

CHAPTER 7

We sprinted through downtown, keeping to the side streets as much as possible. A couple of people glanced at us as we ran by them in the dark, but we didn't slow—not until we reached the towering red Gate of Harmonious Interest of Chinatown. My heart beat erratically in my chest as we passed beneath the ornate entryway, and I dared a look over my shoulder. The shadowed trees behind us reached spindly branches towards the night sky, but nothing moved in the darkness.

"It's not following us anymore," Leon promised.

"Where'd it go?" I panted.

His eyes lit up at my question. "Back to the Underworld, most likely. Hungry ghosts do not possess enough spiritual energy to linger long in the mortal world."

He beamed at me, and I had the sudden urge to toss him a biscuit. Unlike me, Leon looked like he'd had a leisurely walk through the park. Even his hair still looked picture-perfect. I shook a rock out of my shoe, and we continued into Chinatown.

Our Chinatown was more of a China Street. A long

time ago it'd been larger than the two streets it currently encompassed, one of which we were walking down. Now it was an eclectic assortment of hipster juice shops and old Chinese restaurants, all under the same lantern-strewn sky. At night, the lanterns made the street feel otherworldly, like we'd stepped back in time. Red brick walls and wrought iron balconies. Busy storefronts with tea sets and cheap ice cream bars that Michelle and I liked to buy during the hottest days of summer. Then Leon and I passed by Fan Tan Alley, the narrow divide between two buildings, and I suppressed a shudder. People said it was haunted.

I checked the status of my head. No aching. The alley wasn't haunted.

For now.

I followed a few steps behind Leon. Wool peacoat aside, anybody would've instantly pegged him for a visitor. Something about the bright way he took in the neon signs and swaying silk lanterns above us. It would've been easy to mistake him for a tourist soaking in the sights.

And maybe that's what this was to him—just another day on the job for the immortal guy stuck doing ghost cleanup in the realm of shorter lifespans. Eventually, he'd forget all about the Wong family haunting. Maybe he'd laugh about it with his friends, and all that would be left was a story on the tip of his tongue.

Something about the thought was oddly comforting, and I straightened taller as I walked. We'd each do our part, and then go our separate ways. There'd be an end to this.

Leon paused outside a dilapidated brick building. My gaze roved up the four storeys, taking in the wrought iron railing around the balconies and the shuttered windows.

"You're not trying to murder me, are you?" I asked, only half joking.

Leon climbed the two steps to the building entrance.

"My friend works here. She may be able to help us with your situation."

"You have a friend? *Here?*" In the dim glow of the street light, I squinted at the board of business names on the inner alcove of the entrance. More than half of the spots were missing. The rest of the name placards were held in place with rusty screws. "What is she, a crow?"

Leon's face blanched. "Please do not say that. She might hear."

He took out his calligraphy brush and scrawled a character on the handle in tiny, precise movements. The lock clicked open. I gulped. Running from ghosts was one thing—breaking into a building at night was a whole other level of wrong. I could just picture my family's upset faces if I showed up at my front door escorted by police. But Mom would probably cry from the embarrassment. But if Leon's friend could help get rid of the ghosts, it'd be worth it.

I gave a quick nod, and we slipped inside. The ancient wooden stairs creaked and groaned under our weight as we ascended. The steps sagged in the middle, and I had an awful feeling that if I stomped too hard,

my foot would smash through. The building was old, and it smelled even older—musty, with more than a hint of dust.

At the top of the stairs was a blue door with a luxuriously elaborate etching of a chrysanthemum covering the glass panel. Leon grabbed the handle and swung the door open for me.

"After you," he said graciously.

I bit my lip and stepped through, unable to place the apprehension I was feeling.

The shop was full of glass jars, neatly spaced along rows of wooden shelving. Every jar had a label displayed on the front, with some more yellowed than others. I approached the wooden counter at the front. Some things I recognized, like the dried red dates and longan that I'd seen Mah Mah use in soups. Most of it, though, was as much of a mystery as the characters on the labels.

I tried to look past the curtained doorway behind the counter, but there was no sign of any movement. "There's no one here."

Leon nodded solemnly. "Be patient. She is coming."

And right on cue, a young woman came through the door we'd entered through.

She was carrying a stack of cardboard boxes so tall that the only part of her head that I could see was her hair. It'd been combed into an impossibly smooth black bun.

"Hello, Bo Liang," Leon said, dipping at the waist.

"Oh, Li Gwan! Good, you're here. Be a dear and come help me with these boxes." She peered around the stack of

boxes in her arms and the smile disappeared from her face. "Ah. I see you've brought a little mortal girl into my shop."

Stunned, I could only watch as Leon dutifully took the boxes from her and set them on the counter. A million questions ran through my head. I hadn't heard anyone come up the stairs behind us. She barely looked a day older than sixteen, but she had the gall to stare down her nose at me like I was trying to steal from her parents' shop.

I swallowed down the nervousness in my throat and extended my hand. "Nice to meet you. I'm Emma Wong." She brushed past me on feet so light she appeared to be floating and went behind the counter. With a delicate touch, she pushed the boxes to the side as if they weighed nothing.

Then, in front of me, her clothing instantly changed.

Her cashmere sweater and beige chinos transformed into a flowing robe the colour of a pale spring sky. Embroidered flowers and long-tailed swallows ran along the sides of her torso and up her drooping sleeves. She slid open a drawer under the counter and took out a gold filigree ornament studded with round cuts of brilliant green jade. With a surgeon's precision, she slid the ornament into the bun on top of her head, then lifted her chin.

"I greet you, Emma Wong," she said. "My name is Bo Liang Song, Lady of the Chrysanthemum Court and presiding member of the High Council in the Upper Realm." She tucked her hands into the opposite sleeves and sniffed. The ornament in her hair caught the overhead lights, and

the brilliant shine forced me to squint in order to see her upturned nose. "Welcome to my medicine shop."

"... Thanks, I guess?"

"Mortals," she scoffed, dropping her hands from her sleeves and rolling her eyes. "You do them the honour of gracing them with your presence, and all they ever do is gawk like they've never seen an immortal before."

Leon cleared his throat, casting an apologetic wince my way. "Please pardon our intrusion, Bo Liang. We will not be long. There is an... issue for which we would like your assistance."

"Of course. Give me a moment, won't you?" She patted the jade ornament in her hair. "If I don't put these peony roots into cold storage right away, the ghosts on this street might come and consume their energy, and my past three months of work in this wretched realm will be wasted." She shuddered delicately before picking up one of the boxes on the counter and heading behind the curtained partition to the back of the shop.

As soon as the partition stopped fluttering behind her, I whirled around to face Leon. "Okay, what in the world is going on? There are other immortals here?"

His eyebrows arched in innocent surprise. "Of course. Most prefer to stay in the Upper Realm, but there are still many who travel through the Three Realms for business and fun in the sun."

"No," I groaned. "Please don't say that ever again. Nobody says that."

Leon's shoulders sagged. "Fun in the sun? But I just learned it. It is a lovely idea."

"Just say business and pleasure. I promise, it's more normal." I shuddered. "Bo Liang has a store here in the Mortal Realm? Just conveniently in my city? And you know each other?"

He picked up a business card from the stand beside the cash register. "Bo Liang and I have known each other for decades. As for this shop, she took it over when the last owner passed away in the late 1930s. She changes her appearance every few years to prevent the residents here from becoming confused." He flipped the business card over, then handed it to me with both hands.

I took the card, not bothering to look it over before shoving it into my pocket. "But you think she'll be able to help me?"

The two halves of the curtained partition billowed outwards as Bo Liang stepped through, her sleeves fluttering behind her like gossamer wings. "Help with what?"

"Do you remember Lam Kai Ming?" Leon asked.

"Lam Kai Ming?" Her mouth crinkled into a displeased frown. "Oh. The ghost hunter?"

"Indeed." He drew in a deep breath. "He has taken a . . . particular interest in Emma and her family."

"He chased me out of my bedroom window," I added. "And set my ancestral altar on fire. Leon said you might be able to help get rid of him."

She wrinkled her nose like I'd suggested she go take

a swim in the sewer. She twisted off the top of the jar and grabbed a handful of the dried lily bulbs inside. "I'm afraid I really don't have the time. *Important* matters call for my attention at the Chrysanthemum Court."

My mouth fell open. A white heat flushed through me, but before I could say anything, Leon walked up to the counter.

"Bo Liang, I ask you for a favour," he said softly.

She paused in the middle of replacing the jar lid. "Anything—for you."

"I was tasked with protecting Emma's family." He cleared his throat again. "Emma *Wong*." He emphasized the last part of my name, and I suddenly got the uncomfortable feeling that I was missing something.

"Wong?" Interest flashed in Bo Liang's eyes as she peered past Leon, observing me with an uncomfortable scrutiny. "The Wong family of the Three Great Hunter Clans?"

I shot Leon a sharp look. "What Three Great Hunter Clans?"

Bo Liang laughed—a high, tinkling sound, like a chime in a summer breeze. "This silly mortal girl doesn't even know her own lineage."

I stiffened. Leon looked down at the ground, as if he'd been caught red-handed in a lie—which didn't seem to be far from the truth.

"The Three Great Hunter Clans were responsible for maintaining much of the spiritual balance here. They eliminated ghosts that were overstepping their bounds in the

Mortal Realm," he said. He raised his head. "Your family is one of them. There is also the Fung Clan, and the Lams."

Bo Liang sighed. "A pity the Lam Clan is nearly gone. It was like watching the Tang Dynasty fall."

My head spun. My family was descended from ghost hunters. Leon dug out his calligraphy brush and passed it to me, handle first. I took it. My hand shook, but I closed my fingers around it—and as soon as I did, a warmth spread up my arm. It coursed through my body like a river current returning to the ocean. I gasped and nearly dropped the brush when a sparkle of gold burst out from the brush head.

"That," he said quietly, "is proof of who you are. Children from the Three Great Hunter Clans innately know how to grasp their spiritual energy and put it to use. Outside these clans, it would take a mortal years of training to have the brush spark gold."

I turned the calligraphy brush over. It really did look like the calligraphy brushes from Chinese school. But there was no ink to write with.

"How does the brush work with no ink?" I asked.

Bo Liang waved her hand lazily. "The wielder's spiritual energy is the ink."

"Well, I guess my family being one of the Three Great Hunter Clans doesn't excuse the head ghost hunter of the Underworld from coming after us, huh?" I said tersely, passing the brush back to Leon. As soon as I did, the warmth it brought dissipated, and I almost regretted giving it back.

Bo Liang picked up a jagged leaf, brown and brittle, and examined it carefully. She pulled out a stone mortar and pestle from underneath the counter. "I must say, I hadn't expected to find your lot on this side of the ocean. I thought the last of the Wongs had all moved to the cities in Guangdong."

"My grandma immigrated here."

"Wong Lin Mui?"

"You know her?" I spluttered.

"I know of her." She turned back to the shelves behind her. Her fingers danced down the row of jars, lifting airtight lids with a pop and picking ingredients to throw into her bowl. "Her mother used to grow the most wonderful ginseng. It was well-known in the Upper Realm for its healing properties. She had two girls, if I remember correctly."

"My grandmother and her sister," I said, surprised.

"So you *do* know something of your lineage."

I looked down at my shoes. "My great-aunt passed away before I was born. I never knew her."

Bo Liang made a contemplative humming sound in her throat. "And so ends a prestigious family line. I'll miss that ginseng." She threw in small pieces of ingredients and got to work, grinding and scraping the contents against the bowl. "I'm afraid I cannot help you with your situation. It is forbidden for immortals to interfere with mortal affairs."

My mouth dropped, and I turned to Leon. "Is that true?" His face flushed. "Well... I would not say forbidden..."

"You told me you were a guardian for my family!"

Bo Liang tutted. "There's no such thing as an immortal guardian—"

Leon coughed. Loudly. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"But I suppose there are always exceptions," she quickly added before turning back to her mortar and pestle. The oddly calming sound of grinding stone filled the silence in the shop. "Are there other ghosts tormenting the Wong family?"

Leon wrung his hands. "I would not say *tormenting*, but—"

"Tormenting," I agreed. "There was one that had fire in its mouth and another with needles on its head."

Bo Liang hummed. "And they have all been ngo gwai?"

"Hungry ghosts, yeah."

"If they've all been ngo gwai, then I can see why Li Gwan is helping you. Desperate times, desperate measures and all that. It'd be a pity to see the Wong Clan go the way of the Lams." She leaned her elbows on the counter and wove her slender fingers together. "Ngo gwai don't usually haunt a specific family they're unrelated to. Unless..."

"Unless they're being ordered to," Leon finished, his eyes wide. We exchanged a look. He was thinking the same thing I was: Henry was working for Tin Hong, a Ghost Lord of the Underworld. Henry wanted to bring me to the Underworld. What if Tin Hong was ordering him to?

My stomach turned. "What happened to the Lam Clan?"

"Oh, what usually happens to mortals who strive too hard to be something they're not," Bo Liang said with an aggrieved sigh.

What usually happened to mortals who tried to be something they weren't? A part of me wanted to know, but what really mattered was that my family didn't go the same way the Lams had. And in order to make sure of that, I had to do something. Something bigger than what I was already doing. Something more useful.

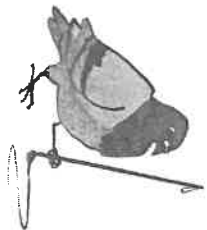
"I suppose you won't be needing anything from me now," Bo Liang continued airily.

I worked up enough patience to smile. "I guess not. Thank you, though—"

"Then if you will not be purchasing anything, I must ask you to leave. Trouble trails ghost hunters like vermin after rice grains, and I *finally* managed to clear out the ghosts in this building." She plunked another glass jar on the counter in front of her and shivered delicately. "I don't want to smell another ligu for at least another hundred years."

"What's a ligu?" I asked nervously.

"Oh, you'll know if one ever comes within a hundred li of you." She turned her attention back to the wall of jars. "Farewell, Emma of the Wong Hunter Clan."



CHAPTER 8

As soon as Leon and I left the medicine shop, I squared my stance. He pointedly avoided meeting my eyes as he started down the stairs. He was definitely keeping something from me. In fact, he seemed like he was keeping a lot of things from me. Why? I wanted to ask him, but I had the feeling that if I did, he'd fly away. I had to be careful if I wanted answers—but even more than that, I had to know how to protect my family.

"Teach me how to do magic," I said in one fast breath, grabbing on to his arm. "You said Henry works for Tim Hong, a Ghost Lord of the Underworld. Maybe he's ordering the ghosts to come after my family."

His expression froze. "What?"

"Please." I thought back to the warmth the calligraphy brush had brought me. "Holding the calligraphy brush felt . . . right. I need to know how to defend my family against ghosts if Henry is going to return."

"No." He shook his head and started back down the stairs in a rush. "No, no. I do not think that is a good idea."

"I'm really thankful," I continued more loudly, following him, "that you've been looking out for me, but you can't be my bodyguard forever. Besides, my parents would freak if they caught you with me. No offence, but you don't exactly pass for a classmate. You look like the right age, but they're going to wonder why I'm hanging out with a private school student."

And for the first time since I'd met him, his smile completely disappeared from his face. "No."

A twinge of annoyance shot through me. "Why not?" "I have never taught anyone how to use syu fat mo before," he said. He shot the door to Bo Liang's medicine shop a pleading look. As if she was listening in on us, the click of a lock resounded through the stairwell. Leon pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. "It would take years to properly train you."

"Then don't properly train me. There must be a crash course of basic spells you can teach."

He ran his fingers through the thick wave of hair hanging over his forehead, pushing it back. "Practising syu fat mo increases your spiritual energy. The greater your spiritual energy, the more danger it attracts. There are ghosts aside from Henry who would take your spiritual energy for their own."

I didn't like the idea of attracting more ghosts, but now I was truly scared. Regular ghosts were bad enough. A Ghost Lord? Yeah, no thanks. "My family's already in danger. I'm sorry, Leon, but you can't protect me forever."

I could see him mulling the idea over in his head. And maybe it was just the exhaustion getting to me, but he looked rather unhappy when he was deep in thought, like all those years of being immortal were finally catching up to him and he was deciding that he didn't like what he was doing after all.

"Okay," he finally said, relenting, and my heart leapt. "I will teach you a little *syu fat mo*. Just to protect yourself. But you must promise me something."

"What is it?"

"Don't try to engage with anything that you feel is too strong." He looked down at his hands and flexed his fingers. "Immortals live much longer than mortals, and some ghosts live even longer still. Time is strength, and you are young."

Done deal. I didn't fancy an early trip to the Underworld, or anything else that happened when ghosts got their nasty spectral hands on people. "Okay. It's a promise."

We reached the bottom of the stairs and opened the door back to the outside world. The cold wind rushed over me. I rubbed my arms to try to warm them.

"We'll start tomorrow?" I asked.

"Tomorrow," Leon agreed, with all the enthusiasm of being forced to drink Mah Mah's herbal remedies.

...

True to his word, Leon showed up the next day at my front door, armed with a calligraphy set. We took the bus to

Cadboro Bay beach, which was the last place I was hoping to go.

"What's wrong?" Leon asked with a frown when I took my time trudging over to the beach.

"Nothing."

"You look like you are upset."

"I don't have the best memories of this place," I admitted. My memory was fuzzy, but I was pretty sure I'd come here with Michelle when I was younger and something terrible had happened. I remembered cold water and Michelle's dad screaming.

"We don't have to be here," Leon said. "We could go to a different area with water. Perhaps a lake? What is that lake called on the highway? Moose Lake?"

"Elk Lake," I corrected. "And I'm fine. Let's go."

We set up Leon's calligraphy set at the far end of the beach. As Leon blathered on about proper stroke order for writing, I closed my eyes and imagined my first day of summer vacation, minus the uncomfortable memories. Summer vacations were ice cream and long bike rides and hanging out with Michelle under the stars. I'd finally be able to help Michelle and Nathan get DiverBot to work. They would scream, and I'd cheer them on at Nationals next year—

"No, no," Leon said, breaking my daydream. "Try again. Like this."

He dipped the long, silky hairs of his calligraphy brush into the ink and wrote the same character for *protect* that I'd just done, only his character looked like an elegant piece at

an art auction while mine looked like a mangled root ball. He held up his piece of paper in the sunlight. The sheet was so thin I could see the shimmer of the ocean through it.

"That's what I've been doing," I forced out through clenched teeth. I swept a few pine needles off the short wooden table in front of me and placed a new square of paper on it. I wrote the character for *protect* and waited for the golden barrier light to appear.

Nothing happened.

I crumpled the paper into a ball and tossed it onto the sand beside me. The beach was nearly empty despite it being a Saturday. The wind was biting cold, and I had to sweep my hair out of my face for the hundredth time that hour. "Why does it feel like I'm in after-school Chinese class instead of learning to beat the crap out of ghosts?"

"Basics first." Leon picked up a black ink stick and began to grind it on his inkstone. An earthy cinnamon smell wafted up with every pass he made over the iron surface. "Syu fat mo is a written magic."

I groaned and re-inked my brush, shifting uncomfortably on the damp sand. Spread out before me was a stack of papers, a calligraphy brush stand, and an inkstone. There was also a small, flat box. The set-up was disappointingly normal. In fact, it looked almost exactly like my Chinese writing lessons with Mah Mah, complete with the posture-killing low writing table.

The only difference was that we were at Cadboro Bay beach, and my dreams of simply flicking out my calligraphy

brush and crushing all my ghostly enemies were quickly disappearing the longer we spent copying out the same character over and over.

Leon leaned over and frowned. "No, your stroke here is too short. You need to make it longer."

"I thought you said that it didn't matter if my characters looked like crap," I groaned.

"Your characters don't look like . . . crap." He avoided looking at me as he picked up several wadded-up paper balls off the ground. "Most beginners struggle with intent and focus. Writing the strokes correctly will help you with both." His brow pinched together in worry. "You *are* focusing, right?"

"Bubble tea," I grumbled.

"Pardon?"

"I'm thinking about how I need to buy Michelle a bubble tea after volunteering at the community garden tomorrow."

"Emma," Leon said patiently. "That's not focusing. Come on, let's write the character for *leon* again."

I rested my brush on top of my paper and sighed. "Why are we even here, anyway?"

Leon gave me a patient look. "You said you wanted to learn magic. Water holds a great deal of spiritual energy. That is why people who do not have enough energy must use ink to channel their magic. Water is life, and the largest source of water is—"

"The ocean," I finished for him. I held up my hands.

"Leon, I stopped being able to feel my fingers half an hour ago. Maybe we should stop for now."

"One more try. It will happen. You simply need to concentrate. Watch."

He scanned the area to make sure no one was around, then he crawled out the character for the barrier spell again. A golden light shimmered out in an orb around him—then, as quickly as it had formed, it vanished. He looked over at me. The hope in his eyes made my heart twinge. All the sharp words on the tip of my tongue faded away. I couldn't kick a puppy if—well, I just couldn't kick a puppy. So, I dipped my brush back into the ink and wrote out the nine strokes for *leon*. *Protect*.

For one brief second, a golden light flared up around the paper—and then it was gone. I exhaled slowly when what I really wanted to do was roll around in the sand, crying.

Leon's face lit up like I'd just written an entire poem in Chinese. "See? You are almost there."

I channelled all my incredulity into one hard-hitting stare. "Is there anything else you can teach me? Maybe something a little more . . . aggressive?"

"Perhaps a new spell would help," he admitted. He slid a fresh piece of paper over to me and picked up his brush. "Copy me, please."

I dipped my brush into the inkstone and stifled a sigh. There was only so much calligraphy practice I could take, and I was close to hitting my limit—but just when I thought he was going to jot down another hundred copies of the

same character, he took his piece of paper and tore it down the middle. Then he ripped those in half, and the halves into smaller pieces still.

My jaw dropped. Leon was capable of destruction. I'd officially fallen into an alternate universe. I watched in mild horror as he crumpled the papers into little balls and threw them into the air. Before they fell back down, he sliced out a quick character with his brush.

The papers hung in mid-air for a split second—and then, as if manipulated by an invisible hand, they folded, creased, and bent into tiny paper animals.

Over our heads, a rabbit and a frog hopped along an invisible path. A heron soared around a lumbering bear. And above them all snaked a dragon, whiskers and all, lazily cutting figure eights beneath the winding red arms of the arbutus trees above us.

"All right," I breathed. "I believe you. That's real magic."

He held his finger out and the paper dragon drifted down, landing on it with an audible rustle. "This particular spell is an easy one. It can be adapted to many uses later on. Your paper creatures may not be able to move like mine at first, but the focus is on making them move."

As if on command, the paper creatures dropped down to the table and lay still. I picked up the rabbit and unfolded it. It had returned to being just a piece of paper and nothing more.

"Okay," I said. "Let's do this."

"Good. You will be a quick learner. I'm sure of it." Leon pointed his thumb towards me.

I squinted. "What are you doing?"

"I am encouraging you with a thumb-up."

A cackle escaped me before I could help it. "That's not how you do a thumbs-up. Here."

I demonstrated, and he studied my raised thumb before imitating it with precise movements of his own. Then he cracked a grin, and I laughed, and then he laughed louder, until we were both clutching our sides, rolling in the sand. It felt nice to be able to teach him something for once.

"I lied," I gasped out. "I can't practise anymore. I need a break."

"My thumbs-up was wasted on you." He held out his hand. "I'll need it back."

I sat up. "I have a better idea. Come with me to the community garden tomorrow."

His smile faded. "The community garden? But there will be people there."

I stood up and brushed the sand off my pants. "Exactly. People like Michelle. You should meet her. I think you two will get along. You're both..."

"Both what?"

"Effortlessly perfect." I blanched. "Forget I said that."

His mouth pulled down at the corners. "No one is perfect."

"I know." I started to pick up my mess of crumpled papers. "That's why I said to forget I said that. It was a weird thing to say."

I finished picking up the last piece of paper, and then

I put away all my calligraphy tools. Leon had been quiet for so long that I thought he was taking my advice to wipe his memory clean. But when I turned around, his gaze was lowered to the ground. He seemed stuck in place.

"Leon?" I whispered. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not perfect," he said, his voice hoarse. His fingers tightened around the piece of paper he held between his hands. "I have made a lot of mistakes. Ones I can never fix."

My mouth went dry. His eyes were watering.

"It's okay to make mistakes," I said.

"It's not." He drew back as if he was ashamed of even admitting it. "But I am doing my best to make it okay." He wiped a hand across his eyes, then smiled at me like nothing had happened. "I would be happy to meet your friend."

"Are you sure?" I asked. His eyes were still a little red, and I didn't know what else to say to make him feel better.

"You don't have to if you're not comfortable—"

"I am," he said firmly. He picked up the calligraphy table. "What time tomorrow?"

"Our volunteer shift starts at eight."

He rewound his scarf around his neck. "I will meet you then."

An idea struck me. "I'll buy you bubble tea too."

His smile cracked open. "You might not want to after tomorrow."

"Why?"

"I will be testing you on what we learned today." My mouth dropped open. "Wait, what?"

"Surely you did not think we were practising writing those characters today for fun." He shook his head in disappointment.

"You didn't tell me there would be any tests!" I yelped, but before I could say anything else, he laughed and transformed into a pigeon, calligraphy desk and all. I whipped around to see if anyone had noticed, but the beach was still empty. As he flew over the tops of the arbutus and pine trees, I could have sworn I heard a chuckle on the wind.

"I hate tests," I moaned to no one.



CHAPTER 9

The next day, I took the bus down to the Fairview Community Garden. No one was going to keep me away from it, even if it was summer vacation. The garden smelled heavenly. Wet, rich soil. Dewy fir needles. Fresh-sawn wood. It would've smelled even better if I could just get my barrier spell to work.

"Come on," I muttered under my breath, scrawling out the character for *protect*—*teon*—again. I looked at my spade. No golden light surrounded it.

I sighed, then scooped up some more fertilizer. Every time I shovelled out another spade of fertilizer, I practised writing out the character with the calligraphy brush Leon had lent me. The handle was made out of a cheap plastic, and the brush hairs were already starting to fray. I could have blamed my failure on the brush, but deep down, I knew it was all me.

Michelle sat her bag of bark mulch on the ground and arched her back like she was fifty. Maybe that's how old her soul was. She wasn't exactly an old soul, but sometimes I'd

catch her looking wistfully out of windows or lingering too long at vintage clothing shops. The obvious answer was that she was a hipster, but I couldn't bring myself to condemn her like that.

"Can we trade?" she asked. She was wearing sunglasses even though the sky was brimming with a thick sludge of grey rain clouds. We were having the weirdest summer weather ever.

"Trade what?"

"Jobs." She caught the bag of mulch just as it started to topple over, her face twisted like she was caught in mid-sneeze. Her jacket wasn't zipped up, and I kept catching flashes of the angry corgi splashed across the front of her shirt. "I think I'm allergic to whatever's in this stuff."

"You mean the bark mulch?" I patted down the fertilizer around the newly seeded sunflowers. They'd only start to bloom in late summer with how cold the weather was being. "Just leave it for now. I'm almost done."

"If I was immortal, I bet I could just magick this whole area clean, and then we could get bubble tea."

I stifled a groan. Michelle hadn't stopped making snide remarks ever since I told her what had happened with Leon and the burning shed. Unsurprisingly, she had taken in my story with the sort of hunger that plagues gardeners when they hear about a seasonal plant sale.

"So when is Leon supposed to arrive again?" She rubbed her hands together like she was plotting something.

"An hour ago."

The evil grin fell from her face. "I'm not going to be able to meet him before we finish our shift, will I?"

"No, but you might be able to help me." I withdrew my calligraphy brush from my pocket. "Come look at this."

Nervously, I aimed the calligraphy brush at the bag of fertilizer beside the pergola. I just had to concentrate. Visualize the barrier spreading its golden light out around the bag. A perfect circle, clean and without breaks.

Carefully, I wrote out the nine strokes for *leon*. For a brief moment, a shimmering cascade of gold flared out around the bag, and my heart leapt. It was better than nothing.

Her eyes became impossibly huge. "Hold on—Emma—you—"

I hunched my shoulders. "I know it's not very good, but I'm practising every spare minute. I was wondering if you could help me sometime when Leon's not around. It works better if someone else is with me."

"Are you kidding me?" she shrieked, punching me playfully on the shoulder. "That's amazing! What else can you do? Set your own fires? Levitate? Smash someone through a wall?"

"I'm also working on moving things—Wait, what?"

She hopped around me, clapping her hands together. "Just wait until the school talent show comes up next year. We're going to whup everyone's but."

I winced. "You're going to have to keep this a secret. I'm not doing this for fun. Leon's teaching me how to defend myself against ghosts."

She covered her mouth with her hand. "Shoot. I'm sorry, Emma."

"There's nothing to be sorry about." I anxiously spun the calligraphy brush in my hand. "Have you heard of geoi hau gwai?"

"A *what*?"

"Geoi hau gwai." I dug my phone out of my pocket and swiped it open. I showed her the webpage I had open on hungry ghosts. "This is the type of ghost that burned down my family altar."

"Ohhh, you mean a jùkkòuguī" Michelle said. She walked over to the rickety table our backpacks were sitting on. I heard a zip and a thunk, and suddenly her laptop was flipped open. "Okay. Let's do this. Research time."

"But the bark mulch!" I said in dismay. It had started to drizzle, and little droplets were collecting on the plastic bag the bark mulch was in.

She rubbed her hands, and I didn't know if it was because she felt cold or was enjoying my plight way too much. "Oh, come on. We both know Leslie will finish tidying up if I don't get everything done. Besides, isn't this what you're doing? Trying to find out more information about ghosts? Seeing what you're up against?"

"Kind of? But Leslie's not going to be happy if she catches us."

Leslie Phuong was the lead volunteer at the Fairview Community Garden. The last time we'd met, she had a smile warmer than Mah Mah's black chicken soup. I had a

sneaking suspicion she wouldn't be as happy if she caught us slacking off.

"Listen, Emma—don't take this away from me. All those years of torture in after-school Chinese classes are finally going to pay off." She paled and added, "Don't tell my parents that. They'd make me go back in a heartbeat if I ever admitted to finding the lessons useful, and there's no way I'm going to listen to another one of Sun Laòshī's lessons on correct stroke order."

"Cross my heart," I promised. I glanced back down the gravel path. The rain had started in earnest now. "But if Leslie comes . . ."

"Excellent. Sun Laòshī was a little too trigger-happy with assigning penalty lines. I swear she gave me future carpal tunnel." She flexed her fingers and opened up the search engine for Baidu. "You aren't going to find much on jùkkòuguī on the English side of the web."

Resigned, I came up beside her. Raindrops ricocheted off the tin roof of the pergola as if the sky didn't approve of what we were doing during volunteer hours. "There's wi-fi here?"

"No, but the bakery across the road has a really long signal."

And fingers flying, she took off, typing in Chinese faster than I could type in English. Robotics Club had begged her to come back for a reason—she was the quickest programmer on the team. Even Nathan had happily taken a back seat when she'd taken over planning last year's national competition entry at our old middle school.

But if I was being honest, underneath my admiration was a tiny sliver of jealousy. Not for Michelle's programming skills, but for her ability to use Chinese. She had the advantage of living in a home where everyone spoke Mandarin. My parents and grandmother usually only spoke Cantonese to their friends or my relatives, leaving me with the vocabulary of a kindergartner and the listening comprehension of a dog—but a really smart, friendly one, as Michelle often consoled me.

I rested my head on her shoulder. "Have I told you how much I love you lately?"

"You might want to hold that thought." Michelle frowned at her computer screen. "Internet's not working."

"Guess the bakery decided to crack down on wi-fi thieves."

"It would've been easier to look this up on a bigger screen, but a phone will do." She pulled out her phone and tried typing something in. "Or not."

"No wi-fi?"

"No *anything*. Look." She flipped her phone towards me, and I caught the ominous *no signal* icon in the corner. I switched on my own phone. No signal, either.

"It was working just a few minutes ago. Is the power out?"

She gave a little sigh of dismay. "LTE is cell towers, not modems. We'd at least still have LTE if the power was out."

"I don't know what you just said, but maybe no internet is a sign we should finish up and head back."

She brightened. "Or maybe—"

"Don't say it."

"—it's a ghost?" she continued like I hadn't said anything. "Ghosts can't mess with the internet. That's ridiculous."

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and zipped it up.

"They're all too busy haunting the old houses on Moss Street and hanging out in the Underworld."

"Underworld? You mean Diyu, Chinese Hell?"

I'd meant it as a joke, so Michelle didn't have any right to look as serious as she did. My mouth went dry. "That's what Pigeon B—Leon said."

"Ten Lords of the Underworld and all that?"

"Yeah—Wait, *what*?" My fingers felt cold, and it had nothing to do with the chill in the air. "You know there's a classist hierarchy in the Underworld?"

"Oh, yeah. Learned about it in Chinese school. You don't mess with the Ten Lords of the Underworld." She stood up and closed her laptop. "That's what my mom says, anyway. She's convinced my great-uncle's never going to make it to reincarnation because he's probably annoying all the Ghost Lords with his complaining. I think he even yelled at the woodpeckers one time when he was visiting us. Can't imagine what he's up to in Diyu."

"Probably yelling at ghost woodpeckers." I swallowed.

"Do you know the names of the Ghost Lords? Like Tin Hong?"

"Is that Mandarin or Cantonese?"

"Canto, I guess."

"Then nope, I have no idea." Michelle tried typing on her phone some more, then she sighed. "I should probably head back in case Mom freaks out trying to get a hold of me. She's invited some of her book club friends over for dinner, and she needs my help getting ready."

My heart sank. "You go ahead. I'll catch up."

"But what about bubble tea?" Her eyes went glossy with hope. "And meeting Leon?"

"I don't think he's going to show up, and I'll treat you to two bubble teas next time."

She sighed and stuffed her phone back into her coat. "Done deal. Watch—as soon as I leave, Leon's going to show up."

I waved goodbye, despite the unease I was feeling. Out in the rain, every tree trunk was the unwavering silhouette of a watching spectre.

I'd dealt with ghosts my whole life. Another ghost story or two shouldn't spook me—and it wouldn't have, prior to the family altar burning to pieces. Now, everything felt cold and far away, like I was stuck behind a waterfall and I couldn't see what was on the other side. Well, I suppose I knew what was on the other side.

Tin Hong and his little ghost hunter crony Henry, a.k.a. the menace trying to destroy my life.

With a despondent sigh, I finished cinching off the top of the bag of bark mulch and shoved it beneath the pergola. I dusted off my hands then reached for my backpack, only to catch something out of the corner of my eye.

A person was walking up the path towards me. They had something on top of their head. It looked like a tall hat, but I couldn't tell through the downpour.

"Sorry, no tours are being offered today," I said. "You'll have to come back another day."

The person came into focus. It wasn't a hat on their head but a bush of needles, sticking out in every direction. My throat closed.

It wasn't a person at all. It was the zam mou gwai.

"I found you," the ghost croaked in a voice that sounded like rustling paper.

The words ricocheted around in my head. I shoved my hand into my coat pocket and pulled out the calligraphy brush Leon had given me. With my hand shaking, I slashed out the character for *leon*.

Nothing happened.

I tried again.

Zilch.

The ghost opened its mouth. Its shoulders shook. With a new sort of horror, I realized the zam mou gwai was *laughing* at me. Heat rose to my face.

It took a step towards me, and I finally ran.

In the distance, the yellow glow of the noon sun peeked through a cage of shadowed rain clouds. It would've been beautiful if I hadn't been running for my life. For the first time ever, I hated the rain. My sneakers slapped through puddles along the sidewalks. Dodged planter boxes of flowers. Skirted parked bikes. The zam mou gwai walked

along the ground like any normal person would've, but every few seconds it would vanish and reappear several feet closer, propelled along by an unfelt wind.

I fled until the streets became more familiar, until I saw my neighbours' mailboxes, until I saw the garbage bins at the end of my driveway. The volunteer centre wasn't far from my house.

I unlocked the front door with shaking hands. Slammed the door shut behind me. I bent over, wheezing, then straightened as fast as I could.

"Mom? Dad?" I stumbled over to the light switch. Flicked it on. "Mah Mah?"

No answer. The house was empty, and I couldn't hear anything but the sound of my own breathing.

Heart pounding, I peered through the peephole in the front door.

The zam mou gwai stared back.

I ducked down, my hand clamped over my mouth, stifling the scream inside me.

My parents would be home from running errands soon. I couldn't risk letting them come into contact with that—I needed a weapon. Something to hurt it with, or scare it away. I'd never heard of anyone exorcising a ghost with a kitchen knife, but I didn't have any other choice. I needed to do something.

I darted over to the kitchen and started pulling open the drawer with the knives, and then I noticed the long, narrow box of incense on the counter. Mah Mah always lit incense

at the family altar. She said it drove away bad energy. Kept away evil spirits.

Maybe she'd been on to something this whole time.

Quickly, I grabbed the box and shook out a few red joss sticks. Lit them with the lighter on the counter. Slid open the drawer and grabbed a knife too—just in case I wasn't going crazy and it was actually a real, live person outside my door after all.

And very quietly, I tiptoed back over to the front door.

I peeked through the peephole, hoping the zam mou gwai had left. Maybe it had got tired, or—

Nope. It was still there. Now it was standing even closer. It stared straight ahead with those empty eyes like it could see me through the door.

My hand tightened around the handle of the knife. This was a bad idea. Really bad. It topped the list of things I shouldn't be doing. I was trying to ward off the spirit of a dead person with a few scrappy sticks and the knife Mom used to chop green onions.

But I couldn't let my family run into it.

I held my breath.

Gripped the handle—

—and shoved open the door.

"Get lost, creep!" I shouted as I desperately waved my small bundle of incense at it.

The ghost reached towards me with its bony arm. I reared back, and before I could blink again, it vanished. And behind where it'd been standing—

My mouth dropped open. "Mah Mah?"

My grandmother looked up at me, a weary look of resignation deepening the wrinkles around her eyes. She was dressed in a floral-patterned blouse. Her permed curls were a halo of soft clouds around her head. She looked every bit the picture of a sweet old granny.

Well, except for the slender dagger in her hands.

She closed her eyes and muttered something under her breath, and maybe it was because my Cantonese sucked, or the rain was too loud, or my brain was muddled because I'd just tried to confront an otherworldly entity, but it almost sounded like she was swearing.