CHAPTER 70: PRAY TO THE MOON, OH ASPIRANT OF MYSTERIES

The central square of Glaze Ridge was bathed in moonlight, empty but for a scattering of cultivators. Most of them were women, cultivating in the abundant yin spiritual energy of the midnight air. This was not their first nor last day at the square, and they were simply spread out all around the square, cultivating on their own in relative quiet, but for the swish of their swords and the scrape of sand beneath their sandals.

None of them bothered a pair of cultivators who approached the pillar at the center of the square, where the world edge curved down to the ground. One of the moons had touched the ground already, and in its light, their silhouettes were black, like shadow puppets on the wall of a theater.

Qian Shanyi reached out towards the moon. Its flat, circular surface was one of rough, luminescent stone, pockmarked and weathered, and a good five meters in diameter. An enormous, jagged cut passed diagonally across the circle, as if left behind by an enormous sword of a careless giant, clumps of earth stuck here and there from when this moon rose out of the earth, somewhere far, far away from Glaze Ridge.

The moon glided smoothly, like a boulder on well-oiled rails, its passage silent except for the scraping of the sand where its bottom edge began to sink into the earth - and even that was hard to hear. This close, the light from the stone was bright enough to read by, and yin spiritual energy flowed out like water out of a spring. In more ways than one: many of the pockmarks glistened with fresh water, droplets running down the face of the stone - a sign of an incoming moonsoon.

“Did you know, the history books say these cuts were left behind by Gu Lingtian,” Qian Shanyi said quietly, running her finger alongside the long cut. Its toothy edge was just on the verge of being sharp enough to draw blood, and her glove’s fabric caught on the spikes. “Some legends say that if a sword cultivator travels across the empire and bears witness to ten thousand moons, they will be able to get a glimpse at the technique he used to cut his way into the Heavens. And if they leave a drop of their blood on every one, they will grasp it in full.”

“I doubt it,” Wang Yonghao grumbled, “probably just some loose cultivators cutting into them by accident over the years. Nothing legendary about it.”

“Hm?” She turned around. “No, it cannot be. The stone heals itself.”

She pointed towards the bottom edge of the moon. If one looked closely, they could see a slight bevel, where the sand and grit of the earth had weathered it down. “If it didn’t, they would have long been worn away by the passage of time. If you leave a mark - it fades back into the stone, day after day, until nothing is left. But not these cuts. They are as clean as the day they were

made, each of them distinct, individual, identifiable - there is even a museum in the capital with the rubbings, though I have never traveled that far. There might even be an Index."

"It's just a rock," Wang Yonghao ground out. "You can't learn a technique *from a rock*."

There was a false certainty in his tone, trying to convince himself more than to state what he believed. If every time he gazed into the night sky, he would start to wonder… "Likely not," Qian Shanyi said neutrally. "There are many such superstitions left from ancient times. Perhaps these cuts had simply changed the innate nature of the moons, so that they cannot be healed."

Wang Yonghao looked *intensely* uncomfortable even contemplating the possibility. Best to move on.

"You know, I've never touched one before," Qian Shanyi said, turning back to the moon. "The edge of the world did not come down anywhere near the Golden Rabbit Bay. To think that the first time I do, it is one with a cut this large. If I was a superstitious woman I would have said it was an auspicious sign, to see it on the eve of a duel."

"Auspicious for who?"

"The moon is for yin," she said, giving him an unamused glare. "Unless Jian Shizhe had been hiding something, it's for me."

"Jian Shizhe is the sword saint, not you." Wang Yonghao said, crossing his arms. "If anything, it's a sign for him. Sword triumphing over yin."

"Is it?" She snorted. "The moon remains unbroken, if blemished, while the one who made the cut had long since perished. Is this not a far greater triumph?" She smiled, turning around. "This is all merely a play of words, of course. I do not believe in such superstitions."

Not intellectually, anyways. There was something to the tradition of it, a faint connection with the generations past. Not enough to dictate her decisions, but still there.

They weren't here merely to chat - she wanted to size up the square, the distances, decide where she should start and end the duel, and she let her gaze slide across the space, admiring the other cultivators at work.

Her other goal was to lay a trap. Even while they talked, a rope snaked down her leg, beneath her robes, quietly burrowing through the sand beneath her feet. All but invisible, unless someone looked at her foot, and even then only up close, its spiritual energy so faint she doubted anyone could feel it without reaching below the hem of her robes. Her free hand, controlling the technique, was hidden behind a loose shawl she put on against the cold of the night, and she directed the rope to circle all around the column of the edge of the world.

She turned back towards the moon, and pulled her glove off to feel the surface better: it was cool, but rough, like sandpaper. There was something primal about it, even setting the legends aside - touching a moon, a source of yin spiritual energy, with her bare skin. Like a small echo of what she felt when her inner spiritual energy senses first unlocked, and she saw *herself* in full. Good for centering herself ahead of the duel.

She slowly inhaled the cool night air, hidden tension of the last four days slowly leaving her body. The intense training was thrilling, but also eye-opening - she still had so much to learn. Wang Yonghao was a good teacher, when he put his mind to it, and her skill with the sword improved by leaps and bounds. Not enough to contest Jian Shizhe directly, not even close, but the sheer variety of perspectives he had was enlightening.

He helped Linghui Mei, too, though the kitsune did not seem too inclined to meditate lately - perhaps because of all the noise in the world fragment. Qian Shanyi didn't push her on it, at least for now.

The worst part of the training turned out to be the medicinal baths she bought to fortify her body. The formulation was a bit more agonizing than she expected, and she ended up hurting her own throat screaming herself hoarse from the pain.

She still took the baths, of course. Both of them. Pain was temporary: body fortification was forever, and the effect was all that she wished, her limbs already feeling faster and more responsive, skin harder yet also smoother, closer to jade. A slight emerald tint would fade after a couple days - timed to make sure it did not attract attention during the duel itself. For now, she wore makeup to cover it up.

"Do you ever wonder about the Heavens?" she suddenly asked Wang Yonghao, surfacing from her ruminations of the past and future. "Not about… you know. But why do they do what they do? Toss down tribulations, send their messengers to enact wanton slaughter?"

Perhaps she shouldn't have asked in public, outside of their world fragment. They spoke quietly, and the others at the square were too far away to hear, but if one were to be paranoid, someone could have read her lips. But the moment felt too precious to simply let it slide, and the topic was safe enough.

Wang Yonghao snorted behind her. "Are you really asking *me* about theology? How should I know?"

"I am asking if you ever wondered why the world is the way it is. The malice of the Heavens is undeniable, but there must be something behind it, something to their desire to keep us chained to the Heavenly Will."

"Why?"

Qian Shanyi turned around with a frown. The question was neutral, even mildly curious, but it still made her soul bristle, and she took a minute to consider why. “Because if they are malicious for no reason at all, there is nothing to be done, no peace to be made, and I would hate it,” she finally said. ”Diren are also malicious, but we know their reasons, and there is a path forward, I think.”

Wang Yonghao raised an eyebrow at her. “What happened to ‘to cultivate is to rebel against the Heavens’?” he said, making mock quotes in the air. “You want to make peace with them?”

“Every rebellion implies an endpoint,” she replied tersely. “I would merely prefer for it to not be genocide.” She looked in Wang Yonghao’s eyes, but he merely seemed amused, lips split in a sarcastic smile, not realizing the weight of what he said. “Do you really not wonder? I thought everyone did.”

“No. I am not a karmist or a philosopher, so why would I?”

“Why *aren’t* you a karmist?” she asked, raising an eyebrow to match his. “I would have thought their philosophy of… abandonment of all personal responsibility would have appealed to you.”

Wang Yonghao laughed, a curt, sudden sound. “You are *really* exaggerating, but whatever. I don’t have any problems with them, but my orphanage was run by a karmist parish. I don’t have a lot of good memories from that time, and the sermons were not for me.”

Qian Shanyi’s eyes narrowed a fraction, and she scratched her head. A *karmist* orphanage? Most orphanages in the empire were run by the empire itself, but that was *now*, and she didn’t know how it was twenty years ago off the top of her head. A clue to Wang Yonghao’s origins, or just a red herring?

“What?” Wang Yonghao asked, noticing her reaction.

“Nothing,” she said casually. “Just had a thought. Don’t worry about it.”

“Now I am *definitely* going to worry about it.”

“I’ll tell you later,” she said, her eyes catching sight of an unexpected arrival into the square. She gestured to Wang Yonghao, and he followed her gaze. It was Rui Bao, who clearly saw them as well. He was heading directly for them, without any hurry.

“What brings you out at this time of day, Bao?” She greeted him with a short bow once he came closer. “Enjoying a pleasant night stroll, I hope?”

Rui Bao bowed, his jewelry glittering in the moonlight. He wore a different set every time she saw him, though always equally opulent, just like a bird, giving her eyes many spots to catch on, to try and figure out the little meanings behind each piece. A pleasant and interesting sight on

any day, to be sure. “That too,” he said, “but mostly, I have been looking for you. I expected to find you here last night, actually.”

Qian Shanyi raised an eyebrow. “I am not a hard woman to find,” she said, “I spent all of yesterday in our rooms in the tavern. Why would I be here?”

“To cultivate, prepare for your duel..”

“Please. I am an immortal chef - I have my own techniques for recovery, ones that do not rely on a moon,” she replied casually. Good opportunity to seed her prepared excuse. “Nor do I enjoy cultivating in the rain.”

“Hard woman to get a hold of, then,” Rui Bao said, grinning slightly, glancing at Wang Yonghao. “I knocked on your door several times, to no response.”

“You should have left a note with a maid.” Qian Shanyi rolled her eyes. “You know I use a sound muffling formation to keep distractions away. But it’s heartening to hear that you’ve missed me so much.“

“Always, darling. In any case,” Rui Bao said, suddenly growing serious. “It’s about Jian Shizhe.”

Qian Shanyi chuckled slightly. “Why, did our little sword saint finally come running home?”

“No, he is still missing,” Rui Bao said, sighing. His hand went to the pommel of his sword, then back to his side, then to his chest, touching a golden chain, as if trying to find a burrow to hide in. “That is what I wanted to talk to you about,” he said with some difficulty. “I am… worried that he would do something… inadvisable.”

She gave him a flat stare. “Inadvisable,” she deadpanned. “Really now.”

“Yes. He is not the type to let an insult lie.”

“Inadvisable?” she continued, confusion and bafflement plain in her voice and on her face. “*Honorable cultivator Rui*, trying to burst into my room was *inadvisable*. Not hearing my rejections was *inadvisable*. Deciding to waste precious time on a hunt was *inadvisable*. The idiot already *did* the inadvisable, now he will simply pay the price!”

“Yes, you are… not wrong, but that’s not…” Rui Bao sighed, ruffling his hair. He glanced at her chest, where the edge of the bandages around her ribs was visible above the neckline of her robes. She didn’t need them anymore, but still wore them, to avoid suspicion. “That’s not what I mean. I mean what he might do about the duel itself.”

“Like what?” she snorted. “Bring a crystal bomb?”

She was pretty sure they knew what Jian Shizhe's plan already was - but there was no reason not to fish for more information.

"What?" Rui Bao replied, frowning in confusion. "A *crystal bomb?* No. Where would he even get one?"

"His father died fighting a Zhuque. Might have told his son how to make them."

"He did? How do you even -" Rui Bao shook his head. "No matter. No, I don't know what he'd do - if I did, I would have told you. But he has as many connections as I do, and he has been missing for three days straight... There are a hundred possibilities."

This is getting annoying.

"Then I will simply have to swing my sword a hundred times and slash every one into pieces."

Rui Bao stared at her incredulously. *You can't win this,* his eyes said.

I know my strengths, hers replied. *Who are you to question my abilities?*

"You still haven't put up an announcement about the duel, have you?" Rui Bao said after a moment, gathering himself together. "Not an official one, at least."

Misconception. There could be no official announcement of a duel, because the Empire did not recognise them in the first place. But there *was* a network of dueling clubs throughout most cities, that self-declared themselves as the "officiators" of the duels. It gave them the respect of many cultivators, and her personal disdain.

"No such announcement is necessary," she said dismissively. "Now get to your point."

"I am sure Shizhe calmed down by now," Rui Bao began, "If you apologize -"

Wang Yonghao drew a sharp breath next to Rui Bao, and stepped away from her. Smart man.

"*Apologize?*" she snapped. To think she ever thought this idiot was interesting enough to fuck. Just another blind frog. "The only 'apology' that waste of spiritual energy will get is my foot through his spleen."

"Come on, Shanyi, that's really not fair. You insulted him first."

"I insulted him because he was too *braindead* to listen to my actual words," she said, rage filling her heart to the brim, starting to spill over the edge. "*You were there*. So why do you defend him?"

“I am *not* defending him.” Rui Bao sighed in exasperation. “I just do not think you two should duel, because it’s too dangerous. Even if you win, what will it achieve?”

“It will teach him a *lesson*,” she growled, gesturing to Rui Bao’s face. She wished she could step up to him and push him, but she was still rooted to the spot, finishing up her rope trap. Just a bit of it left, now. “One he *sorely* needs, before his idiocy kills someone, *or worse*.”

“*Come on*, that is not -”

“You *said* you were worried,” she hissed, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. “You said he might do something *‘inadvisable’*, and you *must* know why we cultivators have to always be careful. So why do you treat Shizhe like a child, too gentle to be spanked? Because he is your friend?”

“No, but you are talking about *killing people*,” Rui Bao threw his hands up in the air. “Jian Shizhe is harmless! He doesn’t even kill in his duels!”

“*Harmless?*” Her eyes narrowed further, sudden certainty sparking in her mind. “Did this happen before?” she said slowly, studying Rui Bao’s face.

“Did what happen before?” he said, frowning in confusion.

“*This*,” she hissed again, gesturing to herself. “Jian Shizhe trying to break into a woman’s room without her consent. And you *dare* defend him? How many other women would have to suffer before someone is allowed to break his delicate fingers? How long will you wait, until he does something even you can’t look past?”

Rui Bao stepped back, raising his hands placatingly. “Shizhe really doesn’t seem like the type,” he began slowly, finally catching onto her implication. It only took her spelling it out for him, but better late than never. Wang Yonghao just glanced between the two of them in mild confusion. “He had never even courted anyone, not that I’ve heard of -”

“Can you *swear* it on your honor?” Qian Shanyi glared at him. “Swear that this had never happened, that it could not, *would not* happen in the future.”

Rui Bao paused, then shook his head slightly.

Qian Shanyi huffed. As expected. “The boy demands a *lesson*, not an *apology*,” she said disdainfully. “And if *nobody else* will provide it, then this here cultivator will take it upon *herself*.”

She turned back towards the moon, touching it reverently for one last, brief moment, and then turned around, walking past Rui Bao, motioning for Wang Yonghao to follow her. She finished burying the ropes while they talked, and there was nothing else left to do in the square.

“Good night, *fellow cultivator Rui*,” she said with a light nod as she passed. “I am afraid I need to rest before my duel. I hope to see you there.”

There were only twelve hours left before the duel, give or take. Two entire days of training for her, mostly to hone her skills to a final shine, and recover from a week of intense training. Only enough to go to sleep for those in the world at large.

Her traps had been set, spare cards stashed up her sleeves, chips set down on the table.

It was time to play.

And behind her, a single drop of crimson shone on the surface of the moon, like a lonely flower of vengeance piercing through the white rock of apathy.