



Two Thousand Promises

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: He promised me forever...But she came to take my soul.

Huli had dedicated his entire existence to making himself into something worthy of Xiao Dan.

But as he stood on the brink of claiming the vampire's heart, an evil deal he'd made centuries ago was coming due.

Min wanted Xiao Dan's soul.

Would he lose Xiao Dan when he confessed his ugly promise? And could he stop Min before it was too late?

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Prologue

ZHANG XIAO DAN

913 CE

Luoyang, near the Zhang manor

Adry, brittle branch snapped under Xiao Dan's foot as he strolled through the forest. The early morning air was brisk with a bite to it, as if a late winter chill had tried to rear its head during the night and now didn't want to leave. Birds were stirring, singing the first greeting of the day.

There was no sense of urgency in his steps. He knew exactly where he was going and how long it would take him to get there. He'd picked out this spot many years ago on one of his ambles through the woods.

A breeze rose and pushed against his chest before lifting to caress his cheek and then moving on. A damp, earthy scent clung to the air with a hint of something green. Spring was still newborn. The plum blossoms hadn't finished falling from the trees yet, and the cherry blossoms had yet to bloom. Winter had loosened its grip on the world, and spring was restoring green to the forest.

After walking for close to half an hour, he reached a spot on the side of a hill where there was a wide break in the trees, giving him a clear view of the eastern sky. A tree had even fallen here some years ago, as if a forest spirit had prepared a bench for him to sit and watch the sun rise one last time.

Xiao Dan stepped over the old log half-covered in new growth, moss, and dead leaves, and took a seat. A long, slow breath pushed out of his lungs, draining all the air from his body. With it, centuries of turmoil, pain, fear, and doubt poured out. It felt as if the giant ball of knots that lived within him untangled one at a time.

He lifted his eyes to stare at the distant horizon. The sky had begun to shift from a deep slate gray to that very first touch of pale blue and dark orange.

There was nothing special about this day. It wasn't an anniversary of Shifu's¹ death or the anniversary of his own death and rebirth as a vampire. It wasn't even the anniversary of Jiang Chong's demise. Just a Tuesday on the threshold of spring, and he'd realized that he'd run out of energy to wake to see another starlit sky.

His clan was as secure as it was going to be. They had no more need for him or his fumbling, useless guidance.

And maybe he was ready to end his lonely torture. He'd had enough of the dead haunting his dreams and casting doubts at his every action. He'd done the best he could to protect his clan. If that wasn't enough, he was prepared to spend another thousand years being peeled and boiled in oil as punishment. So long as he took a step forward to reincarnation and the Naihe Bridge.² As much as he loved his clan mates, he was ready to forget this world and this life.

A rustling in the bush to his left tore his gaze from the distant horizon. It looked to be a knot of old branches and deadleaves. Had he chosen his place of final repose next to some poor animal's den?

He continued to watch, wondering if it would be a squirrel or a rabbit that broke free of the cover. No, it had to be something bigger. A pheasant, maybe.

The thought had no sooner formed in his mind when a flash of orange burst from the

bush and leaped into the clearing a few meters in front of him.

A fox!

It ran a short distance away and just as Xiao Dan was sure it would disappear completely, the fox turned. It stood with its legs spread, its head low, and its ears flat as if challenging him, but that fluffy tail flicked from side to side in what seemed to be excitement. Or maybe even playfulness.

For a moment, Xiao Dan could only blink at the creature. He'd not expected to find himself faced with a red fox—and a young one at that. It looked to be still a pup with some of its baby fluff sticking out, making him appear even more cuddly.

“What are you doing by yourself?” he inquired in a gentle voice. He turned his gaze from the fox to search the immediate area for its mother. It wasn't old enough to be on its own, but there was no additional flash of orange or rustling in the brush. Not even a warning bark to get away from her child.

Had he been abandoned?

Or was his mother killed while out searching for food?

“Where is your mama?”

The fox answered with an equally adorable bark that left Xiao Dan biting his bottom lip. He was obviously trying to be fierce, but it made him even cuter.

“You were born quite early. This season's pups should be born about right now, but you look to be at least a month old.”

The fox's ears perked up and his head tilted to the left as he blinked bright, golden-

brown eyes. It felt as if he were listening to Xiao Dan, or he simply enjoyed the sound of his voice. Some of the tension flowed out of the fox's frame and he sniffed the air, edging a couple of halting steps closer.

“Are you all alone in the world, Little One?”

If he was alone, it was likely he was hungry. Sitting up straight, Xiao Dan reached into the secret pocket in his sleeve, searching for the steamed bun he'd tucked in there prior to walking out the door. He'd wanted one last taste of something Ming Yu had made, and she always made the best buns.

The fox jumped and darted away at his sudden movement, and Xiao Dan froze. But a moment later, that tiny head poked out from behind a tree and sniffed the air again before slinking toward him.

A smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, he found the bun wrapped in cloth and placed it on the ground in front of him, as far away from himself as he could reach without getting up from the log.

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His new companion let out a few high-pitched barks as if he were warning Xiao Dan to stop doing shady things, but he stood his ground, refusing to run off. Xiao Dan sat up straight, his hands in his lap, and the fox stared at him, his fluffy tail flicking from side to side.

Minutes slowly ticked by and Xiao Dan sat perfectly still, content to watch the fox. The creature sniffed the air, but this time he picked up a new scent. His ears perked up, and he scrambled closer, following the scent straight to the bun.

“It’s okay. Jiejie?3 makes wonderful baozi.?4 I think you’re in luck. These have some rabbit in them.”

When the fox was less than a meter away, he hunkered down with his chest brushing the ground and his butt in the air, and he pounced on the innocent bun. He took a bite and jumped away. His ears flattened, and he made a soft smacking noise as if he couldn’t quite figure out what he’d tasted. His pink tongue flashed out again and again, licking his face and teeth. He must have decided that he liked what he tasted, because he lunged for the bun.

The pup grabbed it up as best he could in his mouth and carried it several meters away from Xiao Dan, so he didn’t have to worry about the big human stealing it. He remained far enough away from the trees so Xiao Dan could watch him crouch on the ground and devour the bun. That adorable fluffy tail never stopped moving the entire time. It changed from a flick to more of a slow wag.

The second the bun was gone, the furry scamp sniffed the ground, returning to the spot where he’d gained his treat, checking to see if he’d missed any crumbs.

To Xiao Dan's shock, he sat where the bun had been and stared at him. A bark popped out of him as if he were demanding another.

"I'm sorry, Little One, but that's all I have."

Clearly, the fox didn't believe him. He closed the last bit of distance between them, sniffing the ground and around his feet. Xiao Dan held out his empty hands while silently chuckling. Whiskers brushed his fingers and palms. Finally, the tiny black nose bumped his hand, and Xiao Dan jerked it away at the unexpected spark that bit his flesh.

"What..."

That had felt like magic.

Each vampire had his own magical gift, but vampires, in general, weren't terribly magical creatures. As far as he knew, they couldn't cast spells. They were limited to a few physical enhancements and their gift. However, he'd noticed they possessed a certain amount of sensitivity to magic. They could sense when they were near another magical creature. At least, it seemed as if they could now that they'd each crossed the thousand-year mark in their existence.

This wasn't a normal fox.

Xiao Dan's heart skipped a beat, and he froze while the fox continued to sniff near him, searching for more food, oblivious to the panic surging through the vampire.

"Are...are you a little huli jing?"⁵ Xiao Dan whispered.

The fox's head popped up, his ears alert, and he made a noise that Xiao Dan couldn't quite describe, but at least it sounded happy. His companion sat in front of him, tail

wagging, and his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth.

“A huli jing?”

The fox made its noise again.

This small creature was a fox spirit. But he'd never heard of one so young. Of course, it could all be a ruse to get him to drop his guard. Huli jing had all kinds of stories about them. Some were of benevolent, helpful spirits, while others were evil and mischievous creatures who killed humans and stole their essence. Of course, there were also countless love stories about a huli jing turning into a beautiful, seductive woman and falling in love with a human.

Oh, well, there were also women accused of being huli jing with evil intentions. One had supposedly destroyed the Shang Dynasty while another had brought about the downfall of the Western Zhou Dynasty.

Not that he was sure he believed the stories of those women being huli jing.

Xiao Dan frowned at the bit of orange fluff trying to shove his entire head into his sleeve in his search for another bun. He didn't act like a sneaky fox who was attempting to steal his soul. His heart was a different matter. This ball of fur was too adorable for words.

Carefully, he placed a hand under the fox's stomach and scooped him up so he could extricate the creature from his sleeve. He wiggled and grunted until Xiao Dan put him on the ground again. Surprisingly, the fox didn't run off. He twirled in a circle and flopped on his back, kicking all four of his black feet into the air. His mouth was wide open, revealing two rows of sharp teeth that seemed to be spread into a silent laugh.

“You’re a silly fox now that you’ve gotten some food in your belly, but I have nothing else for you. I wasn’t expecting to...”

The words died on his tongue as he lifted his head to stare at the distant horizon. He’d not come into the woods expecting to find a new friend. The sun had not risen yet, but the sky was markedly lighter now. More bright blues and rosy oranges. It wouldn’t be long now. In less than half an hour, the first rays of early-morning sunlight would break over the distant hills and gild the world. This was a slow and painful death, but in the end, there would be nothing of him left for his clan to deal with.

A sharp bark drew his attention, and he looked down to find the huli jing on his feet. He watched Xiao Dan with bright eyes and a smiling face, possibly demanding more food.

“I don’t have anything else to eat. You’ll need to hunt for something if your belly is still empty.”

The young fox spirit didn’t seem to care about what he was saying. Xiao Dan’s gentle manner was an invitation to climb on him. The huli jing scrambled onto Xiao Dan and attempted to wiggle into his lap all while sniffing at the sleeve that had held the bun.

With a sigh that was half-aggrieved and half-amused, Xiao Dan scooped up the fox and laid him on his back in one arm. The fox spirit didn’t squirm free but lay there with his feet kicked in the air. His eyes closed, and he tipped his chin higher as Xiao Dan scratched his chest and one cheek with a finger.

The fox turned his head and attempted to gnaw on Xiao Dan’s fingers, but the vampire quickly drew his hand away.

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“Be careful now. Those are sharp little teeth, and I’m not sure vampire blood is good for you, even if you are a huli jing.”

The fox made another chirping noise that appeared to mean he was happy.

“Is that what you are? A huli jing?”

The creature flopped its fluffy tail across its stomach and bit at it a second before rubbing the top of its head against Xiao Dan’s chest. He was too cute for words. The more he stared at the fox spirit, the more his heart melted. Maybe he would be dangerous when he got older, but if he was raised with love and compassion, he could grow to be a benevolent huli jing rather than an evil one.

Xiao Dan glanced up at the distant horizon one more time and frowned. Was it really necessary for him to meet the dawn on this particular day? Wouldn’t it be better if he waited a while longer? The sweet huli jing in his arms would not grow up to be a benevolent, magical creature if he didn’t get another meal in him. He certainly seemed to need some help to survive.

But just a tiny bit of help. He was a wild spirit.

“How about you come with me? I think Jiejie has a few more baozi tucked away for later. Let’s get something to fill that empty belly of yours.”

A soft yip jumped from the fox’s throat, and he snuggled deeper into the crook of Xiao Dan’s arm as the vampire rose to his feet and carried him through the woods toward the Zhang manor.

Eternity could wait. This little fox spirit needed him.

1 Shifu – master of a clan or sect

2 Naihe Bridge – the bridge of forgetfulness

(In traditional Taoist culture, the dead will drink a special soup/tea brewed by Meng Po (goddess of forgetfulness) that will give them complete and permanent amnesia, wiping away all memories of their last life. The spirit will then cross Naihe Bridge and be reincarnated.)

3 Jiejie – older sister (opposite of meimei)

4 Baozi – steamed bun that contains a meat, vegetable, or meat and vegetable filling

5 Huli jing – fox spirit, a mischievous spirit that can be an omen of good luck or bad luck. It is believed to be able to change into male or female human form and seduce humans. Different from a nine-tailed fox (jiuwei hu in Mandarin or kitsune in Japanese or gumiho in Korean – just depends on whether you're a donghua, anime, or K-drama watcher. ??).

Chapter 1

Zhang Xiao Dan

October 22, 2023

Zhang Manor, Connecticut

Xiao Dan stepped outside through the door off the kitchen and strolled through the rear garden. The sun had set a couple of hours earlier and the stars were twinkling

overhead in a clear sky. The night air had become crisp and cool. Summer was long gone, and autumn blanketed the region. Each morning now woke to a thin white frost covering all the grass and edging the few flowers that remained. The nights were silent except for the occasional hoot of an owl or a fox scream. Leaves had changed to shades of bright yellow, orange, and red.

Following the winding stone path, Xiao Dan wandered over the small, curved bridge into the thicket of trees at the rear of the property. Just as he was about to turn toward the house, he caught a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye.

A smile grew on his lips. This couldn't be Leo. He'd heard the cat's voice echoing down the hall as he'd played with Erik.

Another flash to the left caught his eye. This one looked like the fluff of that multi-tailed fiend.

"Huli, what nonsense are you up to now?" Xiao Dan called out.

But the huli jing didn't come bouncing up to him. There was a blur of color as he darted from one tree to another, circling Xiao Dan.

"If you're not in the mood to help me pack..." Xiao Dan left the rest unsaid as he turned to the house.

This time, the fox stepped out from behind the tree, coming between Xiao Dan and the building.

Xiao Dan's smile tumbled from his lips and his heart sped up.

That was not Huli.

The fox facing him now was mostly white, with touches of orange on its chest and tails. Its eyes glowed a startling red, and its stance was both curious and aggressive.

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How had the huli jing—no, jiuweihu—gotten onto their property without them knowing it? All the protective spells they'd put in place against intruders were still there.

“You’re not Huli,” Xiao Dan said sharply. “Who are you? What have you done to Huli?”

The fox blinked slowly at him, its nine tails spread out behind it like a peacock’s feathers raised in a great fan. Without a word, the creature shifted into a tall, slender woman dressed in a form-fitting white gown that shimmered in the moonlight. Her black hair cascaded down her back in an inky waterfall to her waist. She blinked, and her red eyes became a sparkling violet. Everything about her held a flawless perfection that was captivating and unsettling. Nothing about her felt real.

“Who are you?” Xiao Dan repeated.

The fox spirit took a step closer.

“Where is Huli? What have you done to him?”

Xiao Dan’s heart hammered, and he balled his hands into tight fists. Where the hell was Huli? If this creature had harmed even one of his tails, Xiao Dan would skin her and turn her pelt into slippers.

“There’s no need to worry about Huli any longer,” she answered in a low, warm voice. “He’s the one who promised me your soul.”

“What?”

“And now I’ve come to collect.”

Xiao Dan retreated a step, his brain locking up at her cryptic words. None of this made any sense. The only way he was getting to the root of this mystery was by talking to Huli and this creature was no this huli jing.

“Who are you?”

“You may call me Min.”¹

“What have you done with Huli?”

“I haven’t done anything to Huli other than fulfill my half of the bargain. I have come to collect my payment. That would be you. Or more specifically, your soul.”

Xiao Dan stood his ground, refusing to be unnerved by the magical creature. If she were telling the truth and Huli had struck some deal with her, he needed to have a talk with a certain fox spirit, but his bigger concern was for Huli’s safety.

“You can’t have my soul. Leave here. You’re not welcome,” Xiao Dan bit out.

“I don’t think that matters.”

Min lunged at him, moving far faster than he’d expected. He dodged her outstretched hand. Her long nails were sharp points like claws, and they nearly raked across his face. He continued to block and sidestep each of her strikes while attempting to get to the house. He needed some kind of weapon, even if it was nothing more than a staff.

“Shixiong!”² Yichen’s shout cut across the lawn. Xiao Dan caught movement out of

the corner of his eye and lifted his hand, snagging the sword Yichen had thrown at him. He deflected Min's next strike with the scabbard and pulled the sword.

The fox spirit darted away and went after Yichen, attacking him with those clawlike nails. But Yichen was ready for her, wielding his sword. She spun and slashed at them a few more times yet couldn't gain a clear advantage. It was only thanks to their vampiric speed that they could keep up with her. A human would have been dead in seconds.

"No!"

The scream echoed through the grove of trees a moment before Huli leaped over the wall. He bounced from tree limb to tree limb and launched himself at Min.

Min dodged and shifted into her white fox form. The two chased each other around the yard, snarling and snapping. The noise was horrific, but the crackle and roar of magic that filled the air nearly drowned it out.

Xiao Dan took a step toward the warring pair, needing to do something but unsure of how he could help Huli. A hand clamped on his elbow and pulled him to the house. He jerked his head to find Kai standing behind him while most of the clan peered out the rear door and windows.

"Forgive me, Shixiong," Kai murmured. "But if you join in, they might injure you."

Everything within him screamed to help Huli, but there was nothing he could do. His heart rested like a hard knot in the back of his throat as he prayed for Huli to come out of this battle unscathed.

Then, as suddenly as the fight started, it ended. The white and orange foxes stared at each other, chests heaving as they panted for air. Huli gave an angry snort and Min

darted away, jumping over the wall with the help of a couple of low tree branches.

Xiao Dan released a shuddering breath of relief. Huli looked unhurt, though he was definitely pissed, judging by the way his fur was standing up and the snap of his many tails. He pulled free of Kai's hold and took three steps closer to his fox. "Huli? Are you okay? What is going on?"

In a heartbeat, his grumpy fox changed. All of his tails drooped as if weights had been tied to the ends, and his ears flattened. Huli slowly turned his head toward Xiao Dan.

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“Come here, Huli. I need to check that you’re not injured,” Xiao Dan pressed. He only wanted to hold his sweet fox. The rest could wait until Huli had time to calm.

“I...I can’t. Not yet. I need time.” Huli ran off, using a different path across the tree limbs to surmount the wall.

“Huli!” Xiao Dan shouted, but the fox spirit didn’t slow a single step.

“What the hell is going on?” Xiang demanded.

“Just what we needed. Another huli jing,” Chen grumbled only to have his words followed by a loud smack. “Ow! Why’d you hit me, baobei?”³

“Because you’re being an asshole,” Moon snapped.

“What?”

“Read the room, Er-ge,”⁴ Meimei⁵ chimed in. “You’re being a prick to Shixiong.”

Chen cleared his throat. “Forgive me, Da-ge.”⁶

Xiao Dan ignored them all and hurried to Kai’s side. “Could you follow him?”

“Do you want me to bring him back?”

“No. Make sure he’s not hurt. If you get the chance to talk to him, tell him I’m not angry. Only worried about him.”

Kai nodded. “I will find him and watch over him until he returns to you by choice.” The dragon had barely finished speaking when he disappeared.

Xiao Dan could finally breathe a sigh of relief. He wasn’t worried about this Min or whatever nonsense deal Huli might have struck with her. His one concern was for the safety of his fox.

1 Narrator Note: Min (?)

2 Shixiong – elder martial brother

3 Baobei – baby

4 Er-ge – second oldest brother. A term of endearment. Referencing Chen Bo Cheng here since he is the second oldest behind Zhang Xiao Dan (a.k.a. da-ge)

5 Meimei – younger sister

6 Da-ge – senior older brother, a sort of respectful endearment

Chapter 2

Huli

No.

No. No. No. No.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. How could she travel all the way to the other side of the globe just for this stupid agreement?

How could she still be alive?

He'd not seen a single sign of her in more than three hundred years. He'd been sure she was dead already and that his stupid promise was now null and void.

Huli stopped running from the Zhang manor when he'd traveled for well over a kilometer, but he didn't stop moving. He paced the forest, bare branches scratching along his side and dead leaves crunching under his paws as panic poured through him in hot, ugly waves.

Xiao Dan must hate him.

All his clan mates had to be telling Xiao Dan to kill Huli and be free of him once and for all.

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And they would be right.

He was a worthless huli jing. No good to his kind—not that he cared about other huli jing—and no good to Xiao Dan.

He shifted into the human form that Xiao Dan was most fond of and magically summoned his most precious treasure in all the world.

Huli cupped his hands together, and a soft glow rose for a moment, engulfing his hands. As it faded, a brilliant green jade pendant with a worn green ribbon dangling from the top rested in his palms.

He squatted, all of his attention on the fine details of the piece of jade that had been so expertly carved. But it wasn't the incredible workmanship or the fact that the jade piece was several hundred years old that made it so valuable.

No, it was that Xiao Dan had given it to him.

His amazing gege?1 had walked into a shop and spent his money to purchase this yupeì?2 for him and him alone.

Huli had treasured it long before he'd understood the meaning of the gift. It had been a shiny thing his human had given to him.

But now he knew it was a promise.

This pendant meant Huli belonged to Xiao Dan and no one else.

He hoped to one day give Xiao Dan a gift like this jade that would mean Xiao Dan belonged to him forever, but he was waiting for when he knew he was worthy of the vampire.

Huli squeezed his eyes shut against the sudden burn of tears and bent his head, pressing the edge of the pendant into his forehead. Now he would never be worthy of Xiao Dan.

Huli's head jerked up, and he strained all of his senses. Someone was close. As he was still locating the intruder, Huli magically tucked the jade away to its secure hiding spot and shifted into his fox form.

He slunk around a large oak, sniffing the air. There was nothing but a sharp tingle of magic. Yet, not huli jing magic.

“Xiao Dan is worried about you.”

Huli swallowed a groan. It was dragon magic.

Ever since the dragon had latched on to the Zhang clan, it had become impossible to sneak onto the grounds and spy on the clan. The dragon always knew where he was, but at least he was more tolerable than Chen or Xiang.

“You're confused, dragon. Gege is angry with me,” Huli mumbled as he stepped out from behind a tree to find Kai as a human. He sat on an elegantly carved wood bench that had not been there a second ago.

For a creature that was content to sleep at the bottom of rivers and lakes, his human form seemed very fussy about dirt. He was always smartly dressed and surrounded by expensive things. How could two such different personalities exist in one creature? And if Kai was this fussy, how could he love such a meatheaded brute like Xiang?

“I’m not confused. Xiao Dan told me specifically that he was not angry. He is worried about you. Are you injured?”

“No,” he whined.

Why couldn’t he have been hurt, at least? If he was wounded, Xiao Dan would have felt bad for him and maybe be more willing to forgive him.

No. That was stupid. No amount of bleeding or broken limbs would convince Xiao Dan to forgive him. Even if he died, Xiao Dan still wouldn’t forgive him.

“Will you return to the manor with me so we can discuss what happened?”

“No. I can’t face him yet.”

Kai sighed and nodded. “Very well.” With a wave of his hand, a table appeared in front of him with a clay teapot and a pair of cups. A thin curl of steam trickled out of the pot. Kai picked up the teapot and poured some tea into both cups. “Shift into your human form. Have some tea with me and tell me about this other huli jing.”

“No.” Huli frowned and belatedly tacked on, “Thank you.” Kai was a dragon and nearly a god. Huli was all too aware that Kai could transport them to the Zhang manor with nothing more than a snap of his fingers.

“You need to talk to someone. Who will it be?”

Irritated, Huli opened his mouth, but the name lodged in his throat. He had been about to blurt out Xiao Dan. He talked to Xiao Dan about everything. Except for this.

“Moon! I’ll talk to Moon. He likes me.”

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Maybe not after he learns the whole truth, though.

Kai blinked, and his lips twisted into something a little more mocking. “Moon?”

“What’s wrong with Moon? He’s great!” Huli’s fur bristled, and a faint crackle of magic entered the air.

“Moon is great. I like the young man a lot.” Kai paused and took a sip of his tea. “But please consider that Moon is only twenty-four in human years. Plus, he’s an American. He knows nothing of our heritage, our history. He doesn’t understand the long, complicated past of huli jing.”

Huli snorted. In truth, he didn’t exactly know and understand the long, complicated past of the huli jing himself. But he got the point Kai was trying to make. The dragon was his best option.

Heaving a loud, annoyed groan, Huli turned into a human and shuffled over to Kai’s bench, where he sat in the empty space. He picked up the cup and sniffed it. Pu-erh tea with...

“I added dried lychee fruit to this batch,” Kai supplied.

Oh, that sounded nice. Well, at least the dragon had better taste in tea than he did in mates.

“We’ll start simple. Is this creature an actual huli jing?”

Huli drank his entire cup of tea and placed it on the table close to Kai. “Yes, she’s a huli jing who goes by the name of Min. She was old when I was still little more than a pup. Had at least five tails already. I think.”

“And can she truly take Shixiong’s soul?”

Huli whimpered as he nodded. “It’s what she does. What all huli jing do.” His voice came out as a mumble, “What I’m supposed to do.”

“Why?”

One shoulder lifted in a halfhearted way. “It’s supposed to help grow our powers. Like cultivation. But there are other, far more effective ways to grow our powers. Plus, humans spent centuries hunting huli jing for their magic and tails. So what if we steal their souls?”

Kai directed a dark look at Huli as he poured more tea in his cup, and Huli shrank back on the bench. The dragon was not a fan of hunting humans.

“How many souls have you stolen?”

Huli threw his arms out, nearly hitting Kai in the face. “Tons! Hundreds!”

“Huli,” Kai growled, pushing his hand away from his face.

“Okay. Dozens.”

“Dozens? Really?”

Huli huffed and slumped in his seat. The dragon was so annoying. “Fine. Like...six.”

“Just six?”

“Yes. And I had a good reason, too. They were all women who kept flirting with Gege after he clearly told them he wasn’t interested.”

“Mn. I have a feeling Xiao Dan would say something about that being wrong, but I can’t say that. I understand your frustration. The other day, a woman was following Xiang through the grocery and trying to flirt with him. I wanted to squash her in her tiny red car.”

Huli’s butt wiggled to the edge of the bench. “Did you? Did you squish her flat?”

“No. Xiang said it would be wrong.”

Huli flopped against the bench and noisily blew out his breath. “That sucks.”

Kai turned his head toward Huli enough so Huli could see his smirk. “When Xiang’s back was turned, I made the bottoms rip in all of her grocery bags. And she had a lot of bags. Food went everywhere in the parking lot.”

A loud snort jumped from Huli, and he sat up, feeling better. At least, if anyone understood him, it might be Kai.

“The difference is that you are a good huli jing because of your devotion to Xiao Dan. Min is an evil huli jing, and we will squash her like a disgusting bug.”

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Huli picked up the cup Kai refilled for him and stared at the brownish liquid. “I don’t feel like a good huli jing. I think I’m evil. At a young age, I made a selfish bargain with her. Now Gege has to pay for my stupidity.”

“What bargain did you make?”

He shook his head violently and drained his tea a second time so he couldn’t speak.

“Very well, but you need to tell Xiao Dan, so he can deal with this Min.”

“I can’t. He’ll hate me. I’m evil.” His fingers tightened on the cup almost to the point of shattering it.

“Shixiong cares very much for you. I don’t think he would give his heart to someone who was evil.”

“Maybe I tricked him.”

The dragon huffed out a dry laugh as he stood. With a wave of his hand, the table and the tea set vanished. The only things that remained were the bench and the cup in Huli’s hand.

“Do you really think you could have tricked him for all these years?”

Huli’s ego thrust up its meaty fist and shouted, “Yes!” But the most realistic part of his brain sighed. No one could trick his beautiful, perfect gege.

Kai didn't need an answer to that silly question. He'd already moved on.

"Will you return with me? Xiao Dan is anxious about you. I don't like for him to worry."

"No," he mumbled. "Not yet. I need to think some more."

"Shall I stay with you?"

"No, thank you." That time, he meant it. "I don't believe Min will hurt me. Go back and tell Gege that I'll return to the manor soon."

The dragon didn't linger another second. He disappeared, leaving Huli with the bench and the cup.

Why hadn't he returned with Kai?

Xiao Dan needed to know what he'd done and why. Not that the why seemed to matter now after all these years.

Why was he hesitating?

Was he afraid Xiao Dan would get so mad that he'd cast Huli aside? No, not really. Xiao Dan was a patient and forgiving human. He always believed in the best for Huli, even if he didn't deserve it.

No, he was afraid Xiao Dan's clan mates would finally convince him that Huli was a worthless soul and didn't deserve one more gram of Xiao Dan's patience and understanding.

Deep down, he was afraid they were all right.

1 Gege – older brother, denotes familiarity and not necessarily a family relation. Can sometimes be added to a name such as Zhang-ge

2 Yupei – jade pendant (Narrator note: ??, Yùpèi)

Chapter 3

Zhang Xiao Dan

“Do you think that woman would be stupid enough to sneak into our home?”

Xiao Dan nearly jumped out of his skin. He hadn’t even heard Ming Yu approach him from behind. It took him a moment to overcome his surprise and replay her question in his mind.

“No, I don’t think she would. Huli jing are known for being intelligent and crafty. I’m sure she would never have approached me if I hadn’t been alone.”

Ming Yu made a small noise of agreement as she stepped past him and peered out the front door. But no one was there. Xiao Dan had been pacing the house for what felt like hours. Kai had reassured him that Huli was safe and would return soon, yet he couldn’t relax. Not until he saw Huli for himself.

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“Then we’re safe?”

“Yes.”

“So, this pacing is for your fox spirit?”

He wanted to argue with her unnecessary emphasis, but there was no point. Huli was his, as much as anyone could possess a fox spirit. They were carefree creatures who went where the wind took them. Sometimes he thought he might never see Huli again because the fox had lost interest in him.

“Yes, I’m worried about him doing something reckless.”

“Ah. Well, you’re wearing a groove in the floors. You can worry and help me stuff buns at the same time.”

Xiao Dan opened his mouth to argue, but he couldn’t figure out what to say. The words became stuck in his throat. Thankfully, Jiejie didn’t wait for him to agree. She simply grabbed his elbow and dragged him to the kitchen, where a bowl of meat and the dough for buns waited.

“Jiejie, it’s been centuries since I last helped you make steamed buns,” Xiao Dan admitted as he washed his hands.

“That’s fine. We’ll tell everyone that you made the lumpy, lopsided ones.”

Xiao Dan choked on a laugh. “I doubt anyone would believe you’d made anything

that wasn't perfect."

A soft noise of agreement came from her throat. "I've had plenty of time to hone my craft."

With a practiced ease, she stepped up to the island, picked up some flattened dough, ladled a dollop of meat in the center, and worked around the ball, closing it flawlessly with flying fingers. She made it look so easy.

"After getting a break from cooking for several centuries, you are now in the kitchen every day." Xiao Dan tried to mimic her movements, but his pork-filled baozi really was pathetic. Jiejie tsked and took it from him. In the blink of an eye, she fixed his bun and added it to the bamboo steamer basket. She handed him another flattened circle of dough to try again.

"I worry we rely on you too much to handle all the cooking," Xiao Dan continued. "You haven't been a servant of the Zhang clan for almost two millennium. We can pitch in more. Handle more of the cooking."

Ming Yu clicked her tongue at him as she accepted his second bun. "Smaller pleats, but this is better. And I appreciate your concern. No one treats me like a servant. I enjoy cooking, especially for the new mates. Rei, Leo, and Moon are completely new to our cuisine. Kai just raves about my dumplings as if the dragon hasn't had a good meal in centuries."

"And Xiao Ping Guo?"¹ Xiao Dan asked with a growing smile.

"Feeding a little one?" Ming Yu sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. "I used to feed and hold all the children in the Zhang clan. After we became vampires, I thought I'd never have that again."

“Erik is our perfect treasure.” Xiao Dan frowned at his baozi. This one felt like it was a step backward.

“And Huli always appreciates my cooking.” She snatched the bun out of his hand, tweaked it a bit, and added it to the bunch. “The point is, my greatest joy is caring for my family and seeing them happy. If I ever wish to take a night off, the others have all offered to cook. I will take them up on the offer. Right now, it is more than enough that Moon and the others always offer to clean up the kitchen after every meal I make for them.”

“I’m glad.”

“But me spending more time in the kitchen is not what has been preying on your mind.”

Crap. He’d known this was coming.

“Xiang mentioned Huli struck some bargain with that other fox spirit. That he promised that woman your soul.”

Xiao Dan lowered his head until his chin nearly touched his chest. He kept his eyes locked on the bun in his hands. His only reply was a soft grunt.

“You don’t care, do you?”

“No. I’m worried about Huli’s safety. What kind of trouble could he be in that he would agree to such a bargain?”

“That fox is very good at finding trouble for you,” Ming Yu murmured.

“Is that any different from Xiang or Yichen? Or even Mei Lian? They all went

through restless periods and caused mischief. Besides, my soul doesn't belong to Huli. He can promise it to whomever he wants. It doesn't mean they're going to get it."

"And that is the end of you helping." Ming Yu reached over and pulled the squished remains of a bun from Xiao Dan's clenched fingers. "You'd think Erik was helping me. Go wash your hands."

"Sorry, Jiejie." He crossed to the sink and washed the bits of pork, spices, and dough from his fingers. He hadn't even noticed he'd squeezed the bun until she was taking it away from him.

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“Your soul might not belong to the huli jing, but it’s quite obvious your heart does. Have you ever told him you love him?”

Xiao Dan turned off the water, but didn’t move to face her. “Huli knows that I’m fond of him.”

Ming Yu snorted. “That wasn’t what I asked you.”

His eyes drifted to the sink as his fingers clenched the edge tight enough to make the veins on the back of his hands stand out. “No,” he muttered. “I’ve never been brave enough. Huli jing are free, unencumbered creatures that pursue the things that make them happy. Which confuses me all the more, because I’ve never been able to understand why he’s stuck close to me for so many years. I’ve never been an adventurous, free-spirited person. Not even when I was young. And Huli is so much younger than me. I’d already been a vampire for a thousand years that night I found him. I had the responsibility of the clan on my shoulders. What...what could he ever see in someone like me?”

“I think he sees the same thing we all see. You are someone who is thoughtful, caring, compassionate, and warm. You have always been someone we could turn to after our adventures away from home and we wanted to return to a safe harbor. Huli adores you for exactly who you are. No, he loves you.”

“Does he? I’m not so sure he understands what that word means. He’s not like us. Huli was never human. I don’t even know if a fox spirit is capable of love.”

And yet, that hadn’t stopped him from falling hopelessly in love with Huli. Seeing the

fox spirit every evening, listening to his stories, and being the center of his world had become an addiction Xiao Dan was sure he had no hope of breaking. Even during the times Huli was being his most ridiculous or giving a rare glimpse at some of his more vicious impulses, Xiao Dan was still head over heels. His heart skipped to see the flash of those orange tails. Or as Huli shifted and Xiao Dan looked down to find those enormous eyes watching him with a greedy smile spreading across his mouth.

If he'd had to describe Huli's feelings toward him, he'd be more inclined to describe them as an obsession. Not love.

"I doubt love is the same for any of us. It doesn't matter if you're human, vampire, dragon, or huli jing. Do you think Kai's concept of love is the same as yours? The dragon has lived countless lifetimes longer than all of us, but not one of us would question his devotion to Xiang."

"That is true." Xiao Dan turned around to lean on the sink, his arms crossed loosely on his stomach while he watched Ming Yu steadily work her way through the dough, filling the small circles and forming them into perfect balls with gathered pleats at the top. Even though he'd largely given up food along with the rest of his clan mates years ago, the enthusiasm of Moon, Rei, and the others had won him back. He couldn't deny that the scent of Ming Yu's cooking would drag him to the kitchen to salivate over rich spices, fluffy buns, and delicious meat.

"Xiao Dan, you've known him for centuries," Ming Yu said, her voice filling with new urgency. "Why have you waited so long? What has kept you from finally claiming him as your mate and being happy?"

"Fear." He hated to say it out loud, but there was no other way to describe it. "I was afraid that he couldn't actually love me. I was afraid that what Chen and Xiang were saying all these years was right and that he was just using me. What if I told him...and he laughed, proving that I'm just a stupid fool?"

“Idiots,” Ming Yu muttered as she dropped the spoon into her bowl, louder than before. “What could Huli have gotten from you? Food? Affection? Time? If Huli laughs at you for loving him all this time, he’s the fool, not you.” Her hands stopped moving, and she sighed. “Even if we have centuries ahead of us, time is still a precious thing. We never know how long we have with someone. Time should never be wasted.”

“The only thing I want to do is protect him. How am I supposed to do that? If he doesn’t tell me when he’s in trouble, I can’t keep him safe.”

“And if he doesn’t know that you love him, he’s going to be even more reluctant to share his troubles with you. Anyone with half a brain can see this clan keeps you occupied with worries. Do you think Huli wishes to add to your troubles?”

“No, of course not, but I...” Words failed him. He sighed. Why was it always so much easier to give advice to his fellow clan mates, but with his own love life, it was just a disaster?

“Talk to him. The moment he returns to the manor, tell him you love him. Before he even tries to explain anything about that other huli jing and the bargain he struck. Let him know he can lean on you for anything. Also, can you get me the second steamer out of the closet over there?” She waved her hand at the closet tucked into the other side of the kitchen near the double-door refrigerator. “I’ve learned to make a double batch. Leo can eat far more than his figure would have you believe.”

Xiao Dan pushed off from where he’d been leaning against the sink and crossed the kitchen, a scoffing noise escaping him. “I find it amazing that you’ve got such strong opinions about how I need to tell Huli how I feel, but you’ve yet to share your own feelings for a certain someone.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ming Yu's voice was slightly muffled as he stepped into the closet with shelves lining the three walls from floor to ceiling. There were numerous canisters for tea and other foodstuffs. They had a pantry for food, but this closet also served as a backup pantry to catch the overflow. Not to mention more cooking implements along with a strange array of small appliances that Ming Yu had gained to try out a few times and then declared that they weren't better than her method.

His eyes skimmed the shelves for the familiar light-brown round bamboo steamer basket. "We can all see that you've been in love with Mei Lian for centuries, but you've only given the tiniest of hints. Like the special box of cookies for her you try to keep hidden from the rest of us. Or that you stare at her anytime she's not looking your way. Or how you wear her favorite perfume. You're happy to tell me to jump straight in, but you're unwilling to take even the slightest risk. Content to waste so many years."

He finally spotted the basket and snatched it off the shelf. He turned to ask Ming Yu if she also needed more liners, but he froze. Ming Yu's eyes were wide and her lips trembled as she stared straight ahead. Not even her hands were moving, where they continued to cradle a half-formed bun.

Xiao Dan stepped out of the closet and looked to his left to see what had caught Ming Yu's attention. His heart skipped a beat. Mei Lian stood in the doorway to the kitchen, fat tearsslipping from her luminous eyes. Dressed in a pair of soft flannel pajama pants covered in blue and white bunnies, while her T-shirt was of a smiling boy running from a horde of zombies.

"You love me?" Her soft voice trembled and cracked.

Oh. Shit.

He hadn't even heard her approach when he'd stepped into the closet, but she had

clearly overhead every word he'd spoken. He might have wanted to help bring Ming Yu and Mei Lian together, but definitely not like this. Xiao Dan stood frozen, seriously debating whether he could slink into the closet before anyone remembered he was there.

"I-I-" Ming Yu stammered.

"Tell the truth! You love me like you would for your little shimei,² and that's all."

"No." Ming Yu lowered her head and swallowed hard. "I love you like I would a mate or a wife. I've loved you for so long..."

"But you've never said anything." Mei Lian stomped her foot, jerking Xiao Dan's and Ming Yu's eyes up to her furious face. "I fell in love with you the first time I saw you. I'd just arrived, and you asked one of the other servants to show me to my quarters, but all I wanted to do was stay there with you. To you, I was some stupid girl sent to be married off to someone she'd never even met. I've always been some stupid child to you."

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“No! Never! I never thought of you like that!”

Mei Lian continued as if Ming Yu hadn’t spoken. “And now you say that you love me while I’ve loved you for centuries. I’ve waited for some small sign. Anything. I—” Her voice finally shattered. She spun around and ran off down the hall.

Ming Yu’s stricken gaze snapped to Xiao Dan as if begging for him to tell her what to do. Xiao Dan rushed to the island and placed the steamer on the counter. “Go!” he ordered as he grabbed the bun in her hands. “Go after her. Talk to her. Tell her you love her!”

Ming Yu didn’t hesitate another second and darted off after the other vampire while a soft smile formed on Xiao Dan’s lips. Okay, he’d never wanted to expose Ming Yu’s secret—and certainly not like that—but this reckoning was overdue. Maybe now they could enjoy some of their long lifespans together as mates.

He hummed to himself as he packed away the remaining dough and the pork filling. Either Ming Yu would settle things with Mei Lian and lure the other woman to the kitchen for a lengthy talk and steamed buns, or she wouldn’t be seen until tomorrow evening and this entire batch would be thrown out.

The only thing that mattered was that Ming Yu and Mei Lian were happy. The rest would work itself out.

Standing there alone, Xiao Dan found Ming Yu’s words were still ringing in his ears. He had wasted too much time keeping his feelings to himself. He’d known for years that Huli wasn’t playing some shifty trick on him. Huli treasured the time they had

together and even put up with hate from Xiao Dan's clan mates just to steal a few moments with him.

That would end now. The rest of his clan had claimed their mates and found their happily ever afters. Xiao Dan wouldn't let anything else stand between him and Huli. Especially some unknown huli jing. He needed to be brave and tell Huli the truth.

1 Xiao Ping Guo – little apple, affectionate nickname for Erik

2 Shimei – younger martial sister

Chapter 4

Huli

963 CE

Luoyang, near Zhang manor

Daytime was the very worst time. There was nothing worth doing. Gege couldn't come out to play with him. Vampires were stuck inside, away from the sunlight.

All except for that one annoying vampire who liked to chase him and threaten to cut off his tail. It was nice to tease him and lead him around the orchard, but it made Gege frown, so he tried not to do it too often.

There was nothing good about the daytime other than naps stretched out in the sunlight, warming his fur. All the good hunting came at night when he could slink through the shadows and find himself a tasty rabbit or a nice, plump pheasant.

With a heavy sigh, Huli threw himself down on a pile of leaves and peered up at the

sky through the trees. How many more hours until he could seek Gege? Until the beautiful vampire with the sweet smile would sneak out of his home and wander through the forest looking just for Huli?

Too many.

Huli curled his tail close to his body and placed it over his nose, preparing to settle in for a nice, long nap.

But there was a smell.

A new smell.

Huli poked his nose up above his tail while holding the rest of his body entirely still. He sniffed the air. It was clearer but foreign. Dangerously foreign. This scent carried a heavy hint of magic.

What other creature could be in the woods smelling of magic?

As the scent grew stronger, Huli tensed all his muscles, preparing to pounce. His ears perked up as he strained to hear the movements of the creature, but there were no sounds besides the chirping of birds and the soft rustle of the trees as the wind skipped through the woods. He could only guess where the intruder was.

The moment he was sure the monster was near, Huli leaped from his comfortable nest of leaves, teeth bared and ears flattened to his head. But the growl died in his throat.

It was another fox.

Not just any fox. A large fox, white as if it had been born from starlight. It had the faintest touches of black and orange on its feet and face. The magnificent creature sat

on a tree stump, its chin tilted up. Huli had the feeling that it was smiling at him. Yet he barely noticed. His eyes were locked on the fox's tails.

Tails!

It had multiple tails fanned behind it. They shivered and moved slowly, as if made of dandelion fluff.

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This was another huli jing. One who was much older and more powerful than his meager fifty years.

“Hello, huli jing,” the white fox murmured.

His flattened ears popped up and his eyes widened. The fox spoke. The huli jing could speak like Gege.

“Can you not talk yet?” she inquired.

Huli’s ears drooped this time as he gave a shake of his head. He’d never spoken. Wasn’t sure how to form human words with his tongue. Gege had always been happy with his barks, laughs, and other noises, but he wanted to do more. He wanted to have an actual conversation with him. Tell him things he saw and did through the day. Ask Gege about the things that made him happy.

“That’s a shame,” the white fox said with a sigh. “It’s been a long time since I’d encountered another one of our kind in this area. I would have enjoyed speaking to you.”

Huli sat with a huff. He irritably flicked at some leaves and sticks with his tail. It would have been nice to talk to her as well. She could tell him what he needed to do to get such lovely tails of his own. Not to mention, learn how to talk so he could surprise Gege.

I guess we’ll have to chat like this.

The voice that whispered through his head was both sweet and smug. Huli jumped to his feet, teeth once again bared at the white fox. It was only when her laugh echoed through his mind that he realized that she'd used her magic to communicate directly with his mind.

“You are such a young thing. But very adorable.”

I've seen fifty summers. Not so young. He pushed the thought at her, hoping she could understand him.

“No, not too young, but little better than a pup among our kind.” The warmth of her words spread through him like a gentle pat on the head.

You're the first of our kind that I've ever met.

The white fox's amber eyes widened slightly. “You've never seen another huli jing?”

Huli shook his head. He wrapped his tail around him, covering his toes, while embarrassment burned through him. Just one tail. He didn't know how old this other huli jing was, but he was envious of her tails. He wanted that. If he had tails like that, Gege would never look away from him. He would admire Huli for his beauty and powerful magic.

“Do you have a name?”

Her question jolted him out of his swirling jealousy, and he blinked at her. When he was young, there had been only himself. And then one day, there was Gege. The beautiful and perfect Zhang Xiao Dan. There had been no one to give him a name at the beginning of his existence. His Xiao Dan called him Huli or Little One.

But he didn't want her calling him that. The name was precious to him because the

words coming from Xiao Dan made him feel like a precious treasure.

Huli, he replied.

The white fox's nose twitched like she was wrinkling it in distaste, but she said nothing for a second. "Very well. I am called Min."

That wasn't a bad name. At least it was easy to remember. Min of the Many Tails.

How had she gotten those tails? Had they been stolen off other huli jing? There was no way he was going to let her steal his one tail. But what if he stole one of her tails? It looked as if she had at least five. There was no way she'd miss one of them.

"Huli, I think you should come traveling with me."

That jerked him from his wandering thoughts. Traveling with her? Was she insane? Why would he ever travel away from this place? This was his home. Most importantly, this was where Xiao Dan lived. He didn't ever want to leave the vampire. Sure, he might wander about and go on hunts that took him away from Gege for a few nights, but never for long.

No. Absolutely not.

"Really? Why not?"

Gege is here. I'm not leaving him.

"Oh. Gege, huh?" Her voice was so smooth and sly that Huli could feel his hackles rising while cursing himself. He should never have mentioned Gege. Min of the Many Tails couldn't go near Xiao Dan.

The white fox climbed down from the tree stump and slowly approached him, her tails slithering back and forth behind her like snakes. “Who is Gege?”

A powerful vampire. He and his clan live close to here. Don’t go near him. He and his clan are very dangerous. They don’t like anyone. Each word as it left his mind for Min’s was a snarl. This fox needed to stay away from Xiao Dan.

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“Ah. A powerful vampire that you’ve tamed.” She prowled around him. One of her tails brushed his cheek and Huli bared his teeth, barely holding in the urge to snap at it. “I’ve seen him walking in the woods and in the market. He’s very handsome.”

He is mine.

“Yours?” she said with a giggle. “Does he know this?”

Huli clenched his teeth and growled low in his throat at the huli jing. He was starting to not like Min of the Many Tails. No, he didn’t like her at all. His stomach tightened and knotted at the thought that she’d seen his gege.

“If you are going to claim this vampire, you will need to be able to talk to him. Wouldn’t you like to talk to this gege?”

Huli’s growling stopped in an instant, and his ears perked. Okay. Maybe she had a good point. Talking to Xiao Dan, using actual words he could understand, would be amazing.

Min strolled to the stump and lightly jumped up. Yet, just before she landed, a sharp white light enveloped her entire body. The light faded, and a slender woman with long black hair and a brilliant blue robe sat on the stump.

Was...was that Min?

The woman smiled at him. “Would you like to appear to your gege as a human so you can get even closer to him?”

Huli's heart pounded so hard in his chest that it felt as though it were going to break through bone. His tongue was tied into a knot, and his thoughts frantically raced along.

Human!She could turn into a human!

When she first spoke, he thought it would be enough to learn how to speak like humans do, but to change shape, to look like a human, would be so much better. He could walk in their world, pretend to be them. So many more tricks could be played on them if they thought he was human.

How?he demanded.

“You wish to shift as well.”

Yes! How? How do I learn to do this? How do I learn to speak and shift into a human form?Huli pushed to his feet and walked to her, shoving his face close to hers.I must learn to do this. You must tell me how to do these things right now.

“Oh, Huli, these things take a long time,” she cooed at him. She reached out and scratched under his chin, but Huli jerked his head away from her and huffed loudly. She didn't seem to mind because her smile never wavered. “It took me centuries to reach this level, and I'm already more than three hundred years old.”

Huli grunted and flopped his ass on the ground. Three centuries. That was too many years. He wanted to do these thingsnow. He wanted to run up to Gege and surprise him as a human.

“A few centuries aren't that long. Your gege is a vampire, right? They live for many years. He probably won't even notice you're gone.”

Huli's ears flattened, and his body slumped. Would Gege really not miss him if he left to learn how to shift? He wanted Xiao Dan to miss him terribly.

Min reached out and put her hand under his chin, forcing his head up so she could look him in the eye. "Don't you want to do more than simply talk to the vampire? In a human form, you could seduce the vampire. With a beautiful human form, you could wrap Gege around your finger. Get him to do anything you wanted."

Oh, that sounded even better.

He knew of the intimate things people did. More than once, he'd followed noises of pleasure and found people naked and entangled in each other. He wanted that. He wanted to feel Gege's kisses and to do things that could wring such noises out of him. As a human, he could win over Xiao Dan so that he loved only Huli and not the rest of his clan. He'd belong to Huli at last, and no one else.

"In this form, the humans find us irresistible. They are drawn to us and do whatever we wish. Like this, we can more easily steal their wealth, ruin their lives, even steal their souls for our own power."

That sounded like fun.

Not that he wished to harm Xiao Dan. He would never harm Gege.

But he could always play with the other humans. They didn't matter.

Okay, I wish to learn.

Min gave him a pat on the head. "That means we must leave this area for a time. For a huli jing to become stronger and to earn more tails, you must cultivate your powers in places of great magic. There is little magic in these forests and mountains. I know

of spots in secret caves in the Kunlun Mountains as well as hidden springs in the deserts to the west. This is the only way to become a true jiuwei hu.”

Huli flicked his tail. This meant leaving Xiao Dan for a very long time. Can I return to see Xiao Dan each time I earn a new tail?

For the first time, Min frowned at him. “That means it will take even longer. Traveling to and from these locations will take months.” She paused and stared at him before continuing in a thoughtful manner. “But the journey would be good practice for both of us. Very well.”

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Huli leaped up and spun in a circle, chasing his tail. Soon, he would have more tails. Big and fluffy orange tails that would be the envy of everyone who saw them.

When do we leave? Can we leave now?

He had no desire to leave Xiao Dan or the forest he'd been born in, but the sooner he left, the sooner he could return to his gege.

“But we haven't discussed payment yet.”

Huli stopped his spinning and gazed at the delicate woman. What? Why?

“Learning how to properly cultivate and grow your powers is no simple thing. It's even harder without someone there to show you the way. My help will shave years off your time in the magic caves and springs.”

But I don't have anything.

“Yes, you do. One day, you'll win your gege completely. I just want his soul. You get to keep the rest of him.”

He didn't want her to have any part of Xiao Dan. But he had little use for the vampire's soul.

Would you take his soul right away?

“No, I promise I will wait until you've become a jiuweihu and you've earned all nine

of your tails. Then I will come to claim his soul.”

Huli glared at the ground as he turned over her offer. Min had only five tails now, and she was more than three hundred years old. For him to earn eight more tails, it would take many centuries. Even if he was better at studying than her. That was plenty of time for him to come up with a new plan to protect Xiao Dan’s soul, even if it meant killing Min.

Besides, what if he stopped at eight tails? Min could never touch his Xiao Dan.

Yes. This was a good, crafty plan. He would use Min to teach him magic. And when he was done using her, he would kill her to protect his Xiao Dan.

Chapter 5

Zhang Xiao Dan

October 23, 2023

Zhang Manor, Connecticut

The sun was rising. He knew he should go inside and wait for Huli to return, but he couldn’t drag himself away from the garden. Any minute now, Huli would jump over the outer wall and race toward him, wiping away all his fears that something had happened to him.

It didn’t matter that Kai was trustworthy and that the dragon believed Huli was safe. The fear digging its fangs deep into his heart wouldn’t release him until he saw the fox spirit with his own eyes.

But minutes ticked by, and Huli didn’t appear.

Pinpricks of pain pierced his eyes and danced along his exposed skin. The sky was growing lighter. He was out of time. Maybe he could retreat to the shaded rear porch. Junjie had sat there many mornings, feeding and petting Yiguo...er...rather Leo, even after the sun had risen. It would be at least another two hours until the angle of the sun made it impossible for him to even be there.

Just as he was turning to the house, a rustle of leaves caught his attention. He stopped and jerked his head in the direction of the sound.

“Gege!” Huli’s panicked shout reached him a heartbeat ahead of the fox that jumped out of a large maple and raced to him.

Relief almost choked Xiao Dan. He forgot all about the sun, the burning and biting becoming a distant memory as he started toward Huli. Even with his ears pinned back, Huli was a glorious sight with all his tails dancing behind him.

Less than a meter away, Huli shifted into a curly haired youth with his arms extended. Xiao Dan reached for him, intending to pull him into an unbreakable embrace, but Huli stopped him by placing his hands on Xiao Dan’s shoulders.

“What are you doing out here?” Huli shouted. “The sun is up! You’re going to hurt yourself. Inside! You must go inside right now!”

Ming Yu was correct. Seeing Huli’s face twisted into panic and fear. Feeling the weight of his own terrified worry for Huli lifted from his chest. It was all crystal clear. Why the hell had he been fighting it for so long? He couldn’t live without this man for another second.

Xiao Dan planted his feet and cupped Huli’s cheeks with his hands, drawing the fox spirit in. He caught a flash of surprise in Huli’s wide eyes before he captured his parted lips in a deep, hungry kiss. Huli remained frozen as Xiao Dan swiped his

tongue through Huli's mouth, stroking the tip along Huli's. He ended the kiss by sucking Huli's bottom lip into his mouth and giving it a little bite. That soft flesh popped from his mouth and a full-body shiver ran through the fox.

“Gege,” Huli exhaled. The pupils of Huli's golden-brown eyes were blown so wide, Xiao Dan thought he could get lost in that darkness.

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“I missed you.” Xiao Dan leaned in for another kiss, but Huli shocked him by jerking back.

“Gege.” This time the endearment was a whimper. “I always want to kiss you, but it is too dangerous out here where the sun can hurt you. Can we go inside first? You can miss me and kiss me more safely there.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of Xiao Dan’s lips. “You want me to miss you?”

A growl rumbled in Huli’s throat, and Xiao Dan could imagine the fox’s tails making an irritated snap as he applied more pressure to Xiao Dan’s shoulders, turning the vampire toward the house. “I don’t want Gege to miss me at all, but if it means you will kiss me more, then yes, I want you to miss me. Miss me terribly. Miss me so much that you feel you must kiss me for hours.” As he spoke, he pushed, poked, and prodded Xiao Dan out of the garden and through the door that connected with the kitchen.

Once Huli closed the door behind them, Xiao Dan grabbed Huli’s hand and pulled him through the winding hallways until they reached his private quarters. He shut the door behind them, blocking out the rest of the world so that he was alone with his huli jing.

A broad, playful grin spread across Huli’s lips as he stood in the center of the room. “Does Gege still miss me?”

“Terribly.”

Huli launched himself at Xiao Dan, slamming his narrower frame into the vampire so that he was pressed against the door. Xiao Dan claimed Huli's mouth, but this time, the fox was a very willing participant. Huli thrust his tongue into Xiao Dan's mouth, and the vampire happily sucked on it while wrapping his arms around Huli. His fingers dug into hard, sleek muscles and soft tissue, molding that lithe body to his own.

Through the years, there had been a few sweet, stolen kisses. Brief as a shooting star and light as a butterfly's wings. Each one was carved into his memory and so very precious to him.

But not one of those kisses possessed the heat and hunger that was now curling his toes in his shoes. His blood heated to the point of melting his veins as it rushed from his brain to his groin. He wanted more than he'd ever permitted himself to want with Huli.

Xiao Dan tore his lips from Huli's and bent to kiss along his neck. His tongue caressed his racing pulse, wringing a moan of pleasure from the fox. "Did she hurt you?" he murmured into his damp skin.

"No. She didn't touch me. Wanna see?" Huli leaped out of his arms, snagged the edge of this white T-shirt, and pulled it over his head, but stopped when he could peek out the bottom with a mischievous grin. Xiao Dan continued to lean on the door, admiring the expanse of flawless pale skin that the sprinkling of reddish-brown hair trailing from Huli's navel and into his pants.

"What? You're not going to stop me?"

That harsh question snapped his eyes up to Huli's face to find the fox frowning at him.

“No. I’m enjoying the show.”

Huli jerked his shirt back down. “You’ve always stopped me.” The statement ended in a sharp gasp, and he jumped across the room. “You’re not Gege!” He pointed a trembling finger at him. “You’re Min! Where is my Zhang Xiao Dan? What have you done with him?”

Xiao Dan sighed. This was what he deserved. He should have been more impulsive and freer with his affection toward Huli a long time ago.

“I’m not Min. I truly am Gege.”

“No! I don’t believe you!”

This was not good. If Huli kept shouting, he was going to bring the rest of the clan to his room, and that was the last thing he wanted right now. His cock was still hard from their kisses, tenting the front of his pants. This was not how he wanted to greet others.

“Huli, did you tell Min about how we first met?”

The fox stiffened and narrowed his eyes at him. “No,” he replied.

“It was early spring, and I’d walked a couple of kilometers away from the clan home just an hour or so before dawn. I sat on a log, prepared to meet the sun, but a little fox tumbled out of the bushes. I gave him my last baozi, and he tried to climb into my sleeve in search of more.”

Huli’s fierce expression softened in an instant and he rushed across the room, back into Xiao Dan’s arms. “Don’t talk about that day. It’s too sad and embarrassing.”

Xiao Dan chuckled and hugged him tightly. “Why is it sad and embarrassing?”

“Embarrassing because I was stupid and sad because you could have died that day,” Huli mumbled against his chest.

“You weren’t stupid, and I didn’t die because you were there to save me. My Huli has always been there to save my life when I needed him.”

Huli lifted his head up to stare at Xiao Dan. “But why the kisses?” He held up one finger to stop Xiao Dan’s answer. “I’m not complaining. But I’m confused. You should be angry at me. You should hate me.”

With one hand, Xiao Dan pushed his fingers into Huli’s unruly hair and brushed it from his forehead. “I don’t hate you. I could never hate you. When I saw you disappear over the wall after Min, my heart went with you. All I could think was that if she killed you, I wouldn’t know how to go on. I panicked. My every thought was how I’d never been brave enough to tell you...to show you...”

“Show me what?”

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“How much I love you.”

Huli blinked, and his amber eyes twinkled with unshed tears. “You love me?”

“So much. But I’ve been afraid to say those words because I thought you’d feel tied to me. That those words would drive you away. I was afraid you could never return such a big feeling and would resent me.” Xiao Dan swallowed hard and shook his head. “I refuse to be afraid anymore. Even if you will never love me, I want you to know that I love you. I cherish everything about my precious huli jing.”

“Love!” Huli threw himself at Xiao Dan as much as he could, despite already being in his arms. He crushed their mouths together in a violent and needy kiss while his fingers bit into his shoulders.

Xiao Dan would have laughed if he was not preoccupied with kissing Huli. This appeared to be an excellent sign that Huli returned his feelings. When the fox spirit attempted to climb him to get closer, Xiao Dan did the only thing he could—he cupped Huli’s ass with both hands to lift him and walked across the room to his bed, allowing Huli to more easily wrap his legs around his waist.

Sitting on the side of the bed with his fox on his lap, Xiao Dan could slip his hands up under Huli’s shirt, caressing warm skin while devouring his mouth.

“Gege,” Huli whined as he kissed across Xiao Dan’s jaw to his ear. “Your Huli is trying to be good and make you proud of me. We should talk about Min, but if we talk about Min, you will hate me, and we will stop kissing.” The tip of Huli’s tongue caressed Xiao Dan’s earlobe and for a moment, he forgot his own name.

“I won’t hate you,” Xiao Dan reassured him as soon as his brain remembered speech.

“But we’ll stop kissing...”

No one could pout quite like his fox.

Huli was right that they needed to discuss Min, but he didn’t want to stop and be responsible. He was so fucking tired of being the responsible one.

“How about this? Answer two questions for me. Is my clan in immediate danger from Min?”

Huli shook his head. “No. I don’t think she’d threaten the rest of the clan. She wants only your soul.”

“Is she a threat to you?”

“No, she can’t hurt me. I will kill her if she comes near me or you ever again.”

Xiao Dan dipped his head and nipped at Huli’s bottom lip. “Then how about we kiss for a little while longer? Afterward, we can talk about this bargain you made. Okay?”

“Just kiss?”

Huli’s voice dropped to a husky whisper as he moved his lips closer to Xiao Dan’s ear. A shiver ran through him as Huli licked his earlobe and his arm pulled the other man even closer. He could feel Huli’s hard cock pressing into his stomach and Xiao Dan’s hands squeezed Huli’s ass.

“What does Huli want?”

“So many things. I can feel your dick pushing against your pants, but what I want is to feel you pushing into my ass.” Huli licked up the side of Xiao Dan’s neck and nuzzled his jaw with his sharp nose. “Do you want that, my Xiao Dan? Do you want to push that thick cock deep inside of me? Make your Huli beg for every bit of you?”

Xiao Dan’s brain was melting down and in danger of running out of his ears. Somehow he’d forgotten that the very essence of the huli jing was seduction. Every story he’d ever read about them was a huli jing seducing a poor human. Only a few positive ones ended with the huli jing falling for the human.

But Huli had always been full of sweetness and mischief. He’d never heard such words out of his mouth.

Now that they had left his nimble tongue, creating an image in Xiao Dan’s brain, it was all he wanted.

Was this too fast?

Huli’s hand slid from his shoulder to his chest, sneaking between them to rub his stomach. “But Huli doesn’t deserve to have your wonderful dick in him.” As he spoke, he shifted his position on Xiao Dan’s lap so that he was on his knees while straddling him. The motion caused their cocks to rub together. Xiao Dan clenched his teeth to hold in his moan. The wicked little fox was reading him so clearly, he didn’t have a chance.

“Huli, maybe we should...”

The fox spirit moved his hips and cried out, short circuiting the few brain cells working.

“Can I touch you?” Huli whispered while his wandering fingers were attacking the

button and zipper on his pants. “It’s all I want.”

Xiao Dan blinked, forcing his brain to focus on Huli’s beautifully flushed face and shining eyes. “That’s all you want? To touch me?”

Huli’s smile turned lascivious. “I want to touch you and make you come.”

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He'd barely finished speaking when Xiao Dan felt Huli's fingers brush against his cock. He gasped at the rough skin and heat that closed around him.

"Oh gods, Huli," he choked out. His fingers dug into Huli's ass and his toes curled. Just knowing that it was Huli touching him, stroking him, put him on edge.

"That's it. I want to hear how much you like it." Huli moved again, rubbing his cock on Xiao Dan's thigh. "So many mornings after leaving you, I would lie in the woods, touching myself, imagining what you'd sound like if I got the chance to give you pleasure."

As if the strong hand stroking his dick wasn't enough. Now he had the image of naked Huli lying in the soft grass, bathed in golden sunlight, his hand shuttling along his cock while his face twisted in ecstasy.

"Yes," he groaned, letting go of his last inhibitions. "Faster. That's it. Tighter." Each direction squeezed a whimper out of Huli as the fox rushed to do exactly as he was told.

Pre-cum spilled from the head and Huli's nimble fingers caught it up and smeared it on the shaft, making each stroke slicker than the last.

Huli pressed his forehead to Xiao Dan's, sending his hot panting breaths across his lips like a kiss. The rich scent of musk and pine filled the room. If he closed his eyes, he could easily imagine them alone in those woods near the Zhang manor in Luoyang.

“So close,” he gritted out between clenched teeth.

Huli flashed a grin that was mostly a grimace. “Me too.”

Then the evil fox did this little twist motion at the head that took him by surprise. His last bit of control shattered, and a shout ripped from his throat as his orgasm broke over him.

Huli’s sharp keens of pleasure followed a second later, causing Xiao Dan to wince for his poor fox. What a pathetic mate he was turning out to be. He’d at least gotten a hand job while Huli had needed to make do with dry-humping his thigh.

Words of apology were about to leave his tongue, but Huli’s head popped up. The biggest smile he’d ever seen graced his face. Never had Huli looked so happy as he did at that moment.

That grin turned wicked as he lifted his hand from Xiao Dan’s cock and licked every bit clean. “Mmmm...better than Su Ming Yu’s congee.”

Xiao Dan huffed out a laugh. “You are shameless.”

“Your moans are the songs of nightingales, and your taste is the finest wine,” Huli bragged. “But only when Gege fucks me will I know what the heavens feel like.”

Xiao Dan plunged his fingers into Huli’s sweaty hair and pulled him in for a hard, laughing kiss.

He’d known this creature for a thousand years, and yet Huli could still surprise him every day.

“Does this mean I’m your boyfriend now?” Huli inquired as their lips parted.

“If you would like to be.”

“And I’m your only boyfriend, right?”

“Yes, of course. You’re already more than I can handle. What would I do with a second boyfriend?”

Huli licked his lips and leaned in close enough to bump the tip of his nose against Xiao Dan’s. “If you get another boyfriend, I will steal his soul and feed his body to the dragon.”

Coming from Huli, that was no idle threat.

Chapter 6

Huli

Don’t screw this up!

Huli repeated the phrase in his mind over and over again as he and Xiao Dan cleaned up. He wanted to continue exploring Xiao Dan’s body, kissing all his lovely parts and coaxing out sexy noises, but they were overdue to deal with the larger problem at hand. It was just that he didn’t want to let this moment go.

For reasons he still couldn’t understand, Xiao Dan had overlooked the fact that Huli had promised his soul to another huli jing and had embraced him. He’d even said I love you!

Not that it was the first time Xiao Dan had whispered those words to him, but this felt different. He could feel it in his soul that Xiao Dan meant it in a forever kind of way, and he wasn’t ready to let this go. He’d waited more than a thousand years for this

moment. Why did he have to be the one who messed this up?

These worries flew out of his mind as Xiao Dan handed him a set of his own pajamas to wear. They were dark navy blue with orange foxes bounding across the shirt. He lifted the soft cotton to his nose and breathed it in. Even though the clothes had been freshly laundered, they still possessed Xiao Dan's uniqueness of winter plums and snow. And now Huli was going to be wrapped up in it. It didn't matter that the pants were way too long and that he was drowning in the top. They belonged to Xiao Dan, and the vampire had given them to him to wear.

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“When did you first meet Min?” Xiao Dan inquired as he finished getting dressed. He turned off the light in the adjoining bathroom and returned to the bedroom, where Huli was sitting on the end of the bed. The sleeves swallowed up his hands, and part of him wished he could hide his entire body within the pajamas.

“A very long time ago.” He pushed the words out in a mumble that had to be barely audible to even the vampire’s superior hearing.

Xiao Dan sat next to him and gently took one of his arms. His nimble fingers neatly folded back the cloth of the sleeve twice to rest right where it was supposed to on Huli’s wrist. “I don’t want you to be afraid to tell me the truth about Min. I won’t be upset.”

“But I promised your soul to her!” Huli cried out and then bit his tongue hard enough to taste blood. He shouldn’t have reminded Xiao Dan of that, even though it was something he wasn’t likely to forget.

“Forgive me, Huli, but my soul is not something you can promise away. You don’t own it. My soul belongs to me alone, and she can’t have it.” He paused and tilted his head so that he could meet Huli’s downcast gaze. “Unless that is something you want. Do you want me to give my soul to her?”

“No!” Huli threw himself at Xiao Dan, wrapping his arms around his neck. “No! Never! I never intended for her to get her claws into your soul. She can’t have you. You’re mine! You belong to Huli and no one else.”

Xiao Dan’s powerful arms closed about Huli, holding him so tightly that the panic

threatening to choke him ebbed. “You’re right. I belong only to you. Min can’t have me. No one else is ever going to have me.”

A gentle kiss was pressed to the top of Huli’s head and another at his temple. “If we’re to protect ourselves from Min, I need to know everything about her. Can you help me?”

Reluctantly, Huli released Xiao Dan and sat up. He placed his hands in his lap, but Xiao Dan picked up his wrist and folded the sleeve back so that it matched the other one. Just watching Xiao Dan’s slow, attentive manner cleared away the last of the fear.

“I was young. It was before I learned to speak. Before I gained my second tail. She found me in the woods. She was the first huli jing I’d ever met. At three hundred, she had five tails and could shift into a human.”

“You became enamored of her,” Xiao Dan said.

“No!” Huli snapped. “I hated her. She’d already noticed you. Seen you in the market.” Xiao Dan’s fingers froze on Huli’s sleeve. Huli threaded their fingers together, trying to infuse some of his natural warmth into Xiao Dan’s chilled skin. He tipped his head up and stared into Xiao Dan’s wide eyes. “From our first meeting, I wanted to kill her. Yet, she had power that I didn’t have. How could I tell you all the things I saw and did if I never learned to speak? How could I make you love me if I couldn’t turn into a human?”

The vampire’s expression softened. “You can’t make someone love you.”

“I made you. I did. You said it earlier that you love me.”

Xiao Dan’s worried gaze filled with warm laughter. “Did you make me love you with

huli jing magic?”

“No. I...I...”

How the hell had he made Xiao Dan love him? Was it the shiny baubles he’d brought the vampire over the years? Maybe it was how he’d protected him when they went for their long walks through the woods?

Xiao Dan’s chuckle tore him from his wandering thoughts. A kind hand cupped his cheek and pulled him in for a slow kiss that scattered fragmented ideas like leaves in the wind.

“I love you because of who you are. Huli is my sweet, playful, mischievous fox spirit. You are so very good at finding trouble, but you have the softest, biggest heart that you let only me see.”

“Because my heart belongs to Gege. Only Gege can see it.”

“Yes, that is mine.”

“But I needed to be able to speak to you. I needed you to see me as a human to win you. That is the reason I agreed to leave Luoyang with Min.” Huli leaned his head against Xiao Dan’s shoulder and sighed. “She was older, knew other huli jing, knew how to become stronger. I needed this information, and she was my one source. Yet, she was unwilling to give me this information for free.”

“And this was why you struck a bargain with her. To become a more powerful huli jing, you bartered my soul for that knowledge,” Xiao Dan finished for him.

His head popped up. “Yes, but I never intended for her to get your soul. I planned to kill her as soon as I was strong enough. That way, she could never touch my gege!”

Xiao Dan threw his head back, laughter bursting out of him. Huli stared at him, his mouth hanging open. This was not a laughing matter. This was all very serious. Even after all these years, there were times he still could not understand humans.

“You planned to betray her from the very start!” The vampire chortled. He wiped a tear away from the corner of his eye. “How could I love such a wicked fox?”

Huli narrowed his eyes on Xiao Dan and pointed one finger at the tip of his nose. “You do love me! You said it! I heard it!”

Xiao Dan wrapped him up as he continued to chuckle. “Yes, I still love you. I’ve loved you for years, all while knowing how evil you can be.”

He gave a shrug as he laid his head on the vampire’s shoulder. “I don’t try to be wicked. I try to be a good Huli, but it is so hard. You don’t know how hard it is for Huli. Especially when Chen and Xiang are so very annoying.” That last bit he grumbled under his breath, but he knew Xiao Dan would hear him.

“They are annoying because they are protective of their clan. They want me to be safe because they also know Huli can be wicked. The one thing that they don’t understand, is how good Huli’s heart is. Only I know that.”

Gege was magic.

There was no other way to explain it. All his words and wonderful hugs had a way of making it all feel better. He was no longer scared of Xiao Dan casting him aside forever. He always seemed to know the right thing to say to fix things.

But words would not fix this problem with Min.

No. To stop Min, he had to kill her. She would give them no other choice.

“Shortly after meeting Min, I left Luoyang and traveled with her. Stealing souls is one way for a huli jing to gain power, but it’s a slow and tedious process. Humans have so little magic in them. I wanted to become powerful quickly. The faster I gained my tails, the faster I could talk and shift for my gege.”

“If it’s a slow way of gaining power, why are huli jing known for stealing the souls of humans?”

Huli snorted and sat up so he could look Xiao Dan in the eye. “Because it’s fun.”

Xiao Dan rolled his eyes. “Of course. Silly me.”

“Yes, that was silly of you, Gege.”

“So, all those times you were gone for years at a time, you were traveling with Min?”

He reached across Xiao Dan’s lap, picked up the vampire’s hand, and pulled it over

to his own lap. He traced the lines of his palm and down his fingers, loving that he had the freedom to touch him. It had been a long time since they'd last had an escape like this. Not since before Yichen was kidnapped. Everything had changed when the fae stole Yichen...

"No, I stayed with Min for a few centuries. Once I learned all the tricks she had for teaching me to cultivate and how she found the best magic-infused places in the world, I parted ways with her. I still wasn't strong enough to defeat her, and I thought that if I went off on my own, I could gain power faster. She guided me through gaining my first two tails. The rest I did on my own."

Xiao Dan closed his hand, capturing Huli's fingers. "And they are magnificent tails."

He couldn't stop preening. They were fantastic tails, and only Xiao Dan appreciated them properly.

"But..." the vampire prodded.

"But many years passed until I saw Min again. When I did, she had nine tails, and I was still stuck at seven. There was no way I could kill her. I had to get my ninth tail first." He huffed and pulled his fingers free of Xiao Dan's grasp. "After I got my final tail and became a true jiuwei hu, it was like she disappeared. I never saw her. The few huli jing I encountered also said they hadn't seen her in years. I thought someone else had killed her. And then..." His words drifted off, and he swallowed hard.

"What?"

It took Huli a couple of seconds to spit the words out. "The fae kidnapped Yichen."

That was the one period since he'd first met Xiao Dan that had been the absolute darkest. He'd never seen Xiao Dan so broken and distraught. It had been the brutal

wake-up call he'd been needing to put his petty desires behind him and focus on what the man who owned his heart needed.

"After his disappearance, we spent all our time digging for information about the fae and how to get to Yichen. I forgot Min ever existed. It wasn't until I saw her in the garden, heard her voice, that I recalled that I'd been searching for her."

Huli jumped to his feet and paced across the room. Except he didn't get far. The bottoms of his pants slipped over his feet so that he was stepping on the hem, pulling them lower while tripping on them. Xiao Dan leaped up and grabbed him by the waist as Huli tipped forward while fighting to pull the pants up.

"Grrr...stupid pants! Stupid Huli! I should have killed her years ago. Then you would never have to know how stupid I am."

"Huli isn't stupid," Xiao Dan whispered into his hair. He wrapped his arms around his waist, holding him close when Huli would have darted away. "My fox spirit saw something he wanted, and he put in so much hard work to get it. I've always been proud of you for working so hard to get your tails. I admire your dedication."

"Please, stop," he begged. "Huli is bad. Evil. I planned to kill another huli jing to keep her away from you. I wanted to be powerful so I could make you all mine. It was about what I wanted. I didn't care about what you wanted."

Xiao Dan's arms tightened despite Huli's words. "Do you care about what I want now?"

Something inside of Huli shattered. He turned in Xiao Dan's arms and hugged him while pressing his face into the vampire's chest. "Yes. It's the only thing that matters. If you don't love me anymore, that's okay. I will take care of Min and go away forever if it makes Gege happy."

“See? You’ve grown up. You’ve learned to care about the wishes and feelings of others. You’re not the same young, impulsive huli jing you were the morning I first found you.” XiaoDan put two fingers under Huli’s chin and forced his head up to meet his gaze. “And the one thing I want is for Huli to stay by my side forever. No matter what.”

“You’re sure?”

“Very sure.” Xiao Dan leaned in close and kissed away the tears that slipped down Huli’s cheeks before taking his mouth in a slow, deep kiss. The saltiness of his own tears was lost to Xiao Dan’s sweetness.

After a thousand years, he had the man who’d claimed his heart that very first morning in the woods. And he was going to risk everything to keep him until Huli drew his last breath.

Chapter 7

Huli

Huli's stomach growled. He flinched and glanced over his shoulder to see Xiao Dan still comfortably sprawled across his bed, his blankets pulled up to his chin as he slept undisturbed. After releasing a silent sigh, Huli slipped out of the room and padded along the hall, only to stop at the next intersection. Normally, if he woke while Xiao Dan slept and he needed a snack, he'd head into the woods to hunt something quick and meaty.

But with Min lurking around and threatening his Xiao Dan, he was unwilling to leave the estate even long enough to grab a bite.

The clan's kitchen always had yummy treats, though. Maybe he could sneak a bite and be back under the covers before Xiao Dan noticed he was missing.

Yes, that was an excellent plan.

Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one who'd had the same idea in mind.

When he arrived in the kitchen, the two people he didn't want to see were already in there. Xiang and Chen. His relationship with Xiao Dan's clan mates had always been a little hit or miss based on how annoying he was being. However, Xiang's and Chen's hatred for him had never wavered in one thousand years.

At least, it hadn't until recently and he was starting to believe that it was the

handiwork of Moon and Kai.

“Huli,” Chen said in a low, hard voice. “What are you doing here?”

He forced a wide and bright smile because he knew it would annoy the vampire. “I would imagine the same thing as you—searching for something to eat.”

“Moon’s hungry,” he corrected as if it were some sin that a vampire his age should feel something as low-born as hunger.

“Aren’t those Xiao Dan’s pajamas?” Xiang demanded.

Now that got Huli to smile for real. He held his arms out and gave a spin. “They are. Don’t they look great on me?”

“I’m sure Da-ge won’t appreciate you stealing things out of his bureau,” Chen grumbled.

“Not stolen. Gege picked them out for me. Gave them to me to wear after we...” He let his words drift off, and his smile grew wicked.

Chen held up both hands in front of him as if to ward off more words. “Enough! I don’t want to hear any more.”

Huli snorted. “As if I’d tell you more. You don’t deserve to hear about Gege’s happy moments.”

“Like you even care about Shixiong’s happiness. The only thing that matters to you is what you want,” Xiang muttered. He disappeared into the pantry. A second later, he could hear the sounds of crinkling bags and the shifting of containers along the shelves. “Where the hell did Rei hide those cookies with the frosting?”

“Top shelf, in the green tin,” Huli answered as he dropped to one of the stools at the center island. He didn’t want to help these two idiots, but the sooner he got them out of the kitchen, the sooner he could find something to eat and return to that toasty bed and Gege’s arms.

There was more noise from the pantry and then a long pause before a slightly muffled “Huh” left Xiang.

The vampire stepped out of the pantry, holding the dark green-and-white circular tin in one arm and holding the lid in his other hand. Within the container were a variety of shortbread cookies of different shapes and sizes. A thin layer of white frosting with colorful sprinkles covered each one.

“How did you know that?” Xiang asked as he stepped closer.

Huli braced one forearm on the counter as he leaned across and plucked a star-shaped cookie from the tin. “Rei told me. He also said that he and Yichen had ordered another tin of cookies with Halloween colors, and we can’t leave the States until the cookies arrive. What’s Halloween?”

“An American holiday where the humans dress up in costumes and celebrate spooky things like ax murderers and superheroes,” Chen explained. “Parents also send their children out to go door to door begging for candy.”

That was confusing. He paused, just about to bite into his cookie. “Are the parents taking the candy from the children? Using them as a sort of slave labor? Or are they hoping the children will be stolen away? Like culling their ranks?”

“Moon says it’s a community-building event and fun for children,” Chen replied, though he sounded doubtful.

“Humans are weird,” Huli mumbled as he shoved the cookie into his mouth. Maybe it was the Americans who were weird. The costume part sounded like fun. “Will Junjie and Leo send their new baby out to beg for candy?”

Xiang choked on the cookie he’d been eating, and Chen sighed as he thumped him on the back. “Erik is too young to go on his own. Besides, the humans are still recovering from their troubles with the fae. Most of the neighborhoods are still empty.”

Which meant there was no one to give Erik candy.

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Maybe they could organize something in the house to allow Erik to experience this candy begging. It kind of sounded like fun if it meant the children got to keep the sweets they collected.

“Why are we discussing Halloween?” Chen demanded in an irritated tone. “We should talk about why the hell you attempted to trade Xiao Dan’s soul to that other huli jing. What the hell were you thinking? I thought you at least cared for him a little. Have all these years of clinging to him been some cruel ruse?”

“No!” Huli had shouted it at Chen, but caught himself at the last second and lowered his voice. He definitely didn’t want Xiao Dan to walk in on him now. “I love Xiao Dan. I have always loved him. Min taught me how to cultivate and the best places to gain powers. The plan was to learn everything I could from her, become stronger than her, and kill her before she ever got close to Gege.”

“Except you couldn’t kill her,” Chen stated.

“Nooooo,” he drew out. Chen always had to be such a know-it-all. “I thought she was dead already.”

“Shit,” Xiang grumbled.

“Exactly.” Huli reached across the counter and snagged another cookie. “I haven’t seen her in over three hundred years. I thought she was dead. Then...Yichen was kidnapped, and I kind of forgot all about her. It’s not like I was expecting her to show up on the other side of the world. If I’d known she was alive, I would have killed her years ago.”

“Ruthless,” Chen said.

“For Gege, I am,” Huli snarled. Some of the frightening posturing dimmed as he took a bite out of his cookie.

“And reckless. Your reckless thirst for power has put Xiao Dan in danger. If you cared one bit for Xiao Dan?—”

“I care for Zhang Xiao Dan more than you ever could,” Huli cut him off, the remains of the cookie in his fist crumbling to dust. “I remade myself for him.”

“What?” Xiang gasped, but Huli didn’t take his eyes off the smug and imperious Chen.

“You say that I care just for my happiness and you’re right. I do, because Xiao Dan’s happiness is my happiness. I knew I couldn’t make him happy enough as a mere fox, so I went away for years, returning when I could speak as a human. I left again for centuries, giving up years I could have spent at his side, so that I could face him as a human. Only as a human could I be everything he wanted and needed. What have you given up for your mate?” Huli curled his lip and shook his head at Chen and Xiang. “What would you give up? Your life?” He made a scoffing noise. “That’s easy. In the blink of an eye, you’re dead and your suffering is over while your mate is left without you for the rest of his life. I met my mate a thousand years ago and left his side for centuries at a time. I ached for him for countless years, waiting to be worthy of him.”

Huli opened his hand and glared at the crumbs covering his hand. He brushed them off and snagged another cookie out of the tin. He didn’t immediately eat it but stared at the round cookie with the rainbow speckling.

“Yes, I made a youthful mistake with Min. I saw her as a means I could use to get

what I wanted faster. My intention was never to put Gege in danger. He...is my everything. Since I've given up so many years to be worthy of him, I'm now willing to give up my life to keep him safe."

Chen sighed long and loud. "Fuck you, Huli." He loudly thrust his hand into the tin of cookies, grabbed one, and stuffed it into his mouth. Huli was pretty sure he'd never seen anyone eat a cookie as angrily as Chen did at that moment.

"What did I..."

"Xiao Dan is a powerful, two-thousand-year-old vampire who is surrounded by a clan of other two-thousand-year-old vampires and a dragon. He doesn't need you to die protecting him," Xiang cut in. "What he needs is someone who is going to make him happy. That's what he's been looking for. What he's been waiting all this time for. Are you going to be that person for him?"

For the first time, he actually felt a little hopeful while in the presence of these two annoyances.

"I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive you for hurting him," Chen whispered.

Huli's heart clenched, and his head snapped up to stare at the tall vampire. "Hurt him?" He'd hurt Gege? He'd never tried to hurt his sweet Xiao Dan. Nothing in this world could make him...

Chen narrowed his eyes on him, his expression icier than his magical gift. "Every time you disappeared, Xiao Dan was sad. He tried to hide it from the rest of us, but I could always see it, and there was nothing I could do to help him. He never knew if he was going to see you again or if he was just some plaything that you used each time you were bored. When you were with him, he was happy, but I dreaded your eventual disappearance, breaking his heart."

“No,” Huli whimpered. Xiao Dan had admitted to missing him during their separation, but he’d never mentioned this deep sadness or that he’d been afraid of Huli never returning. Of course Huli came back to him. Returning to Xiao Dan was the only thing he had to look forward to in all the world.

All that hard work and years apart had been done so they could be together. So he could be Xiao Dan’s proper mate. He’d never wanted to cause sweet Gege any pain.

“But I didn’t realize that you left so that you could be...more,” Chen finished awkwardly. “You made a sacrifice that I think could have broken any of us. Did you ever tell Xiao Dan why you were leaving?”

“Yes, but I could never tell him how long I would be gone. Only that I promised to return so long as I was alive.”

“The past doesn’t matter anymore,” Xiang said. He frowned at the tin of cookies and slapped the lid on it. “The present is the one thing that matters, like how much Rei is going to kill us for eating most of his treats.”

“And Min. We need to deal with her,” Chen added. He brushed his fingers together, knocking off the crumbs. “Huli, do you have any ideas of where she could be hiding?”

The fox chuckled softly as he followed Xiang to the pantry. His eyes skimmed the various containers, boxes, and bags until he finally spotted a box of salty thin crackers. He had some sweet; now it was time for something salty. “Min isn’t hiding.”

“What?” Chen asked.

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Huli walked out of the pantry with his new snack. He'd barely gotten the box open when a hand reached over his shoulder and dove in, snagging a bunch.

"You mean she's close to the manor?" Xiang shoved at least four crackers into his mouth at once.

What happened to vampires not needing food to exist, especially after they got to such an advanced age? It was clear living with a fledgling vampire, an elf, the cats, and a dragon had fixed their stomachs and turned on long-dormant urges.

"What I mean is that she's not hiding because hiding means she's got something to fear, and Min's not afraid of anyone." Huli clutched the box of crackers close to his chest as he walked around the island to resume his seat, not that he honestly believed the expanse of counter would keep Xiang from stealing more. "No, I'm sure she's busy hunting humans while she searches for an opening to steal Xiao Dan's soul."

He watched as Chen and Xiang stared at each other for a second, their brows furrowed and their expressions twisted in concentration.

"Where would she be hunting humans at?" Chen inquired.

"Somewhere there's a large gathering of them," Huli chimed in with a mouthful of salty goodness. It wasn't hot, red meat, but Chen and Xiang were at least being entertaining, so that helped. "Seeking for prey one by one is tedious and boring. Large groups are faster. Also, places where humans are relaxed with their guard lowered. The few times Min and I hunted together, we preferred gambling houses, pubs, and brothels because the humans were happy and usually drunk."

“Does the United States have brothels still?” Xiang asked.

“I don’t believe so. At least not in this area.” Chen narrowed his eyes at Xiang and glared down his long, slender nose at his clan mate. “And I dare you to explain to Kai why you’re planning to go into a brothel looking for a huli jing.”

Xiang gave a full-body shiver. “Not a chance. Kai’s got an enormous jealous streak, and I’d rather not trigger it for any reason. Pub?”

“Bar,” Huli corrected. He closed up the box of crackers and wiped the crumbs from his lips. “She’s most likely hitting up the bars and nightclubs.”

“Fine,” Xiang shrugged. “We make a list of all the bars and nightclubs in the area that are seeing a lot of humans. Then we break up into teams to look for her.”

Chen grunted. “It’s a good place to start.”

“Glad we got that worked out. I’m going to drag a lazy dragon out of bed and begin my rounds.” Xiang strolled out of the kitchen with a fresh spring in his step.

Chen stared wordlessly at Huli for a heartbeat before finally picking up the box of crackers and returning it to the pantry. He grabbed a damp cloth and wiped the island, removing all traces that they’d had an early-morning snack.

As Huli was about to jump from his perch and return to Xiao Dan’s waiting arms, Chen’s voice stopped him. “Considering what you know of Min and your own powers, do you think it’s possible for Min to steal Da-ge’s soul?”

Huli frowned at the newly cleaned counter. He pressed his fingertip into a single bead of water and smeared it across the surface. “Steal it? No.” He vehemently shook his head at the thought. “No, not possible. Zhang Xiao Dan is far too strong and powerful

for any huli jing to steal his soul.”

“But...” Chen nudged when the silence to stretch for too long.

“She could trick him out of his soul. Or he could choose to give it to her.” He lifted his gaze to the vampire, one corner of his mouth twisted in a smirk. “It’s not often that a huli jing bothers with brute force magic to get what we want. Don’t forget that trickery and seduction are our two most powerful weapons.”

“You’re not reassuring me.”

“This isn’t about being reassuring. This is about being honest with you,” Huli replied in the same flat, measured tone. “If she can’t steal it, she’ll force Xiao Dan to give his soul away willingly. You need to protect him from such a thing. Watch for his weak spots.”

“You mean, you.”

“And his clan. There’s nothing Gege wouldn’t do to protect those in his clan.”

Chen nodded and shuffled to the entrance of the kitchen. “Stick close to him, huli jing. Keep him safe. I’ll warn the rest of the clan. We won’t let Min touch a single member of our clan.”

Huli grunted and slid off his stool, but his footsteps halted sharply as he replayed Chen’s words in his head.

He’d said “our.” Not “my.” Our clan. Did that mean he counted Huli as one of the clan members? Would he really let Huli keep Xiao Dan at last?

Chapter 8

Zhang Xiao Dan

985 CE

Luoyang, near Zhang manor

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The basket swung on Xiao Dan's wrist as he ducked under a low branch. He plucked another plum from the tree and added it to his growing collection. Bright moonlight filled the orchard, caressing each of the plump fruits waiting for him. He might have teased Chen about wanting to make a fresh batch of plum wine when none of them could get drunk on the liquor any longer, but the peace of picking plums by moonlight was just what he'd needed.

In Junjie's defense, Xiang had started the argument, but it had spiraled out of control to swoop up Mei Lian, Yichen, Chen, and even Ming Yu. After sending them all out to the practice yard to run through a series of exhausting drills, Xiao Dan had grabbed a basket and left the manor for the orchard.

This kind of fractiousness was to be expected; they'd been together for well over a thousand years at this point.

A thousand years of nights, of hunting humans for their blood, of hiding away from the world.

After shedding Jiang Chong at last, they'd enjoyed a lengthy peace, but there had been others who wished to cause trouble for their clan. Other vampires and witches who'd wished to stir up trouble for them, but one by one, they'd all fallen to the combined might of the Zhang clan.

Yet, after too much quiet solitude, his clan mates grew restless. And if some of them—namely Xiang—didn't find some kind of outlet for distraction, they picked fights.

Sadly, Xiao Dan didn't know what to do for them.

In the time prior to becoming vampires, when people would come to the Sword of the Heavenly Garden sect to study, they'd arrive as children and most would leave in their late teens or early twenties, going out to make their own lives. They'd go out to serve their families or the emperor. They'd join the military or government. Some would go home to take over the family business and marry who they were told to marry.

A handful would stay behind to continue their studies and to teach the next generation of disciples.

If not for Jiang Chong, Xiang would have likely become a general for the emperor and led armies into battle. Chen would have become a crafty minister in the government. Possibly even one of the emperor's chief advisors. Yichen would have returned home to his father king and sat on the throne in the Wu Kingdom. Junjie would have remained in Luoyang to become a teacher of the disciples, while Mei Lian would have married Cao Zimo according to her family's wishes. Ming Yu would have remained a servant dutifully caring for the Zhang clan.

Of course, if not for Jiang Chong, they would have all died centuries ago.

Instead, they were all still alive a thousand years later and feeling agitated and edgy. What was he supposed to tell them? Go out into the world and find yourself?

What did they know of this world? Was it safe for them to wander out in all directions?

Maybe he was the problem. He didn't want them to go.

After everything they'd lost, the lives that had been stolen away so young, Xiao Dan

clung to those who remained within the clan, not wanting any of them to come to harm. But that also meant they weren't living the lives they had. He was holding them back because he couldn't deal with his own fears.

A sigh tripped from his parted lips as he moved to another tree to search for ripe plums. The rich, sweet scent drifted on a breeze that stirred the leaves and grasses, whispering of warm sunny days long gone from his world.

He missed Huli.

Xiao Dan froze as he reached for a plum and replayed that thought. Huli. The little fox that had stuck so close to him for nearly fifty years had vanished. More than twenty years had passed since he'd seen him. He'd initially thought the huli jing had gone off to live a life of adventure and mischief, but now he wondered if maybe something darker had happened to the creature. Should he have spent more time searching for him?

Despite his frequent visits, Huli was always a wild creature, free to come and go, but the sweet fox spirit had clung to him so. Why would he leave with no warning?

Xiao Dan snorted at his thoughts. No warning? What was the fox supposed to do to warn him he needed to go on a long journey?

Regardless, he missed their nightly ambles through the woods. He missed having Huli curl up in his lap while he talked to him about so many random thoughts in his head that he didn't dare share with the rest of his clan. Huli alone had been the repository of all his doubts and fears. Maybe Huli had tired of listening to all his whining.

“Zhang-ge!”

Xiao Dan jerked around, searching the dark shadows of the nearby forest for the person who'd called out to him. But the shadows didn't move, and no one stepped forward. His fist tightened on the handle of the basket, and he stepped away from the tree he'd been inspecting to move into a clearing.

“Who's there?”

Seconds ticked by, and there was only the breeze and the moon.

As he was turning back to the plum tree, convinced he'd imagined the soft voice, something moved to his left.

“Does Zhang-ge remember me?”

He turned toward the voice, his lips parting to say that he had no memory of a disembodied voice, when the basket slipped from his fingers at the sight of a large fox perched on a fallen log. His heart lodged in his throat.

“Huli?” he choked out.

“Yes! I am your Huli!” The fox bounded across the orchard to Xiao Dan as his knees gave out and he sank to the soft ground.

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Huli was alive, and he could talk!

The world was spinning, but it came into sharp focus as that wet tongue swiped across his face again and again. The fox pressed his paws into Xiao Dan's chest as Huli licked and nuzzled him with a frightening ferocity. Apparently, he wasn't the only one who'd been melancholy. He'd stopped talking and given in to his excited, high-pitched barks and other odd noises.

Xiao Dan laughed and spat out mouthfuls of fur as he tried to get his hands on the fox. When he could get the creature in hand, he pushed it away so he could get a good look at him.

"Huli, you can talk now? How? Where have you been?"

The wild huli jing broke free and rolled onto his back, throwing all his black feet into the air. "Huli can talk! Huli can talk just like a human now."

"Yes, you can. I'm so impressed...and...and...stunned. I never..." Huli might have learned how to speak, but Xiao Dan found himself speechless, as if the fox had stolen away all of his words.

Huli rolled over and bounced to his feet. "I am a huli jing, and we are magic."

"Yes, I know. I?—"

Huli paced in front of him, seeming to flick his tails.

Tails!

Huli had two tails now. They looked identical, as if it were a trick of his eyes or some kind of illusion, but it wasn't. They both brushed across his hand. The fur was soft and so very fluffy.

"You have two tails," Xiao Dan exhaled, still unable to tear his eyes away from them.

"I do!" Huli sat, his chest puffed out as if he were exceptionally proud. His tails flicked and moved constantly. "I traveled far away and cultivated for many years in a magical, secret place. The moment I was strong enough, my second tail appeared, and I could speak. I could return to Zhang-ge."

"I'm so proud of you, Huli!" Xiao Dan lifted his hands to cup Huli's cheeks and scratch his ears with his long fingers. The fox's tongue lolled out of the side of his mouth and his eyes rolled up into his head as if he were in heaven. Huli didn't need words for Xiao Dan to know this was his very favorite spot to be scratched. He'd learned that trick years ago, and it still held true.

"Does this mean you'll stay now?" he asked, and the fox stiffened in his hands. Huli's triangular ears drooped, and the fox moved closer, bumping his head against the center of Xiao Dan's chest. It was like he wanted to be picked up and cuddled—something he'd done as a tiny pup. But Huli was now bigger than every fox he'd ever seen. It wasn't a matter of Huli being too big to cuddle, but rather that his size now made it awkward.

"Huli?" he prodded at the fox's sudden silence.

"Don't be mad."

"Why would I be mad? What's wrong?"

“Huli can’t stay, and Huli wants to stay with Zhang-ge forever.”

Joy and fear warred in Xiao Dan’s chest, but he pushed all those feelings away so he could focus on his sad fox. “Look at me and tell me what’s going on. Is someone forcing you to leave? If that’s the case, I will help you. I would never allow anyone to threaten or harm you.”

“This is why Huli loves his Zhang-ge. He always protects Huli and keeps him safe.”

“Of course. You are precious to me.”

Huli rubbed his head on the palm of Xiao Dan’s hand once before sitting up to face him. “I...I must leave because there isn’t enough magic here for me to cultivate, and I will become a true jiuweihu. I want all my nine tails.” The fierceness of Huli’s words brought a smile to Xiao Dan’s lips even as his throat tightened. “I returned when I could speak, so I could tell Zhang-ge why I was gone. I want Zhang-ge to wait for me while I become more powerful.”

“Will you return to visit each time you gain a new tail?”

“I don’t know. The places I must travel are very far away. It will take me a long time to return to you each time.”

Xiao Dan put a hand under Huli’s chin and forced the fox to lift his head so he could stare into those warm amber eyes. “I will be here waiting for Huli, no matter how long it takes you to return. This is important to you, and I support you. If you wish to be a powerful jiuweihu, then you do whatever you must do to become that.”

The fox whined and pushed into his lap, startling a laugh out of Xiao Dan. “But I miss Zhang-ge so much. I don’t want to leave!”

Xiao Dan hugged the fox as best he could, despite all his wiggling and flicking tails. “I miss you too. But each time you return from your adventures, you’ll have so many stories to tell me and new tails to show off.”

That lifted Huli’s spirits in a flash. The fox bounded out of his arms and raced around the orchard as if he had to once again show off his new tail. He zoomed over to Xiao Dan, his mouth open wide. “One night, I will come back to Zhang-ge and I will shift into a human. Zhang-ge will fall hopelessly in love with me!”

Xiao Dan’s heart skipped, and he found himself tongue-tied. In love with a huli jing? That was the focus of so many cautionary tales about the creatures, and ended in the human’s ruin. And yet, it wasn’t fear that he first felt when Huli spoke of falling for him.

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He cleared his throat. “Huli is already precious to me. You’re my dear friend. How could I not love you?”

“No!” Huli bristled, and his tails stood up straight behind him. “Not as friends. You will love me as your mate. I want you with me forever!” Huli’s fierce determination had him trembling one second and wilting in the next. “But I must leave my Zhangge so I can become stronger.”

Xiao Dan reached out and scratched behind his left ear. “But you can stay with me for a little while, right?”

“Just two nights,” the fox mumbled.

Xiao Dan’s heart squeezed. That wasn’t enough time to spend with his fox, but he had to make the best of it. He didn’t allow his smile to waver. “Two nights is enough time for you to tell me about all the things you’ve seen while you’ve been away.”

“Yes!”

And like that, Huli’s spirits rebounded. The fox launched into tale after tale of distant forests, small villages, winding wild rivers, and epic mountains. Xiao Dan snagged his forgotten basket and resumed picking plums, hanging on Huli’s every word. For a time, he forgot about his worries with his clan and their growing restlessness. Huli opened up an entire world for him he’d never seen.

When the sun was rising on the second night, he hugged his beloved fox with two tails tightly and sent him into the world with a bounce in his step. Instantly, he missed

Huli's enthusiasm and simple joy in everything that surrounded him. He missed the fox's playful mischief and fearless determination. There might have been a bit of worry in his heart that he would fall hopelessly in love with Huli. Could he dare to love a huli jing?

Yet, if his most recent encounter with the huli jing had taught him anything, it was that it was time for his clan mates to venture out in the world. Even if it was only for a short time. If a young huli jing could do it and return safely, thousand-year-old vampires had to be able to manage easily enough. Zhang manor would always be their home, but it was time for them to see a bit of the world after being hidden away for so long.

Chapter 9

Huli

October 27, 2023

Hartford, Connecticut

"Are you sure this club isn't owned by an actual phoenix?"

The loud thumping music almost swallowed Xiao Dan's warm chuckle up. "No. Vampire. One of the Variks."

"It's Rafe Varik's place." Moon slung an arm across his shoulders and leaned in close so he didn't have to raise his voice. "I think he renamed it Phoenix after the nightclub burned down in a vampire war. It used to be called something like Blush, I think."

When they stepped into the club, he could understand the name choice. It was like they'd stepped inside of an inferno. The walls were shades of red and there were

black torchlike light fixtures that cast a wavering, dancing glow as if they were small fires. Several black leather banquettes lined two of the walls, giving people a clear view of the large dance floor that was packed with revelers.

Huli's heart raced in time with the music. His nose twitched at the rich scents that perfumed the air. Humans filled the nightclub, but they weren't alone. He could smell vampires, shifters, and maybe even some witches in the mix.

Gentle fingers brushed his, and Huli jumped. He blinked and found Xiao Dan smiling at him while a worried look rested in his dark eyes.

"Are you okay? Not too overwhelmed?" Xiao Dan inquired.

This was what he got for telling Xiao Dan that he'd never been to a modern-day nightclub. He'd visited plenty of gambling halls and taverns prior to getting all of his tails, but in the last couple of centuries, he'd stopped venturing far from Xiao Dan's side. Why go seeking amusement elsewhere when all he needed was smiling at him right now?

Besides, how could he be overwhelmed? He was in public with his mate. Xiao Dan wasn't embarrassed or ashamed to be seen with him. Not that he thought the vampire would feel that way, but Huli had always kept his distance in the past, meeting with Xiao Dan in private because he knew the rest of the Zhang clan despised and distrusted him. Those days were in the past. No more hiding.

He tightened his grip on Xiao Dan's hand and lifted on his toes. If he'd been in his fox form, all his tails would have been wagging. "Nope! I'm fine. I want to see everything with you. The only thing..."

Xiao Dan cocked his head to the side. "What?"

“Why are the humans all dressed so strange? And not even just the humans. Everyone is wearing weird things. I think he smells like a wolf shifter, but he’s dressed up as a sheep! Or maybe he’s a cloud.”

Moon’s laughter invaded their conversation. “It’s almost Halloween!”

“I thought that was a holiday for children to go candy begging.”

“It is, but adults use it as an excuse to dress up in slutty costumes and pretend to be magical and spooky things,” Moon replied.

“Why?”

Moon shrugged. “Because it’s fun and sexy.”

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Huli glanced at Xiao Dan, trying to figure out what the vampire might dress up as to become even sexier than he already was, but his mind came up blank. He couldn't think of anything that could make Xiao Dan sexier. Except maybe...Xiao Dan with a fox tail. Oh, and fox ears? Yes, that could be very sexy.

Xiao Dan pressed a quick kiss to the tip of his nose. "Save that wicked thought for later. We need to take care of Min first."

Fuck.

Min. He'd forgotten all about her.

"Ope! We've been spotted," Moon interjected. He thrust a hand between them and pointed at the enormous bar. "That's Lola. She works for Rafe, and she's a total badass. Don't mess with her."

Huli turned his attention to the woman who matched his diminutive height of one hundred and sixty-two centimeters. She had long black hair that hung down her back and was threaded with several slender braids, but it didn't detract from her stern expression or overall air of violence. She looked like she was accustomed to having everyone listen to her.

"Are you from the Zhang clan?" she demanded when she was standing in front of them.

"We are," Xiao Dan answered.

Her eyes skimmed them only to stop on Moon. “We don’t normally allow fledglings in here.”

“Come on, Lola. You know me,” Moon pleaded in his most cajoling tone. “I’ve been in here plenty of times in the past.”

“As a witch.” She lifted her gaze to Chen, who had a hand on Moon’s shoulder. “Rafe says you’re here searching for a possible troublemaker. I assume you’ll keep tight control of your fledgling.”

“Hey! I—eep!”

“I will keep him locked to my side,” Chen promised as he pulled Moon closer.

“Fine. Follow me. Rafe said he’d be stopping by later, but you can use his booth while you’re here.” Lola led the way through the crowd that parted at her approach. Huli held his head high as all the eyes in the club seemed to fall on them as they crossed to the largest circular booth in the center of the far wall, giving them an excellent view of everyone in the nightclub.

Maybe a bit too good, since it also put them front and center. There was no way Min was going to miss seeing them, assuming she hadn’t spotted them already. He wasn’t sure if the plan was to surprise Min or to use Xiao Dan as bait. He was not a fan of option two.

Once they were seated and Lola was on her way to the bar, Moon slouched in his seat, leaning his shoulder against Chen. “What’s the deal with all the crap thrown onto fledglings? I’m not some out-of-control monster. I have a handle on my impulses. It’s not like I’m going to throw myself at some human because he shows a little neck.”

Chen shifted in his seat so he could wrap his arm about Moon's stiff shoulders. Huli's mouth dropped open as he watched Chen's body language change into something soft and cuddly. "That's the thing, baobei. Most fledglings are out of control and don't have a good grip on their impulses. Fledglings cause most vampire-related deaths in humans. Small things set them off."

"But I've never been like that." Moon pouted.

Xiao Dan laughed. "That's because your maker is an ancient vampire. His blood flows through your veins. I'm sure most vampires turned in the last few centuries have much younger masters than our clan."

"Not to mention, most fledglings need to feed nightly for the first few years of their existence," Chen chimed in. "That's not the case for you."

"Nightly hunting? God, no! I need a nibble once every other week at most."

"That would be my ancient blood bumping you further along than you'd normally be," Chen murmured.

"Speaking of hunting..." Xiao Dan drawled. "How goes that training?"

"Oh shit," Moon mumbled, sinking farther in his seat so that he was practically under the table.

"We put that training on pause when the fae grew too troublesome," Chen admitted.

"It would be a good idea to get back to that now that the fae aren't a problem."

"Yes, Shixiong," Chen agreed instantly.

“Blech,” Moon complained.

Huli leaned on the table, getting as close to Moon as possible. “Do you not like the taste of human blood?”

The pale-blond vampire shrugged a shoulder as he sat up higher. “It’s okay. But nothing is as good as Chen’s. Plus, I’m not a big fan of being a creepy stalker, stealing blood from unsuspecting humans just trying to go about their lives.”

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Chen grasped a short lock of Moon's hair and gave it a tug. "I'm not a fan of you feeding from anyone else either, but this is for your protection."

There was a sudden ripple of excitement through the crowd. The talking and even shouting grew louder. People on the dance floor shifted this way and that, but their movements weren't intimate with the music. They stopped talking and stretched to see what had the humans and even the other vampires excited.

Suddenly, the loud thumping music stopped, and the rich, lilting cry of a violin cut through the room. The song was haunting as it rose and crashed into the people in violent waves. No one spoke, appearing to hold their breath as the song hypnotized them.

The crowd parted near their table, revealing a tall, slender vampire with dark shoulder-length hair and vibrant blue eyes locked on them as he approached while playing a violin. He was dressed in a dark old-fashioned suit and a long cape, as if he were an old movie vampire.

As he reached them, the song ended, and the crowd cheered. Rafe Varik held up the violin and bow above his head for a second and bowed to his audience before sliding into the booth next to Chen and across from Xiao Dan.

"The head of the Zhang clan has finally come to my slice of the world. I am honored," Rafe purred. A servant appeared at the table and opened a violin case. She carefully put away the violin and bow, each movement precise as if she were touching something infinitely precious and priceless. When she left without a word, the DJ restarted the music, but it seemed like discordant noise compared to the music

Rafe had played.

“We are the ones who are honored. Thank you for having us,” Xiao Dan stated.

“I didn’t know you played an instrument,” Chen murmured.

Rafe gave a small dismissive wave of his hand. “All my brothers and I are musically inclined. I’m the only one who likes to show off.” His gaze sharpened on Huli, and he leaned forward. “And who is this adorable morsel? I thought I’d met all the Zhang clan, but you don’t look familiar to me.”

Moon snorted. “You’ve seen him plenty of times in the woods.” Rafe lifted one questioning eyebrow to Moon and the young vampire giggled. “That’s Huli. The fox spirit with the nine tails.”

The Varik’s eyes widened slightly to give away his surprise. His smile grew a little wicked. “So, you’re foxy in all your forms. How delicious.”

“I’m foxy only for my Zhang-ge,” Huli said while threading his arm through Xiao Dan’s.

“Don’t mind him. He likes to stir up trouble.”

All eyes snapped to the blond vampire, who was now standing next to their table. He was dressed all in white and even had a golden halo on a wire hovering above his bright-blond locks. Rafe slid to his feet and captured his mate’s hand. Solicitous Rafe replaced Flirtatious Rafe as he brought Philippe’s hand to his lips and kissed his knuckles several times as he ushered the other vampire into his vacated spot.

The booth was now cozy as it accommodated six full-grown men, but Huli wasn’t complaining, as it gave him an excellent excuse to snuggle close to Xiao Dan.

“Mon ange knows me best,” Rafe murmured.

“You might not have been introduced properly. Rafe and Philippe Varik, this is my mate, Huli,” Xiao Dan announced.

A surprised squeak escaped Huli, and he threw his arms around Xiao Dan, pressing his face into the vampire’s chest. He’d said it. No, more than that. He’d told someone outside of his clan, introduced Huli as his.

A lifetime of waiting and pain and working through the hopeless abyss was all building to this exact moment. He was Xiao Dan’s, and Xiao Dan was his.

“I want the world to know,” Xiao Dan murmured into his ear.

“Aww...aren’t new couples the cutest?” Philippe cooed.

Chen sighed. “They can be when you’re sure that your clan mate isn’t going to lose his soul and have his heart broken.”

Huli opened his mouth to snap at the vampire, but Moon beat him to it.

“Huli adores Xiao Dan. He would never do anything to hurt him.”

Xiao Dan pressed another kiss to his head and loosened his hold on Huli. “Forgive me. This isn’t the place or the time for our nonsense.”

“I beg to differ!” Rafe declared. Huli lifted his head to find Rafe wrapped around his own mate. “Regardless of our long life spans, we should never waste a single opportunity to appreciate those who possess our hearts. Even a thousand years with mon ange is too little time.”

“I cannot agree more,” Chen stated.

Xiao Dan cleared his throat. “As much as I wish this was a normal evening out, we are here on serious business.”

“Yes, yes. You’re right.” Rafe snagged a quick kiss from Philippe and sat up.

“Aiden said something about you hunting a seductive human killer.” He paused and stared at Huli. “Another huli jing, correct?”

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“I wish I could say that she was an abnormality among my kind, but in truth, I’m the oddity,” Huli grumbled.

“That’s not right. Some huli jing are helpful and friendly toward humans, and some are not,” Xiao Dan argued.

“Like humans!” Moon added.

“And vampires,” Philippe chimed in.

“What are we looking for?” Rafe inquired.

“Her usual approach is to appear as a lone attractive woman who is irresistible to men. She will choose her prey and lure him off alone to the woods, where she’ll steal his soul and leave his corpse to be eaten by wolves.”

Rafe blinked slowly at Huli, his face void of emotion. He then motioned one hand wildly at the thick throng of people dancing not more than a few meters away from them. Within the crowd were dozens of attractive women who could wrap a man in a haze of lust and lead him to his doom.

“That would be why this is such an excellent hunting ground. Even better than brothels.”

“I have so many questions, but now isn’t the time,” Philippe murmured. He lifted a hand and touched Rafe’s cheek. “Promise me we’ll travel to their home for vacation. I have questions that need answers.”

Rafe turned his face to press his lips to Philippe's fingers. "Anything for you, my precious darling."

"I agree that locating Min here or at any nightclub will be difficult," Xiao Dan interjected. "Our goal is to locate her and chase her from your establishment. We don't want to start a fight here."

"That would be appreciated. I will alert my workers to keep an eye out for women who arrive alone and attempt to leave with a man." Rafe sighed and shook his head. "They'll think I've gone insane with instructions like that."

"If they're vampires, they'll be able to smell the magic on her," Chen stated. "She's incredibly powerful. Tell them not to confront her. Just follow until one of our clan can get there."

"But I think our best chance of capturing her is to blend in and catch her by surprise." Xiao Dan bumped Huli, drawing his wide eyes up to his mate's smiling face. "Care to join me on the dance floor?"

Huli sat frozen for all of one heartbeat, and then he leaped to his feet. He pulled a chuckling Xiao Dan out of the booth and onto the dance floor. The song had shifted to something slower and gentler, but Huli didn't care. It could have been one of those frantic rock songs and he still would have pulled Xiao Dan into his arms for a slow sway.

"Can you forgive me, Huli?" Xiao Dan asked after they'd been dancing for a minute.

Huli lifted his head from where he'd rested it on Xiao Dan's shoulder. He'd been wrapped in his sweet Xiao Dan's scent and the strength of his arms. There was nothing more perfect in all the world, but his question was a jolt to reality. "For what?"

“For waiting so long to claim you as my mate. I’ve loved you for so long, but I hesitated, afraid that you didn’t really feel the same for me. I was afraid...”

“No more. I don’t care about all those years. Even if we weren’t mates, we were friends, and I cherish every second we’ve had together. I didn’t need to be your mate to be happy. Every time you smiled or laughed, I was floating among the stars. That was more than any huli jing deserved.”

This was all he’d wanted for as long as he could remember.

Huli tipped his head up, wordlessly demanding another sweet kiss from his mate, when magic tickled his nose. Dangerously familiar magic.

Min had just walked into the club.

Chapter 10

Zhang Xiao Dan

Xiao Dan leaned in for a kiss, but Huli stiffened in his arms. He gazed at the playful fox to find a disdainful look filling his normally warm amber eyes. There were few things that could dampen Huli’s good mood, and Min was at the top of that list.

“Where is she?” Xiao Dan demanded. His hands tightened on the man in his arms, fear leaving him wanting to keep his mate close and safe.

“Just walked in.” Huli turned them and glanced over his shoulder through the crowd. “Top of the stairs. Blond hair and heart-shaped face. Tiny red skirt. So tacky.”

Xiao Dan bit the inside of his cheek at Huli’s catty comment and focused on finding the other huli jing. When he spotted her, there was a small frown on her bow-shaped

lips as if she were confused by the humans' Halloween attire. Clearly, it wasn't something she'd planned for.

“Go tell Chen and Moon,” Huli ordered. “See if there's a back way out of here. I'll try to herd her out the front door. They can run around and meet her.”

“Got it.”

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As Huli was pulling away, Xiao Dan jerked him close again, slamming their chests together. He captured the fox's mouth in a brief but bruising kiss that lit a fire in those shining amber eyes.

"Be careful," he admonished.

"Of course. I want many more of those."

Xiao Dan hesitated long enough to see Huli maneuver his way through the crowd. Fox ears sprouted from the top of his head, and with each step, a new tail appeared. Humans and magical creatures both gasped as he passed by. Some remarked on his amazing costume, but others watched him with their mouths hanging open. Huli always had to make an impact wherever he was.

What did it matter if they figured out it wasn't a costume? The fae had already opened their eyes to the long hidden world. And they were going to see much more if they couldn't get Min out of there quickly and quietly.

Xiao Dan cut through the crowd, returning to the table where Rafe and Philippe were getting to their feet. He planted both palms on the table and leaned in toward Chen. "Min just arrived. Huli is moving to intercept her." He glanced over his shoulder at Rafe and Philippe. "Do you have a back exit? Chen and Moon can circle around and catch her before she can escape."

"Yes, I can show the way," Rafe replied. He grabbed Philippe's hand and squeezed. "Tell Lola the situation. Help her keep things calm in here."

“I will. Ryder should also be here by now. I’ll get his help as well.”

“What about you?” Chen asked as he slid to his feet.

“I’m going to support Huli any way I can.”

His clan mate and oldest companion gave him a single wordless nod prior to running off with Moon and Rafe, while Philippe hurried to the bar where he had last seen Lola.

With their support in place, Xiao Dan could turn his full attention to his mate. Hurrying as fast as he could along the edge of the crowd in the center of the room, he worked his way closer to the bar and the main entrance.

Despite the ear-splitting music and flashing lights, no one was dancing. Most people had turned to watch the figure with the multiple fox tails as he stared at the blond woman at the top of the short flight of stairs. The low burble of conversation sounded curious, but it held an edge as if it could all shift to panic in the blink of an eye.

“How convenient,” Min purred as her gaze fell on Xiao Dan behind Huli. “You’ve come to your senses and delivered yourself to me.” She winked, the left corner of her bright-red lips rising in a smirk. “I promise it won’t hurt a bit.”

“Xiao Dan is off-limits,” Huli snarled. “You’re not allowed anywhere near him.”

“Let’s take our business outside, Min,” Xiao Dan suggested. “There’s no reason to include these people.”

Min’s smirk turned into a wicked grin as she stared out at the crowd, who was watching her and Huli as if they were putting on a show. A chill ran across Xiao Dan’s skin, and a knot tightened in his stomach. He’d just said the worst possible

thing.

“Why should I? Will you hand over your soul to save their lives?”

Yep. Very worst thing possible.

“I’m giving you this one chance to walk away from here, Min,” Huli warned.

“Ha! For old times’ sake?”

“No. So Gege doesn’t think I’m a complete monster.”

“Never,” Xiao Dan swore.

His mate shrugged one slender shoulder. “I guess that settles it.”

Huli lunged at Min, shapeshifting from partial human to full fox with all his glorious tails flowing behind him. Min darted out of the way, also losing her human guise in favor of her white fox form.

Huli pivoted on his back paws and gave chase while the rest of the club fell into pandemonium. Screams drowned out the music as people rushed for the exits. The only ones who seemed to linger were the handful of vampires who’d been present within the crowd. They retreated to the edges of the vast room and dark corridors reserved for the staff.

“What are they?”

“Shifters.”

“Not like any shifters I’ve ever seen.”

“They’re fae.”

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Those two words rumbled through the crowd, threatening to stop Xiao Dan's heart cold.

"They're not fae!" he barked at the gathering of vampires on his left. "They are nine-tailed fox spirits. Powerful magical creatures who are hundreds of years old."

"But not fae?" a blond vampire, dressed as what Xiao Dan assumed was a sexy mailman, repeated. Americans were so strange.

"Dude!" His companion punched him in the shoulder. "He said spirits. They're like ghosts."

Thankfully, Philippe and Lola rushed over to save him from this conversation as Huli tackled Min into a set of stools surrounding a tall, round table. The wooden clatter and breaking furniture filled the room and set Xiao Dan's teeth on edge.

"Getting them outside appears to be a bust," Philippe announced as he came to stand beside Xiao Dan. The vampire had lost his halo at some point and loosened his pristine white tie as if he were preparing to jump into the fray.

"Yes. Can you get the last spectators from the club and tell Rafe that I will reimburse him for all the damage caused to his business?"

He didn't wait to hear Philippe's answer. With his teeth clenched, Xiao Dan rushed forward, caught the leg of a fallen stool and flung it a meter in front of Min as she ran from Huli. The white fox was forced to stop sharply and try to move in a different direction. The pause lasted a fraction of a second, but it was enough time for Huli to

pounce.

Orange and white tufts of fur flew into the air, accompanied by angry growls and barks. Both creatures had shed all their human facades as they bit and clawed wildly at each other.

Xiao Dan's heart stuttered, and his mouth went dry. If anything happened to his Huli, he wasn't sure how he'd survive it. He wanted to jump in and help, but how could he interject himself? If this were any of his clan mates, it would have been easy. He was familiar with all their moves regardless of what weapon they were using. But this was two wild animals fighting. One wrong step and he could injure Huli instead of Min.

Not to mention, he was short on weapons. It wasn't like they could waltz into a nightclub carrying swords and bows. He'd hidden a few small knives on his person, but throwing them at Min was impossible as she continued to be wrapped up in Huli.

A low growl of frustration escaped him as he marched to another fallen stool and broke off a leg. Not perfect, but more than enough to crack a head if he had the chance.

Huli yelped and flew across the room to slam into the bar. Breath froze in Xiao Dan's lungs. Did he go to Huli to check on him or pursue Min now that she was free?

"Get her!" Lola shouted as she darted to his fox.

Paralysis broken, Xiao Dan zoomed across the room, swinging his chunk of wood like a sword. Min darted here and there, always a heartbeat away from being struck. Blood matted and stained her white fur. Was she wounded, or was that Huli's blood?

Later. He would think about that when he was sure Huli was safe from Min.

The white fox bounded away from him with a throaty laugh. Xiao Dan's hand tightened on the wood until it trembled. He'd give her something to laugh at. He threw out his left hand, and a bright-white light washed through the nightclub, replacing it with a moonlit orchard filled with plum trees. The same orchard he'd passed countless nights sitting with Huli, listening to his wild tales and silly thoughts.

"You've given me a forest," Min laughed. "That's supposed to stop me? I've lived my life in forests all over the east." He caught flashes of white as she moved between the trees.

"Yes, but not this one," Xiao Dan muttered under his breath. No one knew these trees like Huli.

He followed the flashes closely, trying to herd her away from where he'd last seen his mate. Min ran and hit a hidden wall of the nightclub with an ugly thud. She stumbled back, shaking her head, and even stepped on one of her own tails.

Xiao Dan struck, clocking the fox with his club. A blur of orange zipped in to grab one of those white tails in his mouth. Min yelped and jerked, breaking free as a white bolt of magic energy shot from her other tails. Huli flew into Xiao Dan and they both sailed across the room, slamming into the far wall.

Around them, Xiao Dan's illusion rippled and faded like rain washing chalk from a summer sidewalk.

"She's escaping out the rear exit!" Philippe shouted.

Xiao Dan glimpsed the white fox hurrying away with more blood on her coat and a pronounced limp. "Follow but just to make sure she leaves the immediate area," he directed as he turned his full attention to the fox lying in his lap. Huli's only movements were his shallow pants and the frantic beating of his heart against Xiao

Dan's thigh. Blood matted his fur, and there was now a nick on his left ear.

"My love, can you hear me? Are you all right?"

"No," Huli whined. "I hurt, Gege. I hurt everywhere."

Xiao Dan shifted so he could press a kiss to the top of Huli's head. "I know, my love. I'm going to take you home so you can heal properly."

"Were you hurt?"

"No, Min didn't hurt me, but I think I got a bruise on my bottom when I fell."

Huli turned his head ever so slightly toward Xiao Dan so that it looked as if there were a glint of laughter in his bright golden eye. "Does Gege need me to kiss it and make it better?"

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That was the happy, flirty comment he was hoping for. The panic attempting to strangle him eased enough for him to take a breath.

“You heal for me, and I’ll let you kiss anything you want.”

“Don’t tease Huli, Gege. I want to kiss you everywhere.”

Behind him, someone cleared his throat. With burning cheeks, he glanced over his shoulder to find Chen standing a few meters away in the shadows.

“Forgive me, Shixiong. Min slipped past us. Rafe has sent a couple of his people to follow at a distance. They’ll send an update soon.”

Xiao Dan digested that info as he stared at his fox. His hand stroked his warm fur while listening to his ragged breathing. At first, he’d thought they might scare the other huli jing away. He hadn’t believed that they would need to kill her.

He’d underestimated Min and her powers, and he had no one to blame but himself. He’d judged Min on what he’d seen of his sweet fox. Huli had never used his magical gifts against the Zhang clan. When they’d fought the fae, he’d caught only glimpses of Huli, and then he’d been mostly sneaking.

He’d been wrong about Min. Not cautious enough. She had to die. And not because of the threat she posed to him.

No, she had to die for touching his mate.

No one was allowed to harm his huli jing. And she was going to pay for every drop of blood he spilled.

“Have Rafe call them off. She won’t be going far. She’ll return for me and Huli.”

“Yes, Shixiong.” There was one footstep followed by silence, as if Chen had stopped.

“Will Huli be okay?” Chen inquired in a low voice.

“Oh, no! Gege, am I dying? Did Chen really ask about me? I must be dying!” Huli’s voice trembled with fake fear or genuine laughter he couldn’t quite hold in. Xiao Dan wasn’t sure which.

Chen groaned and stomped off. Xiao Dan was glad his back was to Chen so the vampire couldn’t see his grin.

“Huli, you’re incorrigible,” Xiao Dan admonished, not that either of them believed it.

The fox cracked open one eye to stare up at him. “But you still love your silly fox.”

“I love my silly fox with all of my heart.”

Chapter 11

Huli

Lying in bed alone was boring.

Huli wouldn’t deny that he loved sleeping in Xiao Dan’s bed while wearing his pajamas. He’d even bathed using Xiao Dan’s soaps. There was little else he could do to smell more like his mate.

Well, there was sex.

But Xiao Dan had declared no fun stuff until he'd fully healed. The fight with Min had been three nights ago, and he'd been healed for two of those nights. It was time to show Xiao Dan how ready he was for all the kisses he owed him.

Huli kicked off the blankets and sprang out of bed. He stared at the comfy blue pajamas he was wearing. Xiao Dan had rolled up the sleeves and legs personally, so the material didn't stretch past his hands and feet. Should he conjure up some tight, sexy clothes to put Xiao Dan in the mood?

No. He enjoyed being in his mate's clothes, wearing the same fabric that caressed Xiao Dan's skin.

Besides, Xiao Dan had helped him into these pajamas. He could help Huli out of them again.

That decided, he slipped out of the bedroom and started down the hall in search of Xiao Dan. Voices echoed out of the kitchen. By the number and volume, it sounded like most of the clan was in there arguing about Min. At least they weren't saying bad things about him.

He stood in the hallway, just outside of view of anyone in the kitchen, listening for the sound of Xiao Dan's calm and collected voice, but it never piped up. Maybe he wasn't in there.

While it was tempting to stand there listening to the other Zhang clan members come up with ways to roast Min, he would much rather locate Xiao Dan for some private time.

Smiling to himself, Huli turned on his heel and headed down a different hallway in

search of his mate. An unexpected bubble of joy rose in his chest. He'd never felt such freedom walking through the clan home. The estate in China was three times the size of this one, and they had chased him away every time they'd spotted him.

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In the United States, he'd been tolerated because they'd had a use for him against the fae.

But the fae were gone, and he could still walk where he wished within the home and on the grounds because he was Xiao Dan's mate. This was where he belonged.

He wandered along, poking his head into one room after another, but there was no sign of Gege. Maybe he was in the kitchen. This was why he needed one of those silly phones Moon had shown him. He could send Xiao Dan a covert message to meet him in his bedroom.

At the next hallway, his feet stopped. Right in the middle of his path stood Erik, the adorable two-year-old the clan had adopted. He belonged to Junjie and Leo, though, considering how they doted on the boy. Huli stared at the child in red pajamas that featured a cartoon fire engine. Under one arm, he clutched a large white bunny with floppy ears. Huli looked around, but there was zero sign of Leo or Junjie.

"Hey there, Little One," Huli said a bit awkwardly. "Where are Jun-Jun and Leo?" He'd almost asked where his mama and baba were as a playful reference to the vampire and shifter, but he bit his tongue. The fae had stolen the child's real mother and father. No reason to stomp on that painful memory.

The child's face lit up, and he pointed at Huli with his free hand as he exclaimed in some garbled Mandarin. It took Huli an extra second to realize Erik had called him "Pretty Gege."

Huli straightened and flashed Erik a bright smile. "Yes, I am Pretty Gege." His

mischievous side had so wanted to feed the sweet child Cantonese words just to see if he could make Junjie's head explode, but now he couldn't bring himself to do it. Not when this brilliant boy had cobbled together what words he knew to christen him Pretty Gege.

He'd have to fuck with Leo's language lessons instead.

"What are you doing by yourself? Shouldn't you be in bed? Or with Junjie?" He glanced about again, but there was no sign of the vampire or the cat shifter.

Erik said something he didn't understand at all. He thought he heard mention of a fish, truck, and stars, but it was all nonsense to him. Apparently, Erik didn't need him to understand. The little boy toddled over to Huli and grabbed his hand with his free one. He pulled Huli along the hall, still jabbering away, leaving the fox to make the occasional noise of agreement. He stared at the tiny hand as it held his. In all his thousand years, he'd had few interactions with kids and none where they could touch him.

But Erik had shown no hesitation in taking his hand and smiling up at him, as if he trusted in Huli completely. He cleared a sudden blockage in his throat and blinked away a bit of dust. These vampires needed to do a much better job of keeping up with their cleaning duties.

After a couple of stops to get the bunny repositioned under his arm, Erik led Huli to one of the sitting rooms that opened to a garden complete with a small koi pond. This was one of Erik's favorite places to play because there was a retractable roof that blocked the sun during the day and allowed Junjie and the other vampires to be out there with him.

As they reached the garden lit up by a variety of lanterns, Erik released his hand and went straight for the yellow dump truck sitting under one of the trees. He held it up

for Huli to see with a huge grin on his face.

“Ah. You wanted your truck. Should we go to your room now?”

“No.”

Well, he understood that easily enough.

The boy plopped down on the ground, put his bunny beside him, and proceeded to play with his truck. Huli glanced over his shoulder at the house. He wanted to locate Xiao Dan, but he didn't feel comfortable leaving Erik on his own. Junjie and Leo probably thought the little guy was still napping and weren't in a big rush to check on him.

Oh, well. This gave him an opportunity to shift. When he'd returned to the Zhang manor, he'd healed enough to change into his human form so Xiao Dan could help him clean up. Being human also made it easier for cuddles. But he'd not had the chance to change back into his natural form.

In the blink of an eye, Huli shifted from human to fox. He shook out his tails behind him and stretched one leg after another, working out the kinks. It wasn't uncomfortable to spend extended periods of time in a human body. He'd done it for so long now that it had become a comfortable fit, but there was no denying that it felt nice being a fox again.

Erik's excited squeal drew his gaze. The child clapped his hands and stared up at him with wide eyes. “Pretty Gege! Pretty Gege tails!”

“Oh, you like my tails?”

Erik's eager nod dissolved into giggles as Huli brushed one tail across his cheek. His

laughter squeezed Huli's heart. It was the second best sound in the world. The best was still Xiao Dan telling Huli he loved him.

Huli stretched out on the cool grass next to Erik and draped several of his tails over the child, wringing more giggles out of him. To his surprise, Erik was incredibly gentle with his tails, petting them with extreme care.

“Soft tails. Pretty Gege tails soft.”

“Thank you. They are quite soft. Will you have a soft, fluffy tail when you get older?”

Erik bobbed his head vigorously. “Tail like Mao Gege.” He pointed to the house, where Leo was likely lurking.

“Yes, Leo has a nice tail for a cat.” It didn't compare to his own tails, but there was nothing the shifter could do about that. He was sure a good kid like Erik was going to be blessed with a silky and fluffy tail.

“Who would have guessed that you would go soft on a human?”

Min's voice invaded their happy little scene, raising all of Huli's hackles. His head snapped up, and he bared his teeth in a low, deep growl the moment he spotted the white fox sitting in another tree on the other side of the garden. If he hadn't been so wrapped up in entertaining Erik and reveling in his praise for his tails, he would have sensed her approach.

A soft, frightened whimper escaped Erik and Huli wrapped the child up in all his tails, hiding him from Min's view.

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“Don’t come another step closer. This human is none of your business.”

“How about this trade: give me the boy, and I’ll let you keep the vampire and his soul? That’s more than a fair deal for the knowledge I gave you over the years.”

“No! You get neither! Leave here, or I will rip off all of your tails!”

The words were barely out of his mouth when a horrendous roar rent the air and shook the house. Erik’s whimpers turned into frightened cries. Huli chanced a look into the house to see a large Bengal tiger racing toward them, followed by Junjie and several other Zhang clan members.

Leo stopped beside Huli and roared again at Min, flashing enormous fangs. As Junjie stepped outside, Huli picked Erik up with two of his tails and lightly tossed the boy into his arms.

With Erik tucked away, he leaped across the pond to Min’s tree. Leo was right behind as they chased Min across the Zhang property and over the wall. It was tempting to keep pursuing her, but Erik’s cries seemed to tug on Leo, holding him back. The giant cat let out a final angry huff at the wall where Min had disappeared before turning to the house. Huli followed him to the garden where Junjie was still fiercely holding Erik as he continued to sob. The rest of the clan gathered around him, whispering reassurances.

As Leo entered the garden, he shifted into his human form and ran his hand along Erik’s shaking body.

“Shhh...it’s okay. Kitty Gege is bad kitty. I’m so sorry for scaring you. Everything is okay now. Me and Huli scared the other fox away.”

Huli shifted into his human form as well and waggled his fingers at Erik as the child lifted his head from Junjie’s shoulder to look at Leo and Huli. His crying stopped, and he reached for Leo. He transitioned from the vampire to the shifter, recovered from his scare.

With a relieved sigh, Huli turned to Xiao Dan, ready to demand to know where he’d been hiding. But he didn’t have the chance.

Junjie threw himself at Huli, wrapping him in a bone-crushing hug while a fractured sob broke from his throat. “Thank you so much for protecting Erik. I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to him. He’s our whole world.”

Huli froze, his hands held out to his sides while the vampire clutched him like a boa constrictor seizing its prey. He stared over Junjie’s shoulder at Xiao Dan and soundlessly mouthed, Help me, but his evil mate just smiled.

Not one of the other clan members had ever hugged him. Junjie, though, had been the first to stick up for him besides Xiao Dan.

After swallowing hard, Huli patted Junjie on the back twice. “There, there. Erik is safe. Everyone here will always keep him safe. No one will ever get near the little boy.”

Junjie sniffed and released Huli at last. He hurried to Leo and Erik to coo and cuddle their precious kitten.

But Huli wasn’t free yet. The rest of the clan came to him one by one to pat him on the shoulder and offer supportive words. Ming Yu even pressed a kiss to his cheek

and promised to make him some pork rib soup. His favorite! She knew what his favorite meal was.

The second he was alone with Xiao Dan, Huli had no words. Even Xiang and Chen had said nice things to him without even a hint of sarcasm.

“I’m so proud of you,” Xiao Dan whispered.

And those words from his mate lit a fire that started at the tips of his ears and ran across his face and down his chest.

“It’s all your fault,” Huli countered, wishing he could hide his face behind his tails.

“My fault? How is that possible?”

“I was looking for you, but I found Erik instead, and he called me Pretty Gege. He wanted to play with his truck and he likes my tails. And that boy deserves to have the bestest, fluffiest tail when he finally shifts.”

He was babbling. He knew he was babbling, but it felt like talking was the only way to get rid of the lump in his throat.

“Min offered to take Erik in place of my soul, but you didn’t hesitate to tell her off. You protected that little boy you don’t actually like,” Xiao Dan said, his smile growing wider.

Huli swallowed hard. So he’d heard that part, huh? “It’s not that I don’t like him. I just don’t like the times he gets more attention from you than I do. The kid is cute. Especially when he calls me Pretty Gege.”

Xiao Dan closed the distance between them. He cupped Huli’s cheek with one hand

and a different heat spread through Huli's body. Everything in him wanted to melt into his mate and never separate.

“Well, you have my complete and undivided attention now. What would you like to do, my beautiful, brave fox?”

Oh, he had ideas. So many ideas.

Chapter 12

Huli

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:33 am

1272 CE

Luoyang, near Zhang manor

Huli paced the orchard, tails flicking behind him. This was ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous.

After everything he'd gone through already...

The pain. The heartbreak and worry that came with spending so many years away from Xiao Dan.

All of that, and he still couldn't shift into a human. It wasn't fair. He had five tails now. The same number of tails Min possessed when she appeared before him as a human. Why couldn't he do this?

He was just as smart as she was. Just as strong. He'd even gotten his fifth tails six whole months earlier than she had.

Why couldn't he do this?

He stopped pacing between the barren plum trees and tensed every muscle in his body. He grunted and pushed, trying to forcemagic throughout his frame, demanding it change into a human. It didn't matter if he became a man or a woman. That part could be changed later. He'd make himself into something Xiao Dan could love.

"Huli? Is that you?" Xiao Dan's voice rang out across the orchard.

The fox released the breath he was holding and relaxed again. He collapsed onto the ground, flattening himself into a fox rug.

He couldn't do it.

Maybe he shouldn't have been so hasty to part ways with Min. Once he'd learned all her cultivation tricks, he'd left her behind, confident that he could figure out the human shifting bit on his own.

Wrong.

"Huli?"

"I'm here," he said, lifting one of his orange tails so Xiao Dan could easily see him over the mounds of snow that had fallen earlier in the day.

Xiao Dan's crunching footsteps grew louder as he approached. Huli had returned to Luoyang three nights ago and had been toying with the idea of staying for a full year or even more before continuing with his training. Five tails were nice, but they weren't nine. He wanted to be a true jiuweihu.

Unfortunately, with his shifting failure, it was clear that he wasn't ready to take a lengthy break yet.

"Are you okay?" Xiao Dan knelt in the snow beside him and lightly touched the top of his head. The gentle stroking helped to soothe away some of his frustration, but he didn't want to be soothed. He wanted to be human.

"I'm okay," he mumbled.

"No, you're not. My happy, silly fox would be in my lap, licking my face and

begging for cuddles. What's wrong?" XiaoDan scratched him behind one ear and Huli jerked away to leap to his feet.

"I don't want to be your happy, silly fox," he snapped.

He paced away from Xiao Dan, his tails whipping behind him. The air crackled with magic, which usually made him happy, but this time, it only pissed him off. All this magic and he couldn't change into a human.

"Forgive me, Huli. I...didn't realize," Xiao Dan whispered. Huli turned to find the vampire's head was low and his shoulders were drooping. Did he think Huli meant...

"No!" Huli rushed to Xiao Dan's side, bumped his head into the vampire's chest, and attempted to climb into his lap. "Huli will always be Xiao Dan's fox." When Xiao Dan still didn't move, Huli wrapped all five of his tails around the vampire, cocooning them as best he could. "Always your fox."

"But you said..."

Huli heaved a sigh and pressed his face into Xiao Dan's neck. "I want to be more than a fox."

"You are. You're a magnificent huli jing with five glorious tails. That's amazing. You have so much to be proud of."

Huli closed his eyes and swallowed against the lump that had formed in his throat. Xiao Dan always had such kind, supportive words for him. He didn't deserve this human's sweet devotion.

"But with five tails, I should be able to shift into a human."

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“What?” Xiao Dan stiffened at his words. Huli pulled away so he could sit in the snow and see his expression.

His Zhang-ge looked like a young god, with the snow glistening in the moonlight. His long dark hair tumbled over his shoulders and Huli ached for fingers so he could at last touch it.

“You want to be human? Can huli jing really do that? You mentioned it once years ago, but I thought...I didn’t believe you to be serious.”

“Of course we can do it! There are all kinds of stories about huli jing taking human form.”

“Yes, but in most of those stories, the huli jing do that to trick unsuspecting humans and hurt them.”

Huli pouted, flicking some snow with one tail. “We can shift for other reasons.”

“What would be your reason? Do you plan to trick me?” There was a playful note in Xiao Dan’s voice, but to Huli, this was serious business.

“I want to be human, so you’ll love me.”

Xiao Dan blinked, and his lips parted, but no sound came out. Huli continued to meet his blank stare, fighting the urge to fidget under his continued silence. This was not going as well as he might have hoped.

The vampire blinked two more times before he spoke. “But I already love you.”

A dismissive noise erupted from Huli’s throat, and he flopped down on his stomach, his ears flattened in his irritation. “As a pet. I don’t want to be loved as a pet or some silly amusement.”

“Huli, you are my greatest and closest friend.”

Xiao Dan’s softly spoken words made Huli’s heart skip. His ears perked up as he gazed at Xiao Dan out of the corner of his eye to find his sweet Zhang-ge smiling at him.

“What about Chen?”

“I am close friends with Chen. He is also my shidi.²¹ Yet, since our shifu’s death, he has looked to me for strength and relies on me for answers when the clan is feeling lost. Because of that, I don’t feel like I can share my fears and doubts with him. I don’t wish to burden him and shake his confidence in me.”

Huli’s head lifted. “But you can with me.”

“I can. With you, I feel like I can be my truest self. I’m not afraid or worried about how you’ll judge me. There’s no fear of disappointing you.”

The fox rolled onto his back while resting his head in Xiao Dan’s lap. “Because Gege will never let me down. Zhang Xiao Dan is perfect in every way.”

“Not even close, but I love your confidence in me,” Xiao Dan said with a chuckle. He tapped a finger on the tip of Huli’s nose.

“I want you to love me the way two humans love each other. I want tokissyou.”

“Oh...” Xiao Dan exhaled heavily. “Huli, that’s...complicated.”

“Why? I just need to be a human that you find attractive. Tell Huli what kind of human you find appealing, and that’s what I will be.”

A choking noise broke from Xiao Dan’s throat, and he gasped for air. “Huli, I can’t tell you something like that. Your appearance should be what you choose and what makes you happy.”

Huli thought about it for a second and shook his head. “Nah. My human outside is only for Zhang-ge. The inside is for Huli. That I will never change because you already love my inside.”

“That’s true,” Xiao Dan said, even as he pressed his fingers into his forehead and rubbed. “It’s that things like attraction, physical love, and even romantic love are complicated.”

Huli popped up. “Yes, that! I want all of that with you. And we can have it once I figure out how to turn into a human.”

“Sometimes, the human heart doesn’t work that way.”

“Why?”

Xiao Dan’s sigh was long and loud. “Honestly, I don’t know. I don’t know why some people are attracted to each other and some are not. Maybe love and attraction are nothing more than a type of fickle magic that I have no hope of mastering. I worry that I might not be able to love you like you want me to, and I will lose my greatest friend.”

“No, that is not possible,” Huli declared. “I will always be Xiao Dan’s friend.”

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Of course, Huli also believed that Xiao Dan was worrying too much. Since he loved Huli as a friend, it would be only natural for Xiao Dan to fall in love with him as a human. The vampire was overthinking things. A bad human habit.

They sat in comfortable silence for several minutes. Huli replayed in his head all the steps and tricks he'd used to turn into a human, while trying to think of new options. Was this something he could do piece by piece in the beginning? A hand. A foot. A nose. Or did he have to know what his human form looked like from top to bottom so he could change all of him at once?

He didn't know how much time ticked by before Xiao Dan's voice broke through his meandering thoughts. "Huli, can I give you something?"

The fox perked up, thoughts of shifting forgotten. "A present? Zhang-ge has a present for his Huli?" He lunged at Xiao Dan, sniffing him everywhere, which was unnecessary considering he would have smelled the food on Xiao Dan as soon as he'd entered the plum orchard. Food was what Xiao Dan always brought as a present. However, sniffing Xiao Dan gave him the chance to fill his nose with the vampire's scent and make him laugh.

"I do," Xiao Dan chuckled as he playfully fought to push Huli back. "But you might not like it because it's not food."

"I love all gifts from Zhang-ge." Huli sat across from Xiao Dan with his chest out and his tails flicking wildly behind him. The vampire couldn't expect him to be still when he was waiting to receive a gift.

He watched as Xiao Dan dug into a cloth pouch hanging from his waist. “I saw this in a shop a while ago and thought of you. I wanted to give it to you the moment I heard you achieved your fifth tail. It’s to celebrate all your hard work and to show you how much you mean to me.”

Huli gasped as the moonlight glided over the exquisite green jade pendant. It was intricately carved by what looked to be a master craftsman. Huli did not need to be human to understand the value of jade or that the pendant in Xiao Dan’s hands was worth a small fortune.

But what struck him the most was that Xiao Dan had seen this beautiful art and thought of him.

For the first time, he had an entirely new reason for wanting to be human. He wanted to hold the jade pendant, feel its smoothness with human fingers. He longed to press human lips to it and kiss this treasure Xiao Dan had given him.

“Do...do you like it?”

“I love it,” Huli breathed and meant it with every fiber of his being. “I love it almost as much as I love Zhang-ge.” He touched it with his paw but quickly withdrew it, not wanting to damage the jade with his claws.

“It’s on a ribbon,” Xiao Dan said, holding up the matching pale-green ribbon that ran through a hole at the top. “I can tie it around your neck so you can feel the weight on your fur.”

“Yes! Yes, do that!” He edged closer and lowered his head so Xiao Dan could place it about his neck. When the weight settled on him, he sighed to see the lovely jade against his white and orange fur. It was perfect.

Now he had a constant reminder of Xiao Dan's love. He would learn to shift into a human, and one day, the pendant would hang from his belt, just like how the humans wore them.

Hell, he'd weasel up to Min again and convince her to teach him how to shift if he got stuck. Nothing was going to keep him from winning his vampire.

1 Shidi – junior disciple/brother

Chapter 13

Huli

October 30, 2023

Zhang Manor, Connecticut

"You mentioned you were looking for me," Xiao Dan prompted as soon as they were alone in the garden.

Huli let out an enormous sigh, his shoulders slumping. Finally! He could get back to the business that had carried him out of the bedroom in the first place.

"Yes, I was searching for you. I wanted to tell you I'm all healed up now."

Xiao Dan's eyes traveled up and down his body, a frown pulling at his lips. Huli wanted to burst into tears.

"I don't know," Xiao Dan said. "What about your encounter with Min a moment ago?"

Huli thrust his hands up and waved them frantically. “No! No! She didn’t touch me. I swear. Leo and I chased her off. That’s it. No fighting.”

Xiao Dan held out his hand to Huli, his expression still full of doubt. “I think I will need to inspect you myself to be sure you’ve healed properly.”

Slipping his hand into Xiao Dan’s, Huli felt a flutter in his chest. Was his vampire speaking in a sneaky code? Could “inspect” mean “naked fun time”? If Huli had his way, that was exactly what the word would mean.

He allowed Xiao Dan to pull him through the hallway. The voices of the other clan members discussing Min and cheering up Erik echoed out of the various rooms.

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Huli paused at Xiao Dan's door, hating himself a bit as he said, "Should we go check in with the others? Discuss what we should do about Min?"

A soft smile spread across Xiao Dan's lips that sent tingles throughout Huli's body. "It can wait. Right now, you're my top priority." Xiao Dan tugged the fox into the bedroom when he seemed to freeze. Huli was sure he'd died. Yes, if this was death or a dream, he didn't ever want to move on from this moment.

Once the door was closed, Xiao Dan pulled Huli into his arms and pressed soft, slow kisses along his neck, creating a flock of goose bumps across his arms. He closed his eyes and breathed in the rich scent of Xiao Dan—sweet winter plums mixed with snow and a hint of sandalwood. All the things he associated with the love of his life. His only love.

He'd known from the second he'd jumped out of that bush to scare that large human that he was different, special. That Zhang Xiao Dan would be his and his alone.

Strong hands roamed down his back and up, molding him against Xiao Dan's powerful body. Huli let out a whine as he grabbed the vampire's shoulders and turned his head so that their lips could meet in a hungry kiss that sent all the blood in Huli's brain rushing straight to his cock. He licked deep into Xiao Dan's mouth, stroking his tongue with his own and feeling those sexy fangs. And this was just the beginning. He wanted to explore every bit of his lover.

"See, Gege? Your Huli is all healed," Huli coaxed as his nimble fingers located the edge of Xiao Dan's shirt and sneaked underneath in search of silken bare skin.

“Maybe,” Xiao Dan hummed. “I think the best place to do a thorough inspection is in the bath.”

“What?” Huli squawked. The bath? Not the bed? This didn’t make any sense. Had his sweet Xiao Dan turned evil? Why was he teasing Huli with tender kisses when he planned to shove him into the bath?

“Don’t you want to check me over in the bed?” Huli asked even as Xiao Dan pulled him into the large, white-tiled bathroom.

“No, I think the bath is best.” He released Huli’s hand and set about filling the enormous oval-shaped tub with hot water and wonderful smelling bath salts that made his skin soft and supple. He’d tried the shower once and hated it. The noise was tremendous and there was no way to lounge about for a good, long soak. No, baths were the best.

But Huli would much rather have sex. And that was done in the bed.

Yet, if it would make his silly vampire happy, Huli would take a bath for him. Without another word, he lifted his pajama top off, not even bothering to unfasten it. He tossed it aside and slipped his fingers into the waistband of his pants, but all motor functions stopped as he watched Xiao Dan also take off his shirt and neatly set it aside on the counter. Huli’s wide eyes ate up every centimeter of flawless pale skin stretched over hard muscles. Xiao Dan was a work of art that stole his breath away.

It was only as those amazing hands dropped to his dark jeans and worked on the button that Huli found his tongue. Sort of.

“Gege?”

Xiao Dan looked up and flashed him a smile that was trying a little too hard to be

innocent. “What? I thought the best way to make sure you’re healed is to join you in the bath. Is that okay with you?”

Humans did that?

Huli wasn’t even going to dignify that ridiculous question with an answer. He jerked off his pants and tossed them aside before slipping into the luxuriously hot water. He scooted to the far end and turned in time to see a naked Xiao Dan stepping into the tub and sinking into the water with a happy sigh. Huli’s eyes devoured the sight of him, memorizing every line and curve so he could call them up later at his leisure.

As soon as Xiao Dan was lounging on the curve of the tub, Huli lunged toward him on a wave of steaming water. At long last, there was so much skin to touch and rub against. He ran his feet down Xiao Dan’s hairy shins, marveling at the different texture compared to his smooth chest.

Xiao Dan stared at him with hooded eyes, a look of pure contentment on his face as his large hands skimmed up Huli’s body. The same hands that had ruffled his fur and scratched his chin were caressing him, touching him as if he were the last piece of jade in all the world.

“You know, I think you were right,” Xiao Dan murmured, his voice sounding even deeper in the tiled bathroom.

“Huli is always right,” he stated as he rested his head on Xiao Dan’s shoulder, only to raise it again. “But what was I right about this time?”

The vampire snorted and gave his ass a pinch. “You were right when you said you were fully healed.”

A wicked grin spread across the fox’s lips, and he bumped his nose on Xiao Dan’s.

“Would you like to see exactly how healed I am?”

Those magnificent hands slipped over his ass so that he cupped a cheek in each palm. Xiao Dan squeezed, his fingers digging into muscle and tissue, while he lifted his hips. Water sloshed as their cocks rubbed together. Huli threw his head back and moaned, losing himself in that exquisite sensation.

A thousand years of waiting.

A thousand years of fighting and struggling to be worthy of this beautiful, honorable man.

As much as he loathed every second he'd been away from Xiao Dan, he regretted none of them because each one had built up to this perfect moment.

“I want you,” Huli exhaled in a trembling voice. “Please, Gege. I need to have all of you at last or I'll die.”

Xiao Dan lifted his head and dragged his lips along Huli's damp cheek until finally reaching his mouth. “You may have anything you want. I am yours now and always.”

The vampire sealed his vow with a searing kiss that left Huli feeling as if he'd been branded on his soul. If someone could tear him apart and peer deep inside of him, the words “Property of Xiao Dan” would be emblazoned there. And he fucking loved it.

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With a firm hold on his ass, Xiao Dan boosted Huli to his knees while he sank lower in the water, kissing his way down Huli's chest. He paused to tease one nipple, bringing it to a hard, aching nub. Only then did he rub a fang across it, sending a tingling thrill through his entire body.

“Brace your hands against the wall to steady yourself,” Xiao Dan directed. “I wish to try something.”

Cool air kissed his damp skin when he was half out of the water, but he did as he was told, not sure what Xiao Dan had in store for him.

One hand left his ass to close around his cock and stroke him. A strangled cry broke from his throat. He watched his sweet vampire flash him an evil grin before slipping his dick past plump lips and into the hot, wet cavern of his mouth. The heat of the room combined with the toe-curling suction of Xiao Dan's mouth shorted out his brain. He couldn't pull two coherent thoughts together. The perfect heat and suction. The caress of his tongue along the shaft and over the head. He wanted it to never end. It was just wave after wave of pleasure slamming into him, leaving him wanting to come so hard down his lover's throat.

His long moan echoed off the walls and filled his ears. Nothing could compare to this sensation. In the past, he'd trifled with humans—both men and women—so he would know all the best ways to please his mate. Xiao Dan was not the first person to suck his dick. But he had no memory of it ever feeling this exquisite.

Then Xiao Dan had to make it even better.

As Huli pulled slowly back, one thick digit pressed against his hole, teasing those tight muscles until a needy whimper escaped from his throat and Xiao Dan's finger pushed inside. He thrust into Xiao Dan's welcoming mouth and withdrew, fucking himself on his finger. Each time, Xiao Dan stretched his hole more and more. He added fingers, filling him so deliciously full.

Before he realized what was happening, his orgasm broke from his control and ripped through his body. A happy groan rumbled from Xiao Dan as he swallowed every drop. Huli shivered and cried out, loving the sensation but worried it was all finished too fast.

His softening cock slipped from Xiao Dan's swollen lips and those wonderful fingers pulled free of his ass as Huli sank into the water. Yet, as he straddled his mate, the thick mushroom head of Xiao Dan's hard cock bumped his hole. With one thrust, Xiao Dan entered his body, plunging deep in a single, long slide.

Huli gasped, every muscle locking up at that wonderful surprise. This! This was what he'd longed for. A connection so complete, nothing could tear them apart.

"Better?" Xiao Dan grunted, as if he'd always known what had been missing.

All Huli could do was nod, his voice still trapped in his throat. With one arm locked around his hips, Xiao Dan caught the nape of his neck and pulled him in for a slow, drugging kiss. Huli could taste himself on his lover's tongue and it made him want to purr with pleasure. He wasn't the only one who'd been marked.

Xiao Dan started with slow, lazy thrusts, pushing his body deep inside of Huli as if he were making a home for himself. They kissed until Huli's lips grew sore, but still he didn't want to stop. Each thrust rubbed Huli's cock against Xiao Dan's stomach, stoking that needy fire within him. Muscles tightened and his skin tingled. A whine slipped from his parted lips as he dragged his mouth along Xiao Dan's hard jaw. He

tried to move, to pick up the pace, but the vampire tightened his hold, forcing him to remain still as he continued his slow, measured pace.

“Please,” he sobbed as he dug his fingers into Xiao Dan’s powerful shoulders. That one word made the cock in his ass grow thicker. He moaned and tried to move again, chasing that feeling and wanting more, but the vampire held him too tightly.

“What does my sweet Huli want?” Each word was spoken against his throat so that he could feel the dangerous scratch of his fangs.

Oh, gods. He was so close. Every tiny thing was building to drive him insane. He was about to come out of his skin. But he still needed more. Just a little something else to tip him over the edge into screaming oblivion.

“More!” he cried. “More. Harder. Faster.”

“Yes,” Xiao Dan gritted out. He tightened his hold on Huli and shoved to his feet, lifting Huli out of the water while remaining buried deep in him. As Huli yelped in surprise, Xiao Dan spun them and pressed Huli into the cold tile.

His brain was still trying to process the new position when Xiao Dan moved. Harder. Faster. Plunging so deep, Huli was sure he could feel the head of his cock in the back of his throat. The slap of their wet skin and crash of the water filled the bathroom.

Huli became a taut bundle of trembling nerves. Each pant became a fractured cry of pleasure. He was beyond words. He could only make noises.

Xiao Dan snarled and lifted his head to reveal that his dark eyes now glowed red, and his fangs poked out below his upper lip. Huli whimpered, muscles tightening at the sight of his lover looking so feral and lost to their pleasure. The vampire shifted his hold and sank inside. Huli screamed as that thick cock found the magic spot.

The orgasm that had waited in the shadows tore through him like a rampaging dragon, shredding his mind and soul. Wave after wave of white-hot ecstasy lit every nerve ending on fire. His first orgasm was but a pale shadow to this earth-shattering moment.

As the last wave washed through him and he sucked in a breath, Xiao Dan shouted, his thrusts turning jerky and his rhythm breaking. Huli gasped as a sudden coolness flooded his inflamed channel like a soothing balm. A knot caught in his throat, and he tightened his arms and legs around his sweet vampire. He now had a piece of Xiao Dan soaking into him, becoming part of him forever.

Seconds later, Xiao Dan plunged them into the warm water, chasing away the chill that had bitten into their damp flesh. Huli snuggled in close, his head resting on Xiao Dan's shoulder as he listened to their racing hearts.

"Are you still all healed? I didn't ruin your recovery?" Xiao Dan inquired.

"Mmmm..." Huli hummed. His bones were now liquid, and his organs were goo. He didn't ever want to move again. "I'm healed, but I think I will need this kind of regular treatment, so I don't suffer a relapse."

Xiao Dan huffed a laugh, his hands gently smoothing over his spine. "Anything to keep my sweet huli jing happy."

Just love me.

Always love me, and nothing will ever be wrong.

Chapter 14

Huli

Huli frowned at the big brown truck that rumbled along the driveway and stopped in the main circle near the stairs. It was the middle of the afternoon, and all the vampires except for Xiang were asleep. This was when his mate was the most vulnerable, and intruders on the Zhang property were not welcome.

“It’s a delivery van,” Xiang stated as he stepped around Huli to pull open the front door and step outside. An icy breeze swept into the house, but Huli didn’t move from his spot in the hallway, blocking any unknown people from entering.

The situation went from bad to horrible the second a smaller blue van pulled down the driveway and parked behind the brown van.

Kai stood beside Huli, his hands on his hips and his narrowed eyes locked on Xiang as he accepted a stack of four medium-sized boxes from the driver of the brown truck. “It’s nothing to worry about. The vampires and mates receive packages regularly. These vans appear at least once a week, if not more often.”

“Yes, but Min is still out there, causing trouble. How do we know she won’t use this as a distraction or other way to sneak inside?”

The right corner of Kai’s mouth lifted. “You huli jing might be powerful, but I can still sense the moment you’re close. She hasn’t stepped foot onto the property. I don’t sense her anywhere near us.”

Huli grunted. Apparently the first time Min had entered the property, Kai had

mistaken her for Huli because all he'd been able to pick up was that she was a huli jing. He'd more recently reassured Huli that he could tell the difference between them a little better.

If Kai said she wasn't near, he was a bit comforted, but he wouldn't relax until both strangers had gotten back into their vans and driven out the gate.

"Why don't you use your magic to kill her?" Huli inquired. "Then we wouldn't have to worry about her at all."

"Xiao Dan has asked me not to."

For the first time since the gates opened, Huli jerked his gaze away from the vans to stare openmouthed at the dragon beside him. "What? He did?"

Kai made a noise of agreement. "My regular interaction with you has made it easier for me to tell the difference between you and Min. However, Xiao Dan fears an accident. I believe he is hoping to settle this dispute with Min without taking her life. He stressed to me that huli jing are rare in the world and it would be terrible to destroy such a rare creature if it wasn't necessary."

Huli kept his huff silent as he returned his attention to Xiang and the delivery people. If Xiao Dan were aware of the number of humans Min had killed for her amusement, he might feel differently about sparing her life. However, he was a big supporter of not using the dragon's magic if there was even the slightest chance he could accidentally slaughter the wrong fox.

"Hey, Grumpy Tails!" Xiang shouted, capturing Huli's attention. "If you don't want people here during the day, tell your boyfriend to stop placing so many orders." Xiang dropped the four boxes he'd been carrying onto the porch and turned to the driver of the blue van to accept three more boxes and two packages wrapped in large,

white plastic bags.

Huli stood frozen for a second, struggling to unpack everything Xiang had just shot at him. He was not a Grumpy Tails, but he loved hearing Xiang refer to Xiao Dan as his boyfriend. And why was Xiao Dan placing so many orders?

A low snicker from Kai broke through his muddled thoughts and got his feet moving. He stepped outside to find that all the packages Xiang had set on the porch were addressed to Xiao Dan. With some difficulty, he picked up the four, while Kai moved to assist Xiang with the other set.

As they returned to the house, both of the delivery trucks trundled down the driveway and disappeared out the gate. Huli hesitated at the door, allowing Kai and Xiang to go in first while he watched the gate completely close. Yes, Min could jump the wall with incredible ease, but the gate gave him a sense of security. He'd waited too long to have his Xiao Dan. Nothing was going to take him from Huli now.

"I don't get what he's doing," Xiang muttered as he placed all the boxes to the side of the foyer, out of the main footpath. "We're going home soon. What could he have needed? Won't he just have to ship all of this to China?"

"I will move most of the clan's belongings with my magic when we return home," Kai said, brushing a light kiss to Xiang's temple. "Shixiong was considerate enough to ask me about these orders prior to making them, and I told him it was fine with me. A few extra items won't make a big difference."

Xiang grinned at his mate as he grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him in closer for a proper kiss. "You better be careful with your generosity. I saw Junjie and Leo eyeballing a clubhouse for Erik that would fit in the back garden. That kid has a ton of toys, and they are going to keep adding to it if you let them."

Kai wrinkled his nose and made a clicking noise with his tongue. “I saw the one they’re looking at, and it’s not nearly as big as it needs to be for Erik, his uncles, and his aunties. I promised I would build a proper treehouse for Erik upon our return to China. Something permanent and not plastic.”

“Gods, that kid is so spoiled,” Xiang moaned as he pulled Kai toward the door again.

“Pfft...you’re jealous you didn’t think of it first.”

“Maybe I want to help design it.” Xiang turned his attention to Huli as they passed him. “Can you take the boxes to Xiao Dan’s room? We’re going to do a patrol of the grounds now that the deliveries have been made.”

If Kai could sense anyone near the property and when they sneaked over the wall, was it necessary for the couple to conduct a patrol?

Or were they slipping off to do some things that Huli didn’t want to contemplate because one half of the couple was Xiang?

Huli shuddered and turned his attention to the boxes stacked in the foyer. That was a safer thought. What had Xiao Dan been ordering recently? Since discovering that bath time was now a new kind of fun time two nights ago, he’d noticed Xiao Dan playing with his phone more often and smiling to himself. He’d thought the vampire had been sending silly messages to his clan mates. Could he order things with that tiny computer?

Still inspecting those thoughts, Huli picked up some of the boxes and ambled down the hallway to Xiao Dan’s room. It was getting near the time of day he usually woke up. The sun was setting much earlier now, and the vampires were enjoying the longer hours they could be active.

He eased the door open enough to stick his head inside and found Xiao Dan sitting on the side of the bed while he pulled on a pair of soft sleep pants. His tousled hair and his sleepy eyes made him look so warm and cuddly. It was one of Huli favorite parts of the day because Xiao Dan's brain wasn't fully awake and he was so much easier to cuddle when he hadn't started thinking about the rest of his clan or the long list of things he needed to do that day.

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“Good evening, Gege,” Huli greeted in a low voice.

“There you are, Huli.” Xiao Dan’s voice was still rough from sleep, sending more delicious tingles through Huli’s body. Best voice in the world. “I wasn’t expecting to wake up and find you missing. Were you hungry?”

“No, I heard the gates open, and I went to investigate.” He pushed the door the rest of the way open and walked in with the boxes in his arms. “You received many orders.”

“Oh!” Xiao Dan blinked at the boxes that Huli set on the floor in front of him. “I forgot that stuff was scheduled to arrive today.”

“There’s more.” Huli zoomed out to the foyer and picked up the rest of the bags and boxes. He carried them to Xiao Dan’s room. When he walked in, the vampire had turned on a floor lamp and pulled on a T-shirt, which was disappointing. Huli had been enjoying staring at his bare chest and wide shoulders. At least he was still barefoot. Xiao Dan even had sexy feet.

“What did you order, Zhang-ge?” He set the rest of the delivered items on the floor and waggled his eyebrows at the vampire before wrapping him in a tight hug. “Presents for your Huli?” Not that he was expecting any gift from Xiao Dan. He’d already received the best gift of all—the vampire’s undying love. What else could he possibly ask for?

“Actually, all of this is for you.”

Huli jerked back and gazed up at the vampire, his mouth hanging open. “What?”

Xiao Dan chuckled and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I bought this stuff for you. Open it. I hope you like it.”

For a couple of heartbeats, Huli could only stand there gawking at all the boxes and bags, his brain unable to process what Xiao Dan was saying. The vampire had given him gifts of food and even his precious jade pendant in the past, but never this many things at once. He couldn’t even guess what they were.

A squeal of excitement escaped him as he flopped onto the floor and began tearing into the boxes and through all the protective plastic. Yet, with each box he opened, the more his excitement sank like stones in the pit of his stomach.

Xiao Dan had bought him clothes. Lots of clothes. And undergarments, toiletries, and other personal sundries. It wasn’t hard to tell that all the items were extremely well made and quite expensive. Some were even direct copies of what Xiao Dan owned, but with minor variations that made them different.

After the last box was opened, Huli sat in the middle of the mess, a large lump blocking his throat and his eyes burning with unshed tears. Did Xiao Dan not love him at all any longer? What had he done to deserve this? How had he upset him or insulted him?

“Huli?” Xiao Dan said to break the extended stretch of silence. “Do you not like any of it?”

“No!” he shouted louder than he’d meant to, but the tightness in his throat was making it hard to speak. “I hate it. Send it all back. I don’t want any of this!”

“Oh,” Xiao Dan whispered. “I’m sorry. I thought...” His words broke off and he swallowed hard. “I’ll return it all. Don’t worry.”

Before Huli could ask Xiao Dan why he was pushing him away, the vampire wordlessly rose and hurried out of the room.

Huli clenched his teeth and glared at the stack of clothes and pretty brush he'd received. The urge to shred these things rose in his chest, but he pushed it down. Xiao Dan had spent a lot of his money on these gifts, and Huli would not waste Xiao Dan's money. The vampire could send these things away, and the stores would refund his money.

"So...you've had your first fight."

The lazy drawl pulled Huli's gaze to the open doorway. Yichen leaned against the frame with a dark look in his eye. Yichen had always been tolerant of Huli, but he didn't appear very tolerant right now.

"I don't know. Maybe. I guess." Yichen's eyebrows rose higher and higher up his forehead as Huli spoke until the fox threw up his hands. "I don't know what I did to make Gege hate me."

"Hate you?" Yichen repeated. "Didn't he order these things for you?"

"Yes!"

Yichen shook his head as he pushed off the wall and strolled into the room. He stepped over the flotsam that covered the floor and inspected the different new things that were tossed here and there.

"He got you clothes?" A surprised noise escaped him as he poked into a box. "And some very nice soaps. Those are his favorites." Yichen straightened and stared at Huli. "I think there's been some kind of misunderstanding. Why do you believe he hates you?"

“Because this is his way of telling me he doesn’t want me wearing his clothes and using his shampoo. If I have my own things, I won’t have to use his. He doesn’t love me!”

Yichen closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “If I didn’t have to deal with this same logic from Rei, I’d say you were being insane on purpose.”

Huli frowned at the vampire, but a new, niggling feeling was growing in his chest that was decidedly uncomfortable. Had he overreacted? Was this not what Xiao Dan was trying to tell him? It would be very bad if he was wrong.

“I’m not insane...on purpose,” Huli declared in something of a pout. He was confused.

“Xiao Dan is sitting in the dark in the green parlor, looking like his heart has shattered.”

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Huli gasped and jumped to his feet, ready to race straight to his poor suffering vampire, regardless of the fact that he was the reason Xiao Dan was suffering.

Yichen moved a step faster and jumped in front of Huli, blocking his path. “Pay attention, Huli. This is an important lesson in relationships.”

“I don’t have time for your lessons. Zhang-ge needs me.”

With a roll of his eyes, Yichen placed a hand on Huli’s shoulder and gave him a shake. “I’m trying to save you from making this situation worse, as well as future misunderstandings.”

Oh. That might actually be a good idea.

“Calmly go into the parlor, sit next to him, and ask him to tell you why he bought all those things. Listen to his answer. And I mean really listen to him. Afterward, tell him how you feel about those gifts. Okay?”

That seemed too easy. Of course, Huli’s first instinct was to charge into the room, leap into Xiao Dan’s arms, and blanket him in apologies, but Yichen’s idea might be good too.

“You...you’ve been doing this relationship thing for a long time with that elf, right?” Huli inquired.

“Decades. I’ve made most of the big mistakes. Let me save you from a few of them.”

That was an excellent idea.

He nodded. “Thank you. I will go talk to Xiao Dan.”

Yichen released his shoulder and stepped out of the way. “Good luck.”

Huli didn’t run, but it was a brisk walk through the house and down the corridors to the right parlor, where he found Xiao Dan as Yichen had described. The room was dark, with only some thin light slipping in through the open doorway. Xiao Dan sat on a cushion before a low table, but there was neither tea nor a book in front of him, which was his preferred way to start the evening.

It took every ounce of Huli’s restraint not to throw himself at Xiao Dan. He walked into the room and sat next to the vampire with the slumped shoulders.

“Gege?”

“Huli?” Xiao Dan raised his head and flashed him a tiny smile. “I’m so sorry?—”

The fox reached out and took one of Xiao Dan’s hands in his, squeezing his long, cold fingers. “Gege, will you please tell me why you ordered those things for me?”

Xiao Dan stared at him for a second and then dropped his gaze to the table. One of those strong shoulders lifted in a halfhearted shrug. “I wanted you to be comfortable. To feel like you belonged here with me.”

Huli risked a small kiss to the top of Xiao Dan’s hand. “I belong wherever you are. And I am a fox. I’ve spent most of my existence sleeping in a burrow in the ground.”

“True.” Xiao Dan drew in a shaky breath and released it slowly. “I think I also liked the idea of opening my bureau and seeing your clothes folded next to mine. I wanted

your clothes hanging beside mine in the closet. Your toiletries positioned next to mine on the bathroom counter. The times you were away cultivating and gaining your nine tails, I never knew when you would return. Decades passed between our meetings. Sometimes, I was afraid that you'd never return. That you'd find someone more interesting than me and wouldn't come back. But if I see your things next to mine, I feel better. I know you'll return to me."

Huli's heart was shattered to hear Xiao Dan's words. He released his hand and cupped his cheeks, turning his head so that the vampire had to meet his eyes. "Since meeting you, my every waking moment has been about how to be as close to you as possible. How I can be worthy of you. If I could have been happy as a simple huli jing resting at your feet, I would never have left to cultivate. There is no one more interesting. No one is more kind or loving in all this world. I want to spend every day and night at your side. Nothing is going to separate us again. Even if I don't have a single scrap of clothing, I will still be here with you."

Xiao Dan huffed out a broken laugh. He blinked and two fat tears rolled down his cheeks. "You must think I am silly."

"You are my silly vampire, and I wouldn't change a thing about you." He swooped in for a kiss that was a little salty from their tears of relief, but sweet from their shared laughter.

Huli pulled away and rested his forehead on Xiao Dan's. "But will you still love me when you learn how silly your fox is?"

"How silly?"

Huli cleared his throat and sat on his heels so he could see Xiao Dan's eyes. "I thought you bought those things for me because you didn't want me wearing your clothes and using your shampoo. I thought...you didn't love your Huli any longer."

He might have dropped his voice to a whisper for that last part, but Xiao Dan still heard him.

The vampire wrapped his arms around Huli and pulled him into his lap. “I will never stop loving you. If you wish to wear my clothes and use my soaps, I am fine with it. I love seeing you in my pajamas and smelling like me. I just thought you might like some things of your own.”

“We are both very silly,” Huli said as he soaked in the affection. There was no better place in all the world than being in Xiao Dan’s arms.

He had a point, though. It might be nice to be settled in a home and have some things that he didn’t have to conjure up using magic. His only real possession was the yupei, and he had it hidden behind stacks of protective magic, so no one could ever find it.

Plus, Xiao Dan had picked out and paid for all the things that he’d given to Huli. Even if they weren’t Xiao Dan’s clothes, Xiao Dan had chosen them for Huli.

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“Gege?”

“Hmm?”

“I think I have changed my mind. Can we keep all the pretty things that you’ve ordered for me?”

Xiao Dan threw his head back and laughed, his arms squeezing Huli so tightly. Huli took this answer to mean yes.

Chapter 15

Zhang Xiao Dan

1453 CE

Luoyang, near Zhang manor

Xiao Dan hung back to the deepest shadows of the plum orchard, one hand clutching his sword sheath while the other itched to wrap his fingers on the grip and pull it free. Instead, he rubbed the sweaty palm of his hand on his pants as he scanned the area. The moon was nothing more than a thin crescent, offering little light against the murky summer night.

He hesitated, straining to hear the approach of anyone, but there were just the usual nocturnal insects singing their songs.

What was he doing?

This was crazy.

For the past few months, he'd gotten this strange feeling that he was being watched and followed every time he had to make a trip into town. Not that he went all that often. And when he made most of his trips, he moved through the shadows and used bits of his glamour to change his appearance.

But no matter what he did or where he went, it felt as if there were always a set of eyes watching him.

And then tonight, he woke to a scrawled note in his room telling him to come to the orchard.

His first thought was that Huli had returned from his latest cultivation trip. He'd come back briefly about forty years ago to show off his sixth tail, but he'd made no mention of shifting into a human. Xiao Dan thought it best not to bring up the sore topic and enjoyed the brief time they had together.

Technically, Huli shouldn't be in town so soon. Normally, a full century or more passed between their meetings.

Yet, who else would be so crazy as to sneak onto the Zhang clan estate and invade his chambers to leave a message? There were no other vampires in Luoyang. The last one who'd been so bold as to come into their territory left the same night and never returned. Not only had he been outnumbered, but the fool was barely past his first century and so full of himself. Xiang and Mei Lian had taken far too much pleasure in showing him the error of his ego.

This had to be Huli asking him to come to their special place.

So why the sword? He'd never taken a sword to meet with Huli. The huli jing was playful and mischievous, but he'd never threatened Xiao Dan or made him feel unsafe.

He'd brought the sword because he couldn't forget those eyes following him. If it had been Huli watching him in town, he wouldn't have waited months to make his presence known. During all his other visits, Huli had come to find him as soon as he returned to town, regardless of the time of day or how many of his clan mates he had to outfox to get to Xiao Dan.

Tonight's meeting had him feeling unsettled.

To make matters worse, Chen had been watching him far too closely all evening. His shidi knew something was up, but he was too irrational about Huli. Xiao Dan refused to tell him when the fox was back, not wishing to hear him complaining about the untrustworthiness of the huli jing.

Yes, Huli had his quirky little ways, and he could be a selfish creature at times, but he was also fun and lived for the moment. He embraced all the joys he could find in life, even if it was just lying under the stars with his head in Xiao Dan's lap, listening to his Xiao Dan tell him boring stories about what had happened since they'd last met. He wasn't blind to who Huli was. In fact, he loved all those strange things that made Huli the wonderful creature he was.

Sneaking away from the estate might have taken him a couple of tries, but he felt confident that he'd gotten away before anyone noticed he was missing. He lingered under the oak, listening for any sign that someone was approaching from the house.

Confident there was only the wind and the crickets, he pushed off the tree trunk and wandered into the plum orchard. The limbs of the trees hung low with their bounty. He'd come out twice to fill a basket so Ming Yu could make her special plum sauce,

but they wouldn't do a full harvest for another few weeks. The sticky sweet scent of the fruit filled the air, reminding him of the plum wine Chen and Xiang had been dutifully making each and every year. They might not get drunk off the liquor like they used to, but they were making a healthy profit from it at the market because they could make so much and allow it to ferment for so long without the temptation of breaking into the bottles.

He paused in a larger break of the leaves to stare up at the sliver of moon watching over him. It felt so lonely up there. Clouds were covering big swaths of the black sky, blocking out the stars.

Something moved in the brush, rattling branches and crunching old leaves. Xiao Dan drew his sword with a soft swish of noise and turned toward the intruder, muscles tensed for the coming attack.

"Has your Huli been away so many years that you've forgotten about me?" Huli's voice trickled out of the dark woods that edged the orchard and Xiao Dan's heart skipped in his chest.

"Huli!" Xiao Dan returned his sword to its sheath and rushed to the deepest shadows, searching for that familiar flash of orange and white.

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But it wasn't his fox who greeted him.

A young man with long, soft brown hair and enormous amber-brown eyes stepped out from behind a tree. He was breathtakingly beautiful in his navy robes as they hugged his slender frame. Full, pouty lips turned down in a frown as Xiao Dan stopped and even rocked back half a step. His hand tightened on his sword, but he didn't reach to draw it...yet.

“Who...”

“I knew it. You have forgotten your Huli.”

“What?” he gasped, his brain rebelling against the information that was coming in. The young man spoke in Huli's voice, but he was no fox. He retreated two more steps, but could go no farther. His shoulders slammed into the trunk of a plum tree. The leaves rattled overhead, and two soft thuds hit the ground around him as he knocked plums loose.

Was this really the huli jing in human form?

It couldn't be. This had to be a trick.

“Huli? But...I...”

“Do you not like this form, Zhang-ge?” The young man took another step closer, and Xiao Dan tensed as if he wanted to run. This was too much. Too confusing.

When Xiao Dan didn't answer, he sighed and hung his head. "I worked so hard."

Before Xiao Dan could untangle his tongue and say anything, the young man disappeared in a flash of white light and was replaced with a very familiar fox with seven glorious tails. His fox.

"Huli," Xiao Dan released a deep breath of relief and sagged against the tree. His knees trembled and even his head felt light.

"So you prefer me as a fox." Huli pouted. He flopped on the ground, his ears flat, and his tails were limp on the ground.

Xiao Dan hurried over to his poor huli jing and knelt next to him. "I'm so sorry, Huli. I do like your human form. It's just that I was so surprised. Even after I recognized your voice, I had trouble believing it was you." He reached out and rubbed his fingers through his warm fur on the top of his head, pausing to scratch behind one ear. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see those lovely tails starting to twitch and move as if the fox couldn't hold in his happiness.

"I was also a little nervous," Xiao Dan admitted as Huli continued to pout.

The fox lifted his head at last, his ears perking up. "Nervous? About what?"

Xiao Dan offered a crooked smile and a small shrug of his shoulders. "I've had this feeling of being watched during my trips to town. If you're going to stay for a while, please be extra careful. I don't want anything to happen to you."

That got the fox's attention. He popped up on his feet, all of his tails waving and flicking behind him. "I don't have to be careful. The person watching you was me!"

For a second, Xiao Dan couldn't speak at all. Of all the things he'd expected to fly

out of Huli's mouth, that was not one of them. "What? For the past three months? Why?"

Huli sat with his head held high. "I learned how to change into a human years ago, but it was only when I got my latest tail that I figured out how to hold the shift for long periods of time. For months, even! I could also make tweaks to my human appearance. Then I could come back to see my Gege."

"Okay, but I don't understand why you've been following me. Why didn't you come see me as soon as you returned to town like you always do? We could have spent these months together."

The fox's ears and tails drooped a bit. "I know. It was so hard to stay away. Huli wanted to run to his Zhang-ge so many times, but this was important. When I followed you, I could see the people that Zhang-ge liked, the people you're attracted to."

A giant boulder sank into the pit of Xiao Dan's stomach, and he very much wanted to run from the orchard. The idea of a huli jing tailoring one of his looks just to be attractive to him was a daunting and terrifying idea. It was flattering, in a way, but also frightening. What if he really fell in love with the human creation? What did that say about him?

It also drove home what Huli had been saying for years now—he wanted a real relationship with Xiao Dan. The kind of relationship that two humans enjoyed. It was as they were on the cusp of the moment that Xiao Dan realized how deeply he'd been in denial about the possibility. He was an idiot.

He should have seen this coming. Should have been prepared. There was no one in the world more determined. Huli had stated he wanted nine tails, and he already had seven. It wouldn't be much longer now until he had the last two.

He'd said he wanted to shift into a human so he could win Xiao Dan. So not only had he learned how to shift, but he'd studied the appearances of people that Xiao Dan reacted to. Was it an immense shock that Huli had figured out that he was attracted to men? Of course, he knew. Nothing got by the fox.

“Am I going too fast for Gege?”

Xiao Dan narrowed his eyes on the huli jing with the seven tails. “Are you teasing me?”

“A little. It's not often I can make you so nervous. It's fun.”

“Behave, Huli.”

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The fox let out a strange noise that wasn't quite a bark but a high-pitched panting noise that he'd always taken for laughter. His stern expression melted away at the sight of his happy fox and his many tails flicking and dancing around behind him.

"Silly fox," he muttered.

"Gege, if I shift again, will it scare you?"

Xiao Dan drew in a deep breath. He couldn't deny Huli this. He'd worked too hard for this moment. It was only a matter of a minor adjustment. Regardless of what he saw on the outside, this was still the fox that he knew and had cared for over the past several centuries.

"It won't scare me. I think I'm ready now." He wanted to tell him to do it slowly, but he had a feeling things like this had one magical speed. Blink of an eye.

The bright light flashed and sitting across from him in the field was the young man with the long brown hair and amber eyes. He focused on those eyes first. The pupils were round like his own rather than a fox's vertical slits, but other than that, those were the same eyes he'd stared into for centuries. Huli's eyes.

With that one familiar point, he moved on to the cute nose and high cheekbones. The full lips were pulled wide into a smile that felt like a Huli smile. Even though he'd only ever seen a fox's face, Huli had this way of laughing with his mouth held wide open and he could imagine the fox's smile looking like this if he were human.

His hair was thick and lush. Some shorter strands were full of body, as if they wanted

to curl.

“So?”

Xiao Dan swallowed hard as he pulled his gaze up to Huli’s face. “You...it...I don’t know what to say. This is amazing.”

“Do you like it?”

Again, he was tongue-tied. He cleared his throat twice before attempting to speak, and Huli still beat him to it.

“Because if you don’t like it, I can change it. I have other ideas. Or if you have someone in mind that you want me to?—”

Xiao Dan placed his hand over Huli’s running mouth to stop his words, but there was laughter shining in the eyes just above his hand.

“Huli, I appreciate your ability to change your appearance. It is an astounding bit of magic, and I am so proud of how hard you’ve worked to do this.”

The fox in human form grabbed his hand and forced it off his mouth. “But...?”

Xiao Dan pulled his hand free of Huli’s grip and pressed the tip of one finger to the center of the man’s chest. “But the Huli that I love is the soul inside this form. Honestly, yes, this face is beautiful, and I find this man attractive. However, I think part of the reason I find this body attractive is that he has your eyes. He also has a smile that I always thought you’d have if you were human. The important thing to me is whether you’re happy, especially if you plan to spend many hours walking around as a human. Have you seen your own reflection? Do you like this body?”

“I do!” he said enthusiastically and then sank on his heels. “Except...”

“Huli, I will love you no matter how you look. Be happy with yourself first.”

There was a tiny flare of white light over Huli’s face, but when it disappeared, he appeared the same. Maybe.

Xiao Dan squinted at the young man, trying to figure out what he changed, but he still couldn’t spot it. “What did you do?”

Huli pointed at his chin. “I made it a little rounder. I thought the other one was too pointy. It reminded me of Chen’s.”

A loud bark of laughter escaped Xiao Dan, and he rocked back. He began to shake his head, but stopped as soon as he noticed something else new. “You gave yourself a dimple, too!”

“I did. I thought it made me cuter.”

Xiao Dan succumbed to more laughter. After his initial fear of seeing Huli in human form, he was coming to realize that his fox was the same no matter what he looked like. His soul felt lighter being in his presence again.

“Gege, can I hug you?”

He hesitated for a heartbeat, but nodded, giving in to the notion that it was something he’d been wanting for a long time, too.

Huli threw himself at Xiao Dan. A surprised “Oof!” erupted from Xiao Dan as Huli hit his chest, nearly knocking him on his back. Slender arms wrapped behind his neck and a warm face nuzzled his throat the same way Huli the fox always did. With a

tremble in his hands, Xiao Dan closed his arms on Huli's slight but muscular frame, pulling him in tight. His heart skipped. There was a sudden tightness in his throat, but he ignored it as he closed his eyes and let his brain revel in the feeling that he was finally hugging his sweet fox. His closest friend for more than five hundred years.

"I've missed you, Huli," he whispered into his hair.

Huli sniffled and squeezed him tighter, as if he were trying to merge himself with Xiao Dan. "I miss you every time I must leave. Your Huli hates it. So much. Never want to leave my vampire."

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Xiao Dan swallowed hard, angry at himself for letting those words slip out. He shouldn't have said that and possibly thrown the fox off his chosen path. "I know, but getting your tails is so important to you. Just two more, right?"

Huli loosened his hold enough to gaze at Xiao Dan's face. He wiped away a tear and then glared at it on the back of his hand before turning his attention to him. "Only two more. You'll be so proud of me for being a jiuwei hu."

He tapped the tip of Huli's nose. "I am proud of you now with seven tails. I was proud of you when you had two tails."

The smile on Huli's human face turned a little sly, and Xiao Dan's heart tumbled in his chest, trying to break free. It wasn't fair that he'd loved this fox for years because of his adorable nature, but now all that cuteness was stuffed in an attractive human package. How was he supposed to keep his distance?

"Are you proud enough to give me a kiss?"

He hated to admit it, but part of him had been looking forward to and dreading this moment for hundreds of years. Ever since Huli had first admitted that he'd wanted to shift into a human, so Xiao Dan would fall in love with him. He'd not wanted to face it, even as he'd fantasized about it.

"Huli," he started, even though he had no idea what he was going to say.

"Please! I promise not to ask for another until I gain my last two tails. Just one tiny kiss as a reward."

The fox could give all his sweet white lies, but Xiao Dan saw through them, and he didn't care. He wanted this kiss, too. Even if it was the only one they'd ever share.

Xiao Dan shifted Huli in his lap so that he could cup one cheek with his left hand, his fingers sliding into that soft silky hair. Huli tipped his head to the side, settling more of the weight of his head into his hand while his eyes fell shut.

Leaning forward, Xiao Dan brushed his lips across Huli's in the barest caress while he dragged in a deep breath, pulling Huli's scent into his lungs to stay. Huli gave a tiny flinch and then tipped his head up, wordlessly begging for more. Xiao Dan kissed those soft lips again and again, adding more pressure with each pass, learning the gentle contours of his mouth, memorizing the hitch in Huli's breathing as the tip of his tongue traced Huli's full bottom lip.

Minutes passed, and the kiss continued in an endless barrage of exploring and learning all the little things. He wanted to take these memories out when they were parted and polish each one so that it shone brighter than the moon.

He only pulled away as his own lips grew sore and swollen. He opened his eyes to see that Huli's face was flushed while his thick dark eyelashes lay like two exquisite fans on his cheeks. Those lips still begged for more kisses, but he needed to stop before he gave in to other desires.

Huli's eyelids slowly lifted, and his eyes regained their focus. The soft smile turned into a hard glare. The handsome man pinched Xiao Dan's chin and held him so that he couldn't look away from that fierce stare.

"I will get my last two tails and become a jiuweihu. And when I am, you will be my mate. We will be together forever."

And Xiao Dan was sure he'd never wanted anything more in all his life.

Chapter 16

Huli

November 3, 2023

Near Zhang Manor, Connecticut

Huli's paws barely touched the ground as he ran through the woods, moving away from the Zhang manor as the sun sank lower in the sky. Leaves crunched and the bare limbs of trees rattled in the rising breeze, carrying with it the scent of a cold rain. But even with the air heavy with the aroma of rotting leaves, rain, and the distant hint of smoke, he could still pick out Min's scent.

It was time to end this. No more putting it off or ignoring it in hopes of her simply going away. The presence of the other huli jing in the area had pulled a dark and ominous pall over the Zhang household. She wanted Xiao Dan's soul, but she'd also made a grab for Erik. Who else would she threaten to get what she wanted? The entire clan was on edge, and it was Huli's fault. If he was going to have a moment's peace with his mate, he needed to get rid of the threat to Xiao Dan and his clan.

Plus, there was the nagging of his conscience to consider. While the blasted thing had been content to be silent most of his life, it seemed to want to make noise and complain now that he had everything he could want within his reach. Only he couldn't grasp it and enjoy it until his mate was safe and happy.

There were definite drawbacks to being tied to a morally upstanding lover. You started developing the same values, and that was troublesome.

With the fae moving to their own realm, the tingle of magic in the forest had decreased, making it much easier to follow Min's path. The annoying huli jing had

lurked near the woods that surrounded the Zhang home. He didn't know if she'd been searching for a hole in their protection magic, or just trying to lure him out. With Min, it was probably a bit of both. Aggravating him was a bonus.

He'd traveled more than a mile away from the house when he caught his first flash of white fur darting between the trees. Huli lunged after it, following it on a twisting path between trees and through the brush. Sometimes she moved toward the Zhang property, and then the next turn would take them farther away. Each time he'd get close enough to chomp on one of her tails, she'd speed up, eluding him.

After nearly half an hour of running, she stopped, perched on the top of a fallen log with one end pointed at the sky. Huli was crouched below her, hackles raised, and a low growl rumbling from his throat as he bared his teeth.

"I take it you wanted my attention, Little Fox," Min mocked from her spot on the high ground. "Is there something you wanted to discuss?"

"We are past the point of discussion. You want Xiao Dan's soul and to harm his clan. I won't let you touch him or his family." Huli flicked his tails behind him, snapping them wildly. Min's eyes traveled to those tails and her mouth twitched. He could imagine that she'd be smiling at him if she had a human face.

"Now you wish to go back on our agreement? You promised Xiao Dan's soul in exchange for helping you attain those tails you're so fond of. You wouldn't have those tails or a tenth of the power you now possess if it weren't for my help."

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A scoff broke from Huli's throat. "You're upset because I used you for your knowledge and refuse to pay you for it? It wasn't just cultivation tricks I learned from you all those years. You were the one who taught me all the evil ruses and deceits for stealing and manipulating humans and other creatures. You're the one who turned it all into a game, explaining it didn't matter who got hurt so long as you won in the end. Maybe I'm a better study than you expected."

Min's ears flattened out and pinned on her narrow head. "The key to playing those games is being smarter and faster than your opponent. And you are neither." She hunkered low, her paws pressed to the rough bark on the side of the log while her tails flared out behind her. "I still plan to take my payment. If I can't have that vampire's soul, I plan to take the tails that I helped you win."

"Never," Huli snarled.

He launched himself at Min at the exact moment she leaped from her perch. The two foxes slammed together in a horrific cacophony of snarls, growls, and barks. Teeth snapped and claws lashed out, aiming for tender areas. Magic crackled in the evening air, charging it to the point of lightning streaking out from their whipping tails to lash at nearby trees and dig furrows in the earth.

Huli crashed to the ground with Min on top of him but kicked her off with his rear feet, sending her flying away. Unfortunately, she landed on her feet and dove at him just as he was getting up. Huli's heart hammered in his chest and the taste of blood filled his mouth. There might have been a tiny voice in his head whispering that he deserved this for betraying Min, but it was easy to ignore. He had been willing to do anything to get closer to Xiao Dan, to attain the human form he needed to win his

mate.

“You can’t have him,” Huli roared as he broke free of the white huli jing.

Min’s sharp laugh cut through the forest. Blood stained the fur on her chest and one of her tails hung limp as if it were broken. “You think I actually want that vampire?” She chortled. “I only said I wanted his soul because I knew you were so infatuated with him. As a tiny huli jing, you were so painfully easy to read with your big dotting eyes and pathetic whimpers.”

“Then why did you agree to help me in the first place? You had to know that I planned to betray you.”

“Because I needed you to become a jiuweihu along with me. I wanted to see if I could steal your powers when you achieved your peak in cultivation. And as long as you knew you were fighting for your precious Xiao Dan, you would keep growing stronger, just as I needed you to.”

Ice froze his lungs and shot down his veins. This was about him? The thought had never crossed his mind. He’d always thought she’d wanted to grow strong enough to pit herself against a vampire more than a thousand years old.

No. It didn’t matter. She could never defeat him. His plan had always been to kill her to protect Xiao Dan. Now he had to kill her to protect himself. Nothing had changed.

He shook off the icy terror that had locked him in place and charged Min. The huli jing’s multiple tails snapped, sending a bolt of white magic shooting at him. It slammed into his chest, throwing him several meters through the air and into a tree. Bone ached and air exploded from his lungs. He crashed into the ground and was slower in regaining his feet. His thoughts were fuzzy and scattered like leaves on the wind.

A magical charge rose in the air a second time. Huli didn't pause to think. He jumped behind a large tree, letting it take the brunt of Min's attack while he gathered his wits. Fine. If she wanted to fight like this, he was happy to let her exhaust herself. It didn't matter how powerful she was. No one's magical energy was limitless.

With a new plan in mind, Huli darted from tree to tree, circling. Sometimes moving closer and other times retreating. She sent a few bolts of magic at him, but he was quick enough to dodge the blast each time.

As she seemed to at last be flagging in strength, Huli launched a new attack, throwing his body at her with claws and fangs bared. Yet, it was only when he was in the air that he realized she'd been waiting for this move.

White-hot pain scorched across his chest and down one of his tails. A scream ripped from his throat and was silenced as he hit the ground hard. The forest went black, as if a moonless night had descended on the world. He needed to move, to keep fighting, but there was too much pain. He couldn't even escape to save his own life.

Huli lay on the forest floor, panting hard enough to shatter his ribs. Everything was pain. But he had to move. He had to get to his gege. Dying here without being able to say good-bye to his vampire was not happening. Even if he had to crawl on his belly, he would get back to his mate.

"No!" Xiao Dan's roar echoed through the forest and Huli whimpered, trying once again to move despite the overwhelming pain radiating throughout his entire body. Where were his damn healing powers? Why was it taking so long for his body to rebound from that hit? He needed to move so he could protect his mate.

"I think it's a little late for that," Min derided just before steel clashed into steel.

Had Min shifted and wielded a sword against Xiao Dan?

Huli attempted to move while rapidly blinking his eyes. The blackness had faded and he could make out shapes, but everything was so blurry. He couldn't clearly see Xiao Dan or Min.

Another noise reached his ears under the fighting. Someone was moving closer to him. His ear turned toward the noise, but it was the only body part that was obeying his wishes.

“Kai! Take Huli home while I kill this monster!” Xiao Dan ordered.

The dragon was here?

“Gods, Huli! You're a mess,” Kai murmured, his voice coming from behind him.

“No! I can't leave!” Huli cried. “I need to help Xiao Dan.”

“You're not in any kind of shape to help anyone. Let me get you home to the rest of the clan.”

Fresh panic bloomed in Huli's chest, sharpening the pain pulsing through every nerve ending in his body. “No! You have to stay. Kill Min first. Don't leave Xiao Dan alone with her. She's dangerous. Come back for me later.”

“Chen is here as well. He will protect Xiao Dan.” As Kai spoke, he could feel a pair of large hands slipping under his limp body, sending new ripples of pain screaming through all his limbs. He cried out, but even that felt like it was cut short as darkness flooded his senses, sweeping him out into the icy embrace of unconsciousness.

Chapter 17

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Zhang Xiao Dan

She stole his tail.

That grim thought kept repeating through Xiao Dan's brain as he chased and slashed at the creature who danced ahead of him through the forest with a woman's body and fox ears. In one hand she held a long, slender sword and in the other dangled one of Huli's orange and white tails like a grotesque trophy.

He wanted her dead.

The monster had harmed his sweet Huli. When he'd located the two huli jing, his mate was a limp, matted husk of blood-soaked fur. If he hadn't been panting, Xiao Dan would have guessed that he was dead.

She stole his tail!

Huli had worked lifetimes to achieve each one of his magical tails. They were signs of his determination, dedication, and unwavering strength. Those tails were a source of great pride and joy for Huli. She had no right to touch a single one of them, but now she had one. She'd ripped it from his body.

And now he wanted to rip each of her limbs from her body.

Everywhere she went, he was right there to block her path with a lethal swing of his sword. The laughter that had greeted him at his arrival was gone. So was her contemptuous smile. Lines of strain formed around her mouth and stretched out from

the corners of her eyes. Each slash that she dodged or blocked was getting closer and closer to his ultimate target.

“It’s okay. Kai has Huli at the manor,” Chen called out, but it was too late for retreating to check on his mate. He could only face Huli when he could bring his fox Min’s head. Along with all nine of her tails. That was the one consolation he could give his mate after losing one of his own tails.

Xiao Dan pressed on. He was so close.

Min darted to the left and a wall of ice sprang up in front of her, blocking her retreat.

“No!” Xiao Dan shouted. He whipped his head about to glare at Chen. “She’s mine!” No one could interfere with his kill. He owed this to Huli after letting him get hurt like this. He’d failed his fox. A true mate would never have allowed something like this to happen.

But it was too late. She used his distraction to charge at him, slipping past as he attempted to turn back and slash at her with his sword. The white huli jing became a blur as she zipped between him and Chen. Xiao Dan pivoted on his right foot to follow.

He and Chen raced through the woods as the huli jing moved like a fleet-footed deer, always a step ahead. After a few miles, the distance between them had grown too great. There was no catching her.

Xiao Dan stopped running with a snarl, throwing a knife after Min as a last-ditch effort to stop her, but he narrowly missed. The white fox disappeared into the dark forest, running farther from the Zhang manor.

His entire body trembled. His knuckles ached and throbbed from where he’d

squeezed the sword so tightly.

“I want her dead!” Xiao Dan shouted. His voice echoed through the vast forest surrounding them.

Chen placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “We will get her. She’s not escaping us.”

Xiao Dan shrugged off his shidi’s support and took two steps in the direction she’d been traveling. “That’s not good enough. I want her dead now. I want her pelt and her head and all of her tails. She hurt Huli. She...she took one of his tails.” Xiao Dan’s voice shattered like glass, and it felt like his heart was doing the same thing.

Chen remained resolute, stepping in front of him, forcing Xiao Dan to meet his gaze. “And we are going to make her pay for that, but the important thing is that Huli is still alive. She didn’t steal his life.”

Swallowing hard at the giant lump of unshed tears in his throat, Xiao Dan nodded. Chen was right. Huli was alive, and he had little doubt that Kai and Ming Yu would work hard to make sure he remained that way. It was just that Huli’s tails were everything to him. What was going to happen to him and his magic with the loss of a tail? Would he even be able to shift into his human form?

“What...what if he doesn’t know yet?”

Chen grabbed his shoulders with both hands and gave him a shake. “You’re first going to tell him that you love him no matter how many tails he has.”

“I do!”

“And then you’re going to tell him that you and his clan are going to do whatever it

takes for him to become a true jiuweihu again.”

Xiao Dan nodded, squeezing his eyes shut against the burn of tears. Yes. That was what they were going to do. He was also going to make sure that no one touched his sweet fox.

“Come on. Let’s return home. I’m sure Huli will heal much faster knowing that you’re safe and away from Min.”

As Xiao Dan and Chen reached the manor, they found all the clan gathered silently outside of his room. Even Erik, held tightly in Junjie’s arms, was quiet with wide, red-rimmed eyes. Moon went to Chen and whispered something, but Xiao Dan blocked it out as he stepped inside of the room he shared with Huli.

Kai stood at the foot of the bed with a frown while Ming Yu kneeled beside it. A bowl of pink water was beside her, along with several blood-stained cloths. All the blood had been cleaned from Huli’s fur and there were a number of spots across his body now wrapped in white bandages. But he remained in his fox form.

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The last time he'd been injured, it had taken him hours before he'd felt well enough to shift. His fox form was his natural state, and logically, the one he was most comfortable in. Yet, with the absence of one tail, he was unsure whether his sweet fox could still shift.

Huli had bragged that he'd learned to shift when he had six tails. Or was it seven? Xiao Dan rubbed his head against the pain that was pounding in his temples.

"How is he?" He forced the words out of his tight throat, willing his voice not to break. Huli needed him to be strong. His clan needed him to be strong.

"Resting as comfortably as we could make him," Ming Yu murmured.

"I used a little of my magic to heal the worst of his injuries, but I'm reluctant to do more." Kai shoved a hand through his messy hair and released a barely-there sigh. "Hulijing are unique and complicated creatures. I am afraid that if I do more without better understanding him, I could hurt him." He stopped and licked his lips, but Xiao Dan knew what was coming. "There's also the matter of his missing tail. Ming Yu and I were very careful in tending to him, but we counted only eight..."

"She took one," Xiao Dan stated between clenched teeth.

The silence that followed seemed heavier than before, as if all the air had flown away rather than face his boiling wrath.

Ming Yu shifted where she sat, her hands lying in her lap. "There's no wound. It's the strangest thing. But he had plenty of other wounds."

“Has he been conscious at all since returning home?”

Ming Yu shook her head while Kai spoke up. “He passed out when I was picking him up. He argued right until he lost consciousness that he wanted to remain in the woods to help protect you.”

Xiao Dan nodded once as his eyes locked on the Huli’s unconscious form. His slender body was stretched out, with his head resting on the pillows. His eight tails ran the length of the bed and flowed over the edge to the floor. Everything about him looked so fragile that Xiao Dan alternated between wanting to gather him up in his arms and not wanting to touch him out of fear of causing him more pain.

Kai reached out a hand, and Ming Yu took it, allowing the dragon to help her to her feet. Mei Lian jumped in to help gather up the soiled cloths and the bowl of pink-stained water.

“The best thing we can do for Huli is to let him rest and allow his own healing magic to do its work,” Ming Yu murmured. She paused in front of Xiao Dan, took his hand, and squeezed it.

“Your fox is tough,” Mei Lian added, her shoulder pressed to Ming Yu’s as if she wasn’t willing to be too far from her new mate. “This little thing won’t stop him. Not for a second. In time, he’s going to be on his feet and following you around, calling out for his Zhang-ge.”

He tried to nod, but he couldn’t. It was taking all his energy to hold himself still while the others looked on. Ming Yu released his hand and shooed the rest of the clan away, leaving him alone with Huli. Only when the door closed behind him did he fall to his knees next to his bed.

Leaning forward, he rested his head on the pillow next to Huli’s and pressed in as

close as he could, letting his damp fur tickle the tip of his nose. Gone was the scent of blood, replaced with a faint hint of roses and some other herbs that Ming Yu had put in the water to wash him. It was nice, but wrong. In the past few days, he'd grown accustomed to smelling his own soaps on Huli's skin and even his fur.

“What were you doing chasing after Min by yourself? Why didn't you call for me or anyone else in the clan?” Xiao Dan whispered.

The thought had been nagging in the darkest shadows of his mind since Kai had come to him to say that he'd sensed Min in the area and that Huli had gone after her.

Had he felt like he didn't have time to alert someone else? Was he afraid of losing her if he paused to find help?

Or had it been something else? Like being afraid that the Zhang clan would blame him for bringing this threat to their door. Didn't he trust the others to help him hunt for Min?

He'd failed Huli.

It was like a fishbone lodged in his throat. He'd failed his mate. Huli should have felt that he could come to Xiao Dan or any of the Zhang clan for help. He should have felt confident that he could raise an alarm, and they would all come racing to his side.

But for some reason, he didn't and Xiao Dan was sure it was his fault.

With his eyes squeezed shut, Xiao Dan rocked his head back and forth, nuzzling Huli's fur, wishing his beautiful fox would wake up to reassure him he was going to be okay.

“Huli, please heal. Your gege is so worried about you,” Xiao Dan whispered as the

tears he'd been holding in slipped free and streaked down his cheeks to soak into his pillow and Huli's fur. "I love you, Huli. You are my sweet and perfect fox. I don't know what I would do if I lost you. We've waited so long to be together. You're not allowed to leave me now."

A tiny whimper escaped the fox, and Xiao Dan sat up, staring at Huli. There had been no change in his breathing, but it looked as if there was a new tightness around his eyes, as if his brow was furrowing in concentration or pain. Could Huli hear him?

He dipped his head and peppered his fox with light, soft kisses. "Shhh, love. I'm here. I'm safe. Min didn't lay a finger on me. Not a scratch."

His words were enough to remove the tiny wrinkle on Huli's brow, and the tension flowed out of his body.

"I will stay right by your side. I promise to not leave the estate until you are on your feet." Xiao Dan pressed a kiss to Huli's ear. "But the second you are, I'm going to destroy Min for daring to touch a hair on your precious head."

The corner of Huli's mouth twitched slightly. Just the hint of a smile.

Yes. Min's nights were numbered. No one touched his mate and lived.

Chapter 18

Huli

Consciousness crept into Huli's brain.

But the moment the world shifted into focus, he could feel it. The hole. The new emptiness inside of him. His magic had diminished. He was less now because he had lost one of his tails.

Not lost.

Stolen. One of his tails had been stolen from him.

Min had stolen his tail, and he had no doubt that she planned to take more from him. All of his tails before killing him.

How was he supposed to keep his Xiao Dan safe? He was weaker now. He couldn't beat her at his peak. What was he supposed to do?

Huli squeezed his eyes shut and attempted to curl his body up into a tighter ball, pulling his remaining tails up over his face, except something was wrapped around his middle. He blinked his bleary eyes open and stared at the white bandages covering his stomach. There was another on his front left leg.

Ming Yu. He could smell her on the bandages and a whiff of her soft scent on his fur. He could remember Kai taking him away from the woods, back to the manor. Ming Yu must have cleaned him up and wrapped him in bandages while his body healed.

His sharp nose could also pick up lots of Xiao Dan. He was in the vampire's comfy bed. His beautiful scent was on his fur. Vague memories of Xiao Dan whispering to him danced through his head. He didn't know how long he'd been unconscious in this room, but the impression of Xiao Dan being at his side was very strong. His lover had stayed with him while he recovered.

But where was he now?

He needed to find Xiao Dan, apologize for his failure.

If he was going to do that, he needed to do it properly with human eyes and a human mouth.

Gritting his teeth, he gathered up the broken strands of magic throughout his body, weaving them together in a rough tapestry to cover up the new hole within him. In time, the magic would meld and flow together so that it would be like the hole created by the missing tail never happened. At least, that was what he hoped. He still had more than enough magic to shift.

With a soft grunt as the magic surged through his battered frame, he changed from fox to human. At the same time, the bandages disappeared, replaced with the soft pajamas that belonged to Xiao Dan. Despite his long rest, his body ached down to the bones.

Carefully, he swung his feet over the edge of the bed and sat up. He couldn't help looking at where his tails would have been. Even though they weren't there, he swore he could feel the hole where one was missing.

She'd stolen his tail. He wasn't a jiuweihu any longer. Just a silly huli jing with eight tails instead of nine. He was less. Smaller. Weaker.

Most importantly, he wasn't worthy of Xiao Dan. The leader of the Zhang clan deserved to have someone who was powerful and achieved great things. He needed someone who could protect him against any foe and threat.

Huli dropped his head into his hands and squeezed his eyes shut. He'd brought this threat into the Zhang clan. She'd come after Xiao Dan and even sweet little Erik. It was his responsibility to get rid of her, but he couldn't.

He was more than willing to die to get rid of Min, but what good was that? He'd die fighting Min, and she'd become more powerful.

Huli's throat grew tight, threatening to choke him. It was time to face Xiao Dan. To tell him the truth. Huli opened his eyes and held out one hand. With a burst of magic, the jade yupei Xiao Dan had given him more than seven centuries ago rested heavily in his palm. His one treasure. More precious to him than all of his tails combined. It shone as brightly today as it did the night Xiao Dan had gifted it to him. Only the pale-green ribbon had grown worn and faded with time.

When they were apart and Huli was alone, he would pull out the jade and nuzzle it, searching for Xiao Dan's scent to keep him company. In those early days of learning to shift, he would summon up a human hand so he could trace each of the intricate lines and feel the silky softness of the ribbon.

Xiao Dan had given him this pendant in the name of friendship, in the belief that Huli would one day become something great. He would gain all nine tails and become a powerful creature worthy of Xiao Dan.

But now he was not. He'd lost one of his tails, brought danger into his life, and he

might never regain that lost tail.

Huli pushed to his feet and shuffled out of the bedroom. He glanced out a window to find that night had fallen, but was it the same night? It couldn't be. Had he been asleep for an entire night and day?

Where was everyone? At night, the manor was usually buzzing with activity. There were thirteen people living here, counting himself. While there was ample room for all of them, a person still couldn't go far without tripping over someone, or at least hearing the echo of laughter down the halls.

Had they all gone out to fight Min?

No, that couldn't be. There had to be at least a few people there to protect Erik.

“I want her dead!”

Huli froze. That was Xiao Dan. But he’d never heard his sweet and tender vampire speak in such a hard, bitter voice. He wasn’t simply angry. He was enraged. Fury shook in his voice.

He bit the inside of his cheek and forced himself forward through the house toward the main meeting room, where the clan always made their big plans, especially for dealing with the fae. This time, it sounded like Xiao Dan had called them together to deal with Min.

“She hurt Huli. She stole his tail and nearly killed him. I will not rest until she is dead. No! That’s not enough. I want all of her tails. I want her pelt and her head.”

“Xiao Dan, stop and take a breath,” Chen coaxed.

“Take a breath? Were you calm when the fae king nearly killed Moon?”

Huli flinched at the answering silence. There was no need to comment. He’d seen the way Chen had struggled even after Moon had become a vampire, narrowly escaping a permanent death. The memory of the fae king’s attack on Moon had haunted him for weeks following that horrible night.

He stepped into the open doorway to see Xiao Dan pacing at the head of the room. His pale skin appeared almost gray in the light, and dark shadows stretched from under his eyes. Even his normally soft and perfectly styled hair looked messy and greasy. His vampire had not been taking care of himself. He was making himself sick

with worry. All the clan watched him with expressions of fear and sadness, as if they didn't know what to do for him. Huli could not allow this to continue for another second.

“Zhang-ge?”

Xiao Dan whipped around, his wide eyes jumping to Huli's face. “Huli.”

His name became a prayer exhaled in relief. Xiao Dan started to approach him, but Huli took a step back and bowed low.

With the jade clutched in both hands, he thrust it forward, holding it out to the man who would be his mate. “Forgive me, Zhang-ge. I have failed you. I'm not worthy of this precious gift any longer and must return it to you.”

As he forced the words out, the jade trembled in his shaking hands. He squeezed his eyes shut so he couldn't see the dangling ribbon swinging in the air. “I brought Min into your life. Put all of your clan in danger. I thought I could defeat her, protect you, but she beat me and even stole one of my tails. Your Huli is a weak nothing.”

Large, powerful hands covered his and lifted them up, forcing Huli to straighten. Huli's gaze followed those hands as they rose to Xiao Dan's smiling lips. With tears shining in his eyes, Xiao Dan pressed kisses to Huli's fingers while careful to keep them curled around the jade pendant.

“I gave you this because I love you, Huli. It's a symbol of my love for you. Are you saying that you don't want my love any longer?” Xiao Dan whispered between kisses.

“No,” Huli choked out. “But I'm not worthy of your love. I'm just a stupid huli jing with eight tails. I might never regain my ninth tail. I might never be as strong as I

used to be.”

“You are my huli jing.” Xiao Dan squeezed his hands a little more, his smile growing stronger as he spoke. “I fell in love with you when you were a tiny ball of orange fur that liked to jump at my feet. I grew to love you more and more over the years, not because of your tails, but from your determination, bravery, and sense of adventure. You make me laugh, and you love me even though I’m boring.”

Huli’s pain and disappointment was forgotten for a second at Xiao Dan’s words. “You are not boring! You sit under the stars in the plum orchard and tell me stories. Those have always been my favorite memories.”

“Then I think you need to keep that.” Xiao Dan pressed Huli’s hands toward him so that the jade rested on Huli’s breastbone.

“But...I lost a tail.”

“You didn’t lose a tail. It was stolen from you,” Mei Lian argued, reminding him that they weren’t exactly alone in this fragile moment.

“Huli, the only mistake you made in all this was to go off after Min by yourself,” Xiang interjected. “You’re part of a clan now, and that means relying on your clan to help you.”

“I am?” Huli’s voice wavered as his gaze skimmed the face of each person watching him from the other side of the room. No one was looking at him with distrust or hate. There was just acceptance and joy.

“Of course.” Xiao Dan released Huli’s hands and cupped one of his cheeks. “You’re my mate, aren’t you? That means you’re a member of the Zhang clan now. We’re all your family.”

“You make Shixiong happy. Nothing else matters to us,” Chen stated. Moon grabbed his lover’s face and planted a loud kiss on his cheek.

“Okay.” Huli nodded. He grinned at the yupei he was still clutching, his eyes stinging for a new, happy reason. “Family.”

That was not something he’d ever had. It wasn’t even something he’d let himself dream about. His focus had been on winning Xiao Dan’s heart and being worthy of him. He’d never expected to win an entire crazy family as part of the deal.

“Good! Now come help us plan to kill that witch,” Mei Lian ordered, pounding her left fist on the table in front of her. “No more leaving us out of the fun. It’s like Xiao Dan said. We’re taking all her tails as payback for touching one of yours.”

“Meimei!” Ming Yu gasped from where she sat at Mei Lian’s right, their fingers entwined.

Mei Lian blinked wide eyes at her. “What? It’s true.”

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“Oh, I agree with you. I was thinking that Huli might still hurt and want to return to bed for now.”

Xiao Dan wrapped an arm around his shoulders, drawing him in closer. “How are you feeling? Would you like to go lie down again? We can continue this meeting later.”

Huli shook his head before leaning it on Xiao Dan’s chest. “No. Nearly all the pain is gone. I can stay up for a while longer.”

With his mate’s arm wrapped across his shoulders, Huli shuffled over to the bench seat Xiao Dan occupied during meetings. They sat together, Xiao Dan keeping one arm on him the entire time. Huli continued to lean on the vampire, the coziness doing more for his healing than any amount of sleeping alone in bed could. He already felt stronger just being in Xiao Dan’s presence.

“Huli, is there anything you can tell us about Min that might help us in a fight?” Yichen inquired.

A frown tugged at the corners of Huli’s lips. He waved his hand, returning his jade pendant to its normal hiding spot. It was better if it was away. When he was thinking, he liked to nibble on things, and he didn’t want to nibble on his precious treasure.

“It’s hard to say. I thought I was at least as powerful as her, but I was wrong. She’s faster. I struggled to keep up with her.”

Xiao Dan grunted. “While her sword skills are not equal to ours, her speed enables her to make up for what she lacks in finesse.”

“So, if we outnumber her, we can easily kill her,” Rei said with a shrug.

“That’s only if we can keep her from escaping,” Yichen countered.

“Then it’s a matter of magic. That’s where I have her beat, I believe,” Kai proclaimed with a happy purr in his voice.

Xiang leaned in and smirked at his mate. “Could you be any more smug?”

“Oh, yes. I definitely could. Would you like to see?” Xiang answered that question with a groan, leaving Kai to turn his attention to Huli. “As we arrived at your battle with Min, I noticed a powerful charge, almost like lightning. That was her magic?”

“It was. Huli jing magic is...not interesting.” If he’d been in his fox form, his ears would have been drooping. At best, he could jut out his bottom lip.

“How can you say that? You can change from a fox to a human. You can even change what you look like as a human in the blink of an eye. That’s incredible!” Moon argued, making Huli’s bottom lip retract into a smile.

“We also have some subtle magic that affects the mind and helps us to seduce humans, but it doesn’t work on vampires,” Huli admitted.

“And you know that because...” Xiao Dan inquired.

“What? I didn’t try it on you!”

No, he’d tried it on another much younger vampire out of curiosity, and it still hadn’t worked. That at least had saved him the embarrassment of trying it and failing with Xiao Dan.

His mate narrowed his eyes on him as if he could read Huli's naughty thoughts, but he said nothing.

Huli cleared his throat and gazed at the rest of the clan. "The only other thing is what Kai mentioned. We can condense our magical powers into a single blast, flung from our tails. However, that uses up a lot of energy. At my peak, I could do it once or maybe twice. After that, I was tapped out—I doubt I could have even shifted into a human for at least two or three hours. With Min, I am guessing she can do it four or maybe five times before she is out of magic. It would even impact her speed."

"Understood." Xiao Dan's hand tightened on Huli's waist while he frowned at the table in front of him. No one moved or made a sound for nearly a minute, giving their shixiong time to think. "We need to scout out a location. Somewhere we can lead Min that would allow us to trap her in a single spot. We control the entrance and exit. From there, it's a matter of wearing down her magic."

"You know, I am a dragon," Kai reminded them. "I could just...chomp?"

Xiao Dan was shaking his head as he was still speaking. "She hurt Huli, and she threatened me. There's no satisfaction to be found in letting you eat her."

"Plus, I'm sure she'd taste terrible," Xiang added in a loud whisper.

Huli wanted to laugh, but he could only shake his head. "I was wrong. She lied to me. Tricked me."

Xiao Dan placed his fingers lightly under Huli's chin and gently tipped his head up so their eyes could meet. "What do you mean?"

"I thought I was being so tricky, planning to use her for her knowledge and then betray her in the end so I could keep you. But I was the fool. She admitted that she

only helped me cultivate to become a full jiuwei hu so she could later steal my powers.”

“Just another reason for me to destroy her so she can never get near you again.”

He couldn't help but smile at such a bloodthirsty comment. His vampire wanted to destroy his enemy and keep him safe. How could he not feel so utterly and completely loved?

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“We’ll get to work on finding a suitable location,” Chen murmured.

“And I’ll call the Variks,” Junjie added.

Xiao Dan dragged his gaze from Huli to Junjie. “I don’t think we need to involve the Variks in this. We’ve troubled them enough. We can handle this.”

“Exactly, but we’re going to need a babysitter for Erik. Leo and I don’t want to be left out. Ming Yu has said that she wants to take her meat hammer to Min.” Junjie’s fierce look shifted into a softer smirk. “Besides, King Aiden did offer to babysit at any time. This could help him and Ronan decide if they want to adopt a little one of their own.”

Xiao Dan’s lips twitched as if he were holding back a smile. Huli didn’t bother. He grinned at the idea of Erik turning the Varik house upside-down with his cuteness. He was also a fan of Ming Yu chasing Min around with that metal mallet she kept in the kitchen.

“Very well. Reach out to the Variks to see if they can lend us a hand with Erik. Let’s finalize our plans in the next few nights. It will give Huli the time he needs to heal under my supervision.”

Yes, healing under Xiao Dan’s close and very hands-on supervision. That sounded like an excellent idea to him.

Huli

1923 CE

Luoyang, near Zhang manor

Huli lingered by a thicket of trees near one of the larger buildings on the Zhang estate. Something was wrong. There was a new tension in the air. A heavy silence had settled over the grounds that was almost suffocating. Normally, he would interject himself, sneaking into one of the buildings to locate Xiao Dan, but this time he held back. Xiang seemed sharper and more impatient.

And then there was the crying.

Low, muffled crying had come from Ming Yu and Mei Lian on more than one occasion during the past several hours.

What was going on? Had another one of Xiao Dan's clan mates met the sun?

No, that couldn't be. This core group of vampires had been together for centuries. Longer than he'd been alive, even. Yet...

He ran through the list of them, counting each one he'd seen in the last twenty-four hours, and the only one who came up missing was Wu Yichen.

A door opened and Huli's ears perked up. Xiao Dan stepped outside at last, but he didn't look around. He closed the door behind him and hurried in the direction of the plum orchard. Huli's heart skipped, and the worry that had gnawed on his nerves evaporated. Gege was going to their meeting spot.

Huli darted off in a slightly different direction, running as fast as he could to reach

their private place ahead of the vampire. The trees changed and gave way to a large orchard rich with the scent of plums perfuming the night air. He shifted into his human form. Out of habit, he shoved his fingers through his short hair and ran a hand over his shirt and pants. When Xiao Dan saw him, he needed to be perfect.

But as the vampire stepped into the broken moonlight of the orchard, it was easy to see that something was wrong. A hand covered his mouth and his steps were uneven, as if he were carrying a great burden on his shoulders.

“Zhang-ge?” Huli called out as he walked toward him.

“Huli!” His name broke from Xiao Dan’s throat in a sob. Huli rushed the last several meters that separated them, catching his vampire as his legs gave out. He wrapped his arms around Xiao Dan’s body and he eased them both to the damp ground, clasping him as he cried.

What was happening? In all the years he’d known Xiao Dan, he couldn’t recall ever seeing his vampire so broken. Xiao Dan’s fingers twisted in Huli’s shirt and pulled him close even as his cool tears fell on Huli’s skin, sending a chill through him.

Who had hurt his dearest love? They were going to die. Huli was going to hunt down this person and slaughter them for hurting his gege.

“Zhang-ge, what has happened? Tell your Huli, and he will make it better.”

Xiao Dan shook his head as he sucked in a ragged gasp of air. “Took him. Someone...took him.”

That was...shocking. How could anyone be strong enough to steal one of the Zhang clan vampires? They were each two thousand years old. He didn’t know of anyone else who was as old or powerful as these vampires. Huli thought he was pretty

impressive, but he was no fool. With Xiao Dan and his clan, he was barely more than a pup, even with all of his nine tails, and that would never change.

“Who?”

“Yichen. Our littlest shidi. Someone has taken him.” Each word was hard, sounding as if Xiao Dan were forcing a shard of glass out of his throat.

Huli frowned. That was the one he hadn’t seen in a while. Out of all the vampires, Yichen and Ming Yu were the most tolerant of his presence. Not going out of their way to chase him from the buildings and orchard. Junjie and Mei Lian pretended he wasn’t there. It was Xiang and Chen he had to avoid. They would chase him with weapons. They had become especially violent when they’d learned he could masquerade as a human.

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But Yichen wasn't a bad sort. Quiet. Kept to himself. He liked to pick fights with Xiang occasionally, and Huli enjoyed those moments.

“Do you know who has taken him?”

Xiao Dan's crying calmed so he could speak more clearly. “He disappeared a few nights ago. We found a place just outside of town in the woods where there were signs of a fight and...and some of his blood.”

Still, Huli struggled to wrap his brain around what he was being told. The vampire had studied the martial arts of the Sword of the Heavenly Garden sect for thousands of years. Whocould have been strong enough to take him? How could no one have noticed an entire army attacking one man?

Unless, maybe, they'd surprised Yichen...and then what? Drugged? Could a vampire be drugged? This made little sense, but that didn't make it any less terrifying. Would the villains who stole Yichen come for his Xiao Dan next?

“Do you know who?—”

Xiao Dan was shaking his head before he could finish his question. The vampire lifted his head from Huli's shoulder and wiped the tears from his cheeks. Huli frowned at the man who held his head in his hands. He was too pale, and the shadows under his eyes were far too dark. Xiao Dan was wearing himself ragged with worry about Yichen, and most likely keeping it all hidden away from the rest of his clan mates. Shouldering all the burden while never whispering a word of complaint.

“We don’t know. There’s another vampire who lives in the next town over who spoke of humanlike creatures with pointed ears and blond hair who spoke a foreign tongue. Creatures of nature and magic.” He paused and stared at Huli for several heartbeats. The fox spirit caught on and violently shook his head.

“I’ve never seen them. They’re not huli jing; I’m sure of that.”

Xiao Dan sighed. “I’ve never thought for a second that you had anything to do with this. You would never do anything to hurt me.”

That was true. However, he was sure that the rest of Xiao Dan’s clan did not think the same.

“We’re still digging, but we think these creatures have kidnapped Yichen, and we don’t know how to find him.”

Huli gripped Xiao Dan’s hands in his. “I will go to the place where you think he was attacked, sniff around. I might be able to catch his scent and be able to follow it for you.”

Xiao Dan’s face twisted up, lines bracketing his lips and stretching across his smooth brow. Huli could feel him wanting to tell him not to do it out of fear for his safety, but he couldn’t bring himself to say the words. Not if Huli had even the smallest chance of being able to locate their missing clan member.

“You have nothing to worry about. I will be very careful and report back to you as soon as I learn something.” Huli leaned in and kissed away the remains of a tear that glistened on Xiao Dan’s cheekbone.

“I...I can’t ask you...”

“You are not asking me to do this. I am telling you what I am going to do.”

Xiao Dan’s lips parted, but no sound came out. After a couple of seconds, he closed his mouth and nodded.

“What else can I do? Are there other leads we can follow?”

“Ummm...there’s a witch. South of here. Near Shanghai. Chen heard of her during his most recent travels, but he’s not sure if she’s still there. She might know something. But I’m afraid...”

“You’re afraid that if Chen travels to find this witch, he might be taken like Yichen,” Huli finished for him.

“But I don’t want you to be stolen from me either!” Xiao Dan shouted in his face. That helped to ease some of the pain squeezing Huli’s heart as he sat holding his precious love.

“I can never be stolen. I’m far too fast for anything to grab me.” When that failed to win even a tiny smile from Xiao Dan, Huli cupped his cheek with one hand. “Leave this to your Huli. I will examine the spot where Yichen was in a fight and follow the scent. It may lead me to him, and there will be no need to meet with the witch. If it does not, I will return to you before going to Shanghai.”

Xiao Dan squeezed his eyes shut as he turned his face in Huli’s palm and pressed a kiss to the center. “I can’t ask you to do these things for me. My clan should be searching...”

“And I am sure you will, but I’m a huli jing, the strongest there ever was. You need me to find these monsters for you and steal back your shidi. You have lost too many of your clan mates over the centuries. I’ve known you for a thousand years, and

you've listed so many to me. Yichen will not join their numbers."

The vampire wrapped his arms around Huli, squeezing him in a nearly bone-breaking hug. "I don't know what I would do without you, Huli. I would be so lost if you disappeared from my life, too."

"Xiao Dan will never have to know that loss. I will never leave your side. I will do anything you need me to, go anywhere I must, just to make you happy."

The arms holding him tightened, and Huli nuzzled his face into the crook of Xiao Dan's shoulder, sinking into the feel and smell of this man who'd been his everything for as long as he could remember. There was nothing he wouldn't do to erase the sorrow from his dark-brown eyes and bring a smile to his lips. Those were the only things that mattered to him. If necessary, he'd give up all of his tails to find Yichen and make Xiao Dan happy.

Chapter 20

Zhang Xiao Dan

November 4, 2023

Zhang Manor, Connecticut

It was time to take proper care of his mate. The whispers, stares, and giggles of the rest of his clan didn't matter any longer. For the first time since the death of Shifu, Xiao Dan was going to stop worrying about what was best for the clan. Only Huli mattered.

Xiao Dan bent and scooped up Huli, draping his smaller frame across his arms as Huli gripped the nape of his neck with both hands. A sharp squeal of surprise jumped from the fox spirit, and he buried his face in Xiao Dan's shoulder.

"Gege! What are you doing?"

"I'm taking care of my mate." He cut through the room, weaving them past the others standing there with wide eyes and big grins.

"But I can walk. You don't need to carry me."

"Maybe I want to carry you." A smirk lifted a corner of Xiao Dan's mouth as they strolled down the hall. "Besides, I thought you liked when I carried you."

"I do, but usually it was because it annoyed your other clan mates, which made me laugh. Now they aren't annoyed, and I'm..."

"You're what?" Xiao Dan asked as he nudged open his bedroom door with his foot.

“I’m embarrassed,” Huli mumbled into his shoulder.

Xiao Dan closed the door behind them with a soft click and stopped in the center of the room. “We’re all alone now. Are you still embarrassed?”

Huli lifted his head from Xiao Dan’s chest and looked around as if to confirm his location. There was a small lamp burning, casting the space in heavy shadows. Sandalwood and the sweet scent of orchid lingered in the room from the incense he’d burned while Huli recovered. The muffled noises from the rest of the clan fell away.

A sly grin spread across Huli’s lips and his hands tightened on Xiao Dan’s neck, pulling him in closer. “No, not embarrassed. What is Gege planning to do to me?”

“I thought I would inspect every part of my huli jing to make sure he is healed. You’re not allowed out of bed until I’m satisfied that you are better.” As he spoke, his lips brushed against Huli’s.

“Gege, I think you should just fuck me,” Huli stated in return.

A loud bark of laughter broke from Xiao Dan’s throat to bounce through the room. This was what he got for trying to be smooth and seductive with Huli. The fox wasn’t big on grasping subtle hints.

“What?” Huli demanded.

No more time for talking. Xiao Dan answered with a searing kiss that had Huli moaning into his lips. His tongue slipped into Huli’s mouth, tasting him. He released his hold on the fox’s legs, allowing him to slide slowly down his body while pressing their chests together. Huli’s heart pounded, seeming almost in synch with his own.

Why had he waited so long to claim his mate? Huli had lived within his heart for

centuries, claiming more and more of Xiao Dan with each passing year. With remarkable patience and determination, Huli had conquered all of Xiao Dan's doubts and swept aside his fears. Xiao Dan was not worthy of Huli, but he wanted to be.

As the kiss grew hungrier and more desperate, Xiao Dan worked his fingers under the hem of his lover's shirt and smoothed his palms over the expanse of warm, soft skin, following along the curve of his spine.

A soft, joyful noise escaped Huli as he broke off the kiss and bowed his body into Xiao Dan. It was as though he couldn't get close enough.

"Are you going to be mean and tease me? Have pity on me. I lost a tail," Huli howled.

It wasn't a laughing matter at all, but Huli sounded so adorably pathetic that a giggle might have sneaked out.

"No, I'm not teasing. Because my sweet Huli was injured, I'll give him anything he wants."

"Whoohooooo!" Huli shoved out of his arms and staggered a step away so he could rip his shirt over his head. He tossed it across the room, where it hit the door. With an exaggerated shimmy of his hips, he pushed his pants to the floor. Huli wasn't a fan of underwear and refused to wear it. Despite Xiao Dan's attempts to explain the necessity, the fox spirit couldn't understand the human need to wear two sets of pants. And right now, Xiao Dan agreed with Huli's policy that less clothes was best.

Completely naked, the surprisingly spry huli jing leaped onto the bed and stretched out on his side, facing Xiao Dan. He smoothed one hand across the large open space next to him and gave it two pats.

“Plenty of room right here if you wish to join me.”

Xiao Dan took a step toward the mattress, and Huli’s hand shot up.

“Wait! Only naked vampires are allowed in this bed. You’re wearing too many clothes.”

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“I think I can fix that problem.” Xiao Dan stepped away from the mattress and grabbed the back of his shirt. Holding a fistful of fabric, he pulled off the offending sweater and dropped it on the floor to his left. Huli’s amber eyes widened, darting to his chest and then to his waist. Xiao Dan unbuckled his belt and attacked the button and zipper with quick fingers. A startling heat surged through his body to be the focus of such eager, hungry eyes. He couldn’t remember anyone ever looking at him with such need and excitement.

His pants and underwear were pushed to the floor, and he pulled off his socks as he stepped out of them. With his hands held out to his sides and a smirk, he asked, “May I join you in bed now?”

“Huh?” Huli blinked as if he’d forgotten all languages. He gave his head a hard shake and shoved into a sitting position. “Yes! In bed. Right now!”

Xiao Dan slid onto the bed, but he didn’t stop when he was lying beside Huli. He kept rolling until he had Huli under him and pinned to the mattress. All the skin was pressed to his body, feeling hotter than the sun, and it still wasn’t enough. He captured Huli’s mouth in a deep kiss, taking possession of the fox spirit. He wanted to taste his soul on his tongue, let it roll about in his mouth like caramel.

As the fox’s hands roamed his body, Xiao Dan caught them and pulled them up over his head. He gathered them together with one hand and pushed them into the pillows, trapping them. Little whines escaped his mate as he put up some token struggles and wiggled underneath him.

Xiao Dan broke off the kiss and dragged his mouth along his jaw to the tender skin

along his throat. Huli took the opportunity to voice his complaints. “Mean! I want to touch! You said Huli could have whatever he wants.”

“Mn. You can have whatever you want after I’m done with my inspection.” Xiao Dan licked his throat, sending a full-body shiver through the fox.

Huli shifted under him, getting his legs wrapped around his waist. A thick, hard cock brushed his stomach, calling to Xiao Dan. His mate’s groans of protest turned to moans of pleasure as he continued to lick and suck his way down Huli’s chest. He teased one nipple into a tight nub and moved to the other, cherishing the feel of Huli’s racing heart under his lips. As he moved to Huli’s stomach, he released his hands so he could cradle his lover’s ass, kneading the muscles and soft skin.

The fox squirmed under him, bowing his back as if he didn’t want to give Xiao Dan the chance to lift his mouth from his body. Slender fingers plunged into his hair, twisting and pulling lightly as he attempted to direct Xiao Dan to all his favorite places. Namely, the head of his cock.

Xiao Dan smiled against Huli’s stomach as he kissed his way to the inside of his hip, nuzzling the soft flesh there while purposefully avoiding his dick. Maybe he was a bit of a tease, but Huli’s begging and whining were so pretty. He couldn’t get enough of it.

“Gege! You’re being mean. Your Huli needs you.”

He huffed out a laugh, letting his breath dance over Huli’s shaft. “What does my Huli need?”

“Fucked,” he moaned as he shifted his hips to graze his dick along Xiao Dan’s mouth. “Wanna be fucked so bad. Just like in the bath, but harder.”

Xiao Dan licked the side of his cock once before tipping his face up toward Huli. “If I fuck you, you’re not allowed to come.”

“What?” Huli croaked. The fingers in Xiao Dan’s hair tightened. “Why?”

“Because after I come in you, I want you to fuck me.” Huli’s eyes went so wide they seemed like they were in danger of rolling out of their sockets. “Can you do that for me, Huli? Can you fuck me?”

The fox spirit swallowed hard and nodded. His mouth hung open, but there wasn’t a sound coming out of him. It was as if Xiao Dan had broken his brain, turning him into a taut bundle of need.

Xiao Dan lunged up to the top of the bed and seized Huli’s lips in a hard kiss. It was the one thing he’d always wanted to try. He might not have a lot of experience with physical lovers, but they’d all taken one look at him and assumed he was a top. He’d gone along with it since he’d never expected to see any of them again, but that wasn’t the case with Huli. This was his forever mate, and he wanted to share everything with him, to experience everything he could.

“Are you serious?” Huli demanded on an exhale, his voice trembling. “You really want me to—to do that to you?”

He grinned at his sweet fox and peppered a couple of quick kisses to his lips. “I do. I want to feel what it’s like to have you in me. Would you be comfortable doing?—”

“Yes!” The single word was almost a shout that leaped from Huli’s tongue. “Yes, I can do that! Flip fuck!”

Xiao Dan squeezed his eyes shut and bit the side of his cheek to hold in his laughter. The moment he could control himself, he said, “That. You learned that American

phrase.”

“Moon might have shown me how to watch some American porn. I wanted to make sure I learned all the good moves for you.”

He didn’t know whether to curse or bless Moon for his assistance. “Should I ask if you watched porn with Moon?”

Huli shivered. “No! Moon and I aren’t friends like that. He showed me the website, gave me some headphones, and walked away.”

That was fine. He liked Moon, but he didn’t want Chen’s mate anywhere near his mate when it came to something sexual. Only Xiao Dan was allowed such things with Huli.

He recaptured Huli’s mouth for another draining kiss as he thought of Huli studying graphic videos, mentally making notes of all the things he’d want done to him and what he wanted to do to Xiao Dan. Yes, he was going to make a checklist. He wanted to do all the things with Huli.

His sweet fox pushed, getting Xiao Dan on his back so he could climb on top of him. Xiao Dan thought he just wanted to be in control for a while, but the devilish fox leaned over so he could dig through the nightstand.

“Huli, what?—”

The clever fox grinned as he held up the bottle of lube he’d hidden in there. He hadn’t thought that Huli knew about it, but his sneaky mate had gone poking about the room. That was fine with him. These private quarters belonged to them both, as far as he was concerned. He had no secrets from Huli.

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“How about I prepare you, and you do me?” Huli suggested as he waved the tube at him.

“O-okay,” Xiao Dan stammered, while parts of his brain started shutting down. There wasn’t enough blood to run it and fill his cock.

With an excited giggle, Huli flipped around while continuing to straddle Xiao Dan. The crack of plastic echoed through the room above the sound of his racing heart in his ears.

“Here, give me one of your hands,” Huli said.

It took Xiao Dan an extra second to pull his gaze from the pert ass resting on his chest. So close. All he needed to do was lean forward and he could take a bite out of the adorable peach. He extended his right hand toward Huli, letting him squirt some lube across his fingers.

Naturally, Huli shimmied and wiggled that ass closer to him. He could barely work his own body to follow Huli’s instructions to spread his legs. As he was getting settled and spreading the lube over his fingers better, that devil slipped Xiao Dan’s cock into his mouth and swallowed him to the back of his throat. He cried out and his hips reflexively pumped upward. Huli used that opportunity to push the tip of one finger into his hole.

He swore and fought the immediate urge to come down Huli’s throat. This almost felt like revenge for torturing him in the bath. Maybe. But he couldn’t complain. His toes curled in the sheets and every muscle in his body tightened as he let himself revel in

the feel of his dick in Huli's hot mouth and the delicious mix of pleasure and pain as Huli played with his ass.

It took a full minute for his brain to kick in enough to remind him he was supposed to be returning the favor to Huli. With his left hand, he gripped one sweet cheek and squeezed, revealing that tight pink hole. He worked a finger in, stretching him. Low moans rumbled from Huli, massaging his cock as the fox sucked him harder.

Xiao Dan released his ass and reached under him to caress his leaking cock. Huli pushed back, fucking himself on his fingers. He let Huli take the lead. Each time Huli added a finger to his ass, Xiao Dan added one. He moaned again. The feeling was exquisite. He'd never felt this kind of intense stretch. But it wasn't enough. There had to be more. He needed to know what it was like to have Huli moving inside of him, coming inside of him.

"Huli," he growled between clenched teeth. He was hovering on the edge. All his self-control was little more than frayed threads on the verge of snapping. "I'm too close. I need to fuck you now."

His dick slipped from Huli's mouth. "Oh, thank the gods. I need to get railed now."

Huli clambered off Xiao Dan and moved toward the pillows on his hands and knees, but Xiao Dan didn't give him the chance to lie down. The vampire sprang up, wrapped one arm around his waist, and plunged his cock deep into Huli's stretched ass. Xiao Dan froze, counting silently backward from a hundred, trying to grasp the last strands of his control. But he felt so damn good, and Huli had already tortured him with his mouth and his fingers.

"Don't stop now, my mate," Huli moaned. "I need everything you've got. Fuck me so I can fuck you."

Okay. Huli had a very good point. If he held out for too long, Huli was going to fly off the edge, and they'd have to do the other half of their flip fuck another time.

With a grunt, Xiao Dan withdrew so that the head of his cock stretched those tight muscles before plunging in. He kept a slow, steady rhythm, driving them both mad, but he didn't want to speed up. Every time they were together like this, Xiao Dan wanted to savor every moment. He'd waited so many years. There had been so many missed chances, doubts, and fears keeping them apart. Now that they were together, Xiao Dan wanted to suck on each second as though it were a piece of hard candy. Only then could he move on to the next one.

Sadly, his body wasn't up for slow and steady. His orgasm was burning through him like a wildfire through dry brush. Within a few minutes, the last of his restraint and self-control were ash. He picked up his pace, pounding into Huli, losing himself in the feel of his hot, welcoming body as it gripped him so tightly. All too soon, he leaped off the edge and soared. The orgasm ripped free, sending an electric current of ecstasy racing along every nerve ending.

He wanted to linger in this state of bliss, but Huli was practically vibrating underneath him. The poor fox spirit was on the verge of shattering, and Xiao Dan couldn't leave him in that state. He pulled out and flopped onto his back next to his lover.

"Still want me?" Xiao Dan asked.

Huli's face twisted into an incredulous look and shook his head. "You're silly. How could I not always want you?" He climbed between Xiao Dan's legs, placed a hand behind one of his knees, and pressed the leg toward Xiao Dan's chest as he pressed into his body.

Long, low groans tumbled from them in a chorus of pleasure. Had anything ever been

so wonderful? That was a sharp bite of pain despite every muscle in his body being turned to mush, but it was fading as the wonderful feeling of fullness gripped him by the throat. Oh gods, this was amazing. This was what he'd been missing. The heat from Huli's body was so intense, as if it were scorching him from the inside out.

"You okay?" Huli gritted out between clenched teeth. Sweat dotted Huli's forehead, and his damp hair clung to his temples. Everything about him screamed one big, tense muscle as if he were barely holding it together.

"Perfect. Just need you to move," Xiao Dan panted.

"Can't go slow. So close."

"I know, my sweet fox. Fuck me hard and fast."

Huli took him at his word. He started hammering into his body, while his voice rose in an endless stream of grunts and howls of pleasure. Xiao Dan lifted his hips, trying to meet him thrust for thrust, marveling at the feel of Huli inside of him. He had waited too long to experience this.

Only a couple of minutes passed before Huli's rhythm shattered and he cried out, pumping himself into Xiao Dan. All the lines of strain vanished from his face and he appeared as if he'd lost himself in that bright, shining moment of bliss.

The second his orgasm ended, Huli released Xiao Dan's leg and collapsed on his chest, a slick, sweaty mess. His breathing was frantic pants while his heart hammered against Xiao Dan's.

With a smile, the vampire wrapped his arms around his fox and kissed the top of his head. He couldn't remember ever feeling this happy, this complete in all of his two thousand years of existence.

Huli lifted his head and flashed him a crooked grin. His eyes were barely open, giving him a very intoxicated look. “Did I do good?”

“You did very good. Would you want to do that again?”

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That got his eyes to widen. “Yes. Definitely. But the next time, I get to come first, and you come second. I almost died!”

It started as a low chuckle that shook his frame and exploded out of his mouth as a deep belly laugh. Yes, only Huli would suffer a close call with death over an orgasm.

“Deal!” he agreed when he could catch his breath.

Huli smirked as he shimmied up the bed to stretch out next to Xiao Dan. They lay on their sides so they could face each other, both smiling like fools.

“I love you, Huli. You are the joy that has been missing from my life. I never want to lose you,” Xiao Dan murmured as he reached out to brush the tips of his fingers along Huli’s round cheek.

“You will never lose me. I love you with all that I am. This fox spirit has followed you nearly his whole life. Never gonna let you out of my sight.”

“After we defeat Min, we’ll go home to China. Will you live with me there?”

Huli lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes on Xiao Dan as he made little thinking noises. “I don’t know. Will I get to sleep in your bed every day?”

“If that’s what you want.”

“And will I get to shower with Gege whenever I want?”

Xiao Dan's lips twitched, but he held back his smile. "Of course."

"Will we go for our rambles through the plum orchard like we used to?"

"All the time."

"Will you tell me every night that you love me?"

Xiao Dan leaned in and pressed a kiss to Huli's lips. "Of course. You are my heart and my happiness. I love you with all that I am."

Huli nodded. "Then Huli will live with you forever." The words had barely left his lips when his regal, reserve façade shattered. He crashed into Xiao Dan and peppered his face with kisses. "You are never getting rid of your huli jing."

Good. That was exactly what he wanted.

Chapter 21

Huli

Abranch snapped, the sound echoing through the silent woods, and Huli froze, listening for any other signs of movement. Night had fallen a few hours earlier, and the temperature hovered near freezing. By morning, a thick coat of frost would cover the ground and trees, whispering of winter that was barely more than a month away.

When it came time to confront Min, he'd been sure it would be in the middle of the city, where she had access to all the humans and comforts she preferred. She might have come into existence as a fox spirit and passed her earliest years living in a burrow in the ground, but as soon as she could shift into a human, she remained among the humans, preferring their silk finery, comfortable beds, and delicious foods.

But Kai had located her deep in the woods no more than a few kilometers from the Zhang property, as if she hadn't wanted to travel far from her target.

The dragon had been quite put out when Xiao Dan had banned him from killing the huli jing the moment he'd located her. Huli might have been surprised at first. After losing his tail, he just wanted Min dead so Xiao Dan would be safe.

Yet, as the days passed and Huli slept curled in Xiao Dan's arms, his head on the vampire's chest, he understood why he'd stopped Kai. This was their fight. Min had threatened Huli's mate, and he needed to clean up his own mess.

Xiao Dan also wanted some payback after Huli had suffered at Min's hands.

The rest of the Zhang clan had accompanied them into the woods this night, but they were there only to keep the white huli jing from escaping.

A large hand came to rest on the top of Huli's head, and he gazed up to find Xiao Dan standing beside him with a sheathed sword in his other hand and a reassuring smile on his lips. Just that touch was enough to release the tight grip of fear on his lungs, allowing him to breathe a little easier. With his mate at his side, he could accomplish anything.

A scent drifted through the woods and Huli snapped his head around, pointing his nose toward the faint whiff he'd caught. Could it really be Chenxiang??1 Maybe with a hint of lotus blossom. It was something old that called to fuzzy memories of a time long since dead. Without a word, he darted after the scent. The odor didn't come from the vampires, which left only one creature from his past—Min.

As he followed it, the smell grew stronger. He didn't dare look behind him and risk Min surprising him. He trusted that Xiao Dan was a step behind. Kai would track them from a distance, ready to deploy the rest of the clan the moment Huli had Min in

his sights.

There was a flash of white on his right. Huli tried to change direction, to avoid the coming attack, but Min was faster. Thankfully, though, his vampire was faster than all huli jing. A hand seized the scruff of his neck, jerking him back as a dagger sped through the air and embedded in the dirt where Huli had been standing a second ago.

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“Sorry about that,” Xiao Dan murmured as he released Huli.

The fox winked at his mate and turned his attention to the blur of white as Min darted away.

“Why are you running, Min?” Huli shouted. “I thought you wanted to claim the rest of my tails and steal all my power away. That’s why you helped me, wasn’t it?”

“That’s still my plan.” Her voice drifted out of the trees like a hawk on a gust of wind. “But you’ve brought along a vampire to protect you. I’ll need to kill him first if I’m to get to you.”

“At least you have a fair understanding of the situation,” Xiao Dan called out. “There’s no way I’d allow you to harm my mate. You’ll have to go through me.”

Min’s low chuckle trickled out of the shadows. “It’s amazing that you’re still willing to protect him after everything he’s put you through, the danger he has introduced to your precious clan. It’s as if you don’t know him at all.”

“Shut up!” Huli barked. He lunged away from Xiao Dan, rushing to where he thought she was hiding.

“Huli!” Xiao Dan shouted after him.

“What’s wrong, Little Fox? Afraid I’ll tell him who you truly are?” Min’s mocking voice came from his far right. She’d moved without him even noticing. Huli turned and ran toward where he thought she was hiding yet again, but still came up empty.

He needed to stop her before she told all his secrets. After their travels and years of cultivation, Huli had spent as much time with Min as he did with Xiao Dan. Possibly even more. And with her, he hadn't bothered to watch the things that came out of his mouth. Xiao Dan couldn't know how horrible he really was.

"Huli, be careful! Don't get too far from me," Xiao Dan called after him, but Huli couldn't risk glancing over his shoulder at his mate. He needed to keep those brief glimpses of white in sight.

"Yes, Little Fox. Don't wander too far from your protector."

A low growl rumbled up Huli's throat, and he clenched his teeth. He hated when she called him that. It had been Xiao Dan's nickname for him during his early years. She wasn't allowed to use that name. He raced forward.

Their running through the woods had taken them to a deep valley where the sides around them rose steeply and were covered in fallen leaves and branches, making it hard to escape. Huli stopped too sharply at the top. His body weight carried him past the rim, forcing him to slide and tumble to the bottom of the valley.

Huli jumped to his feet and searched the area to find that he was alone. There was no sign of Min, and he'd even outrun his mate.

As the thought crossed his mind, bright-white fur cut through the darkness. Min strolled along the top of the valley above him, her tails dancing behind her.

"Oh, no. Look at poor Huli. Lost his mate," she taunted. "So determined to keep him from knowing the truth. You didn't even bother to watch where you were running. Is his love for you really that fragile?"

"No. It's not," Xiao Dan stated, less than a meter away from Min. The white fox

yelped and attempted to jump away from him as he swung his sword. Even from his angle at the bottom of the valley, Huli could see the tip of the blade slice her side as she tumbled into the valley.

Before she even stopped falling, Huli pounced on her, his sharp teeth sinking into fur and flesh at her throat. Blood coated his mouth and Min's screams filled his ears. Yet, as he tried to give her a neck-snapping shake, Min planted her feet into his ribs and shoved free.

The white fox faced off against Huli for a couple of seconds, then darted to the other side of the valley, putting more distance between Huli and Xiao Dan. As she reached the top of the hill, Mei Lian stepped out from behind a tree, a spear held in both hands and leveled right at Min's chest. Min dug all her feet into the soft earth to halt her sprint. She changed directions, searching for an escape route, but one by one, the Zhang clan stepped out around the side of the ridge, blocking her exits and forcing her into the valley to face Huli and Xiao Dan, who had now descended to stand beside his mate.

"No!" she snarled.

Huli chuckled. "You would almost think we planned this."

"Did you really think you could hold the truth about Huli's personality over his head?" Yichen called out.

"We know he's selfish," Xiang said.

"And lazy," Junjie added.

"And that he'd sacrifice all of us if it meant getting an extra five minutes of alone time with Xiao Dan," Chen stated.

Huli huffed. “They’re enjoying this too much.”

“I’ve always known all those things about him,” Xiao Dan interjected, shooting a warm smile at his fox mate. “And I still love him with everything I am. Nothing you can say would ever change that.”

Thank the gods he was covered in fur, because it felt like his face was on fire. How could Xiao Dan say those things where everyone could hear him? He wasn’t worthy of this vampire. It didn’t matter how many tails he had. Eight? Nine? A hundred? Not enough to prove his worth.

He’d just have to kill Min.

Huli lowered his head and flattened his ears as he stalked away from Xiao Dan, approaching his prey. Min’s tails flicked restlessly behind her, her gaze darting from the vampires watching above them and Huli as he crept closer.

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“Is this how you finally beat me? With an entire clan of vampires?” Min mocked.

“They are there to make sure you can’t escape,” Huli growled.

“Your fight is with us,” Xiao Dan finished.

The white fox huffed. “Two against one? Hardly seems fair.”

Xiao Dan pulled his sword from his sheath and slashed it through the empty air. “You were the one who was foolish enough to attack my mate and my clan. No one touches my mate or my family.”

As Min stared at Xiao Dan, Huli leaped at Min, tackling her to the ground. They rolled through the fallen leaves, broken branches, and stagnant pools of cold water. A horrendous noise rose out of the valley, a cacophony of screams and barks. They kicked, clawed, and bit at each other, tearing flesh where they could.

At last, Huli flew away from her, freeing himself from the tangle of teeth and tails. The second he was away, Xiao Dan stepped in, swinging his sword. Min was forced to shift into her human form. She blocked the vampire’s sword with her own magically conjured blade. Metal clanged and sparks flew up, briefly lighting the darkness.

While Min was quite strong fighting as a fox, she hadn’t studied the art of swordplay for as long as Xiao Dan. She struggled to keep up with his series of offensive slashes and thrusts to the point of her shifting back into a fox after less than a minute and darting off to another part of the valley.

As she ran, heavy tree branches fell from the trees that lined the edge of the rim. Each time, Min had to dart and dodge to avoid being hit.

“Rei!” Xiao Dan shouted. “We agreed on no interference.”

“That wasn’t me!” the elf cried out.

“Forgive me, Shixiong,” Kai mumbled.

Huli giggled until angry sparks of magic crackled along Min’s tails. He’d been hit with those magic bolts in the past, and it wasn’t an enjoyable experience. He hunkered low, preparing to dart out of the way, when the white fox yelped and violently jerked to the left, pulling her tails out of a tangle of vines that had somehow threaded their way through them.

The elf snorted. “Okay. That one was me.”

Xiao Dan might not appreciate the interference, but Huli did. The second Min was distracted, he lunged at her. The impact of their bodies hitting drove her to the ground again. Unfortunately, she was ready for him and kicked him away. He hit a clump of leaves, rolled to his feet, and shifted into a human. He palmed the throwing knife Xiao Dan had pressed into his hand before they left the manor and threw it straight at Min.

With a wicked grin, she batted it away. But she didn’t notice that Xiao Dan was already racing toward her. The vampire snatched the blade out of the air and plunged it into her neck.

For a heartbeat, it was as if the world had become a frozen tableau of death as Xiao Dan stood over the white huli jing, her tails stiff and still behind her. But on the next beat, Xiao Dan stepped back, ripping the blade from her body. Min fell soundlessly

forward on a gush of blood that covered the dead leaves and cold earth. Her tails fell limp. A couple of gurgling gasps escaped her and then...nothing.

She was gone.

The shadow that had stretched through so much of his life, the threat to his happiness with Xiao Dan, was finally gone.

His brain was still trying to process it when Xiao Dan's arms wrapped tightly around him, pulling him in against his chest. Kisses were pressed to the top of his head and temple.

"Are you all right? Did she hurt you?" Xiao Dan demanded.

Huli lifted his face to look at the worry that lined his mate's handsome features. A small smile grew on his lips. "I'm okay. No harm done."

"Can you forgive me?"

Huli blinked at the vampire, his brain locking up after just starting to function again. "Huh?" That wasn't what he'd expected him to say.

"I know you wanted revenge for all the harm she did to you and stealing your tail, but I lost my patience. She was getting too close to hurting you, and I couldn't take it any longer."

A swell of warmth pushed through his body, replacing the cold nausea that followed Min's death. His mate had acted to protect him. His perfect Xiao Dan had lost his temper and acted in haste. How could he not love him more?

Huli wrapped his arms around Xiao Dan's neck and pulled him in for a kiss.

“Nothing to forgive. You saved me.”

“I will always save you,” Xiao Dan murmured, their lips brushing as he spoke.

“That’s it?” Rei’s cry broke them apart.

Huli stared past Xiao Dan to find the rest of the Zhang clan descending into the valley with them. Most weapons had been tucked away, and there were expressions of relief on their faces. All except for Rei.

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“I don’t get to kill anyone or slice off a couple of tails?” Rei continued.

“I can raise her body, and you can fight a zombie fox,” Moon offered.

“No!” Huli shouted, joined by Xiao Dan, Ming Yu, and Chen.

Moon cackled, and Chen caught his mate by the waist, pulling him in close. “You have many more lessons with your necromancer friend, Sky, before you may raise so much as a headless chicken. Plus, you have punishment training to finish for not telling me about this necromancer thing in the first place.”

To his credit, Moon didn’t bat an eye at Chen’s grumpiness. The witch-turned-vampire smirked up at his mate. “How about I do that magical thing with my tongue and we knock a few training sessions off that list?”

Huli choked when he attempted to snort and laugh at the same time. Xiao Dan remained silent, but his shoulders shook as he burrowed his face into Huli’s hair.

“What should we do with her?” Ming Yu inquired.

“Can’t we just leave her here to feed the local animals?” Mei Lian said.

“I doubt it would be wise for the local wolves and such to eat a magical creature,” Xiang muttered. “The humans are still recovering from that fae mess. They don’t need other weird things happening in these woods.”

Huli pulled away from Xiao Dan enough to locate Kai standing beside his mate,

staring skeptically at the corpse. “Dragon, can you burn her for us?”

Kai made a face. “I’m a water dragon. Fire isn’t one of my specialties. However...” He paused and waved his hands in front of him. In his left, a fancy jar of what appeared to be lamp oil. In his right was a box of stick matches.

Xiang snatched up both and made quick work of disposing of Min’s body so that she could infect no other creature with her magic. Huli could only stand back, watching as the yellow and orange flames turned her body to ash, a strange mangle of feelings twisting in his chest.

“Huli?”

There was no missing the concern that softened Xiao Dan’s voice.

“I’m okay,” he whispered past the tightness in his throat that angered him. “I can’t say that we ever liked each other. We’d had our secret plans to use each other. But...there’s this huge chunk of my life where we were constant companions. Not friends. I guess more like family who didn’t like each other. That part of my life is truly finished. No more running from it or trying to hide it from you.”

Xiao Dan wrapped his arms around Huli from behind and squeezed. “No. No more running and hiding. You have a new family now. One who doesn’t want to use you or hurt you.”

The tightness in Huli’s throat disappeared, and he breathed easier as he stared up at Xiao Dan. “My family.”

“Is it time?”

Huli stepped free of Xiao Dan’s hold and turned at the sound of a catch in Yichen’s

voice as he asked that very simple question. His gaze skimmed the members of the Zhang clan, both new and old. There was something in the vampires' eyes, a wistful longing that he also found on Xiao Dan's face.

And that was when it hit him. They were finally free to leave the United States. No more roadblocks, evil schemes, or danger.

“Yes.” Xiao Dan's voice was rough, and he had to clear his throat before he continued. “After a hundred years of being incomplete, our clan is truly whole at last. We have the shidi we have been missing and the mates we've all longed for. It's time to go home.”

1 Chenxiang – also known as agarwood [Narrator's note: ?? Chénxiang]

Chapter 22

Zhang Xiao Dan

“Jiejie, will you teach me to cook?”

Xiao Dan stopped in the middle of the hall and replayed that request and voice. Yes, that was Huli in the kitchen with Ming Yu, and he was asking her to teach him to cook. For a moment, he was both confused and terrified. He couldn't imagine good things happening in the kitchen when Huli was mixed with knives and fire. Ming Yu seemed to have the same initial reaction.

“I...I don't understand. Is there something you'd like to eat? I can make it for you,” Ming Yu replied, sounding as if she wanted to protect her precious kitchen from the fox spirit. Xiao Dan turned around and started for the kitchen to save Ming Yu's kitchen from the fox, but Huli's next words stopped him cold.

“I want to learn to cook, so I can learn how to make Gege’s favorite meal for his birthday. Also, I need to know what his favorite meal is. And I need you to tell me the date of Gege’s birthday.”

Xiao Dan slapped a hand over his mouth to hold in his laughter while his heart melted for his mate. He didn’t know what to do. Should he go in there and help Ming Yu? He didn’t want to walk away. This conversation was too adorable.

“Oh. Well, Xiao Dan’s birthday isn’t until December thirty-first. The last day of the year. Vampires don’t celebrate birthdays much. They lose their meaning after a couple of centuries. I usually make a big meal to celebrate the end of the year. It would be too much for you to do alone. Would you like to help me with it?”

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“Okay.” Huli’s voice sounded bleak. “But can we make him a cake? A big one? With lots of candles and pretty flowers? And swords! He likes swords.”

“We can, but why are you so determined to celebrate Xiao Dan’s birthday?”

“Because Gege is amazing and we need to celebrate him every day, but especially on his birthday.”

Xiao Dan dropped his hand from his mouth to rest on his heart. He needed to put a stop to this before he expired on the spot.

“I think we can figure something out,” Ming Yu said with a smile in her voice.

“Jiejie, have you seen my mate?” Xiao Dan called out as he walked toward the kitchen. He turned the corner to find Huli standing behind the center island with Ming Yu, a wide grin on his face. “There you are! What are you up to? Sneaking snacks?”

Huli tipped his chin up and squared his shoulders. “Why not? Jiejie always makes the very best snacks.”

“That is very true. I was wondering if you would like to go for a walk with me through the garden.”

“Yes, please!” The playful fox pressed a quick kiss to Ming Yu’s cheek and skipped to the rear door with his hand held out to Xiao Dan.

Xiao Dan winked over his shoulder at Ming Yu, who was now silently laughing at the fox, and escorted him outside. The dark sky was full of twinkling stars, and a deep chill had settled in the area. It felt as if they were mere days away from the first snowfall. He was torn about wanting to stay to see their American home covered in a sparkling white blanket and wanting to hurry to China so that they could see the snow descending on a place they all loved so much.

Of course, Chen could stir up their own personal blizzard anytime he wanted, but it wasn't the same. He wanted to watch nature's magic as it fell on their home.

He gave Huli's warm hand a squeeze as they followed the stone path over the small bridge and into the trees. His lips twitched to see one of Erik's red cars by the brook, nestled by a couple of bushes. He would need to remember that so he could take it back in after their walk. Their littlest clan member would be searching for that later.

"Huli, I was thinking...I don't know when your birthday is."

"I don't have a birthday." The fox spirit gave a shrug of his shoulders, his free hand swinging at his side. "Fox spirits aren't born the same way humans are. Min believed that our essence escaped the underworld and after a lot of time, we developed enough magic and consciousness to become a creature. I think I was born a fox near some magic, and that enabled me to cultivate into a fox spirit. Either way, I don't know when all of that started."

"So, by that logic, you could be older than me."

Huli stared up at Xiao Dan for several seconds before bursting out in laughter. "That's silly. There's no way I could be older than you. Besides, you are Gege, and you will always be Gege."

Xiao Dan lifted their joined hands to his lips and brushed a kiss across Huli's fingers.

“I will always be yours.”

As they reached the trees, Huli skipped a step ahead of him and turned so that he was facing Xiao Dan while he walked backward. “But if I had a birthday, does that mean I would get cake and presents?”

“Of course.”

“Can I pick any day out of the year to be my birthday?”

Xiao Dan nodded, his smile growing wider. “Do you have one in mind?”

“I do. I want my birthday to be the same day as yours.”

“December thirty-first?”

“Yes. I want us to celebrate together. We’ll eat cake and shoot off fireworks.”

“That is a wonderful idea. I can’t wait for our birthdays.”

Huli pulled his hand free and shifted into his fox form with his eight tails dancing behind him. He bounded and leaped around their private forest, darting between the trees and disappearing into the shadows, only to reappear a second later.

Xiao Dan leaned on a tree and watched his mate stretch his legs. Everything Huli did was so full of joy and energy. It was impossible not to smile when he was nearby.

Yet, Xiao Dan’s happiness faded as his eye caught on the flurry of fluffy orange and white tails that flowed behind the fox. Min had been destroyed. They were free of all hindrances and threats to their clan at long last. They could return to China, but the white huli jing had left a mark on them. Specifically, Huli. He was still missing a tail.

Gaining all nine tails and becoming a jiuweihu had been his lifelong dream. For centuries, he'd let nothing stand in his way to attaining his goal.

Now that he was one short, Xiao Dan couldn't help but wonder if he was about to lose his sweet fox all over again. A fist closed on his heart and squeezed. The selfish part of him dreaded it. They'd lost so much time already. He wanted to support Huli, but he also didn't want to go another night without his smiling face.

“Huli?”

The fox stopped sharply in his running and darting through the woods. His head snapped around to focus on Xiao Dan before he zipped between the trees to stop right in front of the vampire.

“What do you need, Zhang-ge?”

Xiao Dan swallowed hard and forced his smile back on his lips. It was better to know Huli’s mind ahead of time rather than stewing in worry alone. “I was thinking about your tails.”

Huli sat up a little straighter and fanned his eight tails behind him like a peacock trying to attract a mate. They were all very similar, with shades of orange along the tails and the tips were colored white. A few had streaks of black here and there that matched his feet. He looked like a normal red fox in all aspects except for the fact that he was twice the size of one. His tails were also longer and fluffier than the average fox.

“They are the best, most beautiful tails you’ve ever seen, right?”

“They really are. I can’t imagine any huli jing in the world has better tails than you.” At his praise, Huli tilted his chin higher and even puffed up his chest. His huli jing was ridiculous, and it only made Xiao Dan love him more.

“But I know you were very frustrated to lose one of your tails, leaving you with just eight,” Xiao Dan continued.

All the tails slumped and Huli's triangular ears flattened. "Stupid, evil Min," he muttered under his breath. "Death was still too good for her."

Xiao Dan wasn't sure he disagreed with Huli on that point, but this wasn't what he wanted to discuss. "I was wondering if you planned to resume your cultivation as soon as we returned to China so you could regain your missing tail."

The fox's ears instantly straightened, and his furry brow wrinkled as if Xiao Dan's words confused him. He hadn't meant to surprise Huli with his thoughts.

"I bring it up because I know how important it was to you to gain all nine tails. I want you to know that I support you."

Huli's head tilted to the side. "Do you want me to leave to cultivate for a ninth tail?"

Crap. He was beginning to wish Huli would shift into his human form. His expressions and moods were so much easier to read on a human face. When he was being sly and sneaky, he couldn't hide it as well as he could in fox form.

"No, I don't want you to leave, but it would be selfish of me to ask you to stay and keep you from your dream to be a jiuweihu. You've also made it clear that you can cultivate faster away from Luoyang. I want you to know that I support you no matter what you decide."

A knot formed in Xiao Dan's throat. These were all the right words to say to support his fox boyfriend, but his heart and brain were both screaming at him to take them back. He needed to demand that Huli stay at his side and not leave him behind for another hundred years. But he couldn't. It wasn't right.

Huli lowered his head to stare at the ground, seeming to think about Xiao Dan's words. The vampire bit his tongue to keep from throwing more fuel on this disastrous

fire. Huli needed space and time to think.

Except he didn't.

Huli shifted into his human form and stepped right up to Xiao Dan, resting one of his hands on his mate's chest. "Do I need to have all nine tails for you to love me?"

Xiao Dan choked on the air he sucked in on a harsh gasp. "No! Of course not! I love you just as much now as I did when you had nine tails."

"So, you think I'm still worthy of you, even though I only have eight tails?"

"Yes. My Huli is very much worthy of me. Not because of your beautiful tails, but because of what's in your heart. You're a good man and a good fox. That's what matters to me."

Huli leaned into him. The hand resting over his heart slid upward to hook around the nape of Xiao Dan's neck. "Then there is no reason for Huli to leave his Zhang-ge."

"What? Really? Are you sure?"

Xiao Dan cursed himself as soon as the questions jumped from his tongue. Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut?

"Yes." Huli lifted on the tips of his toes and pulled Xiao Dan closer so he could steal a soft kiss. "Why would I want to leave? If you love me as I am, I'm not leaving."

"But your dream of becoming a jiuweihu?"

"I was one once, and that is enough. Besides, Huli is still powerful with eight tails. Scarier than most vampires outside the Zhang clan." Huli rested his other hand on

Xiao Dan's chest and started to trace random designs. "Besides, if Huli gets in trouble, Gege will still come save him, right?"

Xiao Dan cackled as he wrapped his arms behind Huli's waist, pulling him in tight so he could plunder his silly mouth with a long, deep kiss.

He didn't think it was possible, but he was finding new ways to love his fox every night. No one had ever made him so happy. He didn't think it was possible to feel this much joy with another person, but Huli brought him to new heights every night they were together.

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“Yes, Huli, I will always protect you.” As he spoke, his lips rubbed Huli’s, teasing his fox. “And I will always love you no matter how many tails you have.”

“Good, but I have no intention of losing any more.” Huli bumped the tip of his nose against Xiao Dan’s and grinned. “If I do, you must come with me while I cultivate. I will never sleep apart from my vampire again.”

“Deal.”

Xiao Dan would happily follow his fox wherever he led him.

Epilogue

HULI

Erik giggled, making the smile toying with Huli’s lips grow. He sucked his bottom lip into his mouth and bit it as he directed one of his tails to dangle just above the kid’s head. The moment Erik dropped his hands to his lap, Huli lowered his tail to tickle the child’s nose. The child squealed, laughed, and made a grab for his tail, but Huli jerked it out of his reach once again.

An owl hooted somewhere in the nearby woods and they both froze, listening for another hoot to determine the direction of the bird. But the feathery menace fell silent with the rest of the chilly woods.

Erik had come outside with Junjie a few minutes ago to say good-bye to the fish and give them a final meal in their current home. Kai was supposed to zap them magically

across the globe to their new home in China. Huli thought it would be better to fry them up for dinner and get Erik some new fish, but Junjie had argued that their little boy was partial to these fish, so they lived another night.

Huli had come out to stretch his fox legs but had been strong-armed into watching the child because Junjie had to check on his mate's progress with dinner. Apparently Leo the WalkingDisaster had offered to make Erik and Junjie an American meal. As a result, there was now smoke coming out one window. That seemed about right.

Stretched out on the ground in his human form, but with all of his tails, Huli smirked at the cute kid. "Your Kitty Gege is a disaster, isn't he?"

Erik either didn't understand or didn't care, because he tipped his head back to look for the tail that had been tickling his face. As he searched, he stretched too far and fell. Huli's tails darted forward to catch the child, letting him fall onto a pillow of fluffy tails.

"Ooooh...soft," Erik whispered as his small hand petted one of the tails that was right under his cheek.

This was always one of the pluses of spending time with the child. He always showed proper appreciation for Huli's tails. The kid was careful, considerate, and he knew beauty when he saw it. It also didn't hurt that Erik was always bubbling over with happiness and sweetness. He was a joy to be near.

"You're going to have a pretty kitty cat tail, aren't you?" Huli said.

Erik bobbed his head up and down in a nod that threatened to knock his head right off his neck. "Big tail!" He held his hands out in front of him. "Soft tail like Pretty Gege."

“Yes, you are. You’re going to have the best tail any cat ever had.”

How could he not? The fates wouldn’t deny this sweet, smart child the most perfect tail that ever existed on a cat shifter. He refused to believe it. The kid had already lost his parents. He deserved a great tail.

Huli stared at the boy for a moment, his brow furrowed. He reclined on the ground, his head resting on his hand. Was there something he could do to hurry along the boy’s shift? Maybe not help him shifting into his full cat form, but a tail and ears wouldn’t be bad. It would make Erik happy, and that was all that mattered.

“Want tail! Want fluffy tail!” Erik pushed up to his feet and hopped once, his hands balled into fists. He landed with his legs and squatted while his face scrunched up in concentration. Was he trying to push out a tail?

At the same time, Huli could sense a tiny stir of magic within the boy. It was only a few sparks, but it was more than he’d sensed from him so far. Huli shoved up into a sitting position and held out a hand toward Erik. It hovered in the air above his bent head. The magic was growing stronger within him.

He was a genuine wonder! Erik had spent so much time around shifters that he understood that one day he was going to shift into a cat. He understood there was magic inside of him that could make this happen, and he was trying to force it. Oh, ho! He was going to shift well ahead of when Leo said he would. This kid was going to force it, come hell or high water.

Huli dropped his hand to his lap and glanced at the house. A little magic boost from Kai would be plenty to get Erik to shift completely, but he had a feeling the dragon wouldn’t agree to it. There was a danger in letting a two-year-old shift into a cat. They had no idea how to help him shift back into his human form.

Plus, Leo and Junjie were likely to throw a fit and not let him play with the boy anymore.

But a tail was different. Huli was an expert at growing tails. He'd cultivated enough magic in his lifetime to grow eight of them. How hard could it be to help one tiny cat shifter into getting his tail and sending it away before Junjie and Leo discovered what they'd done?

"Would you like to shift and have a kitty tail?" Huli inquired.

Erik popped up and nodded. "Yes! Yes, please! Want tail!"

"Okay, we can try, but it's gotta be our secret." Huli held one finger up to his lips and lowered his voice. "We don't want Leo and Jun-Jun to find out yet."

The boy scrunched down again and mirrored holding a finger to his lips while giggling. Yeah, this wasn't going to stay a secret for long if it worked.

"Close your eyes and picture your kitty tail in your mind."

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The child squeezed his eyes shut tight and wrinkled his nose. His hands were balled into fists and pressed to his chest. His tiny body was vibrating in his efforts to manifest this tail.

Huli could feel the sparks inside of the child. There were a few more, but he was still years away from having enough magic to shift. Biting on his lip, Huli lightly pressed his fingers to the top of Erik's head, sending a tiny burst of his own magic into the boy, trying to match the energy that was already there.

Erik gasped, his eyes opening wide as he straightened.

Huli jerked his hand away. "Did you feel that?"

Erik nodded.

"Did it hurt?"

The child shook his head. "No. Again. Do it again!" The second the words were out of his mouth, Erik closed his eyes and scrunched up his body, concentrating on getting his tail.

How could he not do as the boy commanded? Huli placed his fingers on the top of his head and pushed a tiny bit of magic into his small body. He had doubled what was in there. The child's heart was beating fast, but not dangerously so. There was even a smile spreading across his lips, as if Erik was enjoying the increase in magic.

Yet, he hesitated to give him more. The wolf shifters might change between their

human and wolf forms at an earlier age than cats, but it seemed like cat magic was far more complicated. He didn't want to rush things too much for Erik and hurt him.

Just as he was about to lift his hand, the energy in Erik jumped without Huli adding his magic. It was like enough had gathered to break into a secret well. Huli jerked his hand away, but there was no stopping the flood that rushed through the child. Erik laughed and whoosh! A long, black, fluffy tail pushed out of the back of the little boy's pants.

Holy shit! He did it.

Erik had shifted just enough to gain a cat's tail.

It was rather perfect, too. Fluffy to the point of being luxurious. It was deep black except for the tip, which was white.

"Tail!" Erik shouted. With little hands, he grabbed his tail as he plopped on the ground and rubbed it on his face. "Soft tail."

Huli reached out and lightly rubbed his fingers on the fur. "It is a very soft tail. Congratulations! You have a beautiful, perfect tail."

A purr escaped the boy as he continued to rub his tail on his cheek. "Pretty tail like Pretty Gege."

Huli fluffed up his own tails, brushing them against Erik's cheeks to get him to giggle. "Exactly. You have the perfect tail. I bet when the time comes, you're going to be the cutest black-and-white kitty in all the world. You?—"

The sound of the rear door opening echoed across the yard and Huli's words lodged in his throat. His eyes jerked around to see Xiao Dan standing at the edge of the

porch, his head turning slowly as if he were searching for someone—namely him.

Shit!

Too soon! This was too soon! He'd not even figured out how to tell Erik to send the tail away. They couldn't be discovered yet.

Huli shifted into his fox form and moved so that his body was blocking Erik from Xiao Dan's direct view. He covered Erik in all of his tails, hoping to hide the boy.

"Huli, there you are," Xiao Dan said with a sigh of relief.

"I'm here. Just relaxing in the garden," Huli replied in his most nonchalant voice.

"You still have Erik with you?"

Before Huli could answer, the boy's squeals of laughter echoed through the garden.

"Clearly," Xiao Dan stated with a smile. "Could you bring him in? Leo has finished with his dinner."

"Um...sure. A few more minutes, please? We're playing."

There must have been something suspicious in Huli's voice because Xiao Dan's eyes narrowed on him. Instead of returning to the house, the vampire walked toward them.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

He ransacked his mind to figure out a way to make the tail go away or hide it, but he couldn't come up with anything. Meanwhile, Erik continued to giggle, lightly tugging on his tail. Huli glanced over his shoulder to find the black-and-white tail poking

through his own. He was so screwed.

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“Huli?” Xiao Dan prodded when he was standing above the fox. “What are you up to?”

“Me? Nothing. I?—”

“Tail! Tail!” Erik shouted. The little boy fought his way out of Huli’s dancing tails to greet Xiao Dan with his own black tail waving behind him.

But Xiao Dan didn’t seem surprised. In fact, he only sighed with a smirk. “Was this you or Kai?”

“What?” Huli choked out.

“You’re not the first one Erik has wheedled a tail out of.”

“What?” Huli repeated because his brain was locked up. This wasn’t the first time Erik had a tail? Huli changed into his human form and stood up. “Are you serious? He’s had that tail before?”

Xiao Dan chuckled as he pressed a kiss to Huli’s forehead. “A few times, from what Junjie has told me. Apparently, he convinced Kai to help. He would talk about your tails and then make a face like he was trying to grow his own. He convinced you to help this time?”

Convinced was a strong word. Erik had been so sweet and cute. Of course, he’d wanted to help the kitten out. He could only stare in silent admiration at the child while Xiao Dan bent to pick him up, the black tail still waving happily behind him.

“Let’s go get some yummy dinner and show Jun-Jun and Leo your pretty tail.”

Erik nodded. “Mn. Dinner.”

“But...how do we get rid of it?” Huli inquired as he trailed behind him.

“It disappears when he falls asleep.”

That little stinker. Erik had played up his cuteness and got exactly what he wanted—his tail. He had them all wrapped around his tiny fingers, and Huli couldn’t admire him more for it. Huli had spent centuries learning ways to tug on Xiao Dan’s heartstrings to get more attention, more affection, more smiles. This child had been living with the Zhang clan for a matter of weeks, and he’d gotten both a dragon and a huli jing to bow to his whims.

Still in Xiao Dan’s arms, Erik stretched over to Huli and pressed a loud, smacking kiss to his cheek. “Tank yoo, Pretty Gege.”

Xiao Dan’s expression softened as he leaned over and brushed a sweet kiss to Huli’s other cheek. “Yes, thank you, Pretty Gege, for taking such good care of him.”

Yep, he was totally wrapped around Erik’s chubby finger as well as Xiao Dan’s, and he loved it.