

The cherry blossom trees of the Hijed Forest swayed, their pink petals fluttering softly to the grass below. The trees exhaled, more petals descending, a few of them swirling in the wind before settling down on the ground. The sweet scent filled her nose, causing a smile to tug up at the corners of her lips. She slipped her earbuds in and tapped them once, soft music playing in response.

And she danced.

Petals and the occasional leaves swirled around her.

She spun, feeling as though the forest were laughing alongside her, just as happy as she was, maybe more. She threw in a few moves her uncle taught her: A spin with intricate footwork here, a barrel roll there, maybe a thrust of the hand.

It *almost* looked like she was a part of the forest, but more so like the raindrops that rolled off the leaves to the ground below.

Simple, yet graceful.

Music swelled in her ears, her moves becoming more extravagant in return, even though there was no one watching her create this art she called her own.

She danced around roots and trees, all of it playing a part—even if it was small—in her routine. The forest may not be able to replicate the moves she was making, but it danced with her anyways, through the breeze, petals, leaves, and branches.

Her smile grew as her mind wandered to memories of the simpler times.

The fun she had with Ishido...

Running to explore every inch of the forest that was their backyard...

It was so big to her, even now...

The trees went on forever and ever, always a new secret to be discovered...

She and Ishido ran barefoot through the lush green grass as their mother and father watched...

Her smile faded as her dancing slowed.

It's been five years.

Why did it still hurt?

Her dancing didn't stop, but it did lose the intricate moves she'd adopted, instead replaced with something that was deeper; something more personal rather than a lesson that's been taught. As she let her emotions control her body, her mind wandered again.

Life became so different ever since the explosion.

She could still recall when the shockwave had hit, the force pushing through her entire being.

The stench of smoke, stinging her eyes.

How *bright* the fireball was.

The scrapes decorating her arms and legs when she was thrown back.

... Then the news of who had been caught in it.

Many *many* times, people around her told her that time heals all wounds, but she gave it as much time as she could and tried to let go of what happened, yet something always reminded her of them and of that day, years ago. Something always reminded her that her life wouldn't go the way she'd originally thought it would.

If only she had prepared herself.

If only she did something to help.

If only she had made it in time.

If only she was useful.

If only...

Yulong shooed the thoughts away, her dancing coming to a stop as the music faded. She smiled again, but it felt fake, pointless, *wrong*. Everything seemed to feel wrong at this point...

Was there even a point?

She pulled back her sleeve as she brushed those thoughts away yet again, reading the time, then silently cursed.

Time definitely became meaningless when music came into play.

Yulong turned on her heel, then picked up the pace into a light jog as she made her way through the forest. Uncle wouldn't let her hear the end of it, and that was something she didn't want to be added on top of what was already being told to her.

Twisting and turning, Yulong jumped over exposed roots, then ducked under some low-hanging branches as she burst through the petals. She wouldn't say that she knew the forest well—after spending almost her whole life trying to explore it—but Yulong thankfully knew enough about it to know how to get home. After all the time she'd spent going back and forth, she'd made a sort of path which led her back.

Breaking through the forest line, she met the mossy cobbled road and the large metal gates to the imposing manor.

Home—yet never entirely safe.

The gates were closed, as usual. Some of the bars bent inward, creating swirling designs all over the metal surface. Vines curled around the lower parts of the gate, but not enough to overpower it; the gardeners and Qianshe's made sure of that.

She walked up to one of the brick outposts on the left side, going on her tiptoes to peek into the guard's office. The guard, Liao, was in his squeaky chair with his feet up on the desk, different sorts of electronic tablets thrown all over the surface. There was one of those small tablets in his hand as he read something that Yulong couldn't quite decipher from her angle. His dark blue uniform was still well-kept, though the black necktie was loosened a bit. He muttered quietly to himself as he swiped the screen, different colors washing his face.

Yulong cleared her throat, causing Liao to jump and immediately take his feet off the desk, sitting up straighter.

"Hijed's roots," he swore quietly, placing his tablet down on the desk beside him. "We need to put a bell around your neck."

Yulong laughed, placing her chin on the windowsill. "Or we can get you hearing aids." She leaned forward slightly, looking into the small office again. "Can you open the gates?"

"Again?" Liao asked exasperated, but he still pressed a couple buttons, the gate opening with a few creaks. "That's the third time this week."

"Yeah, and I'm not going to hear the end of it," she said, cracking a smile and giving him a wave, then immediately dashed through the open gates.

Yulong sprinted through the colorful courtyard, gardeners greeting her with waves, and she could only give a small smile. Many times, she *desperately* wished she could stop just once to see what flowers were growing and how they were treating her mother's garden, but she forced herself to continue forward.

The hedges became blurs of green with dots of color. Statues turned into unrecognizable blobs of stone. Her lungs burned, resulting in panting, but adrenaline kept her going. She hopped over a small stone wall on the perfectly mowed lawn, then continued her dash up the marble stairs to the manor.

The Qianshe Manor itself was a smaller version of the Qianshe Palace in Tiankong, except it being hidden from the public eye and more for the Qianshe's enjoyment. It had the same architecture as the

Palace: Long arching roofs constructed from dark oak and cherry blossom wood, sliding doors that held many beautiful handmade patterns that originated generations ago when the Settlers had first arrived, and pillars that didn't go as high as the ones in Tiankong, but she always liked to think that they did.

Approaching the front door, she hastily tore off her shoes and brushed any twigs, leaves, and petals that clung onto her. Beads of sweat rolled down her brow as she looked up at the entrance, but Yulong already saw him there, scowling at her. She nearly came to a halt, but instead slowed her pace as she continued up the stairs.

Her uncle, Wuya Qianshe—Emperor of Meide—towered over her, arms crossed as his sapphire colored eyes pierced hers. He still wore the dark blue and violet formal Emperor's robes, draping off of him that made him look more regal than what Yulong knew him to be.

Well, she knew that he had just gotten here, or he would have more casual clothes on. She got that over him at least.

He took note of the shoes in her hand and the petals and leaves that followed in her wake, and Yulong could only give him a weak smile and shrug, huffing for breath. Uncle merely shook his head, sighing as he gestured for her to follow.

Well, lights. A blush rose to her cheeks as she followed him inside, leaving behind the beautiful sounds of the distant gulls and chimes in the wind.

Compared to the Palace, the manor felt more like home. The front area wasn't screaming in her face to put on something nice, but gently nudged her to take her shoes off and relax. The first ten feet was lower and made of cherry wood, while the floor placed a step higher was made of a dark oak that the rest of the manor was floored with.

Yulong hastily walked over to the little cubby shelf off to the right, placing her everyday shoes in its assigned cubby hole next to Ishido's, grabbed and slipped her indoor slippers on, then stepped up towards the hallway where Uncle went down.

The hallways were larger than an average house, but smaller than the Palace. The floors creaked softly, but in a more comforting way rather than in an eerily manner. Even the color scheme was warmer than the Palace, which surprised those who entered, including herself at times.

Passing by the main living area, she caught a glimpse of Ishido studying with their tutor at one of the low tables about something probably related to the Qianshe's ancestry. The tutor gestured over to a vase kept on the mantle, depicting the Weida de Zhàndòu.

Doesn't he know that we've both covered that subject a billion times now? Yulong thought with a roll of her eyes as she continued to gulp in fresh air, wiping sweat from her brow as she turned away before they could notice her hanging around in the doorway.

Stalking past many doors led to rooms that were left unused, the vague memory of her parents saying that it had once been filled with the family members flitted to the forefront. How even the mighty have fallen... all it's down now is to a mere three.

Yulong slowed and slid open a door on the right to a room that was usually used for meditation.

Uncle had already sat down at the low table as he tended to the tea set. Typical. He never cared about looking royal in his robes when he was in the manor as he just let out another sigh, suddenly looking exhausted as he rubbed his face with both hands, then poured himself a cup of dark red tea into a small ceramic cup.

Yulong knelt on the other side of the table on a pillow, feeling stiff. "Should... should I go join Ishido now?" she asked apprehensively, her hands twitching underneath the table.

Uncle shook his head. "No," he said after a sip.

“But... I should catch up—”

“You *should*,” he interrupted, grabbing another cup and pouring tea into it, “but I want to talk to you first.” Uncle pushed the cup towards her, motioning for her to take.

“About what?” She grabbed the warm cup of tea, holding it in her hands for a second.

“Your lessons.” Uncle looked her straight in the eye as he drank his tea. “Why won’t you go to them anymore?”

Yulong’s lips drew into a thin line as she looked at the swirling dark liquid, lifting the cup up to her lips for a soft sip.

Warmth filled her entire being, causing the unknown tension to release from her shoulders, almost as if her mother was embracing her once again. A little Harmonizing by Uncle to make her feel better, but it only reminded her of what could have been. She remained quiet, avoiding his gaze as she sipped again.

Another sigh came from Uncle, sounds of him scratching what she assumed to be the back of his neck reaching her ears. “Yulong, I know I’m not your mother or father,” he said gently, “but could you please tell me why you won’t attend your lessons?”

Words wanted to escape her lips, but she held them back, if only barely.

No... not now.

She raised her gaze. “Because...”

“Because?”

“Because...” Yulong traced a finger along the rim of the cup. *He’ll laugh.* “I dunno.”

Uncle searched her eyes—as if he was seeing through what she told him... could he do that?—pondering her words for a moment, then rubbed his temples with one hand and let out a breath.

“Catch up on your lessons,” he said, placing the tea down and standing up, undoing the clasps on the dark blue robes’s cuffs. “You’re a Qianshe. Please start acting like one.”

“Okay,” she whispered, lowering her gaze to the swirling tea in her hands. “But, Uncle...”

He turned back, raising an eyebrow.

“What if I can’t be the Empress Meide needs?” Yulong asked, her voice soft as she lifted her head, this time right in Uncle’s eyes, holding his hard gaze. “What if I can’t do it?”

His eyes softened, quiet sympathy showing through. He walked over, sat next to her, then clasped her shoulder gently.

“You’re a Qianshe. There isn’t anything you can’t do about that part,” Uncle repeated, gentler. “But if I, one of the biggest Qianshe screw ups, can keep Meide from collapsing in on itself, then I think you can learn to be a ruler.”

“But you made a plan with Mama.”

“And following through with that hasn’t been easy, especially after my father’s rule.”

She found herself slowly nodding. Yulong heard the various stories of what her grandfather’s rule had been like. He’d passed away before she and Ishido were born, so she never had the chance to meet him, but she heard soft whispers from her uncle and even advisors, her instructor, and the groundskeepers made every now and again.

“Look,” Uncle said, catching her attention. “You’re not going to end up like your grandfather. You have these lessons and me to guide you.”

Yulong gave him a nod, her gut twisting painfully inside.

“Alright,” he said, exhaling, standing up. “Dinner is in thirty minutes. I’ll see you then?”

She nodded again, seeing him walk off this time, leaving the tea to grow colder and colder.

Lights, there was so much.

Yulong sat on her bed, jotting down notes on the margins of the papers, then copied them in her notebook that was filled with random doodles and notes. She filled out the answers she knew were true, glazing over the ones she wasn't so sure about for the time being.

She may not be attending the lessons as of recently, but it's not like the instructor made the answers too difficult. It was just boring history stuff she learned when she was younger. Things her mother taught her. Things she barely paid attention to nowadays.

It's not like the past was going to change any time soon.

As she wrote, a soft knock came from her door.

"Come," she mumbled, glancing up to see her brother slip in, sliding the door closed.

Ishido strolled in as if it were his own room, looking around at the small pile of clutter on her desk. He plopped himself at the foot of her bed, running a hand through his hair then absently tracing a finger on the carved dragon on her bedpost. He leaned back, staring at the intricately woven bamboo mat beside her bed.

"Excuse me, dimlight," Yulong said, looking up from her homework. "I didn't say you could bother me with your presence."

"Oh, I'm *sorry*, your *Majesty*. I thought you said to come in," Ishido said in an exaggerated accent, bowing deeply. "Shall I wipe my boots at the door? Fetch you a drink? Polish your shoes? Turn the page *for you*? Help you *breathe*? Blink *for you*?"

Yulong didn't tear her gaze away from her homework as she grabbed a pillow to her side and threw it at him. Ishido, in turn, gave a very manly, high-pitched yelp and jumped back, the pillow smacking him right in the face.

"Lights!" he muttered, picking up the pillow, then sat back down. "I'm your brother, not your enemy."

"Same thing."

"Idiot."

"Dimlight."

Ishido laid back on her bed, breathing out a big sigh as she continued to write away. "Uncle's been giving you trouble?"

"No," she said, gritting her teeth as she wrote faster.

"Yuly," Ishido said with exasperation as he sat up.

"I'm not lying." She placed a sheet of paper beside her in its own pile. Yulong picked up another page, scribbling some notes down. "Not about him."

"Mmm, if you say so, *your Majesty*."

Yulong pressed harder in her writing. "Don't call me that."

"Don't call me 'dimlight.'"

"Well—" She placed another paper on her pile... aggressively "—stop *being* a dimlight."

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

He threw his hands up in the air. "What did I just say?"

Yulong looked up from her notes, and burst out laughing upon seeing his soured expression, any tension in her shoulders releasing. Lights above, it felt *good* to do that.

Ishido rolled his eyes, then narrowed his gaze at her, folding his arms against his chest. "I have feelings too, ya know," he muttered as she continued to laugh.

“And they’re *very* fragile, it appears—” Yulong glanced up at him, wiping a tear “—you know,” she added, grinning, “when I was your age—”

“*Two minutes!*” he yelled, cutting her off. “By only two *lightn’* minutes. You don’t *have* to bring it up in every conversation we have.”

She shook her head, exhaling as she placed a page down on her note pile. “Kids these days,” Yulong said dejectedly, pulling out another page of homework. “You’ll understand when you’re older.”

He growled quietly, but only leaned back on his hands. As Yulong glanced over, his fingers tapped on her blanket, his foot twitching in response, which made her eyebrows knit. Lights, could it also be getting to him too?

“How’s Huoyan?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Doing alright, last I heard.”

“Mm, and training?”

“It’s training.” Yulong looked up at him, raising a questioning eyebrow. “Why?”

“Just thought I’d ask.” He shrugged. “Nothing wrong with that, right?”

“No, nothing wrong.” She lowered her papers, looking off, her gaze unfocusing.

Sting of smoke...

“Well, I dunno,” she whispered, gripping her pen tightly. “It’s just that...”

It had a metallic tang...

Ishido looked up, raising an eyebrow.

Large fireball...

“It’s just that...”

It was so bright...

“I don’t understand.”

So hot too...

“Don’t understand what?” he asked quickly, suddenly interested. “If it’s a move that’s giving you trouble, I can help you with that.”

Burning air...

“No—” She shook her head, refusing to look him in the eye “—it’s not that.”

Its heat rolled upon them...

“Then what?”

People were screaming...

“Just...”

She had been screaming...

Yulong looked down at her trembling hands.

And...

“Why?”

The screams silenced...

Ishido tilted his head. “Uncle’s just preparing us, is all,” he said, shrugging.

“For what, though?”

Ishido shrugged again.

Yulong opened her mouth, but she pulled back her sleeve and quietly cursed.

Once was already bad enough.

Lightslightslights...!

She jumped to her feet, throwing her papers on the nightstand, not even caring that a few of them fell to the ground. She made her way past her brother to the door, holding it open for him with a motion of her head.

Ishido tilted his head at her quizzically, then checked his own watch and grumbled out some curses. He stood up and followed in her wake, the air becoming more and more still.

A servant placed the last plate on the table next to the rest, bowing deeply. “Enjoy your meal, your Majesty and Highnesses,” he said, spreading his hands to the table, then promptly left.

Ishido—who sat directly across from Yulong—let out a breath, then grabbed a small bowl of fish on rice. Uncle—at the head of the table, now in casual clothes—tapped away on a tablet as he subconsciously picked up a bowl and ate some of the same rice, looking over the documents displayed on the screen. Yulong sat with her own bowl, nibbling the fish quietly, enjoying the silence.

If only it would stay like that...

Uncle placed his tablet to the side, glancing up at Ishido as he took a bite. “How was your day?” he asked almost innocently.

“Can’t complain,” Ishido responded, falling into the rhythm of their usual dinner conversation.

Uncle nodded and turned to Yulong. “And you?”

“Same as always,” she said instinctively, biting into the fish.

He turned a somewhat disappointed gaze to her, then looked back to Ishido, the expression melting. “What did you learn in your classes today?”

“Just etiquette and what to do when I become Emperor,” he replied with a shrug, avoiding eye contact.

“And what *would* you do?”

Ishido and Yulong shared a glance. “Well,” Ishido said hesitantly, taking another bite. “I would do the same things you and Mama have done and are doing.”

Uncle nodded, and looked at Yulong.

“I would do the same,” she responded without being told nor with much thinking.

He nodded, looking down at his tablet. “When we’re done here,” he muttered, “both of you meet me in the courtyard in an hour for training.”

Ishido nodded in acknowledgment, eating his food in silence, still avoiding Uncle’s gaze.

No one spoke, save the clatter of the utensils against the bowls. They never met each others’ gazes, except for the occasional glance between Yulong and Ishido when Uncle wasn’t looking.

For the most part, quiet and peaceful.

Birds sang outside in the bright, yet fading sunlight. The wind picked up in the branches and chimes, petals and soft metallic tingles flying around the manor.

It was normal.

This was normal.

But...

Why did it not *feel* normal?

“Why do we do those lessons?” Yulong whispered, picking through her rice.

Uncle blinked at the out of place comment, then turned his gaze back to her. “Because you’re a Qianshe,” he repeated from earlier as if it were obvious.

“I know that,” she said, her voice growing slightly louder as Ishido quietly shook his head out of the corner of her eye. “But why can’t *we* be normal?”

“You were younger then,” he responded, a cold glare forming.

“No, I’m *not*.” She stared at him, her whole form trembling. “We’re only *twelve*, Uncle. We’re not ready for the royalty business. Has it ever occurred to you that it’s too much for us? Any of what you put us through?”

“You’re *never* too young to learn about your royal duties,” Wuya replied, setting his tablet down. “It’s best you learn now in case I was assassinated.”

“No no, I get that—” Yulong placed her bowl down, continuing to stare daggers into him as Ishido continued to shake his head at her “—but have you ever had the bright idea that there’s more to our lives than being royalty?”

“You don’t have the luxury to decide what family duties you have or don’t have.” Wuya placed his hands harshly on the table. “You need to understand that.”

“Yuly,” Ishido whispered, trying to catch her attention. “Maybe *now* is not the best time for—”

“No, *you* don’t,” she retorted, ignoring Ishido. “You don’t understand that all I want is to live a normal life before the call to my duty as a Qianshe finally comes. Why is that so hard for *you* to understand? Mama understood that, so why can’t you? Dammit, *why*?”

“Don’t you *dare* bring your mother into this, and do *not* compare me to her,” Wuya said, his voice rising as he scowled and pushed his bowl of rice aside. “I’m not your mother, but—”

“*And you’ll never be her!*” Yulong yelled, shooting up from her seat, the bowls around her shuddering. “You don’t even *try* to be like her!”

“Yulong,” Ishido warned softly.

“I’ll be having none of this,” Wuya said, ignoring her as he rose to meet her level, towering over her. “You are a Qianshe, so *act* like one, dammit!”

“Maybe I don’t want to be a Qianshe. Maybe all I want is a normal life,” she seethed. “Is that too much to ask? Is it too much to ask for someone like Mama?”

“Yulong—”

“*No*,” she shouted, her grip on the table tightening as her pulse pounded in her ears. “You’re not Mama, and you’ll never be Mama. You’re a *speck* compared to her.”

“If I’m a speck,” Wuya bristled, a deep growl vibrating from his throat,

“Then you are *nothing*.”

She wavered for a second, unwanted tears blurring her vision.

Nothing...?

Like...

Metallic tang.

Huge fireball.

Silence, except for the burning.

And the screaming.

However Yulong continued to stare Wuya down, despite her whole trembling figure. He met her smoldering gaze, his eyes colder than the peaks of Mount Huo.

Lights, how long was he going to hold this?

Out of the corner of her eye, Ishido got up and slowly made his way over to Yulong, but she turned on her heel and stormed out of the dining area without another word.

She marched down the hallways, entering the lobby.

This damn family...

Whipping her shoes out of the cubby, she basically *ripped* her slippers off to replace them.

Enough was enough.

Yulong burst through the door and down the front steps, ignoring any call to her, whether by her family or the groundskeepers.

Can't they even see?

Marching past the garden and the beautiful scenery, Yulong slipped through the front gate.

Even being just two seconds in the forest made her shoulders loosened. Lights above, she may not have wanted that, but she *needed* it. Yulong reached into her pocket and pulled out an earbud, placing it in her ear to bring *something* to this nighttime stroll.

The night air and music calmed her a little, but her anger was still burning hot... nor did she feel in the particular mood to dance. She grumbled to herself as she paced the forest and jumped over the roots, going deeper. The farther from the manor, the better.

Her emotions burned within her, clouding her mind. Yulong tried breathing in the cool air, but it still wasn't enough. Was it ever going to be enough?

Was she ever going to be enough...?

As her anger pulsed and slowly steamed away, the words came back.

If I'm a speck, then you are nothing.

Phantom pain forced its way into her chest, hurting her as she mulled the words over again and again, replaying it in her mind.

His cold eyes seared into her memory, the words associated with them becoming louder by the second.

You are nothing.

You are nothing.

I am nothing.

I am nothing.

Yulong wrapped her arms around herself, going deeper and deeper into the increasingly darkening forest. Lights, what she would give for anybody to be with her right now... but it was probably for the best.

A small clearing branched off to the right. Her feet followed the path, continuing to grumble to herself.

Damn family.

Think they know everything.

Snap!

Everything came to a standstill.

What was...

"You want some help?"

Yulong snapped her head up, looking back and forth—trying, and failing to be alert—but she couldn't see anything or anyone. She squinted at the darker spots of the forest for anything that could be lurking there.

"Who's there?" she called out, now wishing she'd brought some sort of weapon. Yulong did, however, bend down and grab the nearest thickest looking branch. Better than nothing.

Snap!

Yulong whipped her branch to point at the figure walking out of the shadows, their hands in the air. She lowered the branch, squinting at the figure.

A... girl?

The strange girl wore some sort of leather jacket that had seen some better days. Her pants were ripped every here and there, most likely because of the low brush in the Hijed. She scratched her hair, which had some...

Wait, were those *feathers*?

Did she have orange eyes?

"Whoa whoa whoa," she said, noticing Yulong going back into a stance. "I'm a friend."

Yulong stared at her—branch at the ready to give this weird forest girl a piece of her mind—then rose silently, studying the newcomer. "What do you want?" she asked warily.

"I only want to help," she answered sincerely, shrugging.

"How?"

"Well, maybe do some Deathgranter voodoo or whatever." The girl sighed at Yulong's horrified expression, waving a hand in the air. "Not doing that, unless you *really* want to."

"You're mental."

"So I've been told." The girl laughed at her own words. "Anyways, if you want that help I've been talking about, you'd have to come with me."

"Uuh, no thanks," she said, backing away. "I'll just—"

"Oh, so you *want* to go back to your uncle?" She tilted her head at Yulong. "Especially after what he's said to you? *Tsk, tsk.*"

Yulong froze in her tracks. She looked over her shoulder at the older girl. "How'd you...?"

"Do you *want* to go back to your uncle? I mean, *c'mooon.*" She started to walk toward Yulong, hands still in the air. "It's obvious that he doesn't care about you. Since when did he care about what you wanted to do?"

"He's..."

"He won't notice you leaving for a few moments."

But the guards will...

However, the punishment for going back after curfew...

"I—" *She's right* "—suppose. But what about my brother?"

"He'll be along." The girl tilted her head again at her. "Nothing wrong with that, right?"

Yulong looked to the girl, then in the direction where the manor was. *I suppose...* she thought, the decision not seeming that overwhelming. *She's right. There hasn't been anything for me to not trust her about. But...*

The girl grinned, motioned behind her with her head. "Just follow me," she said, going deeper into the forest, to places unknown.

Yulong hesitated again, looking back towards the manor. She set her jaw, then went after that girl who held the answers to her problems.

. . .

Years.

Literal years.

Yet the forest still somehow made her feel calm, maybe not as much as it did in times past. She'd been through so much that she didn't know if there was anything that could fully calm her at this point—except, perhaps, the sweet release of death—but she'll take what she can get. If a forest was it, then that's what she was going to have to deal with.

She came to a stop, closed her eyes to breathe in that peaceful air, but only saw his dead eyes staring back at her.

Q opened her eyes, gasping as she brought herself back into reality.

A melancholic tune.

Everything twisted painfully.

Much like the knives in him.

Throat closed up.

Like the lives she ended.

Hands trembled violently.

Blood stained them.

Harder and harder to breathe.

Red dripped around her, staining the petals.

Realization came over her again and again about what she had done over the past few years and—

Yulong, Whisper said, his warm voice cutting through the chaos. *Breathe.*

She did so, calming the chaotic thoughts a little bit.

It wasn't enough for it to be completely gone, just a bit more muted.

The red receded a bit, but still in the corner of her eye.

You're going to see your family again, he said, sounding excited.

"But... what if they don't want me?" she whispered back, slowing down.

What... do you mean?

"You know what I mean." Q came to a stop, looking down at her hands as the stains began showing through.

Corpses materialized into existence around her.

Scars tingled.

Breaths shallowed.

Head throbbed.

Heart pounded.

I think they'll be happy you came home.

"You..." She swallowed "...think so?"

I know so, Whisper emphasized. *Now go to them.*

Well. Better than sitting around worrying. Q felt a grin split her face as she broke off running through the forest, tripping on new roots, but she didn't care. Hopefully they hadn't heard about what she did while she was away... not that that wasn't going to stop her.

Not this time.

Not ever again.

Breaking through the forest's edge, something filled her nostrils...

It was metallic.

The last thing she wanted to smell upon returning.

No...

She ran up to the gate and her heart almost stopped.

The iron gate was bent and twisted in ways that only a Mystic could manipulate.

Bodies were scattered across the gravel, most of them in black suits, others in blue uniforms.

No no no...

A handful of the sapphire uniformed people had their faces burned off, at the point where even if she tried, she couldn't recognize them... not that she could in the first place.

Most of the suited people were shot in multiple places, bleeding out on the gravel road, painting the small pebbles red.

Some of them looked vaguely familiar, as if she'd seen them once in a dream.

Q's throat closed when looking over the bodies.

It was becoming harder to breathe again.

No amount of Whisper's words could calm her.

She ran up to the guard's outpost, lifting herself and looking in.

"Liao?" Q tried, but...

Liao... or who she thought was Liao had been shot up to the point where he was almost unrecognizable.

Dark blood was sprayed *everywhere*, coating the entire room in a layer of crimson.

Only thing that she could tell that it was Liao was from the small nametag on his uniform; even then, the blood made it difficult to make sure that it was him.

A stab of panic tore through her, her heart racing in response.

Lightslightlights...!

Q dropped to the ground and broke into a sprint through the mangled gates, zipping across the once beautiful and well-kept grounds, doing her best to not linger on the scene.

They were only going to be reminders of the recent past.

Nonononononono, her thoughts raced faster than her own heartbeat as she leapt over bodies of people in suits and uniforms, their blood decorating the garden and cobblestone.

Coming up to the front steps, Q stopped and heaved for a second, looking up at the building she once called home.

Almost like nothing had changed, and normally she would be happy at the prospect, but she couldn't.

Not now.

Wait.

Was that...

She blinked, seeing something move beyond the curtains in the planning room upstairs. Q stepped back, squinting hard to figure out...

The curtain fell to reveal Wuya and Ishido tied back-to-back to a chair, fighting against their bonds.

Their gags fell limp at their chins.

Their mouths moved, but Q couldn't hear them nor could tell what in Ko'ad's good name what they were saying.

Ishido grew to resemble what Q could remember about their father—tall, raven black hair—all save for the sapphire eyes, which seemed to be desperate as he talked with an older Wuya, who had a few gray hairs poking through in his hair and beard.

They took no notice of her.

But they appeared to be alright.

Everything about them seemed to be intact.

She followed Ishido's gaze to...

Q's eyes widened as she took a sharp intake of breath.

I can make it.

Threads whipped out immediately around her fingertips, ready for her command.

I have to.

She held her other hand out for Thyella as she began racing up the steps, getting closer... closer... close—

BOOM

Her ears burned.

Her ribs felt like they *caved in*.

The shockwave of the explosion sent her flying, rolling and hitting the stairs, scraping any bit of exposed skin and tearing what clothes she had. Q crashed down the steps and onto the gravel of the driveway, every tiny, sharp pebble biting painfully into her skin.

The fire roared with delight as it engulfed the manor, the drapery catching quickly, the wood following not far behind.

Rubble fell around her, luckily not hitting her.

She shakily got onto her hands and knees, not even caring about what pieces of gravel were making their way into her open wounds.

The ground spun underneath her, yet she still remained upright.

Her head pounded, fuzzy and unsure.

What just...

Terrible high pitched ringing wailed in her ears, distracting her.

Her throat grew sore, raw even.

Her lungs ached, begging for air.

Her vision blurred.

Why was that so?

She was just kneeling on the ground.

But... she could hear something besides the ringing in her ears and the pounding in her head.

Was that... screaming?

But who would be...?

As the ringing faded, the screaming became loud and clear.

Yulong was the one screaming.

Raw pain escaped her lips as the tears dripped from her eyes to the gravel below.

Deep and guttural, paining her to the core.

Yulong tried forcing herself to stop and compose herself, but she couldn't.

Pain-filled screams made their way out of her one way or another.

Long, dark tendrils sprouted from her, snaking its way in between each pebble in the gravel. One of the vine-like Threads wrapped itself around a flower, draining it of its color, snapping the stem as it withered away.

The tendrils grew as the screams became louder, withering what life that could be found in the place she once called home.

Every thought and hope of her being a good person, turning her life around, and not being responsible over people's deaths—especially loved ones—finally left her.

They left through the screams, any spark smothered by harsh reality.

Any emotion escaped her before she could grasp them through the screams and dark tendrils, leaving the broken figure behind.

She tried to protect them, but she failed in the end.

There was no hope for her to be better.

She only made things worse.
This was who she was.
It was her fault.
It was her fault.
It was her fault.
It's my fault.
It's my fault.
It's my fault.
It's always been my fault.
It will always be my fault.

. . .

Oh gods. The car door opened and he placed a foot on the cobblestone. *What have I gotten myself into?*

Nothing like Aquila had ever seen before.

Mangled corpses... twisted gate... stench of death... sting of smoke in his eyes...

The whole scene burned itself into his mind, creating a Memory. Something that even if he had tried, he could never forget.

“By all the lights above.” The other door opened and the sound boots tapping on cobblestone following not far behind. “What a mess... who could’ve done this?”

Well, there are many.

Far too many, Remi—the voice in his mind—confirmed.

Aquila scratched his beard and closed his eyes, the scene before him playing in his mind’s eye thanks to the Memory Remi took. Out of everyone this could’ve happened to, these were the last he had wanted it to happen to. They’d already been through too much...

Now they’re gone.

But somebody would have to remember them.

“Taraji—” Aquila opened his eyes—the golden color shimmering in the firelight from the manor—straightened his white Pacis uniform, tied his dark hair with white streaks in a half tail, then started through the mangled gate. “—stay here and keep the press away if they start coming. I’ll look for any survivors.”

“You... you got it, sir.”

But Aquila was too focused on the manor.

The once beautiful Qianshe Manor...

He’d only been here a few times on invitation of the Emperor. That was more out of formality. Being the leader of the world’s law enforcement gave one certain privileges like that... not that it mattered in this specific case anymore.

He was too late.

That was evidenced by the strewn bodies of men and women in black suits as well as the royal sapphire uniforms.

The dark blood seeped through the gravel underneath his boots, soaking into the now burnt lawn.

His stomach dropped upon seeing parts of both sides on the battleground that was once a getaway. Aquila tried turning away, but he knew deep down that the Memory will always stay, reminding him of his shortcomings.

As he approached the burning manor, something caught his eye.

The plants around him—the ones that were not burning, at least—were doing alright. Gorgeous... before turning black and withering away at a moment's notice. How, in all the names of the gods...?

Was that...?

Oh no.

Aquila found himself working up to a jog to follow the dark tendrils that caused the withering. He'd only read and heard about these sorts of things. If the stories and tales were true... well, it'd be impossible. All that would prove that the Qianshe's had a chance.

A singular chance.

A hope, if you will.

Wait...

What was he hearing...?

Was that... screaming?

Coming up on the stairway to the burning manor, Aquila beheld...

A girl.

Screaming.

Sobbing.

Yet...

The dark tendrils came from her.

Everything it touched withered.

And yet... the tendrils avoided him.

Her long dark blue hair covered her face. A long silvery blade was cast aside her, as well as black and white knives. She wore tight dark clothing... almost reminding him of a thief or an assassin would wear under the cover of night.

But what wasn't covered by her suit were... scars.

Lots of them.

Gods above. "This can't be," Aquila whispered, still standing far away yet reaching out.

"It is."

His sight became unfocused.

A shiver passed through him, chilling him to the bone.

The ground beneath Aquila turned white.

Of... course.

He took a step out of his physical body, turning to face the newcomer... and folded his arms against his chest.

"It's been a while." Parvos seemed to smile—although thinly—down at him with cold blue eyes, his long stark white hair flowing freely around him along with his white robes, then gestured to Aquila. "The robes suit you, by the way. Compliment your Corhic heritage well."

"I don't have time for this," he growled with a wave of his hand, his own white robes flowing in response, then turned away from the white expanse of the Inbetween and back to the scene of the burning manor. "Unless it's *that* important."

"But it is."

“Oh really?” he questioned, though still continued on his path. “Then would you care to tell me who was the one that committed this horrible crime?”

“I did.”

Aquila froze mid-step towards the real world. His breath caught. His hand trembled slightly. Lights, he couldn't even *blink*.

“You're...” He turned to Parvos slowly. *He can't lie here.* “You're *not* supposed to do that.”

“Maybe centuries ago—” A cruel smile touched his lips, sending shivers throughout Aquila's whole spirit “—but times change, Quil.”

“Then... *why?*” Aquila stumbled away from the... creature that was called a god. “Do you know what will become of this?”

“I do know what will come of this, and...” The cruel smile grew. “You already know why.”

Lights. Aquila looked back at the sobbing girl. “Then... she's...”

“Yes.”

“Gods,” he exclaimed softly, rubbing his forehead. “It's too soon.”

“Right on time, actually.”

“Parvos...” His shoulders slumped, tears stinging his eyes. “Do you fully realize... what you have done?”

His laughter echoed all around Aquila, making him flinch.

Of course he does.

Gods tend to.

“Well—” A hand rested on Aquila's shoulder as Parvos pulled in on the other side “—what do you think of her?”

The girl heaved for breath—still not taking notice of Aquila's body standing perfectly still behind her—then looked at her hands. The tendrils finally receded, the damage already having been done. Reaching for the side, she picked up the black knife with one hand, then bunched up her beautiful long hair with the other.

“Mm...” Parvos watched the girl intensely, curiosity replacing the twisted joy from earlier. “Actually, Quil, I'm not completely familiar with this specific tradition. Care to explain?”

Aquila let out a soft breath, a single tear tracing down his own cheek. He thought Parvos knew souls... but guess those are different from cultural traditions. Never thought he would be a witness to such an event like this, much less so in-person... kind of.

“When all a Meidese man or woman has left is gone...”

The girl raised the knife to the base of the tail.

“Whether that be land...”

She looked up at the burning sky.

“Dignity...”

Tears ran down her face.

“Honor...”

A long scar that started from her right cheek and went down her neck to the collarbone glistened with tears... and blood.

“Family...”

She seemed to whisper something to the sky, the dark tendrils retreating.

“They are to sacrifice that which is most valuable.”

With one swift swipe, the girl took off the tail of her own hair, the cut tips burning gold in the firelight.

“Their... hair?”

The girl let go of the beautiful hair, allowing it to fall to the bloodied gravel... and Aquila smiled sadly.

“It’s what it represents.”

She continued to shave hair off.

“And that is...?”

Strand by strand.

“Their social status, their own sense of honor, and so on.”

Piece by piece.

“Hmm... well, that explains why she held onto it for so long.” Parvos rubbed his chin with his other hand, being only an observer as the girl continued to slice off the longer bits of hair. “I think I’ll stick with souls.”

And now... Aquila pulled free from Parvos’s grip. I have a guess who this one is.

“Oh, give the Angel my regards,” Parvos called out as Aquila stepped into his own body again.

Tingling.

Almost painful.

But it was something.

Aquila snapped his eyes open, taking in a sharp breath. *Thanks, Remi.*

Of course of course. An image of a person rolling their eyes ran through his mind. *What else am I supposed to do?*

He let out the breath and carefully approached the girl. She was just trimming now it seemed. Leaving it at about five inches all around. The discarded hair around her flitted about, not really going anywhere.

“Your Highness,” Aquila said softly, kneeling down right next to the girl.

She stopped then looked towards him.

He caught his breath.

It had been bluffs to himself—the scars made it difficult for him to fully be sure—but he hardly guessed that they were true.

But those piercing sapphire eyes... it confirmed all of it.

Gods, how could he have not put the pieces together earlier?

“Are you...” Yulong Qianshe swallowed, a few more tears finding their way down her face. “Are you going to take me away too?”

He clamped his mouth shut. How was he going to answer that?

“You’re... not like the others,” she continued, staring into his eyes, that piercing gaze almost rubbing him the wrong way. “You’re supposed to take me away. However—”

“Your Highness,” he said, cutting her off. “We can get to the formalities later.”

That gaze...

Was it getting emptier?

“There’s no need to call me that anymore,” Yulong said hollowly, looking back at the burning manor.

“Your Highness,” he insisted, “I can’t just leave you here.”

“But you can. It would be easier if you did.”

“No, it wouldn’t, and you know that.” Aquila sighed. Why must teenagers be so difficult? He reached out a hand towards her. “Please, your Highness.”

The fire crackled in his ears.

Distant sirens.

Gods.

They came faster than he thought.

And...

To his surprise... she took his hand.

As he lifted her up and started walking her away, he heard her whispering... and it caused his heart to ache.

“It’s all my fault. It’s always been my fault. It will always be my fault.”

A single strand of dark blue hair flitted in the burning air, falling into the ash...

Then... it was gone.