

## 二十六

### KILL THE MESSENGER

*A gift from the North.*

For a long time after opening the box, Ren stares down at it. She doesn't move, but her qi grows violent with emotion. A darkness wells in the gap between her lips, then drips out the corner of her mouth.

*Blood.*

"Lordess!" Aster and Tourmaline support her while I seize the box—dropping it when I see the contents.

*Gods be damned.* I dive for it, but it's too late. The box hits the ground and out bounces the head. It rolls, and everyone scrambles back, myself included. *Ten bells.* That *thing* must be diseased, with its shriveled skin and stringy hair clasped back—

—by *my* hair clasp. I recognize it before I can recognize my head in its abject state. My nose wrinkles.

To think I used to be fond of it.

Then a moan from Ren throws everything into focus. "Call the physician," I order one soldier. I turn to another, unluckier one. "You—collect the head."

The rest of us flock to Ren. Officials and generals—ours and the Westlands’—throng around her and start moving her toward the command tent.

I fall to the back of the retinue, where Tourmaline is.

“I thought we recovered the body,” I whisper. Qilin’s body, specifically, killed by an arrow that definitely *was* recovered; it’s resting in my shrine as we speak.

“We did,” Tourmaline whispers back.

“Without a *head*. You could have mentioned it.”

“It seemed irrelevant.”

Until now. Who sent it? Was it really Miasma, or is the messenger actually one of Cicada’s and the South wants us to pin the head on the empire as well?

*It was Miasma*, Dewdrop thinks, and I frown.

*Oh, now you decide to help.*

*It’s not helping if the answer makes no difference. It just proves my point from before. You’re surrounded by enemies . . .*

*So, it was Miasma*, I think to myself as Dewdrop drones on. How very like her.

At least it was my head she sent and not our empress’s.

Inside the command tent, we sit Ren down. The physician arrives and reads her pulse. “The disturbance to your qi activated an existing injury—”

“Injury?” pipes up an official.

“Bruising at the chest from a blunt force,” says the physician, and *my* chest pangs. That would be me. “It’ll heal in time, but I’ll write a prescription.”

A servant delivers tea. Ren doesn’t touch it. Her eyes are

sheened, and my chest pangs again. *I'm right here*, I wish I could tell her. *The head? Is rotted meat.*

But that's not how the mortals see it. Warriors sever the heads of their enemies in this life to deny them peace in the next; even the aunties at Qilin's orphanage avoided burning corpses when they could to keep the body intact.

And Ren is painfully mortal. "I'll kill her." She looks up at us, and I'm reliving my nightmare as she says, "We'll march on the North by the week's end."

No one objects. Have they all fallen asleep? *Miasma couldn't have sent a more obvious provocation!* I could scream.

But I'm Lotus. Lotus would never question her lordess, and it's Sikou Hai who says, "You mustn't," his voice turning heads. Shock ripples through the ranks.

"Young Master Sikou!"

"Young Master Sikou! You're awake!"

He's masked now, but still unsteady as he walks forward. Aster rushes to him; he brushes her aside, proceeding alone toward the parting crowd.

He stops before Ren and bows. "Lordess."

"Please, at ease." Sikou Hai rises, and so does Ren, out of her seat. "Sikou Hai." A pregnant pause. "Forgive me."

She bows to him, and every breath stops.

"Your father and your brother." Ren's voice is pained. "We didn't manage to save them."

"Lordess, please," Tourmaline murmurs, causing the tent to parrot her. A superior bowing to her subordinate? It's

improper, and Sikou Hai's silence is appropriately strained, the unmasked half of his face paler than when I approached him on the cliff.

"If you feel like you owe me," he finally says, "then listen. You mustn't march on the North."

*At last, a voice of reason!*

"The mountain routes that make it so hard to invade the Westlands also make it hard to transport supplies out of it. If we march to Miasma from here, she'll defeat us by stalling confrontation and starving out our soldiers."

*Yes! Exactly as I'd have said it!*

"I'm aware," says Ren. "But Miasma's message is an insult. A challenge. The realm will soon know if I rose to meet it or backed down."

"We won't back down." Sikou Hai goes to the map hanging at the rear of the tent. "We'll respond by taking Bikong."

*What? No!*

Sikou Hai taps the fort, then draws two fingers southward. "Your other swornsister, Cloud. She's stationed in the Marshlands capital right now. She'll have no issue transporting her troops up the Mica." He sweeps his hand back north, following the Mica River's eastern offshoot until it nearly converges with the Gypsum. Bikong sits under the pincer. Nominally a Marshlands fort, Miasma's outpost in reality. Sikou Hai knows this like any statesman would. "We will seize Bikong from Miasma without abandoning our position here," he declares, radiating confidence—until he sees my expression.

*You fool!* Bikong is a great prize—and a great risk. Miasma is no longer our only enemy. Cicada is set on reclaiming the Marshlands, the heart of which Cloud will leave unguarded to carry out this attack. Sikou Hai doesn't yet know the peril of that, but he *should* have known better than to strategize without me. I glare at him, and his gaze wavers, but the plan has been shared and Ren has latched on.

"It's decided." She strides to the front of the tent and stops, her back toward us. "We'll do as Young Master Sikou says. Send word of the objective to Cloud."

"Yes, lordess," answers an official, ledger already out.

"Send Lotus." Eyes turn to me, but not Ren's. Her gaze remains fixed forward as I say, "I'll carry the message."

"No."

"But—"

"Would you refuse an order from your queen?"

A beat.

We fall to our knees.

*Queen.* A title to match Miasma's, a title that seemed so out of reach just hours earlier. Perhaps I should *thank* my head for appearing, because something feels changed. The air is sharper, cooler, the day outside turned to dusk when Ren parts the tent flaps. "And send a message to Miasma."

The official looks up, brush poised, but Ren walks out and speaks to the waiting soldiers.

"Kill the messenger."

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