

A HWAMEI'S SONG

Yèlíng checked the kitchen windows, pulling the curtains closed. The oven's timer buzzed, its hum reminding her of cicadas in the summer. Outside, the sun slipped behind the clouds, and in seconds, the room darkened. She stretched across the counter, reaching for the top shelf where she kept her grandmother's favorite candles. Tiny flames flickered to life, casting shadows that danced along the walls in time with the rain beginning to patter against the roof. Yèlíng hurried to the oven, peeking inside just in time—her mooncakes were perfectly golden, not a hint of burning. Humming an old tune under her breath, she grabbed a towel and carefully lifted the tray out, the scent of warm dough filling the kitchen.

Soft candlelight glowed in the cozy darkness of her little cottage, tucked away in the countryside. She set the mooncakes on a wooden dish to cool, then moved to the living room, lighting more candles as she went. With the curtains drawn tight—keeping out the night and whatever might lurk beyond the windows—the room felt safe, warm. Finally, she brought her freshly baked pastries to the table and set a pot of green tea to brew. Her hands moved without thinking, muscle memory guiding her, just as her grandmother had taught her.

The water in the kettle whispered as it neared a boil, a low murmur that blended with the rain drumming softly against the windows. Yèlíng moved instinctively, reaching for the delicate porcelain teapot her grandmother had

once used. It was a pale celadon, its glaze smooth and cool under her fingertips. She lifted the lid and placed a small handful of dried tea leaves inside—twisted tendrils of jade and brown, carrying the scent of earth after the rain. She poured a splash of hot water over the leaves, just enough to awaken them, swirling the pot gently before pouring it out. This first rinse was not meant for drinking; it was a ritual, a quiet respect for the tea itself. Then, with steady hands, she filled the pot again, letting the water steep. The leaves unfurled slowly, releasing their essence—grassy, floral, with the faintest hint of roasted chestnuts. Steam curled into the air, wrapping the kitchen in warmth. As she waited, Yèlíng let her mind wander to the next book she planned to read. Something with poetry, perhaps. Or maybe an old Wuxia novel, where heroes roamed misty mountains and justice was served with a blade. She smiled to herself. Lately, she'd been craving stories of adventure, of distant lands and bold spirits. There was a book on her shelf she had been meaning to start, filled with ink-brushed landscapes and verses that spoke of longing and homecoming. Maybe tonight, with tea in hand and mooncake crumbs on her fingers, she would finally open it.

She poured the tea into a small cup, watching the liquid settle—a perfect golden-green, clear and inviting. The first sip was delicate, a balance of warmth and bitterness, deepened by the quiet of the room. The storm outside could rage if it wanted; inside, she had everything she needed. Yèlíng quietly approached the bookshelf, her fingers trailing along the spines of well-worn books. The candlelight flickered against the lacquered wood, casting shifting shadows across titles written in elegant, fading calligraphy.

She found the one she was looking for, its cover soft from years of handling. The edges of the pages were slightly yellowed, the scent of ink and paper carrying the weight of time. She pulled it from the shelf and cradled it in her hands for a moment. This was one of her grandmother's favorites, a tale of wandering swordsmen, hidden sects, and honor bound by destiny. Yèlíng had always meant to read it, but life had a way of pulling her attention elsewhere. Tonight, though, with the rain singing against the window and the scent of green tea and mooncakes curling in the air, it felt like the perfect time. She returned to the table, setting the book down beside her teacup. The pastries had cooled just enough, their golden crusts promising sweetness within. She picked one up, breaking it in half, revealing the smooth lotus paste and the single salted egg yolk inside—a bright, golden center, like a hidden sun. Taking a small bite, she let the flavors settle on her tongue, the sweetness of the lotus blending with the richness of the yolk.

Flipping open the first page of the novel, she traced the characters with her fingertips before settling in to read. The story unfolded before her, vivid and alive, pulling her into a world of mist-covered mountains and honor-bound warriors. She took another sip of tea, letting the warmth spread through her chest. Outside, the storm rumbled, distant now, fading. Yèlíng's eyes traced the elegant calligraphy as she turned the first page. The tale began in a land of mist and blood, in an era where the Song Dynasty's borders trembled under the relentless pressure of Khitan Tartar raids. Beneath the sky of an empire locked in conflict, there walked a man both feared and revered—a Yaksha, bound to the wheel of Samsara, cursed with

memories of every life he had ever lived. His name had changed countless times, his titles rewritten in the annals of history, yet his essence remained the same: a guardian of sacred knowledge, a protector of secrets buried beneath the weight of dynasties. In this life, he was called Qiao Liang, a man whose beauty was said to rival celestial beings, whose strength was whispered about in the courts of Kaifeng. He was the silent force standing between the empire and chaos, yet his soul was weary.

The novel painted him in stark, poetic brushstrokes—a figure draped in black and crimson, standing atop the walls of a besieged fortress, watching the horizon darken with enemy banners. He had seen it before. The rise and fall of kingdoms, the ambitions of emperors who called themselves sons of heaven, the blood spilled for power that meant nothing in the endless cycle of existence. He longed for something he could never have: true death, an end to the wheel that dragged him through suffering and duty, again and again. But fate was not kind to Yakshas. Qiao Liang was bound by celestial decree, by his own honor, to continue playing his role. And in this life, his duty was to the Song court—to become a consort prince through a political marriage meant to secure fragile alliances. The emperor's decree was final. He was to wed a royal princess, bind himself to the dynasty he had protected from the shadows, and embrace responsibilities he did not want. And yet, how could he refuse? He had walked these halls before, seen the rise and ruin of men who defied fate. He knew that no matter what he did, the cycle would drag him forward.

As Yéling turned another page, she felt the weight of

his sorrow, the burden of endless memory in a world that demanded loyalty from those who had long since tired of living. The tea in her cup had cooled, forgotten as she sank deeper into the story, drawn into the restless existence of a man searching for a peace that would never come. Yèlíng blinked, realizing her vision had blurred. A single tear traced a warm path down her cheek before slipping onto the page. She hadn't even noticed when she had started crying, but the sorrow of the Yaksha, his exhaustion, his yearning for release—it weighed on her like something real, something personal. She let out a slow breath, closing the book for a moment. The candlelight flickered against the rim of her untouched cup, reminding her that her tea had long gone cold. Without thinking, she lifted it to her lips and drank. The once-delicate bitterness had deepened, sharpened, but somehow, the coolness of it soothed her. She needed grounding, something to bring her back from the haze of emotion the novel had stirred. And yet, as she sat there, still lost in thought, she couldn't stop herself from imagining another path for Qiao Liang—a different fate, one where he wasn't shackled to duty and suffering. What if he could find something worth living for? Someone?

Her mind wove a different tale. A love so strong, so undeniable, it shattered the weight of his past lives. She saw him turning away from that cold, political marriage, choosing love over duty, choosing her. He would look at her the way no one else ever had, with longing that defied centuries of pain. She imagined the warmth of his hands, calloused from battle yet gentle as they traced the curve of her cheek. He would whisper her name like a prayer, a tether to the present, to the one life he would finally want

to keep. And in each cycle, no matter how many times fate sought to separate them, they would find each other again. His exhaustion, his despair—they would fade in the presence of their love. He would no longer crave an end to his existence because his existence would be hers, theirs. And no emperor, no duty, no cruel celestial decree could take that away.

Yèlíng exhaled, realizing how tight her grip had become on the book. The fantasy had swallowed her whole, leaving her chest aching with a longing of her own—one she couldn't quite name. The rain outside had softened to a mere drizzle, a quiet hush against the windows. The candle flames swayed gently, their shadows dancing along the walls. She ran a finger over the edge of the page before opening the book again. She had to know what fate truly had in store for him. The battle raged on the pages before her, painted in ink and poetry. Qiao Liang's legend grew with each war he fought, his presence heralded by the haunting song of a hwamei bird. The enemy feared it—the eerie beauty of that melody drifting through the misty fields before his arrival, a warning that death was near. No one knew if the bird was a specter, a spirit bound to him, or merely a trick of fate, but when the song came, the slaughter followed. He was a guardian, a demon, a warrior bound by destiny. Yèlíng imagined how this birdsong could become something else—something intimate. A secret signal, a love note between them, a call meant only for her ears. She could see herself in the pages, waiting in the hidden corridors of a palace or the depths of a moonlit forest, hearing the hwamei's cry and knowing he was near, coming for her. A forbidden meeting in the dark, a stolen moment where duty could not reach

them.

Thunder cracked overhead, so loud it made the wooden beams of her house tremble. Yèlíng flinched, gripping the book tightly as the storm outside roared. For a brief second, it felt as though the sky itself was scolding her—as if the heavens were furious that she dared to long for something that could never be. She shivered, shaking off the foolish thought. Pulling her blanket closer, she reached for the teapot and poured herself another cup. The candle by the window flickered wildly, its flame shrinking and stretching like it, too, was whispering warnings to her. Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the storm passed. The rain softened to a mere drizzle before stopping entirely. A strange stillness settled over the night, wrapping around her home like a quiet spell. She hesitated, then stood, her bare feet pressing onto the wooden floor as she moved toward the window. Slowly, she pulled the curtains apart. Beyond the glass, the village lights flickered in the distance, their glow reflecting off wet rooftops. The roads were slick with rain, glistening under the moon's hazy light. The sight soothed her, chasing away the last of her unease. It was just a storm. Nothing more. On impulse, she unlatched the window and pushed it open. The crisp autumn air rushed in, carrying the scent of damp earth and fallen leaves. Yèlíng closed her eyes, breathing it in, letting it ground her. Then, she heard it. The song of a hwamei. Her eyes flew open.

A shiver ran down her spine, every hair on her arms standing on end. Her ears strained against the silence, but there it was again—that unmistakable, lilting melody, cutting through the night. Her breath caught in her throat as an old car rumbled up the road, its tires crunching against

the damp gravel. It wasn't unusual to see visitors from the city exploring the countryside, but something about this moment felt... different. The car slowed to a stop just outside her home. Yèlíng watched, frozen, as the driver's door opened. A man stepped out, unfolding himself from the vehicle with an almost practiced grace. The candlelight from her window flickered, casting just enough glow to illuminate his face. Her heart lurched. She had seen him before. She was sure of it. His sharp, elegant features, the way he moved as if he had walked these lands a hundred times before, there was something impossibly familiar about him, like a face glimpsed in a dream, or a memory that had slipped through the cracks of time. In his hands, he held an old paper map, slightly crumpled from use. His dark eyes lifted, locking onto hers.

And then, he started walking toward her.