved as much as he wanted but soon enough he would find himself letting his guard down and laughing. And so, before he knew it, Die Feng was avoiding direct interaction with the Princess. Fond as she was of novelty, there were plenty of objects and people at Kunlun to keep her occupied, he assured himself.

However, today, when he walked into the kitchen, for some reason the sight of Chang Shan's hand in hers made him...he wasn't sure what it was, but something sent a pang through him. He was reminded of the time he had lost his favorite wooden horse, the one he had had since he was a baby. Da-ge had gone strawberry picking with all the other kids, leaving him behind. Die Feng had run after them as soon as he found out, his little horse clutched in his fist. While scrambling through some brambles Die Feng had dropped the horse and, in his haste, had barely noticed. But Die Feng didn't find the other kids that day. He returned, shoulders slumped, and realized his horse was nowhere to be seen.

This was hardly the same situation though. All Die Feng knew was that Li Ying wouldn't look at him and he couldn't stand the sight of her and Chang Shan giggling with their heads bent together for a second longer. Chang Shan was annoying; Die Feng

was angry; Chang Shan needed to be gone. At Chang Shan's worried look, Die Feng looked down to see he had been clenching his fist.

He forced his hand to relax. Why was he acting this way? It wasn't like him to get random mood swings. Strange.

As soon as Chang Shan left, Li Ying snatched the bamboo mould from Die Feng's hand. "Thank you, I'll be needing that."

Why wouldn't she look at him? Die Feng moved forward to pick another mould from the table.

Li Ying snatched it back, "I need that too."

His scowl returned, "Let me help you."

"I don't need your assistance."

"You were happy with Chang Shan's," he accused.

She shot him a look of pure disbelief. "Your junior was *teaching* me the recipe."

At least she was looking at him now. "I want to help too."

"I wouldn't dare intrude on your time. You have many responsibilities to attend to as First Disciple of Kunlun," she said, nose in the air.

Die Feng found that unfair. "I was busy-"

"Yes, yes," she rolled her eyes and began spooning the candy mixture into the first mould. "You made that abundantly clear."

"Princess, I entrusted you to 2nd while I was busy, but you are still my guest."

"Oh, so now you care about that? You've ignored me for more than a week."

What was she talking about? True, he had decided to determinedly focus on work every time she approached until she gave up, but he had made sure her all her needs were met. Unless she thought- “Did it appear that I was making excuses on purpose?”

She raised her eyebrows, “Why, was that the case?”

So she did think that. Guilt stabbed at him and he tried to deny, “No, I really had work to attend to-”

“Go attend to it then.” She turned away.

He stood there not sure what to do. “I’m sorry, I thought you would be too happily occupied with other company to care for mine. I saw you training with the Demon High Goddess.”

Her expression told him she saw this as a feeble excuse. He wasn’t sure he was entirely convinced himself.

“I thought we were friends,” she said in a lower voice.

That made him pause.

Friends. Friends cared for each other’s company because they enjoyed it. Is that how it was between them? Die Feng had told himself she only considered him as a source of novelty but now he realized he had hurt her. Had he truly been that busy? Being cautious was one thing, but to disregard someone who had done nothing to deserve it was another. He moved forward, “Forgive me; I’ve been negligent as a host. Please let me make up for it today.”

“There must be other matters more fitting to your role that need attention,” she said.

“I assure you I am available now. I apologize. At the moment there is nothing more important than helping you prepare the peach blossom candy.”

“All right, let’s stop arguing. The candy needs attention,” she looked down at the mould in her hand.

“Yes, of course.” Die Feng picked up the second mould.

Li Ying glanced up, her expression much mollified despite her next words, “But that doesn’t mean I accept your apology.”

He nodded solemnly. “Understood.”

She stirred the pot. “Okay, let’s start! If we get this right maybe I can setup a successful candy business in the mortal realm. Don’t expect a share of the profits though,” she added over her shoulder.

Die Feng ducked his head to hide a smile.

Yes, she disarmed him. So, what? Was laughing with someone really such a scary thing? She would be gone soon enough anyway. So far, she had done nothing to raise his suspicion except have a sweet tooth. When the moment to deal with the politics arrived, he would deal with it. Avoiding her in the meantime when they could be friends was just silly. And Die Feng was done being silly.

At the best of times, Li Ying was not a very accomplished cook. At the worst of times, she set fire to the kitchen. That didn’t prevent her from trying through the years though. The peach blossom candy was the most complicated recipe she had attempted yet. What she lacked in skill, she made up for with enthusiasm, happy that 2nd disciple had finally found time to teach her.

When Die Feng appeared at the kitchen door, Li Ying found herself dragging his junior’s hand closer. Aware of Die Feng’s gaze, Li Ying’s instinct prompted her to see how he would react. Would he care enough to remain while she prolonged the palm reading, a task that she was usually fast at?

She did feel guilty for involving 2nd, who had been nothing but a great host to her. But it was unusual for Die Feng to seek her out. Was he really was not interested in her at all? She had to know. To her surprise, not only did 2nd almost fall over in his sudden

haste to leave, Die Feng remained and apologized and insisted on helping despite her giving him every chance to make himself scarce. It seemed unlike the Second Prince of the West Sea to take on a task he was obviously not at ease with. She was probably missing something, and she was angry at Die Feng, so why did she feel like smiling?

However, she couldn't dwell on her thoughts when there was working to be done. When 2nd left, Li Ying let him go cheerily, confident that the only task left was to press the candy into the moulds with a spoon. Now she wasn't sure. She glanced at Die Feng who was watching her expectantly, mould in hand. "How do we use this?" she asked, holding out her mould.

Die Feng paused, stared at the mould and back at her. "Um, I've never actually used it before."

Li Ying stared at him in disbelief. "You don't know how to use this, yet you scared your junior away?"

"How hard can it be if 2nd can do it?" he scowled.

"Your junior is accomplished at the hardest of tasks," she pointed out.

"Well we can't call him back now," he snapped. Taking a deep breath, he added, "Sorry. I'm sure we can figure this out."

"I don't think spooning the mixture in is working. It's filling only half the mould."

"So, what do we do?"

Li Ying picked up the mould lid and turned it over. "Ah. Do you see paper anywhere?"

"You mean these?" Die Feng pointed to the sheets lying on the side of the counter.

"Yes, bring them over," she held out her hand. "I have seen a mortal cook use this technique before. I didn't see how he made the cone, but it should be simple enough."

"Cone?" he sounded puzzled.

Li Ying pointed at the small holes at the top of the mould lid. “We close the mould and use a paper cone to squeeze in the candy mixture through these holes so that it sets into perfectly round balls. Then, when it is ready, we open the mould.”

Die Feng looked doubtful.

She smiled. “You’ll see.”

He watched as she used the knife to cut the paper into a triangle. Li Ying paused. “Hmm, maybe we should grease the paper. So that the mixture doesn’t stick.”

Die Feng passed her the oil jar. “Here.”

Li Ying greased and rolled the paper into a cone shape. It took a couple of tries but she figured out how to make the pointy end and have the shape hold.

“Take the pot off the flame and keep stirring,” she instructed Die Feng as she worked. “The trick is to get the timing right. The mixture can’t be too hot for fingers to hold the cone but it can’t be allowed to cool down so much that it becomes stiff.”

“That makes sense,” he said as he followed directions, far more confidence in her ability evident on his face than a minute ago.

“Okay, let’s see.” She held the paper cone in one hand and put in a spoonful of the mixture with the other. The cone held and, carefully, she put in another spoonful. The mixture slowly slid down as she pressed the top of the cone. And then, just as she thought it was working, the cone unraveled at the bottom, dripping the hot, sticky, gooey candy mixture everywhere.

Li Ying swore, dropping the now shapeless paper.

“Princess!” Die Feng grabbed her candy covered hand and dunked it into water.

“It’s...it’s all right,” she said. “It wasn’t that hot.”

“Are you sure?” he asked anxiously.

She took the kitchen rag and wiped herself, waving him away. “Let me try again. There’s probably a trick to holding the paper together.”

“All right, but please be careful,” he said.

Li Ying tried several more times, folding the paper this way and that while Die Feng watched, putting in a word of encouragement here and there. Each time, either the cone fell apart at the bottom or the mixture oozed back out from the top.

At the end, the kitchen was a mess, there was candy all over their clothes and Li Ying was slumped against the counter, head bowed. “I really thought I could do it this time. But I always make a mess.”

Die Feng ducked down to catch her eye, “Princess, nobody is good at something on their first attempt. One cannot master a new skill without guidance.”

She shook her head, “I’ve never had a cook willing to let me stay in the kitchen more than a few days.”

He sounded contrite, “I’m sorry I sent you away.”

“I was being so careful. I thought of everything,” she said, putting her hands over her eyes.

He patted her shoulder, “Don’t be so hard on yourself. You were very creative but nobody can figure out all the possibilities beforehand.”

“And now we don’t have time; the mixture is cooling down. The whole batch will be ruined,” she almost wailed.

“But is it necessary?” asked Die Feng, his brow furrowed. “To get a perfect shape for the candy to taste good?”

Li Ying stared at him. “You’re right!” she exclaimed and sprang forward to grab a fresh sheet of paper. “Of course! Why on earth does it have to be perfectly round?”

They grabbed a spoon each and set about doling out the candy mixture onto the paper in small chunks. After spooning out all the candy and laughing at each other’s shapeless blobs, they got to work cleaning the kitchen. Silently, they mopped the spilled mixture and washed the dishes while the candy hardened.

There was a moment when Li Ying looked up from licking the spoon to find Die Feng’s eyes on her. A sly thought entered her mind. Without breaking eye contact, she moved forward, closing in, slowly, until she had to tilt her head to hold his gaze. She could hear his heartbeat or maybe it was hers as she reached up and his eyes fluttered close. She leaned forward, unable to take her eyes off his lips...and smeared the candy mixture across his mouth. Die Feng blinked and she spun away, laughing. A sheepish grin spread over his face and he licked the candy off.

Later that evening, when Li Ying returned to her room with her batch of misshapen candies, she couldn’t stop smiling. She had not felt this relaxed in days, tired as she was. The candy tasted even better than usual and she decided to celebrate by finally unrolling her scroll of *The Golden Dragon and His 24 Maidens*. She’d been saving it for an appropriate moment and now seemed better than ever.

Excitement building, she untied the string. The play was a rare collector’s item, more a legend now than something mortals circulated. She unrolled the scroll inch by inch, mindful of the ancient paper. Surprisingly, the ink was bright as if applied only yesterday. Could it be a fake?

There was a tiny bronze mouse figurine sitting in the middle of the scroll. Li Ying picked it up and held it against the light. The detailing was exquisite, from whiskers around its small round nose and nails on its tiny paws down to each strand of fur on its body. The look in its eyes was the cutest thing she had ever seen. She carefully set the mouse down on her bedside table, reminding herself to keep it away from the Demon Ancestor’s mount, and returned to the scroll.

Fake or not, the play was certainly engrossing. There were the dragon and the 24 maidens, as promised, and there was also a mouse, doing some very unmouse-like

things. That night, Li Ying fell asleep, reading, with a wide smile on her face. When she opened her eyes the next morning, the Demon Ancestor's mount was hopping near her face. She sat back with a yelp and her eyes fell on her bedside table. The mouse figurine was gone. Li Ying looked at Fong Hung mournfully. Alas, the frog had gotten to it before her! Offending the Ancestor by accusing her mount of stealing was out of the question. There was nothing to be done. Fong Hung croaked as he hopped, looking very pleased with himself.

Li Ying gave him a surreptitious look and scrambled to hide her peach candy box.

Chapter 42.5 ~ Are you Jealous?

Die Feng was going down the front steps of the Hall when Shimu, Ghost Princess Yan Zhi, and Princess Li Ying approached. Li Ying was hobbling, one arm around Yan Zhi's shoulder and a handkerchief pressed to her bloody forehead.

"What happened?" Die Feng asked, running down the remaining steps.

"We were training," said Li Ying, cheerfully. "It's just a scratch."

"She fell off the cliffs," said Yan Zhi, "Li Ying and the Ancestor were a bit...enthusiastic."

"This will be a good reminder to keep practicing footwork," said Shimu. "Take her to her room for now and get that gash healed."

"Don't worry, I'll be okay. Go check on Qiao Er," Li Ying assured Yan Zhi as Die Feng helped her transfer to his shoulder.

Shimu followed them to Li Ying's room suggesting all sorts of remedies, half of which Die Feng had never heard before and half he would be afraid to try. At the door, she whispered something in Li Ying's ear and laughed before leaving with cheery promises of new training plans. Die Feng led Li Ying inside and helped her onto the bed. Pulling down the hand that still pressed the blood-soaked handkerchief to her forehead, he bent to examine the wound.

"You're awfully quiet," said Li Ying as he gently tilted her face towards the light.

The cut was deep but at least she had stopped bleeding. Next, he reached for her leg.

"It's my ankle," she explained. "It's only twisted."

Die Feng paused and decided he could breathe. If that was the extent of her injuries, then she would be all right. His heart had been in his mouth since the moment he had seen her supported by the Ghost Princess. Now, words spilled out in a rush. "Princess, do you think you're invincible? How can you not be more careful when sparring with one of the most powerful deities in all the realms?"

“It’s barely a flesh wound,” she said looking puzzled by his reaction.

“Falling from those cliffs, you’re lucky-”

“Die Feng,” she grinned. “Are you worried about me?”

He ignored her question. “Once I heal you we-”

The smile left her face. “There’s no need to heal me with magic.”

“What, why not?”

“Oh, you Celestials...” she muttered. “Wounds can heal on their own, you know.”

“But-”

A knock interrupted him and 5th walked in, carrying a washbowl and bandages. Charm on full display, with a hand over his heart he said, “Princess? I was devastated to hear of your injury.”

Before either of them could respond, 5th moved to the bed in one stride and kneeled. “Please, let me be of assistance,” he said gallantly, dipping the cloth in water.

Already irritated at the interruption, remembering his 5th junior’s reputation with the opposite sex, Die Feng nearly growled. “Thank you for the supplies 5th, you may leave.”

5th took one look at his expression and straightened. “Of course, senior,” he said smoothly and bowed to Li Ying. “Please rest, Princess. You are being in poor health would leave Kunlun dreary indeed.”

Die Feng watched impatiently as Li Ying thanked him. The moment the door closed behind 5th, he continued. “What are you talking about? Of course, you have to-”

“I don’t want to be healed by magic.”

“Taking unnecessary risks-”

He was interrupted by another knock and 11th and 8th entered, bearing medicine and, of all things, a pipa.

“Princess! We heard you were injured!”

“Would music make you feel better?”

Much as Die Feng cared for his juniors, in that moment he wanted to throttle the whole lot of them.

Li Ying smiled. “How sweet! I must thank you for the medicine, and music always makes me feel better. But later perhaps? I fear my head will not cooperate at the moment.”

His two juniors hovered over her, worrying, until Die Feng reminded them that she needed rest. They quickly departed, beseeching the Princess to let them know if they could relieve her discomfort in any way.

As the door closed behind them, Die Feng said testily, “Are you friends with everyone at Kunlun?”

She quirked an eyebrow, “Are you jealous?”

He stopped, astounded. “Why would I be jealous?”

“Why are you being so petty then?”

“Princess, you are hurt, and they are delaying treatment!”

“You sound like my brother. He hates seeing me hurt so people are too afraid to train with me.”

That made him frown. “But you’re a good fighter. You’ve obviously trained.”

“I have been cultivating in secret. He, um, doesn’t know that.”

Something about what she said made Die Feng uneasy. Didn’t letting her train and cultivate make more sense if her safety was the concern? “Is that why you conceal your aura?”

Li Ying began to nod then stopped, wincing.

“We can talk about this later. You must let me-”

“No,” she said. “We can make sure it doesn’t scar but let it heal on its own. It’s not as if it’s a major injury. Stop fretting.”

Die Feng wanted to argue but her face looked set.

“Die Feng, you must know that injuries during sparring are common. It’ll heal in two days. Let the pain take its course.”

She was right, he was overreacting. He’d seen juniors injured during sparring countless times. *He* had been injured during sparring countless times. Where was this irrational fear coming from? He took a deep breath. “All right. But why?”

Her expression lost its certainty. “I’m not sure how to explain. Pain is real. Honest. We immortals experience it so rarely that the moments we do are...interesting. It’s exhilarating to be reminded that we too can bleed. Unlike mortals, our lives remain unchanging, unaffected by time. Time is precious to mortals. They feel things keenly, more so because of their mortality. Like fireflies, they burn with all their might, flitting about while their short lives run out. It makes me wonder if we’re even alive.”

He processed this as he moved to sit beside her and reached for the washbowl. “Let me clean the wound.”

The water trickled through his fingers as he squeezed the cloth and applied it to her face. A charged silence grew between them as he wiped the dried dark blood. Aware of her curious gaze, his eyes kept locking with hers. With their close proximity he could feel every intake of breath. He was being as gentle as possible, but the cleaning had to

hurt. However, beyond a quickly suppressed whimper, she barely made a sound. What was it about her that enjoyed the pain of mortals?

Die Feng felt this strange impulse to draw her close and soothe her with his lips until the pain faded. After bandaging her head as best as he could, he lifted her injured leg onto his thigh. Now avoiding her searching eyes, slowly, he removed one layer, then the second, and the third until he held her ankle. He had never felt the delicate arch of a woman's foot before. Taking one deep breath, he drew away her sock, trying to avoid causing her anymore pain. Pain he felt himself, when he saw the blood. Her ankle was most definitely not "only twisted."

When he glanced up, he noticed her cheeks were rose red. Was she blushing? That was ridiculous; he hadn't seen her blush once since they met. It must be his imagination. But he couldn't shake off the image of her eyes turning away from him. It was subtle, yet there. He was seeing a side of her he never expected.

"Die Feng...?"

"Huh?"

"Are you going to tend to my wound?"

"Yes! Forgive me." He grabbed the wet cloth and dabbed at the blood so quickly that it made her yelp. "I'm sorry! I'll be gentle!"

She gave him a furtive glance and burst into laughter. "You, my Prince, can neither cook nor are accustomed to treating wounds," she said between giggles.

"Of course, I know about wounds. I've been in many battles," he said with a scowl.

She placed her finger on his lips, her gaze seductive with a hint of mischief. "Admit it," she said. "Your servants or 2nd disciple tended to them. You never had to lift a finger."

Pulling back, she continued laughing, and he could only smile ruefully in admission, his eyes cast downward.

“Thank you,” he heard her say. He looked up. “Thank you for making an exception for me.”

“No need to thank me,” he replied. “And there are ways of knowing. That we are alive.”

“There are,” she conceded.

Die Feng recalled her lips against his. “And we can feel just as keenly.”

“True,” she said. “But we often forget. I once traded my youth for old age with a grandmother for one mortal year. Her despair and joy at life running out...It gives one a new perspective, experiencing mortality.”

Not many immortals in Die Feng’s experience would value mortals that much. The general attitude was to view them as interesting but inferior. Some immortals that were more callous than others might even consider them playthings. Though interfering in mortal lives was forbidden, there were those who disregarded the rules. He had heard stories – Si Yin’s suffering at the hands of Celestials during her mortal trial was proof enough. Living as a mortal was supposed to be either a punishment or a trial one endured to ascend. And here was this woman seeking out mortal life for fun. He couldn’t help asking, “How did you become so fascinated with mortals?”

Something in her expression changed. She looked away, and said in a tense voice, “I-I have a lot of free time on my hands and nowhere else to go. My brother doesn’t have to worry because mortals can’t hurt me.”

Why did he get the sense that there was more to it? It sounded like a rehearsed answer. He had noticed that though she often mentioned the constraints laid by her brother, she never spoke about her home.

“Die Feng,” she said before he could speak. “Are you done bandaging?”

“Yes Princess,” he replied. “If you won’t let me heal you, you need to rest.”

“Let me rest then. I feel tired.”

Surprised that she agreed so easily, Die Feng sent her energy to prevent scarring and left a copper mirror on the bedside table, telling her to call for him if she needed anything. He had never known the Princess to be tired.

After Die Feng left, Li Ying turned into her true form and curled up. Her head throbbed as the litany of thoughts and memories washed over her. When Die Feng had looked at her as if she was an enigma he couldn't solve, and asked how she became interested in mortals, what was she supposed to do? Start at the beginning?

When I was young, my brother brought two mortals to the palace to keep as pets. I didn't really understand the concept of mortality back then.

Ge-ge soon lost interest but I could never stop poking and prodding. The others at the palace clearly showed their disdain for the mortals and I didn't understand why. I liked them, and their curse was liking me back. We became friends.

We became friends, but I never knew the gap between my strength and their fragility until the day I accidentally broke them. That's what Cheng Yin ge-ge said when he found me crying. "Oh no, you've broken your toys. There there." And he laughed and patted my shoulder.

Break? Was that what it was called when one minute you were playing and the next they were on the ground and you were shaking them asking why they won't wake up?

I cried for days but all my magic couldn't heal them.

What had happened? Why were they different and why did it haunt me so when everyone else acted as if the mortals had been playthings? I had to know.

Cheng Yin ge-ge promised to bring me more of them. But he soon forgot, and I knew better than to trouble my busy brother. So I ventured out to find them.

My first time in the mortal realm, an artist saw me and asked if I was a fairy. I asked him would he come with me if I was. He would not leave his wife, he replied, so I left.

Yet, in a frenzied state, he made painting after painting, upset that his brush could not capture my beauty the way he remembered it. He perfected every stroke, every strand, every shade until he looked up and saw that his hair was grey, his skin wrinkled and his wife long passed.

I went to mortals again and again and I understood life and time were precious to those who had so little of it.

I understood that they should never be brought back to the palace, for they will always get hurt by us. They are fragile, but they are not playthings.

I learnt life was precious the day I killed my only friends. I never forgot that lesson in mortality.

What was all this explanation for? I broke them, and they died and that was it. Why sugar-coat it?

I couldn't tell Die Feng though. I couldn't confess my shame and see the horror reflected in his eyes.

With her headache worsening, Li Ying drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 45.5 ~ Once I was Kidnapped...

As expected, Li Ying had recovered from her injury within two days. The evening of the day she got injured, Die Feng had returned with dinner and a soothing tea 2nd brewed for her head. When he arrived, the Princess was less animated than usual. Her red eyes made Die Feng wonder if she had gotten any rest at all. She was in low spirits, but it did not seem like she wanted to talk about it. She asked him to eat with her if he hadn't eaten yet and he picked up a bowl.

To cheer her up he asked if she would like to go to the garden where 8th was playing his flute. "Not tonight," she responded. "Let's just eat."

They began eating in silence, the clink of their chopsticks and spoons the only sound. Eventually, Li Ying asked what he had done that day and he told her about library maintenance. Bodhisattva Wei Tuo had recently come for a look and had given suggestions for the new cataloguing system Die Feng had been developing to make ranking books easier. That got the Demon Princess and Die Feng comparing sources for acquiring rare scrolls. He had a wide network amongst Celestials while she had black market contacts.

The conversation drew her out and she gained more animation. When he had been about to leave she had held him back with a touch on his arm, some unnamed emotion in her eyes. "Thank you," she said. "For staying with me."

Unsure what the intensity of her gaze signified, he said. "You're welcome."

By the next day she was her usual playful self. When he brought her dinner she handed him a bowl of rice without ceremony and began eating.

The same happened the next evening and the next.

The Princess resumed her training and exploration of Kunlun while Die Feng resumed work. The realm politics were moving along. Messengers from the West Sea came everyday as the sea tribes rallied and argued. Die Yong's wedding alliance was in the final stages of negotiation and gifts were being exchanged. On the day of his brother's wedding, the West Sea Crown Prince was supposed to be declared. It was only a

formality as everyone knew that the throne would pass to Die Yong. Die Feng had already made a couple of visits to the West Sea and back.

He had grown increasingly certain that managing things from Kunlun would not be practical for much longer. He needed to be on the ground, speaking to people face to face. Yet he also knew that leaving Kunlun would herald greater changes. Changes that Die Feng was not sure he was ready for.

The last few days, his evenings with the Princess had become the only times he could let himself take his mind off work.

Today she had snuck into the kitchen, determined to unearth some wine. Silently praying that she never discovered the existence of the wine cellar, Die Feng offered to bring her the wine from High God Zhe Yan's orchard that Bai Qian had given him for his birthday. Not being much of a drinker, he hadn't opened it yet. The Princess had gleefully accepted. Now they were sitting side by side against the wall on the kitchen floor, holding bottles. Li Ying was narrating another mortal realm anecdote.

"Once when I was the daughter of a wealthy merchant I was kidnapped by bandits."



"Why am I not surprised?" said Die Feng, taking a swig.

"Hey! I'm telling the story," she protested.

Putting down his bottle, he held up his hands.

"Okay, okay, what happened next? Were you scared?"

Her grin belied her next words. “Oh yes! It was terrifying! On the way to their hideout I couldn’t stop thinking if the bandit leader would be a handsome rogue like in the mortal plays.”

“Was he?” he asked, more than a little curious.

“Alas! He turned out to be a cruel man with rotting teeth. My death was horrific,” she said with relish.

Die Feng shuddered and, unconsciously, moved closer. The woman had a screw loose.

“That made me learn not to trust plays,” she pouted.

He laughed. “Life is not like plays, Princess.”

“I know,” she sighed. “But I still had to see if there was any truth to adventure stories at all. So then I tried becoming a pirate queen.”

Die Feng took another sip. Heat spread through his body as the wine travelled down. “Become a pirate,” he said. “Right. The obvious conclusion.”

She pointed her finger at him, “For two mortal years I carved an empire on the high seas until my brother summoned me back.”

He raised an eyebrow as she drank, “You’re not nearly cunning enough to be a pirate.”

Wiping her lips, she smirked, “I am not bound by mortal limits either.”

“That’s cheating!” Die Feng protested.

“Details,” she waved him off. “What I learned was that mortal life is not like adventure stories at all. People are preoccupied with hunger and wealth. Isn’t that even more interesting?”

“It is,” he agreed. “The idea of adventure is appealing but when it comes down to it people will stick to what they are familiar with. Same physical comforts, same desires and the same hunger. I certainly am set in my ways.”

“You’re too set in your ways,” she said, giving him a light shove.

He acknowledged it with a nod. “Change is painful after getting comfortably used to something.

The more I get used to it the more I get attached.”

“Didn’t any of your past lovers ever ruffle you up?” she asked.

Taking another draught, he shook his head. “I have not been with a woman yet.”

That made her sit up. “What, never?”

“No,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Is that so surprising?”

“It is unusual amongst Demons.”

Die Feng turned this over in his mind. By now, he was well on his way to being pleasantly tipsy. Damn, the vintage was potent. “It has never been of particular concern. It’s my duty to enter into a politically advantageous match arranged by my parents and advisors for the benefit of the kingdom. When the time comes, I believe the rest will follow naturally.”

“That is it? You do not seek love or passion?” she asked. The cutest line appeared between her eyebrows. Die Feng felt like smoothing it.

“As long as there’s harmony and mutual goodwill I should be fine,” he assured her.

“And this politically advantageous match will be with a Celestial vir- woman of virtue?” she continued.

“Probably, yes.”

“Hmm,” she said.

They sipped in silence. He could smell basil and caramel. Not surprising, since they were in the kitchen, but where had he sniffed this combination before-

“Die Feng,” said Li Ying, interrupting his thoughts. Oh yeah, it was her scent. Closing his eyes, he leaned back his head and inhaled deeply. “Will you be scandalised if I ask something?”

Eyes still closed he said, “Princess, when have you ever cared about scandalising me?”

“True. Do you-” she paused, looking for the right word “-have *urges*?”

His eyes snapped open. “Urges?”

“I mean, don’t you get frustrated? Being...*chaste* all the time?” she sounded so puzzled.

He chuckled. “I channel my energies into meditation and exercise.”

“And that is enough?”

Die Feng shrugged. “I’ve lived here from a young age. There are other things to occupy my mind.”

At the moment though, his mind was veering away from its usual occupations.

“You need education,” she declared. “Do you even know how to-”

Was the woman serious? Did she really think- “I am acquainted with the facts of a union between a man and woman, thank you.”

“But do you know anything about pleasure?” she continued undaunted. “So one day you fulfil your duty and marry a virginal Celestial bride but what good will the wedding night be if neither of you are acquainted with receiving and giving pleasure? It will be the unschooled teaching the unschooled.”

“You seem very concerned about my wedding night,” he remarked. This conversation was not going well. Was it the wine or her words that were making him more heated?

“I’m looking out for you as a friend!” she protested.

“Funnily enough, my other friends don’t seem to – what are you doing?”

He couldn’t take his eyes off as she rolled back her sleeve and reached inside. Why was she-? Reaching into sleeve pockets did not require the rolling of sleeves or baring of smooth snow white arms. She saw him watching from the corner of her eye and smirked. Damn it, she knew exactly what she was doing, the evil woman. With a casual flick, she unrolled her sleeve and her arm was covered again. Die Feng forced himself to look up from the spot where her skin had been moments ago.

“Here, take this,” Li Ying put down a book next to him. “It should be enough to get you started.”

“Is that-”

“Erotic stories, yes. I’ll send you more from my collection when I return.”

He choked.

“Be sure to tell your future bride to thank me,” she said in a self satisfied tone, patting his arm.

He caught her hand, “I might as well send her to you for lessons while I’m at it.”

Leaning over him, she smirked again. “Oh? She might not want to leave me after.”

He leaned forward, “I would snatch her back.”

The smirk slid off her face. “Careful, Die Feng. You almost sound like a romantic.”

Still gripping her hand, his eyes bore into hers. “Make no mistake, I do not sit around sighing over love. But what is mine is mine.”

“Then you should be the one getting lessons,” she said in a low voice. “Give me a night or two and I will ruin you for other women-”

Before he knew what he was doing Die Feng had pulled Li Ying down until he felt her heated lips against his. The corner of her mouth tilted up in another smirk and Die Feng bit down on her lip. That wiped the smirk off all right. She gave a low moan, much to his satisfaction. He ran his tongue over the bite and she opened her mouth. Her hands cupped his face, drawing him closer. *The taste of the wine on her tongue, the scent of her...he was getting lightheaded.*

She was almost on his lap as he strained to feel her body against his. He ran his hands over her back, and felt her shiver, her breasts pressed against his chest. Her hand travelled to the base of his neck, holding him in place while her tongue explored his mouth. He strained to regain the upper hand and she nipped his jaw, making him gasp. He changed tactics and leaned back, pulling her down.

They landed on the floor, her hand pressed down on his chest, making him crave her touch on his bare skin. She was everywhere. Her hands, her tongue, the feel of her body... He couldn't be gentle and her lips were hungry, searching. And Die Feng wanted to move closer, closer still. Exercise was not enough to contain these...urges. Those other things that occupied his mind, he could not recall a single one of them. Millennia of meditation, failed when needed the most.

In a swift move, Die Feng turned them over so that she was underneath. They were both panting hard as he scanned her face. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips swollen. *He* had made them that way. And her eyes, her eyes were fiery, commanding him to come back.

“We...” he swallowed, trying to catch his breath. “We have to stop.”

“Why?” she said, voice hoarse.

“I...” he had to clear his head. He sat up, putting space between them. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have. That was-”

“It’s just a kiss,” she whispered. “Nothing more.”

Die Feng shook his head, avoiding her eyes.

“You’re afraid of getting attached,” he heard her say.

He looked up sharply. “What? No-”

“That’s what you said. When you get used to something you start to care. And when you care for someone you care for them wholeheartedly. I too have seen that much.”

He wanted to deny again but her words rang in silence.

She lowered her head, “You are wise to resist.”

“Princess-”

She looked up, “But I am a selfish being. Before we depart, I *will* claim your attention for however long you offer it.”

Her eyes locked onto his, daring him to refuse. He did not back down. “You always have my attention, Princess.”

What that boded he could not say, nor did he want to examine too closely. What did it matter? They would part ways soon enough. He would leave for his brother’s wedding and she would return to her home.

She stared at him and he stared back until he sneezed.

That broke the tension.

Li Ying blinked at him before her face relaxed into a smile. Stretching with a cat-like grace, she yawned before speaking, “I wouldn’t mind getting intoxicated with you more often.”

Die Feng snorted. The wine had kept them warm but the night had steadily gotten chillier. The cold air helped calm his racing heart. He got up and offered her his hand. "Let us leave. I daresay we've had enough intoxication for one night."

Silently, they cleared the kitchen floor of the wine and the untouched snacks and headed down the corridor together.

Suddenly, Li Ying gasped and sped up.

"What is it?" Die Feng asked, following.

"I thought I saw—"

As soon as she rounded the corner, she jumped back to avoid stumbling over Shimu's mount. Die Feng steadied her with one hand on her elbow and looked at Fong Hung. The toad had been growing at an unprecedented rate after taking High God Zhe Yan's elixir. He was almost the size of a small dog by now.

"Damn, he got there before me again," said Li Ying, looking at Fong Hung with a cross expression.

"Where do you even hide it?"

Fong Hung glared back and croaked. Was it just him or did the toad look aggravated?

Li Ying held up her hands. "Okay okay, I won't say anything. Don't be angry."

"What are you even talking about?" Die Feng asked.

"It's nothing," she said. "I lost a toy, that's all."

"Oh. I can help you look for it," he offered.

She turned to him with a sly grin. "Why not? One of these days I'll tell you about it."

He wasn't sure what the grin boded but his heart skipped a beat. He really was tipsy still. They bid each other good night and departed for their rooms, not speaking of what

had passed down in the kitchen. As he climbed into bed, Die Feng still felt flushed and tingly. But as he drifted off to sleep, his lips curved into a smile.

Chapter 49 ~ Before the Storm



The air was changing. The weather had been blistering hot for the past few days, like it hardly ever was on a peak as high as Kunlun Mountain. But now, a thunderstorm was approaching on the horizon, gathering destructive power as it grew in size. Die Feng stopped to have a look at it. He was not one to believe in ominous signs, but he could not help but think that the black, towering clouds looked like they were going to bring what they all feared: the end of peace. As the 2nd Prince of the West Sea and the 1st Disciple of Kunlun, he was well accustomed to war - but like any sane man, he dreaded the bloodshed, the fear, the crushing sadness of loss that any war inevitably brought.

Turning his back on the distant thunder, he headed towards the library, where Li Ying had been spotted last. He was just returning from the West Sea and he really needed to see her tonight. Strange, he had never felt such urgency before - what was this ominous feeling he could not shake? Yes, there was something about the Demon Princess he wanted to decipher, but he had always told himself there would be ample time to get to know her better. By now, he had accepted that she was in his dreams every night, always smiling at him, always teasing him. It was a mirror of their daytime interactions, when he let her tease and taunt him to her heart's content. He marveled at her wit, her knowledge, and her vast experience. She most often won their word battles, leaving him flustered and tongue tied, yet strangely happy. In those moments, she would smile, and it was so radiant and inviting, he often found himself smiling back at her. And

yet...and yet, there was something underneath that smile that spoke of sadness, of fear, of caution. As a result, he had begun to feel a fear of his own - that he could soon lose this source of extra sunshine in his monotonous life.

Yes, his life had been repetitive, by choice rather than pure necessity. He liked routines and order. He still did, but he had come to realize that he liked disorder and surprises just as much, if she was the source of it. The Yellow Demon Princess was an oddity he simply did not understand, but that constant puzzlement was something he had come to cherish. A few times, for example, she would show up while he was reviewing documents at his desk. She told him she had nothing to do and would like to practice painting instead. Since that was certainly much better than having her injure herself during her training with the Demon High Goddess, he had readily consented. While painting, she would continue to glance at him, and he would become more and more self-conscious, coming to believe this would be the day she would create a painting of him. But every time she showed him her drawing afterwards, it was something else. Either it was his dolphin paperweight, the ink marble, the paintbrush stands, or the scrolls on his desk. Maybe, he concluded, she could only paint everyday objects. That was until the day he saw her painting Qiao Er by the pond. Baffled, he opened his mouth to ask her why she never tried to paint him in his studies, but he closed his mouth again as soon as he realized he didn't know how to breach the subject without sounding like he was jealous or offended.

He had thought they had become friends, but now, he was not quite sure he understood what that even meant. Before her, he had never had a female friend (Si Yin did not count, he had not known she was a woman when he had befriended her). There were moments when being with her was easy and joyful, when it did not matter where they were or that she was the Yellow Demon King's sister. But there were other moments when he felt her suddenly withdraw, shy away from him, as if he had touched something sensitive that she sought to hide away from the world. He had thought that maybe, he had lost her trust when he had kissed her the other night. Kissing was not something friends did, he knew that, even if it had been "just a kiss" and "nothing more". Neither did he feel like apologizing for something that he had enjoyed so much. Was it necessary they talked about it? She had not volunteered, and he did not know how to bring up the subject without embarrassing her. Would she, the outspoken one, not have said something if he had breached some unwritten protocol that threatened their friendship?

Die Feng stepped into the library - and found it did not look like the way he had left it. Not even remotely close. Scrolls and books strewn all over the floor. Shelves toppled over. Paper floating around. Ink all over his desk. And in the middle, Li Ying, scrambling to put it all back.

“Princess?” he ventured.

Li Ying started and whipped around. “Die Feng! I thought you wouldn’t return till tomorrow!”

“Work finished earlier than expected,” he said, looking at her with concern. Her face was strained.

“I’m so sorry,” she wailed. “I understand if you’re angry. I wanted to help you with the rearranging – I...I studied the new cataloguing system you’ve developed. I thought it could be done faster with magic...that I could finish it by the time you returned and surprise you. But I just made a mess...a horrible mess. I’m so sorry, I’m useless, I’m completely useless - I should just leave. Your Shifu will be so angry-”

“Princess...,” Die Feng held her shoulders. “Stop. Look at me.” She looked up, her chin trembling. “It’s all right. It’s not a big deal. This place has survived *much* worse when Si Yin and Zi Lan used to team up together. Shifu is too busy contemplating matters of higher importance to either care or notice. As long as you’re okay, it can all be fixed. It’s just paper.”

“But I destroyed the library. Why are you smiling?”

A warmth had been spreading through him. At her question, his smile widened. “I can’t believe you cared enough to help me with the cataloguing. Nobody has ever done that before.”

“Oh.” She suddenly looked shy. “Of course, I care.”

“And you did not destroy the library. None of the texts look damaged. They’re just...scattered? Come on, I will help you put it all back.”

Die Feng was relieved to see that Li Ying soon calmed down from her extreme distress as they returned the library to its previous state, step by step, scroll by scroll. He had come feeling great urgency. Now that she was next to him, he simply felt content.

By the time they finished, the sun had set. The awaited storm was upon them, thunder and lightning striking in the distance. The rustle of the windblown leaves had given way to the steady hum of falling rain and the crackling of a fire in the grate. *How delicious,* thought Li Ying. *Perfect for a night of curling up with a good book.*

Li Ying was glad, grateful, that Die Feng was not angry. He didn't even raise his voice! She still couldn't fathom how he could be so nonchalant about her undoing all his hard work. He was so meticulous about maintaining the library. And the Kunlun library did house some of the most valuable texts in all the realms. She should've left things alone; disaster struck anytime she got herself involved. But the only thing to be done now was to help Die Feng fix it. She did not want to think about how her father or brother would have reacted if she had created a mess like this in their chambers. As it was, her clumsiness often made her brother lose his patience. Die Feng must have the patience of a saint. But everyone had their limits. She must be careful to not make him reach his.

Things were alright for now, though. It didn't seem like Die Feng was hiding his annoyance. He was still at ease, leaning against the desk while she flopped on one of the cushions. "Die Feng, I wanted your opinion on something," she began, "since you know a lot about old texts."

"Sure," he replied.

"Remember that lost toy I mentioned the other day? It's a mouse figurine that came with a play."

"A mouse? You lost it?"

She shook her head. “I, uh, think the Demon Ancestor’s mount took a liking to the mouse and *took* it.”

Understanding dawned on his face, “Ah.”

“It was a cute figurine,” she shrugged, “probably valuable too. I hope to still find it before... But the mouse is not what’s important,” she said, reaching into her sleeve. “I wanted to ask you about the play scroll it came with. It is supposed to be very rare and old and after looking for it for years it fell into my hands through sheer luck. But I noticed that the ink looks very fresh, not at all like faded antique scrolls. Do you think it might be fake?”

“Let me see,” he extended his hand. “Where did you acquire the scroll?”

“A man gave it to me that time we were in the mortal realm looking for your junior.”

Die Feng paused and frowned. “Huh? But I didn’t see it.”

“It was when I told you to wait. The man was following us, and I went to take care of it.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I would’ve when I returned but you ran ahead. That was foolish, by the way, running headlong into danger like that.”

He looked indignant. “You couldn’t have told me to wait while you ran away without an explanation and expected me to stand there while my junior’s life was in danger.”

Li Ying felt her own temper rise. “Do you think I didn’t understand that your junior needed you? That I would do that without a good reason? Do you not trust me?”

“Then why not tell me the reason? Or are you the one without trust?”

“It was a Demon following me, okay? I could tell from the scent. I couldn’t lead more danger to you and your junior. I had to take care of it. There was no time to explain!

The longer we talked the more your junior's time ran out. And I couldn't very well tell you 'Go ahead, I'll catch up' when I didn't know myself where the scent trail led, could I? There were no directions to give!"

Die Feng paused, "The man was a Demon?"

"A bodyguard on my brother's orders it turned out. But it could have been more sinister."

"Why would your brother-"

"He is overprotective, I told you," she said shortly. "I made the man leave."

He looked at her with furrowed brows. "Why would you do that? If we were heading into danger, having more fighters on our side would be a good thing."

Li Ying fell silent. "I don't know. There was something about him...I didn't trust him. I don't like the idea of someone watching without my knowledge."

"Yet you accepted the scroll he gave," Die Feng said incredulously.

She felt her conscience prickle. "That is different! Do you know how rare this scroll is? I have been looking for it for ages! What harm can mere paper do?"

"Oh, I don't know. Carry curses, enchantments, hidden words, threats...shall I go on?"

Li Ying folded her arms. "I'll take my chances."

He frowned. "You're being stubborn."

"And you're being paranoid!"

"You were the one who didn't trust that man," he pointed out.

"The man, yes. But this is paper!"

“Given to you by that man!” he snapped, looking exasperated.

“Fine! Unroll the scroll and see,” she snapped back.

“Fine!”

Die Feng put the scroll on the table, untied the string and slowly unrolled it. A deep blush spread over his features as he read the characters narrating the story of *The Golden Dragon and His 24 Maidens*. When she broached the topic of the scroll, Li Ying had been thinking of his reaction with glee but now the whole thing had taken on a more serious air. Closing his eyes, Die Feng ran his fingers over the paper and tried several spells. Nothing changed.

“Satisfied?” Li Ying snapped.

“It seems...all right,” he said. “The ink looks fresh but there are certain varieties that don’t fade,” he cleared his throat, “I don’t think it’s fake.”

“Good,” she rolled the scroll closed. “Now will you promise me that the next time I tell you to wait, you will wait instead of rushing into battle without backup?”

“You know I can’t do that if someone I care about is in danger. And it’s not as if you didn’t do the same, going to “take care” of that Demon alone. You’re just lucky he turned out to be a bodyguard.”

She felt like shaking him. “You, stubborn man! What if I had not found you? What if I had been a few seconds late? Those Demons would have killed you, make no mistake!”

“I know! And if I had been late Zi Lan would have-- Wait. Did you say Demons?”

“Those assassins were Demons. Couldn’t you tell?”

“I suspected but they were hiding their aura. There was no way to tell for certain.”

“I suppose I could smell them.”

Die Feng raised his hand to his forehead. “Isn’t it strange? A Demon sent by your brother follows you and then Demons attack the Ghost Princess and Zi Lan.”

Li Ying felt her stomach drop. “Die Feng, what are you implying? There are 7 Demon tribes; they could have been from any one of them.”

“But they disappeared. As soon as you arrived. No, as soon as they heard your name. They left.”

“You’re saying they were protecting me? Because my brother sent them?”

Die Feng looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Princess...”

She wanted it all out in the open. Enough tiptoeing, “Is that why you didn’t want me staying at Kunlun? Why you came up with those feeble excuses to make me leave? And then avoided me for days?”

“Princess, your brother and my Shifu are on the brink of war. Surely you must know that.”

War? “What do you mean?”

“Do you trust your brother?” he asked.

“Of course, I trust my brother,” she snapped. “What kind of question is that?”

“But you didn’t trust the man he sent to protect you. So, do you really trust him?”

“I...”

“Your brother is concerned about your safety, but he doesn’t want you to cultivate and be able to defend yourself. Don’t you find that a little fishy?”

“You don’t understand. My brother, he...he is not rational when it comes to my safety...You don’t know what--Anyhow, he doesn’t want me helping him, so I stay out of politics. They don’t interest me that much anyway. But our kingdoms must still be

able to work it out. Isn't that why the Demon Ancestor is here? Surely things cannot be all that dire when there are negotiations being done?"

"Princess, the Demon High Goddess is here in the first place because there was a skirmish with your brother. She is not here representing Demons."

Li Ying was abruptly reminded of a conversation she had been puzzling over the entire day. That morning, she had been strolling through the corridors when the God of War had approached, looking formidable as ever. Nervously, she greeted him and to her surprise, he invited her for tea.

After enquiring about whether she was enjoying her stay at Kunlun, he proceeded to tell her that Die Feng looked much livelier ever since she arrived. Unsure what to make of it, Li Ying listened in silence. He then asked how her training with the Demon High Goddess was proceeding. Li Ying told him that it was going well, and the God of War sighed that it was a pity that the Goddess did not have her own whip to train them with. The Goddess really missed her weapon, he added. Li Ying asked about the whip and he told her that it was currently being held by her brother under a magical seal. That did not make sense to Li Ying, since all Demons were the Demon Ancestor's command.

The conversation left her unsettled, as if the God of War had eyes all around the castle walls. She had proceeded to rearrange the library for Die Feng right after and ended up with the colossal mess as her magic went awry, sending everything flying. The thought of the God of War's dark, serious eyes turning to her as he surveyed his library made her even more scared. But then Die Feng had come, and everything had become all right again.

But now that she thought of it, a lot of things were not adding up. If the Demon Ancestor was not here in an official capacity, why did she not claim her palace? The only reason could be a dispute between the Ancestor and her brother but when had her brother grown powerful enough to challenge the Ancestor? What was her brother up to? And why did Die Feng and the God of War speak as if he was a decided enemy? And had she, Li Ying, been making matters worse, trusting indiscriminately? Li Ying's head was buzzing.

At her silence, Die Feng spoke, “Princess, it’s complicated, I don’t understand half of it myself. But I assure you there is a war coming--why do you think I have been so busy?”

“You have been mobilizing troops?” she said, still thinking. “I thought you were busy with your brother’s wedding.”

“It’s all tied together. The security of the Celestial Realm depends on the water tribes being united...that is common knowledge.”

“What am I doing here then? I need to speak to my brother. I must return-” She half moved towards the door.

“Princess, I struggled with this for a while but for some reason I feel I can trust you. Even if our kingdoms are on the brink of war. You have honor and-”

He was interrupted by a buzzing from his robes. He took out the copper mirror from his sleeve.

“Your Highness!” A voice was calling from the mirror.

“I’m here, speak,” said Die Feng, frowning.

“Your Highness, His Royal Highness, the 1st Prince cannot be found!”

“What?” Die Feng’s face drained of color.

“We have searched everywhere. There is no trace of him. The East Sea is accusing us of reneging on our promises. Their Majesties are extremely agitated, they request your immediate return to the West Sea.”

“I am on my way,” he said and pocketed the mirror. He turned to Li Ying, “Princess, I must go. I don’t know what tomorrow will foretell but I have faith in our friendship.” He hesitated, moving forward as if to touch her face. At the last moment, he shook his head and pulled his hand back. Pulling on his cloak, he looked back. “Regardless of the war, have no doubt of my goodwill towards you.”

Before she could reply, he was gone.

Alone, Li Ying paced the chamber.

Friendship. Goodwill. Loyalty. Treason. The words floated in her head.

She didn't know if she had made a mistake staying here. She didn't know about the rest of Die Feng's tribe. She did not trust the God of War. She didn't know who was betraying whom and what her brother would say. But the connections she had formed at Kunlun--with Yan Zhi, with Qiao Er, and with Die Feng's juniors had been pure. And the Demon Ancestor, her mentor, had claim on the loyalty of all Demons. That was incontrovertible.

Trusting a man like Die Feng could not be wrong. He had never hidden things or lied or demanded anything of her. He was right, there was friendship between them. Friendship and trust and more...but for now friendship would do. And now he was in trouble. He needed to find someone important to him and Li Ying was an exceptionally good finder. Friendship demanded that she help.

She would go to him, help, make sure he was alright, and *then* she would return to the Demon Realm to talk to her brother. *Then* she would confront the facts she had avoided for so long and understand what was going on.

Decision made, Li Ying followed Die Feng out the door.

The politics had waited this long. They could wait a little longer.

Chapter 56 ~ The Choice

Upon his arrival at the Crystal Palace, Die Feng found his poor parents in great distress. His mother's eyes were red and swollen and his father wrung his hands repeatedly, as he was wont to do when under a lot of pressure.

"It is a great calamity," the King of the Western Seas lamented, "the East Sea is accusing us of reneging on our promises!"

"Surely," Die Feng said more calmly than he felt, "they will be reasonable? We need a bit of time to investigate what has happened to Da-Ge but we will be able to sort this out."

"Reasonable?," snuffled the Queen, "these people are not reasonable! They never were! I was against this marriage, from the very beginning!"

"Please calm yourself, wife," the King said, "what good is it now to regret?"

"My poor Die Yong," the Queen sobbed, "I have never before seen him so happy. No wonder...," her voice trailed off as she sniffled more vehemently.

That and the look his father threw his mother after her statement gave Die Feng pause. He bowed.

"Mother, may I ask you to explain? If I am to find Da-Ge, I need to know exactly what happened before his disappearance."

But his mother just continued to sob into an elegant embroidered handkerchief and his father continued to look worried and... uncomfortable.

Ah. Some understanding dawned on Die Feng.

Die Feng's memories of Die Yong during his childhood were infused with great admiration for his sturdy older brother. However, there also had been a lot of silent and not so silent tears, because his Da-Ge had often excluded him, the little one, from playing with him and his friends. They had run away as quickly as they were able to,

sometimes even taunting die Feng for his short legs. But even back then, Die Feng had been persistent - he had searched for the older children until he had found them or until they had all returned to the palace by their own volition.

It had been during one of those times that Die Feng had seen from behind a coral wall how his brother had kissed another boy: the chubby older son of one of the guards. Little Die Feng had not talked to anyone about it even though he had had questions. He had suspected from things he had heard that this was not something that people condoned, and he did not want his brother to be scolded or teased. So, he had kept quiet, always, except for a few times when his brother had come to him, to ease his heart.

Given his knowledge of his brother's leaning, the announcement of Die Yong's marriage to the Eastern Sea princess during the festival had caused Die Feng some sympathetic heartache. But he had also trusted his brother to do what was his duty and responsibility as a firstborn - produce an heir and secure the kingdom with this alliance, as he had assured him he would.

"Has he...," he began, and felt immediate discomfort. He was certain his parents knew about his brother's preferences, but what little Die Feng had sensed was of course correct: In contrast to how some other tribes handled the love between same-sex partners, the Water Kingdoms had always preferred to condemn, or at minimum, pointedly ignore it.

His father looked away and his mother sobbed some more, but she nodded slightly as she dabbed her tears away. Die Feng sighed inwardly. He needed a little more if he wanted to have a clue where to start the search. But he was not going to ask it from his parents.

"Mother, father," he declared, "I will take care of this situation, do not worry. I will set it right."

His brother's actions angered Die Feng, there was no use in denying it, even though he did not show his displeasure to anyone as he assembled the search team. In fact, he did

feel betrayed by Die Yong's selfishness despite all the love and respect he felt for his brother. To be able to follow one's heart was a luxury the Crown Prince of the Western Sea's had never had - just like Die Feng knew his parents would choose a suitable match for him, Die Yong had always known he would be married to someone opportune for the Kingdom. It was how things were done and there was no use in trying to change it.

It required a lot of tact and quite a bit of persistence to shed some additional light into this affair. The servants were afraid to talk, fearing they would offend their Master, but Die Feng's obvious urgency that was slowly turning into desperation must have finally convinced them that it was necessary to share what they knew.

It had been love at first sight, they said. A new guard, a polite and quiet man, assigned to ensure Die Yong's personal safety. Meetings had been easy and natural, and passion - the servants had not used the word, but Die Feng could deduce this from what was said - had taken over. Not long ago, both men had disappeared, without a trace. Some of the First Prince things were missing, the report was, it seemed like a clear case of elopement.

That had eased some of Die Feng's worries in the beginning. Having a tendency to fret more than what was really necessary, he had convinced himself that it had to be something very sinister - Cheng Yin kidnapping his brother, for example - and therefore, an elopement seemed like the minor problem. However, as the initial relief faded, he had realized that maybe, it was worse than a kidnapping. If the Eastern Sea heard about his brother's *willing* elopement with a man...

He felt urgency, then, because he needed to find his brother fast or an immense scandal could shake their house - and worse. The tensions in all the realms were steadily rising and he knew that his Shifu was trying daily to convince the major tribes to join the Celestial cause. If the Eastern Sea were to take more offense, they were likely to withdraw their offer for troops, especially because of Die Feng's family's well-known connections to Kunlun.

The small search party was ready to be deployed in a reasonably short time. Where to start looking was another question but Die Yong's assumed lover was known to be from a somewhat poorly town in the border region between the Western and the Northern Water Kingdom, so Die Feng had decided to start the search there.

It was a wild goose chase. Wherever he and his men turned, nobody had seen two men fitting the description. With every sunset and with every sunrise, Die Feng felt his desperation grow. What if his brother was not to be found at all? What if?

He had no clue where else to look when they happened to run into a group of Eastern Sea soldiers patrolling their border in the evening of the 4th day. In his urgency, Die Feng had led his search party further and further, until they had almost hit the Eastern Sea territory. It was something he could not quite understand when he thought about it later, but maybe his mind had stopped working entirely or maybe, a part of him had simply wished for this period of uncertainty to be over and for *something* to happen.

A party of soldiers at their own border would not have been such a big deal, but fate wanted it that the *Eastern King* was there himself, on inspection. He recognized Die Feng immediately. His eyes narrowed as he swept them over the bedraggled party.

“Second Prince,” he said slowly, “this is an unexpected surprise.”

“King of the Eastern Seas,” Die Feng bowed, “it is my pleasure to meet you again.”

“What brings you to our border?” Donghai Shuijin asked.

“We were...training,” Die Feng said, unsure about how much details the King knew about their predicament. He had to fight his instinctive dislike of this man who should become his brother-in-law.

“I see,” said the King and smiled, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. He obviously did not believe Die Feng. “You train on your allies’ territories? You must share the reason with me, I’m intrigued.”

He looked up to the sky. “It is going to rain soon,” he remarked, “and by the looks of it, it’s going to be quite a downpour. Why don’t you and your men join us at our camp? It is not far from here and we can even spare a tent or two for your party until you have time to put up your own tents.”

Die Feng feigned gratitude for such a generous offer, even if his head kept telling him to disengage and run.

The first heavy drops started falling when they reached the small encampment of the border guards. After showing the Western Sea men where they could put their things, the King of the Eastern Seas led Die Feng to his own tent and bid him to sit down. Uttering apologies for the limited luxuries, he sent one of his soldiers for tea and positioned himself on the floor opposite of Die Feng.

“What news do you bring from your own Kingdom?” Donghai Shuijin asked and leisurely polished a piece of metal on his armor.

“All is quiet,” Die Feng said and quenched an urge to look at his own armor, which he knew to be quite dirty.

“So, has your brother returned?” the King asked and blew a few specks of dust away from another part of his armor. The rain started hammering onto the roof of the tent, indeed a downpour, like the King had predicted.

Die Feng had never learnt how to lie. So, he decided it was the better strategy to say nothing and let the Eastern Sea King further disclose how much he already knew or suspected.

However, as if on cue for his rescue out of this unpleasant situation, there was a sudden, huge commotion outside, with cursing, shouting, and the sound of bodies being hit. Die Feng and the King of the Eastern Seas jumped up in alarm and ran outside.

The grassy patch on which the encampment was situated was already turning into a mud-pit, all the more so because at least a dozen men were trying to hold down something struggling in their middle. While they were attempting to find a good foothold to apply pressure, their feet kept slipping on the ground, leaving brown, ugly streaks in their wake. Bodies were being thrown into the air and more soldiers poured in to join the melee.

“Let me go,” a well-known voice shouted, “I am here to see Die Feng!”

Die Feng groaned. Not possible. She could not really be here, could she?

“I come in peace!” she shouted again and blasted herself free.

A very muddy Demon Princess appeared in a gap between now twenty Celestial soldiers. Their eyes locked. A wonderful smile spread across her face when she saw him standing there.

“Die Feng!” Li Ying shouted, “I have found you!”

Shouldering aside soldiers, she came rushing towards Die Feng, but slipped on the wet grass and almost fell. Instantly, the soldiers jumped on her again.

“The Yellow Demon Princess,” the King said astounded as he recognized her. “Stand down!” he bellowed at his men.

The soldiers immediately complied but glared sullenly at the Yellow Princess who scrambled up again and gingerly stepped forward to where Die Feng and the Eastern Sea King were standing. She managed to clear the worst of the mud off her face thanks to the water pouring from the sky and smiled happily at Die Feng again. She was the most beautiful and the most frightening thing Die Feng could imagine seeing in this situation.

“Another unexpected guest,” Donghai Shuijin said, his brows furrowed in honest puzzlement.

“I am helping Die Feng track his brother!” Li Ying said eagerly, “I have come to report that I-”

“Demon Princess,” Die Feng said in a desperate attempt to prevent what was a point of no return he was not ready to reach yet, “can I escort you to one of the tents, for warmth and shelter?”

“I have found him!” she exclaimed and stepped closer to grab Die Feng’s arm, “I have seen where he and his bodyguard are living! They went to the mortal realm together!”

Instant silence came over the group gathered there. It was like the world stood still, frozen in a moment of shocking revelation, with only the water falling from the sky marking the passage of time.

“Well, well, well,” the King of the Eastern Seas said slowly and menacingly and turned his head to look at Die Feng, “I knew there was something else you were trying to cover up, I just knew it. How *are* we going to solve this mess.”

Die Feng felt a horrible sinking feeling in his stomach. Indeed, how could this be solved. How. Now that his family’s secret was out in the open like this, the Eastern King was humiliated in front of his soldiers. Die Feng knew how close the King and his sister were - he would not easily forgive this disgrace; in fact, *could* not forgive unless he wanted to lose face completely.

Li Ying looked puzzled, not understanding why her successful tracking of a fugitive could be a bad thing. “Die Feng?” she asked, the look in her eyes changing from pride to insecurity to chagrin as she tried to read his expression.

“Please escort the Yellow Demon Princess to my tent,” Die Feng instructed his right-hand man who was standing among the gaping warriors, looking as apprehensive and shocked as Die Feng felt. Li Ying did not resist when the soldier bowed and took her arm to lead her away, but her mismatched, troubled eyes did not leave Die Feng’s for a second. His heart reached out to her, he wanted to tell her it was not her fault, it was a secret that had wanted out anyway, it had just been a matter of time - but he could not say anything and wasn’t even sure any of this mattered now.

Duty, honor, responsibility.

There was no use in lying to himself: Die Feng knew the King of the Eastern Seas needed to be appeased immediately or else this situation would escalate and spiral out of control. His own family would be the one to be thoroughly disgraced, his Shifu would be the one with an army short of men, and he would be the one forever regretting not having prevented this.

“I will take care of this situation,” Die Feng said and pointed to Donghai Shuijin’s tent with a bow, steeling himself for what he had to do.

Li Ying stared at the man standing in the tent before her, ignoring the heavily soaked garments that brought chills to her flesh because they could not in any way be compared to the piercing ice-cold words that froze her very bones. Words that silenced her own chattering instantly. Words that she could not comprehend, even though she had heard them spoken. This dedicated, devoted man, who never took his duty lightly. Whether it was for his juniors, his Shifu, or his family, he would remain loyal, true to his character, true to his Celestial lineage, never straying from the honorable paths. Why? What for? Anger began to consume her.

“What did you say?” her voice was barely above a whisper when she finally spoke.

“Princess...”

“You’re offering yourself!?” she asked incredulously.

“As the 2nd Prince of the West Sea, it is my duty....”

“Quit talking about your duties!”

Remaining composed, he was undeterred by her outburst. “My family dishonored them, we have to restore their honor, our alliance cannot be broken,” he continued to explain.

“So, what?” came the selfish words. She did not care about his explanations, even though she understood.

His expression was unreadable. “You may have no interest in politics, but innocent lives are at stake if I don't deal with this matter appropriately.”

“There must be other ways besides sacrificing yourself!”

Die Feng took a deep breath, collecting himself before he continued: “This is no sacrifice. The Great War may begin at any moment now. The alliance of the Four Seas has to remain stable, and because of my brother’s disappearance, it is now my responsibility to assure that it will.”

His words were reasonable, but why were they so agonizing to hear? A shield, a barrier, a *wall* continued to rise, because the more he spoke the more distant he became. He did not take marriage lightly, he had told her that before. An unsettling feeling set in, anger... frustration... and the bitter knowledge of a future that was inevitably lost and could never be. Forever gone were the days of carefree teasing, unreserved laughter, and furtive glances.

This moment, she knew...his *intention*.

“Why does it have to be you?” her voice echoed defeat.

“Princess...I understand you are concerned about me due to our friendship but please don't be upset on my account.”

“Friendship?” Never would she have thought this word would haunt her. “You think this is about friendship?” Her eyes narrowed as fury took hold. She was right, he was taking the coward's way out.

“You've been a great friend to me. And I still owe you a debt for your assistance with my junior, I do want us to remain amiable,” he reasoned.

“This is not about friendship and you know it!”

“Princess, I know I've upset you...but in matters of alliance...”

“Oh, I understand enough. Don't use politics to insult my intelligence. And stop calling me Princess! I have a name!”

Unable to refute her statement, he could only avoid her gaze. Infuriated by his mute stance, she walked towards him and only stopped when their bodies almost touched. She saw him suck in a breath. He was affected. He couldn't hide from her.

Her head arched, capturing his eyes. “If we were friends like you said, then why have you not called my name even once?” she asked, her dark gaze daring him to turn away, daring him to lie.



“I...I have my utmost respect for you...,” he stammered, though he continued to steel his expression.

She laughed cynically at his clumsy attempts to hide the truth, while her heart hurt. Did he actually believe she was that naive?

“Die Feng, let’s stop playing this game between us. You know very well why you never called me by my name,” she challenged him, but he wouldn’t reply, he wouldn’t give in.

“Say my name...,” she drawled, her voice like spider silk drawing in its prey. His face flushed, his composure cracked.... good, she thought. Without further thought, her hand swiftly grabbed his neck and pulled herself up on tiptoes, while her other hand grabbed the armor at his chest. His eyes widened as her face drew close to his, was now merely inches away.

She saw him draw in breath again, felt his body quiver from her touch, from her presence. His head shook in refusal, but his body spoke otherwise. The damn man refused to speak the truth, to let it come to the surface.

“I’ll make you say it before this night is over.” Startled by her words, Die Feng tried to pull away, but her grip was tight, not allowing him to escape. Their eyes locked. “Don’t you owe me a debt? Several in fact.”

“You can’t possibly mean...,” he said unsteadily, but she captured his lips before he could finish, taking possession of the warm silk sweetness she wanted to consume, the honey nectar she wanted to devour. The tip of her tongue brushed the outer edges of his mouth, he moaned against hers and returned her kiss with enthusiasm. As floodgate of desire washed over her and she arched her body against his, molding her softness to

his hardness. The moment his arms raised to pull her closer, her body shivered in response.

“Die Feng...” she gasped. Abruptly, he tore himself away from her. Shocked by his own behavior, Die Feng backed away. She did not mind, because he couldn’t deny her tonight. She would mark him, brand him, lay claim to the man who would no longer be hers because of his celestial honor.

Eyes determined, she stared at the prize she wished to claim and pulled at the first silk string ribbon that held her yellow cape. “Duty...”

“Honor...” there went the second string.

“Responsibility...” her cape dropped to her feet.

As much as he may try to deny it, he wanted her. He never took his eyes away, his heated gaze continued to sweep over her soaked garments. Demon blood possessed her as she advanced towards him: “Those are your mottos in life, aren’t they? I wish to claim them.”

Retreating from her until he couldn’t go any further, his knees hit the makeshift wooden bed, forcing him to sit down. “Princess...I apologize for upsetting you. I know you’re not thinking straight right now,” he rationalized in desperation.

“Am I? I want what is owed, unless you are not a man of your word,” she told him, her voice never wavering. “Demons have never been denied what is owed to them. Demons do not hold back what they want to possess. All debts need to be repaid.”

“Don’t...,” his eyes briefly closed before he continued. “Don’t ruin what we had...,” he pleaded.

But she was beyond hearing as she walked up right in front of him, putting her hands onto his shoulders and leaning close. His hands remained besides him, still refusing to touch her. “Then say it...,” she coaxed.

Still, he refused to utter what she wanted to hear most. The stubborn man who fought so hard against revealing what he truly desired. Undeterred by his passiveness, her hands ran over his dark blue studded armor. When she had seen him in all his glory for the first time outside, her heart had jumped in her chest at how handsome he was. He was a Commander, a Prince of the West Sea, so right for her - but soon to be married to an unknown woman because of duty. Because of honor. Because of stubbornness.

All thoughts ceased as absolute possessiveness took over. She wanted to peel him out of his protective shell. She roughly pulled at his belt; his body jerked in response, but Die Feng didn't push her away, nor did he look away, though he refused to participate. Silently, their eyes locking, she pulled at the first piece of outer armor, removed it, then the second, getting more angry at every, stubborn piece. She stripped away the thick robe with the cape attached, as he sat there, unmoved by her touch.

Li Ying straddled his waist, her heart continuing to thunder as she framed his face in her hands. She could feel his pulse quicken under her touch as his silent, yet intense gaze continued to search hers. Her thumbs brushed over his lips, probing, stroking, testing the dark soft velvet lushness, softening their resistance to her will. She soon felt them melt and moisten from her intimate caress, bringing out the sweet savory nectar she couldn't wait to drink more of. She continued to tease his lips with her delicate strokes until his mouth parted, his heated breath warming her cold fingers. Softly, she leaned in, her lips brushed his like a feather, merely touching - until her petal kisses were no longer enough. She possessed him hungrily then, and his firm, silky contours parted beneath her lips. Finally, finally he gave her what she wanted as his tongue responded to hers.

The mixture of sea salt, fresh rain, and masculine scent were all around her...too intoxicating...too addicting...she needed more. And he gave it to her, unexpectedly, when his hands came up to glide all over her body, over her soaked yellow gown, turned near transparent by the rain. His mouth was hard, demanding, all-consuming as he gave way to his desire - and pleasure engulfed her, multiplied by the certainty that he really wanted her. A whimper rose from her throat as she writhed and rubbed against him. She felt his hardness grow and despite his gasp, she continued to press herself against him, rhythmically and demanding.

“We have to stop,” he tore his mouth away, but his body continued to tremble, like hers frustrated by the tantalizing waves of unfulfilled lust.

“No, you want me, don’t fight this,” she whispered against his heavy breath. Molding her body against his again, she urged his head back, exposing the long white length of his neck, and started to nibble, lick and bite him with her blatant lustful kisses, until he ceased his resistance.

Before she knew it, she felt the bed against her back, with Die Feng settling his large figure over her trembling body, which was so hungry for his touch. He did not disappoint, the unbearable sweet heat of his mouth traveled lower, tracing the arch of her throat, the sensitive collarbone, and finally reaching the hardening bud beneath her damp gown. She clutched his shoulders, her body throbbing with longing as he continued to devour her. Soon, he growled in frustration at the barrier between his and her flesh. Unaccustomed to women’s garments, he clumsily fumbled with her clothes and then started to rip away the wet layers between them. The sound of the tearing silk further heightened her desire. She succumbed to the relentless caress of his lips and hands, a tide of sensual urgency rolling through her. His name continued to escape her lips, but he silenced her with another sweet, shocking kiss. As he drew her tongue into his mouth, his hand cupped her bare breasts. Drowning in the sensation of his touch, all her thoughts ceased in the ecstasy of the moment.

Abruptly, the weight was no more. He was *gone*.

Gone was the warmth, the passion, the ecstasy. Her eyes fluttered opened. Die Feng? She found him standing before her.

She sat up, confused. His face held an expression of tormented revelation.

“Li Ying...,” came the soft yet harrowing whisper, the words she had longed to hear from his lips, but now, it was all wrong. Now, her mind heard something else. Something much more startling. She saw something in his eyes she couldn’t understand, yet it was as clear as day. *Why? Why now?*

Di Feng looked at her distraught, regretful. His anguish eyes are those of a lost man.

“Li Ying, I’m sorry...”

She stared at him aghast, her face drained of all color. “No... I shouldn’t have...”

“Li Ying?”

Without another word, she clouds jumped away.

Chapter 64 ~ The Lakehouse

Mortal Realm...

“Li Ying, you need to rest.”

“No,” she shook her head.

“You’ve been awake for two days now.”

“I don’t want to go to sleep yet.”

“Why?”

“I’m afraid...” she nestled her head against his throat, inhaling his scent, memorising his warmth, “I’m afraid of closing my eyes. When I wake up, you’ll be gone.”

“We still have time,” Die Feng told her as he brushed his hand over her cheek, “There’s still another day.”

“But...the candle is almost out. I can feel it.” she tightened her hold on him, “Die Feng, let me stay awake a bit longer.”

West Sea Royal Palace

The second coronation of the Crown Prince of the West Sea was less festive than the first, Die Feng couldn’t help noting. Not feeling like mingling anymore, he had left the guests to his parents and headed straight to the beach, away from crowd. Da-ge’s coronation had been attended by all the kings of the four seas, as well as delegations from other tribes. This time the coronation was attended only by close members of the royal family and those guests who could make it at the last minute for the festivities of the royal wedding, which would take place the following day. The coronation ceremony had been a somber affair with scandal and war looming over their heads. The King of

the East had demanded that the wedding date be moved up without delay, making it clear that the alliance depended upon it.

Before returning, Die Feng had visited his brother in the mortal realm, finding him according to instructions left by Li Ying. Da-ge had been living with his bodyguard in a small hut and for the first time in a long time, he looked carefree and happy.

But like a thief, Da-ge's face drained of colour when he saw Die Feng. "I couldn't do it, little brother," he said before Die Feng could begin. "Not after I found love," he glanced at his bodyguard who was silently chopping wood in the backyard. "I never wanted the throne and its burdens. From the start, you were the one suited to be king."

All these years, while shouldering numerous responsibilities on his own, Die Feng had never let himself feel resentment towards his brother. But anger rose in him today. How easy it was for his brother to pass the burdens to him. "You speak, Da-ge, as if it is no sacrifice for me."

Die Yong closed his eyes in shame, "Forgive me, brother. But you don't know love yet. You prefer the company of women. There is still a chance for you and the East Sea Princess to find conjugal harmony together. You're better suited for this marriage than I ever was."

"I-" Die Feng wasn't sure what to say. He couldn't refute any of these claims. Except, the scent of basil lingered at the back of his mind and his anger didn't cool. "Do you know how worried mother and father are?"

"Please don't ask me to go back," Die Yong pleaded. "Before I left, I felt so trapped that I wanted to die."

What could Die Feng do after that? Drag his brother back knowing that doing so would make Da-ge miserable? Die Yong had never asked for anything. He had never needed to. Die Feng had always taken care of it. The scandal had broken out already. After the elopement, the East Sea King would not find Die Yong suitable for his sister.

He closed his eyes once and looked up, forcing his voice to remain calm. “It is best if you don’t return to the Crystal Palace for a while, Da-ge,” he said. “Let the scandal die down and the politics get resolved.”

Die Feng’s parents were not happy when he returned without Da-ge, and were taken aback by his decision to step into the groom’s role. Of course, the King of the East Sea would not be satisfied unless his sister was married to a Crown Prince. For three days, Die Feng had to try and convince his parents that it was the only way to appease their ally.

The Queen of the West Sea was known to dote on her eldest son. Die Feng had always been aware of her affection towards his brother. But what he never expected were the reproachful looks his mother had been giving him these past few days. She was upset, furious that Da Ge’s position as Crown Prince had to be changed to appease the King of the East Sea. Fortunately, his father was more understanding, and had taken it upon himself to reassure his wife that Die Feng was doing what was best for their kingdom.

The two Kingdoms had always been amicable on the surface but at odds in private, rendering marital ties necessary and stalling further impossible. Desperately needing to prepare for war, the Celestial tribe could no longer afford infighting amongst the Four Seas. Within a few days of Die Feng being back, his 10th junior had arrived with a message from the God of War, asking about the current alliance of the Four Seas. Die Feng had reassured his junior that the situation was under control, and that Celestials would have their full support. The alliance *would* hold; he would make sure that it did.

As he reached the shoreline, Die Feng stared at the setting sun along the distant horizon of the West Sea Kingdom. He never felt as connected to the kingdom as when he was by the shore gazing at the never-ending sea. All of this, this water and sand, this vegetation, its creatures, its people, they belonged to him. He was responsible for them in an entirely new way now and yet, this responsibility, it felt familiar. Perhaps he had been Crown Prince in truth already long before the title was bestowed. He couldn’t let his people down or put the Celestial Realm at a disadvantage. More than ever they needed him, now that Die Feng had sealed his fate by formally accepting the title of Crown Prince.

A decision he did not regret, despite what had happened with Li Ying. They would soon become enemies. The thought of meeting her at the battlefield had occurred to him. But, given his protectiveness, the Yellow Demon King was unlikely to allow Li Ying to enter battle. Die Feng had steeled himself to move forward and focus on the tasks at hand.

She was a distraction, a disturbance to his mission and for days he had been pushing thoughts of her to the side. From the moment she had entered his life, he had never felt more out of control of his own destiny. His path had always been laid out, and he never had a second thought that his life would deviate, change, or stir. It was his own fault that he allowed their friendship to cross such a line. That was what he had been telling himself ever since their last encounter, yet, now that he was alone with his thoughts, those words no longer rang true.

Why? Why did he continue to feel her presence, her scent, and worst of all, her touch? He had wanted to seek her, to make amends, but he couldn't, because nothing he could say or do would make things the way they had been before.

"Congratulations on your coronation," Li Ying's voice broke through his thoughts.

Die Feng turned around to see her standing behind him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, unable to believe she was really there.

Li Ying glanced at the far-off festivities. "I heard the wedding is tomorrow. I'm here to give you a wedding present," she told him with a half-smile, which Die Feng couldn't return. He stared at her warily. She shouldn't be there but, as usual, when it came to the Yellow Demon Princess, he was *powerless*.

"Don't be anxious, I'm only here for a candle of your time," she said.

"A candle," his eyes narrowed.

"We won't ever see each other again, but you still have a debt to pay. You should be able to marry tomorrow without the burden of owing a debt to an enemy of your clan. As my wedding gift to you and your future bride, I only ask for a candle of your time."

Enemy. When had they come to this? But he could tell her words were sincere.

His voice was low as he asked, “Is that what you want?” *To sever our ties?*

“Yes.”

There was so much he wanted to ask, but something in her eyes held him back. He looked past her, his eyes drawn to the world beyond where the festivities were about to come an end. Soon, the Crystal Palace would be decorated with wedding finery. Tomorrow, the Kingdoms would be united, his power secured, and his fate sealed. Tomorrow, there would be no going back. Fleeting though time may be, he found himself silently nodding his consent.

Cheerfully smiling at his acquiescence, she grabbed his arm and conjured a burning candle sheltered by a protective glass, which she placed on the sand. And then she cloud jumped them away from the West Sea Palace.

“Where are we going?” he asked as they flew above the clouds.

“One candle is not going to be enough time here. Don’t worry, no one will notice you gone.”

Die Feng continued to frown at her response.

“We’re going to the mortal realm,” she answered with her mischievous smile.

Mortal realm? “You’ve tricked me?” Die Feng accused her, keeping the amusement out of his voice. He should’ve known nothing was straightforward with her.

“It’s not deception, the candle is still burning by the shore. It’s just that it’s in a different realm.”

Before he could argue further, they arrived at their destination. “What is this place?” The small simple lake house rested by the shore, surrounded by yellow lotus, with a bridged walkway leading to the doorstep.

“As you know, I have always been interested in the lives of mortals. Yet, lately, I’ve begun to envy them. Mortals are short lived but-” she gestured at the house, “here we don’t have to worry about clans, war, or who we are.” Li Ying held his hand as, surrounded by the morning fog, they walked onto the bridge.

“Of all the mortal lives I’ve tried, I’ve never been the wife of a poor scholar before, though it is one of the most common love stories in mortal plays. Let’s pretend, for the next seven days, you’re studying for the civil services exam, while I am your dutiful wife who earns money to support your schooling.”

Die Feng shook his head, but his grin gave him away, “Li Ying, you want to spend seven days watching me study?”

“Don’t be silly,” she rolled her eyes. “I won’t be watching you study the whole time. A poor scholar’s wife is not an easy role to play, you know.”

“You can’t be serious,” he half-protected.

But she was, because she magically changed their clothes to mortal garments. Gone were his royal coronation robes, replaced by casual light blue scholar clothes. Dressed in plain mortal clothing, like yellow chrysanthemum, Li Ying still glowed.

“Husband, why are you standing there, idling? I purchased new books for you,” she said, dragging him into the lake house and straight to the study room. It was setup exactly like his study at Kunlun, down to the dolphin paperweight.

“These are important books. There are only seven days left until you leave for the capital to take the exam.” She forced him to sit down, and immediately left to attend to her chores.

Die Feng looked over the books she had collected for him. These were books for statecraft, likely to aid him as a future monarch. He had known of these texts, but never felt the need to study them in depth before, sticking to tactical and military strategy, martial arts, diplomacy, and philosophy. The texts Li Ying had gathered included *Han Feizi*, *Mencius*, *Guoyu*, *the Book of Lord Shang* and many more.

It was oddly thoughtful; his studies here wouldn't be for naught. He was still trying to comprehend how Li Ying's brain had to work in order for her to hatch this wild scheme when she popped her head back into the room. "The scroll on your right contains the backstory of our mortal lives. You should read that first, while I prepare snacks for your study session," she told him before disappearing again.

Die Feng sighed in defeat. Just moments before he had been coronated as the Crown Prince of the West Sea, surrounded by wedding guests congratulating him on his impending nuptials. Somehow, he was now sitting in the study room of a lake house, dressed as a mortal, and given the task of studying for the civil services exam. Staring at the scroll she had instructed him to read, he realized Li Ying had known he would agree to this. She had planned everything down to the smallest detail.



It now struck him that the thought of refusing had never crossed his mind. That was unsettling. How was he so easily led? Why didn't he question her further? What power did she have over him?

But then, Die Feng reasoned, *seven* days in the mortal realm were a small price to be paid for having their slate wiped clean. It was necessary to have closure before the war drew nigh. He would not fail in this task, and no further debts would exist between him and the Demon Princess.

Incorrigible when she was determined, Li Ying took her task seriously--preparing their meals, cleaning the living quarters, and working on her silk spinning wheel, at which, he had doubted her ability at first, but was intrigued to find that she excelled. She

played the dutiful wife of the scholar splendidly. He knew of the many mortal lifetimes she had lived in the past but watching her in action was something else. She even insisted that they bind their powers for the next seven days, so that they wouldn't be tempted to use magic, and truly assume the role of mortals. He had agreed to all her demands, despite his initial reluctance.



That day, she left right after lunch to deliver her silk to the local merchant as if she had done it hundreds of times. He could barely keep up with the persona she had created for herself. But he played along as best as he could, regardless of how he felt about the strange situation. Truth be told, he had grown accustomed to this life more quickly than he had thought he would.

True to her mortal role, Li Ying came back in the evening soaked from head to toe.

“Li Ying, you're all wet! Where is your umbrella?” Die Feng asked in bewilderment, hurrying to the door.

“I forgot it at the merchant's. Don't fret, it is only a drizzle,” Li Ying said through chattering teeth as, behind her, thunder crashed, and rain continued to pour in torrents.

Rolling his eyes, Die Feng ushered her into the lake house. “I'll draw you a warm bath,” he declared, heading towards the kitchen.

“We don't have enough firewood for a bath,” she said sheepishly. Die Feng turned around with a scowl. “I didn't think we'll need...ACHOO!”

“Then let’s change you out of your wet clothes first.” He went straight to the closet, and pulled out a set of robes. When he turned around, Li Ying was already turning blue from the cold. Cursing, he helped her sit on the bed. She began to pull at the straps of her dress but her clothes were soaked through, becoming hard to remove with her trembling fingers.

He pulled her frozen hands away. “I’ll help you,” he offered without hesitation.

Her eyes widened as he pulled at the ribbons of her clothes. “Die Feng, are you sure?” she asked through quivering teeth.

“I believe this is the husband’s duty; to take care of his wife,” he gave his logical reasoning. Her cheeks flushed at his words. He didn’t understand why, but she averted her eyes. Taking that as an invitation, he began to remove her wet outer robe. When he reached for the straps of her inner robe, her eyes closed completely. Puzzled by her reaction, he paused.

“Li Ying, what’s wrong?” he asked.

Her face was now scarlet, despite her shivering from the cold. “A newlywed wife would be shy in this situation,” she answered, voice timid.

Die Feng inwardly groaned. She had managed to make the task more difficult now with her virginal charade. This was the Demon Princess who’d had no qualms falling into his bed or his bath, nor had she ever been shy in his presence no matter how awkward the situation. He found himself flustered, hesitant to perform the task he had volunteered for. He wanted to remind her that this wasn’t the first time he saw her in this state, but she was too into her role--he couldn’t bring himself to break her out of the story she had created. Die Feng had never expected this day to arrive, but he found himself half-wishing for the bold, uninhibited Princess to emerge. Heavens knew that would make his task easier.

Clenching his teeth, he forced himself to take a few deep breaths before continuing. She was obviously at her most vulnerable right now. If he didn’t finish the task soon, her

health would deteriorate. In her mortal body, with her powers sealed, she was at risk of hypothermia. The thought sent a chill through his own body.

So, he did what he had to do and removed the second layer of her robe. Her ice-cold fingers fumbled after his. If only he could get her to stop trembling. He paused for a second to rub some warmth into her hands. And then ignoring her flushed face, he moved to the ties of her undergarments. Her body continued to shiver from the cold, while his was on fire, but he ignored that too. Worst was removing the skirt of her dress, which was difficult, and required her to place her hands on his shoulders. For a moment, it brought him back to the night at the tent. The scent of their drenched garments then had been no different than now. Fighting back the impulse to pull her close until her body soaked in his warmth and stilled, he bit his lips to wake from the spell of those mesmerizing memories. He couldn't, he wouldn't, it wasn't right for either of them. Steeling himself, he lifted her slightly to remove the heavy skirt.

Before he could move away from her embrace, her eyes flashed open, her arms still holding his shoulders. He could hardly breathe; her bright violet and brown eyes had him paralyzed. That night the hut was dimly lit, but he could see them clearly. Had she cast an enchantment, he wondered.

He swallowed hard before collecting the willpower he still possessed. "You said newlyweds would be shy in this situation," his voice was hoarse.

"True, but I'm also cold." To prove it, she pulled him closer, absorbing his warmth, as his breathing grew ragged against her half-clad form.

"I'm remedying that, let me..." he tried to pull away again, but her grip tightened.

She shook her head, her gaze heated. "I want you."

Her eyes demanded his attention. If Li Ying had made further advances, he may have succumbed. But she didn't. Scanning his face, she waited as a moment of stillness engulfed them. He knew what it was she truly *wanted*. But it was a *step* he had no right to take, because he had *sealed* his fate with another.

It must have been a sign from fate when she sneezed and released her hold on him, beginning to tremble again upon the loss of contact with his heat. With a sigh, he reached for the blanket behind her, and wrapped her in it.

“What you need is hot tea. I’ll be right back.” He headed towards the kitchen.

“Die Feng,” she called out, making him halt at the door. He turned around with an enquiring look.

Li Ying did not look at him, her head lowered; avoiding his gaze. “Thank you.”

For days after Li Ying returned to the Demon Realm, she had closed herself off to the world, until she finally understood there was nothing she could change. She had learnt that the Demon Ancestor had cut all ties from the God of War soon after they left Kunlun. She could feel the changes within her realm, they were in preparation for war, like Die Feng had told her. Things she had ignored in the past had become clearer as she once again settled back into her home. Gossip and rumors she had never paid attention to surfaced like a tsunami, as she tried to piece her world together. A world no longer carefree as she had once thought due to her brother’s sheltering ways. How had she been so *naive*? Why had her brother kept so much from her?

It had become clear to her that a future between her and Die Feng could never come to fruition. Die Feng had clearly told her in the past about the type of bride that would suit him--someone with an alliance beneficial to his kingdom; a Celestial, a blushing virgin. Li Ying did not qualify on any of those counts. Instead, she was just the opposite in every regard. Soon to be enemies? *No, their clans had always been enemies.*

Had she not sought to know him in person, would she have ended up in such a state? Did she regret all those moments--their joy, their laughter, their conversations, their working in tandem, their kisses? No, she did not. Of course, she did not. They may not be fated, but that did not mean their time together was meaningless. She continued to capture every moment, to be forever etched in her mind.



Time...the root of mortal existence.

Regret? No, she wouldn't regret her decision to be there, because at that moment, with Die Feng nursing her back to health with his gentle touch and caring words, there was nowhere else she wanted to be. She had known he would not turn her down before her arrival at his coronation. But she had also known he would put his duty above all else. He may not be hers, but she would take a part of him with her. The time here was truly precious; nothing could compare to the simple yet enduring lives of mortals. Li Ying smiled as he spoons fed her rice porridge.

“What's so amusing?”

“I was supposed to take care of my husband, but now it’s reversed,” she said with a rueful smile.

“You took away our powers temporarily,” he sighed, “but I didn’t expect your body to be weak as well.” The spoon paused in his hand as his eyes narrowed at her, “You overused your powers to cast the spell on both of us, didn’t you?”

“It wouldn’t feel real if we were not truly mortal,” she shrugged. The one thing about mortal life was that nothing was set in stone. No matter how much she planned in advance, nature-- no, fate, would intervene.

Die Feng glowered with disapproval, but her smile never wavered. They locked eyes, mock glaring until his stern facade broke into chuckles. It was only day three, yet their time together was reducing fast. He settled her back into bed and set his bedding on the floor, next to the bed. The first day, he slept in his study, but yesterday, he had stayed nearby because of her cold. It was midnight now, neither had fallen asleep, and her mind continued to swirl within the darkness, skirting past memories as unvoiced desires took hold once again.

“You know, the bed is big enough for two,” Li Ying pointed out as she stared at the worn cotton of her bed canopy. The night was quiet as the sluggish waves mingled with the soft breeze rustling through the heavy lotus leaves, and only the sound of crickets from afar could be heard.

“I’m very much aware of that,” he answered, his deep voice seeming to reverberate around the room.

She turned her head to look at him. “I promise I won’t ravish you in your sleep.”

He stifled his laugh before answering, “You already promised me you won’t the first day, and the day after that. Besides, you’re too weak in your current state.”

Li Ying looked him squarely in the eyes. “Then why are you still sleeping down there?” she demanded.

His smile disappeared, a glimpse of yearning entering his eyes before he turned away. After a pause, he answered. "I never promised I won't."

"What did you say?" Li Ying sat up, but his back was to her as silence filled the room. "Say that again," she demanded, but there was no answer.

Impatiently, she climbed out of her bed, and despite the cold air, hovered over him. "Say it again," she repeated. His eyes were now closed, feigning sleep, the stubborn man refusing to answer. She lifted his blanket, but his hand caught her wrist.

Die Feng turned to face her, his expression dark when he finally spoke, "Li Ying, I am not made of *stone*."

"You could've fooled me," she said with a cough. A chill wind had entered the room, making her shiver.

He gazed at her with worry. "What are you doing? Return to the warm bed before your health worsens."

Her eyes sparkled at his order and undeterred, she continued, "I'll heal faster if you warm me up. We can pretend you're a hot stone."

"Li Ying, don't make light of this," he told her, refusing to relent, but his concern was obvious.

"It was you who said a husband's duty is to take care of his wife."

Die Feng hesitated, his gaze uncertain, because she had used his words against him. Then his eyes turned dark again. He immediately got up, swept her into his arms before she could protest, and settled her into her bed.

For a moment Li Ying thought he had returned to his makeshift bed, but she smiled when he lifted the blanket and settled beside her. It was warm, familiar, as she molded her body against his. She had become familiar with his scent, the details of his soft features when he slept, and the large arms that held her. But it was also different, in a way that she couldn't put into words. She didn't have the strength to seduce him, nor

would she, because she had given her word. But she felt his body react, prompting a reaction from hers in turn and making her wonder how long he would last under the situation.

How he dealt with it was unexpected.

“Are you chanting buddhist mantras?” she giggled against his chest.

Die Feng didn't answer her, but continued to chant under his breath. Her smile disappeared, replaced by solemn understanding when she realized the extent he would go to to please her. The mantra, though foreign to Demon ears, was peaceful to the soul. Li Ying began to chant with him, which made him pause. He looked down, as she lifted her head to meet his questioning gaze.

She gave him her usual smile before explaining, “A good wife shares her husband's burdens.”

Chapter 65 ~ He was Lost

Mortal Realm

“When you’re done with the exams, we should start our family,” Li Ying suggested while setting the table for lunch.

Die Feng looked up from his reading, bemused. “How many kids do you want to have?”

Her eyes lit up at his question. “Four? Eight?”

“That many?” he scowled. “Even with a government salary we can’t support them all.”

“What do you mean? Of course, we can afford them.”

“Eight daughters mean eight dowries in this era,” Die Feng said, setting down his book. He proceeded to help himself to the food she had prepared.

Her eyes widened in astonishment. “You want them to be all daughters?”

“Of course, I grew up with all men,” he told her with a shrug.

“Then let’s have four daughters and four sons?” she suggested. “I’m sure we can afford four dowries.”

He gave a heavy sigh, placing his chopsticks down and reaching back for the books. “I have to return to studying.”

“What?! Why?” She scowled.

Die Feng looked up from his book, his gaze remaining serious. “I will need a higher office position to support our family of ten,” he answered, as he flipped the page, ignoring her bewilderment.

When night fell, she was unable to sleep once again. The last couple of days, Li Ying had watched him in his slumber, marveling over the contours of his face. He knew, because he would wake up during the night, feeling her eyes on him. He would then try to soothe her back to sleep. However, tonight was different, neither could prepare for bed. He hadn't put down his studies for quite some time, while she laid on the chaise in the corner of the study room, observing him.

Die Feng set his scroll down and turned to look at her. "Li Ying, get some rest, you'll catch a cold laying there."

"You aren't getting any either," she countered. He eyed her warily, until he sat up and left the room, but he came back soon after, with a blanket in his hand. He scooted himself on the chaise with her, and covered them with the blanket, pulling her into his arms.

"You will be the death of me some day, worrying your husband once again," he chastised, as he warmed her cold body with his.

"Not true...because as the wife, I may die soon," she argued.

"Don't be silly," he chuckled at her logic.

"But that's how the play goes with the scholar's wife. She will die of sickness before he comes back to see her." Li Ying raised her head to meet his gaze, expression solemn as she continued. "He'll become the royal official, and he'll meet a beautiful princess whom he will take as his bride. And he will love his new wife."

"No, you're wrong." His head shook as he pressed her head back on his chest, caressing the side of her cheek. "The scholar will not love the princess. In his heart, he will always love the wife who did all she could to support him, encouraged him, and endured many hardships because she chose to be with him."

"Really?"

*"Insignificant waters become,
When sailings to the oceans abound."*

*Misty clouds circle mount Wu around,
That's the best scenery I have ever found.
Many a flower I pass by,
Second looks I bother not to try,
For pilgrimages as a monk I vie,
Still remember the lover I once had."*

"When did you start reading Yuan Zhen's love poems?" she giggled against his chest.

"Battle tactics and reports are not the only readings I do." He placed a kiss on her forehead. "Now sleep; you need your rest."

"But, I want to hear more poems," she told him with a pout.

"I'll recite more poems, but you have to close your eyes."

Li Ying nodded against his chest, her eyes closed, she listened to the caress of his words as he recited her favorite poems. She could hear the rustling of the large lotus leaves just outside the window, the gentle waves of the night, and the familiar sound of crickets in the distance, as her mind slipped into the comfort of darkness.

Die Feng played the scholarly husband well. Though his role was only slightly different from who he was, carefree mortal life made a different side of him emerge. He was charming, attentive, witty; more so than when they had been at Kunlun. Though she had always sensed this side to him, she hadn't expected to find him even more intriguing now that they were away from the world's cares.

Because of how things had been left between them, she had thought of a way for him to repay his debt, to lighten his heart, but she did not anticipate that the more they were together the more her heart would weigh. Soon all his charm, all his energy, and all his passion would be reserved for his bride.

Li Ying paused before she entered the study, her hands clenching around the tea tray. Soon this would be no more. Today was the *last* day they could be in the mortal realm.

Tomorrow he would be free to go back to his world as *promised*. She took a deep breath and composed herself before entering the room with her usual smile.

Die Feng sat at his desk. But the scroll before him lay blank, brushes and ink untouched. He was frowning. *That's odd. What changed since last night?*

"I brought your morning tea," Li Ying said cheerfully as she approached and placed the tray on the corner of study table. "Die Feng, are you alright?"

He didn't answer, but stared into space, a glimpse of darkness behind his eyes. She came around the table, concerned.

"Die Feng, talk to me."

Without turning to face her, he captured her wrist so quickly, it made her jump.

"What did you do to me?" he asked, in a tone she had never heard from him before.

Perplexed, she frowned. "What do you mean?"

Li Ying tried to pull away, but he held it even tighter, making her wince. He stood up, towering over her, imposing, making her quiver. His expression was dark, dangerous; gone was her gentle prince. "Did you cast an enchantment spell on me?" his tone sent chills down her spine.

"No! I would never," she gave a slight shake of her head, eyes widening. "Die Feng, let me go."

But he wasn't listening; his free hand came to the exposed line of her sensitive throat. For a heart wrenching moment, she thought he might choke her, but instead his touch was gentle as his thumb brushed at the hollow base, caressing the collarbone.

"Die Feng," she said faintly, her eyes half closed, because the intensity of his touch was more than she expected. But something wasn't right, this was not how she wanted things to be.

He must have taken her shivering response as a sign of distaste or fear. He lowered his head, his face so close, their noses almost touching. “Tell me the truth.”

A pit opened in her stomach. He had never doubted her before. Was this the beginning of their fated *enmity*? “I didn’t cast any spells on you, except to make us mortal,” she answered in a hoarse whisper.

Either he didn’t believe her or he wasn’t listening because his expression didn’t change. Instead, it now filled with resentment, anger, and something even more startling. Drowning in fear and desire, she tried to push his hand away from her throat, but his fingers delved into the back of her hair, his grip painful, making her whimper. He released her wrist, but captured her waist, pressing her against his body. His face close to hers, surrounded now by his masculinity, she closed her eyes instinctively, helplessly waiting for what was to come.

“You’re lying,” she heard him mutter under his breath. Her eyes snapped open at his accusation, but his attention was now transfixed over her mouth, engrossed by her parted lips. She started to feel his hand glide from her waist to the side of her ribs, her breath caught when his hand passed over her breast, lightly shaping the roundness. “Why would I feel this way? Why do I...” he didn’t finish because he had captured her lips.

Mind in a haze, Li Ying couldn’t think. His mouth moved over hers expertly, angling just the right way, intimately so, making her gasp. Her arms wrapped around his neck, he gathered her closer, into the hard wall of his body. His sea salt scent, so familiar, now became intoxicating as she inhaled the fragrance with each breath. He explored her slowly, his tongue stroking and tasting her, and she hungered for the pleasure he gave. His mouth traced down her quivering throat, and she writhed when she felt his tongue on her sensitive spots.

Die Feng pulled back, his eyes *burning* into hers. “You must have cast the spell the moment we met.”

Again with the spell! Why did he keep insisting she had cast a spell on him? Why would she? *Why now?* This didn’t make any sense. If they were not already mortal, she would have thought he’d been possessed.

“I didn’t-” she began but he cut her off as his mouth laid siege to her again, and she melted against him, pulling him closer. His anger had switched to passion, and desire now eclipsed rationale. She tried to recall what it was she had tried to say, but she couldn’t when he kissed her harder, more demanding, as his hands roamed her body. Li Ying felt her legs threaten to give out under his touch, but he caught and lifted her with stunning ease, and placed her on the table, pressing closer between her thighs.

Breaking off the kiss once again, he cupped her face in his large hands. His breath was labored, and passionate eyes soon turned cold, with an underlying hint of apprehension.

“Love enchantment is forbidden in my realm, but not yours. Tell me you cast it, please,” he begged with a ragged whisper.

Their gaze locked, their breath caught, she wondered if either of them breathed as they fought what was inevitable. What was so obvious yet *denied* by the man in front of her. *Why wouldn’t he see the truth?* Die Feng continued to stare at her, with barely suppressed wrath that threatened to burst out at any moment.

“No, I would never do such a thing,” she choked out, refusing to comply, to give him the answer he tried to *coerce* her into saying. She was losing his *trust* and it was terrifying how her insides felt like they were ripping apart. How could a man she would barely ever see again have the *power* to make her feel this way? “I hold no power over you,” she said desperately.

But instead of accepting, his face *hardened* as rage took hold once again.

Li Ying knew the exact moment his sanity slipped. Before she could attempt to flee, she found herself pinned down on the desk covered by dark masculine weight that threatened to shake her soul. She tried to protest, but he growled and smothered her cries with his mouth. His kiss was savage, no longer gentle as it was before, she tried to fight back, but he captured her wrists and held them above her head. It felt like a dream, but also a nightmare, her senses told her that this was reality, because his scent and heat engulfed her; like a prey she couldn’t escape from the large predator above her. He pressed himself against her body, making her gasp from the lack of air, she

turned away, but he angled his head to the side, capturing her lips again, drugging her with kisses. Infused with pleasure, Li Ying could only answer helplessly, as her body betrayed her. He must have felt her diminished resistance, because he released his hold of her wrists.

His hands traveled down her body, loosening her robes, sliding inside the opening, touching her bare burning flesh. Her breasts grew further inflamed by his caress, her nipples peaked under his wicked strokes, her body tightened and arched against his palms. She would have been lost completely if her mind hadn't called out to her. He was angry, he was enraged; *this* wasn't how she wanted him. This was passion but...passion was not enough. Her hands grasped his head, pulled him closer, kissing him desperately, hoping her sanity would slip away once again. But it didn't, and grappling with her own mind, she forced him to break the kiss and stared squarely into the depth of his burning eyes. Desire indeed filled them, but she also saw shadows of uncertainty, fear...*doubt*.

She didn't know when her feelings had become like this but she wouldn't have him on these terms. She would *not* have him without trust, only to find a *stranger* in her bed the next morning. Not Die Feng. Despite being in the body of a weak mortal, despite being half his size, she couldn't allow this to continue. So, Li Ying did the only thing she could think of. She pulled his head back and slammed her forehead against his. The impact was enough for his body to jerk back, giving her enough time to scramble off the table. She rushed to the other side of the room, but he caught her upper arm in a tight grip, allowing no chance for her to escape.



“No! Let me go!” she burst out, as she tried to pull away from him, but he yanked her into his embrace.

“Li Ying!”

Fighting against his hold, furious, she continued to slam her fists against his chest. “I didn’t cast any enchantment spell on you! Why won’t you believe me?”

Despite her continued struggles he wouldn’t budge. “I’m sorry, I didn’t believe you,” she heard him apologize, but her rage didn’t cease.

He pulled her closer against his hard body, forcing her to face him. “Li Ying, look at me,” she heard him order, like the stern Kunlun 1st

Disciple she once knew. She stopped struggling, and stared back at the man, who moments before had been a stranger.

“Why?” she asked, her voice trembling with despair. “Why did you...why would...why won’t you trust me?”

For a brief time, she closed her burning eyes and listened to their breathing, the quickening of their hearts, the softness of his touch, and forgot everything. Forgot that he continued to doubt her. Forgot their reality that will soon set upon them. Forgot the role that they must play when they soon part. But what she couldn’t forget, was the man who *held* her, who *hurt* her.

“Li Ying...forgive me...”

Day of the Royal Wedding, West Sea Kingdom

He watched, and he wondered as the servants came and went, again and again. The arrangements in preparation for the big day seemed never-ending. The Crystal Palace felt different, empty; *cold*...this had always been his home, a place he belonged to, to return to, no matter how long he was away. But now, he wanted to flee, to escape from the existence he had resigned himself to only days before. Today was the day to complete his mission and render the alliance complete.

Is this how you felt, Da-ge? Is that why you left? If this was what it had been like Die Feng couldn't resent his brother anymore. Of the two of them, at least one was happy and that was one consolation.

Each step had been excruciating, piercing, his feet heavy as his heart when he walked away from the lake house of the dream that could have been. The *sweet* but wretched short moments that were forever engraved within his memories. How could seven days bring so much happiness yet so much sorrow? The debt she had *asked* to collect was his time, but she *took* what he never thought could be taken.

Why was it so easy to trust her? He shouldn't and that was the problem. He *shouldn't* trust her, and there was no future for them, but how easy it was to slip into the role of the caring husband! To hold her and to kiss her and to get used to her presence as if she had always been there. On the last day the intensity of his desire to stop time scared him. It didn't make any sense. How could she have power over his spirit like that? The power to make him laugh one moment and dread their separation the next?

The thought drove him, Die Feng, 2nd Prince of the West Sea, commander of armies, in charge of Kunlun's disciples, responsible, self contained leader, *insane*. The only explanation could be that something beyond his control had happened, because his own mind couldn't have willingly betrayed him like that. If he couldn't be in command of himself, *whom* could he command? The fear of losing control had almost driven him over the edge. Could he make her feel what he felt?

But his inner turmoil was no excuse for his behavior and Die Feng knew it. Many times previously, he had dealt with muddled feelings by talking them through with the people close to him. Isolated in that hut with no one to talk to apart from Li Ying and being unable to let himself fully trust her, paranoia had taken hold. But forming connections with other people was always scary, requiring leaps of faith, bringing one's vulnerabilities to the surface.

And there had been no one more vulnerable in that room than Li Ying. While he had been terrified, how much *faith* would it have taken on her part to seal her powers and don the body of a mortal woman, where she had the disadvantages of strength and size? She had braved sickness and mortality, secure in her *belief* that he would never let her be hurt. Demons were supposed to be cutthroat, vying for power, never letting their underbellies show, and here she had been, not caring if she was weak.

And what had he done? By doubting her, by trying to use his strength to gain power over her the way she had power over his emotions, he had betrayed her. Li Ying had fled soon after he released her from his arms. He tried to find her, desperately so, but she was nowhere in sight. He waited by the lake house through the night for her to return but she never did. By the next morning, his powers were back. But he couldn't leave, not when there was the slightest chance she would come back and could properly apologize for his behavior. He waited another seven days, but she didn't return, so he reluctantly returned to the West Sea Kingdom.

Die Feng felt sickened with himself. He had hurt her and here he was still thinking of her on the day of his wedding to another woman. He was with his family, people whose loyalty he relied upon and yet the only person he wanted to speak to was the woman he shouldn't trust. It was a complete mess, and all he could do today was act as directed. Get dressed, walk, bow, sit still, wait.

Dressed in wedding attire, Die Feng and the guests waited for the bride, Princess Miao Qing of the Eastern Sea, to arrive. The King and Queen of West Sea, his parents, were seated at the throne, looking grim. Yes, this was not exactly the type of wedding they had envisioned for Da-ge, or even Die Feng himself, but what choice did they have than to appease the Eastern King, who was late, while the guests grew restless? The day may not be auspicious, given the situation, but the auspicious time was still important.

Die Feng had been so lost in thoughts, that he didn't notice the passing of time, until the guests started to whisper. Then suddenly, all hell broke loose as the Eastern King stormed into the room, power collecting at his fingertips.

“Did you have my sister murdered?!” Donghai Shuijun roared, his eyes red with fury as he headed straight for Die Feng.

Chapter 71 ~ Know your Worth

Li Ying had been unable to rest ever since leaving Die Feng at the lake house. She paced the corridors of the Obsidian Palace, replaying their last encounter in her mind over and over. Their time together had been perfect – too perfect, like brittle sea glass that broke when put under strain. Well, what else had she expected? They had been two children playing house until one child got tired of playing.

Playing. Living mortal lives had been a game to her for so long that she had never expected it to be different with Die Feng. The feeling of being able to breathe freely – she had noticed it when she first ventured out into the mortal realm. It had been different, the changes in mood, subtle. She didn't have to be on her toes all the time, tense, trying to not upset her brother. In the mortal realm, left to her own devices, Li Ying felt safe. She had the room to discover her own nature and found that she was adventurous, fond of novelty. Yet, she craved connection -- long lasting connection that mortals couldn't provide.

She had felt possibilities of such connections as she ventured to Kunlun and began forming friendships. With Yan Zhi, with the disciples. With Die Feng. He...he wasn't like her brother. Li Ying was surprised to discover that she liked this about him in particular. She thought she loved her brother, but it was a distant love—he would not let her in. He was indulgent, or he was irritated. There was no in between. The whiplash of emotions was too difficult to handle.

Die Feng was stable, cheerful, confident, caring. He felt wholesome. Until the moment he had doubted her. Questioned her intentions. Shut her out. The familiar feeling of smallness had settled over her like the times after Ge-Ge's rages. It had been the first time Li Ying had felt that way around Die Feng, and it had been unbearable, the thought that the suffocation of the Demon Realm would follow her there. If it was not a problem with the Demon Realm like she had believed, it was a problem with people. If the suffocation could follow her, she would never be free from it. Anyone, anytime could become that person.

Die Feng... Li Ying had known that nothing would come of their connection but a memory – a memory to last forever, she had hoped. But it was ruined now. First, she had felt guilty, but really, what fault had it been of hers? Li Ying was so tired of being

blamed, of being held responsible for everything that went wrong, of never getting anything right. By her father. By...her brother.

“Li Ying,” a voice cut into her thoughts. Li Ying looked up to see the Ancestor standing at one of the larger windows. Shao Wan had lost weight since her return to the Demon Realm, the Yellow Princess thought with a pang - or was it the light from the window that painted new shadows on her face?

“Ancestor,” she bowed and Shao Wan motioned her closer.

“What do you think,” Shao Wan asked the Princess, pointing outside, “would this space here be suited for a garden? I want to build one. A splendid one.”

A welcome distraction from her dark thoughts, Li Ying peered out the window. There was little naturally growing life outside the Obsidian Palace, since it was hewn into volcanic rock and was surrounded by steep mountains of the same material on the one side and volcanic earth on all the other sides. Further away, there were forests and meadows, but the Obsidian Palace was the perfect fortress, built high up on a natural terrace, with a view across the barren valley, where no enemy could hide.

“It would be perfectly suited,” Li Ying said, already seeing the garden in her mind’s eye, “but it would be a lot of work.”

“Hmmm,” Shao Wan said, tapping her finger against her lips, “I will need help.”

“Oh,” Li Ying said, growing excited, “I could help! I once was a gardener in the mo...” too late she realized she had just spilled one of her best guarded secrets.

Shao Wan laughed at her wide-eyed shock. “You do not need to hide from me that you have been sneaking out of the realms regularly. You used the time well. I saw how much cultivation you have, I know you don’t get that from sitting around in the palace. Li Ying, would you like to drink some tea with me? I feel like chatting to you for a bit.”

“I would like that very much, thank you, Ancestor!” Li Ying replied.

Shao Wan took her to the emerald room with its splendid silk tapestry and sent some maids for tea and snacks. Li Ying had not been mistaken; despite her laughter earlier, the Ancestor was moody today—like she was thinking about a particularly troublesome issue. The Princess receded a little, sinking back into the cushions as much as she could. She always noticed signs of displeasure on others and made sure not to inadvertently offer herself as target for their wrath.

“I haven’t seen you around much,” Shao Wan said, and absentmindedly rubbed her stomach, “are you still chasing after your Celestial?”

Li Ying pressed her lips together. Bitter disappointment brought a lump to her throat. “No,” she said. “No. I think I have finally learned my lesson.”

“Has he not treated you well?”

Yes and no, the answer was. He had been so kind at first, and then so mean. But it should not matter: Li Ying knew Die Feng would be married by now. He would have spent his wedding night trying to please his wife, two bumbling fools with no clue. He would beget an heir, he would become King before long, he would lead a boring life befitting a man like him. When had she ever believed she could have a place in it, however short? She had been delusional. Maybe living in her fantasy worlds for so long had made her inept at handling reality.

Li Ying had returned to the Obsidian Palace immediately after cloud jumping away from Die Feng on the sixth day of their candle. Tears in her eyes and heart racing she had reverted to childhood habit and sought her brother.

“How dare any Celestial treat you like this!” he had roared after she had recounted her hardship, “how dare he choose another over you!”

Her brother’s rages scared her senseless; they reminded her too much of their father’s and the violence that had always followed. It must be in these men’s nature, Li Yin used to muse, to be so violent, they could not help it. Sometimes, when she could collect enough courage, she would plead with her Ge-Ge to calm down when he had one of his fits. Most often though, she just cowered somewhere quietly, waiting for it to pass. A few days ago, when she had told him about Die Feng, he had raged for a very long time

and she had made herself small as a mouse. It all ended with him muttering curses and such things as “I will kill him. He’s the First Disciple of the God of War, he won’t be able to overlook that.”

“He failed to trust me,” Li Ying said solemnly to Shao Wan, “and that made me leave.” It was more complicated than that, but in the end, did it not come down to this?

Shao Wan’s face turned even more thoughtful and the hand that had been massaging her stomach stopped. Was she thinking about the God of War? Li Ying did not understand why Shao Wan had so suddenly cut all ties with her previous lover. Thinking back to their time at Kunlun together, Li Ying felt that even though her powers had been sealed, the Ancestor had been...happy. They might be from opposing tribes, but she and the God of War, they seemed *right* for each other. It had been in their glances, in the way they often touched when in each other’s company. So why had they been in a horrendous fight the other day? Her brother was still healing from the injuries he had obtained from getting into the crossfire.

“You are right to know your worth,” Shao Wan said slowly. “We should not pine for men who do not value who we truly are. And we should not give those who hurt us too much space in our lives. We must look forward. We must find people to trust, people who trust us. Without a net of people we can rely on, life is too much of a struggle.”

Li Ying was surprised to hear the Demon Ancestor say this. She had always thought that Shao Wan, of all people, was strong enough to walk her own path, alone, without needing the support of others.

“Whom do *you* trust, Ancestor?” she heard herself say, and immediately wanted to hit herself for being much too forthright. But again, the Ancestor did not seem prone to direct her anger at her. She just looked more weary—sad, even.

“Trusting is a very hard thing to do,” Shao Wan said. “Despite my noble words, I do not know how to do it either.”

“Maybe Ge-Ge is right,” Li Ying exclaimed. “We cannot rely on anyone in the outside world. They all want to hurt us. Maybe I shouldn’t have ventured out at all! He always said it’s the safest here in the realms.”

“Ah, but our biggest foes are often very close to us already,” Shao Wan sighed. “Venture out all you can, Li Ying, as long as you can, let nothing tie you down. The happiest time in my life was when I made friends with people from other tribes. Back then, being friends was still possible, even with the most unlikely people. I mourn those carefree days, when Father Immortal was still alive and me and his...”

Shao Wan stopped in mid-sentence and pressed her lips together.

“I wish I could have been there,” Li Ying said; she had read about Shuǐ Zhǎozé in the history books. She had often wished such a school would exist today. To be able to learn from the best, to be able to form ties to so many other people from other tribes! No wonder the Ancestor still thought fondly about that time.

“I cherish the memories,” Shao Wan said. Then, she shrugged and shook her head, like she wanted to snap out of reminiscing about the past, and helped herself to some salted nuts. She popped them into her mouth one by one. “How is your brother?”

“He seems quite well,” Li Ying said carefully. If she did not understand Shao Wan and her decision to leave Kunlun as an enemy of the God of War, she understood Shao Wan’s relationship with her brother even less. Logic said one thing, her senses another.



“You must be wondering about our relationship,” Shao Wan said and spooned some honey from wild bees into her tea.

“I...”

“I would really like us to confide in each other,” Shao Wan said and looked at Li Yin intently. “I do not have many likeminded people around me.”

“Oh, Ancestor... I... it would be my honor.”

Shao Wan nodded. “Good. Me and your brother, we once were...intimate. But I only saw darkness in him—destructive, morbid, deadly darkness. I fear...”

Don't tell me, a part of the Yellow Princess shuddered. *But I know already, don't I?* another part said. *It's only a matter of time before someone says it.*

“It's because of our father,” Li Ying whispered into her teacup, “please, you must not judge Ge-Ge too harshly.”

“Your father was a horrible man. He hurt you too?”

“Yes. But mainly him. Always him.”

Her mother had died giving birth to Li Ying. She was raised by maids who just did what was asked of them, without real care or love for her. Li Ying's earliest memory was of Cheng Yin smiling at her and of how he used to come and play with her before bedtime. Li Ying's father always said his only two surviving children were a disappointment to him: One was a weakling and the other a fool who could not stop being flighty long enough to stand straight. Li Ying needed to stay out of his way or father would kick her away. Cheng Yin needed harshness and their father delivered plenty of it.

The first time their father had struck her, Cheng Yin had struck him back. Li Ying had never seen her brother that angry before. Their father had looked at him with a calculating, cold gaze. After that he had gone out of his way to bring on her brother's extreme rage, to “drive the weakness out of him”, as he called it. The best method, her father had soon found out, was to hit her more. He had Cheng Yin whipped for

interfering and degraded him at every opportunity and with all possible means. The angrier Cheng Yin got, the more exhilarated their father was: this game gave him immense pleasure. There was no one, no relative for them to turn to. It was just them.

“I will kill him, Li Ying,” her brother used to say in the days running up to her father’s death. “For you and for me. Nothing less will do. I need to become the strongest, the most feared.”

After their father’s death, Cheng Yin had every palace official beheaded and brought in new ones. But he never trusted them. He knew that they were loyal only to power and as long as he was in power he would command them, but they would never hesitate to hurt him and Li Ying if somebody more powerful came along. This was the first thing he told her after ascending: “Father might be gone but never let your guard down Xiao Ying. We are wolves. They will turn on us the moment a stronger wolf tells them to.”

Because of this, Li Ying was convinced the reason why her brother had let Shao Wan take back her palace without a fight was because he was in love with her. Unless he could be sure that Shao Wan would remain at his side in the future, he should fear her. Or was she no real threat to him because at the moment, the Demons would certainly not accept her as a leader? After all, she did not have the necessary legitimacy and trust of the people, and no power base of her own.

“I am sorry, but your brother has become everything your father was and more,” Shao Wan said. “Be careful, Li Ying. You must be careful around him.”

“Please,” Li Ying pleaded, “please, don’t judge him too harshly.”

“Maybe you can help him,” Shao Wan said slowly. “Him and me. Would you like that?”

“Yes,” Li Ying nodded, “yes!”

“Good,” Shao Wan smiled, “I am glad to hear it. I am trying to prevent horrible bloodshed, but I cannot do it alone. I will let you know how you can help when the time is right. Ah, but do not worry, Li Ying. Everything will be fine. Would you like to have dinner with me?”

“Ancestor, forgive me, but I already have dinner plans,” Li Ying said with a bow. Yes, with her brother. Who seemed in a particularly good mood these days and had invited her to a ‘special treat’ as he had put it.

“What a shame,” Shao Wan said with a faint smile. “But please, Li Ying, join me for a drink in this very room afterwards. I have a particularly good wine from Yi Mei Niang that I want to share with you.”

Li Ying put on her favorite dress for the dinner with her brother and took extra care with her hair, putting in butterfly ornaments he had given her a few years back. She was grateful that the Ancestor had not touched any of her things after moving back into the palace—the keepsakes from her travels lent the only warmth to her chambers and Li Ying could not imagine living there without them. The palace was dark otherwise but, with the mementos from the mortal realm, she could appreciate the beauty of the black, shimmering stone, the power of the volcanic rock with almost a sense of belonging. Now that Cheng Yin was close too, she was really looking forward to spending more time with him again—the more years had passed since their father’s death, the less she had seen of him.

It had not only been inconvenient that they had grown more distant, because the rage and protectiveness honed under their father’s reign continued to simmer in Cheng Yin as they grew older. And before she knew it, she became afraid of him. His rage was directed at her when she came in his way. He never hurt her the way their father had but he yelled, and he stormed, and his icy words cut like knives. And then, unlike their father, he apologized, soothed, mad her forgive him. “You should keep your head in the clouds, Xiao Ying. Keep playing. I did all this so that you could be carefree. Don’t bother about realm matters. But be careful, it’s just us two. You know that, right? Don’t trust other immortals. Take them to bed but don’t trust them.”

Luckily, her brother was still in a very good mood when she got to the guest wing in which he currently resided. “My sister!” he shouted, “Come, come!”

She went up to him, bowed and sat down at his knee, looking up.

“You will be very pleased by what I have to tell you,” Cheng Yin chuckled. He seemed to have had quite a bit to drink already, Li Ying realized, which put her on high alert instantly.

“How is your health, Ge-Ge,” she cautiously asked, “do you still need to take elixirs?”

“Ha,” Cheng Yin said, “one more makes little difference.”

He clapped his hands and food was served, many dishes to her liking. *The Ancestor must have known Ge-Ge would have a guest*, Li Ying mused, *these are all from her kitchens*. She relaxed a little with time because her brother was smiling a lot and his smiling face had always been a source of comfort for her. But he also kept drinking a lot of wine, until his cheeks showed a rosy glow, accentuating his fierce handsomeness, but slurring his speech a little.

“Xiao Ying,” he said when dessert was served, very sweet almond jelly, Jiuniang, cakes filled with sweet lotus seed paste, and many more delicious things, “my Xiao Ying. Will you be happy when I take Shao Wan as my main wife?”

Li Ying blinked, her mouth full of pastry. That... did not exactly add up with what Shao Wan had said.

“We have become very close again recently,” Cheng Yin said with a smirk, “I bedded her not long ago. She will soon give in, I am certain of it. She has no choice! Did you not see my wedding present?”

Li Ying shook her head. What was he talking about? A wedding? The Ancestor as her Sister in Law? Had she misunderstood Shao Wan earlier?

“It’s a real treasure,” Cheng Yin smiled, “the Armor of the Thousand Mirrors, you must have heard of it. It was lost, but I was able to recover it. Shao Wan looks splendid in it. And she will discover it has very interesting properties.”

Li Ying had had a bit to drink too and now she wondered whether the confusion she felt had something to do with the wine. “I don’t know what’s going on Ge-Ge: I am very confused. What is happening?”

“I will wed her and we will be Demon Overlords together. With her powers by my side ... we will not have to fear anyone or anything ever again,” Cheng Yin said highly satisfied.

“But Ge-Ge, that talk of war with the Celestials?”

“Yes, we will go to war against them. We will pay them back for the humiliation, my sister. For crushing us in the First Demon War. Only this time, it will be us Demons who will crush them. Their arrogance knows no bounds, but it also is their biggest weakness. I am well prepared.”

So it was really true. Her brother would lead his armies to war. She had grown up in times of relative peace, but even she knew that every war was a turning point, a point of no return after which nothing remained the same. It scared her.

"I have a pre-wedding gift for you too," Cheng Yin beamed, "do you want to see it?"

“What is it, brother?” she asked, unclear why she felt a pang of wariness. Cheng Yin put his hand inside his tunic and pulled out a bloody dagger. She gasped.

“I killed her,” he said proudly, brandishing the dagger in front of her face. “With my own hand. With my own dagger. For you, my little sister! To take revenge on how they mistreated you.”

“Who?” Li Ying said with a very small voice, feeling sick to the stomach.

“That distasteful woman your Celestial was about to marry.”

“No...” Li Ying whispered. No. This couldn’t be happening. She pressed her lips together and took deep breaths.

“It was very satisfying,” Cheng Yin said, and now his smile turned feral. “I’m going to take everything away from him. First his woman, then his alliance, and finally his life.”

Who... what was he talking about?

Cheng Yin took her hand and squeezed it. “I have not yet thanked you for your immense help, Sister. When you went to Kunlun. Very convenient.”

Li Ying shook her head, not understanding, not wanting to understand.

“Shao Wan’s precious feather was inside a mouse simulacrum,” he continued, “I am very proud of it. His blood was on it and it was able to get right to the heart of Kunlun undetected, where it waited for Shao Wan to find it.”

Shao Wan’s feather? Li Ying suddenly understood everything. *She* was to blame. Shao Wan had left her love because of *her*. Because of her and her stupidity.

“It was in the scroll...” she said, her horror increasing by the second.

“Oh yes, my sister. The play you have been looking for so avidly. Your Ge-Ge found it for you. Consider it another pre-wedding present.”

Used. She had been thoroughly used. More realization creeped up with sickening force.

“You deserve even more presents for your help. I meant to ask you, but since you ran away so fast, I just had to act. Without you, Shao Wan would still sit on that cursed mountain, feeling attached to our biggest enemy. Thanks to you, I am only a few steps away from reaching my goals.”

Unable to muster a word, Li Ying watched her brother take another swig. She wished she was drunk or delirious, but the room remained in focus with stunning clarity, Cheng Yin’s chuckles ringing in the air. After their father’s death what had changed, really? Everything and nothing. Li Ying didn’t have to be afraid of her father anymore—but of her brother: very much so.

Enough.

“You are right to know your worth,” Ancestor had said. Li Ying was done being afraid. Because she knew without a doubt that if she did not stop now she would be afraid forever.

Chapter 75 ~ Brothers in Arms

Looking over his life, Die Feng couldn't think of a moment he had been irresponsible. But today he had failed to live up to his standards, to perform his duty. He had failed simply because he no longer had the will to fight. And what resulted from that was all his fault. He had forsaken his duty of protecting those who laid their lives and trust in his hands. Just because of one moment of indecision...or was it distraction? All he could say for sure was that he had not been focusing on the battle the way he should have.

These thoughts ran through his mind as he gasped for air, choking. 10th Junior, Wang Jing's forearm pressed against his throat, holding Die Feng's head against the pole. His face was still sore from the punch 10th had landed upon him right after their arrival back at the commander's tent.

"Did you want to get yourself killed?" Wang Jing growled as he clutched Die Feng's collar and shook with fury, while 3rd made himself comfortable by the sitting table.

"Wang Jing..." came the stern voice of 3rd Junior, Lin Liang, who remained calm even in a situation as unsettling as this one, pouring himself a cup of tea.

"No!" snarled the hot-headed Junior, whose eyes burned with wrath. 10th, who was always calm and collected at Kunlun, transformed when he was on the battlefield. Born from a military family, he was courageous yet stubborn to a fault. "I'm not letting him get away with this, not this time. Senior needs to wake up, or in our next battle we'll all be dead!"



“I couldn't agree more, but you should let go of our Senior,” 3rd reasoned coolly, “he’s after all still injured...bleeding by the look of his arm.” The tea cup paused at his mouth, he glanced up and added, “He protected 7th.”

Die Feng felt the arm on his throat tighten momentarily and then loosen. Die Feng could still feel the rage that remained within Wang Jing, who had every right to be upset. “7th Senior wouldn’t have needed to be saved if Senior Die Feng had focused on handling the battle, as a Chief Commander should have! He needs to tell us why he’s been this way since the moment we arrived!”

“10th, let Senior Die Feng go,” came from the person who could always calm 10th down. 10th turned his head instantly, his eyes locked onto 7th Junior, Mei Shu, who stood by the tent entrance with his medicine box. Because 7th was a man of few words, his words were powerful when spoken.

“I’m unharmed. Not a scratch on me. You should-” before his reassurance could be finished, 10th had let go of the object of his anger, crossed the room, and snatched up 7th in his arms, the medicine box almost falling to the ground.

The tent fell silent, as with every passing second, rage and anger began to subside in the heavy breathing man who had almost lost what he most cherished. In that moment, Die Feng knew, understood, and recognized the true reason for 10th’s anger, and though belated the knowledge may have been, it was more obvious now than it had been for thousands of years. The connection, the bond, was undeniable, as Die Feng leaned against the post behind him, losing grip of reality, *his* reality. How could he have been such a fool?

“Wang Jing, let me tend to Senior’s injury, he’s still bleeding,” 7th said, but 10th was unresponsive. Mei Shu’s free hand touched his shoulder with a gentle shake. “Wang Jing,” he repeated. Finally, 10th pulled back reluctantly, his body still visibly trembling.

7th hurried over, and helped Die Feng settle down across from 3rd, who helped himself to the nuts and dried fruits on the table with a suppressed grin. The three of them ignored the brooding 10th, who had taken Die Feng’s post at the pole across the room. His threatening eyes were unfocused but determined. Die Feng knew the battle was not

yet finished. 10th had every right to attack him, to release his anger, and more than that, to question his ability to command.

Once 7th finished tending to his injuries, he went straight to 10th. The two men gazed at each other without speaking, Wang Jing nodded; his face softened. What occurred between his two juniors was indisputable yet surreal. Die Feng's heart felt an unfamiliar ache which grew the more he watched. He was not a man who spied on others, but he couldn't take his eyes off as Mei Shu grasped Wang Jing's hand with a light squeeze, then released it. But Wang Jing caught his hand and held it a little longer, as if sensing Mei's lingering reluctance to part. Wang Jing looked like he wanted to live in this embrace forever. But Mei had to leave the room to tend to other soldiers.

Before 10th approached the table, he loudly ordered wine. It took a while for three bottles of peach wine to be served by a soldier. Die Feng looked at his Juniors in puzzlement as they both began to help themselves and placed a glass in front of him.

"You need a drink as much as we do. Maybe more," 3rd said as he pushed the wine glass towards him. But instead of taking the wine glass, Die Feng grabbed the bottle, and downed it all without reservation. He desperately needed the scorching burn of the hard liquid to calm his nerves. 3rd and 10th exchanged affirming glances before they too grabbed their own bottles and finished their portion.

With emptied bottles, the silence became deafening between the three sworn brothers in arms. They were waiting for him to explain himself. He had been in charge today; the day of the first battle between the Western and Eastern Sea Kingdoms. Within a week of declaring war, the Eastern King gathered his forces and set up camp on the Western Sea borders. At first, Die Feng tried to establish communication with the Eastern King, but Donghai Shuijun was noncommunicative. Firm in his belief of Die Feng's guilt, he rejected all help from the Western Sea in finding the true culprit. With no recourse, the Western Kingdom could only place itself in the defensive position while the Eastern King prepared to attack.

The threat of civil war amongst the water kingdoms was extremely worrying for Celestials who needed to be united to stand against the Demons, and by sending the Kunlun disciples, Shifu had spared no effort in giving Die Feng the support he would need to resolve the situation. Today, Die Feng had had no choice but to face the Eastern

Kingdom in battle. Unless he found the true murderer soon, the situation would escalate into full blown war. As it was, he had mucked things up today.

They had been outnumbered, but with 3rd's tactical expertise, they were supposed to win by a hair's thread with the new formations he had devised. Everything had been prepared in advance with 10th's skills in Military Training, who had been training the Western Sea Army for several days. They had been ready, they had been *prepared*.

As Chief Commander, Die Feng had been relaying orders from above the battle. It was *he* who was responsible for signaling the flags, as the army commenced in the proper formations. But he hadn't been there today, his mind drifting away, his heart not in the battle. Just a short lapse of judgement, and he was late signaling the flag. 7th's group was attacked, and Die Feng, filled with horror at his mistake, rushed to save them, leaving his post, another mistake. The rest of the army was leaderless, the formation completely broken. If it wasn't for 3rd's quick response, they wouldn't have retreated on time, avoiding heavy casualties, but even minor casualties were casualties nonetheless.

He hadn't felt this suffocated most of his life, but now it had become a daily occurrence. As tension began to build, guilt racked his mind. Pain started to consume him, and it wasn't the injury on his arm but deep within his chest. It became harder to breath as each passing moment weighed on him, until Die Feng could no longer withhold his words. They began to come out, and once they did, he couldn't stop them spilling, untold stories surfacing, kept hidden for far too long. He was afraid...afraid of exposing his vulnerability, his imperfection, his facade. But he told them everything, everything that had occurred since the moment she showed up in his life, on his shore, in his bed. The time they spent in the mortal realm, and the way it had ended. His Juniors listened patiently until he finished. 10th was the first to speak.

"Enchantment?" he echoed with disbelief in his voice. Wang Jing looked as though he was ready to pounce on Die Feng again, but he kept his anger in check much to Die Feng's relief.

Lin Liang remained unfazed as he rubbed his chin with mock curiosity. "How can her magic work at Kunlun?" he asked as he glanced at 10th, making Die Feng flinch in response.

Wang Jing rolled his eyes in exasperation. "We saw the way you *looked* at her," he growled.

"No enchantment was necessary," 3rd added.

"How could you have accused the Princess of such a ridiculous thing!?" 10th shouted, his fist slamming the table as he stood up angrily. 3rd's hand shot out to grab Wang Jing's arm.

"7th will not be happy if you don't keep your promise," 3rd reminded 10th, his cool eyes never leaving Die Feng. "Besides, there is no point in beating someone who won't fight back."

10th took a heavy breath before sitting down reluctantly. He shouted for more wine and was served much quicker this time. His wrath must be being felt across the camp. Slowly, each of them grabbed their bottle as a short silence descended. Die Feng couldn't utter another word as he waited for his Juniors to reprehend him again, but their next words were not what he expected.

"We did wait long enough," 3rd gave a heavy sigh before continuing, "for the day our *perfect* Senior Die Feng would lose himself over a woman." He chuckled lightly at the thought. "I mean, you chastised us enough on never letting *emotions* get the best of us. Too bad, I lost this round."

"I didn't," 10th said grudgingly, taking a big gulp of wine.

Lin Liang turned to 10th in surprise. "Why are you so angry then?"

"I didn't think winning meant we'd have to deal with a Chief Commander who no longer has the will to fight and because Senior-"

"What are you two talking about?" Die Feng interrupted.

Wang Jing smiled, though his eyes narrowed with impatience. "Nothing much. A while back, 5th Senior started a poll to see when you'd do something stupid and drive her off."

“You all bet on me?!”

“Not all of us,” 3rd corrected, shaking his head as he grabbed another handful of nuts on the table. “16th was too preoccupied with his Ghost Princess to even think straight. 13th, as you know, can barely make out two words, and 2nd Senior didn’t cast his vote; he’s forever loyal to you,” Lin Liang shrugged. “Although, between you and 2nd Senior, we did wonder who was slower...I guess we finally got our answer.”

Die Feng rubbed his temple as his head began to ache. He wondered if there was a hole large enough for him to bury himself in. How low could this get? He closed his eyes in frustration, or was it humiliation? He pressed his head down on the table with his hands covering his head.

Not just the battle, but ever since the ill-fated wedding when his soon to be bride was killed, when the Eastern King blasted him with his magic and declared war, even when he was accused of murder—nothing had roused him, because the only thoughts he had left were of Li Ying, who had disappeared completely since that day in the mortal realm. He had lost focus of everything, even his brothers who came to help him prepare for battle against the Eastern forces, which was not their battle to begin with, but they came nonetheless. He had failed all those who believed in him, who placed their trust in him, but most of all, he had failed *Li Ying*.

“Senior,” 10th interrupted his thoughts, his voice no longer angry, but filled with what sounded like sympathy, making it all the worse. “The only reason you would even think of enchantment is because you have fallen for her to the point of insanity.”

Die Feng’s head shot up, eyes unfocused as his mind absorbed the statement. “No, that’s not true, I didn’t...I haven’t...” he stammered but couldn’t get the words out as much as he tried.

“Lost your heart to her?”

“Can’t stop thinking about her?”

“Can you deny what we’re saying?”

3rd and 10th did not look away as they continued to scrutinize him with their hardened gazes. Had he really? Was it possible? She was everything he couldn't have, yet everything he had ever wanted. He didn't choose to give his heart; it had just happened. But *when* did it happen? *When* had he fallen?

“Senior, we're at war, *your* war that is soon to be ours,” Lin Liang continued. “If you can't keep your focus, and resolve your issues, we might as well forfeit.”

“I apologize for placing everyone in danger when you all came to support me. There will be no more lapse of judgement. It won't happen again; I can stay focused now,” he told them with confidence.

Wang Jing raised his brow at the statement. “Are you *sure* about that?”

Die Feng nodded reassuringly. He had to be; too many lives depended upon him.

“Juniors, you all can stop eavesdropping, and bring more wine and food while you're at it,” Lin Liang called out, the smirk never leaving his face as he waved his hand behind him, magically removing the tent flaps.

Dumbstruck, Die Feng turned to look at the entrance. 5th, 6th, 11th, 12th, and 14th were all standing outside, with a guilty yet pitying look on their faces. He was so absorbed in the conversation, he had not even noticed they were there this whole time. Focused, his foot.

10th sighed heavily as he stood up, putting his hand on Die Feng's shoulder with a light squeeze. “Please go resolve your issues before the next battle. We all have our dark days but it's what you do in the future that matters.” Wang Jing left the tent, going to look for 7th Die Feng guessed.

While 14th went to grab more wine, the rest shuffled into the room and made themselves comfortable with the snacks. The tent now filled with light hearted jokes and laughter as the Juniors continued to tease and advise him. Despite what he had put them through, they were still his brothers in arms who never failed to support him. Somehow, he felt lighter, as though a heavy burden was lifted; he wasn't alone.

Tomorrow, he would resolve this and get his head on straight.

Li Ying woke up to find Die Feng's large brown eyes on her. Watching, not with a tempest raging in them like the last time she had seen him but with something inexplicable.

Li Ying scrambled up. All the pent-up rage from the last few days rose to the surface and, without thinking, she leaped at him, slamming him to the floor, pinning his arms down. "How long have you been watching me?" she snarled.

"Li Ying, I-"

"No," she growled pressing harder until she felt something wet. She looked down to see blood darkening his sleeve. Releasing him, she frowned and raised her bloody hand. "What is this? Why are you bleeding?"

"It's nothing," he said, his expression inscrutable, directing a spell at his arm. The blood cleared up.

It didn't seem like nothing, but Li Ying was in no mood to be soft. "Why are you here?"

Why was *she* here? This place.

There was something about what had happened here that seemed to hold answers. Unable to sleep since the dinner with her brother she had been drawn back to the Lakehouse.

The revelation from Cheng Yin had left her reeling. In the days that followed the only thing she could think of was how to fix things. The first thing Li Ying did was inform the Demon Ancestor about where the Feather came from. It was unthinkable that she had been party to such a scheme and helped end any possibility of peace. Terrified, yet resolute, she confessed all she had heard to the Ancestor who, instead of unleashing wrath, as Li Ying expected, looked thoughtful and asked to see the play scroll.

Her brother would probably see her act as betrayal, but things had to be fixed while they still could. She had remained unaware for so long and it was only now that she was beginning to see the dark path he had started upon. What was going through his mind she could only guess at and the task kept her agitated.

Back here, it felt as if she had never left. Sunlight streaming in through the doorway, scrolls and ink on the table. Die Feng must have tidied up and cleared away the tray of food before leaving. For the first time in days she had felt more at ease. She'd sat on the chaise in the study room for only a minute. When had she fallen asleep?

He took a step closer, she retreated further, making him pause. "Li Ying," Die Feng began cautiously.

"Aren't you afraid of getting enchanted again?" She asked with an edge of steel in her voice, making him flinch.

"I-"

"I didn't expect you to come back here," she said evenly as she turned away from him. "I wouldn't have come otherwise."

"That day I waited for you," he said. Her heart paused but did not waver. "I owe you an explanation-"

"Don't bother," she cut him off.

"I apologize-"

"You're apologizing for what?" she asked without thinking.

"I'm sorry about how I acted last time. Kissing you like that was not right-"

"You think this is about that?" she asked in disbelief.

With a remorseful voice, he continued, "You had to stop me, I forced myself on you."

“You can kiss me as much as you want for all I care! Hell, I was kissing you back. This has nothing to do with that.” How dare he try to avoid the real issue? He was playing her again, acting all noble with his intentions. No, she wouldn’t let him take the easy way out. “How can you say I enchanted you and then kiss me in the same breath?” she asked directly, cutting to the chase. Locking him in, cornering.

He squeezed his eyes shut. “I know you didn’t enchant me,” he admitted. Good, he wasn’t as slow as she thought he was. But her anger did not subside.

“Oh, you do, do you? Surprising that you of all people would try to lie with someone you don’t even trust.”

“I do trust you. I trust you too much. I trust you so much that it’s driving me insane because I *shouldn’t* trust you.”

“Shouldn’t trust me?” Li Ying gave a cynical laugh. “What have I ever done to deserve such suspicion?”

“No, you did nothing, it was I who did a horrible thing,” his voice was ragged, eyes full of regret. “I shouldn’t have doubted you. I never should have said that.”

“Then why did you do it? Why did you doubt me?” she asked, her eyes locked onto his, daring him to lie. But he continued to evade, coward that he was.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice soft. “I understand that I hurt you and it was wrong.”

“Answer my question,” she growled.

“Li Ying...”

She lost all patience. Crossing the room, she slammed him against the wall, her forearm on his chest.

“Answer me!”

“I was afraid!” he burst out. “I have never shirked my duty but in that moment I wanted to abandon everything and continue living in this Lakehouse. With you—just you. And no amount of discipline could quench it. How could I go home and become the Crown Prince? I was scared; I didn’t know who I was!” The look in his eyes was that of a hunted animal, wild and uncertain.

There it was. Fear.

She released him, but kept her gaze on him. “Did it never occur to you that it was the same for me?”

His eyes widened in surprise.

“You had the same power over me, Die Feng. The power you feared me having over you. And you used it to hurt me with your words in a way your actions never could.”

“Li Ying, I’m so sorry for doubting you. I won’t—never again. I won’t ask you to forgive me. I... I know it was unforgivable.”

She was afraid too. More than ever, right now, and of many things. Her brother...

Yes, her brother. When had she started fearing him? Always she had told herself that he was this way because of her father. He was in pain and afraid and alone.

No, if she objected that strongly to Die Feng’s behavior why did she make excuses for her brother? Ge-ge said others couldn’t be trusted. But ge-ge himself did not trust her. It had been years since he had shared his plans and troubles with her. She had felt him grow more and more secretive. And if he did not trust her how could she trust him?

Her dear brother. Why did she have to cower before his rages?

First her father’s then her brother’s then Die Feng’s. Would she be the sufferer of their rages all her life? Yes, they were in pain but did her pain not matter too?

Was there anyone who trusted her? Anyone she could trust? She could find the answer only by forming more relationships. The very thing her brother didn’t let happen in the

Demon realm because of his fear. Fear that she couldn't let herself be consumed by. Were there truthfully no people around her she could rely on or were they all scared away by her brother?

If so, whose fault was that? Should she let it happen? Intentionally or not, her brother was isolating her. Like the time they could trust none of the palace officials under her father's reign. Li Ying was tired of being understanding and making herself smaller and getting out of their way. Li Ying was angry.

She looked up. "I understand. You were afraid. And you took it out on me."

He looked stricken and she knew she had hit home. He stared at her in silence, then finally spoke, "I understand if you don't want to see me again."

"I am done." she replied, her voice cold. "I am done being used. I am leaving, Die Feng. Sort your kingdom matters out. I will sort my brother's." Li Ying paused. Now that she had started, what was one more betrayal? "You should know that he was the one who had your bride killed."

She walked to the door. Pausing once more, she turned around, "For that I am sorry." And then she left.

Chapter 95 ~ He Was Hers



Zi Lan was dead. Die Feng did not feel much as 5th delivered his report in a hoarse voice. His gaze remained at the slice of daylight visible between the tent flaps, his mind expecting Zi Lan to walk in any moment, smirking. There was no body. By all accounts, Zi Lan had burned, his aura vanquished.

“Senior?” 5th prodded.

Die Feng wrenched his gaze back to 5th. “Yes?”

“When will be the funeral?”

Funeral? Die Feng spat out a bitter laugh. There could be no funeral because Zi Lan couldn’t possibly be dead. The fell energy surrounding the tower made it impossible to approach. He would speak to the Ghost Princess. Find out exactly what happened. But before that he needed to speak to someone else. Forcing himself to unclench his fist, Die Feng strode towards the tent entrance.

“Senior?” 5th asked behind him.

“I must see to something,” Die Feng said, still looking straight ahead. “3rd is in charge while I am gone.”

In a daze, he walked to the edge of the camp and cloud jumped.

When Zi Lan had been leaving for the Ghost Realm, Die Feng had discouraged him. “It’s too dangerous,” he had said.

Zi Lan had replied with his customary smirk, “Senior, life is dangerous. Aren’t you bored of whiling it away in safety?”

Die Feng hadn’t understood that impulse then and he didn’t understand it now. He should have tried harder to persuade Zi Lan, watched over him if he couldn’t be persuaded, fought beside him if needed, just... done something. Anything. Looking after the disciples was his responsibility and he had known Zi Lan would be a troublemaker from the first day when Zi Lan and Si Yin had snuck off to see who could climb the highest peak at Kunlun first. Die Feng had brought them back in time just before Shifu found out.

As he floated on his cloud, Die Feng didn’t cry. People who weren’t responsible for their junior’s death had the right to grieve. Not Die Feng. He had to see what could be done next.

This realm was where it had begun, their unlikely alliance as they searched for Zi Lan. As he had suspected, she was strolling in the marketplace. Her aura was hidden but he would recognise that silhouette anywhere.

Without ceremony, Die Feng grabbed her hand. Quick as a cat, she twisted out of his grasp, “What are you doing?”

“I need you to come with me,” he said roughly. Something in his voice must have made her relent. With a suspicious look, she placed her hand in his and Die Feng cloud jumped them to the Lakehouse.

She twisted away the moment they landed. “Why did you bring me here?”

Her eyes glinted in the darkness. Snowflakes drifted down outside the window, piling on the ledge, pale in the moonlight. A cold draft whooshed in the ghostly silence. With a wave of her hand she lit the stove. A ball of fire remained floating in her palm as heat spread across the freezing room. The fire cast long shadows on the wall, cutting her features into sharp relief, the flame reflecting in her eyes. Die Feng had never noticed the resemblance before but in that moment, she looked every bit the Yellow Demon King's sister. Her nose was high, her eyes disdainful.

A wave of anger washed over him, the first emotion beyond shock that he had felt after hearing the news. "Where did you disappear?" he growled out. "After giving them the Tower plans?"

"Am I answerable to you now?" she bit back. "Kidnapping the Demon Princess is a foolhardy strategy even for Celestials."

Her words stoked the fire beginning to burn inside him. He welcomed it. Anger made things happen. In a flash he had her arm twisted behind her back. "I am not playing," he growled in her ear. "I have questions, but you are hardly a hostage."

A moment and she was out of his grasp, their positions reversed. "You have acquired a charming new manner. Pity you did not have it before or I might have bedded you." Her fireball hovered near his face.

"You will burn me?" he asked quietly. "Like Zi Lan burned?"

After a moment of shocked silence, she abruptly released him and turned, flinging her fireball against the wall with a force that shook the house. "What do you want Die Feng?" she said in a brittle voice.

"Li Ying, I want to talk," he said.

She whirled around. "What is there to talk about? He's dead."

"No," said Die Feng urgently. "That's what they say but they might have missed his aura. He could still be—"

“He’s dead,” she said firmly. “Accept it.”

Anger surged again. Wasn’t she listening? Zi Lan couldn’t be dead. “No!” he spat out.

“Yes,” she said in that infuriating way.

Die Feng grabbed her by the shoulders. “No!”

She threw him off, “He’s dead, Die Feng.”

Die Feng flew at her again, sword materializing in his hand without thought, “Stop saying that!”

Her whip met his sword with a clang, Li Ying sidestepping to keep distance between them, “The tower burnt to the ground. The energy surged around for leagues. Everyone in the Demon Realm felt it.”

Why was she so infuriatingly calm? Why was everyone accepting it so readily? Die Feng lashed out with his blade again and again, unable to see straight in his fury.

Li Ying met him blow for blow. “Not even a high god could have survived.”

No no no... “Did you lead them into a trap?” he hurled next, not caring about his words.

Her eyes flickered to the side for just a second before her expression shuttered. “Yes,” she said.

He stopped short. That was the last thing he expected her to say. Denial, appeasement, anger at the accusation, all of those he expected, not caring if he hurt her while lashing out. He *wanted* the hurt inside him to bleed out into the world, *wanted* to hurt her, shatter that calm façade, make her feel the way his insides were clawing at him. Make anyone feel what he was feeling because surely it was too much to be contained by his body. But acceptance? What was wrong with her? What was wrong with everyone?

“You’re lying,” he said.

“What?” she snapped, whip at the ready.

“I said you’re lying! You wouldn’t do that, not to your friends,” he panted, not lowering his sword.

“Have faith in me now, do you?” she sneered.

He advanced upon her. “I won’t make the mistake of doubting you again.”

The sneer slid off her face, replaced by something that looked like fear. “Why not?” she whispered.

“Because I know you,” he continued. “You have a pure heart. Only, I was too afraid to see it.”

“Stay away,” she spat out, spinning her whip to stop him from getting any closer. Gone was the calm. She looked very near panicking, in fact.

Die Feng pressed his advantage. “Li Ying what happened? Just tell me the truth!”

She took a deep shuddering breath and closed her eyes. “You know the truth.” Her eyes snapped open, flaming. “Didn’t your juniors report to you?”

“They said,” he clenched his jaw in frustration. “They said you led them into a trap and Zi Lan burned at the bottom of the tower to save the Ghost Princess. Li Ying, please. I need to know. I was wrong before. Tell me I am wrong again. It couldn’t have been you.” He looked at her with desperation. Nothing was making any sense. “Please tell me you didn’t know it was a trap.”

Her eyes were burning as she flew at him. “You think I would betray my own brother, my own blood? For an enemy tribe I barely know? Does that make sense to you, Die Feng?”

Die Feng didn’t hesitate as he leapt forward to meet her whip. “You’re lying,” he ground out as metal clashed again. “That day you helped save Zi Lan from your brother’s men.”

“Only because I didn’t know they were my brother’s,” she snapped back. “We’re in the middle of a war! Of course I will side with my own kind!”

“Side? You call it siding? You are accused of deliberately gaining their trust to lead them into a trap. Plotting the murder of an innocent child!”

“Why are you shocked? You always expected this. You wanted this, in fact.”

“I *wanted* this?”

“Admit it. Isn’t a part of you relieved that I turned out to be a treacherous Demon after all?”

“No!”

“It would make things so much easier. Black and white. Well, have I lived up to your expectations?”

“You’re lying.”

“Admit it. You must relish the thought you were right all along.”

“I don’t believe you,” Die Feng maintained fiercely, as he gazed upon her fiery eyes. “Do you know what 16th said the last time I saw him? He said you’re not your brother. He accused me of not trying hard enough to seek you out. He told me it was never too late. I was going to come to you, enmity be damned!”

“Then he was a fool and so are you,” she snarled, coming at him with renewed force. The heavy storm had finally arrived, beating against the walls.

She couldn’t keep lying to him. He had the look of someone grasping at the seams as his world fell apart and Li Ying barely knew what she was doing. The only thing she knew for sure was Die Feng had to stay away from her. Could she do nothing right?

Everything she touched turned to ash. Zi Lan's death was directly her fault. She had as good as led them into the trap. The consequences remained the same so what did her intent matter? Who would be next? Yan Zhi? Qiao Er? Die Feng? She had no idea what her brother would do to exploit her connection with the West Sea Prince. Ask her to spy on Celestials? Hold Die Feng hostage? Kill him just to spite Mo Yuan? Die Feng had to stay away, for his own safety, and the best way to keep him away was to let him believe she had led to Zi Lan's death. It was true enough. She deserved his contempt.

But what she hadn't counted on was how hard it would be to convince Die Feng. In the past he had been all too eager to assign guilt to her. But now...

He dodged and parried her strikes eagerly. Here was a man looking for a fight. Frustrated, she fought harder, but he would not retreat. He would not give up on her. Fine. She would *make* him.

"It seems like you need a reminder of what demons are capable of," Li Ying snarled, right before she dropped her whip and cloud jumped forward. A moment, and she had him against the wall with her hands against his chest. Without pausing, she surged forward, her hands slipped behind his neck, she grasped a handful of his hair and pulled him down to meet her ravenous lips.

Now he would struggle, now he would retreat she thought as she kissed him, playing the enchantress he had feared she was. Instead, he seemed to come alive. Pulling her closer, he took her mouth greedily, to punish or reward her, she couldn't tell. His sword clattered to the floor as she pulled on him more forcefully, biting his lips, and he held her tighter, tongue warring with hers. His hot breath against her jaw, his mouth slid down the fragile outline of her throat.

This...was unexpected. *He's changed* she thought as he kissed her like his lips could anchor her to him, like his lips could move past her lying façade to the truth of her core.

He's not running away anymore.

The thought was both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time and she allowed herself to fall into the intoxication of his touch. His hands roamed over her, seeking every bit of skin they could find. He was rough and fierce matching her angry kisses



with raw need, seeking her warmth. She needed his warmth too, as much as he needed hers. She allowed herself to hold onto him, the feel of his flesh the only thing that felt real in all the realms, grounding her while she was adrift and alone in a sea of uncertainty. Their embrace grounding them both as the shared guilt and grief that held them frozen slowly thawed.

“Li Ying-” she cut him off as her body pressed against his, molding their shapes together. Eyes closed, he shuddered. Then he grabbed her waist and switched their positions, holding her against the wall.

“Li Ying,” he breathed heavily.

Rationality was slipping through their grasp the way the precious heat between their bodies drained from the room. The snow gale crept through the cracks of the windows, sending fallen papers scattering around them like a tornado. The crackling of the wooden stove nearby was not enough to warm their body, yet there was a fire burning between their heated gazes.

Her cold hand rose to touch his heated face, chilled breath escaped her lips. Lips that he looked like he very much wished to capture again. “Die Feng, I’m cold.” Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

“Li Ying,” his hands tightened on her waist. She pulled his head down to hers, their cheeks met as she greedily nuzzled his cheek, stealing his heat, his warmth. But her touch only stoked the passion burning within them both. Heart racing, breath quickening, she demanded more, more of his touch, more of his skin on hers.

“Can you warm me?” she asked, vulnerable words that were more for her sake than his. Her body couldn’t hide her true need. Here was one truth she could speak among the lies she had whispered that day. Lies that he could see through, stubborn man that he was. He could see through her. He knew. *He knew.*

“Die Feng, I’m freezing,” she pleaded again, but this time, she held his gaze. Her eyes demanded his attention, drawing him in. “Warm me,” enchantress words escaped her lips.

And she knew she had won because in that moment Die Feng couldn’t help but heed her command. His forehead pressed against hers, ignoring the snow storm that burst the window open, sending fresh white floating snow into the room. Without looking up, he waved a hand to slam the window shut and send more coal to the fire. The dark room was now illuminated with a bright yellow glow. With a groan, his head bent to capture her lips softly, delicately, savoring the taste of her. Arms tightened around her waist, pulled her body up, her toes barely skimmed the floor. Like petals in the blizzard, they were lost within their whirlwind world of this eternal moment. Her moan made him tremble with satisfaction, he kissed her harder, chased away her worries. Her tongue met his with relentless hunger, tasting, seeking the comfort he offered.

“Die Feng,” her voice was somewhere between a moan and a plea.

“Here,” he gasped, his lips slid to the side of her neck, heated tongue tracing her cold skin, her body quivering from the tantalizing tip of his touch. “Sweet, sweet Li Ying.”

He kissed her as if after sharing his warmth he wanted to set her on fire. As if he wanted to share his own fire and feel her burning. He kissed her as if he would make the edges of her sanity come unraveling and give and give until she came undone. He kissed her as if his lips could chase away her worries and guilt and the only thing remaining would be his touch, his kisses, his name.

Die Feng, if you kiss me like this how can I keep lying to you? But he knows. He knows.

He knew she lied and he soothed and inflamed with his lips as if determined to chase away her demons.

Without breaking away, she reached for his belt, unknotting it in two quick snaps. Groaning, his hands pulled aside her collar, his lips travelling to her chest, biting, nibbling, tasting.

She removed his belt, pulling at his clothes until her greedy hands slipped under his robes. Here was skin. Here was burning flesh. He moaned as she moved lower, palming him through his trousers.

His hands unknotted her belt, reaching inside to cup her breasts. His touch branded her skin, sending heat between her legs.

She pulled his head back to her lips. He didn't resist, returning her kiss eagerly, his kiss gentle yet fierce, he captured her lips with desperate urgency, sucking on her tongue as one drunk on mead. She returned with the same enthusiasm, branding him with each nibble and bite, her teeth grazed along his jawline, the rasp of his aroused breath sending her over the edge of excitement.

He cupped her breast just over her xin yi, kneading the abundant softness, making her tremble. His heated eyes locked onto hers, their breaths synchronized. Moving closer, his hands slipped beneath her robes, sliding to her back, he found what he sought. The knotted ties, easily removed, to expose her to his gaze. Yet, he paused before pulling on the ties, as if not yet satisfied.

He captured her lips once more. Savagely this time, not letting her pull away, capturing each of her breasts. His hands slipped to the front, under the xin yi, he caressed her bare breast, his own breathing quickening to the sound of her moans. Eyes narrowed in concentration he touched her as if he wanted to draw out her moans, turn them into cries louder than the sound of the blizzard beyond the walls.

And then Die Feng broke the kiss, and bent, lifting the red fabric that partially exposed her breasts. She gasped again, writhing from anticipation. He gazed at her breasts in wonder, his eyes worshipful. As if unable to hold back any longer his teeth clamped on her vulnerable breast. She jumped in surprise, her squirming turning to tremors when his mouth started to suck, his tongue tracing the edges of the mounds, nibbling along the way. But Li Ying couldn't take it anymore, she tried pulling him closer, desperate for

something, anything more than this teasing that drove her insane. Her knees started to buckle as she cried out, but he caught her waist.

He nodded, then dropped to his knees and placed her hands over his shoulders. He slipped under her robes, pulling on her undergarments; he slipped them down, exposing her to his view. His heated breath against her dark curls sent slivers of sensation up her spine. Die Feng inhaled her scent deeply before lifting her leg over his shoulders, holding her against the wall.

Her hand reached for the bookshelf on her left. He glanced up and smiled at her surprised look. Excitement grew in her as she bit the edge of her lips.

With a curious expression, Die Feng parted her damp curls, exposing the lips to her core. Her body tensed, thighs tightened from his exploratory fingers as she bit back a moan. Her heated velvet petals tingled from his touch much to her frustration, because he wanted to learn, to see, to feel her desire. Engrossed by her response to his merest touches, he slipped his index finger into the hot wet flesh. Slowly...but too slowly; Li Ying pressed down, clamping her hold on his finger. She started to move and moan, her mount grasping yet releasing, in a rhythm he soon learned. He slipped in another finger, pressing deeply into her soft core, as she tightened even more around him. He soon took over the vital motion she had taught him.

Still, he did not seem satisfied. He pulled his fingers back making Li Ying cry out in vexation.

Ignoring her frustrated protest, he lifted her other thigh over his shoulders, as he inhaled yet again, licking his lips. His eyes had a primal need, a look that she recognized as he looked up at her once and then closed his mouth over the parted clefts of her throbbing core, his tongue beginning to move.

Yet he was slow, too slow, because he wanted to play.

Her body was like a new instrument he had yet to learn. This was new to him. He was eager, yet patient. Clumsy, but a fast learner. With every touch, he stroked her like a zither, testing the sounds which escaped her lips. But it was not hard for her body to

respond to his touch. If he only knew how much she had yearned for his embrace, he would not have to do much at all.

But patiently, he held back, on instinct, he played her body to his will, to his control. His tongue experimented, exploring as it traced along her petals, sucking the juices along the way, catching each gasp and whimper with primal excitement. He treated her flesh like a delicacy; he took his time to taste every rippling pulsing reaction from her body. When he knew he had found the right spot, he stayed with it, savoring her clitoris like she would peach blossom candies.

“Don’t stop!” she gasped between breaths. Li Ying was cold before. For days, years, probably her whole life. But now, her body was on fire. She relished the flame that broke through her barrier.

Her body inflamed further by his heated breaths against her stomach, soothing away her icy spirit. Body tightened, her hip rose to press her sensitive throbbing nub against his lips. She wanted to scream, but she couldn’t. The sensation arrived before she realized, but it was still beyond reach. Heart hammering, her body continued to burn. She was afraid she would lose it, her hands grasped his head tighter, pressing herself against him, not letting go. Taking the cue from her frustrated cries, he sucked harder, his hands tightened over her hips. Before she knew, her body convulsed on its own. Yet he did not stop, because he didn’t know. He continued to devour, sending electrifying sensation flowing through her veins like a wave of rippling water over endless falls. He kept drawing until every last ounce of sensation was drawn from her core, leaving only the hot sated throbbing flesh behind from his torment.

Roughly, he rose, capturing her lips with his. “Li Ying,” he panted. “Li Ying.”

She kissed him back, intoxicated on the taste of her flesh on him. *He was hers, hers, hers. Had laid claim, undone, unmade...* Her thoughts were broken half sentences as she kissed his face, his nose, his jaw, tenderly now, tenderly.

He was trembling, holding her as if she was the most precious thing in all the realms and maybe, in this moment, she was. His forehead against hers, eyes closed, nothing in the world but his arms to hold her, firm, secure. They stood there a while with nothing but the sound of their breaths slowing down, together.

He kissed her forehead and she nuzzled closer still. They would soon part, but she would savour every drop of his touch, greedy that she was, and take more still. “Li Ying,” he said.

“My precious Li Ying. Look at me.”

She opened her eyes to look into his warm ones. The horrible numbness that had been there when he brought her to the Lakehouse had melted, replaced with emotion. Good. He needed to feel, to process. Even if the feelings were painful. They both did. He had thawed her cold and she couldn't trust herself to speak. She wouldn't be able to whisper her futile lies again. He had seen to her core. *He knew. He knew her as no one did.*

“Come back to me,” he said, holding her gaze, caressing her with his eyes, cupping her face in his hands. “Stop punishing yourself. What happened was not your fault.”

She wanted to sob as her stomach sunk at his words. Words. Words were not to be trusted. Unlike the honest response of the body, words could be manipulated, used against him. She could not return his gift of comfort with words that would lead to his death. For she knew...if he knew the truth he would not let her go. And her brother would kill him. Her words would not take his pain away. Nor would they save his life. Words were useless. She gently disentangled herself.

“Li Ying tell me what really happened,” he begged. “Are you afraid of your brother? We can protect you.”

“Don't be presumptuous, Sea Prince,” she chuckled bitterly. “It doesn't suit you.”

The look of hurt in his eyes almost made her take him in her arms again. She turned around, hiding the tears in her eyes as she righted her clothes. Another fight was beyond her. She had stayed longer than she could afford to. She needed to leave.

“Li Ying, please talk to me,” he begged ducking his head to look into her eyes.

She avoided his gaze, unable to keep up the ruse. “I have to go.”

“No wait!” his voice rang behind her as she cloud jumped to the Demon Realm.

Cheng Yin’s wrath when he found about Li Ying’s involvement in leading Yan Zhi to the tower had been unnerving. However, in the end, Li Ying had managed to convince him that she had been helping all along by leading them into a trap.

“Well done sister,” he had said. “You are not idle, I see. But next time consult with your ge-ge first.” He had said with a smile that did not reach his eyes. “The Ghost Queen should have died. But no matter, I will have my victory still.” He had looked at her with a new, calculating gaze. He did not trust her, she could tell, yet why he didn’t confront her she had no idea. And the lack of confrontation set Li Ying on edge. What was he waiting for? She knew Cheng Yin had her under watch.

Her brother’s spy had been watching her every move ever since the Tower fell and Zi Lan died instead of Yan Zhi. She could sense the constant presence of his aura no matter where she went. She had managed to finally give him the slip when Die Feng cloud jumped her to their secret Lakehouse. For a while they had been alone but Li Ying had no idea how long that would last or whether her brother had other means of spying upon her. Her brother must not, at any cost, find out that she had lied. Everything was riding upon Cheng Yin thinking he had her under control.

Her brother would never physically hurt her, she was sure. He still cared for her but he hated Mo Yuan just as much. In the days leading up to Zi Lan’s death, she had investigated her brother’s activities and found his desire for power and complete domination stronger than she ever anticipated.

Walking into the Obsidian Palace, she found him waiting for her in her chambers. “Sister,” he said with the same smile that did not reach his eyes. “Where have you been?”

Li Ying schooled her face into a neutral expression. “In the mortal realm.”

Cheng Yin got up from his seat and walked towards her. “Really? That’s funny, because my man here says he saw you cloud jump with your sea prince.”

Li Ying smiled back. “He tried to kidnap me. The Celestials thought holding me hostage might give them a hold over you. But I escaped.”

“Oh, and that is why his scent is all over you?” he sneered.

“How else do you suppose I escaped, my dear brother?” she raised an eyebrow.

Cheng Yin laughed, walking towards the door. “It seems the Celestials think you are my weakness, sister.” He clapped his hands. Guards in black appeared, blocking the entrance. “Now we can’t have that, I’m sure you’ll agree,” he continued. The guards parted to allow Cheng Yin to pass through. “They are new guards for your protection. You will stay here.” Cheng Yin smirked. “For your own safety, dear sister.”

Chapter 99 ~ The wolf threw back its head, and howled in fury

It was calm, too calm. The calm atmosphere contrasted with Li Ying's unnerving emotions that lingered at each step. The sun began to set as they descended the uneven steps leading to the dark corridor. The smell of dirt, moss, and mist rose from the walls, filling their nostrils. This was a place like no other in the Palace, unlike other areas, which were pristine and clean. Like his many characters, this was a place he wished to hide from the world, from her.

Had she known him at all?

They soon reached their destination; a grand circular door at the end of the corridor. Two large stone wolves, like guardians, flanked either side of the entrance. The figures were fierce, fangs bared, threatening harm to those who dared venture beyond the gate. Without even touching the stone, Li Ying could feel the power of the magical shield pulsating, vibrating behind the gate. The Demon who had cast it was powerful, far beyond what Li Ying had imagined.

She did not yield to the implied threat of destruction. She was here for a mission, and she would complete it without falling back. Her hands rose, forming a glowing sphere of power. Bright white, like her chain whip, she blasted her magic against the door. The shield was lifted, they pulled on the wolf face lever and hurried in.

The object inside was definitely magical; it glowed with a breathtaking essence. Li Ying never thought there would come a day she would get to see the Ancestor's Demon Tongue. She was already in awe of the powers of the weapon she had never even touched. For millennia she had heard stories about the fierce magical weapon forged by the Ancestor herself. One's weapon defined oneself, one's character, one's soul. Now Shao Wan's weapon floated within reach, beckoning its owner like a whispering echo of the mountain's breeze.

They only had this one chance; the consequences would be dire if they failed. The Demon who wished to harm the realms wouldn't stop, *couldn't* be stopped. But enough was enough. She couldn't sit back and watch him destroy what she held dear. She had

to thwart his plan, no matter the consequences. Yet, Demon Tongue was behind a formidable shield.

Cautiously, the Ancestor approached the invisible shield. She looked tempted to touch, but knew better than to take her chances. Li Ying turned to Shao Wan with concern in her eyes. “Ancestor, the seal is more powerful than the barrier we surpassed. I doubt I can break my brother’s seal.”

“Not all shields are made equal, that is true, but they are unique. Luckily for us, this shield is not about powers,” the Ancestor answered evenly.

“It’s not? Then why did you need me?” Li Ying asked, her brows furrowed in puzzlement as she reached Shao Wan’s side.

“This seal requires your blood.”

“My blood?”

“Your brother, Cheng Yin, has a habit of using blood for his most powerful magic. This shield was undoubtedly created by blood magic. That’s why I couldn’t break it before, no matter how many times I tried. But with your blood, his closet kin, we can surely break it without much effort.”

“Ancestor, did you lead me here just on a guess?” Li Ying couldn’t help but ask. Not because she wanted to doubt the Ancestor, but it seemed too easy.

“If we don’t try, we would never know. If we don’t stumble, we would never reach the journey’s end,” the Ancestor replied, unusually contemplative. Despite her words of wisdom, Shao Wan was nervous, Li Ying could tell. Any mistake would alert her brother. But they were cornered, trapped like prey. The only recourse was to fight back. The world would come to an end if he was not stopped.

The Ancestor and Li Ying were fated to have met today; undoubtedly, it was the will of the Universe for their paths to cross. Li Ying had been trapped within her chambers, on the orders of her suspicious, unstable brother. He no longer trusted her, but she wasn’t going to allow herself to give up so easily. With her wits, she had knocked out the

guards standing at the entrance to her chambers. They were easily subdued, because her brother had never known of her powers.

Well, he had never expected much from her. Ge-ge had always sheltered her like a rare bird whose wings he had clipped off long ago. She couldn't fly way, he had surmised, believed, and trusted. A weakling in his mind, and in the minds of the people around her, even the guards at her door. His miscalculation was his undoing. Unknown to him, her wings had grown back, much stronger than before. Li Ying had hidden her powers and flown away many times without his knowledge. The need to be stronger was in her blood. The same blood that ran through her brother's veins. Although escaping would give her charade away, even on the edge of hell, she would not give up. Perhaps it was time for the truth.

The victors are not those who never fail in their attempts, but the ones who never quit.

Escaping the Palace, she had been almost spotted in the garden, but Shao Wan had pulled her behind the vegetation before the guards approached. With her usual charm, Shao Wan had proceeded to direct the guards to a different part of the Palace. She even chastised their unruly appearance that hurt her eyes. After they left, Shao Wan hurried behind the plants. She listened to Li Ying's situation with concern, and told her of Cheng Yin's plan to destroy the realms. Seeing Li Ying's distress at the revelation, the Ancestor had smiled and assured her that there was a way to tear Cheng Yin away from the greed that consumed him. Shao Wan had a plan, and she needed Li Ying's help.

Now that they were here, Li Ying would do what was necessary to save her brother. *Allies are few when the world falls apart.* She trusted the Ancestor to lead them to victory before calamity fell upon the realms.

Giving instructions, Shao Wan handed Li Ying her dagger. Repeating the ancient spells, Li Ying grasped the blade with her left hand. With a decisive jerk, the dagger slashed across her palm and fingers. Her blood dripped as her palm unfolded but the life-giving essence did not touch the ground. The precious stream of droplets floated like silk weave...encircling, surrounding the sphere shield. Spreading so thinly, cell by cell, that Demon Tongue remained visible behind the transparent pink glow of her blood. Her palm rose, hand pressed against the shield, she transferred more of her cultivation, her magic, forcing the blood sphere to enclose the shield. As if on cue, the shield began to

shrink as the cells of her blood attacked the magic particles one by one, eliminating the molecules. With each burst of the clash between her blood cells and the shield's magic, the sphere sparked like a miniscule firework, until the sparks completely enveloped Demon Tongue, causing the whip to radiate brightly. They had to close their eyes from the brilliant glow. When the brightness was gone, the whip fell to the floor with a thump.

Her blood had worked. The Ancestor had been right. It was kin blood magic. "There was much I don't know about my brother...even this," Li Ying whispered.

The flower may be dead, but the roots remain. He used kin magic because he would never have thought she would betray him. Despite everything, he had trusted she would remain true. *What had she done?*

The Ancestor lunged forward to grab her whip, but upon touching it she screamed in pain, involuntarily dropping it.

"Ancestor! Are you alright?!" Li Ying hurried to her side.

"I'm fine, I forgot how powerful it was," Shao Wan laughed. She then pulled out a black leather glove, and pulled it on over her right hand. Her hands shook but, this time, she grasped the whip without wincing. Yet Li Ying could tell something wasn't right. She hadn't noticed before, but now that she looked at her more clearly, the Ancestor was different tonight. Not just her demeanor, but something else was missing. Her aura was different, lacking its usual glow, for some reason that eluded Li Ying. Before she could ask, the cave began to vibrate. The shield had broken just moments before, yet ge-ge was not far behind.

"Ancestor, quickly! You must leave, my brother is coming," Li Ying pushed her out of the cave.

"Li Ying, come with me! He'll kill you if he finds you here!"

Li Ying shook her head. "I *have* to speak to him Ancestor. If there is any good left in him, I can reach it. I must try and convince him. And like you said, the only person who could break the spell was I, and I am his only kin. I'd rather face him now than wait for

him to hunt me down. Besides, I could hold him back while you escape,” Li Ying told the Demon Goddess in a reassuring voice, despite the chill in her veins.

Even though Shao Wan was reluctant, she knew they had no choice. *Time* was against them.

Li Ying grabbed her hands in a tight squeeze. “My Ge-ge will be furious, but he won’t kill me. Now go...”

She would speak to him, beg him. She would make him see reason. On some level she had always known it would come down to this – her confronting him. And she knew he would react badly. Li Ying wasn’t delusional. Perhaps that was why she had avoided it for so long, hoping her brother would come to his senses on his own, hoping that he would stop. She had let him get away with it all because she hoped, or maybe because she knew that “letting” him do anything was out of her hands. He was powerful, much more powerful than her. He always had been. And after he killed their father, his thirst for power only grew – Li Ying recalled, with a sickening jolt, the basement that she had discovered in his palace, full of remnants of pain and blood magic and torture.

It had happened while she lived in the same Palace, a few corridors away. *She* had let it happen, never protested, never bothered to find out, turned a blind eye to all the signs. Well, no more! He would be angry, but she would not back down. And after his anger passed her brother would listen to reason and she would bring him back. It had been them together in the past, hadn’t it? Trust might have eroded but they still loved each other.

Footsteps rang behind her and Li Ying spun around, “Ge-ge! You must-”

Her words were cut short as she was blasted off her feet. Li Ying slammed into the cave wall and fell to the floor.

She lay there, stunned. Her ge-ge had never raised his hand against her before.

"Insolent girl!" his booted feet neared. "What have you done?"

Li Ying ignored the pain in her back and forced herself to get up. She fought back the wave of shock and anger that threatened to overwhelm her. He was angry, so she had to be calm. They both couldn't lose their temper. She looked up and his expression sent a jolt of fear through her. Cheng Yin had his teeth bared in a snarl and his eyes were wild, bloodshot, furious. She forced words past the bile in her throat. "Brother, I had to. The Ancestor needed her whip and this pointless war has gone on long enough. We must stop."

Ignoring her, Cheng Yin started to pace the length of the cave, muttering, "I had my suspicions, but never did I think you would sell me out to our enemies. You have betrayed me. You lied and deceived. After all that I have done for you, for *us*." The last word he turned around and flung at her like a slap.

Li Ying drew a shuddering breath. To the last he would draw out her guilt with accusing words. "What has happened to you brother? You were not like this."

"What has happened to *me*?" Cheng Yin's voice rose. "I fought and killed and plotted—all to make us secure, yea, so that someone like our father could never touch us again. I carried the burden of my fool of a sister so that she may be happy, and this is how I'm rewarded? Ungrateful wretch!"

Her anger rose at his accusation of being ill-used. "So that I may be happy? You think this will make me happy, brother? You did this for your own greed. You have used me."

"How dare you!"

Li Ying forced calm back into her voice. "Brother, please, stop this destruction. You captured an innocent child. You have tortured and slaughtered thousands. How much more power do you need? I scarcely recognize you."

"You think me a monster?" Cheng Yin sneered. "You sat back, did nothing while I suffered, fought, gained the kingdom, secured our place. It was always I. Left to you we would still be cowering under the lash of father's whip. You are weak!"

Still he underestimated her. Even after everything. It was hard to keep her voice low as she saw through, finally saw through, his manipulation and control, “Brother, look at yourself. You sound like father. Stop this relentless pursuit of power. It will only bring fire and destruction on the realms. Let the Ancestor end the war and come away with me. We will have each other. Is that not enough? There is still time. It can be the two of us living peacefully like we used to imagine.”

“I knew no good would come of you mingling with Celestials. I should have put a stop to it earlier, but I was too indulgent.”

Ever the liar, her brother. He twisted and used words as it suited him. “Indulgent? You needed me at Kunlun for your plans.”

“We needed this victory, sister,” He swiftly changed track, “So long as Celestials ruled we were unsafe. We would never be secure while there were threats and powers to rival my own.” His eyes burned in anger. “You have doomed us both!”

Li Ying pressed her eyes closed, took a deep breath, and opened them. “My brother, my dear brother, please stop. For my sake please stop.”

Cheng Yin was unmoved, no hint of affection in his eyes. “Tracherous girl! You will have me killed? Your own blood?”

“No!” Ice clutched around her heart. “The Ancestor said the war can be stopped with her whip.”

“Fool! She will have me dead and take over my kingdom with her Celestial beside her. I will have the world burn before it happens.”

Had the Ancestor lied? Or was this her brother’s paranoia? In terror, Li Ying caught hold of his arm, imploring, “Brother you must not. What purpose will all our deaths serve? Don’t do this.”

Cheng Yin backhanded her, sending her stumbling. “As for you my naive, foolish sister, you will suffer a fate worse than the others. You, who are so eager to make new friends and be loved. My love was not enough for you.”

For a moment she saw a flicker of disappointment in his eyes.

Her brother was gone, replaced by this madman. Only she had been too stubborn to see it, hoping that deep down her ge-ge could still be reached. Their father's torment had broken and twisted him on a fundamental level, she now saw. It was too late for her to do anything. He was beyond help.

"I had a gift prepared specially for you should this day ever come. Li Ying, Li Ying," he smiled. "What are you afraid of?"

She backed away, unable to stop trembling at his feral grin. Cheng Yin advanced upon her. "Remember this sister. Remember your brother was the only person who could love you and you carelessly threw him away."

Her back hit the cave wall and she shrunk as far from him as she could. She flinched as Cheng Yin bent, an almost affectionate look in his eyes, and kissed her forehead. His kiss was warm and protective, like a brother's.

"Remember this when you are alone in your torment biting yourself," he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Li Ying felt the transformation before it happened. The monster lurking inside her rose, spread, taking over her mind and heart, like a dark shadow obliterating everything that was colorful and bright in her. She was forced on all fours, screaming as her back arched and her limbs twisted. Transformation into her true self always came as naturally to her as breathing. Yet when forced by Cheng Yin it twisted into something unnatural, ugly. Li Ying cried out as the bones in her body broke and realigned.

It was true, what Cheng Yin said. Her brother's madness, her father's rage, she'd always had it. Running in her blood, in her veins, tightening its tendrils around her heart no matter how hard she fought to keep it suppressed, denied. Blood called to blood. And the same blood that allowed her to betray her brother now betrayed her. She had never deserved the world's kindness or love. A monster, through and through, she had been a pretender walking amongst innocents, much like her brother.



A family of monsters killing each other and now the circle was complete. Had she thought she was any different? Foolish indulgence! She should have known that the day she broke her two humans. How could something as pure as love could touch her when she was dirty, buying for blood? The madness would have taken root sooner or later. *A beast incapable of friendship, incapable of love, incapable of loyalty alone, alone, alone...*

Her mind receded until only the rabid wolf remained. A white spot marked its forehead. A pair of brown and purple eyes glinted in the faltering light. Snarling, the wolf spun around, looking to attack its source of pain.

The cave was empty.

Deprived of its prey, the wolf threw back its head and howled in fury.

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