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**In-Laws and Outlaws**

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By: Liliumscribe (/u/882483/Liliumscribe)  (https://www.fanfiction.net/pm2/post.php?uid=882483)

Chu Qiao and Yuwen Yue are back together after the icy lake incident negotiating their happily-ever-after while dealing with the fallout from her past choices. A flood crisis becomes the catalyst for a series of XingYue (mis)adventures that have far-reaching political ramifications.

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It was a trap.

That fact became blindingly self-evident as they dashed out the main entrance like frightened rabbits. All the questions that had been gambolling around inside their minds evaporated in an instant while new ones replaced them. But the luxury of mulling and analysis was not afforded to them at this time. Their survival instincts immediately kicked in and their legs moved with inhuman speed as they scrambled to find their way in the darkness. It didn't much matter which way they were headed but a sense of foreboding told them that they had to remove themselves from that inn in haste as their very existence depended on it.

The woman with the veil who had inadvertently alerted them to some nebulous but imminent danger was not too far behind. She had the advantage of being fleet-footed. Some internal alarm bell told her that the terror that was propelling them was genuine and they weren't suddenly in the grip of some momentary lunacy. But all attempts to communicate at this time were fraught with difficulties while each man had only his own survival uppermost in his thoughts.

The escape attempt while commendable effort wise was ultimately futile. The net had been cast and they were the haul that their captors were lying in wait for. Some sadistic trickster had given them false hope of the possibility of escape when in reality it had all been an illusion. The three men, who were not trained in martial arts, lost heart instantly when they came face to face with well-built trained fighting men.

The woman, however, put up more of a fight. First she unleashed an array of hidden poisoned darts that mowed down the first row of soldiers as they made their approach towards her. Those she missed came at her with swords, which she deftly managed to dodge and kick before unsheathing her own blade. She swerved and then lunged continuously managing to disarm and injure half a dozen men. Suddenly out of nowhere, with no warning, a dagger at the end of a chain flew towards her. She barely managed to dodge it when a tiny flying dagger came barrelling towards her, hitting her in the right arm and compelling her to drop her sword. Relentlessly and instantly another dart sped swiftly towards her aimed at incapacitating her left arm. It promptly hit the mark. The dagger-headed chain came whizzing towards her once again, swung to target her legs in one fell swoop. From this attack, she succumbed and collapsed to the ground, finally immobilized by the enemy.

"Princess Xiao Yu of Liang. We meet again."

Those words had a clear, confident ring and were spoken by a woman. Her voice had a vaguely familiar ring. The female figure trod closer to the princess before speaking again.

"I don't suppose you remember me. We met at the old headquarters of the Afterlife Camp. Your servant here is Meng Feng."

A thought occurred to Princess Xiao Yu. "You're here under the orders of Yuwen Yue."

"Precisely."

"You came to capture these men and I."

"We did."

"Who are they?" The princess quizzed genuinely curious.

"Spies... double agents... I imagine that's why they were meeting you covertly."

Immediately a cry of protest came from the prisoners.

"We are *not* spies!" spat Yang Mingxin. "And we weren't meeting up with her *covertly*. It was just a coincidence that she was there. We were convening for a business meeting with Lin Ke. If you don't believe us, ask him."

"We have documents proving that you were in a conspiracy with Lin Fushu against the State."

"We had a deal with Lin Fushu but our business had nothing to do with espionage." Li Fen insisted. "We are being arrested under false pretences."

"What kind of business meeting did you have that you had to meet outside the city?"

"That's none of your business!"

"That's fine with me. I'm not the one you have to answer to. We'll take you to see His Highness Prince Xiang and the justice minister so you can take your time to explain everything to them slowly."

"You're making a huge mistake."

"Well, it won't be the first one." The former assassin said calmly. "My orders are to hand you over to the palace and nothing more. Someone else will adjudicate your case."

"What about me?" The Princess Xiao Yu demanded. "Until this evening, I've never even met these men."

"We've been tasked with arresting you and bringing you back also."

"This is no way to treat a friendly foreign dignitary."

"Are you a friendly foreign dignitary? You were meeting some dubious individuals in secret and started attacking government sanctioned troops."

"I can explain everything!"

"Well, I'm sure you can but I'm not the one who needs to hear it. You can say what you want to say to His Highness Prince Xiang."

Xiao Yu tried to wriggle free of her bonds but was held down by Meng Feng and another former Afterlife Camp member.

"Hey, you're the new inn keeper's wife." Li Fen exclaimed as light fell on Meng Feng's figure.

"At your service, Your Excellency."

It had been under their noses all the time. Without the information that was retrieved by the Eyes of God agent from the sericulture facility they could not have ascertained the location of Lin Fushu's immense wealth. Despite everything he knew about the man's depraved activities, Yuwen Yue recognized Lin Fushu's wicked sense of humour. Nonetheless on this occasion the young master was not inclined to laugh. Instead his face wore an expression of undisguised revulsion. The sum total of Lin Fushu's liquid assets... enormous, fabulous wealth was hidden in the room of the warehouse where he had imprisoned Xiao Le and Shui Zhu like chattel. The irony of it all... the chunk of his worldly possessions hoarded under the floorboards of a room where it seemed unlikely anyone would look. Still, it provided Young Master Yue an insight into the mind of the previous owner who did not see the young women merely as his prisoners but part of his grand collection of assets contained in his hidden underground facility. Gold, jewellery, foreign artefacts, and unknown quantity of bronze coins... that could be used to rebuild villages that had fallen victim to the recent floods. Yuwen Yue made a mental note that everything had to be inventoried at some stage in future before they could be transported out of the warehouse.

But the real treasure trove in the eyes of the young master were the secret documents which proved that Lin Fushu was involved not only in the kidnapping of young orphaned women and girls but also in the sale of government secrets to neighbouring states and territories. This was the final leverage that Yuwen Yue needed to maintain pressure on Lin Fushu's cronies to properly end this matter politically. There were hints of espionage and smuggling activities in the ledger but to have undeniable written proof was worth more than all the gold and precious stones contained in that secret vault. It was an hour before sunrise, the day would soon be dawning. Yuwen Yue envisaged a very long day ahead as he ordered his Yue guards to gather the crucial documents and take them out of the vault.

Yue Qi who had been surveying the loot was clearly impressed with the find. "Young Master, we could've waited till sundown."

The young master shook his head. "No we couldn't. We had to act quickly because once the arrests of Li Fen, Yang Mingxin and Liu Su are made public, everyone involved in Lin Fushu's organization in some way would have time to get their stories straight or make a run for it. The element of surprise was necessary. We need Lin Ke to remain where he is right now but it won't be long before he realizes that Lin Fushu's private papers from the safe in the office has been taken. He will undoubtedly put two and two together."

"What about Chen Gang or Wang Guang?" Yue Qi inquired.

Yuwen Yue did not answer immediately but released a sigh. "That problem will resolve itself eventually but sadly, there were innocent casualties, which has been the most regrettable part of the entire exercise."

"Wang Ming will be fine, I'm sure."

"It isn't just that." The young master paused for a moment. "Even having to bring him into the fray is truly regrettable. He's a prat undoubtedly but he shouldn't have to pay for his father's sins. Sadly though, he will have to shoulder the consequences of those sins. He and every single member of the Wang clan unfortunately. But the nobles as a class are culpable for their complacency and indifference to those whose station don't merit their notice. Unfortunately, in our society, our justice system doesn't respect the dignity of young women or slaves enough to deal harshly with those who abuse them. Unfortunately those in power get away lightly with all their misdeeds because they have the wealth and connections to do so. This is why our country is in disarray and our institutions are collapsing because we fail to care for even the basic rights of the ordinary people."

"You've changed Young Master." Yue Qi said with a knowing smile. "I know you've never cared for the dissolute ways of the other young nobles but to go to this extent for those girls... you've changed."

"Is it that obvious?" The young master murmured. He didn't say anything else as he became preoccupied by other thoughts.

It was left to Yue Qi to continue the exchange. "It's because of Xing'er, isn't it?"

"Perhaps." The young master allowed himself a smile. "Perhaps this was always the path that I was meant for and what I needed was a push in the right direction. When I think of how Xing'er came along with her noisy brashness demanding justice from oppression, demanding in no uncertain terms that I feel her pain, how could I ignore her? How could I ignore someone who wanted to live that much? Someone who believed in freedom so radically and so dangerously... It was... intriguing. For the first time in my life I even allowed myself to entertain the idea of wanting something I wasn't even permitted to consider."

"She certainly stood out from the other maids," acknowledged Yue Qi.

"It wasn't just that she stood out from the other maids, although that was true too. She didn't *think* like a maid or a slave. It wasn't even that she thought like a noble either. She thought like a free person. She had ideas that didn't belong in this world and she vehemently refused to accept the status quo."

"She was fortunate to have met you. Not all masters would have done as much as you did."

"Perhaps. I don't know that it was that simple. But it's true when a man likes a woman he makes himself vulnerable to her in a way he wouldn't for anyone else."

"Is this why you never took a concubine?" Yue Qi asked cautiously, expecting to be chided or slapped for crossing the line. "Because in your heart you were seeking a woman that you liked?"

To his surprise, the slap and the chastisement didn't come instead the young master replied with no small measure of candour, "I never even considered I would have a choice. My life was duty bound the moment I was born. In my world of snares and snakes, no one can sleep easy being open with their feelings. It's suicide. In this world it is axiomatic that when a man is emotionally invested in anything... but especially a woman, he is doomed to be manipulated by others. As successor to the Eyes of God, there was no room for error. I could not afford to be manipulated by anyone whether it was His Majesty or the third branch or the other nobles in court. I had people and things to protect. When, however, I realized that even when I kept my feelings and desires hidden and I still couldn't protect everything that I cared about, I knew that I wasn't the problem.

"There are larger forces at play that are out of my control even if I were to sit on the throne. Just from using what little power to protect the people I care about, I have already hurt a number of people, some of them bystanders. There is a cost. I can call it justice but I cannot delude myself into thinking that justice... my justice... has no price."

"Young Master, no one can deny that you've done your best."

"What is my best or my worst? Who can say? There is no perfect world, much less a perfect man. Who can even say what that looks like? For the nobles, this was their perfect society... where they were in absolute control, free to fulfill their whims answerable only to a fatuous king who only cared about keeping his throne safe. But for the ordinary people, it was their worst nightmare... one they couldn't awaken from. The best that I can do... it seems... is tilt the scales slightly in their favour.

"Am I doing it for their good... or for mine? I will never be completely sure. "

"I'm sure Xing'er will understand."

"I certainly hope so."

Because I'm never letting go of her again.

Yang Mingxin had never seen the inside of a prison before much less experience incarceration. He was led politely to his cell and even the shackles that bound him were undone as he collapsed onto the mud, dust, dirt-filled stony floor.

"What am I being charged for?" He insisted getting an answer from the bailiff who had led him to his cell.

"I'm sure there will be someone here to let you know soon."

"Who? His Highness? Yuwen Yue?"

"I'm just a bailiff."

Yang Mingxin felt the injustice of his position. This trumped up charge of espionage was a ploy to get him locked up. Nevertheless, deep down he could scarcely plead ignorance. The murdered girls. That started it all. Although he hadn't been responsible for their deaths, he was complicit in some fashion. Lin Fushu had provided a service in secret and he, like all the others had gone in with their eyes wide open and embraced every element, every ramification. Invoking justice at this point would be riddled with irony. The catch cry of someone who painted himself as a victim because he was caught. He understood how the political process worked. Pleading innocence would fall on deaf ears because he would be guilty by association. Just as many before were... like those who spoke in defence of the Yan Shicheng.

There was no one in the royal court who really believed that the previous Marquise of Yanbei was guilty of treason. Everyone knew that the entire affair had been an overreach on the part of His Majesty. His own insecurity and jealousy had led him to act rashly and execute the entire family. But no one stood up to the king. Doing so would have been courting death.

Yang Mingxin thought about his family and how they would be implicated in all of this. He thought about the choices that led him down this path. He thought about the fateful day Lin Fushu brought him the contract. He thought about the well-laid trap that saw him in his present predicament. He thought about the day when he was in court and was one of those who instigated the idea of putting political pressure on Yuwen Yue. He thought hard about Yuwen Yue and his rationale for getting involved. He knew that Yuwen Yue would be relentless in his pursuit of the truth because like everyone else the young master of Qing Shan Yuan had too much at stake to surrender at the first sign of trouble.

The third-ranked official in the Ministry of Personnel had much to think about and all the time in the world to think about them.

General Song took his sword out of its scabbard and began polishing the blade until it gleamed while reflecting the rays of dawn's light. He knew there was no escaping the consequences of his reprehensible association with Lin Fushu. It would be only a matter of time before Prince Xiang's favoured watchdog would be prowling at his door. All that was left was for a proud man like him was to go on his own terms... deal with own sins and pay for them in the only way he knew how without dragging his family into it. Despite his bravado and bluster earlier on, his conscience had been needling him, pressing him to a place of honesty even while his natural inclination was to resist the reality he was faced with. He was backed into a corner... and the inevitable was looming. At least he had mercifully been given time to tidy his affairs.

With a heavy heart he had partaken of his morning meal, and said his farewells to his wife and children. Now he was alone in his tent composing a long letter in his best hand, outlining reasons for his sudden departure, his confession, his regrets, the degree of his ignorance regarding Lin Fushu's problematic activities and his decision to set aside his own suspicions about them to drown out his own conscience.

Would he do it again knowing what he knew now? He wasn't sure. The toll that the whole thing exacted was immense and the certainty that kept him steadfastly on course diminished overnight. He was certain of course, that Yuwen Yue would never let sleeping dogs lie especially after the threat on his life. He would demand justice.

There was no point in prolonging the inevitable. General Song lifted his sword while the tears were welling up in his eyes. He was about to plunge it into his chest when an arrow flew towards him and knocked the sword off his hand. Startled by this last minute intervention, he looked up and saw his second-in-command running towards him.

"General! Why?" Colonel Ling demanded sadly.

"Yiquan! What are you doing here? How did you...?"

"Yuwen Yue thought that you might try to... He sent a messenger."

"He knew? Is there nothing this man doesn't know?" General Song laughed bitterly. "You shouldn't have stopped me. You should have let me die with some honour."

"Honour? Isn't it a little too late to think about that?"

The voice came from behind him and General Song swung round to see who it was. The young master of Qing Shan Yuan seemed to emerge from nowhere. His ubiquity was becoming a matter for alarm.

"You are cruel, Yuwen Yue. You wouldn't even allow a man that much."

"Allow what? For you to escape easy, for your family to live in shame because of your sins?" was the imperturbable retort. "But thank you, for this confession. It makes my job so much easier and nobody has to get their hands dirty."

"You are determined to hound me and make me pay aren't you?"

"To make you pay, yes. As for hounding you, it all depends on what you do from now on."

"Stop toying with me. Let me pay for my sins by dying." The general begged.

"In this game of *wei qi*, suicide is not allowed. But you will pay... one way or another."

Chu Qiao looked on with immense satisfaction as she watched Xiao Le's happy reconciliation with her younger siblings. Xiao Le and Shui Zhu were happily playing with the children and the sound of their laughter rang through the courtyard at Qing Shan Yuan. No. 8 and No. 9 were finally successful in tracking them down after 3 weeks. They were found just outside their village living and working for a rice farmer. The family reunion was an antidote to recent happenings and much needed at a time when matters for celebration were a scarce commodity.

Witnessing this happy company her thoughts soon flew to all the girls they couldn't save, the ones who had no voice, no choice who had their lives cut short. That was undoubtedly a grievous tragedy. Nothing could be done for them now except to remedy an injustice: To expose their abusers and their murderers to the whole world to stem the tide of rampant corruption in the system. Looking however, at the girls and the children... the ones they were able to save... reminded Chu Qiao once again of what it was that drove her to take up their common cause in the first instance... an insatiable craving for the power to throw off callous masters and oppressors. They inadvertently had become the faces of a country's failure to care for its people at the grassroots. There were thousand of men, women and children out there who needed help. It was impossible for her... for Yuwen Yue to save them all.

Of course this begged the question of what were they to do with these children... orphaned by corruption and greed, refugees who had no place to go. Those were the questions flicking restlessly through her mind. Like the Xiuli men who seemed to be perpetual sojourners... where would they call home? Would Qing Shan Yuan be their permanent home? Would Yuwen Yue be amenable to this ever increasing influx of individuals whose presence could potentially complicate their lives? Would Yuwen Zhuo, even with his newfound amiability? It seemed now that resolving one set of problems meant the emergence of a myriad of others. There were all the other orphans from the epidemic and the recent flooding. Who was going to care for them?

While ruminating over the problems of the world and seeking what seemed to be an elusive solution to her domestic predicaments, she noticed out of the corner of her eye that the young master of the manor had returned with his faithful aide. He was glancing over at the children with some interest as they were wrestling on the grass but as usual gave no hint as to what he was thinking. As he turned to face the direction she was standing, their eyes met. The impassive demeanor broke into an unexpected smile as he saw her gazing right at him first with genuine pleasure but then concern. Despite the smile, his eyes contained all the signs of fatigue and his shoulders seemed to sag with weariness of a man carrying the weight of the world on them. In her concern she threw aside her inhibitions and made a dash for his arms in full view of all that were present. The embrace that came next startled him momentarily but then he relaxed into the warmth of hug.

Yue Qi averted his eyes instinctively at this public display of affection and turned away while ceremoniously clearing his throat. Gasps from the children turned into giggles with Xiao Le and Shui Zhu putting their hands over their lips in shy amusement.

"It seems that I have become a source of amusement in my own backyard." Yuwen Yue noted dryly.

He was not his usual robust self so she went straight to the point.

"Are you alright? You look very tired."

He patted her hair first and fiddled playfully with a few wayward strands. "You have a knack of stating the obvious. Yes, I am tired which is to be expected considering I haven't slept for over a day now."

"Then why aren't you heading off to bed?"

"I will be as soon as I complete my report for His Highness."

"The report can wait..."

"No, it can't. Besides, I prefer to do it while everything is fresh in my mind."

"Alright, if you have to, go and do it. I'll bring you some snacks and make you a pot of tea as soon as I see to the children's midday meal. It won't take long."

"That's probably the best offer I've had in the last 12 hours."

She looked at him suspiciously

"I didn't think playing *wei qi* was such hard work."

"It requires more work than you think."

"Did you win?"

"I usually do."

It took her far longer to take care of things than she had anticipated. Dealing with children brought with it an element of unpredictability. By the time she made her way into his room, he had already fallen fast asleep slouched over his desk. The bamboo scroll that he was writing on prior to succumbing to slumber was still lying flat on his desk. It bore witness to his resolution that he would complete the report before succumbing completely to fatigue. It was proof that he had persevered right up to the last brushstroke.

Chu Qiao gently lifted his head but he did not stir. Clearly he had fallen into a deep sleep completely oblivious to his surroundings. So she carefully removed the scroll from under his head and slowly slid it to the unoccupied side of the desk.

As she attempted to roll it up, her eyes were drawn to a set of characters that was vaguely familiar. They were names of the suspects that had been colluding and collaborating with Lin Fushu. Yuwen Yue had been quite busy. He found the key characters in the dramatis personae of this sordid tale and allegedly caught them red handed trying to negotiate the sale of secrets to a spy from Liang who turned out to be none other than Princess Xiao Yu, who for several years had been Lin Fushu's main contact from Liang. The men in the sexual exploitation ring were key people in the government and were seriously compromised by their relationship with Lin Fushu and were manipulated by him to give up confidential information, which he gladly passed on to the highest bidder. These men were refusing to confess to their crimes but the evidence from Lin Fushu's ledger, secret contracts and other documents containing highly confidential information only known to a handful of people, incriminated them. Any denial would be useless as they were implicated in some fashion.

The web that Lin Fushu spun had been quite intricate. He had access to top personnel in the government and had found a way to use that to his advantage and further his business interests. Whether they were ignorant of his true motives for approaching them and offering them a service mattered little in the scheme of things. While they were pawns in his game they were also predators that took advantage of the system that rewarded the powerful.

Yuwen Yue understood only too well that he had to capture these men in quick succession without alerting them to the fact that they were being hunted. An attempt had already been made on his life and they could have succeeded. Unless he attacked the problem at the roots, Qing Shan Yuan and all its residents would perpetually be roving political targets of the conspirators and their cronies. Without a doubt they had the resources and the powerbase to elude capture or make things quite insufferable for him.

Those were some of the implications Chu Qiao was able to read between the lines. Power structures were only as effective as the people in it. Dismantling any would only be the first step in the process of reforming notions about universal justice. Beneath all the formal wording in the report, it was clear that he had been putting mechanisms into place to protect her and all the people that could negatively be affected by the aftermath.

A knowing smile soon replaced the frown that had been the dominant feature of her face while she was pondering the heady matters before them. She got up from the desk and walked to his bed where she lifted the neatly-folded blanket from the bed. Immediately the silver bell she said she was lending him for luck caught her eye. She picked it up and tucked it into her waist belt cheerfully. After all lending him the bell had achieved its purpose and she was reclaiming ownership over it. Bringing the blanket to where he was lying she carefully placed it over his shoulders. After that she sat down beside him holding his hand while staring contentedly at his sleeping face for a very long time.

She was the first to speak as she peered through the wooden barriers of the cell. The royal gaol was no stranger to her but it was a novelty to be on the other side of the cell.

"So this is what a man who violates defenceless young women looks like when all his power and privilege has been stripped from him."

The prisoner, who had been lying on the stony floor wondering what was in store for him, sat up and observed the large piercing eyes of a petite figure of a young woman boring right into his.

"Are you the one they call Chu Qiao?"

"Does it matter?"

"Weren't you incarcerated here not that long ago with Prince Yan Xun?"

"I might have."

"So a woman who doesn't know which man she belongs to has come to sit in judgment of a court official and gloat."

"Four years ago, that insult wouldn't have left your lips before the end of this blade reached your heart."

"I should consider myself fortunate then." The prisoner retorted in bitter sarcasm.

"You should. Because Yuwen Yue is a far better human being than you and I will ever be."

"Better human being? False charges of espionage? You must be joking!" was the indignant response.

"False charges? You were colluding with Lin Fushu. You compromised yourself to satisfy your degenerate pleasures. Who knows what you really told him?"

"What transpired between us is none of your business!"

"Probably not but you will pay and no one will really believe you what you say from here on. But frankly I don't care about that. That's not why I'm here."

"Why are you here?"

"I want to be able to tell two young women who were violated repeatedly that the men who hurt them are now safely under lock and key. I want them to know that they can sleep easy."

"You should be worried about yourself. Don't be too complacent."

"There will be time for that later. Now it's time for me to gloat, Second-ranked minister, Liu Su."

She unsheathed her sword and brandished it menacingly through the wooden bars.

"What are you doing?" Liu Su shifted uncomfortably and put himself at a comfortable distance away from the woman. An unmistakable feeling of dread was rising from the pit of his stomach.

"Me? Nothing."

"Then why the sword?"

"I just want to capture this memory of you looking terrified and gain some satisfaction of knowing that this is the look you will have as you live out the rest of your existence in hell."

Wang Guang was sitting up grasping his knees, rocking to and fro. He was muttering his son's name over and over again oblivious to his surroundings. Chu Qiao studied him carefully as she stooped outside his cell wondering how much of his mind was still capable of rational thought. The head of the Wang clan was a pathetic and broken man... wallowing in an unspeakable sorrow, trapped in a prison of guilt and fear inside his own mind. The temptation for her to inflict pain on him was great but looking at the shell of a man, who was far from resembling anything like a sexual predator gave her pause. Wang Guang looking disheveled and pathetic was just an old man... a father who was out of his mind with fear for his son's life.

He was being watched. Like a bird in a birdcage, those who were soon to determine his fate were looking for a response. The woman spoke first.

"You don't need to stand around and watch over me, Your Highness. I won't do anything. I gave you my word, didn't I?"

His Highness barely suppressed a grin. "I'm not here because I believe that you will do any serious damage although I wouldn't blame you if you did."

The lady turned to the prince in surprise. "Are you giving me permission to hurt this man?"

"Do you really want to... hurt this man?"

"Yes... and no..."

"That was what I thought."

"It's not because I've forgiven him."

"Of course not."

"I wanted to look at evil in the eye and understand what makes one person hurt another person. But I'm disappointed."

"Are you?"

"He looks so ordinary and... pathetic."

"What? Were you expecting him to look like a *jiang shi* or a *fei yu* chimera?"

The lady thought a moment with all seriousness before saying, "I don't know... perhaps... it would be easier to think of him in that way."

"Easier to exact vengeance? Easier to kill?"

"Perhaps."

Her thoughts quickly drifted to Yan Xun and the myriad of reasons why she couldn't perceive of him as evil despite the fact that he had lied to her, kept things from her and was so quick to abandon an entire city of people. On the face of things he was still that pitiful character that she shared a prison cell with... the man who for 3 years under house arrest was fending off assassins. That was the memory she had clung on to for the longest time. In the beginning it was easy to justify the violent tendencies. It was all in the name of vengeance for what he suffered, so she had thought. But gradually being witness to the consequences of where his actions were leading to was becoming unbearable. What made it harder still was the belief that they were fellow travellers of oppression journeying towards freedom. The tension inside her - a mix of revulsion at the violence while trying to reconcile her need to be loyal - was threatening to boil over.

She couldn't articulate her thoughts with precision. Inside her mind shards of emotions and ideas formed a quagmire of questions. In the end all she could do was sum them up in a truism.

"Human evil is so complex."

In response, His Highness Prince Xiang smiled in companionable silence as they both continued watching Wang Guang mumbling to himself.

The sky was dark when Chu Qiao finally landed on the roof directly above where she thought the young master would still be asleep. Balancing deftly on the glazed tiles, she undid the harness and slipped off the flying contraption before finding a spot nearby to plant herself. A full moon graced the sky that evening calling out to her like an invitation for some solitary contemplation. Soon afterwards a low growl escaped her stomach reminding her that a woman could not live by moonlight alone and that she had a squashed up *man tou* tucked inside her robe. She reached for it and soon began chewing through it.

Minutes later she heard a light tap behind her and swung round thinking that a friendly night fowl might be taking up overnight habitation in neighbourly fashion. A voice spoke putting that speculation to rest instantly.

"You might've startled the Yue guards and started a fight. Why didn't you come in through the front door?"

"Yuwen Yue! You're awake!"

"Again, you do like stating the obvious."

"You must be feeling better if you have the energy to be argumentative."

"You must have lots of time on your hands if you have the time to sit and enjoy the moon out here on your own."

"Well, why don't you sit here and enjoy the moon with me then?"

Young Master Yue saw the sense in that remark and took up a place beside her.

They sat in silence enjoying the evening sky briefly before Yuwen Yue broke the silence.

"I hope you didn't kill anyone in the royal gaol especially after all the effort I made to round them up."

"Of course not!" came the swift response. And then the realization hit her. "How did you..."

Yuwen Yue made no attempt to respond. He rolled his eyes and gave her his sternest look. *Really? You have to ask?*

"Did His Highness inform you?" She probed.

"Do I need to be informed about anything related to you?"

"Am I really that predictable?"

"Absolutely. To me at least."

"So you knew why I went there."

Yuwen Yue nodded. "Of course."

"I only wanted to see what they were like... to see if there was anything about them that could help me understand what made them do what they did."

"Did you... learn anything?"

"I think I was... I am... still trying to understand why Yan Xun changed so drastically. I don't think I am any closer to finding the answer. It was easier to be judgmental of these men when they were faceless entities. But seeing how feeble and pathetic they are now makes it so much harder to be rigidly judgmental because it means that despite their sins, they're human not demons. It means also that anyone is capable of being seduced by evil. And as much as I didn't want to believe it then, Yan Xun did cross the line much earlier because I focused so much on getting him to survive without thinking about what he would do after he regained his freedom and exacted his revenge. I just assumed that he would stay the same and we'd liberate Yanbei together."

Consumed by her own thoughts, she stopped speaking. For a while neither felt the need to fill silence with chatter.

"During those 3 years Yan Xun and I were close but we were never lovers. Despite all the rumours." She remarked rather abruptly. "I want you to understand that."

"I know."

"I think he wanted us to be closer... but for some reason I... just couldn't..."

"I know."

"You know? Then why have you been so... *disagreeable* lately? I thought you were having doubts about me."

"Doubts? No. Certainly not after that night."

"Then why..."

He didn't wait for her to finish the question. "Because you're no longer my bedchamber maid!" He hesitated before saying, "You're not a slave... not mine, not anybody else's."

"Your life was on the line. I wasn't thinking about any of that. All I thought was that you could die!"

"It wasn't appropriate for me to use your body in that way."

"What I did I did freely and willingly."

"I know but..."

"But what?"

"You are the woman that I want to spend the rest of my life with, Xing'er. Not as some slave or a lesser concubine but a wife. We are going to have a family together. For me to take advantage of you before I made my public commitment to you and my ancestors is a serious dereliction of duty on my part."

"Does it matter? Everyone already thinks that I'm your woman anyway."

"All the more reason to legitimize what we have first. I know what the world out there thinks of you. It's infuriating that Grandfather assented to it especially when he was so against me marrying you in the first place."

"He was quite apologetic."

"I'm sure that he was being pragmatic." Yuwen Yue muttered sarcastically.

"You're angry... with me."

He shook his head. "No, I'm angry with myself. That I couldn't protect you from having to demean yourself in this fashion even though you are now a free woman."

"I never once thought I was demeaning myself because what I did was an act of free will."

"Xing'er. Still..."

"No regrets on my part. I would have regretted much more if you had died when I could have done something to save you. I'm happy that you love me this much to feel the way you do but as a woman who loves you, I want to protect you in any way I can. If killing General Song or any of those men meant that I could save your life, I would have done it without a second thought. But that night was the only thing I could do for you to keep you safe... to keep you alive."

She inched closer to him and reached over to fondle his cheek. "I promised you that we would live together. I will keep that promise in anyway I can. Even if the world despises me for my past choices, no one will ever doubt that I am truly your woman."

"You will still marry me though."

"Of course. Was that ever in doubt?"

Glossary:

wei qi – commonly known as "Go"

jiang shi – vampire

fei yu – an ancient mythological creature that had the body of a pig, covered with red spots, topped off with the head and fins of a fish.

Author's Notes:

Yeah, I'm terribly sorry for the very late update but the past week was an interesting one. Busy as always and full of distractions where writing was concerned. I'm very thankful that people are enjoying the story to the extent that they're positioning themselves as my motivational coaches to get me back on track. :D

I was amused that having taken all the trouble to set up all the "moving parts" (HT: rampantwolfhound) last time, the biggest mystery for most people was why Yuwen Yue walking around so grumpy with Xing'er. Well, I hope that mystery has now been cleared up satisfactorily and we can move on to the next phase of their relationship. I realise that XingYue is paramount in everyone's minds but it's not much fun playing in this sandbox without some story to put them into.

Anyway my brain is fried and I should turn my attention to other things for a day or two. Once again, thanks for reading and commenting.

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