



DEATHLY
FATES



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PROLOGUE

The high-pitched chime reached the village gate, death's waves ringing toward the shores of the living. Mothers swept their children from the windows into their beds, locking the shutters. Overworked farmers hurried home like rabbits dashing for the safety of their burrows. Even the night sentries abandoned their posts, leaving only a flickering torch to greet their inauspicious guests.

From the shadows of the main road, a tall figure emerged, carrying a staff of peach wood with dangling iron chimes. He wore the crossed-collar cotton robes of a priest, the teal fabric ghostly pale in the moonlight. A square black cap sat atop his head.

Clinging to his side was a girl no older than ten years, her plump face unusually stoic for a child so young.

What followed behind them was what frightened the hiding villagers most: a line of stiff corpses, arms outstretched for balance. Ashen skin peeked out from dust-covered clothes. The scent of sickly-sweet rot hovered over their frames. The

Fu talismans taped to their heads like long yellow paper veils compelled them to lumber slowly, wordlessly, after the priest.

As the group approached the quiet village, the priest turned to the girl and said, “Do you know why we must always ring the bells, Siying?”

“To guide the deceased home?” she replied. This was the first time her father had allowed her to accompany him on his journey, and she was eager to impress.

“Correct.” The priest motioned at the village’s empty streets, the mala beads wrapped around his wrist flashing against the torch’s glow. “But there’s another reason as well—we must ring the bells loudly to warn the living. It’s incredibly unlucky for mortals to look upon the walking dead.”

“But what about us, Baba?” asked Siying. “Are we not also living?”

Her father smiled. “As servants of the gods, we walk a fine line between life and death. If you are wise and protect yourself, the dead cannot bring misfortune upon you—nor can they physically harm you.”

Siying glanced at their undead flock. Their gray faces were stark against the dark silhouette of the forest behind them.

“Why should the dead harm me?” Siying stared back at her father. He’d secured a living out of serving the dead, but it seemed to have only made him kinder. His brown eyes were patient, almost amused, as she pressed, “We’re shepherds who lead them home and gift them with the proper burial rites. What reason have they to hurt us?”

They’d crossed the village gate, the road narrowing to make space for the homes and establishments that had been built over the years. Not a sound, not even a breath, could be heard through the closed windows and doors. Still, Siying could

imagine the villagers praying silently at their shrines, scattering glutinous rice to keep away bad fortune.

Her father led them past the inn without stopping. They never stopped where humans dwelled.

“Not everyone is grateful,” said her father, the bells tinkling with the staff’s movement. “Among the dead, there are bound to be some who carry lingering ill will. When the evil is strong enough, it can even turn the dead against a well-meaning priest or priestess.”

Siying shivered, looking back at the corpses again. The talismans reanimated their lifeless forms and halted their bodies’ decay, but their faces were blank and soulless, their mouths unmoving. No longer able to think or feel as they once had, they were about as threatening as her younger sister’s straw dolls.

“Have you ever faced such a corpse?” Siying asked.

“Once.” Catching her expression, her father reassumed his smile and placed a protective hand on her head. “Worry not, daughter. With your strong, handsome father around, you’ll always be safe.”

Siying’s laugh broke apart the momentary fear. Familiar as she was with death, she was still a child and not entirely immune to nightmares. She clutched her father’s hand, cheerful despite the somber work they were carrying out. “Promise me, Baba? Promise you’ll stay by my side for a hundred years—no, a thousand.”

He squeezed her tiny fingers, chuckling. “I promise. Alongside your mother and your younger sister—we will always be with you.”

Siying clung to his words, unaware it was the promise of a softhearted father, as easily broken as it was made.

CHAPTER 1

As always, I smelled death before I saw it. The odor was gut-deep, a blend of sickly-sweet and putrid rot. Most humans rushed away from such a scent, not toward it.

But I was a ganshi priestess, a shepherd of the dead, and I'd been offered forty thousand silvers to retrieve a corpse from enemy territory.

I approached the abandoned battleground, a large, rugged field. The yellowed grass had been trampled by heavy boots and horse hooves, human waste mixing with mud made from past rain.

People always assumed the iron tang of blood would be strongest, if blood was present at all in death. But it was the stench of excrement, released after the body's muscles failed, that prompted me to wrap a scarf around my nose and mouth.

Accustomed to death as I was, I couldn't help but shudder as I took in the field. Roughly a hundred dead Sian soldiers littered the cursed ground. Arrows and spears jutted from the

earth like snapped bones. Even the trees framing one side of the land looked forlorn, their branches bent in reverence toward the broken dead. Though it was early morning, the deep-orange sun looked as if it should be setting, not rising.

I took in the lineup of corpses and knew I had my work cut out for me.

But it was work that needed to be done.

As I stepped up to the nearest body, the *clip-clop* of horse hooves drew my attention backward. It was a Wen soldier, dressed in full armor, with his face obscured by an iron mask. I watched his eyes sweep over me, taking in my teal pao robe and peach staff.

He dipped his head in respect but didn't dismount. "Are you here to collect, mistress?"

I was momentarily startled by the distinctly female voice. On the few occasions I'd crossed paths with members of the Wen military, I'd never noticed any women. Back home in Sian, all military personnel were male.

Concealing my surprise, I pulled out a Fu talisman and said, "As you see."

Ganshi priests and priestesses had immunity when it came to working across borders. Smuggling goods, on the other hand, was the exception.

But the soldier couldn't possibly suspect *me* of that, I told myself.

"Which side?" the soldier asked sullenly.

"Are you authorized to arrest a ganshi priestess based on the affiliation of her clientele?"

The soldier pursed her lips but didn't argue. She turned her horse around, toward the town. Before riding off, she said, "A

team will arrive near sundown to bury the dead. You'd best be gone by then."

"Rest assured, I will be."

I secretly hoped I was right. Usually I was hired by grieving relatives whose child or sibling had passed away in a distant city. It was always obvious who and where the corpse was. I'd never had to *search* for a body before. I'd never even been to a battlefield. Propelled by the soldier's warning, I quickly got to work inspecting the corpses for identification papers and comparing dirtied, ashen faces to the portrait that Official Yi, the man who'd hired me, had provided. The dead soldiers had been preserved fairly well, despite having been there for a week. Perhaps it was the colder temperature.

I noticed that the bodies, arranged neatly in rows, had already been relieved of anything worth money—metal weaponry and armor, personal tokens, cash. The fractured polearms and arrows scattered about were missing their steel tips as well.

The victors were astonishingly efficient. I didn't know the precise circumstances of the battle, but it looked like an ambush. It seemed the Wen army had prevailed in more ways than one. War was a lucrative business. And considering how the Sian monarchy had been leeching off the Wen territory's resources for years, it made sense that Wen was desperate for any gain.

I waded through the sea of lifeless soldiers, many of whom had been conscripted like pieces on the Sian king's xiangqi board. I had to remind myself to hold my sympathy at bay. Objectivity was crucial to being a priestess.

Although it wasn't easy to maintain while waves of emotions rippled past me.

As a ganshi priestess, I was spiritually attuned to the feelings of the deceased—particularly the remnants of fear, shock, regret, or sorrow that accompanied their last breaths. Sometimes, if I wasn't careful, the more intense emotions could break past my walls of tranquility and strike me with memories of the dead's final moments, their happiest times, or their greatest heartbreaks.

Walking among a felled army tested the limits of my training, but I managed to withstand the grief weighing over the field. I had a job to do.

I spent the following hours trudging through soft earth. I didn't bother resting for lunch; surrounded by decay and misery, I had no appetite. The sun was halfway down the sky when I found the identification papers I was searching for. The name matched the one from the official's documents: Renshu.

I would've hesitated—neither the documents nor identification papers offered a family name—if the soldier's face didn't match the portrait. He was young, around my age. Handsome too. Dried blood caked the side of his head, spilled from a wound that'd likely been inflicted from the killing blow. A cut blemished his jaw and dirt dusted his skin, but his straight nose, his thick brows, and the mole by his eye were undeniably the same as the drawing's.

I pressed my fingers to his neck, sensing the terror that'd colored his death and forcing myself to brush it aside. No sign of a pulse. I proceeded to prepare the reanimation talisman. Moving habitually, I attached the iron bells to my staff and rang them gently while I murmured incantations. As I placed the consecrated paper on his forehead, I wondered how someone worth so much money—that was why I'd taken the job, after all—could end up dying so tragically, so young. *What a terrible waste.*

The reanimation spell needed a moment to fully transfer through the corpse. While waiting, I slogged down the row of soldiers, pressing shut the eyes of those who'd died staring at the wide, unforgiving world. They would be buried without ceremony, their spirits reduced to roaming on foreign land, but they still deserved respect.

I briefly wondered if I could take them all back to Sian with me. But I'd draw too much attention, and I had no idea where their homes were. Did I even have the skill or spiritual strength to reanimate so many bodies at once? I'd been a full-fledged priestess for only three years.

A hand clamped around my exposed ankle. My startled shriek was high enough to frighten the birds in the trees; their wings beat loudly as they shot into the sky.

But I didn't watch them leave. I was too focused on the fingers, purpled and rotting, latched on to my leg. My gaze traveled up the hand and past its arm to the dead soldier sprawled across the ground. His one intact eye, filmy and dull, stared straight through me. The other had been ravaged by a slash that opened up half his face, exposing bloody bone and muscle. A fly crawled out of the gash, its fat black body pausing on a flap of loose flesh before zipping into the air.

Worse than the corpse's decay, however, was the dark aura he emitted, hitting me with his memories of blood and screams. Dread filled my veins.

Jiangshi.

A corpse possessed by evil.

I reached for the purification talismans I'd tucked into my pockets, but my hands were shaking too much, and then the corpse was yanking me, hard, to the ground. Bile filled my mouth at his smell. His grip tightened, and a numbing sensation wrapped around

my ankle. I remembered Baba's stories of jiangshi absorbing the qi, or life force, of the living to feed their own evil spirits. All they needed was to touch your skin.

Horried, I tried to shake the jiangshi off. When that didn't work, I stabbed at him with the end of my peach staff. Though the sacred wood burned his flesh, it wasn't powerful enough to break the monster's hold. The only chance I had was the purification talisman.

My fingers brushed the edge of the paper just as a melon-sized rock came smashing down on the monster's wrist, strong enough to crack bone. The pressure around my leg released. I slapped a purification talisman onto the jiangshi's forehead and rang my iron bells, muttering the incantations my father had made me memorize during training.

The jiangshi immediately went still, a trail of translucent white smoke rising from his body. The smoke hovered in the air like a hesitant ghost, then dissipated into nothing.

Breathing hard, I turned to face my rescuer, the one who'd been bold enough to break the jiangshi's arm with a rock. "Thank y—"

The gratitude died on my lips as I recognized the soldier I'd come to find, my reanimation talisman still glued to his head. To my growing alarm, the soldier lifted the end of the paper, enough to reveal his eyes, and smiled. In a slightly shaken voice, he said, "That was rather terrifying, wouldn't you say?"

I shot to my feet and ripped the talisman from the soldier's forehead. He instantly collapsed to the ground, leaving me standing alone and bewildered in a gradually darkening field. I bit back a squeal, tasting iron. *What in heaven's name?*

Reanimated corpses were just that—reanimated. They had no minds of their own, no emotions, and certainly no voice.

And yet the soldier had spoken to me. He'd rescued me from the jiangshi and smiled while expressing his fear. Living, human fear.

I should've been the one who was more afraid. Not only had I faced a jiangshi, but now I was dealing with a talking corpse. Though the first was rare, I knew what it was. The second was unheard of.

What I did know was that the soldier needed to be brought to Hulin, the capital of Sian, where Official Yi was expecting us. Cognizant or not, he remained a job I had to complete.

I considered the boy crumpled at my feet. How was I to guide him without a reanimation spell? Our destination was too far—I couldn't drag him, unconscious, the entire way. But the last thing I needed was a reanimated corpse making decisions on his own.

I decided to first resolve the issue of his awareness. Was he some kind of jiangshi, albeit an unusually friendly one? Or had I simply been wrong when checking his pulse? But no—I was never so careless.

Whatever the case, only when I was sure he was a normal—*lifeless*—corpse could I figure out how to bring him to the capital.

I peered across the field at the pink-flushed horizon, anticipating the burial workers on their way. I couldn't let them see the soldier.

Then I remembered a nearby town—Ninghe. A client of mine lived there, a wisewoman I'd developed a close friendship with. Perhaps she could help. She had to.

Because whatever was going on with the soldier, I needed to complete this job.

My father's life depended on it.

CHAPTER 2

The wisewoman of Ninghe lived not within the town gates but on the outskirts, in a modest hut cradled inside a bamboo forest. I'd met her a little over a year ago, shortly after my mother died from the fainting fever. While carrying out a job in Wen during the most biting part of winter, I had, rather clumsily, slipped on ice and sprained my ankle. Mistress Ming, as the residents called her, had discovered me limping pathetically through the forest with a swaying corpse at my heels.

Likely pitying my stupidity, Mistress Ming brought us back to her hut, where she *tsked* over my swollen ankle like the grandmother I didn't have. When I attempted to thank her, she brushed off my gratitude with a request that I bring her sweets from Sian the next time I came to Wen. I was, of course, happy to oblige. After my first delivery, Mistress Ming insisted on paying me for additional requests—although she was never above haggling.

And that was how I began my side job as a smuggler, secretly

growing my clientele to include wealthy buyers in both nations who were desperate for things they couldn't find in their own land.

For the persuasive price of fifty silvers, I convinced a passing farmer to make room on his wagon for me and the dead soldier and bring us to Mistress Ming's hut. Our driver, obviously unnerved by the corpse behind him, spoke little as we rolled onto a path that wound into the bamboo forest. I didn't mind the silence.

A late-afternoon breeze danced through the trees. Peach-soft sunlight illuminated the branches and leaves overhead, turning them a fiery red. I breathed in the earthy air, already feeling more relaxed, despite the soldier lying beside me on the cart bed.

My eyes flitted to his face, watching for signs of life. He remained still and quiet. Had I imagined the whole thing? I held a finger under his nostrils, then jerked my hand away. No, I'd definitely felt breath against my skin, faint but warm. Not a jiangshi, then; they had no need for air. He was also no longer emitting any sort of emotion, strangely enough. I leaned back against the wagon, staring at the soldier with a mixture of curiosity and caution.

The moment we pulled into the clearing of Mistress Ming's home, the farmer motioned for me to drag myself and my cargo off his cart. Then he was gone, the *clip-clop* of his horse's hooves fading into the forest.

I was considering how to move the soldier when he tilted over from his sideways position and landed face down in the dirt. With a startled gasp, I tried to flip him, but his bulky armor made it tricky. Besides, he hadn't stirred.

"Bear with me for just a moment," I whispered before

grabbing the soldier by his wrists and tugging. My muscles strained against his weight as I firmly but gently pulled him across the ground, careful to avoid sharp rocks. He was much heavier than he looked. It must've been his cursed height. My shoulders burned as I slowly lugged him past Mistress Ming's garden, a small plot roped off with twine, and toward the wooden hut. There, I hauled him up the low stoop onto the front porch and finally, with a huff, laid him down to knock on the door.

The wisewoman must've been especially busy not to have heard my heavy breathing or the soldier's boots hitting the steps. For a moment, I worried she wasn't home at all.

Then I detected shuffling from the other side of the door. It flew open to reveal Mistress Ming's puffy-eyed red face.

"Dajie," I greeted. I'd learned early on that the wisewoman preferred to be called older sister rather than aunt. In truth, I had no idea just how old she was. Sometimes she looked hardly ten years my senior. Other times she looked as old as my father.

Mistress Ming appeared more worn than usual, having clearly been disturbed from a nap. A loose knot hung at the end of her unraveling hair. The tunic of her pale-green ruqun was rumpled, and she made no move to straighten it.

But despite her tired appearance, her eyes were bright and intelligent as she scrutinized me. A smirk touched her lips. "Well, if it isn't my favorite criminal priestess come to visit. I wasn't expecting a delivery this week; I only saw you last month."

"I apologize for showing up without warning," I said, dipping my head in respect. "But I need your help."

The wisewoman crossed her arms. "Do you have payment?"

"No," I confessed. "But I'll owe you—whatever you want."

Mistress Ming pursed her lips, then spoke as if ordering items at a market. "I want an ounce of rose cuttings. I'd like to try adding flowers to my garden. Ah, but I only want breeds you can't find in Wen. Also, I'd like a case of candied hawthorn and red bean jellies."

I nodded eagerly. "It's a deal."

"And one last thing," said Mistress Ming, smiling toothily. "I want a bag of star anise."

"You can buy star anise from the Ninghe marketplace."

"Yes, but I'd rather not have to buy my own."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes and nodded again. "Very well. A bag of star anise. You're a penny-pincher, dajie, you know that?"

"Takes one to know one." Mistress Ming jutted out her chin. "Now, what do you need my help with?"

"Him." I stepped aside to reveal the body on the ground.

Mistress Ming narrowed her eyes. "What's the matter with him? Have you forgotten how to control corpses?"

I squeezed my staff and made a face. "No. I'll explain everything in a moment. First, can you please help me carry him inside? I'd rather not leave him out for the world to see."

"Is the world so bored as to come peek at my front yard?" But she crossed the threshold and gripped the soldier's left arm while I held the other. Together, it was much easier to transport the body into the hut's front room and place him across a hand-woven bamboo mat.

I straightened, taking a moment to regain my breath. Around us, shelves of jars, pots, and dried herbs lined the room. A medicinal aroma hung heavy in the air, burning my nostrils. Rusty sunlight filtered in through the blinds, catching

motes of dust floating about and glancing off a small brass gong sitting beside the wall. The characters for *clarity* and *truth* were carved into its rounded surface.

"Tell me the story behind this body," said Mistress Ming, kneeling beside him. "A soldier, I presume, judging by his dress?"

"Yes, from Sian." I remained standing on the soldier's other side. "I'm to bring him back to the royal capital, Hulin. But something strange happened when I attempted to reanimate him. He . . . well, he seemed to come back to life."

Mistress Ming grasped the soldier's shoulder and started to turn him over onto his back. "What do you mean 'back to—'"

Her question hung incomplete in the air as she stared at the soldier's face. The color drained from her cheeks, the corners of her mouth going taut.

"What is it, dajie?" I asked, scanning the body for signs of movement. He didn't so much as twitch.

Mistress Ming cleared her throat, leaning back on her heels. In an unusually grave voice, she said, "Start from the beginning, Kang Siying. How did you get involved with this soldier? And what exactly happened when you performed the reanimation ceremony?"

So I started by telling her about the mysterious official who'd sought me out back home and offered me forty thousand silvers to deliver this soldier, who I'd presumed was his son. With my father's illness and expensive medical needs, I'd quickly agreed and set off for Wen.

I told Mistress Ming about finding the battlefield and locating Renshu. Then I described the events following the reanimation ceremony, the jiangshi attack and the soldier's interference. When I finished, I said, "I think he might be breath-

ing, but that doesn't make sense because he was dead when I found him, I swear it."

"I believe you," said Mistress Ming, studying the soldier's still face. "And I have a theory on what happened, but I'll need to examine him first."

I bit my lip. "Will the examination involve cutting him open?"

I took pride in delivering the dead in as good condition as possible, out of respect for them and their loved ones. In this case, I was doubly concerned for the soldier's comfort, having grown dubious of his deceased state. Though my brain told me he couldn't possibly be alive—not after lying in that field, unmoving, for so long—it was much less convincing when the signs proved otherwise.

Mistress Ming smiled grimly, shoving up her sleeves. "Don't worry. It's a simple enough ritual. I'll not harm him." She pointed at the gong behind me. "Bring that over here, would you? I'll also need a handful of incense sticks from that shelf there."

When I'd given her all the tools she'd requested, Mistress Ming lit the incense and blew out the flame. Thick trails of smoke drifted from the tips, filling the tiny space. I knelt across from the wisewoman and blinked as the aroma, deep and spicy, flooded my senses. But I reined in any complaints, familiar enough with the wisewoman's rituals to know to observe in silence.

Moving slowly, deliberately, Mistress Ming swept the incense over the soldier's head, chest, and legs. The fumes poured over his body like mist from a waterfall, their phantasmal tendrils curling against the floor around him. While chanting under her breath, Mistress Ming used her other hand to softly

drum the gong with its attached mallet, the instrument's low ring rippling through the smoke. Like the iron chimes I used with my talismans, the gong's reverberation amplified whatever spell the wisewoman was performing.

I began to feel almost drowsy, as if my soul were unfastening itself from my body, eager to wander out. Just as my eyes started to droop, Mistress Ming finished her chant and looked up.

"Did you feel it?" she asked in the sudden quiet.

I blinked, dazed. "Feel what?"

Mistress Ming cast me an exasperated look. "For a ganshi priestess, you still have much to learn about the art of qi."

"Why are you bringing up qi?" I countered, frustrated at having done something wrong without knowing what it was.

"Because this boy has it."

I didn't know what I'd expected the wisewoman to find, but *qi* certainly hadn't been on my mind.

"Are you sure?" I glanced at the soldier. "A dead body can't have any life force. It goes against the most rudimentary laws of nature."

"You aren't wrong," said Mistress Ming, setting the incense in a metal bowl, "but the *qi* I felt is undeniable. Though faint, *qi* flows through this soldier's meridians. My guess is his spirit was clinging to his body when you found him. And when you put that reanimation spell on his head, you sparked his *qi*, which reversed the fatality of his wound and brought him back to life."

"So he really isn't dead?"

"For now, anyway." Mistress Ming stared at the soldier's blank face. "Give it another day, and he probably will be. At that time, even the borrowed energy from your reanimation talisman won't be able to sustain his *qi*."

I rubbed the tail of my braid, frowning. How had a single job become so complicated? I was a priestess of the dead, not a priestess of the nearly dead. Could I still bring the soldier home like this? How would his family react to his condition? Would he even still be alive by the time we reached Hulin?

Based on Mistress Ming's estimation, the answer to that last question was likely a no.

The wisewoman interrupted my thoughts and spoke while counting off her fingers. "Siying, at this point you have two choices: You can wait for the soldier's qi to fade, letting him die. Or you can do the right thing by saving his life."

"Save his life?" My finger caught in my plait. "Me?"

Mistress Ming crossed her arms. "You may be a priestess of death, but that doesn't mean inflicting death upon others."

"No, of course not," I said, my surprise fading. "It's just . . ."

Do I have time?

I thought of Baba, the entire reason I'd taken Official Yi's job. Since his own encounter with the fainting fever—the same outbreak that'd stolen Mama—his health had never fully recovered. And recently, it'd only worsened. That was why I needed to complete this job, so I could afford better medical resources.

But what would happen if I didn't get home as quickly as possible? I'd already lost precious hours bringing the soldier here and talking to Mistress Ming. It wasn't that I didn't pity him. Certainly, he deserved another chance at life after the horrible death he'd been dealt. But I couldn't save him if it meant sacrificing my father.

My father, who'd surely want me to help this soldier if he were here. Who'd be appalled if he knew I was even hesitating.

I taught you better, his familiar voice sounded in my mind. *What's the point of living a human life if you forget your humanity?*

Tentatively, I asked Mistress Ming, "What would I have to do to save him?"

Something like relief sparked in the wisewoman's eyes. "The solution's simple enough: Replenish his qi."

"How?"

Mistress Ming spread out her palms. "Qi is a force that exists in every part of the universe—the earth on which this house is built, the blood-marked talismans in your pocket, even the air that hovers around us."

"I know all this," I interrupted, impatient for her to get to the point.

She arched an eyebrow, and I mumbled a quick apology.

"As humans," she continued, purposely slow to spite me, "we strengthen our qi with rest and good food. But this soldier will need more than that to survive. He needs pure human qi to match his own."

I straightened at that. "You want me to give him my qi?"

"You could," said Mistress Ming, "but I don't recommend it. For one, you'd need to give him all your qi to help him live, meaning you'd die in his place. For another, you aren't skilled enough in the art of qi manipulation to know how to give it, let alone give it correctly."

"Then what?" I said, trying not to let my frustration show.

"Aside from living people, there's another source of human qi—the spirits of those who no longer need it."

I considered her words. "Do you mean ghosts?"

Mistress Ming nodded. "But not just any ghosts. Ghosts with powerful energy, powerful qi. I'd suggest you take the qi of

evil spirits. Once purified, the spirits' qi can be absorbed by the soldier through mere touch."

"It sounds simple enough," I mused, "but you're essentially asking me to go on a wild-goose chase."

"Not entirely wild," the wisewoman said. "Do you think exorcists wander aimlessly to hunt down evil spirits? They're either hired, as you are, or they meticulously seek out locations of evil."

"And you know of these locations?"

Mistress Ming shrugged. "Humans love telling stories, especially ones of horror and scandal. There are no bounds to how far rumors can travel. For instance, even from my secluded hut, I hear what's happening in the Sian government."

I was struck by the sadness that flitted across Mistress Ming's face as she spoke those last words. I hadn't thought the wisewoman cared that much about politics. But then again, Mistress Ming was a citizen of Wen, the state warring for independence from the Sian kingdom. Even someone as isolated as her wasn't immune to the influence of the monarchy.

"Maybe you're right, and it's possible to locate these evil spirits," I said, bringing the conversation back to the matter at hand. "But I'll need a more specific plan to save this soldier. And if he's alive, as you say, shouldn't he be the one asking me to help him?"

"Shall we have him join us, then? Wake him with a reanimation talisman and discuss the situation face-to-face."

Though she spoke lightly, I detected a hint of uneasiness in her tone. I recalled her startled reaction upon seeing the soldier's face. It wasn't as if Mistress Ming was frightened of the dead, like most people. She'd seen plenty of my assignments

before and clearly had no reservations about dragging a corpse into her house.

Her shock had been rooted in something else.

“Before I wake anybody,” I said, “I must ask: Why is saving this soldier so important to you?”

Mistress Ming stiffened. “Because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Then why not do it yourself?”

“I’m not trained in purification.”

“Is that truly the reason?” I pressed. “Dajie, do you know this soldier?”

Mistress Ming opened her mouth, then shut it. After a deliberative pause, she said huffily, “Yes, I do. But I’d rather you wake him first, so he can tell you himself.”

I didn’t like her vague response, but I decided to stop pushing for now. I began the reanimation ritual again, ringing my staff and chanting the proper incantation. As I did so, I pulled out a fresh Fu talisman and gently pressed it to the soldier’s forehead.

This time, the spell took effect immediately, as if the body remembered the talisman’s qi. As I drew my hand back, the soldier shot up into a sitting position, sucking in huge lungfuls of air.

“W-Where am I?” he stammered, pushing up the talisman to gape at the room in which he’d suddenly awoken. His gaze froze on my face. “I know you. You’re that girl from the battlefield. I helped you and then—then—”

Before I could respond, my attention slid past the soldier to the wisewoman behind him. He turned, following my gaze.

Mistress Ming still sat in a kneeling position, but now her forehead was pressed to the floor in reverence, her hands resting flat on either side. As I wondered why, she said in a clear voice, “Welcome to my humble home, Your Highness.”

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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