

“Careful, priest.”

Lei froze, both feet just over the door’s threshold. Peering deeper into the house, he held his stance, the darkness stretching on into the depths like a yawning mouth.

“Oh? What obedient prey you are.” Four pairs of disembodied eyes greeted him, the black pupils nearly engulfing the red glow of its irises. “If you had taken another step, the webs would’ve sliced you in two,” the feminine voice cooed.

His eyes roved for a second time around the room, squinting deliberately into the darkness; the patches of dim moonlight were just enough to see the intricate weave of silver thread criss-crossing the room.

“I mean no harm, yāoguài,” he said.

She laughed, distorted voices overlapping with one another in a cacophony of cackling. “You call me a monster and expect me to believe you?” A gentle tug on his robes diverted his attention; a flash of light and the sharp sound of sizzling assured him his barrier was still working. “Don’t think you can fool me, holy man. I’ve long heard the whispers in the village about your coming.”

“It’s true that the villagers requested my help to exterminate you.” Lei slowly raised a hand in a sign of appeasement. “But I’m here to request you for yours.”

“Help you?” Her voice turned sly. “Consuming you sounds much more appealing.”

The tickle of wind against his cheek was his only warning; he dodged, clashing against serrated limbs with his bronze staff. With a practiced breath, he twirled his staff, forcing her limbs back. He waited for her shriek of defiance to stop reverberating in his ears before saying in an even tone.

“I know about your human husband. Jing Yu is his name, isn’t it?”

A pause— and then a suffocating hostility pressed in from the pitch black around him, the killing intent so thick that his shoulders tense. “How *dare*—?”

“The murders, destroyed property, brutalized livestock,” Lei continued as if she didn’t speak, “that didn’t start until Jing Yu was arrested by the governor. If I remember correctly, he’s set to be executed in three days—”

“*You!*” she hissed, the cry whistling sharply through the night air. He dodged another pronged leg, and then spun around to block another strike, arms straining with the effort. His forehead burned; he ignored the warm liquid dripping down the curve of his nose, his eyes steadfast on her snarling face.

“I can help you save him.”

Fast as a candle being snuffed, her legs retreated. He stood waiting, the silence of the night setting in like a heavy wool quilt.

“How?” When she spoke again, her voice was softer, more feminine.

“As you well know, the reason you can’t breach the castle walls is because it is heavily warded.” The priest righted the staff on the ground, the metal rod glowing faintly with his *qi*. “With my spiritual power, I can easily remove those wards for you.”

“And what—” her fangs clicked against each other on the harder consonant, “—would you get in return?”

“The governor,” Lei said with the finality of moving a chess piece into position. “Leave his head to me. That will be enough.”

“A holy man wants his fellow humans dead.” It took him a moment to recognize the grating noise— the high-pitched skittering of pincers scraping against wooden floors. “Explain.”

For once, the priest’s face soured. “I see no need to—”

He was barely able to fend the next attack from landing, the tip of a fang so close, his eyelash brushed against the sharp pinpoint when he blinked.

“We have the same goals,” he gritted through clenched teeth. “Surely, we can come to an agreement.”

“You know about my husband.” Her melodic voice took on a sibilant quality, echoing from the inky shadows as if she was all around him. “Give me an equivalent.”

His grip tightened and slipped on the staff; the sweat and blood were indistinguishable in the dark. “The governor is a greedy man. Do you think your husband is the only victim?”

The pressure lessened. “Your—?”

“Mine is gone,” Lei uttered the words as if they were being ripped from his lips.

The fangs retracted into the darkness once more. Planting his staff onto the floor for support, the priest used his sleeve to wipe away the grime on his face.

“And you’re willing to let everyone in that castle suffer for this? Know this, *priest*,” she emphasized the last word in a mocking tone. “I won’t discriminate.”

He took a steadying breath, his eyes burning through the crumbling edges of his impassive facade.

“Yes,” he said, every syllable a cutting piece of shrapnel. “Raze it to the ground.”