



# *Àn 'yīng*

*Xī'lín Village, Central Province,  
Kingdom of Rivers*

**M**y mother always told me the sunrises were the most beautiful part of our realm. A sky on fire in shades of rose and persimmon, clouds streaked with flame, and the breath of a world waking to the light.

I remember Mā's words as I move through the pine forest on velvet tread. I hold a bow and arrow—but my crescent blades are tucked in the bodice and sleeves of my black gauze dress, like quiet companions in the predawn silence.

This morning, I am hunting.

Dew from pine needles wets my sleeves as I slip past, a trailing shadow. I hear a slight rustling, and a speckle-coated hare darts through the brush.

I squint through the foliage, following glimpses of the hare's coat as it skitters through the browning leaves, unaware of my pursuit. Méi'zi will cry that I've killed a rabbit, but Mā needs the nutrients as her body returns to full health.

Autumn has arrived, bringing a crisp bite to the morning air. The flowers are beginning to lose their bloom; soon, winter's snows will cover everything in white, and my realm will be made anew with the turn of a year. Yet ever since I've returned here to the mortal realm, its colors have seemed duller, the landscapes imperfect, compared with the ethereal beauty of the immortal realm.

*Real, a voice in the back of my mind whispers. It's real.*

The hare leaps into a small clearing and stops, nose twitching, as though scenting for danger. I, too, stop in my tracks. It's a long shot from here, but I might make it.

As I raise my bow and arrow and take aim, a sudden gust of wind stirs, shifting the clouds overhead. The clearing fills with the warm glow of dawn, and my mind conjures a dreamlike memory.

*He stands in the clearing, turning toward me as though time has slowed.*

*Hair, billowing like swirls of ink.*

*Eyes, flashing like golden embers.*

*The phantom of a smile on his face as his gaze lifts to meet mine—*

I take a swift step back. Blink and the vision's gone—there's only an empty clearing, leaves falling like the wings of dying butterflies.

The hare starts at my movement and shoots off into the brush again.

My heart is in my throat. I have the strangest feeling that I'm dreaming and that I've had this dream before. The setting changes: Sometimes it's a bamboo forest, sometimes a field of flowering cherry trees, other times a vast mountaintop . . . but the person I'm chasing is always the same.

The clearing before me blurs.

I hate him.

I miss him.

I hate myself for missing him.

Yù'chén is the son of the Kingdom of Night's demon queen, Sansiran—and the mortal emperor, as I found out a few days past. Half mó and half mortal, he tricked the wards of the immortal realm, sneaking in to compete in the Immortality Trials in the guise of a mortal . . . and enabling the Kingdom of Night's demonic army to cross into the previously impenetrable Kingdom of Sky.

He is also the man who saved my life more times than I can count.

And the man I thought myself in love with.

*No.* I release an arrow into the brush where the hare disappeared, imagining it to be Yù'chén's heart instead. "I hate him," I mutter, as though speaking the words aloud will render them true. "And I'll kill him."

"Admirable attitude, but your bow-handling skills leave much to be desired."

I whirl around. Hào'yáng strides toward me between the pines. He's shed the golden armor that once marked him a captain of the guard of the Kingdom of Sky, but light still wraps around him, teasing out the gold-stitched patterns on his pale shift. It catches on the silver hilt at his waist—the longsword named Azure Tide, gifted to his lineage by the dragons in a time long past.

Hào'yáng, my boy in the jade. Rightful heir to our realm, the Kingdom of Rivers.

And now, my betrothed.

He studies me as he approaches. “Nock your arrow and take aim again,” he says coolly, and I obey, pivoting to face the clearing. My pulse is still racing, but in moments I feel a warm hand at my elbow.

“Lift it to be level with your chin.” Hào’yáng’s voice is low by my ear, and as his other hand comes to meet mine, steady and firm, the tumult of my memories dissolves. My mind clears, sharpens like a blade. “Draw . . . and release.”

*Swoosh.* My arrow whizzes through the clearing, lodging firmly in the trunk of a pine.

Hào’yáng makes a satisfied hum. “Whoever your prior instructor was did not do you justice.”

I turn to him and find his eyes narrowed, the corner of his mouth ghosting into a smile that I’ve seen only a handful of times. “It isn’t the instructor who’s at fault but the student who is lacking,” I reply.

His gaze dances with light as it meets mine. “I find that difficult to believe,” he says as he steps away, his hands coming to rest behind his back.

“You humor me.”

It’s been only two days since we arrived back at my village, Xī’lín—and less than a week since we escaped the battle between the demonic army and the immortals in the Kingdom of Sky that interrupted the Immortality Trials. Though the Kingdom of Night began its war against the Kingdom of Sky nearly ten years ago, the mortal realm is less safe than it’s ever been.

Yet now, with Hào’yáng’s return, we have a plan to take it back from the demons.

Before the Immortality Trials ended, I learned my true heritage I am the daughter of Lady Shī’yǎ—one of the

legendary Eight Immortals—and as her sole surviving heir, I have the right to call upon an army of immortals pledged to her name.

Hào'yáng needs this army to defeat the Kingdom of Night and take back the Kingdom of Rivers from their clutches. And so we agreed to an alliance.

A marriage alliance. Political in nature.

I touch the broken jade pendant resting against my chest. My father gave me its other half when our kingdom fell to the demon realm, telling me there was a guardian at the other end of it; all I had to do was ask for their help. In the years after he died, my guardian in the jade was the person I turned to as war ravaged our land. Whether it was to treat my sick mother—who was slowly dying after an attack by a mó—or learning to care for and feed my baby sister, the guardian in the jade always had an answer.

I lost mine, but just weeks ago, I found the owner of its other half that I now wear: my guardian in the jade, Hào'yáng.

We have had little chance to be together in the past few days—me, focused on nursing my mother back to health; Hào'yáng, on strengthening the wards of our village with talismans.

Even so, we both know it's only a matter of time until Sansiran will realize that the heir to the Kingdom of Rivers is missing from the Kingdom of Sky, and she'll come searching—right into my village, I'm sure of it.

I glance up. Gold-tipped clouds are scattered across coral-hued skies—yet beyond them, storm clouds linger. The weather has been tempestuous since our return; there are whispers in my village that the gods are angry.

Only a handful of us know the truth: that war has arrived

at the immortal realm . . . and salvation for our world is more precarious than ever.

Hào'yáng follows my troubled gaze to the distant skies. The morning sunlight is a reminder of how little of it we have left—and how an eternal night awaits us should we fail.

“I have a better idea than hunting on land,” he says lightly, but I know the time has come to take the first steps of our plan. He holds out his hand to me. “Besides, your sister wanted fish for her breakfast congee.”

The sky over the river glows a luminous blush through the storm clouds, and a pale mist shrouds the silhouettes of the distant mountains. The Pearl's Claw is an offshoot of the river that runs through the mortal realm: the Long River, sprung from the bones of the Azure Dragon, who once upon a time lay down to slumber and birthed our land.

In the past, our village fishermen sailed the Pearl's Claw's abundant waters and returned with fresh fish, trading across the other villages and cities in the province. Bà, my father, brought me here once by horseback when I was small. I recall the wooden fishing boats with their webbed sails navigating the river's currents, the song of the fishermen as they cast their nets into the water and praised the dragons for their gift.

I never had the chance to return; the Pearl's Claw was farther from my village than I dared venture after my father died. But by dragonhorse, the journey takes less than an hour.

I know Hào'yáng deliberately selected this location for the two rites we are about to perform to begin our offensive. I slide off Meadowsweet's back after him. The dragonhorse whinnies as she leaps back into the air, kicking off into the skies. Her

body lengthens and scales grow over her coat, and soon I watch her dragon form grow smaller until she's a tiny stitch of silver among the clouds.

I follow Hào'yáng to the river's bank. The rulers of the Kingdom of Rivers have always been tied to this land. Long ago, when our realm came to life from the springs of the Azure Dragon's bones, she gifted a drop of her blood to the first mortal empress. That divine dragon's blood bound the empress and her descendants to the land: to love it, to serve it, and to protect it. And in return, the land, too, would accept them and only them.

Hào'yáng told me that if the land of the Kingdom of Rivers was the blood and bones, then its emperor was its beating heart.

I watch him step into the river, and I have no doubt this is true. The waters rise in a whirl of blue ribbons, cradling him, as the sun gilds him in a halo of light. Only the true bloodline of our emperor, blessed with the blood of the dragons, has the power to control water. I have seen him call upon oceans, yet the sight never fails to steal my breath. Outlined against the turquoise, he is beautiful in a way poems cannot capture: a fairy-tale prince risen from the river. And in that moment, I have the sudden, hollow feeling that my boy in the jade is far away, the distance between us one that I can never close.

He turns to me and holds out his hand, and the feeling dissipates.

The river sweeps me up, and Hào'yáng draws me against him with the confident familiarity we developed throughout the weeks he trained me for the trials. The air is chill, though Hào'yáng is warm as he shields me.

"You told me once that you wanted to see the ocean," he

says. “Do you remember that day? It was when you shot your first quail. You were so proud, and it was the first time you told me that you thought you could hunt.”

I close my eyes briefly. Yes, I remember my first kill—the first time I thought that my hands could be good for something other than sewing. Knives and blades, bows and arrows, had become the new keys to survival in our realm, and tasting the rich oil of the meat on my lips after months of foraging had felt like a new door opening.

One my boy in the jade had led me to.

That was the first time I’d felt like I could survive in a fallen land.

“I remember my first successful hunt,” I say, opening my eyes and meeting his. “But I don’t remember telling you about the ocean.”

Hào’yáng studies me. Something in his tone softens when he continues: “That was the night you told me you would swap your needles and threads for your blades,” he says. “It was after midnight. Méi’zi was asleep in the other room, and you sat by your father’s bookshelf, holding the silk handkerchief you were sewing. You spoke to me then, and you said that you’d always dreamt of seeing the ocean. Of seeing the rest of the realm and capturing it in your sewing.”

My lips part. I had forgotten about that dream until recently: the one I’d buried deep in my heart and left to dust and darkness. In the days that had followed and the nights that had befallen our realm, dreams had felt like a luxury when we were starving and dying. There had been only survival.

Hào’yáng watches me patiently. He’s waiting for me to speak.

But I have nothing to say. And suddenly, the emptiness of that forgotten memory threatens to crack my heart.

“I don’t remember,” I whisper, blinking quickly.

Hào’yáng’s hand is warm on my waist; he laces his fingers through mine, as though we are in a slow dance. “That’s all right,” he says. “I remember for you. I remember all of you, Àn’yīng. The girl you were when we first met, with dreams and a love of colors and silks.”

I find that I cannot breathe.

“I wanted to let you know that—no matter who you become and what you choose to be.” Hào’yáng’s gaze shifts to the horizon. “Whether a mortal girl . . . or an immortal’s heir.”

My chest tightens. This is the first part we agreed upon: to secure our initial forces by calling upon the immortal army that once belonged to Lady Shī’yǎ.

My birth mother, who died to save my life.

Unlike mortals, immortals do not leave their corporeal forms behind when they pass. Yet Lady Shī’yǎ bequeathed one single item to me when she left this world, with only myself and Hào’yáng as witnesses.

Hào’yáng reaches into his storage pouch, where he has been keeping it safe for me.

Lady Shī’yǎ’s lotus flower reflects the morning light with a sheen like magic. Blush-colored and framed by a jade-green leaf trailing a long, elegant stalk, it seems to pulse with a soft, dusky glow.

“You know the legends of the Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea,” Hào’yáng says, and I nod. It is a fairy tale all mortal children have heard: the Eight Immortals using their vessels of

power to tame an ocean during a storm as they crossed from the mortal to the immortal realm. “This lotus was the vessel of Lady Shī’yǎ’s power. Some say the immortals’ vessels hold a drop of their souls,” Hào’yáng continues. He lowers his gaze and holds the lotus out to me as reverently as though it were a part of the woman who raised him for the last ten years. “It’s yours, Àn’yīng.”

The lotus shimmers between us. Even from here, I feel the magic energies spilling from it and sweetening the air. It’s a fragrance so similar to Lady Shī’yǎ’s that I half expect her to step from the river waters, that gentle half smile on her lips. The first time I set eyes upon her, having just qualified for the Immortality Trials, she was holding this lotus. I’ve seen her wield it as a sword as well as use it to heal the most terrible wounds, yet I know I’ve beheld only a fraction of the magic it holds.

This lotus, Hào’yáng and I have reasoned, is the way for me to legitimize my position as Lady Shī’yǎ’s heir. And it may be the key to the one thing most important to Hào’yáng and this war: access to Lady Shī’yǎ’s immortal army.

Today, I need to find out how to unlock its powers.

I slide my hands over his, our fingers clasping the lotus—the only thing left of the mother we shared: the one who gave me life, and the one who saved his. And when I look up, I see the heartbreak on Hào’yáng’s face.

I press my palm to his cheek. He doesn’t look at me, but there’s a tension to the lines of his shoulders and his muscles. As though he’s afraid of being touched like this.

“Hào’yáng,” I say softly, and finally, he lifts his eyes to meet mine. And there, within, is an ocean of grief.

He doesn’t speak—he doesn’t have to. Though Lady Shī’yǎ

is my birth mother, it is Hào'yáng who was closest to her. She was his sole source of comfort during his time in the immortal realm; when his family was slaughtered in the war with the Kingdom of Night, she became all that he had.

I gained two mothers during my time in the Kingdom of Sky—and I found Hào'yáng. But he has lost all that he had of family.

Beneath his collected facade as the heir to our kingdom is a boy who is grieving.

Hào'yáng shuts his eyes briefly. When he looks at me again, his gaze is cool steel, a vast and unreachable ocean. He takes my hand from his cheek and presses it back to Lady Shī'yǎ's lotus. His palms are warm and firm against mine. "I'm going to let go now, Àn'yīng," he says.

I do not know if I am ready. I don't know if I ever will be—to fight in a war I wanted no part of, to put my life and my family's lives in danger again without the promise of a happy ending.

All I ever wanted was sunlit days sitting beneath my plum tree at my mother's feet, watching her and Méi'zi sew; evenings spent traveling the realms with my father along silvered rivers beneath pearl-dust stars in the night sky.

An ache rises in the back of my throat. In my dreams, my father's face is already fading.

But I know I will never see those days again if I do not choose to fight.

I nod.

Hào'yáng releases me and steps back. The river waters swirl, lifting me by his silent command, and the world seems to hold its breath to watch.

I'm not certain what I expected. In my hands, the lotus remains still. Yet as I watch, its glow seems to be dimming; its

leaf is wilting, and the pink petals are curling at the edges, losing their blush. Faint sparks of light drift from its core.

A horrifying thought comes to me: Without Lady Shī'yǎ in this world, the lotus, too, is dying because I, her daughter and heir, am not strong enough to keep it alive.

I am not worthy of being her heir.

*Please.* I send a silent prayer to the vessel. *Please answer me. Give me a sign.*

At last, Hào'yáng approaches, gazing down at the flower, an inscrutable expression on his face. His hands wrap around mine. "Keep it safe," he says. "I may not be familiar with the magic of the immortals, but I do believe in destiny. The lotus is yours, Àn'yīng, and it will show its true powers when the time is right."

I can't meet his eyes. He's being kind, and I've just failed catastrophically in the first step of our plan. The lotus was meant to recognize me and allow me to summon Lady Shī'yǎ's immortal army.

Now we still have nothing.

I do as he says, tucking the precious flower into the innermost pocket of my dress, nestled against my heart. "I'm sorry," I mumble. "I'm so sorry, Hào'yáng."

Instead of answering, he cups my cheeks in his palms and presses a kiss to my forehead. The move is so swift, imbued with such familiarity, that I don't have time to react before he's drawing back, his dark brown eyes warmed by sunlight as he gazes into mine.

"I have something to show you," he says.

Then he tips back and falls into the waters, and without his magic holding me up, I go with him.

The plunge is a disorienting shock of cold at first. But

Hào'yáng's grip is strong against my waist and my back, and I hold on to him tightly, eyes squeezed shut.

A laugh sounds through the water. *Open your eyes, Àn'yīng.* Hào'yáng's voice echoes through the muted silence, just as it did when he saved my life in the frozen lake, and then again in the Four Seas, when I fell from the Immortals' Steps. *I'm here.*

I do.

It's more beautiful than I could ever have imagined. The surface of the river overhead has come alive with sunlight stitched through like gold threads upon a lapis-colored tapestry. Silver-bellied fish dart around us, scales glinting like crystals. And before me, drifting in the currents as though he belongs here, is Hào'yáng.

My surprise must show on my face, for his lips part in a rare, full smile. It's a distraction to take my mind off the lotus—but it's working. Ever since my near-drowning, being underwater has been a terrifying thought. But with him, I know that I'll be safe.

I stretch out a hand as a school of speckled carp swim by—only to have them dart away.

The currents come alive, pulling us in the direction of the carp, until we're swimming in their midst. Slowly we spin, sunlight sparkling overhead and the school of carp circling us, their scales the color of flower petals. I have the strangest feeling I have stepped into a fairy tale, one that has no place in the realm I live in.

That feeling swells as Hào'yáng takes my chin in his hand and tilts my face to his. His eyes flicker to my lips.

Then he lowers his face to mine and exhales.

Life energy springs from his mouth, golden and threaded through with bubbles. As it flows down my throat, his magic

turns to breath. Fresh air fills my lungs, pure and sweet, tasting of pine and sunlight, the salty tang of the sea.

I inhale, leaning forward as I marvel at the sensation of breathing underwater. My fingers wind through his hair—and in the shift of the current, my lips brush his.

It's as though a whisper of wind touches my heart: rippling the surface of an ocean I didn't know I held within me. Hào'yáng's hand tightens almost imperceptibly against my waist; his eyes have fallen closed.

I blink and lean back slightly from the dizzying sensation that races through my head.

Hào'yáng moves back swiftly, and before I know it, we're rising back up through the depths of the river. We break through the surface and arc through the air, buoyed by waves, and he holds me as we land on the riverbank.

We are soaked. Water snakes down the hair that's escaped the golden pin he wears to pull it back. Our sleeves tangle in the soft morning light, his hands still tight around my waist.

And he doesn't let go. "Àn'yīng," he says quietly. "Can I ask you something?"

Again, that ripple in my heart, butterflies' wingbeats against a sunlit pond. "Of course."

Hào'yáng hesitates, his eyes searching mine. I imagine his brilliant mind forming the words, honing them to be as sharp and well-balanced as a blade. "How do you think of me?"

I am surprised by the heaviness to his question. I do not know what to make of his words, nor of the feeling of gentle currents threading through my chest. Shifting.

I smile teasingly to cover the warmth in my own cheeks as I select the most diplomatic response. "You are my . . . betrothed."

His face softens, and he returns my grin. Teasing in his own way, reminiscent of the days when I'd trained under him in the immortal realm. "Is that all?"

Hào'yáng is careful with his words, taught at a young age, I imagine, by the Imperial Court to speak only tactfully. Yet as I draw breath to answer, I'm aware of the sincerity in his gaze. I recall the terrible grief in his eyes when he gifted Lady Shī'yǎ's lotus to me, when he spoke his adopted mother's name.

*He needs comfort. He needs family.*

I reach up and place my hand on his cheek. "You are my guardian in the jade," I say, and I mean each word. "You are closest to my heart, and the one who understands me the most. I promised Lady Shī'yǎ that I would stay with you every step of the way, no matter how difficult the path."

Hào'yáng looks at me, and whatever is running through his mind snaps shut. "I see," he says. "Thank you."

Though I have, to the best of my ability, given the right answers, I feel as though they were not the ones he sought.

"And you," I finish, taking his hands, resolve steeling my voice, "are my realm's rightful heir. My emperor blessed with the blood of dragons, who belongs on the throne of the Kingdom of Rivers."