

# Peculiar Circumstances

by

sakana17

## Chapter One

The train's steady rattle lulled Tong Zhou to sleep. When he woke, there was a man sitting in the carriage across from him, leaning forward, peering curiously at the basket on Tong Zhou's lap, trying to see inside. He was a tall, slender man, probably no older than 30, with thick, wavy hair and a neat moustache and trimmed beard. He wore a light brown suit of ordinary quality and creased leather shoes. He looked up at Tong Zhou and their eyes met. Tong Zhou ignored the sudden racing of his heart and stared at the man placidly.

The man smiled, and his eyes—dark, friendly, inviting eyes—curved and creased. “It was moving,” he said, nodding at the basket, “and I thought I heard sounds coming from it.”

Tong Zhou rested his hands on the basket lid. “Mimi must be restless. It's a long journey.”

The man raised one eyebrow. “Mimi?”

Tong Zhou smiled a little. “My cat. The European lady I got her from named her. The name amused me so I didn't change it.”

The man sat back and gave Tong Zhou a long, interested look. Tong Zhou controlled his pulse and stared out the window at the repetitive scenery.

“It is a long journey,” the man agreed. “It may go faster with pleasant company. I am Liu Shilin.”

Tong Zhou tipped his hat. “Tong Zhou.”

“Are you traveling to Changsha?” Liu Shilin's manner was relaxed and disinterested.

“A bit further than Changsha,” Tong Zhou replied truthfully.

The glint in Liu Shilin's eyes suggested he wanted to know more, but Tong Zhou didn't elaborate and Liu Shilin didn't ask. They both watched the landscape streaking outside.

“Do you always travel with, uh, Mimi?” Liu Shilin asked, looking intently at the basket.

“Always.” Tong Zhou patted the lid, smiling. “She’s a devoted companion. And she hates being left by herself.”

“Huh.” Liu Shilin arched one eyebrow. “I don’t know much about cats but I never thought of them as devoted to anyone but themselves.”

Tong Zhou gave him a cool look. “They could say the same about people.”

Liu Shilin laughed, disarming and warm. He glanced out the window again and changed the topic, remarking about the recent cold, rainy weather with perceptive quotes from poetry. Tong Zhou, drawn to his easy manner, responded in kind, and they passed the time discussing literature, first classical, then modern. Liu Shilin was erudite, charming, and attractive. Tong Zhou was both disappointed and relieved that their journey together would soon end.

After all, it will be safer for us both after we part, Tong Zhou reflected.

“Are you journeying home?” Liu Shilin asked casually. “To a family awaiting your return. And that of Mimi, of course.” His plump lips bowed in an amused smile as he regarded the basket.

“No.” Tong Zhou paused and was compelled to add, “I live in Shanghai.”

Liu Shilin’s smile transformed into a delighted grin that lit his entire, handsome face. Tong Zhou couldn’t look away.

“I live in Shanghai, myself,” said Liu Shilin. Of course he did, Tong Zhou thought wretchedly, wishing he hadn’t faltered in a weak moment and shared more about himself than he should have.

Liu Shilin rattled off an address in the French Concession—Tong Zhou knew the street well—and mentioned twice that he lived alone. “We must meet sometime after our travels. Have you ever tried coffee? There is a European café not far from my door. But of course, if you prefer tea…”

Liu Shilin’s invitation was nonchalant but Tong Zhou wondered at it. Beneath Liu Shilin’s carefree demeanor was something else. He was interested in Tong Zhou—that was obvious—but was his boldness merely self-confidence?

“That sounds very pleasant,” Tong Zhou murmured, as noncommittal as he could be.

Liu Shilin’s grin widened and he laughed a little. “Excellent. What good fortune we must have to meet like this.”

Tong Zhou looked out the window, eyes narrowing slightly. Was it good fortune?

They conversed intermittently for the duration of the ride to Changsha. At one point Liu Shilin's head dropped back on his shoulder and he dozed. Tong Zhou watched him, observing more details. His hands were smooth and clean, and his grooming and bearing in general were that of a man with more means than Liu Shilin's clothes suggested. His hat, placed on the seat beside him, was European and probably cost more than his shoes. He traveled with one leather suitcase. Its sides were worn and there was a torn paper pasted along one edge.

Liu Shilin jerked out of his nap and sat upright. Tong Zhou glimpsed a gold pocket watch chain swinging from his waistcoat before Liu Shilin straightened his jacket.

"Oh, we're near Changsha already," Liu Shilin remarked, sitting forward and taking a good look out the window. The late afternoon was a grey slate of murky rain as the train gasped into the station. Liu Shilin put on his hat and beamed at Tong Zhou.

"I am so happy we met. We must meet again in Shanghai."

Tong Zhou nodded and wished him well. Liu Shilin picked up his suitcase, bowed quickly, and left the carriage. Alone, Tong Zhou sat back and let out a breath. The basket on his lap rocked back and forth. Tong Zhou patted the lid reassuringly.

"It's all right now," he said quietly.

Mimi moved restlessly. Tong Zhou tapped the lid. "Little girl, be patient. The journey's almost over." Mimi made a low, unhappy sound. "He's gone and chances are we will never see him again."

Mimi moved again and finally settled. As the train pulled out of the station, Tong Zhou searched the platform for Liu Shilin and saw him among the queue of passengers heading toward the exit.

It was after nightfall when the train stopped at the small, empty platform and Tong Zhou alighted. A canvas satchel hung from his shoulders. He carried Mimi's basket in one hand and a tall hiking pole in the other. The train lurched away from the platform as Tong Zhou briskly strode away from the tracks. He followed a worn trail into the mountains that surrounded the village. After walking some distance, he stopped to let Mimi out of her basket. Pleased to be free, she stretched and strutted while Tong Zhou secured her in a thin leather harness and fastened it to the leash. He and Mimi continued their trek side by side in the cold, damp air.

They stopped briefly to eat the light meal Tong Zhou had packed: bread for himself and dried fish for Mimi. He rested while Mimi groomed her sleek black fur. The moon was high, half-hidden behind clouds, when they resumed the journey.

The trail tapered off as the trees became denser. There were many nocturnal animals active in the forest and Mimi reacted to each movement and sound. Tong Zhou focused on their direction and

footing as they climbed the steepest mountain. Remains of old paths were markers to follow, leading them to their destination: a narrow cave entrance. Ancient writing was carved into the stone on either side of the entrance. Tong Zhou could see well in the dark and read the inscription before entering the cave.

He had often been here before and he knew its twists and turns. It was a dank, unpleasant place: a forbidding recess in the earth that most people would avoid. Precisely for this reason, in the depths of the cave was a tomb left undisturbed for centuries. Tong Zhou and Mimi crept along the narrow, rough passages, deeper and deeper into the mountain, until they reached the cavern which held the tomb.

As tombs went, it was not impressive. It was neither large nor small and it held one coffin made of ordinary stone, decorated plainly with a carving and a few inscriptions. Tong Zhou took off his hat, set down his satchel, and brought out a sturdy cloth to wipe dirt and bat droppings from the coffin. Mimi sat on the rock floor, alert to their surroundings.

Tong Zhou climbed the low platform around the coffin and stopped. Something was wrong. In the same instant Mimi sensed it, too, and emitted a low growl. They were alone in the tomb, Tong Zhou was certain of it, but he couldn't shake the feeling of something amiss. He stuffed the cloth into his coat pocket and pulled out an electric torch, switched it on and inspected the coffin thoroughly.

The headstone had been moved not too long ago. Within the past couple of weeks, Tong Zhou guessed, judging by the disturbance of dust. Whoever had opened the coffin had tried not to disturb too much, but hadn't had the strength to move the stone effortlessly. Tong Zhou bent over the surface and narrowed his eyes. Hairline fractures marred the stone.

Tong Zhou stood back, tapped the torch on his palm, and switched it off. Well, this was an interesting development. He supposed it had only been a matter of time before some inquisitive explorers discovered the cave and were lured by the inscriptions at the entrance—all dire warnings. He smirked, thinking the explorers had no doubt found less than they bargained for.

Although... Tong Zhou sighed. He should move the headstone and check inside. For several reasons he was loath to open the coffin and he hesitated. He glanced back at Mimi, who sat in a crouch, watching him. She swished her tail back and forth. No help from her.

Moving the headstone required an considerable exertion of Tong Zhou's strength. He pushed it at an angle until there was an opening about the size of a hand. He caught his breath, muttered a few superstitious words, and turned on the electric torch to peer inside.

"That's not right," he said to himself, frowning. He took a deep breath and braced himself against the headstone to move it farther. Now the opening was wide enough for him to lean inside, flashing the torch from side to side.

Several things happened at once: Mimi screeched loudly, the sound reverberating off the tomb walls in horrible cacophony; something warm and tall bumped against Tong Zhou's back, causing him to tumble head first into the coffin, his rear and legs dangling outside; and another something—cold, long, and slithering—escaped the coffin. The warm, tall thing pressed against Tong Zhou's backside, flailed and cried out sharply. Mimi howled and hissed. The warm thing struggled.

Tong Zhou gripped the torch, apologized to his grandfather's bones for disturbing their rest, and squirmed himself out of the coffin with some backward kicks and elbow jabs. The warm thing blocking his exit abruptly fell away. Tong Zhou stood upright on the platform and waved the torch over the immediate area.

Lying flat before him, face up, looking dead or nearly so, was Liu Shilin. Slithering across the rock floor was a winged snake demon: a slender juvenile with red, resentful eyes. Stalking the snake demon was Mimi, dragging her leash and hissing, tail tall and bushy.

"Mimi, no," Tong Zhou told her sternly. She flicked her ears but, of course, did not obey. "If you continue this course of action you'll be sorry for it," he snorted. She had the snake demon cornered and paced in front of it, growling, convinced of her invincibility. Tong Zhou let her be for now. He had a more urgent problem: Liu Shilin.

How and why Liu Shilin was here were questions Tong Zhou fervently wanted answered, but first he had to make sure Liu Shilin was alive. He knelt beside him, set the torch on the floor, and checked Liu Shilin's breath and pulse points. Far too shallow. Tong Zhou pursed his lips and tipped Liu Shilin's chin from side to side, pulling his shirt collar open. He saw five telltale diamond-shaped marks where Liu Shilin's neck curved to his shoulder.

Tong Zhou spared an icy glare at the winged snake demon. "Oh, you nasty thing." It coiled against the tomb wall in a wary standoff with Mimi.

Tong Zhou acted quickly. He bent down to cover the bite with his mouth and suck as much of the poisonous venom as he could. Liu Shilin's skin was clammy and the taste of the poison was disgusting. Tong Zhou spat it out and sucked again, repeating several times until he heard a low groan and Liu Shilin stirred weakly. Tong Zhou helped him sit up, vigorously rubbing his back to get his blood flowing. The color of the bite marks had faded from black to red, signifying a clean wound. Liu Shilin blinked and swayed like a drunkard. It would take some while for him to recover. This gave Tong Zhou time to take care of the other problem.

The stalemate between cat and snake demon was about to collapse. The snake demon had had time to size up the opponent and liked its chances against a small housecat. Mimi put on a brave front but sensed the tide was turning. Tong Zhou stood up and marched into the fray. The snake demon, full of confidence, uncoiled to its full length to face him. It grinned and opened its maw, revealing five sharp baby teeth, three on the bottom and two on the top.

“Silly youngster.” Tong Zhou struck before it could. He grabbed it with both hands, one to grip its short, underdeveloped wings and the other choking its throat. It writhed and beat at him with its long body as he carried it over to the coffin. He tossed it inside to the farthest corner and swiftly pushed the headstone back into place before it could slither out again. Catching his breath, he patted the headstone.

“You’re supposed to hibernate and keep Grandfather company, not escape and feed on an innocent person,” he told the snake demon, though he doubted it could hear him. He turned and looked down at Liu Shilin, whose color had returned and who sat up more steadily. If this person can be called innocent, Tong Zhou thought with a frown. What was Liu Shilin doing here?

## Chapter Two

The jazz music was brassy and lively. Laughter closed in from all sides. The booze was flowing, making his head swim. “Liu Shilin!” the laughing voices called. They were toasting him, celebrating his new job.

That wasn’t right. Liu Shilin had been at his job for years. He winced and shook his head and the jazz music receded to a background accompaniment. The laughter faded. He opened his eyes and, with effort, focused on his surroundings in the cool, stone chamber.

A single electric torch lay on the ground a distance away, casting a beam of weak light toward the platform upon which Liu Shilin sat. The rest of the chamber was grey gloom. Liu Shilin shook his head again as fragments of his memory returned: the flicker of light inside the tomb, the robber leaning inside the coffin, the horrible screech from the dark, and the creature that bit him.

Liu Shilin reached under his collar and rubbed his neck. He faintly felt a cluster of five tiny welts. He was sore around the bite and touching it made him hiss in pain. In response there was a low growl in the darkness and a restless, shuffling sound. Liu Shilin dug the small electric torch from his jacket pocket, turned it on, and held it out.

Sitting against the wall several meters away was Tong Zhou, staring at him suspiciously. Beside Tong Zhou was a lean black cat wearing a leather harness attached to a leash. The cat also stared at him suspiciously as it paced from side to side, dragging the leash over the uneven rock floor.

That must be Mimi. Liu Shilin remembered the pleasant rail journey to Changsha. He had wanted to make Tong Zhou’s acquaintance again—very much so—but had never expected it would happen so soon. Or under these circumstances. He met Tong Zhou’s stare and regarded him curiously and smiled.

“Did you follow me here?” Tong Zhou’s voice was flat and accusing.

“Follow you?” repeated Liu Shilin. “No, of course not. I—”

“Then how did you get here?” Tong Zhou interrupted.

His severe, frosty manner provoked Liu Shilin’s indignation. “I arrived by automobile,” he said crisply. “Despite the condition of the roads, it only takes little more than an hour to drive from Changsha, and I was given to understand that the railway platform in the village is used only for freight, not passengers.”

Tong Zhou’s delicately curved lips dipped. “For a few silver dollars the train engineer will stop anywhere. But you misunderstand my question. How did you get here?” He gestured at the burial chamber around them.

“I walked from the road in the village,” Liu Shilin answered, slightly confused. What other way was there to reach this place?

“You entered from the cave?” Tong Zhou pressed. “Ignoring the inscriptions outside?”

Liu Shilin laughed softly. “Those inscriptions are ancient warnings to ancient people who believed in such things. Entertaining but not threatening.”

Tong Zhou gave him a bland look. “And yet you were bitten, were you not?”

Liu Shilin touched the bite mark again and grimaced. “Yes... What was that thing, anyway? I couldn’t see it.”

“A winged snake demon,” Tong Zhou told him as simply as stating the time of day. Liu Shilin blinked and arched one eyebrow.

“A snake...demon.”

“Yes. A winged one. If you’re skeptical, I can open the coffin again and let it out.” Tong Zhou’s grin was sharp and rather demonic itself. “I’m sure it would enjoy another bite of you. It’s young and no doubt hungry.”

Liu Shilin shifted uneasily on the platform, edging away from the coffin. He waved off the suggestion with a gesture and a shake of his head. The light from his electric torch bounced across the stone walls.

“That’s fine. No need.” He paused, remembering why he was here. “But speaking of the coffin, why were you robbing it?”

Tong Zhou’s eyes—large, expressive eyes fringed with long, dark lashes—widened in surprise. He huffed a short, disbelieving laugh.

“I wasn’t robbing it. As if there’s anything in it to steal,” he added with a soft snort.

“Hm, somebody thought so,” Liu Shilin commented. He scratched his beard. His instinct was to believe Tong Zhou, but he asked himself if it was because Tong Zhou was being truthful or because he found Tong Zhou fascinating and attractive. He was afraid it was the latter.

“What do you mean?” Tong Zhou asked.

Liu Shilin stood up gingerly, bracing himself on the coffin until he found his footing. He was slightly dizzy but the brassy jazz from his earlier hallucination had fallen silent. He picked up Tong Zhou’s



electric torch and went to sit beside him. Mimi had calmed down and, bored by their conversation, curled up near Tong Zhou's feet.

Liu Shilin handed him his torch. Tong Zhou switched it off and pocketed it. Liu Shilin kept his on, setting it on the ground and directing it at the coffin.

"I'll tell you that if you tell me why you're here and what you were doing inside the coffin."

There was about an arm's length between them, but Liu Shilin felt Tong Zhou's sudden tension. It reminded him of the moment on the train when he'd asked if Tong Zhou was traveling to Changsha. It was an ordinary question for people sharing a rail carriage, yet Tong Zhou had tensed slightly and given a vague reply. Liu Shilin had already found him pleasing to look at; his reaction to a common question honed Liu Shilin's interest in him.

There was a long silence but Liu Shilin was in no hurry to break it. While Tong Zhou decided whether to answer, Liu Shilin looked him over. He wore the same clothes from the train: a light grey changpao over matching grey trousers, white socks and black cloth shoes. Over the changpao he wore a long, brown leather coat. His grey fedora lay on the ground near a canvas satchel, a hiker's pole, and Mimi's wicker basket.

Liu Shilin had thought him pleasing before, but without his hat his face revealed the true extent of his handsomeness. Likely around Liu Shilin's age, he was clean-shaven and his thick, straight hair was parted on one side in a short, modern style. His high cheekbones were curved and prominent, his chin rounded, his nose long and with the subtlest of slopes at the bridge. His pretty lips had a demonstrative mobility about them. But it was his eyes—big and dark, under heavy, masculine brows—which mesmerized and enticed. He was possibly the most attractive man Liu Shilin had ever seen.

And possibly one of the most interesting, he thought as Tong Zhou's strained silence stretched.

At last Tong Zhou said slowly, reluctantly, "This tomb was built for one of my ancestors. I visit it occasionally." He paused. "I opened the coffin because I could see it had been disturbed. I was checking that the contents were still intact."

It was a perfectly reasonable reply yet like a match to gunpowder, it set off an explosion of questions in Liu Shilin's mind. He doused these for now; Tong Zhou had honored his part of the bargain.

"And were the contents intact? Nothing missing?"

Tong Zhou's pause this time was brief. "The only thing missing is a bronze chain. It is quite old but there's nothing remarkable about it."

Liu Shilin nodded and rubbed his chin. “All right. That means my information was correct. There was a report that this tomb had been robbed recently.”

Tong Zhou turned toward him with a stern look. “And why would this concern you?”

Liu Shilin gave him his best, warmest smile. “I’m a newspaper reporter. I’m chasing the story.”

His response did not impress Tong Zhou, who twitched one eyebrow. “There’s hardly any story to chase,” he said suspiciously.

“On the surface of it, no,” Liu Shilin conceded. “But given the location of this mountain and who’s interested in this area…”

“The Japanese,” Tong Zhou said with a heavy sigh.

“There are mines in all of the nearby mountains. All but this one. That would attract anyone’s curiosity.”

Liu Shilin noticed the light from his electric torch dimming and turned it off to conserve its power. The chamber was cast in impenetrable black. He resisted the urge to shiver and told his brain to stop imagining slithering, biting things sliding toward him.

“That doesn’t explain the theft of the bronze chain. Though I suppose because it is old, whoever found it assumed it was valuable,” Tong Zhou mused. “But I wonder…” He trailed off and after a moment Liu Shilin prompted, “What do you wonder?”

“Why the snake demon didn’t attack the thief.”

Setting aside—for now—the whole “demon” question, Liu Shilin frowned and asked, “How do you know it didn’t?”

“There would be a body.”

“I’m not a body. Yet.”

“Ah!” The stale air shifted as Tong Zhou moved. “Yes. It’s possible, if there was more than one thief. And if the coffin were opened only wide enough to grab the chain, they could’ve closed it before the demon could escape. The headstone is cracked, a sign that it was hastily dropped into place.”

Liu Shilin nodded, picturing a scene of two or three figures opening the coffin, grabbing the chain, and panicking after one of them was bitten. He touched the bite mark on his neck. It was no longer painful.

“A winged snake demon, you say.”

“Yes.”

Liu Shilin fidgeted with his electric torch, passing it from palm to palm. “You believe in demons?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t,” Liu Shilin stated. He lightly pounded the end of the torch against his palm.

“Even after being attacked by one?” There was a hint of amusement in Tong Zhou’s voice.

“It was a nasty snake, yes. But a demon? Why should it be a demon? What would make it so?”

Tong Zhou didn’t immediately reply. In the pause there was a low, steady hum: a cat’s purr.

“That,” Tong Zhou said finally, “is an interesting and complicated question.”

Liu Shilin wanted to push for an answer, but he suspected that Tong Zhou might be more forthcoming without being pushed. He leaned against the cool, rough wall and changed the topic.

He asked as casually as he could, “Are you going to stay here overnight? Or do you have a place to stay in the village?”

“I intend to stay until morning,” Tong Zhou said. “The train engineer said he’d stop for me if I waited on the platform.”

Liu Shilin clutched his torch like a weapon and folded his arms over his chest to keep warm. He’d planned to find a place to sleep in the village but staying with Tong Zhou, even inside a dreary tomb, appealed to him.

“Why don’t you ride back with me?” he offered. “The driver’s returning in the morning. There’s plenty of room in the auto. And it’ll take less time.”

He was getting used to Tong Zhou’s long pauses before speaking. He waited. Tong Zhou made his decision and said quietly, “I will, thank you.”

Liu Shilin smiled and closed his eyes. A night in a tomb was a small price to pay for extending their acquaintanceship. The longer he stayed with Tong Zhou the more he’d find out about him—he hoped.

### Chapter Three

This is unwise, Tong Zhou thought, yet he didn't feel particularly sorry about keeping Liu Shilin company. For one thing, he should keep a cautious eye on him in case there were delayed side effects of the snake demon venom. A shorter journey back to Changsha would be welcome. And—

And he found Liu Shilin interesting. He was friendly. He was intelligent—despite his refusal to believe in demons. He had a pleasing manner. He was uniquely handsome. Tong Zhou had never met anyone like him before.

Well, he thought, rubbing Mimi's head, there's no harm in spending another few hours with him.

Tong Zhou's eyesight in the dark was almost as good as in light. After Liu Shilin fell silent, Tong Zhou watched him sleeping, noting his steady breathing. Satisfied that there were no ill effects from the poison, Tong Zhou rose and strode to the coffin. He cleaned the headstone with a cloth and water from a flask. He murmured a few respectful words and bowed several times. When he returned to the wall, Mimi had moved to curl against Liu Shilin's hip. He arched an eyebrow and mouthed, "Shameless," at her.

He sat down and settled as comfortably as he could, propped against the tomb wall. He thought about the robbery and what Liu Shilin had said. He wasn't bothered by the loss of the bronze chain. He supposed it could be called a family heirloom, but it wasn't an object with strong associations for him. It had simply been a grave good inside the coffin.

What was more worrying was that the whole mountain could be plundered. Like the mountains around it, it held deposits of copper, but the presence of the tomb and centuries of local superstition had kept it from being mined. Japanese interest in the area was no secret, and although the local warlord was not friendly with the Japanese, he was a venal businessman. Offered enough money, he could sell the mines and this mountain without a second thought.

Tong Zhou stared worriedly at the coffin. If the mountain were to be mined, the coffin would need to be moved. But to where? And how? It was a tricky prospect at best.

Beside him Liu Shilin breathed loudly in sleep. Tong Zhou glanced at him and smiled at his uninhibited relaxation. Mimi was also asleep. Tong Zhou yawned and closed his eyes and invited slumber.

When he woke, Liu Shilin still slept. Mimi had moved to the foot of the platform and was bathing herself. The tomb chamber was too deep to receive any light, but Tong Zhou sensed it was morning. He stood up and stretched and took out the rest of the food from his satchel. While Mimi breakfasted on dried fish and Tong Zhou ate a round of day-old bread, Liu Shilin stirred and opened his eyes.

He sat up stiffly, rolling his shoulders, and picked up his electric torch. He turned it on and flashed it at his gold pocket watch. Then he shifted around and noticed Tong Zhou and Mimi sitting on the platform below the coffin.

“How do you feel?” Tong Zhou asked. He dug into his satchel for the last round of bread.

“Sore, but that could be from sleeping on this,” Liu Shilin said, patting his hand against the rock floor.

“Are you hungry?” Tong Zhou held out the bread round.

Liu Shilin smiled. “Famished.” He took the bread with a word of thanks and ate it heartily.

After their meal, Tong Zhou gathered his things and put on his hat. Liu Shilin offered to carry Mimi’s basket, making the trek out of the mountain less cumbersome. They exited the cave into early morning fog, damp and cool. Tong Zhou, leash in one hand and hiking pole in the other, led the way. Liu Shilin stayed close to him.

“Winged snake demon,” Liu Shilin said musingly after they’d been walking for a while. “You’re sure it was a demon and not an ordinary, vicious snake?”

“I’m certain of it.” Tong Zhou focused on the path ahead. The fog thinned as they descended the mountain.

Liu Shilin made a skeptical noise. “But why is it a demon?”

“According to some old beliefs, demons are formed from imbalance. An obsessive man, a jealous woman, and so forth. And there are objects or places with impure energy that magnify these imbalances until a being’s nature changes and they become a demon. What happens then rather depends on the being and the quality of their imbalance.”

Mimi, trotting beside him, rubbed against Tong Zhou’s leg. Liu Shilin was quiet. Songbirds chattered in the trees around them.

“But of course,” Tong Zhou continued, though he hardly knew why he was explaining this to Liu Shilin, “some demons are formed from reproduction.”

“Reproduction?” Liu Shilin echoed. “You mean they’re born demons?”

“Yes.”

Liu Shilin was silent for a moment. “Hm. But I thought, according to old beliefs, the same imbalances that make someone become a demon keep them from being fertile.”

It was interesting that Liu Shilin, who didn't believe in demons, nevertheless knew something about their lore. Tong Zhou glanced at him sidelong.

"That is the accepted wisdom," he allowed. "Demonic reproduction is exceedingly rare but possible if the unbalanced natures of the couple complement each other."

Liu Shilin rubbed his chin, lightly scratching his beard. "Do born demons inherit their parents' imbalances?"

Tong Zhou furrowed his brow. "It's hard to say, but I think they don't." He struck the damp earth with the hiking pole, taking firmer steps as the path widened.

After a moment Liu Shilin said solemnly, "But this means there are demon offspring who are demons through no fault of their own. That's very sad."

Tong Zhou's foot slipped on slick ground and he tripped against an exposed tree root. Liu Shilin caught him by the elbow before he could fall. Mimi circled anxiously, pulling on the leash.

As Liu Shilin gently pulled him back, Tong Zhou gazed into his eyes and felt the skittering heartbeat he had when he first saw him. He held his breath. Liu Shilin met his gaze and smiled. Tong Zhou released his breath, swallowed, and stood straight. He shook off Liu Shilin's hold on his arm and resumed striding down the path. It leveled as they reached the village.

Liu Shilin's automobile was waiting, big and modern and completely out of place among the modest surroundings. Liu Shilin introduced the driver as Ah-Meng. Ah-Meng nodded politely and finished smoking his cigarette while Tong Zhou unhooked Mimi from her harness and placed her inside the basket. Liu Shilin sat in the front passenger seat and Tong Zhou and Mimi sat in the back seat.

The road paralleled the train tracks for a short while before veering away into switchbacks. Drawing back the side window curtain with one finger, Tong Zhou watched the different view this afforded until Liu Shilin rested one arm on the seat back and glanced at him.

"With all that knowledge about old beliefs and such, let me guess: you're a professor. A historian. An antiquarian?" he ventured as Tong Zhou shook his head. "All right. What do you do?"

"I can read several European languages," Tong Zhou replied. "Currently I'm working as a translator, primarily for offices in the French Concession and occasionally for authorities elsewhere."

Liu Shilin smiled broadly. "I knew you had to be scholar." He shifted until he was practically facing Tong Zhou with his arm draped over the seat. "Listen, do you have to leave today? I need to stay in Changsha until Thursday. If you're not in a hurry, why don't you stay in Changsha overnight? Get some rest before the long train journey. Enjoy a good meal. There's an excellent restaurant near my hotel."

Liu Shilin's eyes were even more inviting than his words. Tong Zhou's pulse quickened. He was very tempted to agree but in fact he did have to return to Shanghai straightaway for his next job.

Liu Shilin read his refusal before Tong Zhou could speak. The light left his eyes and his smile faded. "Ah, you're busy, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid so. Thank you for the invitation."

"No matter." Liu Shilin grinned again. "We'll meet for coffee—or tea, if you prefer—when I'm back in Shanghai."

Tong Zhou inclined his head, stopping short of making a promise to meet. Liu Shilin patted the seat happily and shifted around to face the front again.

The road curled and climbed between mountains, a jumpy, rough ride. Tong Zhou had slight regrets about not waiting for the train. He peeked inside the basket, and Mimi was crouched tightly, eyes wary and nervous. She loved to travel, but this ride was too jarring for comfort. Ah-Meng was a skilled driver, attention fixed on the road. The auto followed one twist after another and was suddenly plunged into a fog bank. Ah-Meng cursed under his breath and slowed to a crawl.

Liu Shilin glanced back at Tong Zhou with a reassuring smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. Everyone sat rigidly in silence as Ah-Meng steered through an opaque blanket of grey. This fog was much thicker than earlier. It reminded Tong Zhou of something...

Mimi growled, the sound startling everyone. Ah-Meng snarled, "Can't you keep it quiet? I need to concentrate."

Tong Zhou frowned and rested one hand on the basket. Mimi's growls became louder.

The attack happened too fast. Glass shattered—the side window next to Liu Shilin. Ah-Meng yelled profanities and clutched the steering wheel, trying to keep control as the auto bounced and jerked. Mimi pushed against the lid of the basket, yowling. Tong Zhou stared at Liu Shilin, saw tiny cuts from broken glass bleeding down his cheek. Before he could reach for him and offer him a handkerchief, the attacker flew inside the window and grabbed Liu Shilin. Tong Zhou saw a swirling mass of black scales and malevolent green eyes.

No! he thought. Why is this happening?

He didn't wait to see more. Ignoring Mimi's wails and Ah-Meng's frightened shouts, Tong Zhou lurched forward and grabbed the demon's thick, muscular body. Another snake demon, this one without wings but a full adult and much more dangerous than the one in the tomb.

The demon wasn't very concerned about Tong Zhou; it was intent on Liu Shilin. It coiled around Liu Shilin's neck even as Tong Zhou tried to wrestle it away. The seat was in the way, and Tong Zhou threw himself halfway over it to get a better grip. Liu Shilin's face was completely red, his eyes squeezed shut. He made no sounds and his body trembled. Tong Zhou pulled at the demon's body until he could shove one arm between it and Liu Shilin's neck. He wedged the demon into the bend of his elbow and squeezed with all his strength. His other hand found purchase to grip the demon's head below its jaw.

Now the demon was angry. It thrashed and hissed. Tong Zhou kept hold as it turned its head to glare at him. That's right, Tong Zhou thought grimly. Pay attention to me. Leave Liu Shilin alone.

It wouldn't let go of Liu Shilin. It snapped its hideous teeth at Tong Zhou but its body still wrapped around Liu Shilin's neck. Tong Zhou flexed his arm as forcefully as he could, summoning inner reserves of strength he hadn't used in a very long time.

"Can this be you?" the demon asked with a surprised laugh, its green eyes going round. "Xiao Tong, we thought you were dead."

Tong Zhou blocked out the demon's voice, blocked out every distraction, and focused on channeling all of his power to his arms and hands. With a sickening crunch, he crushed the demon's spinal column, breaking its neck. The demon thrashed as it died, still wound around Liu Shilin. Tong Zhou yanked at its body until it went limp and fell away. Liu Shilin collapsed sideways along the seat, his head bumping against Ah-Meng's hip. Ah-Meng yelped and braked. The auto jolted to a stop.

Tong Zhou awkwardly reached forward to pitch the demon out through the shattered window. "I can't leave it like that," he stated. "Stay here, please, and wait for me." He pulled the flask of water from his coat pocket and handed it to Ah-Meng. "Try to wake him."

He eased back and opened the rear passenger door and marched over to the demon's body. The heavy fog was clearing rapidly, evidence that it had been conjured for the attack. Keeping his back to the automobile, Tong Zhou crouched and removed a sizable, curved knife from an interior pocket inside his coat. It was an ancient knife, and its bronze handle was dull, but its blade was as sharp as if it were brand new.

Tong Zhou worked with quick efficiency, slicing the demon open and gutting it. He used the butt of the knife to dig a hasty grave in the cold, damp earth and poured the spine and entrails inside. He covered them up with dirt and a few loose stones. He rolled the demon's hide up from the tail until it formed a gruesome cushion for its head. He held the head and scored a mark between its eyes, saying to it, "My apologies for this unpleasant burial, but you brought this upon yourself. May you reflect on your mistakes in the afterlife."

He stood up, looked around, and found a small niche of stones. He tucked the head inside, facing out so it could watch over its grave. He loosely covered it with some twigs and leaves so it would not be



visible to any unwary visitors. Sensible animals would stay clear of the smell, and if any demons were attracted to it, he hoped the grave site would serve as a warning.

He pulled a cloth from his coat pocket and wiped the gore from his hands and knife. He stuffed both into the breast pocket and strode back to the automobile. Inside, Ah-Meng had wet a handkerchief with the water and was patting it over Liu Shilin's cheek. Liu Shilin's face was no longer red but was very pale.

Tong Zhou opened the front side door. "Let me do this while you drive. We should not stay here."

Ah-Meng swallowed and nodded. His forehead was sweaty and his hands shook. Tong Zhou rested a hand on his shoulder. "It's all right. The thing is dead and will not come again. But we're isolated here. We need to get to Changsha and take Liu Shilin to a doctor."

Ah-Meng took a calming breath and nodded again. "Yes. You're right." He got out and helped Tong Zhou move Liu Shilin into the back seat. Handing Tong Zhou the flask and wet handkerchief, he said, "Is your cat all right? The noises it made when you left the car..."

The wicker basket had dropped onto the floor. Tong Zhou righted it and lifted the lid. Mimi was hunkered inside, fur standing up. She blinked up at him. He smiled at her to show her all was well. She looked dubious but let her fur relax.

Tong Zhou climbed into the back seat and arranged Liu Shilin lengthways, resting Liu Shilin's head on his lap. He inspected the little cuts—not very bad, now that they had been cleansed with water—and frowned over the bruise darkening Liu Shilin's neck. Ah-Meng started the ignition and the automobile rolled forth, away from the demon's grave.

## Chapter Four

The music was distant—a string quartet, perhaps. Overlapping it were low murmurs. Liu Shilin was in a bed. He was in England, at school, too sleepy to wake up and watch the concert on the lawn. It must be parents' visiting day. His parents wouldn't be here, of course. He was all alone...

No, that wasn't right. He wasn't a schoolboy anymore. He'd come back to China over a decade ago.

Liu Shilin opened his eyes and immediately winced from the bright light. A nurse's cap came into view and darted away again. "He's awake," a low, woman's murmur said.

A man's face, broad and humorless, hovered over him. "Can you sit up?" he asked in a loud voice. Liu Shilin pulled himself up shakily until he leaned against the bed frame and a pillow. His eyes adjusted to the light and he looked around. He was in a hospital ward. The broad-faced man wore a doctor's coat and, without warning, lifted Liu Shilin's wrist to take his pulse. His fingers were cold. Behind the doctor was the nurse, writing something down on a clipboard. And—

And sitting in a chair beside the bed was Tong Zhou, watching him with enormous, worried eyes. He held the wicker basket on his lap and Liu Shilin noticed how tightly his fingers gripped its sides.

Liu Shilin smiled at him, unbelievably happy to see him again. Again? Weren't they just... As he tried to remember, pain stabbed through his head and he winced again. Tong Zhou leaned forward slightly, staring at him with anxious concern.

"I'm fine," Liu Shilin lied, smiling again. The stabbing pain receded to a dull ache.

The doctor dropped his wrist and prodded Liu Shilin's jaw, turning his head from side to side. He pressed his thumbs on either side of Liu Shilin's throat and Liu Shilin hissed. It felt like someone had stepped on him. Or choked him. Choked...

The doctor snapped his fingers. "Did you hear that?" he asked sharply.

Liu Shilin lifted his eyes to the broad, unsmiling face. "You snapping your fingers? Yes."

"Good. How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three."

"Good. What month is it?"

"September."

"Do you know where you are?"

“A hospital.” Liu Shilin hesitated. “In Changsha?” he guessed.

The doctor nodded. “You’ll be fine. No lasting damage. Rest here until the drip is finished, then you can go home. Sleep well, no heavy food, no alcohol.”

The doctor turned, mumbled something to the nurse, and they both departed. There were eight beds in the ward but only three others were occupied, two of them at the far end, and the third across a wide aisle from Liu Shilin’s. Liu Shilin turned to Tong Zhou. The intravenous drip attached to his arm flapped, jostling the glass bottle hanging from the hook. Tong Zhou reached forward to steady it.

“You’re really fine?” Tong Zhou asked, searching his face.

“No.” Liu Shilin smiled a little at his own honesty. “I have a headache. My neck is sore. And the last thing I remember is riding in the car next to Ah-Meng and you telling me you couldn’t stay overnight in Changsha.”

“Oh.” Tong Zhou’s brows lowered and he looked grave.

“Can you fill me in?”

Tong Zhou’s eyes scanned the ward. He sat forward in the chair to lean closer. “Not here,” he murmured.

Liu Shilin relaxed in the bed. “That sounds like you’ll be staying overnight in Changsha after all.”

Tong Zhou sat back and lowered his eyes. He flattened his hands over the lid of the basket. Liu Shilin thought he heard Mimi purring inside.

“There is a job waiting for me in Shanghai,” Tong Zhou said slowly, “but... I’ll telephone the office and tell them I’m delayed. They can hire another translator if the assignment is urgent.”

This pleased Liu Shilin but he lifted his eyebrows, surprised. “And that sounds like you’ll be staying in Changsha until Thursday.”

Tong Zhou glanced at him briefly then looked down at the basket again. “I’ll explain later.” He swallowed. “May I know the name of your hotel? I’ll need to find a room.”

Liu Shilin flirted with the idea of inviting Tong Zhou to stay in his room. Very lovely thoughts filled his head, easing his headache a bit, but these were daydreams best not acted upon with someone he’d only met yesterday. Had it really only been a day since they met on the train? As little as he knew about Tong Zhou, it felt like they’d been friends for ages.

Friends... He wondered if Tong Zhou would use that word.

“It’s the Chunyue Hotel,” he told him. “Basic, clean, and near the local newspaper office. The only thing I should warn you about is there’s a dance hall downstairs. The music can be loud. If you need a quiet room, ask for one on the top floor.”

Tong Zhou met his gaze and smiled. “Thank you. I’ll go now to see about the room. Ah-Meng said he would be here—There he is now.”

Tong Zhou picked up his hat from the floor and rose with a slight nod. He spoke a few quiet words to Ah-Meng as they passed each other, and left the ward. He carried the basket as if it held a picnic, not a cat.

Ah-Meng dropped heavily into the chair Tong Zhou had just vacated, lit a cigarette, and puffed on it agitatedly. “Who is that...that person?”

“Who? Tong Zhou?” Liu Shilin sat up straight and checked the progress of his drip. “I met him on the train. He’s incredibly interesting.”

Ah-Meng made an abortive laugh, sucked on his cigarette, and said, “That’s for sure.” Tobacco smoke drifted from his mouth and filled the air with haze. Liu Shilin coughed and his sore neck burned.

“Listen. Fact is, I don’t remember what happened during the drive to get here,” he said. Ah-Meng gulped and gave him a look that was somewhere between I don’t want to talk about it and I want to tell you everything. It was a look Liu Shilin encountered often in his line of work.

He continued, “All I know is, I’m banged up a little—nothing serious, according to the doctor. My throat feels like you ran over it a few times. And Tong Zhou has suddenly changed his plans and is, as we speak, going to book a room in my hotel. Whatever happened, it was something I have a right to know about, isn’t it?”

He watched Ah-Meng’s face and saw the moment he decided to tell all. Ah-Meng took a long drag on his cigarette before stubbing it out on the side of the chair and dropping it on the floor.

“Something attacked you,” Ah-Meng said, moving the chair closer and keeping his voice low. “I don’t know what it was. Some animal. Looked like a snake, sort of, but with a face like... I can’t describe it. But it was ugly.”

“A snake,” Liu Shilin mused, furrowing his brow. Like the one from the coffin in the tomb. But Tong Zhou had sealed it up again, hadn’t he? And that one was a biter, not a strangler. Liu Shilin reflexively touched the bite mark on his neck. Five small, rough bumps rose from his skin.

“I guess it was,” Ah-Meng said, shifting uncomfortably. “It wrapped around you and I thought there was no hope, that we’d all become its lunch, but that...person—”

“Tong Zhou,” Liu Shilin put in.

“Tong Zhou,” Ah-Meng echoed with a grimace, as if speaking the name was distasteful. “He grabbed that snake and...” Ah-Meng shuddered. “Anyway, he saved you.”

Liu Shilin looked him over. Ah-Meng had omitted the best part. Tong Zhou had grabbed the snake and what?

After a moment he said, “That should be a good thing, shouldn’t it? Why are you so scared of him?”

Liu Shilin had known Ah-Meng for years. He expected Ah-Meng to sit up, get indignant, insist he wasn’t scared, and present some rationale for not trusting Tong Zhou. Instead, Ah-Meng fished another cigarette out of a crumpled packet in his jacket pocket and lit it. He shook his head.

“I’m glad he saved you,” he said at last, not meeting Liu Shilin’s eyes. “But if you need the auto again while you’re in Changsha, I’m not driving anywhere with him again.”

He gave Liu Shilin an apologetic shrug, got up and patted his shoulder, and left. Liu Shilin bemusedly watched him leave. He settled back against the pillow and drummed his fingers over the coverlet. He made another attempt to remember the attack, and his head pounded. He closed his eyes to blank his mind and without meaning to, dozed off.

When he jerked awake, Tong Zhou was standing beside the bed, watching him. Liu Shilin’s first thought was that he could get used to Tong Zhou being worried about him. There was something comforting about it.

His second thought was to ask what Tong Zhou had done to the snake that attacked him, but he decided he’d better wait until they left the hospital. The nurse swooped into view to remove the drip and helped him stand. He was wearing his clothes, except for his hat, tie, jacket, and waistcoat. He rolled down his sleeves but left his shirt collar unbuttoned. He pulled on his waistcoat and Tong Zhou held his jacket out so he could slip it on. He hoped Tong Zhou would pat it into place over his shoulders, but Tong Zhou stepped back.

“I secured a room on the top floor of the Chunyue Hotel,” he said informatively. “I arranged with the desk for a light meal without alcohol to be served when we arrive. I hired rickshaws to take us to the hotel, as Ah-Meng seems to have left.”

Liu Shilin glanced at him, warmed by his thorough caretaking. He smiled softly. “Thank you.”

Tong Zhou inclined his head and they left the ward together. They took the stairs to the ground floor and Liu Shilin stopped by the discharge desk, digging into his breast pocket for his wallet.

“I settled the bill earlier,” Tong Zhou told him, turning toward the exit.

Liu Shilin was speechless. He followed him outside, still holding out his wallet. “Let me repay you,” he said at last.

Tong Zhou paused beside a rickshaw, gesturing for Liu Shilin to climb up. “We can discuss it later.”

Liu Shilin climbed in and the rickshaw man hefted the poles and trotted down the street at a steady pace. The other rickshaw came abreast, and Liu Shilin shot Tong Zhou a sidelong look. Caretaking was one thing, but paying his hospital bill...

The ride to the Chunyue Hotel was brief. Tong Zhou paid the rickshaw men, and they entered the lobby. Liu Shilin touched Tong Zhou’s arm.

“I shouldn’t owe you money,” he said. “I must repay you.”

Tong Zhou looked at him, unbothered. “If you insist.” He pulled a folded paper out of his coat pocket and passed it to Liu Shilin. It was the hospital bill. Liu Shilin counted out enough paper money and handed it to Tong Zhou. It left his wallet nearly empty, but fortunately he had paid in advance for his hotel room.

As promised, there was a meal waiting for them in one of the small, private dining rooms off of the dance floor. The concierge led them inside and closed the velvet curtains when they were seated. Tong Zhou poured their tea.

Liu Shilin accepted his cup and shifted in his seat. “I’m very grateful to you. About the money...” He hesitated, staring at the platters of food in front of them. “I don’t like to owe anyone money.”

“I understand.”

Liu Shilin looked across the table at him. “Especially not to someone I...consider a friend.”

Tong Zhou gazed at him, incredibly still. He blinked slowly, his long lashes sweeping against his cheeks. His delicate lips formed the faintest of smiles.

“That you consider me so is an honor.”

Liu Shilin laughed quietly. “You’ve saved my life twice now. That must make us friends.”

Tong Zhou tensed and looked down, focusing on the food. He gestured for Liu Shilin to eat. Liu Shilin picked up his chopsticks and selected some tofu and vegetables.

“Ah-Meng told me a little of what happened,” he said between bites, keeping his manner nonchalant but watching Tong Zhou closely. “Except he skipped the best part. He said you grabbed the snake and saved me. But didn’t say how you saved me or what happened to the snake.” He paused. Tong Zhou took small bites of rice and vegetables, not meeting his eyes. Liu Shilin added, “He also didn’t tell me why he’s scared of you.”

Tong Zhou reacted to that, lowering his chopsticks. “I would never hurt him.”

Liu Shilin frowned. “No, I’m sure you wouldn’t.” He took a few bites of rice. “Please tell me what happened. The snake that attacked me was another demon, wasn’t it?”

Tong Zhou’s eyebrows rose. “You said you didn’t believe in demons.”

“After being attacked by them twice, I’m revising my beliefs.”

Tong Zhou nodded and set down his chopsticks. He took a sip of tea. “Yes, it was a snake demon. A strong one, very old. It probably formed the fog to slow us down and trap us on the road.”

“Why?” Liu Shilin asked. “Why me?”

Tong Zhou, troubled, took a deep breath. “I’m not entirely sure but my guess is that when the juvenile bit you it left behind a mark.”

Liu Shilin reached under his collar and touched the bite. Tong Zhou shook his head. “Not the physical mark but what one might call an ‘essence mark’. The mark could draw certain kinds of demons to you.”

Liu Shilin wanted to laugh. Wanted to scoff at superstitions and the very idea of demons. He couldn’t manage it. Instead, he felt a cold sweat on his forehead and the hair on the back of his neck prickled.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” he said finally, pushing his plate aside. He’d lost his appetite. He drank the tea. “Is there anything I can do about it?”

A fleeting, strange look passed in Tong Zhou’s eyes before he furrowed his brow. He refilled their cups. “There are several things, some of them harmless.”

Liu Shilin didn’t like the sound of that, either. Some of them?

“Do you think any of them will work? Especially any of the harmless ones?”

Tong Zhou gave him a small but sincere smile. “Yes. What’s in our favor is that it’s still early. But you’ll need to rest and recover your strength. You should finish your meal and retire early.”

Liu Shilin picked up the rice bowl and added a slice of tofu. He thought of something. “I have assignments to work on while I’m here. I can’t rest all the time.”

“Rest as much as you can tonight, then. I will make arrangements for tomorrow morning.”

Liu Shilin ate as much as he could stomach. His headache was worse and exhaustion settled over him. After the meal they climbed the stairs to the top floor. Tong Zhou’s eyebrow twitched. “You’re also staying on this floor?”

Liu Shilin flashed him a tired grin. “Of course. That’s how I know it’s quiet up here.” He pointed out his room, and Tong Zhou watched him until he entered. Once inside, Liu Shilin staggered to the bed and crawled on top of it in his clothes, too weary to do anything else.



## Chapter Five

The first thing Tong Zhou did when he reached his hotel room was to feed Mimi. On the way back to the hospital he had purchased some fish snacks. He pulled the crumpled paper bag out of his coat pocket and spread it open on the floor next to a saucer of water. Mimi, curled inside her basket which lay on its side, stretched and slinked over to the food. While she dined, he petted her back.

“I’ve told him about the snake demon’s mark,” Tong Zhou said, mostly to himself. “I think he believes.” He glanced down at Mimi licking and chewing at the fish, and lightly scratched between her ears.

“And tomorrow? We’ll have to see.” Tong Zhou stood up and took off his coat. He removed the knife from his coat pocket and cleaned it thoroughly in the water basin. He left the room to replace the water, casting a glance at the closed door to Liu Shilin’s room.

Back in his own room, he undressed and got into bed in his underclothes, leaving the knife on the table beside the bed, within reach. Mimi finished her meal and he switched off the lamp. She hopped on top of the bed and after a lengthy self-bath curled up beside his legs.

The next day, Liu Shilin was markedly better. His face was no longer sickly pale and his eyes glinted as he opened his hotel room door and saw Tong Zhou waiting for him. Liu Shilin wore a different suit, this one charcoal grey, almost black, and very flattering to his slim build. Tong Zhou felt unsightly wearing yesterday’s clothes. They were all he had. His visit to the tomb was meant to be a short overnight stay.

Liu Shilin smiled broadly. “Good morning. I hope you haven’t been waiting there long. People might talk.” He exaggeratedly looked down the corridor.

Tong Zhou smiled back. Liu Shilin’s boldness was a good sign of health. “How do you feel this morning?”

“My headache is gone, I slept soundly with no unpleasant dreams, and I’m famished. Nearly as good as new.” He chuckled quietly.

They headed downstairs together. “When do you have to go to work?”

“For today, it can probably wait until the afternoon. Visiting a bureaucrat. Actually, the later the better,” Liu Shilin said airily. “If I can corner him when he’s about to leave the office, he may give me what I need just to get me out of the way.” He rubbed his hands together. “You may not credit it, but I can be very annoying when I want to be.”

Tong Zhou raised an eyebrow and controlled his smile. “I believe it,” he said evenly.

Liu Shilin's good spirits lasted throughout the plain breakfast they shared in the private dining room. Drinking the last of the tea, he sobered and looked at Tong Zhou.

"Are we going to try to remove this 'essence mark' now?" He made a face and toyed with his empty cup. "Will it hurt?"

"No, it shouldn't hurt," Tong Zhou told him. Liu Shilin didn't look reassured.

They left the hotel and walked for about a quarter of an hour before reaching a shadowy, narrow street. Tong Zhou led the way, following the street to a closed shopfront with a faded, painted sign above the door. Liu Shilin stopped and touched Tong Zhou's arm.

"What is this place?" He scanned the sign and door. "This isn't an opium den, is it?"

Tong Zhou drew himself up stiffly. "It is not."

"No offense meant," Liu Shilin said placatingly. "I've been in some for assignments. I just like to know what I'm entering into."

Reasonable, but explaining this particular place wasn't Tong Zhou's secret to tell. As it was, he'd spent over half of the money he had—including Liu Shilin's repayment for the hospital bill—to secure an appointment here on such short notice. Still, Tong Zhou reflected, he should prepare Liu Shilin for some things.

He faced him squarely and said, "If I tell you that not all demons are evil, do you believe me?"

Liu Shilin's doubtful look gave him his answer. "My experience of them so far seems contradictory to that assertion, but do go on."

Tong Zhou pursed his lips. "There's no time now to convince you. You'll have to know this: removing an essence mark requires the work of another demon. A skill or power, if you like."

Liu Shilin arched one elegant eyebrow. "Magic?"

"If you want to call it that."

Liu Shilin took another long look at the shopfront. "What you're saying is that there are demons in here who can remove the essence mark." He seemed disturbed but not frightened.

"One she-demon," Tong Zhou corrected. "And yes, I hope she can remove the mark."

Liu Shilin gave him an odd look, grinning slightly. "She? A friend of yours?"

Tong Zhou froze for a moment, his pulse galloping, before he calmed. “I’ve never met her before now,” he answered coolly. He turned away and knocked on the door.

Yiwei had once been a princess. Though living in circumscribed conditions now, she answered the door with a regal bearing. She was dressed in traditional robes, the upper one deep blue with gold embroidery, a contrast to her hair, which was short and styled in a modern wavy style. She looked no older than twenty-five under the thick layer of white powder and deep red lip paint. From the front, no one would know she was a demon. Turning to lead them inside, a ridge of spikes down her back showed above her collar and marred the shape of her robes.

Liu Shilin cast a wary look at Tong Zhou before following her. The shop itself was modestly appointed with antique furnishings and a few scroll paintings hanging on the walls. There was an exquisitely carved chair along the back wall with two modest chairs facing it. She waved them to sit before seating herself in the grand chair. Her eyes—very dark with a long shape—fixed on Liu Shilin.

“The snake demon’s mark upon him is as clear as mountain spring water,” she pronounced. Her voice was low and pleasant but cold. She gave Tong Zhou a curious look. “Did you not notice it immediately?”

Tong Zhou shifted in the chair. He placed his hands on his knees, clutching slightly. “I did not,” he admitted. “I…” He shot a furtive look at Liu Shilin and cleared his throat. “I mistook the mark for something else.”

Yiwei regarded him with mild interest before focusing again on Liu Shilin. She examined him slowly and Liu Shilin squirmed a bit, restless. “You don’t believe in us,” she said finally. Tong Zhou glanced quickly at Liu Shilin.

“I didn’t believe,” Liu Shilin corrected her. “After the attacks, and now meeting you, I believe.”

She nodded, satisfied. “You don’t need to believe, of course. My art will work upon you, regardless.” She reached for an oblong wooden box on a side table and picked it up. Raising the lid, she continued, “But it’s easier for me to work if you believe.”

She lifted a folded cloth of fine silk and opened it and drew out a long, thin, gold needle. Liu Shilin laughed nervously and leaned sideways toward Tong Zhou. “You told me it wouldn’t hurt,” he murmured.

Yiwei made an impatient sound. “Sit still, please.” She held the needle straight in the air, pointed toward Liu Shilin. “And remain quiet so I may concentrate,” she added, though Tong Zhou suspected this formidable princess could concentrate through even the noisiest of disruptions. He observed her work, somewhat in awe.

She held the needle motionless. Her control was astounding. When at last it vibrated, Tong Zhou had no doubt that her fingers hadn't caused it. It was the snake demon's essence being drawn to the needle.

Yiwei closed her eyes. Her brow sloped downward as she maintained her unwavering focus. Tong Zhou found himself holding his breath. He cast a glance at Liu Shilin. He sat upright, motionless, with his eyes closed. His eyelashes rested on his cheeks, the tip of his nose curved appealingly over the softness of his lips and mustache and point of his jaw. In the flickering light from the shop's lamps, his profile was the handsomest vision Tong Zhou had ever seen. He stared for a moment and turned away. Yiwei opened her eyes and watched him, though the needle remained steady. Tong Zhou braced himself for the look she would give him: scorn, pity, a smirk. But her indifferent expression did not change, and she looked at Liu Shilin again.

The process took longer than Tong Zhou expected, nearly a full hour, and he wasn't sure if that was a good sign or a bad one. Yiwei seemed satisfied. When she lowered the needle, she immediately dropped it into a tall ceramic vase and sealed it with a stopper. "The snake demon's mark is dissipated now," she told them. "This is to purify the needle."

Tong Zhou looked closely at Liu Shilin, who sat back and exhaled. As far as Tong Zhou could discern, the mark was gone. He relaxed.

"It is done," he said to Liu Shilin.

Liu Shilin smiled at him and at Yiwei. "My thanks to you."

"Mine also," Tong Zhou said, bowing his head toward her. Yiwei gestured that they could depart. Liu Shilin shot out of the chair, eager to leave. Tong Zhou rose more slowly so he could give her a proper bow.

"Xiao Tong," Yiwei said, keeping her voice low enough that Liu Shilin, waiting by the door, wouldn't hear, "if you are to protect him, you must know yourself first."

Tong Zhou stared at her, going cold. He chewed on his lip, wanting to deny that he knew what she meant. He couldn't. He lowered his eyes. "It has been a very long time and this...he...I didn't expect this."

Yiwei's mouth curved, not quite a smile, but there was understanding in her eyes. "That's the way it always is, isn't it?" She looked away, dismissing him silently, and Tong Zhou sensed her words had partly been directed at herself. He recalled that her imbalance had been an obsessive, jealous love for a duke who, for political reasons, could not marry her. Tong Zhou made his bow and left.

## Chapter Six

It was strange to be outside in the bright daylight after leaving the shop and the narrow street. The sky was clear and the air cool and it smelled like autumn, even in the heart of the city. Tong Zhou and Liu Shilin strolled side by side, in no hurry, the silence between them companionable.

“Do you think it worked?” Liu Shilin said at last. “Be honest.”

“I do,” Tong Zhou replied. “Yiwei’s skills are impressive. She is a master of her craft.”

Liu Shilin accepted this. He slowed his steps in front of a small shop selling pastries. There were little tables inside. He waved Tong Zhou toward one, ordered a pot of tea and a plate of dainty red bean cakes, and sat down across from Tong Zhou. “A little celebration,” he said with a wink and quick smile. Tong Zhou smiled back.

After eating two of the cakes and draining his tea cup, Liu Shilin leaned back in his chair and watched Tong Zhou. Tong Zhou finished his cake with a swallow and took a sip of tea. He looked contented, which was, Liu Shilin had to admit, a beautiful look on him.

“You’re a demon, aren’t you?” Liu Shilin asked, quiet and casual, his preferred way to handle an unwilling informant.

Tong Zhou froze and stared at him anxiously. His soft, pretty lips parted. Liu Shilin waited.

“Yiwei,” Tong Zhou sighed. He set down his cup and lowered his eyes.

“I caught the ‘us’ when she said I didn’t believe in your kind,” Liu Shilin said with a nod. “And there was her curious assumption that you should’ve recognized the essence mark immediately. While I sat there I remembered something from the tomb: when you threw the snake demon back into the coffin, you told it to keep your grandfather company. I thought how odd it was that someone would want a snake demon inside their family’s tomb. And then there is your knowledge of demons. Well. If I didn’t suspect you I wouldn’t be much of a reporter.”

Tong Zhou would not look at him. His shoulders drooped slightly. His fingers, still holding his empty cup, trembled. He seemed not only sorry that his secret had been discovered but devastated by it. Liu Shilin had a brief urge to reach across the table and touch his hand, steady it and assure him everything was fine.

Except everything was not fine. Tong Zhou was a demon. A demon Liu Shilin had called a friend. A demon whom Liu Shilin—still—found quite attractive and intriguing. Everything was absurd.

“Is Mimi a demon, too?”

Tong Zhou raised his eyes, startled by the question. “Mimi? No, she’s an ordinary housecat.”

Liu Shilin squinted and scratched his jaw. “She seems unnaturally close to you.”

Tong Zhou’s anxious, regretful manner cooled and he sat upright, giving Liu Shilin an appalled glare. “What you’re implying is distasteful.”

“I didn’t mean—” Liu Shilin frantically leaned forward. He had not meant that. Tong Zhou’s frosty gaze didn’t waver. “I only meant,” Liu Shilin said, “that her devotion to you seems unusual.” That was not much better. Liu Shilin winced. “For a regular cat,” he added weakly.

Tong Zhou thawed a little. “You said yourself that you don’t know much about cats,” he pointed out. “But it’s true that we seem to understand each other, perhaps in a way that isn’t common between cat and human.” He paused. “Mimi doesn’t judge me for what I am.”

He looked directly at Liu Shilin, the subtlest hint of challenge in his eyes. Liu Shilin’s breath caught and his pulse jumped. He hurriedly lifted his cup as a distraction but it was empty. He rolled it between his fingers, regained his calm, and frowned.

He’d wanted to know the truth, of course. He always wanted to know the truth, no matter how damning it was, no matter how hurtful. Now he knew. Now what?

Liu Shilin slid his jaw from side to side. He glanced at Tong Zhou. “I won’t expose you. That’s not why I asked.”

Confusion flittered briefly in Tong Zhou’s eyes and Liu Shilin realized that Tong Zhou hadn’t even considered the possibility that Liu Shilin would do so. He trusts me, Liu Shilin thought in wonder. Why?

“Oh. Thank you,” Tong Zhou said quietly.

They sat in silence for a while, each lost in thought. Liu Shilin’s list of questions grew endlessly but he held back from barraging Tong Zhou. Watching Tong Zhou become more and more morose, Liu Shilin almost wished they could go back in time to the moment when Tong Zhou ate cake and smiled contentedly.

“I’m not judging you for what you are,” he said at last.

“Aren’t you?” Tong Zhou’s voice was resigned.

“You saved my life twice. Three times if we count taking me to Yiwei to have that damn essence mark removed. Judging by your actions, you’re a good and brave man.” Liu Shilin hesitated and swallowed. “Someone I still consider a friend.”

Tong Zhou gazed at him for a long moment, motionless, and though there was a softness in his eyes, Liu Shilin couldn't tell, couldn't guess, what he was thinking. Tong Zhou lowered his eyes and said, "Thank you. Your regard is an honor."

Liu Shilin smiled and relaxed. "Meeting you has been an experience like no other," he chuckled. He pulled out his watch and checked the time. "I should go hunt down my bureaucrat now. It's still early but maybe he'll have a forthcoming disposition. There's always hope, eh?"

He looked Tong Zhou over, wishing he weren't so tense, and said, "Tonight I'll take you to a restaurant close to the hotel. It's one of the finest in Changsha. Tomorrow and Wednesday I'm afraid I'll be busy all day. My main assignment is to cover the trade association meeting this week and those things drag on into the evenings. But I can recommend some places to see while you're here if you're unfamiliar with the city."

He stood up and went to the counter to settle the bill. When he turned around, Tong Zhou was gone. Liu Shilin hurried out of the shop and scanned the street for him. He whipped past a few doors one way, then doubled back the other way, but Tong Zhou had vanished. Maybe that was something he could do, Liu Shilin thought, troubled. Demons had certain powers, didn't they?

On his way to the municipal office building Liu Shilin's mind spun with everything he wanted to know about Tong Zhou. How old was he? How had he become a demon? What was his imbalance? This was of particular interest because Tong Zhou seemed very steady, very balanced. Liu Shilin couldn't imagine him being obsessive or evil or violent, any of the things demons were supposed to be.

Although... He hadn't seen what Tong Zhou did during the attack in the car. Whatever it was, it had scared Ah-Meng and Ah-Meng had faced warlord thugs without flinching. On the other hand, whatever Tong Zhou had done, Liu Shilin reasoned, it was to save Liu Shilin. And if the opponent was a strong demon it no doubt required equal strength on Tong Zhou's part. Or maybe a power. Had Tong Zhou conjured up a set of talons? Gruesomely sharp teeth? Liu Shilin kept these questions on his endless list.

As he walked, unable to concentrate on anything but Tong Zhou, it bothered him that Tong Zhou had vanished from the shop. Liu Shilin stopped and checked his watch. A detour to the hotel wouldn't take too long. He hailed a rickshaw and spared a few coins from his dwindling reserves.

When he entered the lobby of the Chunyue Hotel, the first thing he noticed was Tong Zhou walking from the stairs to the front desk, carrying his hiking pole and Mimi's basket, his satchel slung between his shoulders. Tong Zhou's steps slowed briefly as he saw Liu Shilin, then he looked away and continued to the desk. Resting the pole against the wall, he produced his room key from his coat pocket.

Liu Shilin took three long steps to reach the desk at the same time. He laid a hand on Tong Zhou's wrist.

"Please," he said. "Don't leave like this."

Tong Zhou stood stiffly and glanced down at Liu Shilin's hand holding his wrist. Liu Shilin didn't let go.

"Stay and talk to me. Tell me about yourself. Help me understand. I want to know about you." He kept his voice low but the clerk at the front desk couldn't help but overhear. Liu Shilin didn't care what the clerk thought. He only cared about convincing Tong Zhou to stay.

Tong Zhou warily looked in his direction. He bit his lower lip. Liu Shilin delivered the decisive argument. "The next eastbound train isn't until tomorrow morning. If you leave now, where will you go?"

Tong Zhou frowned, pulled his wrist free, pocketed his room key, and picked up his hiking pole. With a short, apologetic nod at the unperturbed hotel clerk, he turned around and strode back to the stairs. Liu Shilin followed him to his room.

Stopping to unlock the door, Tong Zhou gave him a sidelong look and said, "I thought you had to visit the bureaucrat."

"I do. But I was afraid you were going to do what you were just about to do." Liu Shilin looked him over. "Please, stay one more night? Have dinner with me and we'll talk." He rested one hand on the door frame, wishing Tong Zhou would face him again without averting his eyes. "If you don't want to tell me about yourself, that's fine. We'll talk about literature again. About our favorite foods. About the weather. Anything at all."

Tong Zhou opened the door. Without looking at him he said, "I'll stay until tomorrow morning." He closed the door before Liu Shilin could respond. Liu Shilin stared at it with a wincing smile. He'd stopped Tong Zhou from running away. It was something, at least.



## Chapter Seven

Tong Zhou sat down heavily on the hotel bed, still wearing his coat and satchel, and set the wicker basket down. The basket rocked. He opened the lid and Mimi slipped out, rubbed against him, and mewed quietly. He ran his palm over her back and sighed.

“Why did he ask me to stay?” he said, petting Mimi. She paced back and forth, sliding against him, before climbing onto his lap and kneading his thigh. Her claws were tiny needles. Tong Zhou’s clothes were not thick enough to blunt. He endured it.

“I know. You like him.” He smiled down at her. She purred. “I like him, too,” he whispered, as if saying it too loudly would invite additional catastrophes.

Though in fact, what additional catastrophes could happen? He’d failed to recognize an essence mark which possibly led to the attack that could’ve ended Liu Shilin’s life, and now Liu Shilin knew he was a demon. Tong Zhou wondered if his centuries of being careful had led to carelessness now. He’d let his guard down because he found Liu Shilin appealing.

He shouldered out of his coat and satchel without disturbing Mimi, who insisted on curling up on his lap. He tickled her soft fur. “He thought you were a demon, too,” he teased. She purred louder.

Locked into place by a comfortable cat, Tong Zhou closed his eyes and tried to blank his mind and rest. It was only one more night, then he could return to Shanghai and go back to his quiet, careful, unassuming life. He should turn down the invitation to dinner, but as he thought this he imagined Liu Shilin’s crestfallen disappointment. Nor could he deny the temptation of enjoying a good meal with him.

He chewed on his lower lip. What questions would Liu Shilin ask and how much should he tell him? Liu Shilin was a newspaperman. He would be very good at eliciting information. His nature was to be curious and inquisitive and perceptive. Why him? Tong Zhou wondered. Why am I so drawn to him?

But there were no secret reasons. He remembered Yiwei’s words: that’s the way it always is. Being attracted to someone, finding him fascinating, wanting no harm to come to him—how and why such things happened were the great mysteries poets had written about since ancient times.

Carefully moving Mimi, Tong Zhou stretched out over the bed. Mimi climbed back onto his lap with a small sound of annoyance. Tong Zhou drowsed, gradually falling deeper.

He knew it was a dream. He stood in his grandfather’s tomb, facing the old, strong, black snake demon with green eyes. You’re dead, he told it. The snake demon reared up and grinned at him. Its eyes flashed. You want to protect him, it sneered, but can you protect him from yourself?

“I would never hurt him!” Tong Zhou said aloud, jerking awake. Mimi stirred on his lap. He gasped a deep breath and blinked up at the ceiling. The light in the room was low. It was late afternoon. Tong Zhou sat up and pulled his canvas satchel closer. To clear the dream from his mind he took out his notebook and wrote out some passages for a translation he’d been working on.

Before sunset Tong Zhou took Mimi out for a walk. When they returned to the hotel, Liu Shilin was standing in front of Tong Zhou’s room, one hand flat on the door and his head bowed. He startled when Mimi strutted over to him and rubbed her head against his leg. He stared at Tong Zhou and swallowed, then laughed unconvincingly.

“There you are. Uh, ready to eat?” He smiled easily.

Tong Zhou wondered how long Liu Shilin had been standing at the door.

“Let me put Mimi inside. We went for a walk.” He unlocked the door and left it open while he took Mimi out of her harness. He petted her and promised to bring her dinner later. She settled on the floor beside her wicker basket and began her post-walk bath. Liu Shilin watched them from the door.

“How long have you two been companions?” he asked as they descended the stairs together. His way of asking pleased Tong Zhou.

“Not long. I got her when she was a year old and she’s four now.”

They reached the lobby and strode past the dance hall to the exit. Lively, bright, foreign music rang through the entire floor. Outside, the street sounds were sedate. Tong Zhou fell into step beside Liu Shilin.

“Aren’t you, ah, worried she’ll become a mother?”

Tong Zhou twitched one eyebrow. “Mimi conducts herself appropriately,” he said with amusement. “But to keep the chances of a love affair low, she stays indoors unless I accompany her. Suitors have visited and made their noisy pleas but none have caught her interest. Although...” he continued, thoughtful, “her kittens would be adorable if they were like their mother.”

“Perhaps you should hire a go-between to broker a suitable match for her,” Liu Shilin suggested with obvious sarcasm. Tong Zhou thought the idea of arranging a good match was worth considering if Mimi were willing.

The restaurant was not far from the Chunyue Hotel. It was large, busy, and brightly decorated. They were shown to a small table behind a wooden screen. Liu Shilin enthusiastically recommended several dishes—pork belly, spare ribs, spiced beef—but Tong Zhou, reading the menu, demurred.

“I’m not fond of red meat,” he said. “A little fish, some tofu, and vegetables will be fine. But of course, order what you wish.”

Liu Shilin gave him a skeptical look. They ordered vegetables, fish, and the pork belly for Liu Shilin. When the waiter left, Tong Zhou regarded Liu Shilin evenly and said, “You’re surprised a demon doesn’t like red meat?”

Liu Shilin shifted uncomfortably. “Well...”

“Perhaps it’s only cooked meat I don’t like,” Tong Zhou suggested with a quick grin, indulging an impulse to tease him. “Raw meat, on the other hand...”

Liu Shilin looked blank and Tong Zhou chuckled. “In fact, I’ve never cared for the taste of chicken, duck, pork, beef, and the like. I eat a bit of fish and the occasional egg.”

Liu Shilin visibly relaxed. “Good to know,” he commented.

The dishes were well-seasoned and skillfully prepared. Tong Zhou enjoyed the meal so much he almost forgot to save some fish for Mimi. He picked at what remained and placed the choicest slivers into a small, waxed paper bag he carried in his pocket. Liu Shilin watched him and offered a few chunks of pork belly. “Surely Mimi’s diet isn’t as restricted?”

“Thank you. She’ll appreciate the pork very much.” Tong Zhou rolled the paper bag closed and stuffed it in his coat pocket.

Liu Shilin ate a bite of bamboo shoot and said, “All day I’ve been accumulating questions I want to ask you but it seems all I’ve been asking about tonight is Mimi.” His smile was rueful and hesitant.

Tong Zhou sipped water. “It’s not in my nature to reveal things about myself so you will have to tell me what you want to know.”

Liu Shilin gazed at him. “I want to know everything about you,” he said simply.

“Oh.” Tong Zhou was held by his gaze. His pulse quickened. He hurriedly took another sip, lowering his eyes.

Liu Shilin laughed a little. “It’s all right. You don’t have to tell me anything, of course. I can’t help being curious—that’s in my nature.”

“So I gathered.” Tong Zhou smiled. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have become a newspaperman. How long have you worked for the newspaper?”

Liu Shilin sat back, comfortable. “I’ve worked for various newspapers since I returned to Shanghai when I was nineteen. That was twelve years ago. I’ve been at my current job for five, nearly six, years.”

“Where did you live before your return?” Tong Zhou had traveled extensively and was always interested in knowing about other places.

“I was educated in England,” Liu Shilin said, his manner sobering. “Sent to the best schools which would accept a Chinaman.” His lip curled over the English word. “Or at least would accept his family’s money.”

Tong Zhou could feel his bitterness. “You were sent away as a child? That far away and all alone?” Tears gathered in his eyes and he looked down at his cup, blinking them away before they could escape.

“Yes, but it turned out all right,” Liu Shilin said with false breeziness. “My pronunciation may never be perfect but I’m fluent in English. Something we have in common, perhaps?”

Tong Zhou swallowed a drink of water. “Ah, no.” He frowned. “English is one language that eludes me. I read French and German, but when I’ve tried to learn English I quickly despaired. It resembles the other languages but doesn’t behave like them.”

Liu Shilin grinned. “English doesn’t behave at all,” he chuckled. He lifted his cup and took a sip. “I should’ve ordered wine for this special dinner with a special companion.” He set his empty cup on the table. “Next time, eh?”

Tong Zhou nodded before he caught himself. Next time? How could there be a next time? But his heart raced a little at the thought that there could be.

## Chapter Eight

Morning light flooded the hotel room. Liu Shilin yawned and stretched and picked up his pocket watch from the bedside table. He had an hour before the trade association meeting. He rose, washed, groomed his beard, and dressed. As he exited his room, he saw the door to Tong Zhou's was open. Inside, a maid was stripping sheets from the bed.

It was disappointing but not surprising that Tong Zhou had left. He hadn't promised to stay in Changsha more than one night. Liu Shilin had hoped their enjoyable meal the previous evening would change his mind and was now a little sorry for his gentle questioning. He'd learned almost nothing about Tong Zhou. He was an attractive demon who read French and German, disliked most types of meat, and had a four-year-old cat.

But beyond those basic facts, Liu Shilin reflected as he strolled to the municipal congress hall, he'd discerned Tong Zhou's sense of humor, his tender empathy, his generosity, his gentleness. And yet he killed a snake demon to save me, Liu Shilin thought with a shake of his head.

The trade association meeting was as dull as these things usually were, but Liu Shilin kept his eyes on the Japanese representative who attended. He was a short, mild, middle-aged man surrounded by a small retinue of two Japanese, a local from Changsha, and a thin Belgian wearing round, tinted glasses. The more Liu Shilin observed them, the more the Belgian piqued his curiosity, but during the evening soirée he was unable to approach him for a polite chat. Liu Shilin had to content himself with a sharing a few drinks with the other newspaper reporters in attendance.

The next morning he decided the few drinks were a few too many. His head felt like someone was beating it with an iron pipe. When he got out of bed, he swayed woozily until he managed to creep to the water basin and splash his face. The headache receded a little by the time he reached the congress hall, but his general discomfort kept him irritated all day. His mood was not helped by the boring speeches about tariffs. He skipped that night's soirée, had a light meal at the hotel, and spent the evening writing his report for the newspaper. He fell asleep sitting up on the bed, notebook on his lap and fountain pen in hand.

He knew it was a dream. He was standing inside the tomb in the mountain, searching the darkness for Tong Zhou. Tong Zhou would not be there; he had returned to Shanghai. But in the way of dreams, Liu Shilin kept searching until a pair of green eyes flashed in front of him and he heard deep, rumbling laughter. Poor human, a sneering voice said. You've lost your little demon and lost your way. Liu Shilin spun in a circle, trying to see who spoke. Suddenly the demon princess Yiwei was there, standing in front of the stone coffin. She screamed but the scream turned into a laugh as shadows enveloped her. Liu Shilin turned again and the Belgian in tinted glasses was standing right in front of him, grinning.

Liu Shilin woke jerkily, gulping breaths. Ink from his pen tip ran down the page of his notebook and formed a tiny pool on his lap. He cursed and hopped out of bed to mop it from his trousers. He spread his notebook open on the floor to dry the pages.

The dream disturbed him. He paced the room, undressing for bed, and replayed the dream in his mind. He settled in the bed and switched off the lamp and stared at the dark hotel room. He wished Tong Zhou hadn't left. Otherwise, Liu Shilin would be at his door now, knocking to be let in. He pictured Tong Zhou sleepily opening the door, shocked to see him at this hour, and trying to appear displeased.

He'd tell Tong Zhou about the dream, omitting no details. And then...what? Would Tong Zhou smile softly and say it was only a dream? Tease him gently and tell him to go back to bed and get a good sleep. Or would he look grave and thoughtful and tell him it was serious? Explain some obscure point of demon lore and conclude with an unhappy sigh that Liu Shilin's essence mark hadn't been completely removed.

Liu Shilin switched on the lamp, climbed out of bed and got dressed.

Despite the darkness and the late hour, Liu Shilin found the narrow street and the old shop front without difficulty. Facing the shuttered door, he asked himself why he was here and what he expected would happen. He nearly turned away to return to the hotel but noticed a light inside, visible through the gaps in the shutters. He swallowed and knocked on the door.

Yiwei, magnificent in a voluminous blood red robe, answered the door and looked at him curiously. She did not seem surprised that he was there, but Liu Shilin wondered if anything ever surprised her.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," he said with a weak smile. "Especially so late."

"You may enter," she told him in her low voice. He followed her inside.

She sat down on the elaborately carved chair again, but the modest chairs were nowhere to be seen. Liu Shilin hesitated and awkwardly sat cross-legged on the floor. She watched him silently.

"Is the essence mark gone?" he asked. "Completely gone? Not that I'm questioning your expertise," he added hurriedly. "It was very impressive, what you did. But I understood from Tong Zhou that essence marks can be hard to get rid of, and I...want to be sure."

Yiwei's dark eyes narrowed very slightly for a brief moment, then her entire expression changed to one of distant interest.

"You know what Tong Zhou is," she said.

"I guessed and he confirmed." Liu Shilin winced a little. "Will he be in trouble for letting me know?"

“In trouble from--?” Yiwei’s expression didn’t change but her voice was bemused. “Generally, the trouble our kind faces comes from your kind.” She stared into his eyes. Liu Shilin tried not to shift nervously. “Do you intend to cause Tong Zhou trouble?”

“No!” Liu Shilin replied without hesitation. “Far from it. I...I’m grateful to him. Very much so.” He paused. “But I wondered if other demons would be unhappy with him...Perhaps his family...” He felt only a tiny twinge of guilt over fishing for information. If Tong Zhou hadn’t left Changsha, Liu Shilin wouldn’t need to resort to investigating him this way.

Yiwei’s interest in him faded. She blinked slowly. “As far as I know, Tong Zhou’s family died long ago.” She pulled a fan from her sleeve, shook it out and held it in front of her face, perhaps to hide a yawn. Liu Shilin rose to his feet and bowed.

“The snake demon’s essence mark is completely removed,” she told him as he turned to go. He paused and glanced back. “My work is thorough.”

Liu Shilin smiled at her and bowed again. “Thank you.”

He took one step before she spoke again. “As for other demons being unhappy with him, I assure you, Tong Zhou can take care of them himself. If he chooses.”

Liu Shilin didn’t look back. He left the shop and outside in the cold night air he asked himself what her final words had meant. If he chooses? Why wouldn’t Tong Zhou choose to defend himself?

He slowly walked back to the hotel, lost in thought. He reviewed her reaction (or lack of one) when he’d mentioned Tong Zhou having a family. The family was all dead but that made sense, of course. Liu Shilin scratched his jaw. Was it really Tong Zhou’s grandfather’s tomb? Why keep a winged snake demon inside the coffin?

An explosion of questions. Liu Shilin’s sigh turned into a yawn as he reached the Chunyue Hotel doors. He entered and paused. Across the lobby on the dance floor was the Belgian in round, tinted glasses, waltzing with a pretty young lady in green. Liu Shilin scanned the area. The rest of the Japanese representative’s entourage was nowhere in sight.

Liu Shilin found a table along the side, tucked in the back but with a view of the dance floor. He ordered a coffee and watched the dancers.

He reported to the office of his newspaper’s sister paper early the next morning. He put the finishing touches on his story about the trade association meeting with some additional background information from the local editors. Ah-Meng arrived while he was there and acknowledged him with a nod.

Liu Shilin took him aside on the way out. “Tong Zhou returned to Shanghai,” he said, “without telling me what happened on the road.”

Ah-Meng stuffed his cigarette in the corner of his mouth and checked his watch. “There’s a couple of hours before your train. I can show you.”

They drove the same road as before. About halfway to the village, Ah-Meng pulled the car over and stopped. He nodded toward the steep incline along the side of the road. Liu Shilin got out, crossed the road and took a few climbing steps up the mountainside until the sickening smell forced him to double over, gagging. He covered his nose and mouth with a handkerchief and scanned the rocky ground. He noticed a triangular arrangement of stones and crouched to get a better view.

Tucked between the stones was a black, scaly head with lifeless green eyes staring forward. A mark had been carved between the eyes. The head was about the size of Liu Shilin’s fists or a bit larger. Looking closer, Liu Shilin saw that it had been disemboweled and deboned and its skin had been rolled up beneath its head. Liu Shilin stood and checked the area and found a strip of disturbed earth. He didn’t investigate it further.

Tong Zhou did this.

Liu Shilin walked back to the road. Ah-Meng had turned the car around and was waiting in the driver’s seat, lighting a cigarette. Liu Shilin climbed into the passenger seat.

“The thing was dead already,” Ah-Meng said, driving away from the scene. “It was dead when he threw it out of the window. Then he got out and went over and did that. I couldn’t see everything but I saw enough. I saw he had a knife dripping blood. I saw him stuff that thing’s head between some rocks.”

Liu Shilin said nothing, thinking Tong Zhou must’ve had a good reason for doing such a thing. Yiwei’s words floated back to him: Tong Zhou can take care of other demons himself. If he chooses.

Liu Shilin drummed his fingers on the dashboard. “How did he kill it?”

Ah-Meng puffed on his cigarette. “From what I could see, he broke its neck. With one hand.”

Liu Shilin instinctively touched his throat. He felt beneath his shirt collar for the five tiny welts.

“That thing almost killed me,” he said at last.

Ah-Meng focused on the road. “I’m glad he saved your life. But what he did afterward... Who does something like that?” Liu Shilin didn’t reply and they spent the rest of the drive in silence.



When they reached Changsha, Ah-Meng dropped Liu Shilin off at the Chunyue Hotel. Gao Qixiang, an errand boy from the newspaper office, was waiting for him in the lobby. He approached, face brightly eager, and spoke with breathless excitement. “Guess what news came in just after you left this morning! About the Japanese delegation to the trade meeting—one of them is missing!”

Liu Shilin stared at him. “Who?” His instinct knew the answer even as Gao Qixiang replied, “The man from Belgium. He never returned to the delegation’s hotel last night. The delegation reported him missing to the police before they left this morning.”

Liu Shilin checked his pocket watch, frowned, and turned on his heel, patting Gao Qixiang’s shoulder. “I better talk to the police. I may have been one of the last people to see him last night.”

Gao Qixiang’s eyes bulged in surprise. He scurried to keep pace with Liu Shilin on the way to police headquarters. While they hurried through streets busy with vendors, rickshaws, and bicycles, Gao Qixiang said, “Oh, and you were interested in that rumor about the tomb robbers. It was true. There were two of them and one killed his partner. The police brought in the killer today.” He took a deep breath. “It was such a busy morning! Where did you go?” Liu Shilin didn’t reply, his mind working through all these disparate pieces of information.

The detective leading the investigation of the missing Belgian man was a type Liu Shilin had encountered often over the years. Overconfident and unwilling to help the press. He listened to Liu Shilin describe seeing the Belgian at the Chunyue’s dance hall the night before. Several witnesses from the dance hall had already come forth. Liu Shilin read the detective’s attitude: a foreigner went out carousing and was now missing. It was an all-too-common occurrence. “We’re checking the opium dens,” the detective told him with a dismissive wave of his hand. Liu Shilin wasn’t convinced the case was that simple.

Since he was already at police headquarters he asked Gao Qixiang to nose around about the tomb robbers. Gao Qixiang came back after a few minutes and nodded toward a stout, older, uniformed officer. “He knows about the case if you can spare a silver coin or two,” he whispered. Liu Shilin could ill spare any silver but he slipped Gao Qixiang a coin for his troubles before counting out two more for the uniformed man’s pocket.

It was two silver coins well spent, Liu Shilin decided. The officer took him to the cells where he could view the suspect through a barred peephole in the iron door. The man looked bedraggled and hunted. His eyes shifted from side to side and he muttered to himself.

“Did he confess?” Liu Shilin asked.

The officer sniffed. “Not yet. But he was found with the victim and they were known associates.”

Liu Shilin took a last look at the suspect and scratched his beard. “Can I see the victim? How was he killed?”

“Strangled.” The officer led him down a dismal corridor and into a small room with tiled walls and a smooth, slippery floor. On a metal table a man’s body was laid out. The dark strangulation marks around his neck were visible from a distance. Liu Shilin covered his nose and mouth with his handkerchief and approached.

Liu Shilin leaned over to inspect the victim’s neck, then squinted at five tiny marks on the man’s hand. Using his handkerchief as a barrier, he lightly touched the marks and determined they weren’t puncture wounds. The bite hadn’t broken the man’s skin.

“Hey, don’t touch anything,” the officer snapped. “The medical examiner doesn’t like it if anything is disturbed.”

Liu Shilin replaced his handkerchief and walked back to the officer. “I’m no expert, of course, but the bruising around the throat doesn’t look like it was made by a man’s hands.”

The officer escorted him out of the examination room. “No, the murder weapon was found at the scene. You want to see that, too?” He seemed unsurprised by Liu Shilin’s morbid interest and took him upstairs to a room filled with files and boxes. A young officer was there, sorting through papers. He bowed to his superior officer and left them alone. The officer opened a file box and showed Liu Shilin. Inside was a bronze chain.

Liu Shilin blinked at it and took a breath. He noted its patina, hinting at its great age, its length, and the size of its rings. It was probably quite heavy but not too heavy for a man to lift and wrap around another’s throat.

“Would it be possible to get a photograph of this?” he asked with a charming smile. The officer regarded him suspiciously. Liu Shilin said airily, “It might be connected to something I’m pursuing in Shanghai or it might be a coincidence. A photograph would help, but of course, if it’s out of the question...”

The officer shrugged and lifted a paper folder from the file box. He sifted through it and handed him one of the evidence photographs of the chain. He replaced the folder, closed the box, and pushed it onto one of the shelves.

Liu Shilin thanked him for his assistance and departed, hoping he still had time to make his train. He didn’t—the train had left nearly an hour earlier—so he scraped the last of the money from his wallet for an additional night in the hotel. He ate the cheapest meal he could find—a few dumplings from a street stall—and retired early so he could wake up in plenty of time to catch the next morning’s train.

Tong Zhou was not listed in any of the directories for Shanghai, and Liu Shilin checked them all. But a few questions to contacts in various offices about a translator of French and German yielded several

leads, and within a week after his return to Shanghai Liu Shilin strolled through narrow warrens wedged near the old city wall.

Tong Zhou lived in a two-storey shikumen behind a brick wall with a plain wooden gate. Liu Shilin knocked on the gate and waited. Tong Zhou, dressed in grey trousers and a loose Qing-style jacket, opened it and stood very still, staring at him with big, dark eyes. If Liu Shilin wasn't inventing fantasies for himself, Tong Zhou was pleased to see him again.

Tong Zhou stepped back and invited him in. The courtyard was neatly kept, ringed by large, ceramic storage jars and potted plants. It was early afternoon, the day sunny and clear, and Mimi lazed on a step in front of the central hall. Its tall, French-style doors were open, revealing a sparsely furnished room with a dark wood floor. To one side was the dwelling's single wing with latticed windows.

Tong Zhou showed him to the central hall and went to make tea. Liu Shilin glanced about with interest. On one wall was a small, European painting showing a landscape scene. The only furniture in the room were two low wooden chairs and a matching table. Everything was clean and well-dusted, but Liu Shilin formed the impression that Tong Zhou didn't use this room much. It made him curious to see the rest of the house.

Tong Zhou brought a tray with tea. They sat in the wooden chairs and Liu Shilin accepted a delicate cup and took a sip.

"What brings you to my home?" Tong Zhou asked, polite but reserved.

Liu Shilin reached into his breast pocket, pulled out the evidence photograph and handed it to him.

"This. Your grandfather's, I believe?"

## Chapter Nine

Tong Zhou stared at the photograph of the bronze chain and listened as Liu Shilin explained how he'd come by it, what it had been used for, and the fate of the unfortunate thieves. All the while, Tong Zhou's heart beat quickly and his mind reeled because Liu Shilin was here. Had tracked him down and shown up at his gate.

He shouldn't be surprised, Tong Zhou told himself. Liu Shilin was clever and as a newspaperman he had connections. It wouldn't be hard for him to find out where Tong Zhou lived. No, Tong Zhou realized, his reaction at seeing Liu Shilin again was due to his own shortsightedness. He'd believed that leaving Changsha would put an end to their acquaintanceship—and to his own fascination with Liu Shilin. But after everything there was a connection between them.

Liu Shilin's explanation rambled a bit in Tong Zhou's silence, going off on tangents about a Japanese business delegation and a missing Belgian man. During a pause when Liu Shilin took a sip of tea, Tong Zhou said, "Yes, this is the chain from my grandfather's coffin. Can I get it back?"

Liu Shilin swallowed tea and looked at him kindly. "I'm afraid not. At least not immediately. It's being kept as evidence at the moment. Although..." He rubbed his jaw. "I met an officer who might be willing to return it to you for the right price."

Tong Zhou sighed at the thought of bribing a police officer to get his own family's possession back. He passed the photograph to Liu Shilin. "I'll think about it. Thank you for coming here to let me know that the chain has been found."

"That's not the only reason why I came," Liu Shilin replied with a slight smile. His eyes glinted, igniting a long dormant warmth in Tong Zhou that spread over his chest and up the nape of his neck.

Whatever Liu Shilin meant to say next was interrupted by Mimi entering the room and mewing for her afternoon snack. She shamelessly wound around Liu Shilin's ankles and gave Tong Zhou an expectant look. Tong Zhou pursed his lips and carried the tray back to the kitchen to refresh the tea and set out Mimi's food. She followed happily and he petted her while she nibbled at flakes of fish. When he returned to the main room with the fresh tea, Liu Shilin stepped out from the door to the study, smirking. "You misled me."

The door to the study had been open, but it was rude of Liu Shilin to explore without invitation. Tong Zhou frowned and set the tea on the table. "How so?"

Liu Shilin entered the study again with Tong Zhou close behind. Aside from the wide, old-fashioned desk, the room was furnished with tall cabinets and shelves full of papers, scrolls, and books. The room was, to Tong Zhou's sudden chagrin, cluttered and disorganized. He hastily replaced some writing brushes on a hanging stand and rolled up a loose scroll.

Liu Shilin waved his hand lazily at the shelves. "I see not just French and German but Latin and Greek. I believe this is Italian. Is this Dutch?" He tapped one shelf. "And this. Tibetan?"

"Sanskrit," Tong Zhou replied self-consciously. "The books on the shelf below are Tibetan."

Liu Shilin nodded, scanning more shelves, exclaiming to himself, "Manchu...Portuguese...I don't even recognize this one." He raised one eyebrow and gave Tong Zhou a considering look. "I've been wondering what your imbalance is. Is it this? An obsession with languages?"

Tong Zhou looked away and straightened the shelf of Sanskrit books. He felt Liu Shilin watching him and said, "Thank you for your visit. I will let you know what I decide about the chain. You can see yourself out, I believe?"

Liu Shilin made no move to leave. He said slowly, quietly, "You don't have an imbalance, do you? You were born a demon."

Tong Zhou's hands shook. He clutched the shelf, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. Were there no secrets about himself that he could keep from Liu Shilin? He opened his eyes. Were there no secrets he wanted to keep from Liu Shilin?

"Yes," Tong Zhou answered. He ran his fingers along the shelf. Sunlight pierced through the lattice window and dappled the books with soft shadows.

Liu Shilin didn't say anything. Tong Zhou heard his steps as he left the study. Tong Zhou went back to the main room. Liu Shilin sat in one of the chairs, sipping tea. Mimi sprawled on the floor by his feet, stretching and showing off her fuzzy belly. Tong Zhou sat in the other chair and rested his hands on his knees.

"My mother's imbalance was the desire to know everything, to see everything, to experience everything. But she was imprudent. Her quests took her to an impure place and changed her. This was very long ago."

He paused. Liu Shilin refilled both tea cups. Tong Zhou took a sip and stared out at the courtyard.

"My father's imbalance was the opposite. He wanted to stay inside and be protected. He didn't want to learn new things, didn't want to experience new adventures. He didn't want to meet anyone new. My grandfather doted on him but decided he was unhealthy. He sent him on a journey with some cousins to restore his health. The journey took them to the same impure place and changed my father. He met my mother and they fell in love. Their imbalances were complementary and I am the result."

He held the empty cup in his hand, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger.

“It’s your father’s father in the tomb?” Liu Shilin asked. His manner was very gentle, giving Tong Zhou space not to tell him.

“Yes. Despite what happened to his son and despite the nature of his son’s wife, he took them in and shielded them—and me—as best he could. He was a respected scholar but as time passed and rumors spread, the village turned against him. There was an uprising and when the emperor sent soldiers to quell it, the villagers directed them to my grandfather’s house, demanding blood.”

Tong Zhou closed his eyes briefly, remembering the shouts, the neighs of horses, the chaos.

“My mother was fearless,” he continued, opening his eyes. “She grabbed me and ran from the house. My grandfather followed. They begged my father to come with us but he wouldn’t leave. His nature was to stay put and he was killed in the house where he had always lived. Then the villagers burnt the house to the ground.”

Mimi had wandered over to sit beside his feet. She rubbed her face against his leg. Tong Zhou reached down to stroke between her ears, thankful for her comfort.

“I was young and my demonic traits were not yet obvious, but my mother’s appearance marked her as a demon. As long as she was with me and my grandfather, we were in danger. My mother made the decision to leave us one night and I never saw her again.” He looked over at Liu Shilin and set his empty tea cup on the tray. Liu Shilin’s eyes were gravely sympathetic.

“The nature of aging for a born demon is the same as for human children as long as the demon’s parents are alive. With the death of both parents the aging process stops as it does for other demons. In my thirties I realized my mother was dead. My grandfather, who had kept me alive but never stopped mourning his son, died shortly after that.”

“You created the tomb for him,” Liu Shilin guessed.

Tong Zhou shrugged slightly. “Actually, he began building it himself. He had intended it for his son but there weren’t even enough ashes for us to gather. In the end I placed him there over the village which despised him.” Tong Zhou’s lips twisted. “He never forgave them. I think he appreciated taking one of their mountains from them.”

Liu Shilin furrowed his brow. “Why place a winged snake demon inside the coffin?”

Tong Zhou sat back as the memory of capturing the juvenile flitted through his mind. “In case the villagers weren’t warned off by the inscriptions outside and tried to desecrate my grandfather’s resting place. Trapped in a cold, dark place such as the coffin, a snake demon will hibernate for centuries. That one was young and rude and I thought it would be a fitting deterrent should anyone open the coffin.” He paused and gave Liu Shilin a contrite look. “I didn’t intend for it to attack someone innocent like you.”

Liu Shilin's eyebrows rose. It was clear that Liu Shilin didn't consider himself innocent, though in the matter of the coffin he certainly had been. Liu Shilin carefully set his cup on the tray and said, "I'm not the first person it attacked. Your guess about the tomb robbers was correct."

Tong Zhou frowned. "Oh? But you said one was killed by the other. If either of them were poisoned, how did they leave the tomb?"

"He was attacked but not bitten." Liu Shilin touched the spot on his neck where, below his shirt collar, were five small welts. "I saw the marks on his hand. They didn't pierce the skin."

Tong Zhou considered this. "It makes sense," he said at last, nodding. "The thief reached inside and after a long hibernation the snake demon's reflexes were sluggish. It struck where it could but without enough force. The thieves grabbed the chain and managed to close the coffin before it could try again. Unfortunately, that probably woke it up enough to be alert when you showed up."

Liu Shilin gave him an interested look. "Why didn't it bite you?"

Tong Zhou smiled smugly. "It knew better than to try. Besides, I'm not what it likes to eat."

Liu Shilin visibly shuddered and touched his neck again. A moment passed before his manner changed, lightened, and he gave Tong Zhou a sincere smile. Tong Zhou marveled at it. Liu Shilin was beautiful.

"Thank you," Liu Shilin said.

"For what?" Tong Zhou calmed his pulse.

"You didn't need to tell me any of that yet you did. I'm grateful for knowing." Liu Shilin's eyes sparked. "As I said, I want to know everything about you."

Tong Zhou swallowed and glanced away. They rose together and he walked Liu Shilin to the front gate. Liu Shilin paused, one hand on the gate.

"I nearly forgot. I had another question."

Tong Zhou watched him and waited.

"Would the winged snake demon's bite need to pierce the skin to leave an essence mark?" Liu Shilin looked at him, full of curious interest. "How are essence marks left on their victims?"

Tong Zhou stared at him for a moment and furrowed his brow. "Why do you ask?"

“I wondered if the dead tomb robber could’ve been marked.”

“You think he was killed by a demon, not by his partner in crime?”

Liu Shilin shrugged. “I don’t know. But something seemed off about them.” He flashed a grin. “Call it a reporter’s instinct.”

His grin was charming and inviting, and Tong Zhou wanted to resist it but replied truthfully, “There are various ways a demon can leave an essence mark and there are different types of essence marks. Yes, the winged snake demon could’ve marked the thief without fully biting him. In fact...” Tong Zhou trailed off and chewed on his lower lip.

“In fact?” Liu Shilin prompted.

Tong Zhou opened the front gate and took a breath. “In fact, it’s even possible the mark could’ve been made unintentionally. The demon may not have realized what it had done.”

Liu Shilin nodded slowly. “I see. A young snake demon, slow to wake after a long hibernation. Strikes out and may not mean to mark the victim but isn’t entirely in control of its actions. Is such a thing common?”

Tong Zhou gave him a steady look. “Common?” He smiled a little. “That depends on what you would measure such an occurrence against.”

Liu Shilin laughed, bubbly and amused and admiring. Tong Zhou immediately wished he could capture that laugh and listen to it again.

“And you’ll let me know what you decide about the chain?” Liu Shilin passed through the gate and looked back.

“The chain?” Tong Zhou had nearly forgotten Liu Shilin’s reason for coming here. “Ah, yes, I will.”

Liu Shilin smiled and strolled away down the narrow lane. Tong Zhou closed the gate, thoughtful. He wasn’t sure if reclaiming the chain would be worth the effort. It had been a revered possession of his grandfather, who’d believed it to be ancient and special, but Tong Zhou had never found it attractive. On the other hand, if he wanted to travel to Changsha to get it back, he was certain that Liu Shilin would accompany him, and that prospect was very attractive.

Tong Zhou put away the tea set and sat outside on a step, petting Mimi, who basked in the sunlight. “Why him?” he asked her. Mimi stretched and purred. He tickled her stomach. “I shouldn’t find his curiosity and intelligence and boldness appealing. I’ve already told him more than is wise.” Mimi drowsily fluttered her tail. “You’re no help at all.”



He went inside his study to work on a particularly challenging translation concerning maritime law but his attention wandered as he thought of Liu Shilin's laughter and smile.

## Chapter Ten

Despite being awoken early by a nightmare, Liu Shilin was in a good mood when he sauntered into the newspaper office the next morning. He now knew where Tong Zhou lived and with his imagination he was sure he could manufacture excuses to see him again. Tong Zhou had been candid about his family, sharing more details than Liu Shilin had expected. He'd hoped Tong Zhou would immediately want to return to Changsha to get the bronze chain and he was prepared to become his traveling partner. Tong Zhou's ambivalence about the chain was slightly disappointing, but Liu Shilin didn't let it ruin what was otherwise a very informative visit.

Liu Shilin tossed his hat onto a coat stand and poured himself into his desk chair. Song Liying, the newspaper's youngest photographer, had the desk opposite his. She looked up from her notebook. "Successful meeting?"

Liu Shilin grinned. "Most successful."

Her eyes gleamed with interest. "Anything you can share?" Song Liying was bright and ambitious. In the past year since she'd started working there Liu Shilin had given her a few leads. She appreciated his tips and always made the most of them.

Liu Shilin picked up a pen and balanced it between his forefingers. "Not yet," he said. He'd already submitted a short piece about the tomb robbery. He didn't name Tong Zhou in the article and, of course, omitted any mention of the winged snake demon.

He bent over his papers, pulling together notes for a promising feature about a corrupt official's connection to smuggled firearms. He was busy writing when the errand boy called for him. "Visitor for Liu Shilin."

For a moment Liu Shilin daydreamed it would be Tong Zhou and his heart beat faster. The daydream faded when a mousy young man dressed in a black changpao approached the desk.

"You're the reporter who wrote about the East Asian trade congress in Changsha?"

"I am." Liu Shilin set down his pen and leaned back in his chair. "You are--?"

The young man bowed and presented a calling card, holding it in both hands. "My employer begs to know if you would do him the honor of dining with him tonight. He instructed me specifically to mention that he has information you may find useful."

Liu Shilin cocked an eyebrow and took the card. "Zhang Ruifu," he read. "Northeast Importing and Exporting Partners Limited. Zhang Ruifu is your employer?" He'd never heard of the person or the company.

“Yes.”

Liu Shilin rubbed the jaw. “Tell your boss I’d be delighted to meet for dinner tonight.”

The young man looked relieved. “The driver will pick you up here at the end of the day if that’s acceptable.”

Liu Shilin nodded, bemused. “Sure, that’s fine.”

The young man bowed again and left. Song Liying, who’d overheard everything, came over to pick up the calling card. “What was that about?”

“I have no idea,” Liu Shilin chuckled. “Ever heard of him?”

Song Liying slowly shook her head. “Northeast Importing and Exporting... Maybe he’s recently expanded his business here. Or relocated.” She handed the card back. “You better tell me everything about this dinner tomorrow. So mysterious!” She grinned and went back to her desk.

“Nothing mysterious.” Liu Shilin smirked. “Just a dinner.”

Song Liying made a disbelieving sound.

As promised, when Liu Shilin left the office that evening there was a big, gleaming Bentley saloon car parked out front. A stern-faced chauffeur opened the passenger door and gestured Liu Shilin inside. Liu Shilin’s curiosity about Zhang Ruifu deepened.

The drive took them out of the heart of the French Concession proper and toward the Western Roads area. The sun was setting when the chauffeur turned off the main road and followed a paved driveway to a grand, European-style house. The mousy young man opened the door, showed Liu Shilin into a wood-paneled study and left him alone. Liu Shilin browsed the hanging artwork—two large scrolls of striking calligraphy and a few sketches of pretty women—and the bookcases shelved with a mix of foreign and domestic titles.

“Liu-xiansheng.”

Liu Shilin turned around to meet his host. Zhang Ruifu was slender, of average height, and strikingly handsome. His face was narrow but finely featured, with sharp, dark eyes under arched black brows, a straight nose, and softly curved lips. He wore a light grey suit of European cut, perfectly tailored. But the most remarkable aspect of his appearance was his hair. Parted on one side but falling loose to his shoulders, it was pure white. He looked no older than thirty.

Liu Shilin politely inclined his head. “I must thank you for your invitation.”

Zhang Ruifu laughed pleasantly. He gestured for Liu Shilin to accompany him to the dining room. “I hope you like duck. My chef prepares it quite well.”

“It sounds delicious.”

Liu Shilin observed Zhang Ruifu closely as they took their seats at the dining table, Zhang Ruifu at the head and Liu Shilin on his left side. The table was long and could seat ten.

“It’s just the two of us,” Zhang Ruifu explained, not quite apologetic. “I hope you don’t mind. Easier for us to chat this way.”

“Not at all.”

Servants brought the food already apportioned on individual plates: roast duck, vegetables in a French sauce, freshly baked bread, and red wine. Liu Shilin was reminded of meals at school in England, though the quality of the dishes was beyond comparison. Zhang Ruifu raised his wine glass in toast. Liu Shilin took a drink and waited for Zhang Ruifu to tell him why he was here. Zhang Ruifu was more interested in eating, and Liu Shilin enjoyed the excellent meal before broaching the topic.

“You read my article about the East Asian trade congress?”

“Oh, yes.” Zhang Ruifu motioned for a servant to refill their wine glasses and clear the plates. When they were alone he continued, “Your account was accurate and thorough, a rarity in the press these days.” He smiled at Liu Shilin. “But I was more interested in the smaller pieces related to that article. The disappearance of a man from the Japanese delegation and the robbery of a tomb in a nearby village.”

Liu Shilin sat back, toying with the stem of his wine glass. His instinct was not to trust Zhang Ruifu. It occurred to him that no one knew where he was, although Song Liying had seen the calling card. If something happened to him he hoped she would be able to trace him here.

After a pause Zhang Ruifu said good-naturedly, “You’re being cautious with me. I understand. I didn’t bring you here under false pretenses. I do happen to have a tiny bit of information related to the Japanese delegation which I thought might interest you. But mostly I simply wanted to meet the man who became Tong Zhou’s friend under such peculiar circumstances.”

At the mention of Tong Zhou, Liu Shilin stared at him. Zhang Ruifu met his look evenly.

“You know Tong Zhou?”

“We’re old...” Zhang Ruifu paused. “...acquaintances is probably the word Tong Zhou would use. I would say friends.”

Liu Shilin looked him over, arching one eyebrow. He smiled coolly to hide his nervousness. “Do all demons know each other?”

Zhang Ruifu laughed, delighted. “Very good.” He lifted his glass and tipped it toward Liu Shilin. “No, we don’t all know each other, but I happen to know Tong Zhou.”

“Just as you ‘happen’ to know something about the Japanese trade delegation,” Liu Shilin remarked acidly. “What is that something, by the way?”

“Ah, well.” Zhang Ruifu’s smile angled. “You will appreciate this, I think. The missing man is not, ah, human.”

Liu Shilin gazed at him closely to detect any hints of deception. But who knew if demons would reveal the same hints?

“He’s a demon?” Liu Shilin wondered if every second person in China was a demon or if it was his dubious luck to keep crossing paths with them.

“Yes,” Zhang Ruifu replied. “But not like Tong Zhou nor like the snake demons who attacked you.”

Liu Shilin shifted in his chair. He really wanted to know how Zhang Ruifu got his information.

“Yiwei,” he said at last. He would not have credited the formidable princess as being a gossip. Zhang Ruifu smiled without replying.

“All right,” Liu Shilin said with a frustrated sigh. “Let’s set aside your demonic telegraphy or whatever for now. What can you tell me about the missing man? Is he even Belgian?”

“As far as I know.” Zhang Ruifu swallowed a mouthful of wine. “His origins are obscure but he has been seen in our country several times before. His association with the Japanese is worrisome.”

“Is he dangerous?”

Zhang Ruifu leaned close. “All demons are dangerous,” he murmured with a smug grin. “Even little Tong Zhou.”

Liu Shilin was on the verge of protesting this but remembered the dead snake demon. He took a sip of wine.

Changing tone, he asked casually, “So, ah, how long have you known Tong Zhou?”

Zhang Ruifu laughed quietly and didn’t answer. He watched Liu Shilin over his wine glass. “Tell me, what was taken from the tomb? Your newspaper account merely mentioned an ancient artifact.”

Liu Shilin drank more wine to stall, thinking. On the one hand, the bronze chain belonged to Tong Zhou's ancestor and was a private object. On the other hand, Tong Zhou didn't seem especially attached to it. Liu Shilin decided he might elicit more information from his host by sharing a little.

"A bronze chain which had been laid inside the coffin."

Zhang Ruifu's perfectly arched eyebrows rose. "Do you know what it was originally used for?"

Liu Shilin frowned. "No. Do you?"

For the first time all evening Zhang Ruifu looked serious. He touched one elegant finger to his lips, rubbing distractedly. "I might."

Liu Shilin drained his wine glass, waiting. He gazed at Zhang Ruifu expectantly. Zhang Ruifu put on his charming smile again and Liu Shilin sensed he was not going to get a straight answer. He pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time.

"It's rather late," he said. "Thank you for the excellent meal."

Zhang Ruifu's smile became slightly predatory. The hair on the back of Liu Shilin's neck prickled.

"As it's so late, why don't you stay the night? There are plenty of bedrooms. You may have your pick." He lowered his head to look up at Liu Shilin through dark eyelashes and added, "Though my bedroom is the most comfortable."

This was not the first time in his life that Liu Shilin had been propositioned—with the kinds of stories he'd pursued earlier in his career, it had not been an uncommon occurrence. He wasn't in the least bit tempted though he was curious about Zhang Ruifu's motive. During their dinner and conversation Zhang Ruifu's interest in him hadn't seemed carnal.

"A generous offer but I must decline." Liu Shilin sighed as if he were sorry to leave. "Early morning tomorrow. You understand."

Zhang Ruifu's smile deepened and he gave Liu Shilin a long look. "Yes, I believe I do." He rose and escorted Liu Shilin to the entry hall. "It was a true pleasure to meet you. I hope our paths will bring us together again. Or better yet, bring all three of us together: you, me, and little Tong Zhou."

The way he emphasized the 'little' before Tong Zhou's name irritated Liu Shilin for reasons he couldn't name. He smiled politely and bowed. Zhang Ruifu summoned his chauffeur, who silently drove Liu Shilin back to the newspaper building without incident.

Liu Shilin thought it prudent not to be driven to his home address. After making sure that the Bentley was gone Liu Shilin walked home in the cold, dark streets. He lived on the top floor of a modest, modern apartment building. By the time he'd climbed the stairs and entered his flat he was so exhausted he could barely stand. He stripped, tossing his clothes aside haphazardly, and flung himself into bed, wrapping himself in blankets. He fell into a deep sleep, pursued by disjointed, disturbing dreams.

## Chapter Eleven

The following day Tong Zhou visited the German consulate to deliver the completed maritime law translations. The morning was clear and cool, and Tong Zhou didn't mind the long journey by tram. His business at the consulate finished, he visited some bookshops, the bank, the post office, and bought groceries for his and Mimi's dinner. He walked home, returning in mid-afternoon.

Mimi did not come out to greet him when he entered the house. This was odd but sometimes she sulked when he was away for too long. He put away his purchases and searched the house.

"Little girl," he called, climbing upstairs. "I brought you a chicken heart from the butcher. Your favorite."

She was being stubborn. He sighed and entered the bedroom and heard a low, growling sound. He knelt on the floor. Mimi cowered under the bed, her eyes round and scared.

In the instant Tong Zhou realized something was very wrong, the attacker flung itself upon him. It was long, cold, scaly, and extremely strong. Another snake demon, Tong Zhou thought with a snarl, reaching to grab it. It was highly unusual for one to be in the city, but Tong Zhou didn't have time to wonder about its origins. He and the snake demon wrestled together, thrashing across the bedroom floor, knocking into furniture and overturning a tall, antique vase.

The snake demon slithered around his chest and aimed to wrap around his throat. Tong Zhou caught it by the jaw but its powerful body constricted him. If he could wrench it away, he could conjure a defensive barrier around himself long enough to regain his footing. Tong Zhou tried to take a deep breath to summon all of his strength. He coughed and wheezed for air. The snake demon squeezed him harder.

Tong Zhou dug his fingers into the snake demon's hide. He gritted his teeth and tumbled until he was on his knees, gulping for breath. The snake demon gripped him like a vise. Tong Zhou felt his own internal strength welling up. A moment to focus and he could call it up—

A dark streak dashed past his vision, followed by a sharp jab next to his shoulder blade. There were two snake demons. Tong Zhou's shock quickly turned to panic: his strength was fading fast. His knees shook and his hands trembled. He fell forward and rolled on the floor, desperate to pry the snake demon off of him. Where was the other one? Had it gone after Mimi?

Unspeakable pain seared his shoulder, spreading rapidly from the jab. Tong Zhou's limbs became heavy and useless. Gasping, he turned his head and tried to find Mimi but the bedroom had become unnaturally dark. He heard a distant noise, a knocking far below, but couldn't tell if it was real. He opened his mouth to call out but he had no voice, no air, no breath.

His struggle ended. Blackness enveloped him.



He saw Grandfather, standing in front of the stone coffin and holding the bronze chain. Grandfather looked at him sadly and held out the chain. All at once Mother's voice shouted his name. They were on a mountainside at night, running through the forest. The sounds of horses and soldiers were close behind. A roar shuddered the air and an orange glow lit the trees. Fire crackled where their home had been.

"My boy, my boy," Mother cried, clutching Tong Zhou to her chest. "You will always have the strength of your parents. Use it. Don't give up."

Mother hugged him tightly and Tong Zhou was pressed into blackness again. When she let go, he could feel nothing, see nothing. He was all alone.

A sound pierced the black emptiness: Liu Shilin's voice. "Tong Zhou! Can you hear me? Tong Zhou! Please, oh please." He sounded frightened. Tong Zhou wanted to reassure him that there was no reason to be afraid, he would never hurt him, but he couldn't move, couldn't speak. He couldn't even lift his eyelids.

A warm finger brushed beneath his nostrils. Liu Shilin exhaled. "I'm getting you to a hospital." A warm palm patted, then lightly struck Tong Zhou's cheeks. "Without your help, ah, it's all right. Don't worry. We can do this."

Liu Shilin pulled on Tong Zhou's arms, raising him. The pain in Tong Zhou's shoulder flared and Tong Zhou whimpered.

"Sorry, sorry." Liu Shilin spoke rapidly, anxious. "Almost done."

While Liu Shilin maneuvered him, the pain peaked to the point that Tong Zhou slipped back into the numbing nothingness. Liu Shilin's voice drew him out of it again: "Ouch! Sorry. My fault."

The world tilted and swung dizzily but Tong Zhou felt secure, pressed against something warm and vital and strong. Liu Shilin was carrying him on his back.

Tong Zhou tried to circle his arms to hold on. They barely moved and now the pain in his shoulder felt like a burning iron stake being driven into him. He winced and hissed.

"Nearly there," Liu Shilin told him. "The hospital's a few streets away. We'll make it."

Tong Zhou put all of his effort into shaking his head and getting out one word: "No."

"Tong Zhou! You're awake." Liu Shilin's relief jostled him. "Did you say no?"

Tong Zhou swallowed. His throat felt like it was filled with dust and stinging insects. He managed another word: "Demon."

After a moment Liu Shilin said, "Oh, yes. Of course. I see. Let me think." He walked on, holding Tong Zhou's legs around him as if Tong Zhou weighed nothing. Liu Shilin's back was comforting and inviting. Tong Zhou's head drooped forward. He was so very tired. He heard Liu Shilin say, "Well, nothing for it. Can't be helped." Then Tong Zhou floated in nothingness again.

This time he didn't see his family but he dreamt in uneasy fragments. When he next heard Liu Shilin's voice, it was close and clear. He opened his eyes but it was still the darkest, deepest night. He tried to focus. Why couldn't he see anything?

He could feel his whole body, not only the excruciating pain in his shoulder. He was lying on a bed. It felt different than his own. Had Liu Shilin taken him to a hospital after all? What would they do to him? He wanted to get up, get away, but he couldn't move his limbs.

"He's awake again," Liu Shilin said. "What's wrong with his eyes?"

Another voice answered, "We need to hurry. Help me with his clothes."

Tong Zhou knew that voice, he was sure of it. Four hands moved quickly over him, unfastening, unbuttoning, and removing his clothes. He recognized Liu Shilin's touch guiding him onto his stomach. Then: two simultaneous, sharp intakes of breath.

"What in the hell is that?" Liu Shilin was appalled.

"It's worse than I thought," said the other voice. "A snake demon bit him. He's been poisoned. Of course. That explains the eyes. Xiao Tong, what trouble have you gotten yourself into?"

Now Tong Zhou could name the voice: Zhang Ruifu. How in the world--? Where had--? Why was he here, with Liu Shilin?

"Poisoned?" Worry weighted Liu Shilin's voice.

"Yes, but the poison shouldn't be fatal if we act fast. I'll bring a doctor. Keep him warm and feed him the ginger soup. I'll be back as soon as I can."

There were muffled sounds before Liu Shilin gently touched him again, positioning him upright on the bed. Soft bedcovers were tucked around him. The smooth edge of a spoon pressed against his lower lip. Tong Zhou parted his lips enough to accept a mouthful of ginger soup.

He tried to think clearly but could only focus on Liu Shilin's steady attentiveness as he fed him the soup. After the last spoonful Liu Shilin sighed quietly, "Tong Zhou."

His concern made Tong Zhou feel secure again and he drowsed for a while until Liu Shilin snapped, “What is that?”

“This is the doctor,” Zhang Ruifu said imperiously.

“It’s a tortoise.”

“A tortoise demon,” Zhang Ruifu corrected. “Do you want Tong Zhou to die from the venom? No? Then stand back and let her work.”

Yet again Tong Zhou was eased onto his stomach by Liu Shilin. The bedcovers were whisked away and he felt a cool heaviness descend upon him. The pain in his shoulder, which had receded to a pounding ache, burst into full effect. Tong Zhou locked his teeth together and clenched his jaw. Perspiration beaded on his skin.

Right when he thought he could no longer bear the agony, something thick and sharp gouged him at the spot where the pain was the worst. Liu Shilin cried out angrily.

“What are you doing to him? Stop that!”

Zhang Ruifu said impatiently, “This is the only way. He can recover from a tortoise demon bite. That’s nothing. He can’t recover from snake demon poison. If you can’t stand to watch, go away.”

“I’m not leaving my own flat,” Liu Shilin muttered.

“Then make yourself useful. Heat up the rest of the ginger soup. He’ll need more of it after this.”

Tong Zhou well remembered how annoying Zhang Ruifu could be and thought to warn Liu Shilin not to cross him. But the tortoise demon bit him again and he succumbed to unconsciousness.

The next time he woke and opened his eyes, it was day. He couldn’t focus but he could perceive light and vague shapes. He wore soft pyjamas and his shoulder was bandaged. From the stillness around him he could tell he was alone.

In Liu Shilin’s flat, apparently. He was curious to see his surroundings and tried to identify the indistinct shapes. A throbbing ache flashed in his head and he gave up. He closed his eyes and tried to move his limbs. He could raise both arms. With effort, he could bend his knees and lift his feet from the mattress. He practiced this a few times until Liu Shilin asked with sincere concern, “How do you feel?”

Tong Zhou opened his eyes again and saw a blurry shape coming closer and lowering beside him. He wished he could see Liu Shilin clearly.

Speaking required more effort. His mouth was dry and swollen. “Better.”

Liu Shilin made a soft, relieved sound. “Good. The doctor believes she’s neutralized the poison. You look a bit better. Your eyes aren’t, uh... Can you see anything?”

“Shapes,” Tong Zhou answered. He worked his jaw to remove the stiffness. “Tell me.” He rolled his jaw. “About Zhang Ruifu.”

“He was the reason I went to see you,” Liu Shilin said with a short, humorless laugh. “Thank goodness I did. Otherwise...” He didn’t complete the thought. “He’s an old friend of yours, I believe?”

“An acquaintance.”

Liu Shilin chuckled dryly. “He said you’d say that. He invited me to dinner, for what true purpose I honestly don’t know. Although he... Well, anyway. When I couldn’t take you to a hospital, I called him because I had his telephone number and because I thought another demon would know what to do. He did and I’m glad.”

Liu Shilin sounded more than glad, as if his greatest fear had been conquered. Tong Zhou mulled over Liu Shilin’s explanation. Zhang Ruifu lived in Shanghai now? And why would he want to meet Liu Shilin? Although Tong Zhou suspected he could guess the reason.

“Be careful with him,” Tong Zhou warned. “He’s—”

“I’m what?” Zhang Ruifu interjected indignantly. His shadowy form came into view and the bed moved as he sat down on it beside Tong Zhou’s legs. “You’re looking much better. Still some milkiness in the eyes but the doctor said that should fade in a day or two. Your human has been taking good care of you.”

Tong Zhou directed a frown at him. “How long have you been here?”

“Why, since Liu Shilin called me. I couldn’t bear to leave until I knew you were better.” Zhang Ruifu’s insistence sounded insincere. Tong Zhou’s frown deepened.

“How long have you been in Shanghai?”

“Not long. I’ve extended my business here. I must say, I’m thoroughly enjoying Shanghai and all it has to offer.” This last he added in a low, suggestive tone.

Liu Shilin cleared his throat. “I’ll go heat the soup.” His shape rose and disappeared.

As soon as Liu Shilin left the room Zhang Ruifu's manner changed, turning serious. "Tong Zhou, tell me. Why did your grandfather have a bronze chain? What was it used for?"

His sudden shift and urgency puzzled Tong Zhou. "It wasn't used for anything. It was something my grandfather kept and admired because he thought it was valuable. It was one of the few things he saved when our home was destroyed."

"Really? How interesting," Zhang Ruifu said musingly. "What did it look like? Can you describe it?"

"I can do better than that," Liu Shilin said, entering the room again. "I have a photograph of it."

After a while Zhang Ruifu said grimly, "As I thought."

"What?" Tong Zhou and Liu Shilin asked at the same time.

"You really don't know, do you? Well, you are relatively young," Zhang Ruifu sniffed. "This type of bronze chain, under the right circumstances, is used to subdue our kind. And I would bet your grandfather knew exactly what he had and how to use it. Fascinating that he never did, so far as you know."

A chill coursed through Tong Zhou. Liu Shilin said, "What do you mean by subdue?"

"Drain one's power is the simplest way I can explain it." Zhang Ruifu fell silent before he continued quietly, "But more than that. It turns one docile and dependent with no thoughts or dreams or desires of one's own. A vessel awaiting a master's command. Little more than a pet." His voice dripped with sorrow and anger.

At the mention of pets Tong Zhou jerked forward. "Mimi! Where's Mimi?" He panted in agitation. "What...what happened to her?" He braced himself to hear the worst.

Liu Shilin touched his forearm, soothing. "I don't know. I didn't see her. She wasn't in the room when I found you. I...I thought she might've been attacked, too, but there were no signs of it."

Tong Zhou slumped back. It was not the worst but it was bad enough. "How long have I been here?"

"It's been two days."

Tong Zhou groaned. "Oh, no. Mimi. We have to find her." He sat up to get out of bed. Zhang Ruifu clamped one hand on his knee, hard.

"You're going nowhere. Not until your eyes clear. Strict orders from the doctor."

Liu Shilin rubbed Tong Zhou's arm. "I have to agree. Mimi's smart. I'm sure she escaped and will come back when it's safe."

Tong Zhou, stubborn, kicked his leg out, trying to dislodge Zhang Ruifu's grip. His leg muscles burned from the sudden movement and his shoulder spasmed. He gasped and fell back against the bed.

"Tong Zhou," Liu Shilin said despairingly.

"See?" Zhang Ruifu put in, merciless. He rose from the bed. "Ginger soup, plenty of rest, and no searching for cats. I'll visit again in two days to assess your progress."

Tong Zhou dimly saw his dark shape leave the room. Liu Shilin bent over him. "He's right. You need to rest. I'll look for Mimi. If I go, you'll stay put? Don't try to get up. You're not ready for it yet." His voice was anxious and pleading. Tong Zhou felt bad for making him worry like this. He nodded.

"I'll stay here," he promised. "I'll rest while you look for her." Liu Shilin patted his hand. Tong Zhou thought of something. "I brought her a chicken heart. She loves chicken hearts. It's gone bad by now but if you could get a fresh one and take it with you, that might lure her out of wherever she's gone to hide."

"All right. I'll try that. I'll go now while it's still light. Please, rest well."

Tong Zhou closed his eyes after Liu Shilin left the room. He didn't immediately sink into sleep. Instead, he thought about his grandfather and the bronze chain. He didn't have a strong reason to believe Zhang Ruifu. Nevertheless, he did. He could tell that Zhang Ruifu spoke from experience—either witnessed or lived—and was sincere in what he described. Sincerity from Zhang Ruifu was rare. That in itself lent credence to his story.

Why did Grandfather have the chain? Tong Zhou wondered, weary. Was it to use on my father? My mother?

Or on me?

## Chapter Twelve

For the next three days Liu Shilin returned to Tong Zhou's shikumen to search for Mimi. By the third day the butcher, upon seeing him, wordlessly handed him a fresh chicken heart wrapped in waxed brown paper before Liu Shilin could ask for one.

Mimi was nowhere to be found. Liu Shilin was skeptical about the odds of her survival but he kept his doubts to himself. He dutifully checked the alleys, talked to the neighbors, and left the chicken heart in the courtyard. Something (or someone) had eaten the others. That brought Tong Zhou hope but Liu Shilin had a list of suspects he thought more likely.

After searching for the day, he went to the office. His managing editor had been sympathetic about his "sudden personal emergency," but Song Liying was beginning to ask questions and his vague answers weren't satisfactory. Liu Shilin assured her the emergency was over—indeed, he hoped it was—and continued researching the story about smuggled firearms.

That evening Liu Shilin stopped at a street stall and bought a container of steamed vegetables and rice. The tortoise demon doctor had given approval for Tong Zhou's diet to extend to congee for the past few days and today he was allowed a light meal. The milky film over his eyes was gradually clearing. Its appearance had been unsettling but not nearly as disturbing as the flat black filling his eyes when Tong Zhou had found him after the attack.

Liu Shilin slowly climbed the stairs to his flat. He hated reliving that evening, hated his mind's image of Tong Zhou on the floor, as motionless as a corpse. But he couldn't leave the memories alone. Tong Zhou had been attacked and snake demons appearing in an urban area was a rare enough occurrence to disconcert Zhang Ruifu. Liu Shilin didn't know Zhang Ruifu well but he could tell that he was not easily unnerved.

Snake demons, Liu Shilin thought with disgust as he reached his door. A few short weeks ago he hadn't believed in demons at all. Now they seemed to be everywhere. Now there was one in his bed.

But Tong Zhou wasn't like the others. He wasn't even like Zhang Ruifu, which made Liu Shilin's curiosity about their past burn brighter. Tong Zhou was gentle and kind, handsome and modest. He worried about his missing cat—a common cat! What kind of demon did that?

Liu Shilin entered quietly in case Tong Zhou was asleep. He heard murmurs from the bedroom. Zhang Ruifu was here again and Liu Shilin curled his lip at the way Zhang Ruifu had been making himself at home in Liu Shilin's flat. He also wasn't fond of Zhang Ruifu referring to him as "your human" when talking about him with Tong Zhou. He suspected Zhang Ruifu did it on purpose to annoy him.

Liu Shilin gave in to sudden temptation and crept closer to the bedroom to eavesdrop. It was his own home, he reasoned. He had a right to know what they were talking about.

“I really didn’t mean to do it,” Tong Zhou said, sounding forlorn.

“Nonsense,” Zhang Ruifu retorted. “Stop fooling yourself. You convince no one. And after all, it’s been centuries, hasn’t it? Haven’t you been lonely?”

Tong Zhou sighed. “Of course. But...but he’s human. We both know how this ends.”

“Hm. Do we, though?” Zhang Ruifu sounded thoughtful.

There was an intake of breath and Tong Zhou said, “You can’t mean...that.” A pause. “Ruifu. Have you ever done...that?”

Liu Shilin, standing next to the bedroom door with the tray of food, held his breath. ‘That’? What was ‘that’? And was he the human they were talking about? What hadn’t Tong Zhou meant to do?

“I?” Zhang Ruifu laughed. “You give me too much credit.” In a different, louder voice, he said, “I think your human has returned already and judging from the delicious smells, he’s brought you dinner.”

Liu Shilin grimaced and hastily changed position to make it appear that he hadn’t been hovering outside. He was fairly sure Zhang Ruifu wasn’t convinced.

“You’ve trained him well.” Zhang Ruifu, sitting on the bed beside Tong Zhou’s legs, smiled crisply as Liu Shilin brought in the tray.

“Stop being rude,” Tong Zhou groaned.

Small chance of that, Liu Shilin thought, shooting Zhang Ruifu an acidic glare. Zhang Ruifu got the message, patted Tong Zhou’s knee through the bedcovers, deliberately giving it a lingering caress, and stood up.

“Our patient is doing well,” he said to Liu Shilin. “His eyesight is clear. The doctor says he can go home tomorrow.” He smirked. “You can have your bed again. All to yourself. Alone.”

Liu Shilin escorted Zhang Ruifu to the bedroom door. “Thanks for visiting.” He smiled insincerely.

Returning to the bed after Zhang Ruifu left, Liu Shilin pulled up a chair and helped Tong Zhou sit upright. He handed him a lap cloth, the tray, and chopsticks, and poured a cup of hot water from the insulated container he kept on the bedside table. Tong Zhou lifted the lid of the bowl and smiled at him, pleased and stunningly beautiful. His large, dark eyes were clear now, and his smile curved them adorably.

When Liu Shilin caught his breath he said, “You’re looking healthy. How do you feel?”



“Hungry.” Tong Zhou grinned and took a bite of rice. Liu Shilin watched him enjoying the simple meal and a profound sense of peace settled over him.

I could watch this every day and I would be happy.

The thought surprised him. He had never seriously considered a future of settling down with someone. His cold upbringing and the brittle example of his parents had given him a streak of cynicism when it came to relationships. But he’d considered Tong Zhou a friend from practically the moment they met—that should’ve been his first clue. Liu Shilin smiled ruefully. He believed he was so clever and observant yet he’d missed the obvious: his own heart’s longing.

Tong Zhou swallowed a mouthful of food. “You’re smiling. It’s nice to see that again.”

There was a gleam of hope in Tong Zhou’s eyes that Liu Shilin recognized and hated to disappoint. He shook his head.

“I didn’t find her today. I’m sorry.”

Tong Zhou nodded sadly and finished his meal in silence. Liu Shilin took the things away and came back to sit beside the bed.

“When I go home tomorrow she’ll come back,” Tong Zhou said with forced optimism.

“I hope so.” Liu Shilin picked at his fingers, frowning. He didn’t want Tong Zhou to be ill but he would be sorry to see him go. He’d gotten used to having Tong Zhou here. He liked coming home with Tong Zhou waiting for him.

“Are you sure it’s safe to return there?” he asked. “The demons that attacked you—couldn’t they come back?”

“I’m sure they believed I was dying. Which I would’ve been if you hadn’t arrived when you did...” Tong Zhou’s wide-eyed look of gratitude was almost worshipful and made Liu Shilin shrink. He curled his hands and dug his fingernails into his palms.

So many things he wanted to know... The question he blurted out was, “How do you and Zhang Ruifu know each other?”

Tong Zhou gave him a mild look. “We met a long time ago. I’d just left...a situation and was traveling alone. We traveled together for a while then parted ways. Occasionally our paths crossed afterward, but I hadn’t seen him in quite some time.”

Liu Shilin looked him in the eyes. “Were you lovers?” He immediately wished the words back. He winced. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked something so private.”

Tong Zhou twitched one eyebrow and replied frankly, "I was briefly attracted to him when we first met but knowing him better ended the attraction. Besides, I'm not his type. He only beds virgins." As soon as he said this, he bit his lower lip and looked abashed.

"Oh?" Liu Shilin thought about Zhang Ruifu propositioning him. "Then I'm not his type, either," he said with a little laugh.

Tong Zhou stared at him. They gazed at each other for a long moment, the silence between them tentative and uneasy. Tong Zhou took a breath and glanced away. "Zhang Ruifu's imbalance is debauchery."

This wasn't difficult to believe. Liu Shilin picked at his fingertips again. Why had he asked such a thing? Why were they talking about Zhang Ruifu when all he wanted to know about was Tong Zhou? But he'd found out Tong Zhou wasn't a virgin... Of course, how could he be? He was centuries old, judging by the age of his grandfather's tomb.

"There's something I've been wondering about." He hesitated. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to." He smiled weakly. "I warned you that I want to know everything about you."

Tong Zhou matched his uncertain smile. "And I warned you that you would need to ask me because I don't talk about myself. Go on."

"Demons always have an outward appearance or trait, right? Something that marks them as a demon. Yiwei's back. Zhang Ruifu's hair." Liu Shilin glanced at the bedcovers shaped by Tong Zhou's body beneath them. "When I brought you here after the attack and we had to strip you... Well. There's nothing that marks you as a demon."

Tong Zhou's eyebrows raised slightly. "Ah. You want to know what my demonic trait is." He didn't seem bothered by the question. "I had horns." He raised one hand and touched two spots on the top of his head.

"Had?" Liu Shilin noticed Tong Zhou's hand tremble as he lowered it.

"Yes." Tong Zhou swallowed and looked down at the bedcovers. "They were taken from me," he said, his voice steady but very quiet.

Liu Shilin felt the blood drain from his face. He could not imagine what happened but he had no desire to ask. What he most wanted to do was sit on the bed, draw Tong Zhou into his arms, hold him and promise him nothing bad would happen to him again.

He couldn't make such a promise.

Tong Zhou slid lower in the bed, drawing the bedcovers to his shoulders. “I’m sleepy now. Thank you for the meal.”

Liu Shilin reached over and patted his arm. “Get a good rest.”

Tong Zhou smiled tiredly at him and closed his eyes. Liu Shilin turned off the lamp, got up and went to the living room where he’d set up his makeshift bed on the sofa. He stared at the dark for a long time before he finally fell asleep.

## Chapter Thirteen

In the morning Zhang Ruifu arrived in his automobile to take Tong Zhou home. Liu Shilin announced that he would need to accompany Tong Zhou. The auto wouldn't fit in the narrow lanes of the shikumen block. Tong Zhou stayed out of their tiny war of wills until at last he was seated in the back seat of the auto, wedged between Zhang Ruifu and Liu Shilin.

He cast sidelong looks at both of them, thinking about his conversation with Liu Shilin the night before. It wasn't surprising that Liu Shilin thought he and Zhang Ruifu might've been lovers. Zhang Ruifu had been heavily suggesting as much for days whenever Liu Shilin was within earshot. Playing one of his tiresome games, Tong Zhou had thought at first. Until Zhang Ruifu had questioned him seriously about his attraction to Liu Shilin. Zhang Ruifu might be playing a game but it was a different one than Tong Zhou expected.

The auto parked in front of the entrance to the block. Liu Shilin got out first and helped Tong Zhou before Zhang Ruifu could. "I'll take him from here," Liu Shilin said with a wave. Zhang Ruifu smirked and slid back into the automobile.

Liu Shilin kept one arm around Tong Zhou's waist as they slowly walked the maze of lanes to get to Tong Zhou's shikumen. He opened the gate and Tong Zhou stepped into the courtyard. He'd expected his home to look different—violated—but it looked untouched.

Liu Shilin helped him up the steps and opened the French-style doors. Tong Zhou entered the central hall and paused. Against all rationality he'd hoped Mimi would trot forward to greet him like always. No Mimi. He closed his eyes and listened. He felt his home. She wasn't here.

He took a shuddering breath and wiped his eyes. Liu Shilin touched his elbow. "Sit down and rest. You should take it easy today." He helped Tong Zhou sit and stood by the chair, looking worriedly at him.

"You need to go to work now, don't you?" Tong Zhou managed a smile. "I'll be all right on my own."

"Are you sure?" Liu Shilin seemed unwilling to leave. Tong Zhou wanted him to stay but felt guilty keeping him from his job.

"Yes, it's fine."

Liu Shilin nodded doubtfully. "All right. But I'll come by as soon as I finish today. I'll bring another meal. You liked the one yesterday, didn't you?" He reached down and rested a hand lightly on Tong Zhou's shoulder. "I mean it. Take care of yourself."

Tong Zhou assured him again that it was fine and Liu Shilin departed, glancing back a few times on his way to the front gate. He closed it securely behind him.

Tong Zhou sat for a while before he rose and closed the doors. He couldn't face going upstairs so he spent the day in his study. He cleared books and scrolls from the platform under the window and brought out some cushions and a quilt from a cabinet in the storage room. He arranged an old-fashioned bed on the platform and lay down. It wasn't too comfortable but it would do.

He dreamt he was in a mountainside forest, walking alone in a moonless night. He walked and walked, never reaching a destination, never nearer to the crest of the mountain. He became anxious and started running. "Xiao Tong," a deep voice reverberated through the trees, "can it be you? We thought you were dead." He stopped abruptly and spun around. Hovering in front of him was the head of the dead snake demon with Tong Zhou's mark carved between its unseeing green eyes. "You're the one who's dead," Tong Zhou spat back. The snake demon's head dropped to the ground and rolled down the mountain. Laughter filled the night. Tong Zhou turned and saw who was laughing: a thin foreign man with round glasses.

Knocking on the gate woke him up. Tong Zhou stirred drowsily and rose from the platform. It was late afternoon already.

"Tong Zhou! Are you all right?" Liu Shilin's voice was panicked. Tong Zhou opened the doors just as Liu Shilin let himself in through the gate. He stopped when he saw Tong Zhou standing in the doorway. They looked at each other across the courtyard for a span of time. Tong Zhou's heartbeat quickened.

Tong Zhou smiled a little. "The food will be getting cold." He nodded toward the basket Liu Shilin held.

Liu Shilin had brought two containers: one for Tong Zhou and one for himself. Tong Zhou arranged the table and chairs in the main room so they could dine together. He made tea while Liu Shilin set out the food. The simple fare was delicious. Tong Zhou ate every bite and self-consciously noticed Liu Shilin watching him once in a while. Liu Shilin must think him a glutton.

After the meal Liu Shilin relaxed, in no hurry to go home. Tong Zhou found he was in no hurry to send him away and also relaxed.

"I slept most of the day. I set up a bed in the study. I'm able to manage the stairs on my own," he assured him, "but I don't want to sleep in the bedroom just yet." The memory of Mimi cowering under the bed before the attack was too fresh.

"That's understandable," Liu Shilin said gently. "I keep asking myself why they attacked you. The essence mark was on me."

“I’ve thought about it and I believe I made some enemies when I killed the one who attacked you in the car.” Tong Zhou rested his hands on his knees and narrowed his eyes. “It deserved what it got but I suppose its clan may disagree.”

Liu Shilin arched an eyebrow. “Clan? As in snake demon clans. I really don’t like the sound of that.”

Tong Zhou gave him a lopsided smile. “Neither do I, but it’s not uncommon. Snake demons are territorial. That’s why they rarely venture into cities where there are too many obstacles to establish a comfortable nest.” He paused. “I think the ones who attacked me traveled here for that purpose.”

“To exact revenge,” Liu Shilin said with an unhappy sigh. He ran a hand through his thick, wavy hair. Locks of it fell over his forehead.

Tong Zhou made a sound of agreement. “What interests me more is how they traveled here. If they belonged to the dead demon’s clan that’s a long way. Very much outside of their territory. To travel into the heart of Shanghai undetected, without incident... It’s strange.” He rubbed his jaw, thinking.

“Could they be more local than that? Maybe they’re not from the same clan. Maybe they’re just, I don’t know, friends of the dead demon. Acquaintances?”

“Possibly,” Tong Zhou said doubtfully.

“Maybe the attack wasn’t related to the demon you killed. It might be a coincidence.” Liu Shilin didn’t sound like he thought this was likely.

Tong Zhou shook his head. “I’m fairly certain it’s related,” he said and he described the dream he’d had to Liu Shilin.

Liu Shilin listened and looked shocked at the end. “The foreign man with round glasses. I know who that is. Sort of.” He told Tong Zhou about the Belgian who’d gone missing from the Japanese business delegation in Changsha. “According to Zhang Ruifu this man is a demon.”

Tong Zhou chewed on his lip. “Oh. That’s...concerning.”

“That’s what Zhang Ruifu said. He couldn’t be wrong about the man, could he?”

“No,” Tong Zhou said. “Our kind can recognize each other. Even without seeing any traits.”

Liu Shilin’s eyes glinted with curious interest. He refilled their cups with tea. “You can look around and tell who’s a demon and who isn’t.”

Tong Zhou took a sip of tea. “That’s more or less how it works, yes.”

Liu Shilin's interest sharpened and Tong Zhou took another sip of tea. Liu Shilin sat back. "Just like you can see the essence marks demons leave on their victims." He tapped his cup thoughtfully. Tong Zhou sat very still, cup raised to his lips.

"I've been thinking about that, too," Liu Shilin said slowly. "What's the purpose of an essence mark? The winged snake demon was going to eat me, wasn't it? Why did it need to mark me?"

Tong Zhou's breath calmed and he set his cup down. "Ah, yes. The winged snake demon must've marked you in case he didn't eat you all at once. If he wanted to save some of you for later. It was a juvenile and you are rather large for one meal." He smiled teasingly but Liu Shilin grimaced in disgust.

"To keep other demons away from its food, you mean. But it didn't keep other demons away. It attracted them. Or at least one of them." Liu Shilin furrowed his brow, puzzled.

Tong Zhou opened his mouth to reply and stopped. He'd had a theory about why the snake demon had attacked Liu Shilin in the car but what if his theory was wrong? He went cold and his palms sweated. What if the snake demon attacked Liu Shilin because of Tong Zhou?

Liu Shilin watched him worriedly. "Are you feeling all right? You look unwell." He got up and helped Tong Zhou stand.

"I'm fine." Tong Zhou smiled. "A little tired, that's all. Thank you for the meal." He searched Liu Shilin's face, gazing into his eyes. Did I cause it all?

Liu Shilin gently touched his arm. "All right. Sleep well. I'll stop by tomorrow and see how you're doing." He smiled softly.

"There's no need," Tong Zhou protested without conviction.

Liu Shilin's smile deepened. "I know. I'll see you tomorrow."

It was after sunset. Tong Zhou watched him leave, his heart skittering. He stood at the door for a long time, staring into the night and hoping to see a small black cat coming back to reclaim her territory. He finally closed the door and went to bed inside the study.

For the next couple of weeks Liu Shilin visited every evening, ostensibly to help search for Mimi. He brought dinner from street stalls until Tong Zhou insisted on preparing their meal himself. Liu Shilin praised the home cooking and ate heartily, which infinitely pleased Tong Zhou. After their meals, they strolled the surrounding lanes and alleys, Liu Shilin flashing his electric torch at shadows while Tong Zhou scanned for Mimi.

When Tong Zhou was ready to return to his regular bed, Liu Shilin helped him clean the bedroom, taking care of the broken vase and other objects. Tong Zhou washed all the bedding and covers, even

the gauzy bed curtains, and replaced everything with old spares he kept in a chest in the storage room. The quilt smelled a bit musty but it would air out. He and Liu Shilin dusted the floors and all the furniture and, at last, the room looked like nothing bad had happened here.

They conversed about literature, travel, and languages. Liu Shilin told Tong Zhou stories about his work and asked a few questions, but nothing too private or probing. From his way of asking, Liu Shilin no longer seemed to be trying to figure out Tong Zhou as a demon; he seemed genuinely interested in Tong Zhou as an individual. Tong Zhou talked about his journeys across Asia and Europe. Liu Shilin listened with fascination.

Tong Zhou resumed his work, visiting various offices to pick up new assignments. He began to feel that life had returned to normal. In most ways. There was Mimi's absence, of course. But there was also a new routine: seeing Liu Shilin every day. Tong Zhou found himself planning their meals ahead of time and shopping for the ingredients he noticed Liu Shilin liked best. Knowing Liu Shilin enjoyed eating meat, Tong Zhou bought some braised pork ribs from a street stall to complement the vegetable and tofu dishes he prepared. Liu Shilin protested that he didn't need to go to such trouble but he devoured the ribs with obvious enjoyment and Tong Zhou was happy to indulge him.

One morning Tong Zhou dressed in a dark grey changpao of good quality, matching trousers, and an imported, long, wool coat. He put on his hat and shook out his umbrella and went to visit Zhang Ruifu.

Zhang Ruifu's address was a long walk from the end of the tram line but Tong Zhou didn't mind. Passing the large houses and gardens in different styles was interesting, reminding him of past travels. Mimi would've loved the walk, sniffing the air and staying close to Tong Zhou's legs to remain under the umbrella, protected from the steady rain. Tong Zhou's free hand clenched, feeling empty from not holding her leash.

He arrived at Zhang Ruifu's imposing house at mid-morning and was shown into an ornately furnished parlor by a polite young man who took his hat, coat, and umbrella to dry elsewhere. While Tong Zhou waited he stared out the window at a wet garden that seemed neglected.

Movement in the foyer caught his attention and he saw a young woman in a brown Western-style dress descending the staircase. Her color was heightened and she wore a secret smile. Tong Zhou's grave suspicions were confirmed when Zhang Ruifu followed her down the staircase, a loose house robe over his shirt and trousers, and the woman turned to him with a delighted grin. Zhang Ruifu embraced her, she giggled and glanced around furtively, and they kissed briefly. She whispered something in Zhang Ruifu's ear before scampering away. Zhang Ruifu laughingly closed the door behind her.

He was still smiling smugly when he entered the parlor and greeted Tong Zhou. Waving Tong Zhou to sit in a cushioned chair, Zhang Ruifu lolled on the sofa.



Tong Zhou glared at him. “You promised me the last time our paths crossed that you would refrain from ruining young women’s reputations.”

The manservant brought them tea and left before Zhang Ruifu spoke. “Ah, Tong Zhou, you don’t know the temptations of women. Their soft curves. Their delicious scents. The sweetness between their thighs. Irresistible.”

“So you’ve told me. Repeatedly. In lurid detail.”

Zhang Ruifu sat up and poured their tea, handing Tong Zhou a cup. “That one came to Shanghai to become a dancer. Her deflowering was only a matter of time. Was it not better to come from me, who would go slowly, treat her gently, and ensure she reached the fullest enjoyment? Rather than from some grubby, impatient human.”

Tong Zhou frowned and sipped the tea, which was excellent. “You don’t know that’s what would’ve happened,” he muttered.

“You’re such a hopeless romantic.” Zhang Ruifu smirked. “But very well, as you’re so disapproving, I’ll go back to pursuing men for now. Do you know, there are several delightful institutions in the area brimming with blushing virgin males? The foreigners set them up to teach superstitious nonsense.”

Tong Zhou cleared his throat. “Discussing your sexual adventures is not why I came to see you.”

Zhang Ruifu gave him a canny look over the edge of his cup as he took a sip. “No, I’m sure it’s not. Please do continue.”

Tong Zhou set his cup down and rubbed his palms over his knees. “Is it possible that the snake demon who attacked Liu Shilin outside Changsha was drawn to him because of my mark? I’ve believed it was because of the juvenile’s mark. After it claimed Liu Shilin as its food, I tossed it back into the coffin and it went into hibernation. I’ve thought this could invite other snake demons to poach him since the one who claimed him was no longer active. But now I wonder...” He frowned and looked down at his hands.

Zhang Ruifu listened carefully, serious, and refilled their cups. “Your mark is to protect him,” he observed quietly.

“Yes, but I did it without thinking.” Tong Zhou gripped his knees. “And it didn’t work against the old snake demon. It might not be good enough, complete...I don’t know. I’ve never done such a thing before.”

He took a breath and closed his eyes, reliving the moment when he saw Liu Shilin lying on the tomb floor, looking dead. Tong Zhou’s instinct was to save him and while sucking the poison away, he sent

the thought, the desire, his most fervent wish that Liu Shilin be protected. Not until Liu Shilin was awake and alert did Tong Zhou sense the mark and realize what he'd done.

When he opened his eyes, Zhang Ruifu was watching him closely. "Princess Yiwei could've removed your mark when she removed the other."

Tong Zhou glanced down and nodded guiltily. "I saw that she hadn't but I didn't say anything."

Zhang Ruifu sipped his tea and sat back. "Tell him."

Tong Zhou blinked. "Tell him what?"

"Tell him everything. Tell him about the protection mark." Zhang Ruifu suggested this as if it were as easy as telling Liu Shilin the time of day. Tong Zhou stared at him in disbelief.

Zhang Ruifu gestured impatiently. "Xiao Tong. You know very well that I am not one to advocate being honest with a human. However, I've watched you two. I've watched him. I've tested him. He's as utterly smitten with you as you are with him."

Tong Zhou swallowed and chewed on his lip. He tried to deny it, but in his heart he'd felt how close they'd grown and he knew it wasn't entirely his own doing.

"But if I tell him," he said, anguished, "he'll never trust me. He'll never forgive me."

Zhang Ruifu shook his head and sighed. "You don't know what he'll do. You need to trust him. In my opinion, Liu Shilin cares deeply for you and would do anything for you. Unlike that other one," he added with a snarl.

"You never met the other one. You don't know how he was with me," Tong Zhou countered sullenly.

"Anyone who would do what that person did to you could not have cared for you." Zhang Ruifu finished his tea and set the cup down with a definitive clink. Tong Zhou was silent, having no convincing argument, but Zhang Ruifu hadn't been there and didn't know what it was like. Didn't know Tong Zhou's own weaknesses at the time.

Tong Zhou dug his thumbnails into his knees and took a deep breath. "Getting back to my original question, is it possible my protection mark drew the snake demon to Liu Shilin?"

"Possible?" Zhang Ruifu shrugged. "Anything's possible. Would a snake demon ignore a protection mark? I think so, especially an old and powerful snake demon. They're vile, unpredictable creatures. Could the protection mark have attracted the snake demon? I don't know. It's as likely that your first theory about the juvenile's mark is true. We can't know unless we ask a snake demon, but as you've killed one of their clan leaders I doubt they'd be willing to meet for a chat."

Tong Zhou ignored his sarcasm. “One other thing I wanted to ask you. That foreign man in the glasses who was with the Japanese in Changsha. You’re certain he’s a demon?”

“Quite certain. I’ve met him before.” Zhang Ruifu looked unwilling to say more. Tong Zhou waited, glowering at him. “Oh, all right. I briefly met him some time ago in Tianjin. He was working with the British at the time. I didn’t like him and he didn’t like me and that’s the whole story. We stayed out of each other’s ways. But he’s a type of demon we both know is dangerous. His imbalance is a lust for power or destruction or both, and he’s attracted to instability.”

As bad as Tong Zhou feared, and he couldn’t help but worry that the foreign demon had noticed Liu Shilin in Changsha. That the foreign man had disappeared was no comfort at all.

## Chapter Fourteen

Liu Shilin hopped over one puddle and skirted the next as he reached Tong Zhou's front gate. The heavy clouds had brought endless rain and early darkness. He knocked once on the gate before opening it and letting himself in.

Tong Zhou opened the French-style doors of his shikumen and smiled in greeting. Liu Shilin avoided more puddles in the courtyard and shook out his umbrella on the front step. Inside the house it was dry and lit with lanterns. Tong Zhou laid out the dishes he'd prepared and brought a platter of braised pork belly purchased from a vendor. Liu Shilin watched him fill two bowls with steaming rice and felt overwhelmed by comfort and contentedness. He accepted one bowl and smiled when Tong Zhou added two juicy, choice slices of pork belly. They ate in relaxed silence, enjoying the food and close company.

After eating they both shrugged on their coats, put on their hats, and opened their umbrellas. They completed their nightly patrol of the area, searching in vain for a black cat.

After their walk they returned to the shikumen and sat in the study, where Tong Zhou kept a small coal heater. There was only one chair in the room, at the desk, so they sat on cushions on the platform, cozy and dry by the heater. Lit by a lantern, Tong Zhou's beauty was breathtaking, the shadows accentuating his high cheekbones, the soft light emphasizing his dark eyes. Liu Shilin stared at his profile until Tong Zhou glanced at him self-consciously.

Tong Zhou seemed nervous tonight. He toyed with the edge of his changpao.

"There's something I should tell you." He paused and huffed a short breath. Liu Shilin waited, patient but curious.

Tong Zhou gazed at him, his eyes enormous. "Back in the tomb, when I saw you were bitten, I sucked the poison out and—"

"Wait. What?" Liu Shilin interrupted. "You sucked the snake demon's poison out of me?" Tong Zhou nodded, looking strangely apologetic. Liu Shilin gestured in agitation. "But that could've poisoned you."

"I spat it out."

"Yes, but still..." Liu Shilin rubbed the spot where the bite left its mark. He had never taken the time to wonder why he didn't die from the bite or what had happened while he was unconscious from it. Tong Zhou had saved his life in such a way and had never spoken of it before. Liu Shilin regarded him with admiration and gratitude.

Tong Zhou lowered his eyes and picked at the changpao's hem. "While I was sucking out the poison I was very concerned about you and I...I..." His voice was unsteady. He winced. "I put a mark on you. A mark to protect you. It was unintention—not entirely intentional." He swallowed hard and didn't raise his eyes.

An explosion of questions. Though...not really, Liu Shilin decided, watching Tong Zhou closely. After a long moment Liu Shilin said quietly, "Yiwei didn't remove it?"

"No."

Liu Shilin scratched his beard. "Did you ask her not to?"

"No!" Tong Zhou finally looked up and met his eyes. "But...I also didn't ask her to remove it."

Liu Shilin thought back to his visits to Yiwei. She'd always said the snake demon's mark was thoroughly removed. She'd been careful with her words. He had to admire that. He smiled a little.

Wetness gleamed in Tong Zhou's eyes. Tears escaped and ran down his cheeks. Liu Shilin furrowed his brow and without thinking reached over and took Tong Zhou's hand, rubbing it soothingly.

"Why are you crying?"

Tong Zhou blinked rapidly and shook his head. Liu Shilin scooted over and wrapped one arm around him to pull him close. "Tong Zhou." He kept his voice low and gentle. "Don't cry."

Tong Zhou gulped a shaky breath and leaned in until his cheek rested on Liu Shilin's shoulder. Liu Shilin lightly smoothed his palm up and down Tong Zhou's arm. Neither spoke for a long time, not until Tong Zhou's tears had dried.

"I'd never hurt you," Tong Zhou said bleakly.

Liu Shilin couldn't imagine such a thing. "I know." He paused. "Do you think I'm angry about the mark?"

Tong Zhou lifted his head and searched his face. "Aren't you?"

Liu Shilin immediately missed the feeling of Tong Zhou's cheek on his shoulder. "No. The mark is to protect me. Why should I be angry about that?"

Tong Zhou lowered his eyes. "I'm afraid it's done the opposite. It didn't keep the snake demon from attacking you on the road to Changsha. It may even have attracted its attention." Tong Zhou hesitated and added in a quieter voice, "I should've told you immediately. I should've asked Yiwei to remove it. I...I don't know what I can do to regain your trust."

Liu Shilin took his hand and held it. Tong Zhou had long, attractive fingers with very blunt fingernails. Liu Shilin smiled, remembering that he once tried to imagine Tong Zhou with talons.

“I trust you. I don’t know why I do but I do.” Liu Shilin laughed once, softly. “I’ve trusted you from the moment we met. Even when I started to suspect you weren’t human I never stopped trusting you.”

Tong Zhou gazed at him, his eyes large and dark and filled with tenderness. Liu Shilin met his gaze. He wanted to draw him closer, embrace him, and press a kiss to his forehead. Hold him quietly until the rain stopped, until the coals went cold, until it was dawn.

“It must be getting late,” he said, sighing. “I should go home.”

Tong Zhou looked at him solemnly with a slight, worried frown. “Yes, it’s late now.” He chewed on his lower lip. “It’s still raining and it’s a long walk. You can stay if you like. I have extra bedding. We can put it on the platform here.”

Liu Shilin’s impulse was to refuse. Not because he wanted to leave—because he wanted to stay. He wanted it almost too much.

“I’d like that,” he said, and Tong Zhou’s relieved smile was a precious reward.

With brisk efficiency Tong Zhou brought the bedding and laid it out on the platform. He even lent old-fashioned bedclothes for Liu Shilin to wear. He wished him a good sleep and left him alone in the study. Liu Shilin heard floorboards creaking upstairs. The study was underneath Tong Zhou’s bedroom.

The bedclothes, made for Tong Zhou, hung a bit loosely on Liu Shilin. The mattress was more comfortable than its thickness suggested and the quilt was splendidly warm. Liu Shilin settled in the bed and reached for the lantern. He paused and lowered his arm and looked out at the room.

Tong Zhou’s study was where he undoubtedly spent most of his time. Unlike every other room in the house it was a bit cluttered, a bit chaotic. Liu Shilin found it charming and fascinating. Like Tong Zhou himself.

The floorboards stopped creaking. Tong Zhou must be in bed now. Liu Shilin extinguished the lantern. He listened to the steady rain tapping the roof tiles and the assortment of pots in the courtyard.

He was admittedly disconcerted to learn that he still had a demonic essence mark on him. Any human would be taken aback by such a thing. But on the other hand, it was Tong Zhou’s mark—a mark of protection—and that gave Liu Shilin a deep, warm, satisfied feeling he couldn’t precisely name. He felt somewhat honored that Tong Zhou found him worthy of protection.

He wants to protect me but how do I protect him?

Liu Shilin rolled onto his side and blinked at the darkness. What did a cynical newspaperman who'd never had a serious relationship have to offer someone like Tong Zhou, he wondered.

How can I make him happy?

And yet, Liu Shilin thought as he drifted into sleep. I want to try.

He woke early in the morning, washed and dressed, and folded the bedding neatly. He heard nothing from the room above and crept upstairs to check on Tong Zhou. Visible through thin bed curtains, he was still asleep, curled on his side under an old quilt. Liu Shilin gazed upon him for a moment before silently padding downstairs.

In the small kitchen beyond the light well he heated water and found ingredients to make green onion pancakes. He hoped the scent would rouse Tong Zhou but the day brightened and Liu Shilin had to leave for work. He left a couple of pancakes in a covered dish to keep them warm and took one pancake for himself, chewing on it as he left the courtyard and closed the front gate.

When he reached the main road he hired a rickshaw to take him home. He had just enough time to change clothes and groom his beard before rushing to the office. He arrived late and Song Liying, pulling a camera strap over her shoulder, stared at him.

“Why are you here?” she asked, picking up her leather satchel of supplies.

Liu Shilin paused in mid-stride and frowned in confusion. “Because I work here?”

Song Liying rolled her eyes. “I meant, why aren't you at the riot? When you were late I assumed you must've headed there already.”

“What riot? Tell me on the way.” Liu Shilin spun on his heels and they left the building together.

“A warehouse in Pudong,” she informed him. “Since early this morning. No one's sure what started it.”

They raced to the riverfront and hired a boat to ferry them across to Pudong. The boatman let them off close to the warehouse. They could hear the commotion from streets away and followed the noise.

It was chaos. About fifty laborers blocked the main entrance to the warehouse, shouting and brandishing tools as weapons. Soldiers armed with rifles faced them. Some of the rioters threw empty bottles, rocks, and broken bricks. Debris had been set on fire around the perimeter of the confrontation.

Song Liying uncapped her camera lens and began snapping photographs. Liu Shilin made notes in a small notebook he kept in his jacket and sidled closer to the action. He spotted a member of the local fire brigade who had helped him on an arson story in the past. He wended his way through the onlookers.

“Is that you, Wang Xi?”

Wang Xi recognized him and took him aside. “I can’t tell you much,” he said. He held out one hand. “But I can promise not to talk to any of the other reporters.”

Liu Shilin dug into his jacket for a couple of silver coins and dropped them onto Wang Xi’s palm. Wang Xi, satisfied, pocketed them and said, “We don’t know how it began. By the time they called us over there was a small fire inside the warehouse. We put it out and rescued everyone inside. It was only a few people. Most of the workers were already outside, marching and shouting.”

“Was the fire suspicious?”

Wang Xi smirked. “All warehouse fires are suspicious. We haven’t been able to get back inside and investigate.”

“Thanks.” Liu Shilin jotted down notes. “Anything else you can remember?”

“One of the women we rescued remembered seeing a foreigner outside the warehouse right before the riot.”

“Foreigner?” Liu Shilin was about to ask if the foreigner was Japanese or European when movement across the street caught his eye. He thanked Wang Xi and followed. He entered a narrow alley and stopped.

A delivery truck unloading crates into a neighboring warehouse blocked the alley’s exit, effectively making it a dead-end. A thin man in a long, brown, wool coat turned back and spotted Liu Shilin. It was the missing Belgian man.

The Belgian walked toward Liu Shilin, his face shadowed by the brim of his hat. Light reflected off of his glasses. The noise from the delivery truck and the riot seemed to fade away. Liu Shilin heard the Belgian’s shoes striking the uneven pavement with each deliberate step.

He glanced about. Aside from the men busy unloading crates, they were alone in the alley. He was uneasy but excitement and curiosity kept him rooted to the spot. The Belgian demon’s appearance this close to the riot was suspicious. Liu Shilin wanted to gather as much information as he could. He was near the alley’s entrance and could, he told himself, turn and run at any time.



When the Belgian was a few meters away, Liu Shilin reacted with exaggerated surprise and said, “All of Changsha was searching for you! I hope you weren’t caught up in something dangerous.”

The Belgian man stopped, cocked his head, and looked at Liu Shilin. Liu Shilin switched to English, repeated himself, and added, “How long have you been employed by the Japanese?”

The man took two steps closer before he stopped again. “No one employs me.” His English was perfect but his voice was high and nasal and unpleasant.

“Ah? Then you’re here for yourself? Did you witness the start of the riot? I’m a reporter and—”

“I know who you are.” The Belgian took another two steps and was now close enough for Liu Shilin to discern his cold smile. Light bounced off his tinted glasses. The hair on the back of Liu Shilin’s neck prickled.

“Well, in that case,” Liu Shilin said with a forced chuckle, “if you could describe the scene of the riot when you arrived, provide some quotes, that sort of thing...”

The Belgian moved too quickly. In an instant he was less than an arm’s length from Liu Shilin. He cocked his head again and asked with contempt, “Who’s protecting you?”

Liu Shilin blinked. Tong Zhou’s protection mark must be working. He swallowed a breath and decided not to press his good fortune.

“If you don’t want to give me a quote for the story, I understand,” he called as he sprinted out of the alley and back to the warehouse where the crowd of spectators had swelled. He slowed to blend in and caught up with Song Liying.

The number of rioters had also grown. More shouting, more bricks and bottles thrown. The soldiers aimed their rifles and marched forward in a line, their commander demanding that the rioters disperse.

Suddenly a rioter leapt forward, barreling into one of the soldiers and knocking him to the ground. He attacked mindlessly, tearing at the soldier’s uniform. The soldier struggled, trying to push the attacker off with his rifle. The rioter grabbed the rifle, jerked it free with great force, and tossed it aside. He slammed the soldier’s head against the ground.

The chaos became bloodshed. More rioters ran forward, emboldened. The soldiers fired at them. The mêlée lasted mere minutes but felt like hours. At the end of it, most of the rioters were wounded, some dead. The only casualty among the soldiers was the one who had been attacked first.

Liu Shilin and Song Liying stayed at the scene as long as they were allowed. In late afternoon the military commander finally steered the press away and directed his men to escort them from the area.

Song Liying's mood was somber as they returned to the office and she immediately went to work in the darkroom to develop her photographs. Liu Shilin stayed late to write the story. By the time their editor was satisfied, it was after midnight. The story was sent to the printing press to become the morning's front page news.

Liu Shilin went home, so tired he fell back into his old routine. Reaching his apartment building, he wondered if Tong Zhou would be worried that he didn't visit tonight. Tong Zhou might even think he didn't want to see him after their talk the previous night.

Liu Shilin made up his mind. He washed hurriedly and gathered some clothes for the morning, grabbed his pyjamas and shaving things, and stuffed everything into a suitcase. He left the flat and walked quickly to Tong Zhou's shikumen.

The lane was dark, the night very cold, and everything was so still Liu Shilin slowed to be as quiet as possible. He didn't want to knock on the gate and wake the neighbors, so he let himself in the way he had many times before. He crossed the courtyard, bumping into a ceramic pot on the way, and reached the front doors. He rapped on one with his knuckles.

"Tong Zhou?" He kept his voice as quiet as he could without falling to a whisper.

He was about to knock again when he saw a dim light inside. Tong Zhou threw open the doors, wearing old-fashioned bedclothes and staring at him. He grabbed Liu Shilin's wrist and pulled him inside, closing the doors behind them. He seized him in an embrace, wrapping his arms around Liu Shilin's shoulders, his head turned away from Liu Shilin's.

Liu Shilin dropped his suitcase to the floor and slid his arms around Tong Zhou's waist. Tong Zhou vibrated with anxious energy. Liu Shilin tightened his hold.

"I'm sorry," he said. "There was a big story. I had to work late. I stopped at my place for some things then I came here as soon as I could. I didn't want you to think that I didn't want to see you."

Tong Zhou didn't speak until he'd calmed somewhat. "You were in danger." His arms were strong and solid, holding Liu Shilin firmly.

Liu Shilin tilted his head to glance at him. "You could tell?"

Tong Zhou loosened his embrace but kept his arms locked around Liu Shilin's neck. He drew back and looked at him. "Tell me what happened."

"It was the Belgian man. There was a riot in Pudong. It turned violent. The military were there. Several rioters and one soldier were killed before it was over." Liu Shilin took a breath. He was shaking. He'd seen death in the past but had never before witnessed it happening that close in front of him. He flattened his palms against Tong Zhou's back to stop his hands' tremors.

“Before the worst of it, I saw the man in an alley and he saw me. He said he knew who I was. He asked who was protecting me. It must have been your protection mark.”

“He wanted to harm you,” Tong Zhou stated firmly. “I felt his evil.”

Liu Shilin looked into his eyes. He smiled softly. “Your protection mark saved me.”

Tong Zhou, dubious, furrowed his brow. “It stopped him for now. I don’t know if it will again.”

Liu Shilin gazed at him in silence. Tong Zhou, full of concern for him, standing there in his bedclothes, lit by low lantern light. He could feel Tong Zhou’s warmth and strength beneath his palms. Tong Zhou’s eyes were dark in shadow. His lips looked very soft.

Liu Shilin swallowed and licked his lips. Tong Zhou glanced down distractedly. “You brought a suitcase.”

Liu Shilin eased his hands from Tong Zhou’s waist and stepped back. “Ah, yes. Could I stay here tonight?”

Tong Zhou smiled beautifully at him. “Of course.” He let go, lowering his arms. “I’ll lay out the bedding in the study.”

Catching his breath, Liu Shilin nodded with a smile and picked up his suitcase.

## Chapter Fifteen

Tong Zhou lay in his bed, staring into the dark room. Beneath his bedroom Liu Shilin slept in the study. He was safe for now. Tong Zhou wanted him always to be safe. The idea that something could have happened to him—the evil Tong Zhou had felt directed at Liu Shilin—shook Tong Zhou to his core.

He was too restless to sleep. He got out of bed and wrapped up in a silk robe, tying it closed. He slipped downstairs and silently approached the study. Light shone from behind the door but Tong Zhou opened the door carefully, not wishing to startle Liu Shilin.

Liu Shilin was sitting up, leaning against the wall, fast asleep. He'd been reading an old book from Tong Zhou's library. The pages were spread open on his lap.

Tong Zhou crouched on the floor close to the platform, folded his arms over his knees, and watched Liu Shilin sleeping. Liu Shilin was relaxed and peaceful. His hair curled in thick waves over his forehead. His dark eyelashes rested on his smooth cheeks. His lips, framed by his moustache and short beard, looked as plump and luscious as ripe fruit. A jolt of heat coursed through Tong Zhou as he remembered the touch of Liu Shilin's hands on his back earlier. He bit his lower lip.

He extinguished the lantern and quietly withdrew from the study and closed the door. He went upstairs, dressed in dark clothes and his leather coat, and left the house soundlessly. He slowly roamed the lanes leading to the main road where he stopped and closed his eyes.

I know you're close, he thought. I am his protector. You dare threaten him again, you will regret it.

It was risky to provoke an unknown opponent like this but Tong Zhou didn't care. He stood in the deserted road with his eyes closed, listening. He finally heard distant laughter and a high, nasal voice said, "You must be le petit Tong. The born demon."

Born but still a demon, Tong Zhou assured the voice. It laughed again, and Tong Zhou listened very intently, trying to track the direction of the sound.

His concentration was broken by an automobile zooming toward him and braking abruptly. Zhang Ruifu threw open the passenger door and stumbled out. "Tong Zhou!" He yanked on Tong Zhou's arm and dragged him into the back seat of the auto.

Zhang Ruifu huffed for breath as he spoke. "What do you think you're doing?"

Tong Zhou glared at him. "I'm protecting what's mine."

"You're inviting trouble."

“That too,” Tong Zhou agreed with an angled grin, baring his teeth.

Zhang Ruifu shook his head. “Every demon from here to Suzhou heard you. Who knows what you’ve stirred up? Have you forgotten about the snake demons who attacked you? Now they’ll know you’re still alive.”

Tong Zhou had, in fact, forgotten about the snake demons. He slumped back against the seat. “Ah.”

Zhang Ruifu’s arched eyebrows formed a deep frown. “This isn’t like you.”

Tong Zhou looked down at his hands and picked at his fingertips. After a moment he said, “I took your advice and told him about the protection mark. He wasn’t angry. He said he trusts me.”

Zhang Ruifu sighed. They rode in silence for a while. Tong Zhou realized the automobile was driving in a wide circle. It slowed and stopped by the lane near Tong Zhou’s house. Zhang Ruifu leaned across Tong Zhou and opened the door.

“You can’t protect him if you’re dead,” he said flatly. “Be careful.” Tong Zhou climbed out of the car. Zhang Ruifu gave him a worried look. “If the worst comes, I’ll help you if I can.”

Tong Zhou smiled a little. “Thank you. If something happens to me, will you take care of him?”

Zhang Ruifu’s eyes flashed. “I’d love to, my dear.”

“He’s not a virgin,” Tong Zhou spoiled his hopes.

Zhang Ruifu raised his eyebrows. “Well, well. You two happened faster than I predicted.”

Tong Zhou narrowed his eyes. “No, we did not. He was already... Never mind.”

Zhang Ruifu chuckled, closed the door, and the auto drove off into the night. Tong Zhou walked a long circuit to his house, checking the area thoroughly. Arriving back at the shikumen he saw two large raven demons perched on top of his front gate. He tiredly looked up at them.

“The one you seek hides his movements,” one said. “He hurts humans. Protect yours.”

“We’re no friend to snake demons,” the other cawed. “We’ll keep our eyes open for trouble.”

Before he could respond, they both flew off, spreading their magnificent wings and lifting into the dark sky.

Tong Zhou sat outside until dawn, weary but alert in case more visitors wanted to find him. At first light he went inside to prepare breakfast. He was stirring noodles in broth when he heard Liu Shilin

moving about. By the time Liu Shilin was dressed and neatly groomed, Tong Zhou had laid out the dishes in the main room.

Liu Shilin ate hungrily. Tong Zhou smiled, watching him. Liu Shilin glanced over his bowl at him.

“You didn’t sleep last night.”

Tong Zhou tapped his chopsticks against his bowl. “No. I did something rash instead.”

Liu Shilin swallowed a mouthful of noodles and waited.

“I challenged the foreign demon who threatened you. I told him if he did it again he’d be sorry.”

“You saw him? Where?” Liu Shilin’s eyes widened in alarm.

Tong Zhou shook his head. “I sent him a message. It’s something demons can do. You might call it telepathy. But it’s not advisable because other demons can hear it and most of the time a demon doesn’t want to reveal itself to everyone else.”

Liu Shilin set his bowl down with a clunk. “Snake demons heard, you mean. They could attack you again. Tong Zhou.” He was angry. “That wasn’t a wise thing to do.”

Tong Zhou wearily ran a hand through his hair. “I know.”

Liu Shilin leaned closer across the table. “I don’t want you doing such risky things on my account. The Belgian wants to threaten me, let him.” Tong Zhou stared at him. Liu Shilin met his look evenly. “I know. To you I’m just a weak human. And in a fair fight I’m sure I wouldn’t stand a chance. But I don’t fight fair. If he comes for me, you’ll know, won’t you? Well, then. Let him come. You’ll swoop in and take care of him, and that’s that.”

Tong Zhou blinked and looked into his eyes. Liu Shilin was utterly sincere. Tong Zhou wanted to tell him it didn’t work like that, except...maybe it could work like that.

“I won’t let you make yourself bait,” he said.

Liu Shilin sat back, grinning. “I have no intention of becoming bait.” He picked up his bowl and, sobering, he added, “But I would like to find out what the Belgian is doing with the Japanese. He claims they’re not his employers.”

“That’s probably true.” Tong Zhou took a bite of noodles and drank some broth. He told Liu Shilin what Zhang Ruifu had told him about the demon. “I doubt he works for anyone but himself. Though whether the Japanese understand that is another question.”

They finished their meal. It was still very early and Liu Shilin didn't need to leave for work yet. Tong Zhou, in the interests of being honest, told him about the raven demons.

"They may keep watch over you, I'm not sure. But at least I don't think they will be threats."

"I'll be more thankful if they keep watch over you," Liu Shilin countered. He drummed his fingers on the table. "I've been wondering about those snake demons. How did they get inside your house? How did they get upstairs? For that matter, how did one of them get at me through the car window?"

Tong Zhou grimaced. "Winged or not, snake demons can rise up and propel themselves for short distances to strike at their prey. Once they located my house it wouldn't be difficult for them to find a way in—a loose roof tile, most likely. Perhaps I should inspect my roof." He yawned. "I wasn't expecting any attackers when I bought this place."

Liu Shilin looked him over. "Right now you need to sleep." He shifted over, took Tong Zhou's arm, and rose, helping Tong Zhou to his feet. Tong Zhou needed no such assistance but he welcomed his touch. Liu Shilin guided him up the stairs and to the bedroom before he let go.

"You'll be all right here alone?" Liu Shilin asked worriedly.

Tong Zhou faced him and smiled. "Yes."

"I'll bring our dinner tonight. You should rest. Don't worry about cooking. My treat."

Tong Zhou reached over and touched Liu Shilin's cheek, grateful for his concern, his understanding, his care. He rubbed his thumb once over Liu Shilin's skin before he drew his hand back. His heart raced.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, glancing away.

"Don't be." Liu Shilin placed one hand on Tong Zhou's shoulder and smoothed it toward his neck. "Tong Zhou..."

Tong Zhou swallowed. Liu Shilin's touch ignited deep, deep fires. He closed his eyes. "I don't want you to be late for work."

"Tong Zhou," Liu Shilin said again with a touch of exasperation. Tong Zhou opened his eyes and smiled a little.

"I'll be fine. And I'm very tired now. I'll rest while you're at work."

Liu Shilin took a deep breath, nodded, and left the room. Tong Zhou heard him downstairs, washing their dishes before he headed for work. When he was alone in the house, Liu Shilin undressed and crawled into bed and slept deeply.

He knew it was a dream. He entered Grandfather's tomb. He lifted the lid of the stone coffin as if it weighed nothing. Among the bones inside he saw the decaying corpse of the winged snake demon. Laughter echoed through the chamber. Tong Zhou turned and saw the thin Belgian man wearing tinted glasses.

"A more private way to meet," the foreign demon said.

"My human is no threat to you," Tong Zhou told him. "Leave him alone."

The foreign demon smirked. "Humans are simply a means to an end."

"What end?" Tong Zhou asked, but the foreign demon faded away.

When Tong Zhou woke, it was very late in the afternoon and pouring rain. He listened to it battering the roof tiles and wondered about holes in the roof. He finally got out of bed, dressed, and went down to the study to do some work. He noticed that Liu Shilin hadn't put away the bedding and this pleased him. He knelt by the platform and rested one hand on the quilt as if he could feel Liu Shilin beneath it.

He was deep into a translation of land trust agreements when he heard the front gate rattle. He went to open the doors. Liu Shilin crossed the courtyard, carrying a stack of lacquer food baskets in one hand, a large leather suitcase in the other, and wrangling an umbrella tucked under his arm, trying to keep it aloft. Tong Zhou rushed forward in the downpour to take the baskets from him.

Once inside, Liu Shilin shook off the rain from his clothes. Tong Zhou lit the small coal heater in the study and laid out Liu Shilin's hat and coat beside it to dry. He rushed upstairs for one of his winter house robes and insisted on folding Liu Shilin into it, rubbing his back and shoulders.

"I'm fine," Liu Shilin laughed, gathering the quilted robe over his clothes.

Tong Zhou set out the food on the table. Liu Shilin had purchased a feast of fish and vegetable dishes, including some of Tong Zhou's favorites. They were both hungry and ate their fill before relaxing and listening to the rain lashing against the house.

"You brought another suitcase," Tong Zhou observed, casting a look toward the study where Liu Shilin had left it.

"I don't like the idea of you being here alone overnight." Liu Shilin poured a cup of hot water and took a drink. The idea of having a human protector was amusing but it also gave Tong Zhou a deep, warm, contented feeling.



“Besides,” Liu Shilin continued, “we may need to travel again.”

“Ah? Why?”

Liu Shilin gave him a serious look. “I got some news from Changsha today. Your grandfather’s bronze chain has been stolen again.”

Tong Zhou slowly sipped water. Knowing the chain’s real, original purpose disturbed him whenever he thought about it. He calmed himself and said, “What happened?”

“The thief arrested for murder attacked a guard and tried to escape. He’s been executed. When they closed the files on the case, they discovered the chain was missing.” Liu Shilin cursed softly. “I should’ve gone back when I had a chance and bribed that officer for it.”

Tong Zhou rubbed his thumb along the edge of the cup. “Do you have any details about the attack?”

“No, not yet.” Liu Shilin set down his cup, stretched lazily, and yawned. He smiled at Tong Zhou. “Did you have a restful day?”

Tong Zhou matched his soft smile. “Yes. I finished some translations. It was very quiet. Although...” He hesitated. Liu Shilin’s look sharpened and Tong Zhou knew he couldn’t avoid telling him about his dream. He described it in detail. Liu Shilin sat up, frowning.

“A means to an end. What did he mean by that?” He shuddered visibly.

Tong Zhou swiftly moved behind him and vigorously rubbed his arms and shoulders and back. “That’s not why I’m shuddering,” Liu Shilin commented. He reached back and patted Tong Zhou’s hand. Tong Zhou urged him from the chair.

“You’re tired. You should get plenty of sleep tonight after being in the rain. The study should be nice and warm now.”

They moved to the study, where Tong Zhou found little tasks to linger over while Liu Shilin sat by the heater and watched him. After a while Tong Zhou made up his mind.

“Yes. I should go back to Changsha to investigate what happened to the chain.” He neatened some scrolls on a shelf. “But first I need to visit Zhang Ruifu.”

“We’ll stop by tomorrow before going to the train station,” Liu Shilin said definitively. Tong Zhou met his look. Liu Shilin narrowed his eyes. “You’re not going to Changsha alone. We’re both going. And if you were planning on asking Zhang Ruifu to keep an eye on me while you were away, I can only tell you I’d feel much safer with you.”

This had, indeed, been part of Tong Zhou's plan, but he couldn't deny that he'd rather travel with Liu Shilin than be parted from him. He sighed. "All right. But truthfully, I need to talk to Zhang Ruifu before we leave."

Liu Shilin stretched his arms and legs and smiled. He reminded Tong Zhou of Mimi basking in the sun. A pang went through him. He wouldn't need to bring Mimi's basket on this journey.

"I'll pack my things for tomorrow," he said to take his leave.

Liu Shilin stood up and caught his hand and held it. They gazed at each other. Tong Zhou's pulse beat furiously and his breath tripped. Liu Shilin's eyes were so very warm and inviting. His nose was adorable. His smile was soft, his lips lush. He was the most handsome being alive.

"Tong Zhou," he said, his voice low and rich. His eyes scanned Tong Zhou's face. "I...I want to make you happy."

Tong Zhou took a steadying breath. He smiled. "You do make me happy."

Liu Shilin blinked and swallowed. "Ah?" He laughed a little. "That's good."

Tong Zhou slid his hand free and patted his shoulder. "Get a good rest."

He left the room quickly, not glancing back, before the temptation to do something reckless and potentially disastrous overtook him. Not until he was upstairs in his bedroom did his heart stop hammering. He exhaled slowly and set about packing a small suitcase.

## Chapter Sixteen

To save time, they took a taxicab to Zhang Ruifu's house instead of the long tram ride. It was a damp, fresh, early morning with patches of fog. The air was cold and Tong Zhou fussed over Liu Shilin's coat, bringing out a woolen scarf to bundle him more securely. Liu Shilin didn't object to his overreactions. Tong Zhou's concern for him was very pleasing to Liu Shilin.

The polite young manservant showed them into Zhang Ruifu's parlor, offered them tea and invited them to sit while they waited. He left the room with a slight bow. The wait stretched longer than they'd anticipated. Liu Shilin checked his pocket watch.

"If we're here too long, do you think Zhang Ruifu would lend us his saloon car and driver to get us to the train station on time?"

Tong Zhou parted his lips to speak but hushed noises from the foyer drew their attention. Liu Shilin leaned forward on the sofa and craned his neck to see out from the parlor. Three attractive young men descended the grand staircase, lingering at the bottom, obviously reluctant to leave. They cast longing looks up the stairs. The young manservant appeared, handing them their coats and hats and gracefully shepherding them to the front door. A few moments after they were gone Zhang Ruifu sauntered downstairs, yawning. His stark white hair was mussed and beneath a modern bathrobe he wore old-fashioned bedclothes.

Liu Shilin sat back and arched an eyebrow. "You said he only beds virgins."

"Yes," Tong Zhou replied mildly.

"There were three of them."

Tong Zhou sighed a little. "Ah, hm."

Zhang Ruifu swept into the parlor, flinging his arms wide and stretching his spine. "Yes, there were three of them, you unimaginative little human." He yawned exaggeratedly. "And lucky for you we had reached the completion of an absolutely charming, delicious night. Otherwise I would be in no mood to be nice to you." He flung himself into a cushioned chair and lounged bonelessly.

"This is you being nice to us?" Liu Shilin muttered.

"Hush," Tong Zhou whispered in warning.

Zhang Ruifu gave Liu Shilin a heavy-lidded look. He idly twisted a lock of white hair around his forefinger. "Xiao Tong. Other than your human's fascination with my bedroom affairs," he drawled, "what brings you here so early this morning?"

“Grandfather’s bronze chain was stolen from the Changsha police station. We’re going there to investigate. Are you certain the chain—”

“Quite certain,” Zhang Ruifu interrupted, his manner changing instantly. He sat upright, serious, and poured tea into three cups. He lifted one, took a sip, and stared into the light green liquid. “It is not something I would ever be wrong about.” His voice was grave, an ancient anger lurking beneath the surface.

Tong Zhou nodded, accepting this. “There’s something else I need to ask you.” He paused, chewed on his lip, and frowned. “Aside from...that way...is there another way that a demon could transform a human directly?”

Tong Zhou and Zhang Ruifu shared a long look. Liu Shilin’s eyes darted from Tong Zhou to Zhang Ruifu and back.

Zhang Ruifu set his cup down. “Are you sure this is something you want to discuss in front of him?”

Tong Zhou raised his chin. “Yes. You told me to trust him.” Liu Shilin’s eyebrows rose and he glanced at Zhang Ruifu. “I trust him.”

“Very well.” Zhang Ruifu sat back in the chair, thoughtful. He rubbed a finger over his lower lip. “Yes, there are similar methods that would work if the demon’s will was strong enough. Most demons wouldn’t find the effort worth it, though.”

Tong Zhou clenched his jaw. “The foreign demon. He met me in a dream and said that humans were a means to an end.”

Zhang Ruifu’s cool artifice cracked. He was rattled. “Tong Zhou. This is more dangerous than we imagined.” He looked at Liu Shilin. “If you care for him, take him away. As far as you can go.” It took a moment for Liu Shilin to realize Zhang Ruifu was speaking to him, not about him.

“Why?” he asked. “What’s the Belgian doing? What do you mean by ‘transforming’ humans?”

Zhang Ruifu shot a look at Tong Zhou.

“I think he’s turning humans into demons,” Tong Zhou said heavily.

“That’s possible?” Liu Shilin’s hand shot to his neck, over the spot where the winged snake demon’s bite left its five tiny welts.

“Or he’s trying to...” Zhang Ruifu mused. “Think about it. With his nature, if he was successful the place would be overrun with demons by now.”

Tong Zhou knitted his brow. “That’s true...” He glanced at an ornate clock on the mantel. “We have to catch our train. Ruifu, can you—”

Zhang Ruifu launched himself out of the chair and marched to the foyer, calling for his driver. His manservant brought Liu Shilin and Tong Zhou their hats and coats.

“Be careful,” Zhang Ruifu told them seriously.

“You as well,” said Tong Zhou.

The manservant whisked them into the back of the saloon car and Zhang Ruifu’s chauffeur hurtled through the busy morning streets to get them to the train station in time.

The trains were crowded and they never got a compartment to themselves. Tong Zhou stared out the window for most of the journey. Liu Shilin attempted to chat with him about meaningless subjects but Tong Zhou was distracted. Liu Shilin couldn’t blame him.

The evening air was cool and humid when they reached Changsha. They walked from the train station to the Chunyue Hotel and checked into a room on the top floor. When they reached the door Tong Zhou roused from his preoccupations and took a step back. “Oh. I should go downstairs and book my own room.”

“Nonsense,” Liu Shilin told him, going inside. There were two narrow beds separated by a table with a lamp. “Plenty of room to share. Besides, I don’t want you to be by yourself.”

Tong Zhou walked about the room and set his suitcase on the bed closest to the window.

He thinks a threat will come from outside. Liu Shilin scratched his jaw. For all he knew, one would.

Tong Zhou glanced over at him with an amused glint in his eyes. “I can take care of myself, you know.”

“All right, then.” Liu Shilin shrugged. “I would feel safer if you stay with me.”

The amusement faded and Tong Zhou looked at him with his enormous, concerned eyes. Liu Shilin chuckled softly. “It’s fine. I’m not scared.” Much. “But we’re safer together, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Tong Zhou agreed with a hint of uncertainty. He went to the window and pushed one curtain aside with his finger to watch the street outside. It was evening and streetlamps and shop lights cast colorful reflections.

They dined downstairs before retiring for the night. Tong Zhou went to the shared bath down the hallway to change into his bedclothes. Liu Shilin changed when he was alone in the room and settled

in the bed closest to the door. Tong Zhou returned, closed the curtains, and climbed into the other bed. Liu Shilin switched off the lamp.

Long minutes passed. Neither of them were asleep. Liu Shilin spoke quietly. “Tell me how a demon could transform a human.”

Tong Zhou was slow to reply and Liu Shilin could feel his reluctance.

“Three things are needed. First, the demon’s will to turn the human must be resolute. Second, the demon must have a physical medium to convey its will into the human.”

Liu Shilin touched the welts on his neck. “Like a poisonous bite?”

“Poison’s too risky because it might kill the human before the transformation could happen, but a bite with blood or saliva would work.” Tong Zhou trailed off. Liu Shilin waited, absently rubbing the bite mark on his neck. He heard Tong Zhou shifting on the bed and when Tong Zhou spoke Liu Shilin could tell from his voice that he was facing Liu Shilin.

“Lastly, the only times transformation has ever been successful the human was willing. The human didn’t fight the demon’s will.”

Liu Shilin clasped his hands behind his head. “Why would a human want to become a demon?” He tried to imagine it happening: a human suddenly sprouting wings or a long tail. Growing talons. He wiggled his fingers behind his head. How would one hide talons, he wondered whimsically.

“Perhaps it was a desire for power or long life.” Tong Zhou was silent for a moment. “Most humans wouldn’t be willing. I’ve only heard about three times when it happened and they were all centuries ago.”

Liu Shilin thought back to what Zhang Ruifu had said about demons not finding the effort worth it. “And what if a demon has a strong will and a physical medium but the human isn’t willing?”

“That’s another reason why it’s incredibly rare. The risk to the demon is too great. If the human successfully fights it, not only is the human unchanged but the demon’s will is broken and physical medium drained. Effectively, it’s a way to weaken or even kill a demon. There were incidents in ancient times where humans pretended to be willing to lure a demon to its destruction.”

The idea of this gave Liu Shilin unpleasant goosebumps and he shuddered. “The Belgian...”

“I hope I’m wrong.” Tong Zhou’s voice faded into a yawn. “But he may have found a way to turn unwilling humans into demons. Or he’s trying to find a way.”

Liu Shilin felt queasy. He stared into the darkness and was certain he wouldn't be able to fall asleep with that nightmarish idea in his head, but when the day came he woke up after a peaceful sleep.

Tong Zhou, already neatly dressed and groomed, sat on the other bed, hands on his knees, watching him. Liu Shilin stretched against the mattress and yawned. He picked up his pocket watch from the bedside table to check the time. He pushed the hair back from his forehead and blinked sleepily at Tong Zhou and smiled.

Tong Zhou licked his lips, swallowed, and abruptly stood up. "I'll go downstairs and order our meal," he said. Before Liu Shilin could reply, Tong Zhou had darted from the room.

After a light morning meal at the hotel they went to police headquarters. Liu Shilin was relieved to see the same bribe-susceptible officer on duty. While Tong Zhou went through official channels to inquire about the bronze chain, Liu Shilin gathered some silver coins from his pocket and strolled over to find out the full story. They compared notes when they left the station.

"The robbery happened the same night the thief attacked the guard," Liu Shilin said as they slowly strolled through the streets under light, misty rain. "The storeroom where they keep files and evidence was ransacked. Other items were taken—knives, a pistol, and a ladies' purse. The police believe it was an opportunistic break-in because everyone was busy trying to stop the attack."

Tong Zhou, thoughtful, took a few steps. "It took so many police officers to stop one man?"

Liu Shilin glanced at him sidelong. "It did. The thief was due before the judge. He had a meal and everything was normal. An hour later, the guard came to escort him and he went into a frenzy. The officer I talked to described him as a wild animal with inhuman strength. He not only bashed the guard's skull and killed him but he injured nine others who tried to stop the attack."

"What did stop the attack? You said he was executed."

"The police drew their guns and one bullet hit his shoulder. It wasn't a fatal wound but the man stopped attacking instantly and became docile. He never said a word after that, not even when he was sentenced to execution."

Tong Zhou listened gravely. They took slow, measured steps in silence. Around them the city bustled in the morning. They passed an open doorway from which tantalizing aromas drifted.

"Are you hungr—"

"I could use a—"

They spoke simultaneously and laughed. Liu Shilin touched Tong Zhou's arm and they entered the restaurant. Over hot soup, steaming vegetable dumplings, and savory side platters, they continued sharing information.

"I'm curious why the thief wasn't executed earlier for killing his associate." Tong Zhou placed the last dumpling on Liu Shilin's plate. Liu Shilin politely accepted it and added the final slices of winter squash to Tong Zhou's.

Liu Shilin ate the dumpling before replying. "He never confessed to his partner's murder, though the circumstantial evidence was enough for most judges to find him guilty. I think the police had more pressing matters in the meantime. His partner was a criminal. It wasn't a high-profile case that aroused public outrage."

Tong Zhou took a sip of hot water. "Do you believe the officer's account of the robbery? You once mentioned he would be willing to sell me the bronze chain. Might he have done so to someone else?"

Liu Shilin had already given this possibility a lot of consideration. "I don't think so. He's easily bribed, true, but..." He shrugged. "I believed him. It's hard to say why. Sometimes I get a sense of a person. My reporter's instinct." He smiled crookedly at Tong Zhou.

"My inquiries were less fruitful." Tong Zhou refilled Liu Shilin's cup with water. "The officer in charge offered me a paltry sum as compensation and hoped I'd leave the matter alone." Liu Shilin remembered the officer in charge from before and was not surprised. "I did learn one thing, not exactly related but troublesome for me all the same. The warlord whose territory includes my grandfather's tomb has sold the mining rights of that mountain to a Japanese enterprise." He sighed dejectedly.

Tong Zhou's unhappiness pained Liu Shilin. And he imagined the winged snake demon, released from the coffin, feasting on desperate miners.

"We'll go to the tomb. I'll ask Ah-Meng to drive us."

Tong Zhou looked at him, softly grateful. He knitted his brow. "Are you sure? After the last drive..."

Liu Shilin smiled to reassure him. "I'm sure." Tong Zhou's answering smile made his heart beat faster.

After the meal they went their separate ways: Tong Zhou to purchase some things he would need and Liu Shilin to the local newspaper office to seek out Ah-Meng. Not surprisingly, Ah-Meng didn't like the idea. Liu Shilin wheedled, begged, and offered bribes. Ah-Meng puffed on a cigarette, shook his head, and patted Liu Shilin's shoulder. "No," he said. "I won't do it." Before Liu Shilin could think of his next tactic, Ah-Meng walked away.



“I can drive,” Gao Qixiang, the newspaper’s errand boy, piped up. He’d been hovering nearby, eavesdropping curiously. Liu Shilin looked him over.

“Can you?” he asked skeptically.

“Sure!” Gao Qixiang grinned proudly. “My elder brother drives a delivery truck for the newspaper and he taught me. I drive routes for him sometimes. I’ve driven as far as Yiyang.”

Liu Shilin rubbed his chin. With Ah-Meng’s obstinance, he was left with few alternatives.

“Can you borrow a truck? We might be there all night.” He wasn’t certain what Tong Zhou planned to do, but better to be prepared for anything.

Gao Qixiang thought it over, his broad, youthful face uncharacteristically serious. He edged closer and asked in a low voice, “The money you offered Meng-ge, can you really spare that much? For that amount I bet one of the trucks can be available.”

Liu Shilin patted his jacket pocket. The sound of heavy coins scraping together could be heard. “It’s a deal,” he said.

## Chapter Seventeen

The truck bucked and bounced over rough, mountain roads. Tong Zhou locked his teeth to keep them from clattering and, during the more perilous turns, closed his eyes. Liu Shilin, wedged between Tong Zhou and the enthusiastically helpful young man named Gao Qixiang, seemed unconcerned and relaxed on the surface, but Tong Zhou felt the tension in his posture. He noticed Liu Shilin's hands clenching the edge of the pocked and cracked leather seat.

Gao Qixiang had never driven this route before but had the confidence of youth. Also the exuberance. He talked nonstop, chatting about the weather, about working for the Changsha newspaper, about his home village, his family. This last topic was a seemingly endless source of particular detail. Gao Qixiang had five siblings including three elder sisters he praised for their modesty, cooking skills, and faultless housework. Eventually Tong Zhou understood that Gao Qixiang hoped to match his sisters with Liu Shilin and himself. He slid a sidelong look at Liu Shilin, who wore a fixed, politely interested smile that almost hid the boredom in his eyes.

When the truck reached the area where the powerful snake demon had attacked Liu Shilin, Tong Zhou and Liu Shilin both sat rigid, scanning the road and the mountainside. They passed without incident, though Tong Zhou remained alert. They reached the old village in mid-afternoon. There was a shabby guesthouse next to the road near the train platform used for transporting rock and ore from the mines. Liu Shilin rented a basic room for the three of them. The hunched, grey woman in charge of the guesthouse served them bowls of spicy soup with rounds of bread before Tong Zhou and Liu Shilin left for the mountain. Gao Qixiang wanted to accompany them but Liu Shilin, out of earshot of the grey woman, meaningfully convinced him it was better to stay where he could keep an eye on the truck.

In Changsha Tong Zhou had purchased two hiking poles, two oil lanterns, and a bulky wooden box the size of a large suitcase. He tied ropes around the box to form makeshift straps and slung it over his shoulders like a rucksack. He and Liu Shilin each carried a lantern and a hiking pole and followed the path up the mountain.

Recent rain left the path muddy and slippery. Tong Zhou, who knew each step well, kept his attention on Liu Shilin in case he lost his footing. Liu Shilin focused on the ground, grimacing from the exertion. The forest around them was quiet as the shadows deepened. They reached the cave entrance at sunset.

Tong Zhou didn't need a lantern to see his way. Liu Shilin lit his and the yellow glow flickered as they made their way to the tomb, treading single file. The chamber appeared undisturbed since their last visit. Tong Zhou unshouldered the wooden box and set it on the platform beside the stone coffin. Liu Shilin stood back and held his lantern aloft.

Tong Zhou took a deep breath and flexed his fingers. "Are you ready?"

“Not really but go ahead,” Liu Shilin said, one hand resting on his neck over the spot where he’d been bitten before. He smiled ironically and nodded.

After bowing and murmuring apologies to Grandfather, Tong Zhou braced his shoulder against the lid of the coffin and pushed it open about a quarter way. He hurriedly changed position to grab the winged snake demon as soon as it woke up.

Nothing happened. Tong Zhou cautiously peered inside and pushed the lid all the way off. It fell and broke into a dozen fragments.

“What are you doing?” Liu Shilin yelled.

“The winged snake demon is gone,” Tong Zhou said.

“Eh?” Liu Shilin crept closer and with a visible shudder climbed the platform next to Tong Zhou. His lantern swung over the coffin. Liu Shilin and Tong Zhou stood side by side and stared. Except for Grandfather’s bones and tatters of fabric, the coffin was empty.

“Someone came here and let it out.” Tong Zhou frowned, uneasy. Liu Shilin glanced around, thrusting the lantern forward. “It’s not in the tomb,” Tong Zhou told him. “If it were, well.”

“Ah, yes. If it were, I’d be eaten by now, is that it?”

Liu Shilin scooted off the platform and lit the other lantern. Tong Zhou removed the ropes from the wooden box and opened it. Inside was a folded length of white silk. Tong Zhou reverently removed Grandfather’s skull from the coffin and laid it in the silk. He worked methodically but carefully to fit Grandfather’s skeleton inside its temporary home.

Liu Shilin, watching him, said, “I hope you don’t mind if I ask this, but when you put the snake demon in with your grandfather’s body, wouldn’t it have, ah, nibbled on him before it fell asleep?”

Tong Zhou arched an eyebrow and glanced over at him. “No. Grandfather was quite dead and snake demons only eat living flesh.”

“Oh?” Liu Shilin rubbed his neck. “But then why mark a human as food for later if they need to eat someone while still...fresh.” He made a face. “And isn’t their poison lethal?”

Tong Zhou arranged Grandfather’s bones as securely as he could, wrapping them in the white silk. “The poison eventually kills but that’s not its main purpose. First it incapacitates the victim and sends them into a stupor. The snake demon can take its time feeding while the victim is still alive.”

“I see.” Liu Shilin gulped and looked ill. “And the one who attacked me in the car...”

“Wanted to choke you into unconsciousness, yes. Same principle, different methods. The poison is somewhat merciful since the victim won’t regain consciousness.”

Tong Zhou finished transferring his grandfather’s skeleton and checked the coffin thoroughly for anything he might’ve missed. Satisfied that nothing remained, he closed the wooden box, latched it, fastened a brass lock through the latch, and bound it with the ropes again. Liu Shilin helped him hoist the box on his back and checked that the ropes were secure. With the added weight, the ropes dug into Tong Zhou’s shoulders through his clothes but there was nothing for it. At least the climb down the mountain would be faster than the climb up.

Liu Shilin carried both lanterns, lit, and Tong Zhou carried the hiking poles until they were outside of the cave. It was night, dark and cold. Liu Shilin exchanged one lantern for a pole. Tong Zhou kept his lantern lit and held it in front of Liu Shilin to guide the way on the path.

“I’m worried about that winged snake demon being loose in the world,” Liu Shilin said after a while.

“So am I.” Tong Zhou glanced back at him. “But I don’t think it will come after you, if that’s your worry. It was seeking food and you happened to be there. It wasn’t personal.”

“That does not,” Liu Shilin stated, “make me feel better.”

They descended the trail in silence for a while before he spoke again. “Do you think your grandfather knew what the bronze chain was used for? Why did he have it?”

These were questions Tong Zhou had been asking himself ever since Zhang Ruifu informed them about the chain’s true purpose. “I wish I could ask him,” he said with a gloomy sigh.

“Grandfather always treated me well,” he continued. “He was a stern man, not given to gentleness, but he took care of me and never acted as though I was anything other than his grandchild. He never mentioned me being a demon, not even when my horns grew longer and he had to arrange my hair to cover them.”

“I wish I could’ve seen your horns,” Liu Shilin said with quiet sincerity.

Tong Zhou slowed his steps and looked back. “You do? Why?”

Liu Shilin stopped on the trail and looked at him, his lantern swaying as he held it higher to bathe Tong Zhou’s face in yellow light. “Because they were part of you.”

Tong Zhou gazed at him and saw the warm sentiment of his simple truth. Tears gathered in Tong Zhou’s eyes and he blinked them away rapidly, swallowing hard.

“Tong Zhou...”

“I’m fine. It’s just that...” Tong Zhou shook his head with a feeble smile. He turned away and proceeded on the path, Liu Shilin following closely. When Tong Zhou could speak evenly again, he said with an attempt at lightness, “Nowadays there are times I think it was a fortunate thing to lose them. Otherwise I would need to wear a big hat all the time to hide them.” His laugh was shakier than he wished. “It was easier when I was young because the style then was to have very long hair pulled up into a topknot. I found ways to gather my hair until the horns couldn’t be seen.”

Liu Shilin didn’t say anything and they strode silently for some while. Through the black silhouettes of trees were small, distant lights from the village, gradually growing larger. They reached the guesthouse very hungry and the hunched, grey woman prepared a plain, hearty meal. Gao Qixiang was obviously eager to know where they’d gone and what was inside Tong Zhou’s box but Liu Shilin engaged him in conversation about his family to steer the topic to safer ground.

That night the three of them slept on mats in the biggest of the guesthouse’s three rooms. Tong Zhou kept the box beside him, one hand resting on the latch. He woke before the others, had a quick wash outside from a basin of cold water, and sat on the floor next to the box and watched over Liu Shilin. Gao Qixiang and Liu Shilin woke within moments of each other, the former quick to rise and venture outside to wash and inquire about getting a meal.

Liu Shilin stirred against the mat and smiled softly at Tong Zhou. Tong Zhou smiled back. He smothered the urge to reach over and smooth a hand through Liu Shilin’s messy hair. The scents of heated cooking oil and spices wafted into the room. Liu Shilin sat up and stretched and pulled his coat on over his crumpled clothes.

“All safe?” he asked, nodding toward the box.

“Yes.”

Liu Shilin combed his fingers through his hair until the thick waves were modestly tamed. He rubbed his palm over his beard and moustache with a look of dissatisfaction. “Well. Nothing for it. Am I presentable, at least?”

Tong Zhou gave him a long look. He would be content to watch him forever. “Exceedingly presentable.”

Liu Shilin met his gaze before flicking his attention back to the box. “What are you going to do with, ah, him?”

“Yesterday I spoke with Yiwei while you were negotiating our ride. She knows a suitable place.” He rested his hand on top of the box. “If you don’t mind staying in Changsha for another night, she’ll show me where, and I can take care of Grandfather today.” He paused and gave Liu Shilin an angled smile. “Assuming we survive Gao Qixiang’s driving.”

Liu Shilin chuckled. “And that he doesn’t kidnap us to marry us off to his sisters.”

Tong Zhou stood and helped Liu Shilin to his feet. His fingers lingered on Liu Shilin’s wrist before he let go. “I’ll take the sister who likes to dust and clean. Keeping my house tidy is burdensome work.”

“I’ll take the sister who cooks the best,” Liu Shilin laughed. “That leaves the third, the one who sews. As you have a house I think she should go to you, too.”

“How considerate of you,” Tong Zhou said dryly.

They survived the bumpy—but peaceful—drive to Changsha. Gao Qixiang’s chatter waned as he realized Liu Shilin and Tong Zhou would neither tell him about the box nor express interest in meeting his sisters. Though it wasn’t the most satisfactory trip for him, Gao Qixiang clearly appreciated the adventure. He cheerfully dropped them off at the Chunyue Hotel and drove off to return the truck.

Tong Zhou didn’t enter the lobby. “I should go to Yiwei now.”

Liu Shilin nodded. “Do you want me to come with you?”

Tong Zhou stared at him, deeply moved. He was tempted to say yes, but remembering the place Yiwei described he thought it best if he went by himself.

“Thank you for the offer but I should do this alone.”

Liu Shilin accepted this. “It’ll give me time to see a barber.” He smiled. “And tonight we’ll eat at the restaurant down the street.”

Tong Zhou nodded and smiled and strode off to Yiwei’s shop.

The demons’ graveyard she took him to in her old-fashioned horse-drawn carriage was on the outskirts of the city in an overgrown, lonely field. The grave markers, invisible from a distance, were nothing more than polished stones, some inscribed. From the relative grandeur of a tomb to this humble resting ground, Tong Zhou thought with a twinge of guilt. But it was better than being blasted by miners’ dynamite.

Yiwei waited in the carriage while Tong Zhou found a suitable spot and began digging. The moment the shovel he’d brought touched the earth, two great, brown, dog demons with thick muscles padded forth through the tall, dead grass. They placed their forepaws in front of Tong Zhou and made cursory bows in greeting. Without a word or sound they dug the grave for him. Their work was quick and efficient and expertly measured. The wooden box fit perfectly. They rested while Tong Zhou knelt

before the grave and spoke to his grandfather, then they filled the hole with dirt and patted it into place.

“Thank you,” he told them, bowing deeply. “How may I repay your kindness?”

The dog demon with golden eyes replied in a deep, hoarse voice, “There is no need. We oversee the field for our kind.”

The other dog demon’s eyes were milky white. Tong Zhou wondered if it was blind. Its voice was high and chirping. “The princess has told us all. Your ancestor will be well protected here. His neighbors are a tortoise demon who lived peacefully for five thousand years and a lady whose imbalance was to nurture others, whether they wished for it or not. No one visits them any more. It will be very quiet here.”

The golden-eyed dog demon pushed a polished green stone toward Tong Zhou. Tong Zhou picked it up, held it high, and murmured a memorial to Grandfather. He carefully placed it over the grave. The dog demons watched him as he returned to Yiwei’s carriage.

“This was most suitable, thank you,” he told her. He wiped his eyes. His grandfather had been dead for centuries but grief had a way of returning.

He was still downcast when he returned to the hotel. Liu Shilin sat up on one bed, reading the Changsha newspaper. He watched Tong Zhou with concern before asking gently, “Is it done?”

Tong Zhou sat on the other bed. “Yes. The place is well cared for despite its appearances. No one should disturb him there.”

“We don’t have to go out tonight if you’d rather stay here.” Liu Shilin folded the newspaper and set it aside. His hair had been brushed and sharply parted, and his beard and moustache were nicely trimmed.

“No. I’d like to go out.” Tong Zhou smiled a little. “I remember how good the food was.”

Liu Shilin matched his smile. Tong Zhou napped until early evening. When he rose, he changed into a good quality changpao and made himself neat for going out. Liu Shilin wore a dark blue suit flatteringly tailored for his narrow frame. They strolled to the restaurant under cheerful city lights and Tong Zhou’s mood lightened.

The delicious dinner helped his mood even more. Liu Shilin ordered wine and they drank and ate and talked about food and travel and books. For one evening it was wonderful to forget about snake demon attacks, the Belgian, and the bronze chain. After the meal they wandered the city streets in the chilly air, remarking upon the lights, the moon, the faraway stars.

The dance hall at the Chunyue Hotel was bright and lively with jazzy dance music when they returned. They hung back as spectators to the joyous couples twisting and swirling across the floor. A young woman in a sparkling silver dress approached and held out her hand in invitation. Tong Zhou bowed his regrets and nudged Liu Shilin with his elbow. Liu Shilin laughed, took her hand, and joined the merriment. Tong Zhou watched them, impressed by Liu Shilin's graceful moves.

Under the dazzling chandeliers, dressed in finely tailored dark blue, laughing and happy, Liu Shilin was radiant. Tong Zhou couldn't take his eyes off of him. Liu Shilin and his dance partner swept past and Liu Shilin's gaze met Tong Zhou's, glittering. It was impossible, Tong Zhou thought, that any other man could be as attractive and appealing as Liu Shilin.

When the song ended Liu Shilin bowed to his partner and thanked her for the dance. She wandered off to meet another partner and Liu Shilin joined Tong Zhou, breathless and buoyant.

"I managed not to step on her feet," he chuckled.

"You were flawless." Tong Zhou hailed a passing waiter for a glass of water. Liu Shilin drank the water gratefully and checked his pocket watch.

"We'll need to get up early to make the train."

When they reached the hotel room, Liu Shilin took off his jacket and draped it over his suitcase. Tong Zhou started unfastening the collar of his changpao. Without warning Liu Shilin caught his hand. He flattened one palm on Tong Zhou's waist and stepped to one side, leading Tong Zhou in a waltz.

"You drank too much at dinner," Tong Zhou laughed, but he enjoyed how Liu Shilin held him and he moved with him in the impromptu dance.

They covered the floor of the hotel room, from door to window, lit only by the city lights from outside. Liu Shilin slowed and released Tong Zhou's hand. He placed both hands on Tong Zhou's waist and pressed close, subtly swaying from side to side. Heat raced through Tong Zhou, awakened. He rested his hands on Liu Shilin's shoulders.

Liu Shilin's look was sparkling, warm, inviting. His lips were very red. A wayward wave of hair hung over his forehead. He'd loosened his necktie and unbuttoned his collar and at the base of his throat, five tiny dark marks were visible. They looked like a cluster of birthmarks.

Liu Shilin gazed into Tong Zhou's eyes for a long moment. Their bodies rocked together minutely. With a self-conscious smile Liu Shilin said, "I've been wondering if you would like to kiss."

Tong Zhou's heart pounded. In reply, he pressed his lips to Liu Shilin's. They were wonderfully soft and lush. Liu Shilin stilled and ran his hands over Tong Zhou's back, holding him closer until their bodies touched. Tong Zhou tightened his grasp on Liu Shilin's shoulders.



Liu Shilin's lips parted beneath his. Tong Zhou lifted from the kiss. Liu Shilin chased him back, his lips brushing against Tong Zhou's cheek as he asked, "French style?"

Tong Zhou swallowed. "I've never done that," he admitted.

"Shall we try?" Liu Shilin's voice was a purr, as alluring and gentle as Mimi's.

Tong Zhou covered Liu Shilin's receptive mouth and tentatively slid his tongue past Liu Shilin's teeth. Liu Shilin immediately urged his tongue deeper with a strong suck. Heat burst throughout Tong Zhou's body and he trembled. He laved the hot, welcoming cushion of Liu Shilin's mouth, tasting hints of alcohol and spice. Liu Shilin's moustache tickled Tong Zhou's lips, enhancing the thrilling sensation.

The kiss lasted a long time, until Liu Shilin moaned in pleasure. Tong Zhou drew back, aware that Liu Shilin's yearning matched his own. I should end this before it's too late, Tong Zhou thought, but when Liu Shilin's lips touched his, he invited the next kiss without hesitation.

They stood in the room, kissing, until the city lights went dark. The room was cast into blackness. Liu Shilin licked along Tong Zhou's lips before slipping back.

"Tong Zhou," he said quietly. "I don't want any misunderstanding between us. I care for you such that I can't imagine life without you. I can't imagine—don't want to imagine—a day without seeing you."

Tong Zhou held his breath. The words Liu Shilin spoke echoed the words in Tong Zhou's heart.

"I want to share a bed with you," Liu Shilin continued. "I want to hold you in my arms and be together with you as one. If you don't wish for it or aren't ready for it, I understand. As long as I can be beside you, I'm happy."

Tong Zhou released his breath, closing his eyes briefly. He pressed his lips to Liu Shilin's cheek. "Stay beside me," he whispered. "For now, let that be enough."

Liu Shilin hugged him tightly. "Yes, yes. It is."

They parted slowly. Liu Shilin fumblingly stripped in the dark and climbed into his bed. Tong Zhou undressed neatly and lay down in the other bed. He was dizzy with happiness. Tinged with vague fear.

## Chapter Eighteen

A few short months ago Liu Shilin could never have imagined any of this. Not only had he met a beautiful, gentle, caring demon, but he had come to the conclusion that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with this demon. Had he been mesmerized, he wondered as he watched Tong Zhou nap on the train. Maybe demons could seduce unsuspecting humans into devoting their lives to them.

At present he only had one demon he could ask so when they had a train compartment to themselves, Liu Shilin stole a tender kiss and said, “Did you bewitch me?”

Tong Zhou gave him a wicked grin, showing teeth. “Would I admit it if I had?” He stole a kiss right back and said, “I think it’s you who bewitched me.”

Liu Shilin chuckled and they held hands until the next station when a stern elderly lady, her browbeaten manservant, and her morose niece joined their compartment.

As before, Tong Zhou was preoccupied on the journey, but judging by the thoughtful, secretly pleased glances he gave Liu Shilin, his preoccupations were different than earlier. When they neared Shanghai Liu Shilin both anticipated and dreaded their arrival. He would stay by Tong Zhou’s side, but what awaited them?

As it turned out, nothing, apparently. Shanghai was—if not peaceful—not unusually tumultuous. It snowed the day of their arrival, dusting the streets in white. They crossed the city in trams and tromped the rest of the way to Tong Zhou’s shikumen. Tong Zhou hung up their snow-soaked coats and hats then carried both of their suitcases upstairs.

Liu Shilin followed him, puzzled but his pulse rushing. Tong Zhou set the suitcases in his bedroom. He turned to Liu Shilin and said mildly, “Bring the rest of your things up from the study.”

Liu Shilin placed his hands on Tong Zhou’s shoulders. “Are you certain about this?”

Tong Zhou’s look was soft but with a flicker of heat behind it. “Yes.”

Liu Shilin embraced him first then went to collect his things from the study. Tong Zhou made tea. Liu Shilin went out to buy a newspaper and two containers of savory buns. After their meal they relaxed in the warm study. Liu Shilin caught up on the news in Shanghai—nothing out of the depressing ordinary—and Tong Zhou sat at the desk and read a book in German, making notes. In the evening they went out for dinner at a small place nearby, little more than a covered stall. The meal was very good and Tong Zhou knew the chef and introduced Liu Shilin as his friend.

He’s bringing me into his world, Liu Shilin thought and felt honored.

After a stroll through the snowy streets they returned to the shikumen and went upstairs to the bedroom. Liu Shilin's heart thumped. Tong Zhou chastely turned away and undressed, changing into traditional bedclothes. Liu Shilin slowed his jittery heartbeat and put on his pyjamas.

In bed together Liu Shilin slid his arms around Tong Zhou and Tong Zhou drew him into a deep kiss followed by another and another. Liu Shilin's excitement grew to arousal. Tong Zhou made a quiet, yearning sound and unwrapped him from his pyjamas. Tong Zhou kissed him everywhere, licking and tasting, pleasuring him with his soft lips, his eager mouth. Liu Shilin moaned and writhed as he was brought to the pinnacle of fulfillment.

He caught his breath and gathered Tong Zhou into his arms, kissing and caressing. He wished to reciprocate but Tong Zhou tangled their bodies together. He pressed and pushed and gasped out glorious sounds when he shuddered from ecstasy. His bedclothes clung to him, a thin barrier.

Afterward Liu Shilin held Tong Zhou close. Tong Zhou nuzzled and licked his neck.

"You taste delicious," he murmured.

Liu Shilin pressed a kiss to Tong Zhou's forehead. "Hearing that from a demon I probably shouldn't feel so incredibly happy."

Tong Zhou laughed softly and gently bit his earlobe. Liu Shilin tickled the small of his back.

Over the next few days Liu Shilin moved his things from the flat to Tong Zhou's shikumen, packing and making the trips after work. He was thankful for the series of tedious assignments his editor gave him. They kept him busy enough during the day but were not too demanding and didn't spill over into the evening.

Tong Zhou cooked their meals and arranged spaces for Liu Shilin's clothes and possessions. His books presented a small problem because Tong Zhou's study was already full. Tong Zhou sorted his library and moved parts of it into the storeroom, giving Liu Shilin an entire bookcase. They sat together in comfortable silence, warmed by the coal heater, reading and talking until late in the night.

Their bedroom life intoxicated Liu Shilin. Tong Zhou was enticingly insistent on pleasuring and tasting Liu Shilin, bringing him the purest satisfaction. But Tong Zhou always remained clothed until at last, one night, he removed his bedclothes, revealing his strong, finely muscled, perfect, beautiful body. He clasped Liu Shilin between his arms and legs and tempted him with avid kisses. Liu Shilin followed where he was drawn and filled him. Their passion was wondrous and complete, the culmination exquisite.

They lay together afterward in a warm, naked embrace. The room was still and black. Liu Shilin smoothed his hand along Tong Zhou's arm and down his side, following a faint gold trail.

“You’re glowing,” Liu Shilin said, watching the shape of his hand move over Tong Zhou’s golden skin.

Tong Zhou nestled against him with a happy sigh. “Yes. That happens when I’m thoroughly content and satisfied. It’ll fade in a while.”

Liu Shilin raised his eyebrows. “Thoroughly content and satisfied,” he murmured, smiling. He kissed Tong Zhou tenderly. “You’re amazing.”

Tong Zhou touched his lips to Liu Shilin’s in a slow, cherishing kiss. They fell asleep in each other’s arms and woke the same way. Liu Shilin felt contented and lazy and Tong Zhou made no effort to move as low winter daylight reached the bedroom window.

Tong Zhou laid his hand over Liu Shilin’s breast, above his heart. Liu Shilin caressed his back and shoulders and the nape of his neck. He combed his fingers through Tong Zhou’s thick, black, straight hair. Beneath his fingertips he felt two subtle, circular ridges.

Tong Zhou didn’t move or react in an obvious way but Liu Shilin felt his mood shift. He pressed his lips to Tong Zhou’s forehead.

“After Grandfather died,” Tong Zhou said quietly, “I went out into the world. I traveled alone to many places. I met scholars and poets, farmers and merchants, and enriched the education I’d received from my parents and grandfather. The world beyond my village was exciting to me.”

He ran his palm across Liu Shilin’s chest. “With my hair in a topknot my horns were hidden. No one guessed my nature. I wandered for a long time, meeting many people, until my travels took me to what was then the capital. By chance I met a wise old scholar who enjoyed our discussions so much he invited me to meet an important friend of his.” Tong Zhou paused and took a breath. “His friend turned out to be the emperor.”

Liu Shilin listened, trying to imagine Tong Zhou in the styles of ancient times, entering an imperial palace surrounded by grandeur and eunuchs and guards in armor.

“The emperor was not an old man. He was clever and intelligent and learned. And despite his lofty position he was easy to talk to. I’d never met anyone like him.”

Tong Zhou shifted, raising up so he could look at Liu Shilin, very solemn. “He had several concubines in addition to the empress. He also had male lovers. He invited me to his bed. After our first night I told him what I was. I took down my hair and showed him. Far from being scared or repulsed he was fascinated. He asked me about my past and I told him plainly. He said I was very special, a treasure, and he gave me a pavilion to live in so we could be together. Naturally I was kept apart from the rest of his household but he gave me one diligent servant.”

A chill trickled up Liu Shilin's spine. He touched Tong Zhou's hand and threaded their fingers together. Tong Zhou lowered his eyes.

"We were happy together for a while. He filled my pavilion with gifts, treated me gently, told me how special I was. When I wanted to leave the palace he always managed to convince me to stay, arranging entertainments I could view from my pavilion or bringing me new books to read."

The chill spread to Liu Shilin's gut and he felt ill. What Tong Zhou described was little better than a gilded cage for a songbird. He watched as Tong Zhou took a deep breath, met his gaze, and continued.

"What I didn't know was that the emperor had a few daughters but no sons. He was desperate for a son, an heir, as were all his ministers. It was the dynasty, his legacy, at stake. One night he explained this to me because, he said, he wanted my help. I told him that I didn't have any power to ensure that his next child was a son, but he replied that I did. He told me about the great medicinal powers of animal horns. How much greater, he asked, would be the power of a demon's horn? If I would give him one of mine, he would give me anything I wanted, anything I asked for."

The blood drained from Liu Shilin's face. He closed his eyes briefly. The room swam around them. His fingers tightened around Tong Zhou's.

Tong Zhou said in an odd, faraway voice, "I didn't love him. What I thought was love was infatuation. If I'd loved him, I would've done anything for him. I would've given him my horns. But I refused. He tried to convince me. He knelt on the floor and wept—the emperor of the world! I couldn't do it. It was like asking me to give up an arm or a leg. He told me he understood and he left very sad. Shortly afterward his guards came and bound me. Right there in the pavilion where we had shared so many nights, the strongest of the guards chopped off my horns. The pain was excruciating. I passed out."

Liu Shilin's breath caught in a sob. He pulled Tong Zhou into his arms, clutching him and rocking him. "Tong Zhou."

Tong Zhou hugged him and brushed his lips over Liu Shilin's cheek. "Hush now. This happened centuries ago. And after all of that, the emperor never had any sons," he added with sour irony.

Liu Shilin drew back to search his face, blinking through his tears. "Does it still hurt?"

"No." Tong Zhou smiled a little and shook his head. He raised one of Liu Shilin's hands and kissed his fingers. He guided it to the top of his head and placed Liu Shilin's fingertips over one subtle ridge. "You can't see them but you can feel where they were. If I could show you my complete, true form, I would."

Liu Shilin carefully moved his fingertips, following the circle. Tong Zhou said, "I don't know how or why I wasn't killed or who saved me. When I regained consciousness I was outside the palace. I ran as

far as I could. A few months later I met a skilled healer who was able to smooth away the broken edges left by the guard's axe. And about a month after that I met Zhang Ruifu."

Liu Shilin placed his hands on either side of Tong Zhou's face, bent his head forward, and softly kissed the two spots where his horns had been.

"I'm so angry that I want to know the name of that emperor so I can go burn his tomb to the ground," Liu Shilin admitted, "but I know it's useless. And I suspect you won't tell me who he was, will you?"

Tong Zhou's lips quirked. "No. Though Zhang Ruifu will, I'm sure. He wanted to eviscerate the emperor but that wouldn't have done anyone any good."

Liu Shilin gazed at him seriously. "You are special. You are a treasure. You are beautiful. I don't want anyone or anything to hurt you ever again."

Tong Zhou touched Liu Shilin's lips with one finger, tracing their shape. "I know you don't." He smiled and Liu Shilin pulled him into tender kiss.

It took the rest of the day for Liu Shilin to shed his inchoate, futile rage. Song Liying recognized his foul mood and kept her distance in the office. To vent his fury, Liu Shilin wrote a viciously truthful story about corrupt officials, naming names, that was far too damning to be printed. After work, in a better mood, he bought a box of Tong Zhou's favorite dumplings and returned to the shikumen.

Tong Zhou had prepared a generous meal already. He'd spent the day at the offices of the electricity company in the French Concession and received several folders' worth of work. While there, he said with a pleased little smile, he'd discovered that the company planned to bring electric lines into the area.

"We could electrify. Modernize," he said, placing tantalizing slices of braised fish in Liu Shilin's bowl. Liu Shilin glanced around, imagining the conveniences they could add to the shikumen, and his heart swelled at the simplicity of 'we'. The two of them together. He grinned and dug into his bowl and enjoyed the delicious meal.

That night Tong Zhou wound around Liu Shilin with urgent desire and they made love again. Liu Shilin felt a little smug, making Tong Zhou glow again. They lay side by side in the dark afterward.

"It's easy to forget with happiness," Tong Zhou said, "but there are things unsettled."

Liu Shilin had been thinking the same though he'd tried not to. "Do you think the thief who attacked the guard was one of the Belgian's attempts to turn a human into a demon? The way the attack was described..."

“I do. I’ve also been thinking about the riot you witnessed in Pudong. The rioter who attacked the soldier.”

Liu Shilin frowned, remembering. Now that Tong Zhou mentioned it, there were disturbing similarities. And the Belgian had been close by. He absently traced curlicues on Tong Zhou’s arm.

“I’d like to know where the Belgian is and how to defeat him.” He pressed a kiss to Tong Zhou’s temple. “Make sure he never comes after you.”

Tong Zhou yawned and nestled against him. “We should talk to Zhang Ruifu. He may know more about him than he’s told us.”

Liu Shilin dozed with Tong Zhou comfortably curled against him. Disjointed, obscurely disturbing dreams periodically shook him awake throughout the night. He pulled the quilt snugly around their bodies and tried to relax completely.

A scraping sound outside jolted Liu Shilin’s nerves. He opened his eyes and listened. He heard it again. Something was in the courtyard. He tightened his hold on Tong Zhou. Nothing will happen to you, he vowed. I won’t allow it.

Tong Zhou, cheek resting against Liu Shilin’s shoulder, said quietly, “I hear it, too.”

“Snake demons?” Liu Shilin grimaced at the thought.

Tong Zhou shook his head. They stayed motionless, holding their breaths and listening. A louder sound knocked downstairs. Tong Zhou got out of bed in one fluid motion, lit a small oil lamp, and threw on his bedclothes and robe. He opened a wooden chest and pulled out a large, old-fashioned knife with a curved blade that looked newly honed. Liu Shilin blinked at it before distractedly admiring how expertly Tong Zhou held it.

Liu Shilin reached for his pyjamas on the floor. When he was dressed, Tong Zhou crept to the bedroom door and silently eased it open, knife pointed, ready to thrust into the intruder.

A rotund black cat paraded into the room and looked up at Tong Zhou with innocent, round, yellow eyes. Tong Zhou set the knife aside and dropped to his knees.

“Mimi!”

Liu Shilin was cautiously relieved. To be certain, he left the two of them to their joyous reunion to investigate the rest of the house. No snake demons. No signs of thieves or break-ins. In the courtyard he found a cat’s paw prints in the dusting of snow and a loose shutter ajar wide enough for a cat. He returned to the bedroom where Tong Zhou sat on the bed, Mimi rubbing against him and purring. Tong Zhou petted her back and scratched between her ears and told her how worried he’d been.

Liu Shilin arched one eyebrow and sat down beside him. Tong Zhou smiled happily. “I can’t believe she’s come back at last. I shouldn’t have doubted her.” He tickled under her chin. “She’s a smart girl.” She kneaded Tong Zhou’s thigh and purred louder. “I’ll bring her some chicken hearts tomorrow. A return feast. Although from the looks of it, she hasn’t been starving.”

“No,” Liu Shilin agreed blandly. His lips twitched. “In fact, I think she’s had quite the adventure.”

“No doubt,” said Tong Zhou. Mimi curled up next to him. He stroked her glossy black fur.

Liu Shilin kissed Tong Zhou’s cheek. “I’m glad she’s come back. But, Tong Zhou, your cat is pregnant.”

Tong Zhou stared at Mimi in shock. “Mimi!”

Mimi gave him a sleepy, satisfied look and purred.



## Chapter Nineteen

One night of the three of them—Liu Shilin, Mimi, and himself—sharing the bed made Tong Zhou rethink their sleeping arrangements. Mimi's preference for sleeping by Tong Zhou's legs enforced a separation between him and Liu Shilin that wasn't desirable. And with the state she was in, he worried what would happen if either of them accidentally bumped against her.

In the morning he created a nest for her from a tray and an old quilt, setting it up beside the bed. Liu Shilin expressed skepticism that Mimi would obediently sleep there instead of the bed but Tong Zhou trusted her. Over her morning meal of fish scraps he petted her, explained the reasons for her relocation, and told her again how happy he was she'd come back. Liu Shilin listened to this with one eyebrow cocked while he made green onion pancakes.

They sat at the table and ate. "To make sure she doesn't climb on the bed you could move her elsewhere for the night," Liu Shilin observed. "And close the bedroom door."

"She wouldn't like that. She's always slept in my bedroom." Tong Zhou noticed Liu Shilin's discomfited look and his lips twitched. "Are you bothered by her being in the same room when we're intimate?"

Liu Shilin looked up, lips parted, not quite able to deny it. Tong Zhou cast a sharp glance at Mimi as she trotted over to the table and rubbed against Liu Shilin's legs. "Given her current condition she's hardly in a position to judge us."

"Hm." Liu Shilin reached down and scratched between her ears. He watched her for a few moments. "Have you always kept cats?"

Tong Zhou filled Liu Shilin's cup with hot water. "No. I traveled so much I stayed by myself most of the time. I lived in a village for several years and came to know a stray cat who wandered about and liked to be fed, but Mimi is my first housecat."

Liu Shilin, rubbing Mimi's chin and ears, said carefully, "Cats don't live very long. Fifteen years? Maybe twenty at most?"

Tong Zhou regarded Liu Shilin evenly and sipped water. The meaning behind Liu Shilin's words made his heart ache. "I know."

Silence stretched between them, broken by Mimi's shameless purring, not abated when Liu Shilin gave her a bite of pancake.

"You're trying to bribe her," Tong Zhou accused.

Liu Shilin grinned, his gorgeous eyes twinkling. "Of course I am."

While Liu Shilin was at work Tong Zhou purchased food for the household including Mimi, and spent the day in the study with the translations from the electricity company. Some of it was technical and challenging but most of it was routine stuff about accounts and billing. Tong Zhou yawned and slipped into a doze while sitting at the desk.

He knew it was a dream. He walked down a shadowy alley, hearing footsteps ahead. He tried but could not catch up to them.

Born demon, a high, nasal, unpleasant voice sneered, what do you think you can do to me? Stay out of my way and I'll leave your human alone.

Interesting that the foreign demon had presented a bargain. Tong Zhou kept following the alley. It turned sharply and he saw a retreating back. This is a trap, a raven demon cawed.

Tong Zhou jerked awake. Mimi was curled on his lap. The late afternoon light was low. He watched snow falling through the latticed window and thought about the dream until Liu Shilin came home. He roused, prepared a simple dinner, and finished his translations in the evening while Liu Shilin wrote in a notebook.

Mimi eschewed her new nest that night and planted herself on the bed between Tong Zhou and Liu Shilin. Liu Shilin chuckled softly, "Told you so," and gave Tong Zhou a quick, awkwardly placed kiss. Tong Zhou silently scolded Mimi in his heart.

He couldn't stand not touching Liu Shilin so he reached over to hold his hand. He rubbed Liu Shilin's knuckles. Liu Shilin spread his fingers playfully.

"Why did your parents send you to school in England?" Tong Zhou asked. This question had long been in his mind. "Were you alone all that time?"

Liu Shilin threaded their fingers together. "My father did well in business, not always in legitimate ways, and built up the family's wealth. He married young and had two children, a son and daughter, but his first wife died. His second wife was my mother."

He paused, gently stroking Tong Zhou's hand with his fingertips. "By the time I was born my half-siblings were in their teens. He was preparing my older brother to take over the business. And the world was changing. My parents wanted me to learn European things." He laughed mirthlessly. "They wanted me to become a diplomat. When I was old enough they sent me abroad to study. And yes, I was always alone. For a few years my older brother visited me until the family business took more and more of his time."

Tong Zhou swallowed the lump in his throat. "But you were just a child. Alone in a foreign land. It must've been wretched for you." He squeezed Liu Shilin's fingers.

“It was,” Liu Shilin said flatly. “But it prepared me for all the changes that had happened when I returned. And I learned that what I loved to do was ask questions, find the truth, and write it up.”

“Are your parents still living?”

“No. My father died a year or so after I came back. My mother died a few years ago. My siblings are still alive but they have their own families. I see them on holidays or when we go to our father’s grave and sometimes we exchange letters, but I’ve never been close to them.”

Tong Zhou rubbed Liu Shilin’s hand soothingly. “It sounds lonely. I don’t ever want you to be lonely.”

After a silence Liu Shilin said, “Now I won’t be. Not with you and Mimi and however many kittens she gives us.” He said it teasingly but with a lightness, a truth.

Liu Shilin didn’t have to work the next day so they took the tram to Zhang Ruifu’s neighborhood. Tong Zhou brought Mimi in her basket and fastened the harness—after carefully adjusting it for her new, round shape—when they alighted at the end of the tram line. They strolled through the quiet streets flanked by large houses and didn’t arrive at Zhang Ruifu’s until late morning. Plenty of time for Zhang Ruifu’s overnight guests to have departed.

When the wide front door opened, the normally polite, impassive young manservant in black grabbed at their arms and cried, “Sirs! Something’s happened! My master is missing!”

They led him to the parlor. Liu Shilin persuaded him to sit while Tong Zhou poured a glass of water. He looped Mimi’s leash around the arm of a chair and handed the glass to the servant, who looked dismayed at being waited upon by guests but accepted the water. Liu Shilin and Tong Zhou sat facing him.

“What’s your name?” Liu Shilin asked with gentle patience.

The man calmed a little and said, “I’m Zheng Ping. I’ve served Zhang Ruifu for ten years.”

He’d entered Zhang Ruifu’s service at about sixteen or seventeen, Tong Zhou calculated. “Tell us what you know,” he said. “When did Zhang Ruifu leave?”

Zheng Ping rubbed his forehead. “He’s been gone since yesterday morning. He never came home last night.”

“Is that unusual?” Liu Shilin asked, dubious. He raised his eyebrows.

“Master always entertains guests at home,” Zheng Ping said primly. “Especially overnight guests. He would never stay out all night without taking someone from his household with him.”

Tong Zhou understood Zhang Ruifu's caution very well. Liu Shilin didn't seem convinced but he gestured for Zheng Ping to continue.

"Master received an invitation yesterday morning. He told me he was going out and would be home in a few hours."

"Did he take his chauffeur?" Tong Zhou asked.

Zheng Ping nodded. "Yes. But Ma Li came back early and said Master had dismissed him until dinnertime, when he was to return to the Astor House Hotel and pick him up. When Ma Li went back, Master wasn't there. He looked everywhere, asked all the staff, and...ah..." Zheng Ping frowned and set the glass of water aside. "He was arrested by police in the International Settlement for causing a public disturbance. He attempted to search every room in the hotel himself."

"What invitation did he receive? Did you see it?" Tong Zhou asked.

"Or see who delivered it?" added Liu Shilin.

Zheng Ping knitted his brow worriedly. "It came with the morning mail. Master didn't show it to me and I didn't see anything on the envelope. The address was handwritten neatly. From the stamp, it was mailed locally. The paper was thick and foreign."

This caught Tong Zhou's interest. "Foreign?"

"Yes. It was like the paper the European drawings in Master's study are on."

Liu Shilin tapped his knee. "Does Zhang Ruifu receive a lot of invitations? Business connections, charity events, that sort of thing?"

"Not a lot," Zheng Ping answered, tilting his head. "Two or three a month. But if it's for the company, he always tells me where he's going, who invited him, and who will be there. I keep a record of business contacts."

Tong Zhou and Liu Shilin exchanged a look. Zhang Ruifu keeping the invitation secret implied something other than work and probably also not pleasure. That left a third possibility: demonic matters.

"Where is the invitation?" Tong Zhou asked.

"He took it with him." Zheng Ping paused and stood up, excited. "But perhaps not the envelope. I'll look for it now."

He hurried off before Tong Zhou or Liu Shilin could say anything. Liu Shilin toyed with his pocket watch, thoughtful. “Zhang Ruifu is noticeable. Someone must’ve seen him. Especially in a place like the Astor House Hotel.” Tong Zhou agreed.

Zheng Ping brought them the envelope. It looked exactly as Zheng Ping had described. There was no return address.

“I can ask about this paper in a few shops,” said Tong Zhou.

“I’ll see what I can find out at the hotel.” Liu Shilin rose and patted Zheng Ping’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. We’ll help you find him. You should take care of Ma Li’s matter now.”

Tong Zhou collected Mimi’s leash and Zheng Ping escorted them to the door. “Please let me know if you find out anything,” he said, wringing his hands.

As they walked back to the tram, Liu Shilin, hands in his coat pockets, asked, “Is this as worrying a situation as Zheng Ping thinks? Zhang Ruifu isn’t powerless, is he?”

Tong Zhou understood what he was asking. “All demons are stronger than humans,” he replied. “Zhang Ruifu is by no means powerless. If another demon came after him...I honestly don’t know if he would be in as much danger as Zheng Ping believes.”

Liu Shilin glanced at Tong Zhou. “Does Zhang Ruifu have enemies? You said the Belgian didn’t like Zhang Ruifu. Could it be him?”

They reached the tram stop. Tong Zhou knelt down to place Mimi inside her basket. He gave her a few distracted pettings.

“The only enemies I’ve known about were outraged relatives of his human bedmates. As for the Belgian, Zhang Ruifu told me they stayed out of each other’s way.”

“Maybe Zhang Ruifu stopped staying out of his way,” Liu Shilin said gravely.

They rode the tram until they went their separate ways. Tong Zhou knew of several shops that stocked fine, imported papers. He inquired at all, Mimi’s basket in tow, and learned that the paper was French and expensive but not scarce. All of the shops carried it and many customers bought it.

Disappointed, Tong Zhou went home. It was afternoon, the sky a solid pale grey, the air cold and moist. He put Mimi inside the house and went out into the courtyard. He stood very still, closed his eyes, and sent out the call: Zhang Ruifu.

There was no response. He called again and this time heard a choked, Don’t!

Where are you? Are you hurt?

Silence, then high, nasal laughter.

Tong Zhou opened his eyes. Perched on top of the wooden gate were two raven demons. They eyed him for a moment.

“Zhang Ruifu is being held by the foreign demon, isn’t he? Do you know where?” he asked them.

One cocked its head. “You made enemies of snake demons. Beware. They are close and know you’re alive.” It flew away, great black wings spread wide.

“The foreign one isn’t easy to find but try Zhabei,” the other told him. It lifted off, flapping until it soared high and away.

Zhabei was huge. Tong Zhou hoped Liu Shilin had more luck at the hotel.

## Chapter Twenty

Not surprisingly, a young-looking, attractive man with pure white hair had been noticed. Liu Shilin utilized his reporter's talents and collected as many statements as he could before returning to the shikumen after sunset. Tong Zhou had prepared their evening meal and insisted Liu Shilin should eat before they put together their information.

After the meal Liu Shilin spread a map of the International Settlement over the table. "Ma Li dropped off Zhang Ruifu at the hotel here." Liu Shilin used an ink pen to mark the hotel. "But a witness saw Zhang Ruifu leave the hotel lobby immediately after the Bentley drove off. He walked to here." Liu Shilin marked an intersection on the map. "I talked to a shop owner who remembered Zhang Ruifu standing outside a jeweler's for a while, looking in the window. I talked to the saleswoman at the jeweler's and she noticed Zhang Ruifu outside their window." Liu Shilin's pen traced a line of Zhang Ruifu's movements.

Tong Zhou studied the map curiously. "Where did he go after that?"

"He was seen walking to here—" Liu Shilin made a mark on the map. "—but after this area I didn't find anyone who remembers seeing him." Liu Shilin straightened, tapping his pen against his fingers.

"He stood outside the jeweler's for a reason," Tong Zhou stated. "We must look there."

Liu Shilin rubbed Tong Zhou's shoulder. "We will. Tomorrow. It's too late now, and if we're seen lurking outside of a jeweler's shop this late we'll be arrested for planning a robbery." He smiled lopsidedly.

Tong Zhou told Liu Shilin what he'd found out about the envelope paper and they agreed there were no useful leads there. Tong Zhou lowered his eyes and looked furtive.

"I called out for Zhang Ruifu," he admitted. "The same way I confronted the foreign demon."

Liu Shilin clenched his jaw. He dropped his pen onto the map. "Did you learn anything?" he asked, brittle. Tong Zhou needed to stop taking such risks.

Tong Zhou bit his lower lip. "I may have heard Zhang Ruifu. If it was him, he was in trouble. The foreign demon laughed at me. One of the raven demons suggested I search in Zhabei. And the snake demons know I'm still alive now."

Liu Shilin stared at him. Tong Zhou added with forced reassurance, "I'll be better prepared for their next attack."

Liu Shilin crossed his arms over his chest. "Why are you being so reckless?"

Tong Zhou furrowed his brow and looked into Liu Shilin's eyes. "Because I have things in my life I want to protect. That I want to fight for." He bowed his head and quietly went upstairs.

Liu Shilin sighed and ran his hands through his hair. He climbed the stairs and went to the bedroom door and stopped. Tong Zhou had opened one of Liu Shilin's suitcases and was going through the wardrobe, selecting Liu Shilin's clothes.

"What are you doing?" Liu Shilin crossed the room and grabbed the clothes out of Tong Zhou's hands.

"It will be safer for you if you move back into your flat for a while. At least until we know the threat of a snake demon attack is over." Tong Zhou's manner was calm and reasonable.

"And when would we know that?" Liu Shilin paced to settle his agitation. "Tong Zhou, stop this. We will risk everything together." He stood in front of Tong Zhou and held his hands, lifting them to a kiss. "I'm not moving out."

Tong Zhou gazed at him with anxious concern. "But if anything happens to you..."

Liu Shilin cupped Tong Zhou's face. "If anything happens, I want to be with you when it does. Besides," he added with a half-smile, "the flat's been rented."

"Oh." Tong Zhou wrapped his arms around Liu Shilin and held him. Liu Shilin caressed Tong Zhou's back. When they drew apart they saw that Mimi had climbed onto the bed unnoticed and lay down in the middle of it and fallen asleep.

The next morning Liu Shilin went to the newspaper office and informed his editor that he was working on the story of a man's disappearance at the Astor House Hotel. It was basically true, he decided, and the location—a prestigious hotel in the International Settlement—caught his editor's attention. When Liu Shilin left the office he met Tong Zhou outside the jeweler's where Zhang Ruifu had been seen.

"You brought Mimi?" Liu Shilin arched an eyebrow and looked down at her sleek, black, round body. She blinked up at him innocuously. Liu Shilin's back was still sore from sleeping in a contortion to avoid rolling over her or falling off the bed.

"I was concerned about her being alone if snake demons return to the house." Tong Zhou stepped back and scanned the front of the shop. Liu Shilin recognized the saleswoman from yesterday and went inside to get more information.

"She thinks Zhang Ruifu stood here for several minutes," he said as he emerged from the shop.

Tong Zhou absently wound Mimi's leash around his hand. Mimi paced by his legs and looked around with interest.



“There are apartments above,” Tong Zhou said. “Maybe he waited for someone to come out.”

Liu Shilin wondered about that, too. “If he met someone, he didn’t leave with them and wasn’t seen talking to them.” He stuffed his hands in his coat pockets and looked over the displays in the jeweler’s window. “He spent most of his time facing this.”

Tong Zhou joined him and they stood side by side, examining the jewelry and baubles. The shop’s façade was brick and Liu Shilin rested his fingertips on the rough edges beneath the window to crane his neck, searching for a clue among the glittering trinkets. Something white fell from between two bricks. Mimi batted at it, and Tong Zhou knelt to pick it up. It was a small, folded slip of paper. He unfolded it and sucked in a breath.

Liu Shilin took the paper from him. On it was written Fancheng.

“Could this be Zhang Ruifu’s handwriting?”

“I believe so. He left this for me.” Tong Zhou gave Mimi’s leash a subtle tug and started walking the same route Zhang Ruifu had taken. Liu Shilin fell into step with him.

“What does it mean?”

Despite this sudden lead, Tong Zhou looked unhappy. “A long time ago we traveled to Fancheng together. There was an incident, a misunderstanding, in the tavern where we were staying and Zhang Ruifu was blamed. I did something foolish to cast suspicion on myself and draw attention away from Zhang Ruifu. It worked. He snuck out of the city to safety.”

Liu Shilin gave him a sidelong glance and noticed Tong Zhou’s tense jawline. “He left you there to take the blame. Was the misunderstanding his fault?”

Tong Zhou’s lips quirked wryly. “I didn’t think so at the time.” He caught Liu Shilin’s hard look. “After a few days Zhang Ruifu arranged my escape. He forged some papers to make it seem like I was a high-level official with imperial connections. It was crude but it worked.”

“After a few days...” Liu Shilin muttered.

“In a prison cell, yes.”

“Couldn’t you have escaped on your own?”

“Not without hurting men who were only doing their jobs. I did consider it, though.” Tong Zhou slowed his steps to allow for Mimi’s waddling pace. “For Zhang Ruifu to have left this message for me means he knew he was walking into danger. He’s taking the blame for me. Taking my place.”

Liu Shilin slid his jaw to one side. He had been asking himself why Zhang Ruifu and Tong Zhou viewed their relationship differently—a friendship, according to Zhang Ruifu, and an acquaintanceship, according to Tong Zhou. Although he didn't exactly like Zhang Ruifu, Liu Shilin appreciated the information he'd given them. But taking the blame for Tong Zhou, taking his place? Liu Shilin had his doubts.

“Or this message means he's escaped to save himself from whatever trouble is brewing.”

Tong Zhou's silence told Liu Shilin this was a possibility Tong Zhou didn't want to believe.

They systematically covered the area where Zhang Ruifu had last been seen, talking to vendors, shop assistants, anyone who might have noticed him. A newspaper boy thought he might've seen Zhang Ruifu getting into a rickshaw but wasn't certain. Liu Shilin and Tong Zhou questioned the rickshaw drivers they met but none remembered seeing Zhang Ruifu.

The late afternoon was grey, cold, and heavy, foretelling more snow. They ate a hot, nourishing meal at a street stall, Tong Zhou ordering a small dish of meat for Mimi. After their tiring day, Liu Shilin hailed a taxicab to take them home. By the time they reached the shikumen's front gate, it was dark and snow was falling steadily.

In the house's washroom was a large, traditional bathing tub. Liu Shilin and Tong Zhou had been visiting the local bathhouse as more modern and convenient, but tonight Tong Zhou heated water and filled the tub. He insisted Liu Shilin bathe first. Liu Shilin's counterproposal was that they should bathe together. Tong Zhou's cheeks colored and he agreed.

After thoroughly washing off the city grime and rinsing in cold water, they climbed into the steamy bath. The tub was a tight fit for two people, which didn't bother Liu Shilin in the slightest. He pulled Tong Zhou between his arms and legs and kissed the back of his neck. Tong Zhou leaned into his embrace and relaxed. The comfortable intimacy, the hot water, and the long day made Liu Shilin pleasantly drowsy. He lazily caressed Tong Zhou and closed his eyes.

“You're asleep,” Tong Zhou murmured.

“Mm, yes.” Liu Shilin nuzzled Tong Zhou's ear. “Should we go to bed now?”

Tong Zhou tilted his head back and Liu Shilin brushed his lips along his throat. He slid his hand lower in the water to stroke Tong Zhou's inner thigh. Tong Zhou made a quiet sound as he grew aroused. Liu Shilin caressed and kissed, encouraging his reactions and enjoying how he arched and shuddered and moaned. Tong Zhou gasped and trembled as he crested. Liu Shilin held him tenderly.

After the bath Tong Zhou lingered over drying Liu Shilin, pausing sometimes to kiss him. Liu Shilin, wrapping Tong Zhou in his bedclothes, grinned and said, “We should use the tub at home more often.” Tong Zhou twitched an eyebrow and smiled softly.

Liu Shilin emptied the tub since Tong Zhou had done the hard work of filling it. Dressed in pyjamas and a robe, he wandered into the bedroom and blinked at the miracle he saw: Mimi was asleep on the folded quilt nest Tong Zhou had prepared for her.

“Smart girl,” Tong Zhou said. “She finally figured out where she’s supposed to sleep.”

Liu Shilin draped his robe over a chair and slipped into bed next to him. “You didn’t do anything to prod her along?”

Tong Zhou frowned at him. “Of course not.”

Liu Shilin stretched comfortably. Tong Zhou extinguished the lantern and nestled against him. Liu Shilin yawned, contented, and fell asleep with Tong Zhou in his arms.

Low, unhappy chirps woke him up in the middle of the night. Skyglow from snow-covered roofs and walls outside cast enough dim light for him to see Mimi on her nest, her eyes round and fearful. The chirps were coming from her.

Liu Shilin sat up groggily to nudge Tong Zhou, but Tong Zhou wasn’t in bed. A heavy sense of unease blanketed him. He got out of bed, shrugged on his robe, and lit a small lantern. He quickly checked the rooms by the bedroom before treading downstairs. When he reached the central room he heard a sickening whacking sound coming from outside. He opened one door enough to peer out at the courtyard.

The scene was from a nightmare. Under a black sky, the courtyard was grey snow and deep shadows, and standing in the center of it was Tong Zhou in his bedclothes. He didn’t notice Liu Shilin at the door. Trails of blood crisscrossed the ground. In one hand Tong Zhou gripped a long, limp, serpentine shape Liu Shilin guessed was a snake demon. In Tong Zhou’s other hand was the large, old-fashioned knife with a sharp, curved blade. Blood streamed from the snake demon’s body.

Liu Shilin, alarmed, opened the door wider and held up the lantern. He took one step outside and stopped when Tong Zhou whipped his head up to stare at him. Now Liu Shilin could see that the snake demon had been gutted. A black shadowy mass beneath its body was its entrails. Tong Zhou’s hands and bedclothes were smeared red with blood and his knife dripped.

Nausea roiled through Liu Shilin and he had to glance away. Eyes fixed on a patch of pure white snow, he swallowed and said, “Are you hurt?”

“No. I expected they would come again and was prepared this time.” There was a faint quaver in Tong Zhou’s voice.

Liu Shilin nodded. He took a deep breath and regretted it. The air stank of blood and viscera. He coughed and flicked a look at the snake demon corpse Tong Zhou held.

“You, ah, had to mutilate it in such a way?”

Tong Zhou’s face tensed. “Yes,” he replied solemnly. “To ensure it’s dead.”

Liu Shilin nodded again, turned away, and hurried inside the house, dizzily stumbling his way to the light well in the back. He braced himself with one hand on the wall and sucked in cold night air. When the dizziness passed he set the lantern in the hallway and started heating pails of water. Tong Zhou would need to wash.

He carried the first pail of water to the courtyard. Tong Zhou had somehow disposed of the carcass and entrails. Liu Shilin’s gaze darted around the courtyard and he noticed that one of the big ceramic storage jars had been moved. He handed the water and a cloth to Tong Zhou.

“You don’t have to do this,” Tong Zhou said, watching him. “Go back to bed. I don’t think there will be another threat tonight.”

Liu Shilin couldn’t quite meet his look. “You need to wash. Strip off your things and soak them in the water before the blood dries.”

“These are ruined. I’ll dispose of them later.” Tong Zhou set the pail on the ground and knelt beside it, running his hands in the water.

“There’s no reason to get rid of perfectly fine clothes,” Liu Shilin snapped, suddenly angry. “They just need to be washed.” He stormed off to get another pail of hot water.

In the kitchen, while he waited for the water to heat, he closed his eyes and tried to calm his temper. He saw Tong Zhou holding the dripping knife and the snake demon carcass. The image seared into his memory. Now he understood why Ah-Meng had kept his distance from Tong Zhou.

Tong Zhou has to do such things, he reminded himself. He was protecting himself. He was protecting me.

When he brought the next pail to the courtyard, Tong Zhou wordlessly stripped and plunged his bedclothes into the steaming water. He stood naked in the snow-lit night, pale but for the bloodstains on his hands.

Liu Shilin took off his robe and draped it over Tong Zhou's shoulders. "I'll bring you more water and some soap."

"Shilin..." Tong Zhou regarded him warily. Liu Shilin patted his back and went into the house to heat more water.

The process took a long time before Tong Zhou had scrubbed himself and his bedclothes clean. He hung up the bedclothes on a clothesline in the light well and tied Liu Shilin's robe around his waist. Liu Shilin emptied the bloody water into the lane where it would run off. When he returned Tong Zhou waited for him at the door, closing it behind them.

"Will you look at me now?" Tong Zhou asked, quiet and despairing.

Liu Shilin stood before him and gazed into his eyes.

"I didn't expect..." he said, and paused. He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. All that matters is that you're unharmed."

He willed himself not to turn away from Tong Zhou's look of sorrow. He shivered. "We've been in the cold all night. Let's light the heater and get warm."

He didn't wait for Tong Zhou to agree but went into the study and lit the coal heater and a lantern. Tong Zhou followed slowly and they sat by the heater in silence. Liu Shilin watched his profile. In the lantern light he was still breathtakingly beautiful. He was still Tong Zhou.

Tong Zhou looked at him. "If there were another way, I would do it."

"I know." Liu Shilin reached over and took his hands and held them. If there were any traces of blood left, he couldn't see them. He rubbed his thumbs over Tong Zhou's fingers and pressed kisses to his knuckles. Tong Zhou released a breath and relaxed a little.

"I'm sorry you had to see me like that."

Liu Shilin knitted his brow. "I'm not. Not now. I was shocked, yes. But this is part of who you are." He stared into Tong Zhou's big, dark eyes. "I don't want you to ever feel like you need to hide who you are from me."

Tears welled in Tong Zhou's eyes. He blinked them away and squeezed Liu Shilin's fingers.

The study was warm and comforting. Liu Shilin yawned. Tong Zhou shifted and slid his arms around him. Liu Shilin rested his head on Tong Zhou's shoulder.

Their peaceful closeness was broken by a distressed yowl from upstairs. Tong Zhou bolted upright. “Mimi!”

Braced for another snake demon attack, they ran for the stairs. Tong Zhou grabbed his knife from the table. He made it to the bedroom door first and stalked inside, knife poised to strike. No snake demons barreled forth, there was no attack. Mimi made another sound—a low, desperate cry—before purring loudly.

Tong Zhou stood in the center of the room, knife still raised, glancing around in confusion. Liu Shilin knelt beside Mimi’s nest and set the lantern on the floor.

“You can put the knife away.” He smiled up at Tong Zhou. “Mimi’s becoming a mother.”

Tong Zhou stared at them, eyes wide with anxious worry, and lowered his knife.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Daylight gradually stretched across the bedroom floor. Tong Zhou's eyelids drooped closed and he jerked himself upright, blinking to stay awake.

"It's all over," Liu Shilin said in his ear. "Go to bed now."

Tong Zhou looked at Mimi on her nest, stretched out, tired but satisfied with herself. Four tiny kittens—weak, squirming, helpless things—nursed and snuggled next to her. The first three, all black with patches of white, had arrived in quick succession. The fourth, grey and striped, smaller than the others, had arrived much later. This worried Tong Zhou and he'd sat on the floor all night to watch over Mimi and her newborns.

He chewed on his lower lip. "Do you think Mimi's all right? And the kittens? Are they healthy? The grey one is so small."

Liu Shilin's lips touched Tong Zhou's temple. "They'll be fine. They're only hours old. Give the mother and babies time to get used to each other."

"Yes, you're right." He glanced at Liu Shilin and smiled tiredly. "Mimi did well, don't you think? Only a few complaints. It probably hurt, poor girl."

Liu Shilin looked at him curiously. Tong Zhou sensed he was still thinking of what he'd seen earlier in the night, and the contrast between Tong Zhou holding an eviscerated snake demon and Tong Zhou worried about his cat giving birth. The memory of the thwarted attack prompted Tong Zhou to rise from the floor.

"I need to go to Suzhou," he said. "If I leave now, I should be back this afternoon."

Liu Shilin scrambled to his feet. "Suzhou? Why?" He raised his eyebrows in surprise.

Tong Zhou released a breath and looked at him evenly. "I have to take care of the thing in the courtyard. It can't stay here."

Liu Shilin briefly closed his eyes. "I understand."

Tong Zhou flashed on the sight of Liu Shilin standing in the courtyard, lantern raised, looking horrified and repulsed. Tong Zhou hated it. Hated that Liu Shilin had seen him covered in blood after taking a life. Tong Zhou wondered if Liu Shilin could ever look at him the way he used to, with fond tenderness.

"Will you watch over Mimi and the kittens while I'm gone?"

“Yes, of course.” Liu Shilin frowned. “Be careful in Suzhou.”

“I will.” Tong Zhou took Liu Shilin’s hands in his. Liu Shilin wove their fingers together.

“I mean it,” he said. “I want you to be careful and come back safely.”

Tong Zhou gave his fingers a reassuring squeeze and let go to get dressed.

The morning was grey, damp, and misty. The ceramic jar was bulky. Tong Zhou had sealed the wooden stopper in place with wax to keep the stench from escaping, otherwise he would’ve received even more curious looks from the other passengers on the train to Suzhou. He hired a rickshaw to take him from the station to a dismal, lonely plot of land near a lake. The rickshaw driver viewed him with suspicion but made no comment, and Tong Zhou paid him generously.

Tong Zhou hadn’t been to this place in a very long time but it hadn’t changed much. A decrepit, seemingly uninhabited inn was the only nearby structure. Tong Zhou approached, set the jar on the ground, and knocked on the weathered, wooden door. After a few moments the door opened a crack.

“Tong Zhou, is it you?” a raspy voice said from inside. “We thought you were dead.”

Annoyance flared as Tong Zhou wondered why every demon he met thought he was dead.

“I have this to get rid of,” he said, gesturing at the ceramic jar.

The raspy voice cackled. “Snake demons found you, then? Not surprised.”

“Will you take it from me or should I bury it in the field?”

There was a quiet stirring behind the door, a conversation or debate of some sort. Tong Zhou waited, absently looking up at the blank, grey sky.

“We’ll take it.” The door opened wide enough for Tong Zhou to push the jar into the opaque black interior of the inn. He produced three ancient copper coins from his pocket and placed them on the jar’s lid.

“Thank you,” he said with a bow and turned to leave.

“Wait,” the raspy voice called him back. “Someone wants a word with you.”

Tong Zhou stopped and glanced back at the door. “I won’t enter,” he stated firmly.

More stirring and conversation inside. At last the raspy voice returned. “Wait by the water. It will meet you there.”



Tong Zhou muttered agreement and strode down to the lake's reedy shore. He shoved his hands into his coat pockets. In one pocket he carried his knife and he wrapped his fingers around the hilt. He watched disturbances in the dark water while he waited. A slender, black snake demon with underdeveloped wings slithered from the lake and onto the shore a short distance from him. Tong Zhou gripped his knife and tensed, ready to strike.

"Tong-xiansheng," the young snake demon with red eyes greeted him deferentially.

Tong Zhou watched it warily. Its body undulated on the shore but came no closer. It said, "I watched over your grandfather until I was awakened. I mean you and yours no harm."

Tong Zhou did not relax. The winged snake demon was the first demon he'd ever fought, centuries ago. "You haven't come to seek revenge?"

The red eyes flashed but the demon replied, "No. You defeated me back then and you're still stronger than me now. Perhaps one day..." It grinned toothily. "But not today."

"Then why did you ask to speak to me?"

"Your grandfather's chain," it said, solemn.

Ice trickled down Tong Zhou's spine. "Do you know what happened to it?"

"I bit the human who stole it but that's not who has it now." The juvenile flicked its wings back and forth in agitation. "The one who freed me has it and he is close to you."

"Who freed you?" Tong Zhou asked, though he guessed the answer.

"A thin, old demon who blends in with the humans. Except he doesn't like them." The snake demon rippled.

"Do you know where he is?"

The juvenile paused and its red eyes dulled slightly. "Human locations make no sense to me, but it is a place made of flat stone and it smells like camphor. Inside that place he does things to the humans. A waste of good food, if you ask me."

Tong Zhou clenched his jaw. "If you're eating humans, I will put you in another coffin."

The snake demon hurriedly slipped back into the water with a whine. "I haven't eaten very many. Only a few."

Tong Zhou paced the shore, staring into the lake, but the snake demon was gone. With a disgusted sigh Tong Zhou trudged away from the water and the inn and walked until he found a rickshaw to take him back to the train station.

It was late afternoon, the sky already darkening, when he returned to the shikumen and found it strangely populated. A raven demon perched on the brick wall next to the front gate, which was open. Waiting in the courtyard were Zhang Ruifu's young manservant, Zheng Ping, and a solid, sturdy man Tong Zhou recognized as Ma Li, the chauffeur. Tong Zhou's hopes that Zhang Ruifu had returned were killed when Zheng Ping scurried to him and asked desperately, "Have you found him?"

Tong Zhou winced. "Not yet. But why are you waiting out here?" He scanned the exterior of the house. "Isn't Liu Shilin inside?"

"He is, but—" Zheng Ping's answer was cut short when the French-style doors opened and three young children romped down the steps, giggling and chattering happily. They slowed and grinned when they saw him, and Tong Zhou vaguely remembered seeing them around in the neighborhood. One girl told him smartly, "We've been to see the kittens," and the three scampered off.

Tong Zhou knitted his brow. "The kittens? But they're much too young for visitors." He frowned and marched into the central hall. He stopped short when he saw a petite young woman emerging from his study, wiping her hands with a cloth. She wore trousers, a work shirt, and a waistcoat, and her wavy hair was bobbed. She smiled at him.

"Are you Tong Zhou? Ah, don't worry about the kids. We didn't let them get close to the kittens. They were allowed to stand at the door and watch."

Tong Zhou stared at her. "You must be Song Liying. I'm pleased to meet you." He bowed politely. "But stand at what door?"

Liu Shilin came out of the study and closed the door behind him. "This one. We moved Mimi and her family into the study where it's warmer." He smiled broadly at Tong Zhou. "I enlisted help. Song Liying is a cat expert."

Tong Zhou relaxed somewhat. "Oh?"

Song Liying shook her head. "He exaggerates. But I learned a few things from watching my brothers' cats when we were children." She paused. "Ah, I hope you don't need that quilt back. It's been taken over by the cats now. And we had to borrow—"

Liu Shilin, his smile fixed, gestured her toward the French doors. "I'll explain it. Thank you for your help."

Song Liying stuffed the cloth in her trousers pocket and took her jacket from a hook on the wall. “Let me know if you need anything.” She tipped her head toward Tong Zhou. “Nice to meet you.”

He watched her leaving, passing Zheng Ping and Ma Li in the courtyard, where they gave each other mutual, curious looks. The raven demon had flown off.

“I thought my day was eventful,” Tong Zhou murmured.

Liu Shilin lightly patted his back. “Zheng Ping and the chauffeur showed up half an hour ago. The kids had just arrived, it was a little chaotic, and I asked them to wait.”

“How did the children know about Mimi’s kittens?”

Liu Shilin winced. “When I went to call Song Liying, they were playing near the telephone booth. They overheard me and followed me back and begged to see the kittens. According to them, their grandmother’s cat is the father.” Liu Shilin’s lips twitched. “Mimi has been silent on the matter.”

Tong Zhou sighed. “We better speak to Zheng Ping and Ma Li now. Not that I have any good news to tell them.”

“Song Liying told me there was a brutal attack in Zhabei last night,” Liu Shilin said, troubled. “It sounds like the kind of frenzied attack she and I witnessed at the riot.”

“And like the thief who attacked the guard in Changsha,” Tong Zhou said. “This could be a lead, and I have some information though the source may be unreliable.” Liu Shilin looked at him questioningly. “I’ll explain later.”

They invited Zheng Ping and Ma Li inside, served them tea, and got as much information as Ma Li could tell them about the day he dropped off Zhang Ruifu at the hotel. It was not more than they already knew. Tong Zhou promised them he wouldn’t stop looking. He didn’t mention his suspicion that Zhang Ruifu entered a trap set up by the Belgian nor Liu Shilin’s suspicion that Zhang Ruifu had snuck out of Shanghai. Zheng Ping and Ma Li both pledged to help in any ways necessary. They were clearly devoted to their employer.

After they left, Tong Zhou headed for the kitchen to prepare their meal. Liu Shilin rested a hand on his arm to stop him.

“It’s been a long night and long day,” he said. “Get some rest. I’ll go out and bring back food, all right?”

Tong Zhou was too weary to protest. He smiled his thanks and after Liu Shilin left he went into the study to check on Mimi. He found mother and kittens nestled together in their quilted nest near the coal heater. Mimi licked the nearest kitten and blinked lazily at Tong Zhou. He brought her a dish of

water and remembered the chicken heart he'd bought for her on the way home. He fetched it, diced it small, and set it out on a small platter. The kittens writhed and kept close as she shifted position to eat. She devoured the food and water.

"Poor thing. You must be exhausted." He rubbed her head. She purred loudly and lay down so the kittens could nurse at her belly. Tong Zhou sat on the floor and watched for a while, eventually noticing other changes in the study.

Another tray—one he'd been fond of—had been filled with wood chips and shredded newspaper and exuded sharp cat scents. He picked this up and took it to the back to empty it with the rest of the household waste. He replaced the wood chips and found more shredded newspaper in the study. He caught sight of a soiled cloth near Mimi's nest and recognized it as his own nightclothes, the set that had been covered in demon blood in the night. It had been carefully deconstructed and cut into useful shapes and sizes for kitten care. He approved of this practical reuse of nightclothes he'd decided never to wear again.

Liu Shilin returned with a small feast of food, all hot and nourishing. While they ate, Tong Zhou recounted what the juvenile snake demon had told him.

Liu Shilin grimaced and set down his bowl with a clunk. "That thing is in Suzhou?"

"It won't come after you. You were merely a convenient source of food when it was inside the tomb." Tong Zhou placed a few slices of cabbage in Liu Shilin's bowl.

"Do you think it told you the truth?" Liu Shilin refilled Tong Zhou's cup with water.

"I don't know," Tong Zhou admitted. "But it's the only lead we have so I think we should follow it." He sipped water and frowned. More and more he hoped Liu Shilin was right about Zhang Ruifu leaving and getting out of danger.

"I told my editor I'm pursuing a story about a missing man, and now there's been the attack. We'll go to Zhabei tomorrow." Liu Shilin finished his bowl and set it aside. "I'll ask Song Liying to look after the cats."

"Doesn't she have her own work to do?"

"She does, but..." Liu Shilin hesitated. "All right, it's like this. Song Liying and I discussed it and she's going to ask her brothers to help. I've never met her brothers but I trust Song Liying." He looked sheepish. "I've overstepped, inviting her and now her brothers. I'm sorry."

Tong Zhou shook his head. "No, it's fine. I'm grateful for the help."

After eating, Tong Zhou felt full and sleepy. Liu Shilin cleaned up, checked the study, and rubbed Tong Zhou's shoulder.

"To bed. Now. You barely got an hour of sleep last night." He gently pushed Tong Zhou toward the stairs and stayed close until they reached the bedroom. Tong Zhou yawned and hunted through storage chests for another set of nightclothes. By the time he'd stripped and changed, Liu Shilin was in his pyjamas and lying in bed. Tong Zhou crawled under the quilts beside him and extinguished the lantern.

Without hesitation Liu Shilin drew him into his arms and held him. Tong Zhou relaxed completely. Liu Shilin's lips touched his forehead. Tong Zhou caressed his chest. Beneath his palm Liu Shilin's heartbeat was strong and steady. It lulled him to sleep.

He woke from a heavy, dreamless sleep very early, before light reached the bedroom window. Liu Shilin, awake, stirred beside him, one hand lazily brushing down Tong Zhou's back. Tong Zhou shifted to kiss him, a light press of lips, and tasted Liu Shilin's desire for him. The kiss deepened. Soon their nightclothes were tossed aside and their bodies surged hard against each other, hot and urgent.

Liu Shilin captured Tong Zhou between his legs and lay back, arching. "I want you..." he pleaded quietly. "Please."

Tong Zhou trembled. Such great temptation. He fought for breath and stroked Liu Shilin's hair. He gazed at him with sorrow, passion, longing. A long moment passed. Tong Zhou kissed him gently and reached to touch him in steady glides. Liu Shilin's breath expelled in a gasp and he pushed with Tong Zhou's pulls until shuddering in pleasure. Tong Zhou embraced him and softly kissed his temple.

You are the most precious gift in my life. All the centuries I was alone are worth it for this: to hold you and bask in your warmth and understanding for this treasured interval.

Liu Shilin napped and Tong Zhou watched him until cold, clear daylight lit the room. They rose, washed, and dressed. Liu Shilin checked on Mimi while Tong Zhou made breakfast. After their meal Liu Shilin left to telephone Song Liying. Tong Zhou studied a map of Zhabei he had, though it wasn't up to date.

"Cat nanny arranged," Liu Shilin announced with a smile when he returned.

Tong Zhou glanced up from the map. "I doubt Song Liying would appreciate being called that."

Liu Shilin rested a hand on the back of Tong Zhou's neck and leaned over his shoulder to read the map. "The nanny is one of her brothers, at least for this morning. Song Liying will arrange shifts depending on how long we're gone."

Tong Zhou tilted his head to look at him. “You shouldn’t come with me,” he said, serious.

Liu Shilin, unconcerned, gave him a sidelong look. “Perhaps not, but I will, anyway.” He dropped a kiss on Tong Zhou’s brow. “I don’t want you to go alone. Besides, we can search more efficiently together.”

Tong Zhou saw his stubbornness and didn’t have an argument he thought would convince Liu Shilin. They hunched over the map together, planning their search until Song Liying’s brother—a lean, jovial young man with thin hair—arrived, eager to meet the cats. Watching him crouch in the study and coo over the babies while expertly critiquing their environment put Tong Zhou’s mind at ease. Mimi blinked sleepily at him and purred. Tong Zhou felt she and her brood were in safe hands.

If only the same could be said for the rest of them.

## Chapter Twenty-two

Liu Shilin was the first to admit they did not have a good plan. Zhabei was huge and they had next to nothing to go on. Smooth stone walls and a smell of camphor, if the winged snake demon was to be believed. And Liu Shilin, touching the base of his neck out of unconscious habit, did not believe.

But they had to start somewhere. The Belgian demon had connections with the Japanese so Liu Shilin and Tong Zhou began their search at an area where Japanese businesses had set up manufactories. It was a cold, bright, clear day and the sun cast crisp shadows between buildings humming with voices and machinery. Tong Zhou walked slowly, occasionally closing his eyes or stopping to listen. Liu Shilin had made him promise not to use demonic telepathy—or whatever it was properly called—although he couldn't know if Tong Zhou broke that promise.

But he trusted Tong Zhou, Liu Shilin thought, sparing a moment to watch him pause at the corner of one building. He trusted him completely and had offered himself thoroughly to him in bed. Tong Zhou had not accepted the offer. Not entirely. Which was curious and faintly disappointing but, Liu Shilin reflected, they had not discussed any specifics of their bedroom life and perhaps Liu Shilin had guessed wrongly. It was no matter. Entwining with Tong Zhou in their bed was satisfaction enough, no matter what else they did or didn't do.

Aware he was inappropriately distracted, Liu Shilin pulled his attention back to their surroundings. Tong Zhou resumed his deliberate steps and turned a corner. Liu Shilin followed, noticing a recently mounted metal sign covering an older one. The new sign advertised medicinal tinctures with a stylized graphic of a phoenix.

The narrow lane between buildings reminded Liu Shilin of the Pudong alley where he'd met the Belgian. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. The lane was mostly in shadow but here and there the sun caught metal and cast bursts of white light in dazzling patterns.

The building to their left was blank and windowless. The building to their right had opaque glass windows set high in the wall and there was a wide entrance in the middle, opening into the lane. Tong Zhou stopped in front of the entrance and stared inside. Liu Shilin reached him and stopped, too. The smell of camphor pervaded the area.

Liu Shilin rubbed the back of his neck uneasily. "It might not be here," he said. "There could be another—"

"It's here," Tong Zhou stated, standing utterly still and staring into the murky interior. "I've felt his evil for some while now. It is concentrated in this place." He inhaled and exhaled slowly. "He is here." His lips angled in a grim smirk. "It's time I met him."

Tong Zhou reached into his coat pocket and withdrew the knife with the curved blade Liu Shilin remembered rather too distinctly. Liu Shilin was unarmed and now his insistence on accompanying

Tong Zhou seemed foolhardy. If he was captured he'd be a liability. No, he vowed. He would not become a tool to be used against Tong Zhou.

Liu Shilin sucked in a deep breath. "You were right. I shouldn't have come." Tong Zhou shot him a glance. "But I'm here now and I want to help. What can I do?"

Tong Zhou searched his face, grave and concerned. "Find anything you can use as a weapon. Stay back and let me go first. It's likely we'll be separated, and he may try to use one of us to control the other. If that happens..."

Liu Shilin flashed him a grin. "If that happens, you'll come and rescue me."

Tong Zhou furrowed his brow and paused. "If Zhang Ruifu is here I want to save him. And it's important to get the bronze chain. But I don't know what else we'll find inside." He gave Liu Shilin a soft look and kissed him tenderly. "Be as careful as you can. Don't take unnecessary risks. And if anything comes toward you, attack it immediately, with all your strength."

Liu Shilin swallowed against the lump in his throat. "Good advice," he said, "that you should follow yourself."

Tong Zhou nodded, his eyes huge and dark. They turned and entered the factory together.

Despite the smell of camphor and the new sign on the building, it didn't look like the place was an active production center. There were long, empty tables stretching in several rows and some large, squat conglomerations of machinery spaced between them. There was also a spiral staircase in the middle of the floor, leading up. Tong Zhou approached this, careful. Liu Shilin scanned for anything he could use as a weapon and stopped at one of the machines.

He found a heavy wrench he liked the heft of and noticed a coil of thin wire he felt might be useful. This he slid over one arm like a gigantic bracelet and he wielded the wrench in his other hand. After a quick inspection for anything else he might use, he looked up and Tong Zhou was gone.

A tremor of excitement, of fear, ran through him and his blood pumped fiercely. Logic told him that Tong Zhou had ascended the spiral staircase but his eyes tracked the room to be sure he was alone before he followed.

He was not alone.

He saw the shape—grey like a shadow but bulky and moving erratically. Liu Shilin flattened his back against the tallest part of the machine and hoped he hadn't been seen. The shape kept moving, sluggish and listing like a drunkard. He heard its footfalls, louder and louder. His pulse hammered.



It stopped close to the machine and he heard its hoarse breathing. It sniffed the air. Its smell was unwashed and foul. Liu Shilin fought a wave of nausea and gripped the wrench in his hand. Maybe, he thought—hoped—it wouldn't find him and would move on.

At the instant this thought ended, the thing rounded the edge of the machine and saw him. They stared at each other for a heartbeat, and Liu Shilin imagined he saw his own terror reflected back in the thing's eyes. No, not a thing. It was a person. A man with greying hair and a wide moustache. Round about his middle. Dressed in loose laborers' clothes.

Liu Shilin's first impulse was to smile, disarm and distract, set the man at ease. Assure him he was no threat. But he saw the look in the man's eyes shifting, becoming less human and more like...

More like the look in Tong Zhou's eyes when he was slaughtering the snake demon in the courtyard.

Liu Shilin ducked in time to avoid the full assault, but the man's teeth scraped his arm and tore his jacket sleeve. Liu Shilin rolled away from the man's awkward pounce and the man hit his head against the machine. The metal rang like a towered clock chime. The man slumped forward onto the floor. Liu Shilin, wrench raised high, looked him over and didn't strike. The man wasn't moving. He might be dead. Liu Shilin didn't wait to find out. He ran to the spiral staircase and raced upstairs.

The upper floor was a grid of corridors and rooms with frosted glass windows and closed doors. Weak light entered from dirty skylights above. It was strangely quiet here, as if the building held its breath before attacking its prey. Liu Shilin couldn't tell which direction Tong Zhou followed. He chose the first corridor and opened each door. None of them were locked.

By the time he reached the last door along this corridor, a forbidding sense of unease descended upon him. Most of the rooms were empty but in some he'd found cabinets lined with glass jars of unidentified, opaque liquids. In one room was a desk covered in stained cloth. The stains looked like blood. Liu Shilin clenched his jaw and went to the next corridor.

Where was Tong Zhou? Was he in trouble? What if he opened one of these doors and found...

Liu Shilin shut his eyes, faltering. He could not imagine it. He refused. No. Tong Zhou was strong, was armed. Nothing would happen to him.

Liu Shilin remembered Tong Zhou helpless on the floor of his bedroom, his eyes a blank black, unseeing, after the snake demon attack. Liu Shilin swallowed, opened his eyes, and raised the wrench. He opened the doors faster now, checking quickly before moving on.

His inspection was so rapid he almost missed the body in the room at the end of the corridor. A glimpse of pure white hair made him pause. Lying prone on the floor was Zhang Ruifu, naked and unmoving. Liu Shilin approached warily, glancing about the empty room.

When he stood over Zhang Ruifu, Liu Shilin grimaced. Zhang Ruifu's skin was marred with dozens of fresh cuts, some deep. There were bruises on his wrists. Liu Shilin crouched down for a closer look. He recognized the shape of the bruises. It matched the throat of a dead tomb robber in Changsha. Zhang Ruifu's wrists had been bound with the bronze chain.

Zhang Ruifu's torso moved slightly. He was still alive. Liu Shilin quickly set down the wrench and wire and removed his jacket. He placed it over Zhang Ruifu's shoulders and spoke quietly.

"Zhang Ruifu. It's Liu Shilin. I'm here with Tong Zhou but we got separated. Can you hear me? Can you sit up?"

Zhang Ruifu didn't stir and Liu Shilin hesitated. He couldn't stay here but he didn't want to leave Zhang Ruifu like this. He held Zhang Ruifu's shoulders and tried to ease him upright. Zhang Ruifu flinched from his touch and roused, slowly sitting up. A red cut split his lip and there were more cuts across his chest. His hair, matted and dirty, fell in front of his face.

"It's Liu Shilin. Can you hear me? Do you understand my words?" Liu Shilin waited but there was no response. He sighed heavily, making his decision. "I have to find Tong Zhou. I can't take you with me like this but we'll come back for you, I promise." He reached forward to draw his jacket around Zhang Ruifu. "We won't leave you here."

He wished for some reaction but there was none. Liu Shilin gathered the coil of wire and wrench. He hated to leave Zhang Ruifu defenseless, but he didn't know what he would face next himself. He got up and left the room, closing the door behind him.

The next two corridors were like the first: empty rooms, jars in cabinets, the occasional stained cloth. In one room was a pile of discarded clothing and Liu Shilin chose not to think deeply about what its size and variety implied. There was one corridor left. It had no windows and only three doors, solid and spaced far apart. Liu Shilin stopped and stared at them, overwhelmed by dread. Tong Zhou had said he felt the Belgian demon's evil. Liu Shilin now thought he felt it, too. Stepping forward to the first door took all of his effort, like wading against a river's current.

He turned the doorknob. The door stayed shut. He pressed his weight against it and pushed. It opened, but fought him as it did so, as if someone—or something—was on the other side, pushing back. At last it gave way and Liu Shilin was in a small, shadowy room with a balcony overlooking a cavernous, windowless chamber. A set of spiral stairs descended into it. The door he'd opened with such difficulty swung shut easily. Liu Shilin approached the balcony's wooden railing and looked below.

Various chains and straps hung from plain stone walls. Bare electric lights were strung along one wall and glared into the space, illuminating clusters of blood stains. But what held Liu Shilin's attention was the table in the center of the room. At one end sat Tong Zhou, holding his knife flat against the

tabletop. At the other end sat the Belgian demon, dressed in a light brown suit. Between them, stretched over the table, was the bronze chain.

“And here he is now,” the Belgian said to Tong Zhou without turning his head.

Tong Zhou jerked his head and stared up at the balcony. Angry. The force of his anger made Liu Shilin take a step backward. He’d never seen such a look from Tong Zhou, not even that night in the courtyard.

The Belgian laughed thinly. “Your protection mark doesn’t mean much if the human fights against it.”

Liu Shilin inwardly cursed. Of course. The dread, the difficulty reaching the room, the door pushing him back... Tong Zhou had been trying to protect him. Liu Shilin had ignored it all and broken past his protections. No wonder Tong Zhou was angry.

In a louder voice the Belgian addressed him, “You might as well join us now that you’re here.”

“I’m fine where I am, thanks,” Liu Shilin called back with a carefree smile. Tong Zhou shot him a dismayed look.

The Belgian shrugged as if Liu Shilin’s presence was of no importance. Liu Shilin, apprehensive, stepped backward and tried to open the door to leave the room. The doorknob was stuck and the door immovable. He slunk back to the railing and shook his head at Tong Zhou’s unhappy look.

“It’s the same problem, isn’t it?” the Belgian said to Tong Zhou. “We’ve always believed that for our will to work, the human must accept it.” The Belgian smiled coldly. “That’s no longer true. My creatures prove it.”

Even from this distance Liu Shilin saw Tong Zhou’s nostrils flare and his lips curl in disgust. “If those pitiable humans you’ve experimented on are the measure of your success, you’re far from proving anything.”

“Well,” the Belgian intoned, smug. “We’ll have to see.”

After a beat, Tong Zhou suddenly thrust away from the table with a panicked look at Liu Shilin. Liu Shilin confusedly watched him until...

Oh, he thought as a great, black, scaly weight sprang from the shadows and knocked him down. Not again.

## Chapter Twenty-three

With furious effort, Tong Zhou tore through the barrier the foreign demon had placed around him and scrambled up the spiral staircase. Liu Shilin lay facedown on the floor, motionless beneath a large, old snake demon with milky white eyes. The snake demon was not feeding—yet—and seemed dull after its attack. It lay over Liu Shilin's body, moving its head from side to side, and Tong Zhou couldn't tell if it could see him.

He stared at Liu Shilin long enough to see flickers of a pulse on his neck. Tong Zhou bit his lip. He needed to go down and take care of that monster while he could, but killing this snake demon would take effort and time. He noticed a coil of thin metal wire beside Liu Shilin and grabbed it. Perhaps he could garrote the snake demon quickly, enough to keep it from feeding.

“Xiao Tong,” the snake demon said, slow and ancient.

“Yes, yes. You thought I was dead.” Tong Zhou stuck his knife in his pocket and pulled a length of wire between his fists.

“Of course you are alive,” the snake demon replied. “You are the born demon.” It shook its head ponderously. “The one below has drained me too much. I have little time and no inclination to feed. Your human will be safe. Go after the one you should. Quickly. Get the chain before he can use it on another.”

Tong Zhou frowned. Could he believe anything from a snake demon? Then he saw the marks on the snake demon's body. Deep impressions of links of a chain that had broken through scale and skin. Gouges and unhealed cuts, some leaking blood.

“Go!” the snake demon hissed at him.

Liu Shilin, Tong Zhou sent his thought with all of his will. Be safe. Be protected.

He scurried down the staircase. The foreign demon and the chain were gone—through an open doorway leading into darkness. Tong Zhou carried the coil of wire in one hand and his knife in the other and followed.

The room was a laboratory, filled with jars and beakers and thin pipes. It wasn't very big but there were cabinets and shelves haphazardly situated, preventing Tong Zhou from getting a complete view. He cautiously stepped past one set of shelves and peered around a cabinet.

On the floor was a snake demon, mutilated with crisscross marks cut to the bone. Too little blood seeped from the cuts; it had been drained. If it was still alive it was in agonizing pain. Beheading it would be a kindness. Tong Zhou bent down, set the coil of metal wire aside, and raised his knife to strike in one swift, merciful, sweeping blow.

The bronze chain crashed against his skull, knocking him sideways. Before he could right himself, the foreign demon had wound the chain around Tong Zhou's wrist and pulled tight enough to weaken his grip on the knife. It slipped from his hand and fell to the floor. Tong Zhou kicked wildly and yanked at the chain, causing the foreign demon to falter. Tong Zhou staggered to his feet and turned to face his attacker.

The foreign demon's tinted spectacles slid, askew, to the end of his nose. His orange, slitted-pupil eyes widened and his thin, colorless lips twisted. He tugged on the chain and said, "You must obey me. You must follow my will."

Tong Zhou jerked his bound wrist until the chain stretched taut between them. "Why?" he asked.

Something flashed in the foreign demon's eyes before they narrowed. "Whoever wields this chain commands demonkind. You will submit to me and let my will become yours. I will milk you of your blood and feed it to my creatures to do my bidding."

"And what is your bidding?"

Tong Zhou stood very still, listening to the foreigner's unpleasant, nasally voice gloatingly describe the horrors he wished to unleash on humans. The evil cruelty made his gut clench. He would never be part of such a plan. He would rather die than let his blood be used to destroy innocent people.

Tong Zhou grabbed the chain with his free hand and heaved with every reserve of strength he could summon.

"There's one problem with your plan," he countered. "I can wield the chain myself. And I don't want to be your vessel."

The foreign demon lurched forth, glaring at Tong Zhou in shock. "This is impossible! How are you resisting? You must obey! I command it!"

Tong Zhou wound the chain around his hand, drawing him closer. The foreign demon finally let go and stumbled backward. Before he could make any move to escape, Tong Zhou threw the chain around the demon's neck and twisted it tightly.

Immediately the foreign demon went slack. The fire left his eyes and he hunched forward. Tong Zhou, holding the bronze chain in place, thought quickly. The demon was under control as long as Tong Zhou subdued him with the chain. Tong Zhou had no wish for such power over another but he couldn't release this demon to return to evil.

This chain holds my will and you must obey. Tong Zhou unwound the chain from his wrist and drew the ends around the demon's chest. He used metal wire from the coil he'd carried to secure the ends

together behind the demon's back. Still gripping the chain, he sent the thought, You will rid this place of the tools and results of your experiments. How you choose to live after that will be the decision I leave to you, but you will never harm another human, animal, or demon again. This is my will.

Before releasing his hold on the chain, he leaned over and picked up his knife with one hand. Holding it ready, he cautiously uncurled his fingers from the chain's heavy bronze links. The foreign demon made no sudden move. His eyes were dull and posture slouched.

Tong Zhou checked on the mutilated snake demon and ended its suffering with one rapid slice. The foreign demon began to move. Tong Zhou braced himself for another assault, knife at the ready. The foreign demon ignored him, clumsily gathering items in the laboratory and dropping them into a pile in the middle of the room. Realizing what the demon meant to do, Tong Zhou rushed from the room, through the high-ceilinged chamber, and up the spiral staircase.

Liu Shilin and the ancient snake demon were gone. Tong Zhou, his heart battering at his breast, tore open the door and raced through the corridors, shouting for Liu Shilin. He skidded to a halt at the stairs that descended into the factory floor below. The old snake demon had Liu Shilin's shoulder in its mouth and was dragging him across the floor.

Tong Zhou leapt onto the snake demon's back, about to whip his blade across its neck. The demon released Liu Shilin. He was alive. No blood stained his shirt, which had puncture holes; the demon had bitten through the fabric to drag Liu Shilin to safety. Tong Zhou stood up and bowed apologetically.

"I'm sorry. I misunderstood."

"It is no matter, Xiao Tong." The snake demon's voice was slow and tired. "You must save your human before all life in this place is ended. You know the evil one's intent better than I."

"Yes," Tong Zhou said, worried. He crouched and gently shook Liu Shilin and patted his cheeks. "The foreign demon tried to subdue me to his will, but I don't know why the chain had no effect on me."

The snake demon nudged at Liu Shilin to wake him. "Don't you?" it said to Tong Zhou. "Impure tools such as a bronze chain only work when there is an imbalance to exploit." It paused and added meaningfully, "You are a born demon."

Tong Zhou, rubbing Liu Shilin's shoulders, took a breath, understanding. Only a born demon without an imbalance could resist. Even Zhang Ruifu hadn't seemed to know this. Tong Zhou wondered if his grandfather had known.

Liu Shilin's eyelids fluttered and he roused with a frown. "Stop that music," he groaned. "It's too loud."

“Shilin. It’s Tong Zhou. Wake up. We have to leave. Quickly.”

Tong Zhou urged him to sit. Liu Shilin rubbed his head and face. Aside from some small scratches on his face and hands from being dragged across the floor, he was unharmed. He blinked, focused on Tong Zhou, and smiled in relief.

Tong Zhou returned the smile, but they could waste no time. “We must leave,” he said again. “Now.”

“Zhang Ruifu,” Liu Shilin said grimly, getting to his feet. Without delaying to explain, he ran off. Tong Zhou followed and found him cautiously guiding Zhang Ruifu out of one of the rooms. Tong Zhou could spare no precious seconds to assess Zhang Ruifu’s physical state beyond the obvious signs of trauma. He slung one arm across Zhang Ruifu’s back and helped him totter to the staircase. Zhang Ruifu clutched his arm gratefully but didn’t speak.

The ancient snake demon made a short sound of approval. “One still lives. That is good. There are no others left.”

“You must escape now, too,” Tong Zhou said. “Before it’s too late.”

“I have no strength to navigate below. It is fine.” The snake demon rippled weakly.

Liu Shilin sniffed the air. “I smell chemicals. Burning.” He exchanged an alarmed glance with Tong Zhou.

Tong Zhou nodded toward the snake demon. “Help it downstairs. It’s helped us. We have to get out of here.”

Liu Shilin gave the snake demon a dubious look, bent down, and wrapped his arms around its middle. It complied as best it could, its thick body unwieldy in Liu Shilin’s awkward embrace. With a gasp of exertion he lifted it. He climbed down the twisting stairs agonizingly slow, carrying it to the bottom. He let go, panting, and reached up to help Tong Zhou lead Zhang Ruifu next.

Once they were all on the lower floor the snake demon slithered off toward the exit. Liu Shilin and Tong Zhou held on to Zhang Ruifu and ran in its wake. Acrid smoke from deep inside the building gusted after them. They reached the street but could not pause. Tong Zhou hefted Zhang Ruifu onto his back, held Liu Shilin’s wrist in one hand, and jogged as far as he could before the terrible sound of the factory exploding quaked in the air around them. Fine ash rained down, causing them to cough.

There was a strange moment of stillness before shouts and fire bells erupted. People ran toward the inferno. Tong Zhou ducked into an open doorway to avoid the crowd. It was a cramped tobacco shop. A wrinkled, sharp-faced proprietress scowled at them.

Liu Shilin eased out of Tong Zhou's grip and smiled charmingly at the woman. "Do you have a telephone we may use?" He reached into his trousers pocket and pulled out some coins. "We will pay, of course."

The woman eyed the coins and nodded toward an old telephone at the end of the counter. Liu Shilin handed over the coins and made a call. Tong Zhou lowered Zhang Ruifu from his back and looked him over anxiously.

Zhang Ruifu's head tilted forward and he would not look up or respond. The bruises around his wrists were dreadful and some of the cuts on his body could leave scars. Aside from Liu Shilin's jacket across his shoulders, he was nude. Tong Zhou removed his long coat, dressed Zhang Ruifu in it and buttoned it closed. Liu Shilin finished his telephone call.

"Has he said anything?" Liu Shilin asked.

"No." Tong Zhou pursed his lips. "But I know what was done to him. The evil one used the chain to try to spread his will into Zhang Ruifu's blood and feed that blood to humans. He turned them into monsters, neither fully demon nor fully human."

Liu Shilin rested his hand on Tong Zhou's back. "I've called Zheng Ping. Ma Li is on his way to pick us up. Perhaps we should contact that doctor. The tortoise who helped you." Tong Zhou agreed.

For another few coins the proprietress let them wait in the shop until the sleek saloon car arrived. Zheng Ping, trembling with worry and relief, marshaled Zhang Ruifu into the back seat. Tong Zhou sat with them and Liu Shilin rode in front beside Ma Li.

The farther they drove away from the site, the calmer Tong Zhou felt. Was the worst of the danger finally over?



## Chapter Twenty-four

Bright daylight streamed in through a tall window. Liu Shilin woke after a peaceful, dreamless sleep. He was in a soft, European style bed under too many blankets. He stretched and blinked, disoriented, and then remembered everything. He sat up. He was alone in the bed but the mattress was still warm where Tong Zhou had slept beside him.

Liu Shilin climbed out of bed, washed, and dressed in yesterday's clothes. He entered the room two doors down. Zhang Ruifu, clean but pale beneath his bedclothes, reclined on an enormous four-poster bed. Tong Zhou sat on a chair beside him. The tortoise demon doctor paced from one side of the bed to the other. Zheng Ping held a small tray crowded with bottles, a mortar and pestle, and a bowl.

"How is he?" Liu Shilin asked Tong Zhou, keeping his voice low. "What does the doctor say?"

Before Tong Zhou could answer, Zhang Ruifu lifted his head and regarded Liu Shilin. "Thank you," he said seriously.

Liu Shilin was relieved that Zhang Ruifu was talking again. He smiled and gestured casually. "It was nothing to mention. Tong Zhou did all the hard work."

Zhang Ruifu's eyes tracked to Tong Zhou. He smiled slightly. "So I hear."

"Master. You must rest and save your strength," Zheng Ping pleaded.

Tong Zhou leaned forward and patted Zhang Ruifu's hand. "He's right. And Shilin and I have to go home now." He and Zhang Ruifu exchanged a look of understanding and Liu Shilin wondered what conversation he'd missed.

Zhang Ruifu gazed past Tong Zhou and looked at Liu Shilin. There was a flicker of the old Zhang Ruifu in his eyes and he said, "There's more than one path in front of you, Xiao Tong. Think it over."

Tong Zhou sighed and frowned a little. "Don't worry about us. You need to save your strength for the journey. Take care."

"You as well," Zhang Ruifu bade him. Tong Zhou rose and accompanied Liu Shilin from the room. Zheng Ping stayed to care for his master. They descended the grand staircase and saw themselves out.

"What journey?" Liu Shilin asked as they strolled the clear morning streets toward the tram stop.

"Zhang Ruifu has decided to leave Shanghai. He has a business concern in Hong Kong and is moving there."

Liu Shilin scratched his jaw. "The danger's over, isn't it?" He fervently hoped so.

“The foreign demon is gone, yes,” Tong Zhou said slowly. “But there’s always danger. Zhang Ruifu said Shanghai has lost its appeal to him.”

Liu Shilin could understand that.

“He likes moving around and traveling,” Tong Zhou continued. “Even without this incident he probably wouldn’t stay here for long.”

They walked in silence for a while. Tong Zhou’s mood was solemn. Liu Shilin gave him a sidelong glance. “What’s considered a long time for a demon?”

Tong Zhou took a breath before he answered. He smiled uncertainly. “It depends.”

Liu Shilin didn’t press for more. He asked in a more disinterested tone, “Did he say what the invitation he received said? How was he lured to the Belgian’s lair?”

Tong Zhou shook with visible anger. “The foreign demon claimed to have captured me. Zhang Ruifu suspected it was a trap but he believed he was strong enough to face it alone. Strong enough, this time, to resist the bronze chain’s effects.” At Liu Shilin’s questioning look, he sighed unhappily. “It turns out that Zhang Ruifu had been subjected to such a chain once before, a very long time ago.” Tong Zhou’s eyes flashed with fury. “He should never have been ensnared by one again. I was used against my own friend by that evil creature.”

Liu Shilin lightly touched his back in reassurance. “Friend,” he repeated with a soft smile.

Tong Zhou gradually relaxed. “Yes, a friend.” He matched Liu Shilin’s smile.

They arrived at the shikumen to be greeted at the front gate by Song Liying, who’d stayed the night to watch over Mimi and her litter. A raven perched on the wall, and crowding the lane were neighborhood children who wanted to see the kittens again. Liu Shilin ushered the youngest visitors away with promises of bribery later—an afternoon kitten-viewing and sweets if the children behaved.

Song Liying sidled up to Liu Shilin as they crossed the courtyard. “That raven has been here since yesterday,” she murmured. “It’s unnerving. I feel like it’s watching me.”

“I know the feeling,” Liu Shilin replied. “But it’s harmless.” For us. I hope, he added silently.

Tong Zhou served tea, thanking Song Liying and her brothers for their help. Liu Shilin answered her curious questions truthfully, omitting any mention of demons. News of the explosion in Zhabei had, of course, spread, but it was widely believed to be the work of saboteurs or of Japanese provocateurs. While Liu Shilin and Song Liying outlined the report Liu Shilin would write for the newspaper, Tong Zhou quietly excused himself and went into the study.

He was still there, sitting on the platform and watching the cats, an hour later after Song Liying left.

“Sorry about that,” Liu Shilin said and rubbed the back of his neck. “She gets enthusiastic about big stories.”

Tong Zhou looked at him fondly. “So do you. It was pleasing to watch. But I wanted to check on Mimi.”

Liu Shilin sat down beside him. “Motherhood seems to suit her,” he observed, studying her pose and face as the kittens wiggled and nursed at her belly.

“It does,” Tong Zhou agreed with a smile. “Though after these babies are grown enough to go to other homes, I’ll need to monitor Mimi’s love affairs. I understand from Song Liying that cats have a frightening propensity to produce litters.”

Liu Shilin chuckled that this was news to Tong Zhou but then again, he reflected, Tong Zhou had lived alone most of his life. Liu Shilin, thoughtful, watched him praise and encourage Mimi, who basked in his attention.

A few days after the explosion, Wang Xi, Liu Shilin’s contact in the fire brigade, slipped him a copy of the inspector’s report. One gruesome detail set his and Tong Zhou’s minds to rest: a burnt corpse, twisted with melted bronze, had been found in the wreckage. Although the body couldn’t be definitively identified, Tong Zhou was certain it was the Belgian demon.

“I allowed him a choice and he chose to destroy himself. I no longer feel his evil.” Tong Zhou rubbed Liu Shilin’s shoulder reassuringly. “He is gone.”

Liu Shilin was relieved to hear it, though even without a foreign demon’s interference the Japanese were a threat to Shanghai and all of China. The future was troubling. He clung to the comforting present as hard as he could.

The next few weeks settled into an uneventful rhythm. There were no more unwelcome visits from snake demons. Liu Shilin speculated that Tong Zhou saving the ancient one from the explosion had settled things between them. The raven demons no longer guarded the front gate, though they occasionally flew by. Tong Zhou and Liu Shilin worked as before. Liu Shilin noticed he was not as driven to go to great lengths for a newspaper story as he had been in the past. Now he was impatient to go home, share a hot meal with Tong Zhou, and spend a quiet evening at home.

Tong Zhou was busy with translations, including some of literature he worked on for his own amusement. Liu Shilin enjoyed relaxing in the study and discussing turns of phrase and the meanings behind words with him. Under Tong Zhou’s guidance, Liu Shilin improved his neglected, schoolboy French.

The kittens—two boys and two girls—grew remarkably fast. Tong Zhou consulted with Song Liying's brothers on diet and development and was assured all the kittens were progressing healthily. Liu Shilin put his interviewing skills to work and found homes for them to go to when they were ready to leave their mother.

The lunar new year approached. Liu Shilin's custom was to visit his brother in Hangzhou and spend the holiday with his family. He wanted to bring Tong Zhou but Tong Zhou insisted on staying home with the cats. Liu Shilin sensed Tong Zhou wouldn't feel comfortable surrounded by a human family. He reluctantly left Tong Zhou and traveled to his brother's place.

He had never felt this disconnected from his family, though they'd never been particularly close. Their lives were so different than his, revolving around children and spouses. They viewed the Japanese threat as distant, not impacting their immediate concerns. They naturally knew nothing of demons. They weren't interested in travel or foreign languages or newspaper reporting. The only question they wanted Liu Shilin to answer was when he was getting married.

Liu Shilin was with the one he would stay with for the rest of his life, but that was not what his family wanted to know. They weren't curious about Liu Shilin's happiness in love. For them his marriage would be an occasion to toast, an assurance of his responsibility, and a mark for the family, either good or bad, depending on his bride. Liu Shilin found he had nothing he wished to say to them on the matter.

On the way back to Shanghai, Liu Shilin felt unaccountably anxious. He and Tong Zhou had not discussed their future together, but now the thought of it weighed on Liu Shilin. Before he met Tong Zhou, Liu Shilin believed, if he were lucky, he had about forty or fifty years ahead of him and that was fair. Now it seemed like a cruelly short span of time. It could take forty years for him to learn only half of what he wanted to know about Tong Zhou.

And Tong Zhou— When he thought about Tong Zhou left on his own after their brief time together, his heart ached wretchedly. What would Tong Zhou do? He'd already spent centuries all alone. Casting him back to that lonely existence was too horrible to contemplate.

Liu Shilin shifted restlessly. What if Tong Zhou couldn't face this future and decided it was easier to part early? He envisioned returning to the shikumen and finding an abandoned courtyard and empty rooms. Tong Zhou would leave a note. Brief and painful and written in neat, precise brushstrokes. We both know how this ends, Liu Shilin had once overheard Tong Zhou say to Zhang Ruifu in a voice rent with sadness.

He reflected upon other things Tong Zhou had said and was so deep in thought he startled when he arrived in Shanghai. He crossed the city in a rickshaw, impatient to be home. He stood in front of the wooden front gate and braced himself before entering, in case his worst imaginings had come true.

The courtyard hadn't changed. It was still lined with storage jars and pots. Liu Shilin reached the doors and cautiously opened them. Tong Zhou sat cross-legged on the floor of the central hall, teasing the kittens with a length of string. He looked up, grinning, as Liu Shilin stepped inside.

Liu Shilin's heart spun with joy. He set his suitcase down and joined Tong Zhou on the floor. Mimi padded out from the study to rub against him and purr. He scratched her chin in greeting.

"I haven't been gone that long, but they look twice as large," Liu Shilin laughed, watching the kittens frolicking.

"They're growing rapidly," Tong Zhou agreed. "Their personalities are emerging, too." He picked up one of the boys, all black except for a triangle of white on his underbelly, and held him up to look into his eyes. "This one is a troublemaker, aren't you? Jumping onto the desk, knocking my ink pot over, leaving inky paw prints all over the place." He chided the troublemaker good-humoredly and tickled the kitten's belly before setting him down.

"You had an eventful time, then," Liu Shilin said.

Tong Zhou looked at him, his eyes big and soft and happy. "Eventful with the kittens but quiet without you." Another kitten, the grey striped girl, climbed into Tong Zhou's lap. He petted her a few times then handed her to Liu Shilin and stood up. "I've prepared a big meal for us. Stay here and watch the little ones."

Liu Shilin sat back and smiled, watching him stride off to the kitchen. He tickled the grey kitten's fur. She wound around on his lap and curled up comfortably.

After the welcome feast and an evening play session with the kittens, Liu Shilin was exhausted. He wearily climbed the stairs and discovered that Tong Zhou had relocated the kittens' home to the upstairs storage room.

"Fewer things to ruin in here," Tong Zhou explained as he shepherded the kittens into their room. It was a cozy space of boxes and chests, and nests that Tong Zhou had fashioned from trays and old quilts. Mimi slipped past them to enter the room and settle on one of the nests. "Mimi likes it, too." When mother and babies were comfortable, Tong Zhou closed the door. He chewed on his lower lip and glanced at Liu Shilin. "There may be noises in the night. What they get into I can't imagine, and when I check in the morning everything looks the same."

"They must like exploring. Like their mother."

Liu Shilin couldn't take his eyes off Tong Zhou: happy and comfortable and handsome. He took Tong Zhou's hands in his and led him to the bedroom. He wrapped his arms around Tong Zhou and held him. "I missed you."

Tong Zhou's arms slipped around his waist. "I missed you, too," he said, his lips brushing against Liu Shilin's neck.

They kissed and undressed slowly, desire rising but with no need for urgency. They lay on the bed together and touched and kissed and savored each other. Liu Shilin lit a lantern so he could see Tong Zhou, bare in the warm light. Tong Zhou smoothed his hand along Liu Shilin's side, smiling.

Liu Shilin said quietly, "The demon's will must be resolute, there must be a physical medium for it to enter the human, and the human must be willing."

Tong Zhou's smile faded and his eyes widened, anguished. Liu Shilin lifted Tong Zhou's hand and kissed it. "I worked it out on my way home. This is what Zhang Ruifu meant about there being two paths before us."

"Shilin..."

Liu Shilin kissed the tips of Tong Zhou's fingers. "The human is willing. Very willing. The physical medium is, ah..." He glanced at Tong Zhou's arousal. "...obvious. But is the demon's will resolute?"

Tong Zhou trembled and swallowed. He shook his head jerkily. "You don't know what you're asking. You don't realize—"

"I do know," Liu Shilin cut in. "I've thought about nothing else." He paused and kissed Tong Zhou's palm. "Do I know what it's like to be a demon? No. But I have the perfect role model before me." He smiled. Tong Zhou frowned and lowered his eyes. His long eyelashes brushed against his cheeks. "Can I imagine what it's like to live for centuries? No. But I have the perfect partner to teach me." He gazed into Tong Zhou's eyes. "Does the demon wish for love and companionship? Wish for his life's mate?"

Tong Zhou gently pulled his hand away, shaking his head. "Stop saying these things."

"Why?"

Tears glistened in Tong Zhou's eyes as he stared into Liu Shilin's. "Because they're true. Of course they're true! But..." His words vanished as Liu Shilin kissed them away.

Liu Shilin caressed Tong Zhou's cheek. "I want to be with you for the rest of your life. Do you want this?"

"Yes." Tong Zhou searched his face. "But... But you're certain about this? Truly? It's still risky."

"As I understand it, the greater danger is to you." Liu Shilin wiped a tear's track from Tong Zhou's cheekbone and frowned. "If the worst would happen..."

“You wouldn’t leave me helpless and alone,” Tong Zhou said with quiet certainty.

“Never. Our lives are inseparable now.”

Tong Zhou swallowed again and kissed him, slow, deep, cherishing. Their bodies entwined, their lips seeking each other’s skin and taste, their hands constantly stroking as if in new discovery.

Liu Shilin was willing, was ready, but was prepared to be patient with Tong Zhou. Tong Zhou surprised him with the swiftness of his ardor. Resolute indeed, Liu Shilin thought, delighted. He arched beneath Tong Zhou, enfolding him between his legs. Tong Zhou lavished him with gentle caresses. They made love throughout the night with tender, passionate strength.

## Chapter Twenty-five

“I don’t feel any different,” Liu Shilin said lazily. His hands glided over Tong Zhou’s skin, silhouettes in the golden glow.

Tong Zhou, in a daze of happiness, nuzzled and kissed his neck. “Don’t you?”

“You’re sure it worked?”

Tong Zhou softly bit Liu Shilin’s earlobe. “You’re glowing,” he murmured.

Coppery light shifted as Liu Shilin raised one arm and leg. “So I am,” he chuckled, a low, appealing sound. He squeezed Tong Zhou closer. “As are you. You’re beautiful. You’re amazing.”

Tong Zhou stretched in his embrace. “You’re the most precious gift in my life,” he said truthfully.

Liu Shilin lightly scratched his fingernails up Tong Zhou’s back. “What happens next? Will I grow a tail?” He raised one hand and curved his fingers. “Talons? What will my demonic trait be?”

Tong Zhou smoothed his hand over Liu Shilin’s chest and watched gold ripple over copper. “I didn’t give you one.”

“Oh.” Liu Shilin sounded faintly disappointed. Tong Zhou arched one eyebrow.

“You’re perfect the way you are,” he said and kissed Liu Shilin sweetly.

“Mm, all right,” Liu Shilin demurred. “And I suppose talons would’ve made writing and typing harder.”

Tong Zhou smiled and nestled against his warm, firm body. He could barely comprehend this bliss, this wonder. He slept in Liu Shilin’s arms, overwhelmed by contentment.

Any doubts they had about the success of Liu Shilin’s transformation were put to rest the next morning. Raven demons, dog demons, a family of tortoise demons, even a grasshopper demon came visiting, all curious to meet the new one. A human willingly transformed was a rare event, so rare it had been believed to be a myth. Liu Shilin was taken aback by the interest in him but met them with confident politeness. Even the three snake demons who paid their cautious respects later in the day didn’t unnerve him.

He could hear demons’ speech now and with a little assistance from Tong Zhou figured out how to understand it. After the last visitor left, he wanted to learn about the various types of demons. Tong Zhou and Liu Shilin sat in the study all afternoon, playing with Mimi’s kittens and discussing demonkind.



I am thrilled to have been correct about the pair of you, Zhang Ruifu's message filled the air. Liu Shilin sat upright, blinking in surprise. Visit me sometime, my friends.

"That was more intense than I imagined," Liu Shilin said, taking a deep breath.

Tong Zhou thought back to the first time he'd heard another demon's voice in his head, centuries ago. The message hadn't been pleasant but had been a violent threat. He shuddered. "Yes."

Liu Shilin stretched out on the floor on his back so the kittens could climb over him. Tong Zhou, sitting beside him, stroked his hair. Mimi snuggled next to Liu Shilin's legs and purred. Tong Zhou, watching them, thought his heart might swell beyond the confinement of his chest.

"When the weather's warmer we should visit Zhang Ruifu," Liu Shilin said, teasing the kittens with his fingers.

"That would be very pleasant." Tong Zhou dangled string to tempt the little troublemaker away from the desk. "After we've sent the kittens to their new homes. You found families for them all?"

"All but Qiqi," Liu Shilin said.

"Qiqi?" Tong Zhou asked, puzzled.

Liu Shilin picked up the grey striped girl kitten and nuzzled her soft belly. "Qiqi," he said as if in introduction. "We're keeping this little princess, of course." He looked up at Tong Zhou, his eyes soft and pleading. Qiqi was patient with Liu Shilin's handling before she wriggled away to pounce on his pocket watch chain.

Tong Zhou bent down and kissed his brow. "Of course," he said with a smile. He looked over their little family and laughed. Liu Shilin laughed with him and pulled him into a joyful kiss.

