

CHAPTER 10

"Um," I said.

I didn't know who should've been more upset in this situation, but judging from the uncharacteristically deep lines dragging down Mah Mah's mouth, she looked like she needed a few more consoling words than I did. She fished out an iron sheath from her pants pocket and slid the blade into it. The dagger made a satisfying snick as it went in.

"Did you just kill a ghost?" I asked faintly.

"We go inside," she said, dropping the sheathed dagger into her wicker tote of gardening tools. "You want some tea?"

"... Sure?"

On wooden legs, I followed Mah Mah into the kitchen. She took a tin canister of tea from the cupboard and spooned some leaves into a teapot. Awkwardly, I pulled out a chair at the dining table and sat down. I bit my lip. Chewed it, really. Like it was gum and the only thing keeping me stuck to this earth.

What. The. Heck. Was. Going. On?

When the tea was done, Mah Mah joined me at the kitchen table. Wisps of steam rose from the cups in front of us like frail apparitions. The ticking from the clock beside the fridge was painfully loud.

"Is it gone?" I blurted out.

"Yes."

"What'd you do to it?"

She took a sip from her cup. "Keoi gwai."

"Keoi gwai?"

"Make the ghost go away. Sometimes from inside people."

"You mean you exorcised them?" I squeaked. "Is that

what you did to the . . . the thing out there?"

She nodded, even though I got the feeling that she didn't completely understand what I was asking. She only repeated, "Keoi gwai."

My head spun. My grandma exorcised ghosts. Other people's grandmas did normal stuff, like baking cookies or knitting. I mean, my grandma did that too. But she also keoi gwai'd ghosts.

"Did you give me the paper talismans because you knew I could see ghosts?" I asked. Suspicion rose inside me. "You said to hide them from Mom and Dad. That they'd only work if I used them."

She exhaled. It wasn't quite a sigh, more like a long release of a pressure that had built up inside for years. "When I was young, everyone in Wong family can see ghosts." She smiled wistfully, as if, against everything she'd taught me, people being able to see ghosts was a good thing. "Now Seeing gone."

No more. Just me now." She took another sip of her tea. "And you, Ah Ling. Yes, talisman only work for you."

Mah Mah was the only person who called me by my Chinese name, Yan Ling. Usually, I liked hearing her call me by that name. It felt like a secret between us. Now it reminded me that all families had secrets, and they weren't all good. I stared down into the amber surface of my teacup. I'd already encountered ghosts five different times this week, and that was five encounters, too many. She was being so nonchalant about everything. As if she'd never told me to hide what I could see when I was younger.

"Why did you never tell me you could see them?" I asked, my voice small. "Why didn't you tell me what the paper talismans were really for?"

She reached out and grasped my hand in hers. Her hand was sun-spotted. Warm. "I left Hong Kong to start new life here. New country. No ghosts. No more."

"No more what?"

"Hunting." She poured more tea into my cup. "We not do anymore. You can see ghosts, but don't touch them. Don't speak to them. If you see one, pretend you don't see."

And that was just it—my whole life, my family had taught me to hide what wasn't acceptable. My ability to see ghosts. My low test scores. But hiding problems was a chore in itself. It made me into someone I wasn't. Someone I couldn't be.

Despite the tea, my mouth felt dry. "I can't do that, Mah Mah. I can't keep hiding what I can see."

She leaned back in her chair, and all of a sudden I was looking at a stranger. She looked exactly like my grandmother, but there was a hardness to her that I hadn't noticed before. A force that stared down everything that I wanted to say.

"One of my uncles was a ghost hunter," she said quietly in Cantonese. "Too confident. He tried to fight off a ghost, but the ghost was stronger. His body was alive, but his *hei* was gone. It was impossible to bring it back." She shook her head and poured some more tea into my cup before refilling her own. "His wife and children cried for so long, we worried they would become ghosts too."

I shifted uneasily in my chair. "*Hei?* You mean like spiritual energy? *Qi?*"

"Energy, yes. Everyone has inside. Some people have stronger," she said, switching back to English. She coughed and drank another sip of tea, and my chest clenched. "You can see ghosts because your *hei* is strong. But ghost hunting needs tools. Power. You don't have. If you have trouble with ghost, you can't escape."

"But you're still hunting them. You have a dagger."

Her hand tightened around her cup, and she closed her eyes briefly before opening them again. "My sister's. She died a long time ago." She bent down and fished around inside her bag of gardening tools. She placed the sheathed dagger on the table, but she didn't extend it to me. The iron sheath was decorated with a phoenix that arched into the sky, its tail flared majestically. On the hilt, the same phoenix

wound around the narrow body, creating shadowed ridges and curves that gave the creature a semblance of life.

"She was smart and strong, but sometimes the ghosts are smarter. Stronger. We were both lucky today, *Ah Ling*. I am old now. I cannot protect you all the time. My *hei* isn't strong enough." She patted her chest as if all her spiritual energy was concentrated in that one spot. "Don't go near ghosts. *Run*. You are fast."

Despite the calm in her voice, her fingers trembled—only slightly, and I wouldn't have seen them quivering at all if I hadn't been looking, but I didn't know where else to look. So I pushed down my frustration, my disappointment, my embarrassment, and all the rest of the questions I wanted to ask—and instead gave a small nod. "Okay, *Mah Mah*."

Her face softened, and she was my grandma again. "Gwai ah. You're a good girl. Be careful."

She raised her teacup to her mouth, and just like that, it was as if the ghost had never happened.

...

When people talked about family secrets, they usually didn't mean the ancient art of punting a ghost back to the Underworld.

I paced back and forth across my bedroom floor, gnawing on my thumbnail. It was a bad habit that I'd carried with me all the way until fifth grade, when Michelle had accidentally commented about it in front of my mom. After

that, I reserved my nail biting for the most incomprehensible of moments, and this situation definitely called for it.

Of *course* there were ghost hunters. There were deer hunters, after all, and moose hunters too. And it made total sense that my family hunted ghosts. My ancestors needed something to do in their spare time, so why not go for a good game of hunting terrifying spectres from the Underworld?

I forced my thumb back down and pulled out my phone, wanting to message Michelle. I needed to tell her what had happened. She was going to explode. Then I remembered she was helping her mom entertain the book club, so I just left her a short message:

IMPORTANT!!!! msg me back when you see this

I paused, then wrote another one:

seriously msg me right away. I really need to talk

She didn't reply.

MICHELLE PLEASSSE

I sighed, then tossed my phone onto the bed. Mah Mah had made it pretty clear she didn't want me involved in any paranormal business, but I had a bad feeling that wasn't the last ghost I was going to see. Thankfully, I had someone I could count on: Leon.

I mean, so what if he was also a bird? I wasn't going to discriminate. And okay, so maybe he never appeared when I needed him most, and he sounded exactly the way my dad did when he really got into different types of building materials, but right now, he was the best guide to getting me out of this mess.

But where was he?

I went up to my window, reached behind my row of succulents, and shoved the window open. I'd been keeping it unlatched ever since the Henry incident in case I needed to make another quick escape. The sun had ducked back behind the rain clouds. Even though the rain had stopped for now, the air felt heavy with moisture.

"Leon?" I tested in a whisper. "Are you there?"

The breeze ghosted past me, and I shivered before shutting the window again. It was silly of me to think he was just hanging around outside my house. I hoped he was okay.

I dug into my pocket for the calligraphy brush he'd lent me. The bristles were even more frayed than before. Experimentally, I tried writing out the character for *teon*—*protect*. I held my breath as the last stroke shimmered into gold existence. It spluttered and sparked and the whole character vanished.

My heart dropped. How was I supposed to protect my family if I couldn't even make a simple spell work?

Something tapped at the window. When I looked up, I caught sight of a grey wing. A pigeon fluttered down onto the outer sill. Its orange eyes stared at me, unblinking, and relief washed through me.

I threw open the window again. "You're here!"

The pigeon hopped inside, and in a split second it was gone—Leon stood in its place. He was still wearing his wool peacoat, but his scarf was ragged and carelessly looped around his neck. His hair was a mess. Strands of it flopped

over his eyes. It was the first time I'd seen him be anything less than perfect. His cheeks were sunken, but he managed to summon up a smile as he nodded at the calligraphy brush in my hand. "You have been practising."

"Are you okay?" I asked as he wavered on his feet. "You look like you got eaten by a dragon." I paused. "Wait. Did you? Did it spit you back out? Do immortals taste bad?"

His brow pinched in confusion. "Immortals don't eat other immortals."

"Dragons exist?" I squeaked.

"Certainly," he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Although most masquerade as snakes nowadays. Mortals no longer consider giant, slithering beings in the sky to be auspicious."

"So, you're really okay?" I looked him over, but he did seem okay, other than being tired and dishevelled. "What happened? You were supposed to meet me and Michelle at the community garden this morning."

He winced. "I ran into some trouble while I was trying to find out more about the ghosts haunting your family."

The heat drained from my face. "Did you run into—?" "Tin Hong?" He whacked the back of his shoulder like he'd pulled a muscle. "No. Ghost Lords do not leave the Underworld. They are bound to their specific courts."

"Here. Come sit." I pointed at my computer chair. For a moment it seemed he was about to refuse, but then his shoulders slumped and he dragged himself over. He sat down with a plop, his eyes widening in surprise. He did a

cautious twirl in the chair, and his tired smile was replaced by a genuine one.

"It moves!"

"Of course it moves. It's better for working at a desk." My mouth dropped open. "Wait a second. Have you never sat in a computer chair before?"

He clasped his hands together on top of my desk and said seriously, "We do not have moving chairs in the Upper Realm. Good posture is instrumental for a long and healthy life."

"Okay." I sank down on the edge of my bed. "It's probably a good thing you weren't at the community garden, anyway. A ghost showed up."

Instead of freaking out as I expected him to, he stayed quiet. He tapped the desk with a finger, then seemed to realize what he was doing and drew his hands together again. His knuckles were white. "The best thing you can do right now is continue to practise your *syu fat mo*."

My gut churned unpleasantly. "I'm trying, but..."

"I could try teaching you a different spell if you would like."

"It's not that." I looked down at the calligraphy brush in my hand. "What if I'm just not good at *syu fat mo*?"

His eyes softened in understanding. "You come from a prestigious lineage of ghost hunters. The Wong Clan was very respected for centuries, both for their healing remedies and for their calligraphy."

"*Was*."

"Pardon?"

"You said *was*." I tried to keep my tone light, but insidious thoughts were starting to niggle at my mind. "That's because the Sight has faded from the family line, right? No more Seeing ghosts, no more hunting ghosts. My grandma told me."

"She did?" he asked, horrified.

"I know," I said glumly. "I'm the only person in the world whose grandma shanks ghosts with a dagger."

"No, it isn't that." He wrung his hands together. "Although I suppose it is a tad unusual."

"Right?" I cried. "What if the ghosts are targeting my family because my grandma and I can see them?"

Then a thought hit me. I went cold.

"What if *I'm* the problem?"

The rate at which he was wringing his hands increased twofold. "Emma, don't think that way."

"But it would make sense, wouldn't it?" I shot up from my bed and paced around the room. "You said the ghosts are after me. That they'd follow me. *Me*. Not my parents. Not my grandma."

"It was just a theory I had. I don't know if that is truly the case."

"But maybe we could test it."

He stepped in front of me. All the colour had leached from his face. "No. That is a terrible idea."

"Well, what ideas do you have, then?"

He ran a hand through his hair anxiously. "I simply need more time to find out what is going on."

"You mean you're going to try to talk to Tin Hong," I said flatly. "A Ghost Lord recluse who never leaves his musty room in the Underworld."

He shook his head. "He will not entertain a request from a random immortal. I need to ask other immortals if they have any information."

"And in the meantime, more and more ghosts are going to be coming after me and my family." I swallowed, but it didn't make the awful pit in my stomach go away. "My grandma's involved now, Leon. It's time to put a stop to it."

He closed his eyes. I had the feeling he was trying to think of a way to convince me to keep practising what he'd taught me. To give him more time. But giving him more time meant giving the ghosts more time to harm my family.

"We catch a ghost," I said.

A long, drawn-out sigh escaped him, and he opened his eyes. "Oh dear."

"Think about it. The ghosts want me." My hand tightened around the handle of the calligraphy brush. "Henry said he was going to take me to the Underworld."

"And that is exactly why this is a horrible idea." He unwound his scarf from around his neck, then straightened it properly. "You're mortal."

"No need to rub in your immortal superiority over me," I grumbled.

"You do not understand. Only the dead live in the Underworld."

Cold pricked the back of my neck like icy fingers had hold of it. "We're only trying to lure in a ghost."

"If anything happens, and you do go to the Underworld, you won't be mortal anymore." He pointed at my calligraphy brush. "This won't protect you. You will be dead. A ghost yourself!" He lifted his gaze. There was an emptiness in it that I'd never noticed before.

"You don't know what the Underworld is like," he continued hollowly. "It's a realm just as dead as its residents. Life there is paper-thin. A meaningless copy. It slips from your fingers before you can fully grasp it. Ghost Lords are the least of what you must fear in the Underworld."

I shifted under the weight of his uncomfortable stare. "We won't let anything happen." He shook his head, and I raised my voice. "I promise. I'll be really careful, okay?"

He stepped back. "Give me a few days."

"For what?"

With a small poof, he transformed back into his pigeon form. Its head bobbed and ducked away from me.

"Are you ignoring me?" I said incredulously as he took to the air. "Hey! Don't just fly away—"

Before I could slam the window shut again, he shot out and vanished into the night. That sneaky little—

I slammed the window shut anyway. Fine. If he didn't want me to talk to him, I wouldn't. I didn't need his help. I'd already sent a ghost back to the Underworld. I could take care of myself.

My phone dinged, and my heart soared. Michelle had finally returned my message.

*is it a ghost
are you dead*

do I have to plan your funeral

Quickly, I started typing.

with why is that your first thought—

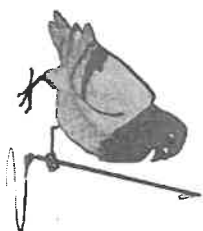
Then I stopped.

Michelle had never shied away from any of the paranormal misfortunes plaguing my life. If Leon wouldn't help me, then maybe she could.

You free tomorrow night? I messaged.

Does DiverBot dive? Don't answer that.

I grinned and furiously messaged back: *Meet me at the park near my house.*



CHAPTER 11

"So, you want me to lay out the salt in a zigzag path?"

Michelle shook her box of table salt at me. I traced out the path in the air again. It was Sunday evening and my family thought I was working on DiverBot with Michelle at her house. Technically, a third of that was true.

The park near my house was dimly lit in the dusty grey haze of another strangely cloudy evening. The air felt damp. Michelle was half-cast in shadows. She was wearing a T-shirt with an angry-looking bear on it, its arms crossed below the words BEARER OF BAD NEWS. I was already shivering in my hoodie, but she never seemed to be cold.

"With as many sharp corners as you can make," I said. "Ghosts can only travel in straight lines, so the corners will stop them from getting to us."

Hopefully.

The day had passed quickly and now I was having some serious second thoughts while we worked on setting out our trap in the shaded coverage of the Douglas firs. The trees shook their boughs at us in disapproval. We'd bought out all

the boxes of table salt from Soonshine Market. I would've bought some of the containers of Himalayan pink salt too, just in case it did a better job. But one bottle would have cost me an entire week of allowance, so whatever ghost we summoned would just have to make do with normal table salt like the rest of us.

I swallowed, though the lump of worry in my throat didn't budge. "You don't have to do this, you know. It could get dangerous."

Her eyes watered as she finished sprinkling out the last of the salt path. She had her hair in short, twin braids today, and she swept one of them off her shoulder. "Emma, I'm so proud of you."

"Huh?"

She clapped a hand onto my shoulder. Her eyes glinted. "You have a life outside your plans."

"What's wrong with my plans?"

"You have no idea how worried I was after that tenth succulent you bought." She wiped away an imaginary tear with her finger. "I thought I was going to have to stage an intervention."

"I'm going to put chili flakes into your bubble tea," I threatened.

"Oooh, make it extra spicy for me, okay?" She tossed the box into the pile under one of the Douglas firs. Then she flipped her hood over her head. "Seriously, though. I'm totally fine." She peered at me from under her hood, and that sneaky smile was back. "Are you?"

I stood back and surveyed the path we'd created with nine boxes of table salt. The path zigzagged through the small clearing in the middle of the trees. One of the ends was completely enclosed. That was the end where I'd stand and hope I wasn't making a massive mistake. I slipped my hand into my coat pocket for my calligraphy brush. The smooth, cool handle brought me a tiny bit of comfort.

"I'm ready," I said nervously, moving towards the end of the path, still holding on to my calligraphy brush.

She rubbed her hands together gleefully just as the street lights flickered on. "Do you think I'll be able to see the ghost?"

"I wouldn't count on it. Just stay outside the pathway. If anything goes wrong..."

The humour vanished from her face, replaced with a solemn understanding. "I'll get your grandma."

I nodded, too tense to say anything. We'd purposely picked the park because not only was it dead quiet most days, it was also close enough to my house that Michelle could run there and get my grandma if things didn't go according to plan.

At the end of the salt pathway, I took a careful look around, ears open, eyes wide. The park was empty. Dark. It was the perfect time to break one of Mah Mah's superstitions.

I started whistling. Michelle scrunched up her face. "Maybe you should let me whistle instead."

I paused to suck in another breath. "Too dangerous.

Grandma said whistling at night will attract bad luck." I was starting to realize that *bad luck* was really her code word for ghosts and evil spirits.

"What's dangerous is your lack of melody."

I pointed my calligraphy brush defensively at her. "I'm trying to call a ghost, not join a K-pop group."

She drew her hood down more and tugged on the strings. "At this rate you're going to call up Linglun's ghost. He's going to yell at you for ruining music."

"Who's Linglun?"

She scoffed. "Only the legendary creator of music. He even made a flute that sounds like a phoenix's song."

"You're distracting me," I said. "On purpose."

She shrugged, but before I could whistle louder to spite her, my head started pounding, and the note died on my lips. I held my breath. Even Michelle seemed to notice something was amiss, because she turned her wide eyes to me.

A gust of wind shot by, whipping my hair to the side, and I adjusted my sweaty grip on my calligraphy brush.

Something poofed into existence in front of me. I jerked back—but it wasn't a ghost.

It was Leon.

And he looked *really* upset.

He straightened the lapels of his coat. He had another scarf on, but this time it was sitka-spruce green and carefully coiled around his neck. His polished oxfords were perfectly shiny. He took in the salt pathway around us, and his hand tightened around the strap of his leather messenger bag.

"Emma," he said in a strained voice. "Please tell me this is not what I think it is."

I cleared my throat. "It's not what you think it is."

"I told you to wait."

"You ignored me."

His mouth thinned. "I only needed a few more days."

"You've been saying that this whole time," I said. "Also, you *ignored* me. You literally just flew off. Who even does that? No one."

"I am sorry. Truly. I just . . ."

Suddenly, I felt as awkward as he looked. He lowered his head and I looked up to the sky. Why couldn't a ghost have shown up? Why did it have to be Leon?

"I am concerned," he said hoarsely. "I feel I am making the wrong decisions."

I kicked a pine cone. "Yeah, well, we all make mistakes."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Did your grandmother teach you to make the salt pathway?"

"No." I still felt frustrated, but I continued, "I'd read that salt was purifying. A lot of cultures use it to drive away evil spirits."

"I cannot dissuade you, can I?"

I thought hard. I really did. But before I could answer, Michelle cheerfully said, "Nope."

She was standing under the coverage of one of the pine trees. The expression on her face said that she was entirely unimpressed with our whole conversation. She stuck out

her tongue at Leon and rolled her eyes. Thankfully, he either didn't notice or didn't care.

"Good afternoon," he said, extending his hand to her. "You must be Michelle."

She shuffled away from his outstretched hand. "You suck at apologies."

He winced like she'd struck him in the heart. "I *am* sorry. If there is something else I should be doing—"

"Help us out," I quickly intervened, because Michelle looked like she was going to erupt.

He mussed his hair then tried to sweep it off his forehead, but it didn't settle and it ended up making him look like a panicked spider plant. "I still think this is a terrible idea. If anything happens to you, I'll never be forgiven."

"By who?"

Leon cleared his throat. "I believe you mean by *whom*—"

"You said you'll never be forgiven. Usually that means somebody would need to forgive you." I crossed my arms.

"Unless you mean you'll never forgive yourself?"

He seemed to draw into himself. "The latter."

I uncrossed my arms. The expression he wore was a mix of guilt and dismay, and I had a good idea who it was directed towards. It made me want to give him a comforting hug. "You're really hard on yourself, you know."

His face clouded. "I have reason to be."

"Well, are you going to tell us the reason?" Michelle asked. She was giving him a peevish glower, as if she'd

finished scrutinizing him and found him lacking. Which was weird, because Michelle didn't dislike anyone until they did something she didn't agree with. Hmm. Actually, maybe her reaction wasn't so strange after all.

Leon flushed, the pink tinge spreading all the way up to his ears. "Sorry. Let us focus on the task at hand."

He started whistling. Clear, high notes, as crisp as the early evening air. The sound cut through the quiet, slicing through my apprehension and warming my ears.

"Are you bad at *anything*?" I groaned.

He stopped whistling like he was going to reply to me, but as soon as he did, my head rang in alarm—and a second later, a crescendo of nausea whupped me in the gut.

I hunched over, but before I could find a tree to steady myself against, I slipped on the loose dirt and tumbled down a path that had newly opened up before me. I crumpled into a heap amongst the ferns and salal bushes, curling up as the nausea turned to pain. Blearily, I looked up, only to find that the small wood around me had stretched out impossibly large. Dozens of pine trees filled the space, clustered into dense forest. They blotted out the rest of the park.

"Michelle?" I said shakily, "Leon?"

A loud hum vibrated through the ground, strong enough that it rumbled through my body. I jolted up. Twigs dug into my hands, sharp enough to cut. I scampered back as the space in front of me darkened.

And kept darkening.

The darkness became a mass that was a deeper black than the bottom of the ocean, so dark that it swallowed what little light was left. I couldn't see past it. I couldn't even see into the middle of it. The darkness was so deep that it was almost tangible.

Out of the darkness, a hand reached for me. It was skeletal and weathered, and its papery skin was ashen. Panic swept over me, cold and hot at the same time. I patted the ground. Where was my calligraphy brush?

The hand lurched out, and I dodged it. Barely. I scrambled to my feet. My calligraphy brush was nowhere in sight.

"Emma!" someone called, but their voice was faint, an echo of an echo.

I flinched back as the hand grabbed for me again. I tripped and fell out of the darkness. A golden barrier went up around me.

For one exhilarating moment, I thought I'd thrown up the barrier—and then I spotted Leon tearing through the dark underbrush towards me.

"Stay down!" he shouted, skidding onto the path. He whipped out his calligraphy brush and wrote something in the air before him. Another barrier went up, this time around him.

The dark mass stretched and ebbed. It condensed into three distinct forms. Human forms.

Terror gnawed at me with sharp teeth when I recognized what they were. The geoi hau gwai yawned its mouth

open, revealing the molten core. Even at this distance, I could feel the heat from that ball of fire. Beside it was the zam mou gwai. It dragged its spindly fingers through its scalp of needles. Two hungry ghosts, one made of fire and the other of needles.

And behind them was Henry, head ghost hunter of the Underworld.

"It didn't have to be this hard," he said frostily, stepping forward. "You could have just accepted Lord Tin Hong's initial invitation to go to the Underworld. Now you've dragged everyone else into it."

My head thudded—not in pain but in annoyance. "I'm not just going to go with you to the Underworld. Didn't your parents ever teach you about stranger danger?"

"My parents," he gritted out, "are dead."

My stomach flipped. Oh. His gaze flicked to Leon, then back to me. "Lord Tin Hong requests your presence."

"Why?" Leon asked tensely. "It is against the laws of the Three Realms to take a mortal to the Underworld before their time."

He shrugged. "Not if it's to make reparations for damage caused by this girl's family. You're all about upholding the balance of the Three Realms, Li Gwan. Even you should understand that mortals messing with Underworld business tips the balance. The girl comes with me."

I took a step backwards, and the barrier followed my movement. Leon whirled out another character, one with so many strokes I couldn't follow all of them—yet Henry could.

His eyes followed the movement, and his hand reached for his own brush—

"I'll come!" I yelled.

Henry's hand halted. His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Really?"

"No." I held my breath as a bright gold light shot from my brush towards Henry. It was going to hit him—but at the last second, the geoi hau gwai darted in front. The light hit it in the chest. It crumpled to the ground.

Henry slid his glare to it. "Get up."

He reached into the black drawstring pouch at his side and withdrew a short stick. He gave it a twirl, and the stick elongated until it was as tall as he was. A vicious, fanged silver blade sat at the top. A red tassel hung off a notch in the blade, and it swung forward as he pointed the blade—not at us but at the ghost at his feet. It dragged itself up on shaking limbs while Leon inched closer to me.

"When I say so, grab your friend and run," he muttered. Dread filled me. I looked around for Michelle, but she was nowhere in sight. I couldn't see past the edges of the strange forest that had engulfed us. "Why?"

"I cannot exorcise the geoi hau gwai back to the Underworld," he continued in a low voice. "Henry is sustaining it with his own spiritual energy. They're too strong for syu fat mo spells, and I don't have any ghost hunting tools on me."

My mouth went dry. "What about you?"

He grimaced. "I will hold them off as long as I can."

My eyes didn't leave the sharp blade of Henry's weapon. If Leon got run through with that, he'd be toast. We'd all be toast. Burnt and best left to the compost. Or the Underworld.

I gulped. "Okay."

He steadied himself. Henry scowled. "You're making this a lot harder than it needs to be. I can keep this up all day. But you?" He lifted his chin and shot Leon a disgusted sneer. "Your spiritual energy is already waning. Those beginner spells are taking a lot out of you, aren't they?"

"Try it, jerkface!" Michelle shouted.

I tensed and turned around. Michelle was trudging through a thicket of salal bushes, panting. She had a box of salt in her hand.

Panicked, I called out, "Wait—"

She threw the box at Henry. Salt sprayed out like glittering snow. It dusted his hair. His clothes. The box fell to the ground with a thud. He stared at it. A snarl twisted his mouth. He dragged his icy glare to Michelle.

My stomach dropped and a strange energy zinged up me. She placed her hands on her hips. "That's right, you nasty spirit. Get lost. The Underworld needs your ugly face back."

Fury filled his expression and Henry lifted his blade. As he did, I caught a flash of a long white string of spiritual energy. It was connected to his chest and trailed off into a place I couldn't reach. I blinked, and it vanished. I raced towards him, the energy inside me humming and restless—but Leon beat me. He dove in front of me. The blade sunk into his chest.

"Leon!" I screamed.

Henry whipped his blade back out, and Leon fell backwards. The energy soared through me. Dated into the tip of my pointer finger—and without thinking, I slashed my finger down, and a blinding gold light flared up around Leon.

I ground my teeth. Spun around. Slashed out two more characters for *teon—protect*. Gold orbs flickered into existence, surrounding me and Michelle. Henry stopped outside Michelle's, hatred etched on his face. He lifted his blade again, but the tip of it only skidded off the edge of the barrier, sending sparks flying. He turned that hate-filled glare to me, and a grin spread across my face before I could stop it.

"You have nothing to be proud of," he said. "Your family disrupted the balance of the Three Realms. Now you need to fix it."

And then he and the ngo gwai vanished, leaving nothing behind but a cold breeze.