



# Two Thousand Shadows

**Author:** *Jocelynn Drake*

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

**Description:** That cat is a liar!

The “stray cat” Junjie has been feeding and cuddling for months is actually an extremely rare cat shifter.

Of course, Leo would have preferred to continue their arrangement of Junjie feeding him choice bits of fish and rubbing his belly, but he needs Junjie’s help and that means revealing his secret.

An orphaned kitten needs a home after the fae killed his parents, and Leo is the most irresponsible, feckless, lazy creature in existence. In short, he’s a terrible choice for raising a two-year-old cat shifter. No. The WORST choice.

Yet, even after the little boy is settled with Junjie and the rest of the Zhang clan, Leo can’t walk away.

There’s just something about that sweet, bashful vampire with the too-soft heart and sexy eyes. And that kid is stealing chunks of his heart, too.

The war with the fae is about to tear the world apart and an old dark shadow has fallen over the Zhang clan, threatening to destroy them all.

Leo must stay to protect his new family. Even if it means giving up all his secrets to the vampire who is steadily stealing away his heart.

Two Thousand Shadows is the fourth novel in the Kings of Chaos series. This book contains a gentle, shy vampire who will stop at nothing to protect those he loves, a shifter with a secret, a nosy family who wants all the spilled tea, other non-human surprises, snark, angst, magic, found family, brotherly bickering, chaos, cuddles, secrets, and an endless love.

**Total Pages (Source):** 101

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## Prologue

ZHANG JUNJIE

18 BCE

Luoyang, Zhang clan home

A summer breeze swept through the plum orchard, stirring the dense covering of leaves. Junjie tensed, waiting for another sharp burn of pain as the fading sunlight shot through a fresh break in the foliage. Sunset was still more than an hour away, but his torture wouldn't stop just because the sun had disappeared below the horizon.

"Attack now!" Jiang Chong ordered, his voice as sharp and cutting as a blade.

Across from Junjie, Xiang stared at him with an expression of frustration and pain. As a daywalker, the sun offered Xiang no torment, so Jiang Chong liked to use him as a training weapon for the rest of the clan. He expected them to fight and defeat Xiang despite being constantly burned by the sun.

"Attack now, while he's weak!" Jiang Chong bellowed from his haven in a thick bank of shadows.

"Junjie is not my enemy," Xiang gritted out between clenched teeth. "He's suffered enough. The wind is picking up. There's no way he can avoid the sun."

"Then he must learn to fight through the pain," Jiang Chong snapped. His hard, lean

features twisted into a sneer. “This entire sect is soft and weak. Your last shifu? I coddled you, allowing endless excuses to stunt your ultimate potential. Even after all my tireless dedication to your training, it’s clear that not one of you will ever be more than a mediocre fighter.”

Junjie tightened his hold on the hilt of his sword to stop the trembling in his hand. Shifu Zhang Shi Lei had been both a brilliant teacher and a loving uncle. He couldn’t stomach another harsh word against him.

Before he could take a step toward Jiang Chong, he caught a tiny movement out of the corner of his eye. He peeked at another shaded spot where Xiao Dan stood under a tree, ever so slightly shaking his head. His dark eyes were full of fear and warning.

“Now attack him, Xiang! I am your creator, and you will obey me!” Jiang Chong’s fierce words rang through the orchard.

But it was Xiang’s low, icy words that struck them all. “No. I’d much rather kill you.”

No one had a chance to react, let alone stop him. Xiang lunged at Jiang Chong, aiming to slice the vampire’s head clean off his body. A surprised cry broke from Jiang Chong as he leaped back and raised his sword in time to block Xiang’s blow.

Junjie hesitated for a heartbeat of indecision. To attack Jiang Chong and fail to kill him meant putting the entire clan in danger. Retribution in Jiang Chong’s eyes was whatever inflicted the most pain. And most of the time that was harming the innocent.

But doing nothing meant abandoning Xiang. It also meant staying trapped under Jiang Chong’s control for another night, and none of them wanted that.

This might be their one chance.

Junjie shot forward as Jiang Chong forced Xiang to retreat. He moved too close to a dancing shaft of golden sunlight, and searing pain cut across his cheek, but he ignored it. He fought Jiang Chong, driving him out of his pocket of shadows, but it didn't last long. The vampire was older and faster.

Yet, before his blade could touch Junjie, another stopped it. Junjie gazed up to find that Xiao Dan had stepped in to save him.

"Leave now or we will destroy you," Xiao Dan said evenly to Jiang Chong.

"Never!"

"Good. I was hoping you'd say that," Yichen growled. He jumped in to fight alongside Xiao Dan.

The battle ranged all over the orchard, various members of the clan leaping in to join the fight when one had to retreat. They attempted to herd Jiang Chong toward the sunlight. If they could injure him, they might create an opening to end his life once and for all. It was amazing that he wasn't disappearing into the dead realm to escape them.

Of course, if he ran now, he had to know he'd never be able to reclaim control of the clan. His cowardice would undermine his every order from this day forward.

To Junjie, it didn't matter if he ran or died here. This was a turning point. Jiang Chong had pushed them too far for too long. They would reclaim their freedom from him or die in the attempt, but there was no going back to being his tormented "student."

Chen sent spikes of ice hurtling through the air, but Jiang Chong darted away at the last second to miss being impaled. Ming Yu and Mei Lian stepped up to drive him

into the fray. When he found himself overwhelmed yet again, Jiang Chong sliced a hole between the dead and living realms and slipped away.

“Be careful! Protect each other!” Xiao Dan shouted. As he spoke, he waved his hand across the surrounding orchard. For a moment, the world seemed to waver and shimmer as Shixiong’s<sup>2</sup> glamour washed over everything. He’d placed a forest scene on top of the orchard but kept the time of day the same, so they knew where the sunlight and shadows fell.

“Where is he?” Mei Lian demanded. She clenched a spear in both hands while pressing her shoulders against Ming Yu’s.

“Stay calm. He’ll reveal himself, eventually. There’s no way he’d leave without killing one of us.”

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“He’s not leaving here at all,” Xiang snarled.

Junjie tried to calm his racing heart and slow his breathing. Desperation and fear would hinder his reactions and weaken him as a fighter. He had to be at his best for the sake of his clan mates and for the honor of his clan.

A slight ripple in a deep shadow beside Chen caught Junjie’s attention. He palmed a throwing knife and sent it flying past Chen’s cheek. It narrowly missed Chen and disappeared into the opening Jiang Chong had created. A soft grunt slipped from the opening before it closed.

“You couldn’t have just said, ‘Move’?” Chen asked, though it came with a smirk.

“It was faster to throw a knife.”

Jiang Chong continued this frustrating game of hide-and-seek until he found a weakness to exploit. A snap of a branch from a powerful gust of wind drew too much of their attention. Jiang Chong surged through a black doorway to strike at Yichen. Chen barely pulled their shidi away as the monster’s blade kissed Yichen’s arm.

Junjie threw himself at Jiang Chong. Their blades clashed again and again as Junjie went through the same moves that had been drilled into his head for decades. And as he expected, Jiang Chong deflected every one of them. Junjie grew tired, and Jiang Chong knocked Junjie’s sword out of his hand. A gasp left Junjie. Pain surged through his gut as Jiang Chong shoved his sword deep. At the same time, Junjie plunged a dagger he’d kept hidden through bone and muscle in the center of Jiang Chong’s chest.

The monster tumbled back on a shout, and Junjie went with him. He pulled the knife from Jiang Chong and slammed his free hand into the opening. His fingers brushed what felt like a frozen stone that faintly pulsed.

Jiang Chong's heart.

He wrapped his fingers around the organ and attempted to pull it from the monster even as Jiang Chong twisted the sword in Junjie's stomach. A scream erupted from Junjie's lips, but he kept digging and pulling at the heart. Nothing was going to stop him.

"I may die, but I'm taking you with me," Jiang Chong threatened through clenched teeth.

"I'm happy to die for my clan."

The words had barely left his tongue when he noticed the darkness falling over them. Jiang Chong had pierced the veil between worlds, opening a doorway around them. He planned to trap Junjie there with his corpse.

Should Junjie release Jiang Chong and save himself?

Or stay and finish him?

Stay. End this. Save his clan.

The thought had formed in his mind as two sets of hands grabbed his legs and pulled. The unexpected sensation jolted him into loosening his hold on Jiang Chong's heart. As the monster's sword slid free of his stomach and his grip on Jiang Chong faltered, Junjie took a final swipe at his creator with the blade in his left hand, cutting him across the throat.

Those black eyes—filled with icy hatred—held Junjie’s as the doorway between the living and dead realms closed. Should he survive his injuries, the unspoken promise of torment and death rested in Jiang Chong’s cold stare.

“Jun-Jun, are you okay?”

“What the hell were you thinking?”

“Is he dead? Do you know if he’s dead?”

It was Mei Lian’s frantic question about Jiang Chong that snapped Junjie out of his daze.

“Why did you pull me out?” he shouted as Xiao Dan and Chen helped him sit up. He winced at the painful tug of the open wound in his gut. “I had his heart in my hand! In my hand!” As he shouted, he shook his blood-and-gore slicked hand at his shixiong. “I almost had him.”

“And we would have lost you,” Chen argued.

“Who cares! It would have been over! We would have been free.”

“How do you know we’re not?” Xiang pointed out.

“Jun-Jun, drink,” Xiao Dan ordered, placing his wrist to Junjie’s lips, but Junjie turned his head to avoid it.

“But—”

“Shidi, shut up and drink,” Xiao Dan snapped. “You’re bleeding from several wounds and covered in burns.”



Junjie wanted to argue that they were all in terrible shape, but a quick glance revealed he had suffered the worst injuries. It was only when he carefully took his first drink of Xiao Dan's blood that Shixiong released a sigh of relief.

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“Chen, Xiang, keep watch for any sign that Jiang Chong has returned. Yichen, please take Mei Lian and Ming Yu to the villa. Tell the others what occurred here,” Xiao Dan ordered.

Junjie watched as Yichen, Mei Lian, and Ming Yu slipped out of the orchard in the growing darkness, while Xiang and Chen took up a defensive position near them.

In the fight’s chaos, the sun had finished its descent, disappearing below the horizon. The sky that was visible between the tree branches was darkening from orange and pink to deeper shades of blue and purple. The first stars were peeking out. Even the wind had calmed, as if nature were holding its breath against the return of the monster.

Xiao Dan lowered his face to the top of Junjie’s head and whispered, “You scared me to death, Didi.”<sup>24</sup>

His heart squeezed. It was rare for Xiao Dan to call him that. Zhang Shi Lei had always treated them like sons, and Xiao Dan had taken the role of older brother seriously.

“I had his heart in my hand, Gege.<sup>25</sup> I could have saved our clan. It’s what Shifu would have wanted,” Junjie replied around the knot of unshed tears growing in his throat. He licked away the last drop of blood from Xiao Dan’s wrist. He would need to go into town to feed more, but at least he’d regained his strength.

“Shifu would have wanted you to survive so you can go on fighting for your clan,” Xiao Dan countered.

“How do you know you didn’t kill him?” Chen inquired in a low, even voice. “You nearly pulled his heart out, and I saw that final gash you opened in his neck. Right now, he’s trapped in the ghost realm with no access to the blood he needs to heal. How long could he possibly survive there before becoming a ghost himself?”

“He’s dead. He has to be dead,” Xiang declared.

“Only time will tell. For now, the clan will remain vigilant. Everyone must report any sign that Jiang Chong is lurking about. The important thing is that he now knows that we will not go back to being under his control. That life is over.” Xiao Dan wrapped an arm around Junjie and squeezed. His words grew rough. “We will celebrate every night we have free of him, whether it is one or a thousand. We are free and we will remain that way.”

1 Shifu – master of a clan or sect

2 Shixiong – elder martial brother

3 Shidi – junior disciple/brother

4 Didi – younger brother

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

Chapter 1

Zhang Junjie

August 31, 2023

Zhang Clan Manor, Connecticut

The cat.

The cat wasn't a real cat.

He was a human. Or a shifter. Or maybe...a cat spirit? The same way Huli was a fox spirit. But did those exist?

Junjie thought his brain was going to explode any second now as he stared at the naked man lying on his bed, just barely covered by one of his white robes. Yiguo wasn't a common house cat that he'd given some food and belly scratches.

Oh, gods! He'd scratched this man's belly!

Think. He needed to think clearly, and not about the questionable things he may or may not have done to or around this cat...person.

"Who are you?" Junjie demanded in a trembling voice.

"I already told you. I'm Yi?—"

Junjie held up one hand while keeping his eyes squeezed shut. "Don't say it. I named you Yiguo because I thought you were a feral cat without a home. You are not that. What is your real name, and why are you here?"

"Jun-Jun," he purred, and Junjie's head snapped up, eyes blazing as he glared at the stranger.

"Do not call me that. You have not earned the right to speak to me in such a familiar tone."

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A devilish grin spread across the cat-man's lips, making Junjie's heart speed up, but he told himself it was out of rage. Not because the man was ridiculously sexy.

“Are you sure about that?”

“I am very sure. What happened between us during the past several months occurred under false pretenses. I thought you were a simple cat, and not...not...” Junjie's words drifted off as he waved a desperate hand in the man's direction. “Now, I demand you to tell me who you are and what you want this instant, or I shall summon the rest of my clan. I don't give a damn if you are naked.”

A heavy sigh escaped the stranger's lips, and he sat up on the bed, throwing his legs over the side so he could better face Junjie. Thankfully, the robe that was resting across his lap remained, covering all the important bits. Junjie could do without those distractions.

“My name is Leo. Leo St. George. I didn't mean to upset you.”

“Is this what you do? Go around, begging food off unsuspecting people and laughing at them behind their backs because they don't realize you're a shifter?”

“No.” Leo paused and scrunched up his face. “Okay, maybe a little. Usually, I pop by a place, get a nibble, and move on. I've never stayed at a place as long as I've stayed at yours. It's just that the food you offered was so good, and you're so handsome. Why wouldn't I want to stay close to you?”

Junjie narrowed his eyes at the man. He would not be sweet-talked. “So, you're a

freeloader.”

“Sometimes. You didn’t seem to mind when you thought I was a cat.”

“That’s because a cat is a helpless creature and needs our help.”

Leo lifted one eyebrow and smirked. “Cats are not helpless. They’re skilled hunters and predators.”

“Then you’re lazy.”

“Precisely.”

Junjie threw up his hands. Maybe it would be best if he went to find Xiao Dan or Chen to help him with Yiguo. No, Leo. Leo St. George.

He must be losing his mind. Wasn’t it bad enough that they were still in danger from the fae, and now Jiang Chong had returned to make their lives a nightmare? Did he need a lazy cat shifter in his life causing problems? He lifted a hand and pressed his fingers to his eyes, praying to Shifu for strength.

“Sorry,” Leo murmured, and he sounded remorseful. “Normally, I don’t hang out with a single family like this. When I saw this interesting place being built, I came back to see who was moving in.”

“After that, you returned for the food.”

“True. And the belly?—”

“Please, stop talking about the belly scratches.” Junjie dropped his hand from his eyes and glared at Leo, who seemed like he was still trying to tuck away his grin so that

his expression matched his remorseful tone.

“You all turned out to be vampires who added a witch and an elf. A fox spirit was hanging about. You appeared to know what was going on with the fae, so I stuck around for information.” Leo pressed his hand to his chest. “It’s not my fault that you and your companions became so damn interesting.”

Junjie sighed. Talking to Leo was draining the last of his will to live. Maybe it wasn’t entirely Leo’s fault that he’d remained close. His life had become interesting in the past several months. Too interesting, in fact. He was very much looking forward to returning to China, where his life would be a lot less interesting.

The fastest way to getting a less-interesting life was to help Leo with the problem he’d mentioned when he first appeared. Hopefully, it was something they could tackle quickly, and he could return his full attention to the problems of the fae and Jiang Chong.

Junjie paced his room, hoping none of his clan mates had overheard any of this insanity. He’d have to come clean about Leo and his true nature, but couldn’t they have a few hours of peace and quiet after their fight with the fae and Jiang Chong? “Let’s put aside the fact that you’ve spent the past several months deceiving me.”

“That would be great.”

He threw Leo a quelling glare. “You mentioned something about having a problem and needing my help. What’s wrong?”

“Yes! I need your help!” Leo jumped to his feet and Junjie squeezed his eyes shut, not trusting Leo to keep his private region covered with his robe. A firm hand grabbed his and Junjie gasped, lurching back to pull free.

“Don’t!”

“Mr. Zhang.” Leo’s voice was filled with a mix of amusement and exasperation. While the address was formal and proper, it felt wrong coming from Leo’s lips. He didn’t know this man. Not properly. But Leo was also Yiguo. They’d spent countless hours together since the Zhang clan had moved to the United States.

“Junjie is fine,” he bit out. He opened one eye and then the other when he found Leo was still covered up.

“I won’t hurt you. What sense is that? You’ve taken care of me for months now, and I need your help. I’d like to think of us as friends.”



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“We’re a long way off from being friends. We’re strangers. In fact, I’m a stranger who has been lied to.”

Leo huffed, a frown tugging at his lips. The friendly, easygoing attitude fell away for the first time. “Look, I wouldn’t have revealed myself to you if I wasn’t desperate. I probably wouldn’t have stuck around as long as I have, but I’m in a bad spot. Things are not going well for your clan at the moment. I get it, and you have my sympathy. The world is pretty shitty for a lot of people right now, thanks to the fae. The key difference between your clan and the humans and even my kind is that you’re holding your own.”

Fuck.

He had a point.

It was just that Junjie had already had a long night, and he wasn’t in the best mindset for surprises.

After taking a deep, steadying breath, Junjie nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry my temper has been short. What can I do to help you?”

“I need you to come with me.”

“Where?”

“It’s not too far. About twenty miles. Not a big deal. But it’s best if we go now while the fae are in such turmoil.” He reached for Junjie’s hand again and Junjie jerked

away from him.

“Twenty miles? Out there?” He pointed at the big window on the wall that faced the rear garden. “The sun is rising. It’s too dangerous to go out there now. I’m avampire!”

“That’s why we need to leave right this second. If we go now, we should be back in time for you to get safely away from the sun.”

“Should be?” This cat-man was going to get him killed. Vampires didn’t live as long as he had by playing it fast and loose with the sun. The rising and setting of the sun weren’t things that could be fudged. “Can this wait until the sun sets? We won’t be in a rush. The fae will be sorting out the mess we made for several days, at the very least.”

“We can’t wait. I’ve put this off for far too long.”

“What needs to be done?”

“Someone needs to be rescued. Someone...who’s like me.”

“Cat shifter?”

Leo nodded. “There are so very few of us in the world, Junjie. The number is growing smaller by the day because of the fae. Please, I can’t lose another one.”

Junjie wished he could say that he debated his next decision, but he didn’t. There was no way he was going to allow the fae to wipe an entire species from the earth. Not when they could do something about it.

“I need to tell the others. Get help.”

“No. Just you.” Leo’s eyes darted away from his as he continued. “It’s safer that way.” He felt like Leo was hiding something big from him, or at least not telling him the entire truth.

Junjie almost rolled his eyes at himself at that thought. As if Leo had told him the truth about anything. He’d hidden everything until he’d become trapped in a corner and had been left with no other option.

“It can’t be only me. It won’t be safe for anyone that way. How about I ask for Xiang and Kai to come with us? The sun can’t hurt Xiang, and I’m sure Kai will provide all the protection we might need.”

Leo’s smooth brow furrowed, and his upper lip curled. “The dragon,” he mumbled.

“That’s my final offer. I want to help you, but I won’t go alone with the sun so close to the horizon.” Leo also hadn’t bothered to describe who they were rescuing or who was holding his fellow pack mate hostage. There was no way in hell he was going with Leo without some kind of backup.

“Fine. Xiang and Kai will be fine.”

That settled, Junjie crossed to his door, intending to head to Xiang’s quarters to request his help. He glanced over his shoulder to tell Leo that he should find something in his closet to wear, but the man was gone. Something soft and furry brushed against his leg and he looked down to see Yiguo...grrrr...Leosqueeze through the opening in the door and trot along the hall as if he owned the place.

This cat was going to be the death of him.

Biting his tongue, Junjie followed the cat through the winding hall, their footfalls silent. There was no point in disturbing the rest of the clan until he knew how to tell

them he'd welcomed an unknown shifter into their midst. That was going to be just fantastic. Chen was going to explode. He had never cared for Junjie's pets.

When they reached Xiang's door, Junjie knocked, but the interior of the room sounded too empty. Had Kai taken Xiang away to his hoard? That was great. How was he supposed to talk to Xiang now? Could a phone signal even reach the hoard?

He was about to step away from the door and go in search of Rei and Yichen. His clan mate was as vulnerable to the sun, but the elf wasn't. Maybe he could give them the edge they needed.

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Yet, he didn't get more than a step from the door. There was the soft shuffle of movement a second before the door jumped open. Kai stood in front of him, a questioning look on his handsome face. His normally styled hair was mussed, though, giving vivid proof of what he'd dragged Kai from. That was going to put him in a wonderful mood. "Junjie? Is something wrong?"

He never got the chance to answer. Leo meowed and slipped between Kai's legs to enter the room.

"Ah. The cat," Kai continued. He retreated a step and motioned for Junjie to enter. "I take it he came clean with you?"

And that was another thing...

Junjie threw the dragon a warning scowl as he entered Xiang and Kai's room. How could the dragon know Leo was a shifter and not tell them about it?

"Who came clean about what?" Xiang inquired.

Thankfully, Leo saved him from needing to answer. In the blink of an eye, he shifted into an auburn-haired man with a sprinkling of freckles across his nose, bright-green eyes, and clothes.

The asshole was wearing clothes.

"You can shift without being naked?" Junjie shouted, the words slipping out as the filter in his brain was still trying to kick in.

Xiang screeched and jumped up on his bed, pulling a knife—from where, only the ancestors knew—to point it at Leo. “He can shift? Wait! Did you see him naked?”

Just let the floor open up and swallow me whole.

“I thought shifters couldn’t change and not be naked. Bel Varik’s wolves always have to bring their clothes with them,” Junjie argued.

Leo grinned at Xiang and scratched his head with his left hand. “Yeah, I thought naked would be a good icebreaker with Junjie. I was afraid of the dragon snapping things off if I tried that again.”

“Smart decision. And not being able to shift with clothes is a wolf-shifter problem,” Kai said as he crossed to where Xiang was standing on the bed. He wrapped his fingers around the hand holding the blade and got him to lower it. “There’s no need for that, my precious one. He’s not a danger to you or your family.”

“What?” Xiang demanded, refusing to move his eyes a centimeter from where Leo was standing.

“Yiguo’s real name is Leo St. George, and he’s a cat shifter or a cat spirit. I don’t know. All I know is that he’s not an actual house cat, and he needs our help.”

“What?” Xiang repeated.

Junjie almost sighed. Information was not entering Xiang’s brain. It was too overloaded.

“Cat shifter would be the best description, but not quite like the wolf shifters,” Leo chimed in. He tipped his head toward Junjie. “I’ve got way more skills than those dogs.”

“The main point you should remember is that your mate knew he wasn’t a cat.” Junjie pointed at Kai, who stared at him with his mouth hanging open as if he couldn’t believe Junjie had betrayed him like that.

“Are you shitting me? You knew? When?” Xiang demanded.

“From the moment I saw him. I didn’t say anything at first because I thought you knew. When I realized you didn’t, I thought it best to wait and see how it played out. The cat isn’t stronger than me. I knew I could protect you and your clan.”

“Kai!”

“Rei and Huli knew it too,” Kai blurted out.

Whoosh! Just like that, Rei and Huli were thrown in front of the oncoming bus.

“What?” Xiang was near shrieking levels. That was going to bring the rest of his clan running to their room, which was exactly what Junjie didn’t want. They’d all been through too much tonight. He wanted to take care of Leo’s request now and have a long talk with his clan mates the next evening, when everyone was well rested.

“Xiang, we can argue later about who knew what. The sun is going to rise soon, and I need your help with something.”

Those words flipped a switch inside of Xiang. He hopped from where he’d been standing on the bed and closed the distance between them so he could put his hand on Junjie’s shoulder.

“What’s wrong? What can I do?”

“Leo said that one of his pack mates is in danger and needs our help, but we have to

go now while the fae are in disarray. The sun will be up in a couple of hours. I can't do this alone."



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“The place where he’s hiding is about twenty miles from here. I can take you there,” Leo chimed in.

Xiang’s fingers tightened, biting into flesh, but even though it was mildly painful, there was something comforting in it. Xiang’s sledgehammer approach to everything was so very familiar. He’d been like this prior to becoming a vampire and hadn’t changed in more than two thousand years. “There’s no way we’d let you out of this house alone.”

“Just remember, cat,” Kai cut in, his eyes glowing bright gold as his pupils became slender vertical slits, “I will be there. If I believe there is any threat to my mate or my family, I will send them home in the blink of an eye and I will eat you in a single bite.”

Leo’s smile wavered, and he nodded once to Kai. “Got it. Don’t fuck over the vampires. That was never my plan, anyway.”

That might be true, but Junjie wasn’t so naïve that he believed Leo didn’t have some kind of scheme in mind. He simply had to figure out what it was before it got him or his clan in trouble.

### Chapter 2

#### Zhang Junjie

Trees with long branches thick with leaves stretched across the road, crowding close to block out the light from the moon and the thin twinkle of stars. Moisture choked

the hot summer air. Junjie was usually indifferent to the seasons, but the unrelenting heat had become annoying even if vampires weren't much bothered by heat or cold. He was so very ready for the changing of the leaves and the cooler temperatures of autumn—not to mention the significantly longer nights that were made for his kind.

But those pleasant dreams seemed distant compared to the looming threat of the fae and the pall they cast on everything.

Tension tightened Junjie's shoulders as Xiang drove them away from the clan home and into the forest. With the fae casting spells and wiping out the smaller human towns, pretty much everything east of Hartford was forestland now. The only thing to break the tension in the SUV was Kai's steady stream of complaining about being in a rolling death box once again.

The dragon did not like motor vehicles of any shape or size.

"Why are you so worried about the other humans on the road?" Leo inquired. He leaned forward, which put him closer to Xiang in the driver's seat and earned him an impressive glare from the dragon. "Can't you use your magic to protect us or stop the other car before it can hurt us?"

"Xiang doesn't approve of the random destruction of human life in the name of protecting him," Kai replied.

Junjie snorted. He couldn't help himself. This was the same vampire that had wrought more than his fair share of wanton destruction to human life.

"Hey!" Xiang snapped. He turned his head toward Junjie and pointed a finger at him. "I don't threaten human life needlessly. I?"

"Eyes on the road! Eyes on the road!" Kai shouted. He grabbed Xiang's hand and

forced him to grip the steering wheel again.

Leo snickered, and Junjie had to bite his lip to hold in his smile.

The new couple bickered in the front seat for another minute, and then Kai returned his attention to glaring out the passenger window.

“Are the fae out there, watching us?” Junjie asked.

“The fae are always out there.” Kai released a huff and continued. “But there are fewer out there now than there have been. None are actively watching us at the moment, but they’re not far. Don’t worry, Junjie. I will protect you from the fae.”

“I get the impression you would enjoy battling the fae again,” Junjie said.

“Yes,” Kai said with a soft hiss. “I would very much enjoy killing more of the fae...to protect my mate and our clan.”

Junjie gazed out the window to hide his grin from the rest of the car’s occupants. That last bit felt like Kai had tacked it on for the sake of appearances.

“Hey, cat,” Xiang called out suddenly. “What kind of shifter are you?”

Junjie looked at Leo to find the man smirking at Xiang. “Exactly what you said—acatshifter.”

“Yeah, but are you like a bakeneko?”

Junjie gasped and scooted closer to his door. The thought hadn’t even occurred to him. He’d assumed that Leo was of the shifter variety like River and Wyatt Varik, except where they changed into wolves, Leo became a house cat.

“Precious one, he’s clearly not Japanese,” Kai pointed out.

“Yeah, but what if he’s like a third or fourth generation, where all of his ancestors of the past several generations have been Americans? That would cause his human form to appear more American and less Japanese, right?”

Kai turned in his seat to stare at Leo, his nose wrinkling. “I’m not sure it works that way. A bakeneko would have a long life span similar to a huli jing<sup>1</sup> or a jiuweihu.”

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“Time-out.” Leo lifted his hands and made a T sign with them. “What the hell is a bakeneko? And jiuwei-something? I need an English translation.”

“A jiuweihi is a nine-tailed fox spirit. That’s what Huli is. You’ve seen him about the manor,” Junjie explained.

Leo dropped his hands to his lap and relaxed in his seat. “Oh! Yeah, that crazy psychopath who likes to pick fights with the fae. Hangs all over Xiao Dan. I’ve seen him. He’s a fox shifter.”

“No, he’s a fox spirit who shifts into a human.”

“I don’t understand. What’s the difference?”

“A fox shifter is a human who can change into a fox, but at his heart, he is human. Huli is a fox spirit who wears the guise of a human, but at his heart, he is a fox spirit.”

Leo sank even lower into his seat and pressed his hand to his forehead. “Whoa.”

“A bakeneko,” Junjie continued, “is a Japanese yokai—a supernatural entity. At their heart, the bakeneko are cats, but after a long time, they grow in size and can even learn to shift into human form. It’s believed they can even reanimate the recently dead and use their bodies as puppets.”

“Bakenekos are bad news. They bring bad luck and curses to all who know them,” Xiang added.

“So, Leo,” Kai drawled. “Are you a bakeneko or just a cat shifter?” There was a heaviness to Kai’s tone that hadn’t been there earlier, making it obvious that Leo’s life hung in the balance if the dragon thought he was going to bring curses down on their heads.

“Hey! Whoa!” Leo sat up straight and held his hands in front of him as if to ward off Kai. “I’m not one of those bakeneko. Totally American. No Japanese in me at all. A cat shifter. I’m human, but I spend a lot of my time as a cat because Junjie gives the best belly?—”

“Don’t say it!” Junjie snapped. He’d heard enough about his infamous belly rubs.

Leo cleared his throat and offered Junjie a modest smile, but he didn’t continue. “There!” he shouted suddenly, nearly stopping Junjie’s heart. “Right into that driveway up ahead.”

“You mean the slightly shorter grass path between the trees? That driveway?” Xiang demanded as he slammed on the brakes to slow them enough to make the turn.

The headlights flashed over trees, making their shadows lurch and stretch away from them. In a couple of spots, Junjie thought he saw small bodies leaping away from the driveway, heading deeper into the forest. The SUV rumbled slowly along the narrow passage, bumping and rocking along the path until they came to a two-story structure with dim lights flickering in the windows.

“This used to be a subdivision filled with houses, but the fae trees took most of them out,” Leo commented. His voice was low and solemn, leaving Junjie wondering if he’d once known some of the people who’d lived in this neighborhood.

Xiang parked the car near the house and turned off the engine, plunging the area into thick darkness except for the thin streams of light coming from the windows.

“How many people are inside?” Xiang demanded.

“Just one,” Kai replied.

Leo unbuckled his safety belt and scooted forward. “That’s him. The shifter who needs your help. There were a few others who were protecting him, but they backed off when we approached. We need to hurry.”

That definitely sounded like a bunch of cats. Skittish and cautious. Watching from a safe distance until they could determine if the person was a threat.

Xiang placed a hand on his mate’s arm. “Fae?”

“None in the area,” Kai said with a shake of his head. “I will keep you and Junjie safe.”

“What about me?” Leo chimed in.

Kai turned his head to glare at the cat shifter. “You’ve not earned my protection yet, thanks to your sneaky ways.”

Leo opened his mouth as though he intended to argue with the dragon.

“We don’t have time for this,” Junjie muttered as he unbuckled his seat belt and shoved his door open. The sun was rising, and he needed to be home before it peeked above the horizon.

The others joined him, walking up the creaking wooden porch stairs. He scanned the area to find that there were almost no remains of the old subdivision. It was as if this dense forest had stood here for centuries, holding the secrets of animals and the fae.

A sliver of golden light slipped out where the front door stood open a crack. Junjie reached out his left hand and pushed the door open. It moaned like something out of a horror movie, but nothing jumped out to attack them. The scent of cheese and what he could have sworn were hot dogs drifted out of the house, causing his nose to wrinkle. Not exactly what he had been expecting.

Nor was the next sight to greet him.



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Junjie took a step inside to find that it opened into the main living room, where a boy sat in the middle of the sofa. His brown hair stuck up in several directions as if they'd just woken him up, and he clutched a yellow blanket in his fists. Wide, bright-blue eyes watched Junjie, and his pink bow lips were parted.

“Hello, little one,” Junjie cooed as he got his brain working. With some effort, he tore his eyes from the child and examined the room, searching for an adult. Oh, he desperately wanted an adult to be present. “Where’s your mama and baba?”<sup>2</sup>

That earned a very loud and disturbing gasp followed by a heart-breaking sniffle. Enormous tears formed in those brilliant blue eyes, and Junjie’s stomach sank. That was a very bad question.

“What the—” Xiang began and cut himself off.

Junjie didn’t spare his clan mate a glance as he rushed forward with his hands held out toward the child. “It’s okay. It’s okay.” He dropped to his knees in front of the sofa, trying to make his much larger frame seem smaller and less intimidating. “Nobody is going to hurt you. Everything is okay.”

“Nothing is okay,” Xiang corrected him, each word low and tight. “Nothing is okay at all. What the hell, Leo?”

The boy’s gaze lifted from Junjie to stare over his shoulder. Junjie twisted slightly on the balls of his feet to see Xiang, Kai, and Leo standing close to him. Only Leo didn’t gawk utterly flabbergasted at the child.

“Leo?” Junjie prodded as he turned his attention to the boy.

When the cat shifter spoke, his voice was low and almost sullen. It was the most serious he’d sounded to Junjie since the man had first opened his mouth. “The fae killed his parents a few weeks ago. We were lucky to stumble across him before he became sick or the fae found him.”

“You knew them?”

“I knew of them. They were cat shifters like me.” He stopped and shifted from his left foot to his right while scrubbing one hand through his hair. “You have to understand that we don’t have a clan or pack like vampires and wolves. We’re typically a solitary people. We’ve done what we can for him.” Leo’s voice drifted off, but Junjie didn’t need him to finish. It was crystal clear what he wanted them to do—take the child in.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Xiang grumbled, but Junjie ignored him.

“He feels mostly human to me,” Kai stated. He paused, and it sounded like he was sniffing the air. “But there is something to him. A hint of magic.”

None of that mattered. Human, shifter, fae. It didn’t matter. The only thing that did was that this was a helpless child who was very much alone in the world—something Junjie could still remember all too well even after two thousand years.

“Do you at least know his name?” he demanded.

Silence filled the house. Junjie twisted around to find that Leo was gone.

“Fucking cat!” Xiang snarled as they realized Leo had slipped out the door the moment they’d all been focused on the child.

Junjie winced. Not the language or emotions the boy needed right now. Kai also moved toward the door, but his voice was slightly distant, as if he were concentrating on something else.

“There’s a cat running away from the house. Not too far away. I could catch him.”

“Yes!” Xiang hissed.

“No!” Junjie overruled. “There’s no point. Leo either isn’t able to or can’t handle caring for a child. That’s why he asked for my help. The only thing that matters right now is getting this little man safely home with us.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Xiang snapped. “You want to take him home with us?”

“Of course. He can’t stay here.” Junjie turned his full attention to the child and held out his hands. “Would you like to come home with me? We’ll get something yummy to eat and a nice soft bed. I bet we could even borrow some nice toys for you to play with.”

Xiang snorted. “Good luck with that.”

Yeah, Meimei had an enormous collection of soft plushies, but they were all related to her manga and anime shows, which meant they were guarded and treasured. Maybe he could convince her to give up one to the child, who couldn’t be over two or three, until they got him some toys of his own.

“The sun is rising. I’m running out of time. Why don’t you and Kai search the house for toys or possibly clothes for him? We don’t know if this is where he lived with his parents or if this was simply a house the cats were borrowing,” Junjie instructed.

Thankfully, Xiang and Kai followed orders rather than continuing to argue. Junjie fluffed up his smile and wagged his fingers at the boy. “My name is Jun-Jun. Can you say that?”

The boy sniffled and rubbed one eye with his fist while the other continued to cling to his blanket. He didn’t speak. Only stared at him.

“How about gege? Gege means older brother. Would you like Gege to take you to get something to eat? We have all kinds of good food at my house.”

Which was thanks to Rei, Kai, and Moon. How the vampire could be such a bottomless pit was beyond his understanding, but right now, it could be a real boon.

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At last, the child nodded and stretched out his arms, leaning forward. He fell straight into Junjie's outstretched hands. Junjie's heart squeezed almost to the point of being pulverized as he gathered that fragile body against his chest and tucked his head under his chin. The nameless child gave a deep, shuddering breath and relaxed all of his weight on Junjie.

That was all it took. Junjie knew he'd die for this child. He'd destroy entire armies to keep him safe. He didn't know anything about raising children or caring for them, but nothing had ever felt so right to him.

Seconds later, Kai and Xiang returned to the living room, carrying a reusable grocery bag. Xiang's eyes widened and his mouth popped open, but a sharp glare from Junjie was all it took to get him to close his mouth without saying a damn thing.

"There were two rooms upstairs that looked like they belonged to children, but more of the teenaged variety. Nothing for a small one like that. But we found this bag with some diapers and cleaning cloths," Kai announced.

"The cats were probably squatting here with him until they could come up with a more permanent solution," Xiang continued.

"That's fine. We need to get out of here. The sun is coming up," Junjie murmured. He grabbed the edge of the soft fleece blanket covered in cartoon characters on it and wrapped the boy in it, despite the lingering heat in the air. This wasn't about being warm but about creating a sense of security in this child's endlessly changing life.

"Chen is going to lose his shit," Xiang commented, a hint of evil laughter lurking

among his words. He sobered and became serious as he continued. “Da-ge?3 might, too.”

Junjie ignored his warning and marched out of the house, walking straight to the SUV they’d taken. He slipped into his seat, keeping the child held tight against him, while Kai came up behind him and closed the door with a reassuring smile.

Yes, Chen, Xiao Dan, and the rest of his clan were likely to be upset about the addition of a child to their lives, but that didn’t worry him much. Prior to becoming vampires, they’d lived on the grounds of the Zhang family manor and lands. There had been plenty of kids running around—members of the vast Zhang family and the children of the servants. Not to mention, more children had arrived regularly for training under the Sword of the Heavenly Garden sect masters. They might be out of practice when it came to interacting with children, but he was sure they’d find a rhythm soon enough for this little one.

His genuine fear came at the timing of the child’s appearance. Their primary concern right now wasn’t just about the fae. They were also faced with Jiang Chong and the threat that he posed to all of them. Junjie wanted to keep this child safe and help him find a shred of happiness after losing his parents. But how safe could he be with Jiang Chong looming over the clan?

1 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, kitsune in Japanese or gumiho in Korean – just depends on whether you’re a donghua, anime, or K-drama watcher ??)

2 Baba – father

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

## Chapter 3

Leo St. George

Stale beer, sweat, and old grease filled the stagnant air of the tiny bar. The lights were dim, creating deep shadows in the corners and around the edges. But this was the type of place people came to, hoping to fall into those shadows, never to be seen again.

Leo sat on a stool with worn-out padding and a wobble. He leaned on the damp bar top, glaring at the nearly empty glass caged in by his limp hands as if he were expecting it to make a break for it. Leo planned to spend the next couple of nights here hiding out. He was afraid that if he left, his wandering feet might carry him to those Chinese vampires. He didn't trust himself.

The door opened, sending bright early-morning sunshine spilling through the room. A series of grunts and grumbles traveled through the room until the door closed, allowing the darkness to wash over the surly occupants.

A familiar scent made Leo's nose twitch, but it was more than enough warning that he was about to receive a visitor.

"Whiskey, neat. And put it on his tab," Sage ordered from the bartender, getting the large round man with the balding head moving from where he'd been propped up against the side of the bar, watching the news on the small TV hanging from the ceiling in the far corner.

"Not on my tab," Leo growled. "Pay with your own money."

The tall, thin woman plopped onto the stool beside him and poked his arm with her

pointy elbow. “Stingy.”

“Whatever.” Leo picked up his glass and drained the last of the cheap whiskey he’d been nursing. As the bartender brought over the glass he’d poured for Sage, Leo held up his empty glass and gave it a shake, ordering yet another. “What are you doing here?”

“What do you think? I was looking for you. Why else would I come in here?”

“Searching for a date,” he sneered, lifting his eyes to take in her shorts and black tank top. Her hair was a strange gray-brown and very thin. She kept it cut short, but no matter the season, it stood up around her head as if it possessed a static charge or she were a human dandelion.

A loud cackle erupted from her, and she rocked on her stool. “Here? I don’t think so.”

Despite her loud words, no one present bothered to argue with her. They all knew they weren’t receiving any roses on *The Bachelorette*. In fact, everyone seemed to be rather diligently ignoring them.

“What do you want?” he demanded as the bartender replenished his glass and picked up the card Sage had slapped on the counter.

Sage dropped her jovial attitude and hunched on her stool, matching his demeanor as she leaned closer. “Did the vamps take the bait?”



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Leo rolled his eyes and snatched up his own glass. “The kid wasn’t bait, but yes, they took him to their place. He’s their problem now.”

“Then what’s with your sour mood? Are you afraid they’re going to snack on him? He’s such a tiny thing. He couldn’t be a full meal for even one of them, and you said there’s an entire clan hiding out.”

For a second, all Leo could do was stare openmouthed at her. There was a reason cat shifters were solitary creatures, and it started with the fact that every last one of them rubbed him the wrong way. The sad part was that Sage was the most tolerable of the ones he knew, and right now, he itched to smash his glass against the side of her skull.

“I wouldn’t have handed the boy over to them if I thought they’d use him as food,” he snarled.

“So, the kid got a new home. At the very least, a decent temporary one.”

More than decent. Leo had spent several months with the Zhang clan, wandering through winding halls and watching their interactions. They bickered, teased, and fought as much as the average family, but there was no missing that they were also very close. They watched out for each other. Protected one another.

The dynamic didn’t change when new mates joined them. Moon, Rei, and Kai were folded into the clan as if they were meant to be there. One big happy family.

And now the kid was included. Leo knew it without needing to see it. Junjie had the

biggest, softest heart. The vampire might be cold and dead, but there was no one warmer in all the world. He was going to wrap that little boy up in so much love and happiness that he'd forget all about how he'd lost his birth parents.

No, he wasn't envious.

Not even a tiny fucking bit.

"I'm sure the kid is going to be fine," Leo murmured, talking mostly to himself. "It's a shame we couldn't find another cat to take him in. There's no one to teach him the things he's going to need to know about himself when the time comes. Bastet? I know the vampires can't explain shifting to him."

A harsh noise left the back of Sage's throat, almost as if she were hacking up a hairball. "Another cat? Really? You thought that was even possible?" She laughed while Leo finished the last of his drink. It was tempting to order yet another, but he wanted to be able to walk out of here when he was done with this annoying conversation. The alcohol was already going to his head, smoothing the harsh edges of the world and mellowing out the ache in his chest he refused to examine too closely.

"Idiot," Sage muttered as her laughter died off. She finished her drink and waved for the bartender to pour her another. "Even if you could find a cat who wasn't utterly useless and irresponsible, it's likely they want kids of their own. You can't bring someone else's kitten into your litter. That's bad fucking luck. You're asking for one of your own to be killed off."

That was the old superstition that preyed on the minds of every cat who'd looked at the orphan after they'd found him. Despite cat shifters being insanely rare, they refused to raise another's kitten. It was thought that if you took in another cat's offspring, you doomed your own. Cats were independent by nature. If a parent died,

shifters believed the kitten should survive on its own.

Except the little boy couldn't have been more than two years old!

How could he be left on his own? He would have died.

Yet, after he'd been discovered and brought to that house in the woods, more than one cat had whispered to him in passing that they should leave him. Some bad karma had found the parents, and it was only a matter of time before the same fate befell the kid and anyone who helped him.

Fuck that shit.

It wasn't karma that had killed the boy's parents. It was the damn fae.

"You did the right thing. You're the one who said that these vampires were like a real family. I bet they're going to feed him and teach him things. You know, other than how to bite people."

Leo lowered his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd had about enough of this conversation.

"Besides, what were you going to do? Keep him and raise him yourself?" Sage cackled so hard she almost fell off her stool. "You can barely keep yourself alive. What do you know about caring for a kid?"

"Nothing," Leo mumbled. "He's just a cute kid."

"Absolutely adorable." The eye roll was evident in her words, and Leo ignored it. "That still doesn't mean he isn't better off with bloodsuckers."

“Don’t call them that.”

“What? Bloodsuckers? That’s what they are.”

Leo bit off the rest of his argument. Yeah, Junjie and the rest of the Zhang clan might be vampires, but they were way more than that. However, his words were wasted on Sage, and he didn’t want to bother anymore.

“Okay. Fine. You found me. Was there something else you wanted?” He lifted a hand to the bartender to get his attention and made a motion in the air as if he were signing the bill. It was time to close his tab and get the hell out of there.

“Are you worried about them coming to find you?” Sage asked.

“No. If they wanted to catch me, they could have before I got away from the house.”

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When he'd formulated this plan to lead Junjie to the child, he'd been only twenty percent positive he'd be able to sneak away from the vampire if he tried to pursue him. That number had dropped to zero the second Junjie had invited Xiang and Kaialong for the ride. Xiang was a daywalker and had no problem chasing him after the sun rose.

And then there was the fucking dragon. Nothing stopped Kai when he wanted something. The only snag he'd run across was dealing with the fae, and the Zhang clan had largely fixed that problem.

Leo knew he'd escaped the house and the woods thanks to Junjie. The vampire had to have told his clan mates not to pursue him, which was totally what he'd wanted.

It didn't matter that maybe there was a part of him that had secretly hoped Junjie would stop him and force him to return to the Zhang manor with them.

But Junjie had let him go, and Leo had walked away from the kid. There was no returning to the manor grounds, and that sucked.

The bartender ambled over with a receipt and a pen. Leo spared it a glance to make sure the guy wasn't trying to scam him, added a respectable tip, and scratched out his name. If he left now, maybe he could escape Sage while she waited for her bill.

He was not that lucky.

The door to the tiny hole-in-the-wall bar opened, sending a bright slash of light through the place. All the occupants squinted and cringed from the glare, trying to

shrink into the retreating shadows. With the light came a gust of wind that carried the rich scent of flowers and petrichor after a summer storm.

Leo's heart leaped into his throat, and he whipped around. His brain had expected to find Rei standing in the doorway, sent by Junjie to drag him to the manor so he could answer questions about the kid.

It wasn't Rei but five other elves he'd never seen before. And judging by the weapons in their hands, they hadn't stopped by for a drink.

For a heartbeat, the world froze as the occupants eyed the elves standing in the open doorway. Tension thickened in the air until there was no oxygen to suck in at all. The fine hairs on the back of Leo's neck stood on end and every muscle in his body tightened, preparing to either fight or flee from the building. In an instant, the pleasant haze created by the alcohol evaporated out of his pores, leaving his brain on high alert.

Someone moved, and a wooden chair clattered to the old tile floor. It was like the firing of a starter pistol. The elves hovering in the doorway surged forward with crossbows in hand. Tiny but lethal arrows sliced through the air.

A rumbling growl filled the room like rolling thunder pouring across the sky as a storm crashed into a city. The handful of people who had crowded the small round tables began shifting one after another into large, angry wolves.

"Holy shit!" The bartender dropped behind the bar, and Leo's heart went out to the human. Leo had been coming to this bar for months now, and he'd had the chance to watch it steadily grow more popular among the shifters as a place where they could get a drink and not have to talk to anyone. After the recent displacement of the local wolf pack, more than a few wolves were simmering balls of anger and frustration.

For now, hiding behind the bar was the bartender's safest decision.

But the man didn't stay there. He popped up, holding a shotgun with the butt against his shoulder. The loud chunk of his cocking the weapon did little to capture the attention of the wolves and elves as they fought at the entrance of the bar, but the boom of the first shot did wonders drawing eyes to him.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

Leo was not sticking around to see who'd win this fight. Let the humans, wolves, and elves kill each other.

When he'd first spotted the elves, he'd jumped from his stool and stopped in front of Sage. Without looking, he reached behind him to grab her arm and shove her toward the rear of the bar, hoping to escape the building. Only his hand hit empty air.

His brain locked up as he whirled to find Sage's stool empty. He'd taken his eyes off the annoying cat for a second. Where the fuck could she have gone?

A low meow reached his ears above the gunshots, wolf growls, and elf grunts, thanks to his enhanced hearing. He twisted farther to find a slender calico with poofy fur standing on the end of the bar, staring at him like he was the idiot for lingering.

Maybe she was right, and he was the idiot.

With a growl, Leo lunged at her while shifting from his human form into his house cat form. Orange and white fur covered his lithe body. Deft cat paws landed on the sticky bar and he ran, not caring if the human saw him change. It was unlikely the bartender was going to come out of this fight alive. Hell, it would be a wonder if any of the wolves escaped with their lives intact.

This wasn't the first so-called random fae attack of a human business. They were striking at odd times throughout the suburbs of Hartford, going into places where there were handfuls of people and slaughtering them all. Afterward, they'd burn the buildings to the ground. It wasn't doing a lot to eliminate the humans, but it worked wonders at striking fear in them.

He was a step behind Sage as she leaped from the end of the bar and hit the handle for the rear door with her front paws. The door creaked open, and Leo slammed his larger girth into it, sending the door swinging open and slamming into the wall.

The scent of beer and liquor was even stronger in the storeroom. His nose burned and twitched, but he fought through it as his pupils expanded to soak in what little light permeated the area. He pushed forward on quick, quiet paws, searching for a door that had to lead to an alley or parking lot. There was no way in hell this place had just one door. Bars always had a back entrance for deliveries and provided an area for the employees to smoke on their break. Right?

Except this bar was the diviest of dive bars. The bartender was probably the owner and only employee. He didn't look like the type to care if he smoked indoors.

Fuck!

Leo darted here and there, bumping into Sage and letting out a low growl when the cat hissed. He might have made a grab for her to help her out of the bar, but that was the end of his helpfulness. She was on her own now if she wanted to get out of there safely.

A hint of fresh air cut through the thick miasma of alcohol. Leo stiffened, tipping his nose up to get a better fix on the direction. The happy, clean smell sharpened, and he shot forward, winding between rotting boxes and awkwardly stacked crates. He didn't know what was out there, and he didn't care. The bartender could have



doubled as a mortician with stacks of decaying bodies, so long as he had another door.

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Sounds of fighting in the bar were dying off. The gunshots had stopped, and Leo had a sinking feeling in his stomach that it meant the bartender had either run out of ammo or luck. Growls and panicked cries of pain punctuated the scrabble of claws on tiles. The werewolves were still putting up a good fight.

At the end of the long room, a door appeared.

A door with a round goddamn knob. Cat paws were not great with those kinds of handles. Swearing in his thoughts, Leo shifted into his human form so he could grab the handle and twist it.

The door swung open with an ear-piercing shriek and afternoon light flooded in. He blinked rapidly, his eyes adjusting to take in the new brightness, but his nose shifted faster, picking up the scent of sweet flowers over the lingering smell of old garbage. They weren't alone.

Leo opened his mouth to shout at Sage, but it was too late. The calico burst out of the building and a quick hand jumped out, snatching her up by the scruff of her fur. Sage yowled and hissed, spittle and claws flying in every direction as she fought to get free.

She was fucked. He could either leave her or try to save her.

Leo cursed himself as he threw his larger frame into the elf that held Sage away from his own body. They slammed into the brick wall on the other side of the alley. A grunt escaped the elf as all the air rushed from Leo's lungs, but the surprise was enough to get the elf to loosen his hold on Sage. The cat sprung free and raced away,

disappearing in the blink of an eye.

He shoved off the elf and shifted into his orange tabby form while his would-be attacker was still gathering his wits. His paws hit the broken concrete, and he ran with everything he had, ignoring the bits of glass and puddles of only Bastet knew what.

A shout came from the other end of the alley and a second later, pain exploded in his shoulder. The force of the impact knocked him off his feet, and he rolled. Leo kept rolling until his paws found the concrete again. As he got up, pain radiated down his right foreleg, but he didn't let it stop him. He didn't know if the damn elf had hit him with a rock or something else.

After the first block, there were no sounds of pursuit, but that didn't keep him from running full tilt for at least another half mile. There was no sign of Sage, either. That cat was long gone.

When he was sure the fae had no interest in finding him, Leo crawled under a thick bush covered in leaves and thorns, and flopped on his stomach, trying to catch his breath. The pain in his shoulder would disappear soon enough thanks to his faster-than-human healing. For now, he just wanted to be grateful he was still alive.

This was definite proof that the kid was far better off in Junjie's hands than his own.

1 Bastet – Egyptian goddess associated with cats, protection, fertility, pleasure, good health, and childbirth

## Chapter 4

### Zhang Junjie

The sun had risen by the time they reached the Zhang home again. However, Kai and

Xiang jumped into action the moment they parked the car, bringing out a blanket and an enormous umbrella to protect Junjie from the sun's harmful rays. The boy hadn't spoken during the entire car ride. He'd seemed content to sit in Junjie's lap, his head resting on the vampire's shoulder as he'd watched the world pass them by outside the window.

"I think it would be best if we told the rest of the clan after sunset," Junjie whispered as Xiang shut the door behind them. "After everything the clan has been through, I'm sure they would appreciate a good day's sleep."

"Is this about being thoughtful, or are you just afraid of Da-ge?"

Junjie's arms tightened on the boy as he glared at Xiang over his shoulder. Not that he could argue with him. His suggestion was about forty percent thoughtfulness and sixty percent fear of Xiao Dan's reaction. Of course, Shixiong wasn't a heartless person. He would want to do what was best for the child. Yet, it was also his responsibility to consider what was best for the entire clan. Taking care of a child—a cat shifterchild—was a massive undertaking, and the timing of his appearance wasn't the greatest.

"Why would Junjie be afraid of me?" Xiao Dan's amused voice drifted down the hall. Without thinking, Junjie swung toward him and found himself face-to-face with their clan leader. Xiao Dan's eyes dropped to the adorable bundle in his arms and widened to the size of steamed dumplings. "Oh! Hello there, little one. What's your name?"

"No clue. The cat either didn't know or just fucking disappeared before bothering to tell us," Xiang interjected.

"Language," Junjie hissed at Xiang. It wasn't right to swear in front of such young ears. He didn't want the child's first word to be "fuck."

“Cat?” Xiao Dan asked, heading off a new argument between Junjie and Xiang.

“Leo—” Junjie began, but Xiang took great pleasure in interjecting himself.

“Yiguo. That stray that’s been hanging about since we arrived.”

“The cat led you to the child?” Xiao Dan’s words were growing shakier and more disbelieving by the second.

Kai sighed loudly and placed a hand over his mate’s mouth. “The cat that has attached himself to Junjie is a shifter by the name of Leo St. George. He took us to the child, who was orphaned following the murder of his parents by the fae.”

That was painfully succinct, but at least he’d gotten Xiao Dan up to speed faster than if Junjie had been left to him and haw his way through a gentler version of the story. There would be questions later about how they’d allowed a cat shifter into their home with none of the vampires realizing it.

“Ah. I see.” Xiao Dan cocked his head to the side and smiled warmly at the boy, who was still clinging to his blanket with onetight fist while the other was wrapped in Junjie’s T-shirt. “Are you hungry, little man? Would you like some breakfast?”

The child didn’t budge. He stared at Xiao Dan as if he were the most interesting person in all the world, but he also didn’t loosen his hold on Junjie.

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“Are you planning to wake Ming Yu?” Xiang inquired, sounding as if he thought Xiao Dan had lost his mind.

“Of course not. It’s been a while, but I’m pretty sure I can remember how to make something as simple as congee. Or even some scrambled eggs. If I recall correctly, humans are quite fond of their scrambled eggs for breakfast.” Xiao Dan reached out and lightly brushed some hair away from the child’s forehead and ever so gently tapped the tip of his nose. “Let’s get something to fill your belly.”

“Shixiong?” Junjie whispered. His heart raced and his breath became trapped behind a lump in his throat. Was he going to allow the child to stay with them? Just like that?

The broad grin on Xiao Dan’s face dimmed slightly and there was a hint of sadness that entered his warm chestnut-brown eyes. “We’ll figure everything out later. Right now, the important thing is that this little guy has a full belly and a sense of security.”

“Yes, Shixiong.”

They formed a line and followed Xiao Dan through the house, past where other clan members were supposed to be sleeping, to the kitchen. Once there, Xiao Dan directed Junjie to sit on a stool at the center island counter with the child. He issued a series of impressive orders to Xiang and Kai to help him find the ingredients and cooking instruments he would need.

It also didn’t hurt that Kai located some soft pastries that had been tucked in the pantry, along with some fruit that could be cut up for their guest. One corner of Junjie’s lips quirked higher as he twisted to look at the child’s face. The boy watched

all the movement in the kitchen with such rapt attention.

“I know you’re not making a mess in my—” Ming Yu’s comment stopped as she walked into the kitchen, and her eyes fell on the newcomer. “Oh, my. He’s absolutely adorable.”

“Shixiong was trying to make him something for breakfast,” Junjie supplied.

“Just a bit of congee,” Xiao Dan added.

Ming Yu’s sharp gaze swept over the strange assortment of things that were spread out on the island and counters. She clucked her tongue at them. “Congee is good. The apples are fine. Put the rest away for now. What were you thinking with the peppers?” She glared at Xiang, knowing it was his nonsense without being told. Her expression softened when she turned to the child and touched his cheek. “What’s your name, little one?”

“We don’t know. He’s an orphan because of the fae,” Junjie replied.

“That’s okay,” she cooed. “We’ll get you fixed up with some breakfast. Then you can take a nap with your new gege.”

To Junjie’s surprise, the child relaxed against him, the tension that had hummed through his small body flowing out through his toes.

“Gege,” he mumbled.

Everyone in the room froze, their eyes locked on the boy. He’d spoken. Not only that, he’d called Junjie “gege.”

“That’s right! You have many new gege now!” Ming Yu cried, clapping her hands

together.

“Ming-jie,”<sup>1</sup> Xiao Dan broke in, his tone low and warning. Junjie understood it with nothing else being said. They needed to keep in mind that it was no guarantee that the child would stay with them. It needed to be thoroughly discussed.

“Pah.” Ming Yu waved a dismissive hand at him, not at all caring about his warnings. She acted as if she were sure they were keeping the boy, and there was no point in discussing it further. Junjie bit his bottom lip and lowered his head to hide his grin behind the child’s head as Shijie<sup>2</sup> stole control of the kitchen from Xiao Dan.

Wisely, their shixiong got the hell out of her way as she worked.

But even as she set about getting food prepared for the kid, no one was willing to leave the kitchen. They lingered about, trying to make the child smile or laugh.

Naturally, that created a great deal of noise and drew the rest of the clan into the kitchen. Mei Lian was the first to appear and the only one who didn’t look as if she’d been sleeping, but the woman stayed up gaming and watching her shows well into the morning.

“Oh. My. Gods. Could he be any cuter?” she demanded, slapping her own cheeks with both hands. “Are you keeping him? I didn’t know we could adopt humans. Do they have to be kids? Like real little kids? There are some boy group members I would totally adopt right this second if?—”

“Meimei,” Xiao Dan cut in before her ramble could spiral further down the rabbit hole.

Xiang sighed. “What you’re talking about is kidnapping, not adopting.”



“And I think this clan has dealt with enough kidnapping. At least enough to last us a few centuries,” Xiao Dan said.

“Is he talking about me?” Kai whispered loudly to Xiang.

“No, baby.” Xiang turned and pressed a kiss to Kai’s jaw. “He’s talking about Rei and Chen. They’re the troublemakers.”

Junjie rolled his eyes and ignored their nonsense. He turned to Meimei, who was busy making faces at the child and earning giggles for her efforts.

“Meimei, do you have any old T-shirts you don’t mind parting with? I was hoping to give him a bath after breakfast, and I’m sure he’d like something clean to wear.”

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She straightened and shifted her stance, one hip pushed out as she tapped her lips with one long finger. She was the smallest of all of them. Her clothes wouldn't fit the child, but they would also swallow him up the least.

“Yeah, I think I got a couple of things that would work.”

“Just until we can order some clothes for him,” Junjie reassured her. “Also...” He paused, wincing, but Ming Yu stepped up before he continued.

The older woman gently placed her hand on Mei Lian's arm, causing Mei Lian's head to snap up. A pretty flush dusted her cheeks, and Ming Yu quickly removed her hand and bit her lip for a second. “Do you think that you might have a plush toy he could borrow? He has nothing at the moment.”

Mei Lian was extremely protective of her collection, and Junjie was skeptical she'd be willing to part with?—

“The poor baby!” she cried. “I know I've got something. I'll go pull things together right now!”

Before Junjie could argue that he needed only one plushie to get the child through the day, Mei Lian was racing out of the kitchen and through the halls while Ming Yu returned to the stove. A bark of outrage jumped from Chen as Mei Lian passed him.

“What the hell is going on? Why is everyone awake at this hour and messing about in the kitchen?” Chen demanded. His eyes fell on the child and widened while his mouth dropped open. Moon poked his head past his mate and rubbed his sleepy eyes.

“Oh.” The blood witch-turned-vampire extended a finger, pressed it to the bottom of Chen’s jaw, and pushed upward, closing his mate’s mouth. “It’s a baby, darling. Nothing to lose your shit over.”

“Language,” Junjie automatically replied.

“Whoops! Sorry. Out of practice.” Moon grinned at the little boy and waggled his fingers at him. “It’s been a while since I was around a kid.”

“Is it talking already?”

“He, not it,” Junjie growled at his clan mate. “And yes, he talks. He called me gege.”

“He’s Chinese?” Chen gasped.

Yichen shuffled into the room with his elf half draped across his back. He took one look at the situation and groaned. “He’s obviously not Chinese. They taught him that word. Wow, you are slow when you’ve not had enough sleep.”

Ming Yu swung around and shook a wooden spoon at the gathering of vampires and mates. “Why is my kitchen so crowded? The sun is up. You should be in bed.”

“They were noisy,” Rei cried out.

“And we heard cooking,” Moon chimed in.

“And there’s a strange baby,” Chen stated, pointing at the child.

Xiang snorted from where he was leaning on Kai, his arms folded on his chest. “You’re a strange baby.”

This was getting out of hand. Xiao Dan stepped into the center of the room and lifted his arms above his head. “It is late, and everyone needs rest after the fight with the fae. All you need to know right now is that we have a guest staying with us. This evening, we will have a meeting to discuss what will be done and how Xiao Ping Guo?3 came to be here.”

There was some grumbling, but the rest of the clan filed out of the room. Xiao Dan lingered, but Ming Yu poked him with her spoon and pointed at the door. Junjie swallowed a giggle, but she had a point. The only ones who needed to be up were the two of them. Meimei popped in to say that she’d left some T-shirts and a couple of toys on his bed before exiting on a yawn.

Ming Yu leaned down to the child’s eye level and beamed. “Now, that’s much better, isn’t it?”

The boy giggled, clapped, and reached for her wooden spoon.

“I bet you’re hungry. Gods only know what they were feeding you.” Ming Yu put her spoon aside and picked up a plate of peeled apple slices.

“I don’t know. The cat shifters found him and took care of him until they could find him a more permanent arrangement. Oh, that’s right. The stray cat I’ve been feeding is a cat shifter named Leo. The child is also a cat shifter.”

“Leo didn’t tell you his name?”

Junjie shook his head as he handed the child an apple, which he stuffed greedily into his mouth. “I don’t think he knows. The cat shifters are solitary creatures. They aren’t close and don’t have packs like the wolves. It was luck that they stumbled across him.”

“Poor baobei,”<sup>4</sup> Ming Yu crooned. “We’ll get you all fixed up and comfortable. Nothing for you to worry about.” She cocked her head and lifted her eyes to Junjie. “Though I think we need to decide on a name for him. I keep thinking of him as the little boy or child. A good American name. I think I saw Liam is popular now. Or Noah. Maybe Elijah or Asher.”

Junjie chuckled and rested his cheek against the top of the boy’s head as he handed him another apple slice. Ming Yu was having too much fun with this. “We should discuss that with the rest of the clan. Also, I should try to talk to Leo about the boy’s name.”

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Ming Yu made a dismissive noise as she turned to the rice porridge. “If the cat knew his name or had an opinion about it, he should have said something.” She tapped the wooden spoon on the side of the bowl and set it aside. “Besides, it looks to me that he’s attached himself to you. If he could say it with words, I think he’d tell us that the only person he wants naming him is you.”

“Really?” He shifted the kid so that he was sitting on the edge of the counter rather than Junjie’s thigh. The biggest grin spread across his red lips and he held out half of an apple slice to Junjie, wanting to share with him. How could he be so sweet and adorable? After everything he’d been through, shuffled from his own kind to a clan of vampires, who didn’t know what they were doing.

All except for Ming Yu. He had no doubt that she’d had some interaction with the younger children of the Zhang clan and the sect prior to the arrival of Jiang Chong.

“Eat that,” Ming Yu admonished in a whisper. “I’ll cut up another to go with the congee.”

Junjie leaned close and took a small bite of the offered apple, smiling at the child. He chewed but struggled to swallow the piece of fruit past the sudden lump that had grown in his throat.

“Why do you think he’s so attached to me already?”

“No idea, but children are often excellent judges of character. He can look at you and sense that you’re going to take good care of him.”

He would. That soft smile and sparkling blue eyes shining so brightly at him sealed it completely. The feel of him cuddled against his chest, the chubby fist clenching his shirt, begging to be kept safe. All of it worked deep into Junjie's heart and there was no letting him go now. Even if he didn't know the boy's name.

Yet, one problem remained.

Jiang Chong and the fae.

That monstrous group was trying to destroy all of humanity, but their first target continued to be the Zhang clan. How could Junjie think to keep a small child at the manor when they weren't sure they could protect themselves?

"Jiejie?" Junjie choked out.

"Hm?"

"What about Jiang Chong?"

"What about him?"

His head popped up, and he stared at her back, his forehead furrowed as his eyebrows snapped together over his nose. "What do you mean?" She made it sound as if that bastard wasn't even a threat to them at all.

"Just that. What about him? What does he have to do with this precious Xiao Ping Guo?"

Yep, that settled it. He needed to decide on a name for the child. He couldn't let him go through life as fruit.

“But...but...Jiang Chong is trying to destroy us.”

“And we’re going to stop him. We defeated him once before, and we’re going to do it again.” She turned to face him and clucked her tongue as if she were disappointed in him. “We fought too hard to escape Jiang Chong and a string of useless emperors. To have a life that we weren’t ashamed of. We can’t put that life on hold because we’re threatened.” Her gaze softened as she stared at the boy who was chowing down on the fresh plate of apple slices she’d placed next to him only minutes ago. “This darling young man needs you, and he needs a family who will care for him. If we allow Jiang Chong to force us to be less than ourselves, to turn aside those who need us the most, what is the point of fighting him? He’s already won.”

That was a very good point.

He smirked at Ming Yu. “Practicing for when you have to make the same argument to Shixiong?”

She stiffened for a heartbeat, only to scamper close. “Some. Was I convincing?”

“I thought you were very convincing, but you know that Xiao Dan’s first concern will be for the child and whether we can properly care for him. Not just about the danger, but what does a group of vampires know about caring for a human...or rather, a mostly human child?”

Ming Yu straightened and waved a hand at him. “Pfft. We’ll figure that out. Moon will know some modern parenting things, and I recall plenty from my years of serving the Zhang family. What we don’t know, we search for on the Internet.” She gave a giggle. “Raising children must be so much easier now that you can buy premade food in stores and disposable diapers. We can order all the clothes and toys online.”



From there, Shijie was off and running, talking about all the things they would need to buy for the boy so that he could be comfortable. Clothes, diapers, toys, a proper bed, books, and so much more. He let her talk while she made a small bowl of congee for the child. She had no problem with the idea of the baby staying with the clan.

A soft noise rose from the child in front of him and he looked down to see that adorable, chubby-cheeked smile directed at him. The little guy was holding his blanket up to Junjie as if offering it to him. He accepted it and the boy clapped. His laughter rang out, and it was the best sound in the world. It went straight to his soul and soothed old aches, reviving him when his energy flagged.

He and Ming Yu took turns feeding him and making funny faces as he devoured the porridge she'd made. By the time she was scraping up the last bits in the bowl's bottom, the kid's eyes were growing heavy and struggling to stay open.

Ming Yu advised that maybe they could get by just wiping off the dirt with a soapy cloth rather than a full bath. Thankfully, she also showed him how to change his diaper.

By the time they had the child settled, he was asleep in Junjie's bed, his blanket gripped in one hand.

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Ming Yu patted Junjie on the shoulder with one hand while covering her mouth with the other as she yawned. “Get some sleep.”

“What if he needs me and I’m asleep?”

“Don’t worry. You’ll wake up.”

She was right. He was a notoriously light sleeper. He’d also never attempted to sleep with someone in bed with him.

Leo didn’t count. He’d been in cat form and slept at the foot of the bed, which he now regretted allowing with a new passion.

After Ming Yu shuffled down the hall to her room, Junjie closed his door. He turned on the light to his en suite bathroom so the bedroom wouldn’t be completely dark in case the little one woke up before he did. The main light to the room clicked off, and cool quiet settled over the room. He slipped into the bed, careful not to shift the mattress and wake the child.

For a moment, he lay there wondering how the hell he was going to fall asleep, but it swept him away as he finished the thought. When the night had begun, they’d been fighting the fae. They’d watched the death of Queen Belladonna, the rise of the tyrant King Trin, and the return of Jiang Chong. Kai had gotten his stolen sword back, and now Junjie had a child.

No wonder he was so exhausted.

1 Jie/jiejie – older sister (opposite of meimei.)

2 Shijie – older clan sister

3 Xiao Ping Guo – little apple

4 Baobei – baby

## Chapter 5

Leo St. George

Leo flattened himself across a tree limb while in his cat form, his eyes fixed on the rear of the Zhang manor. Lights glowed in the interior, and more were blinking on throughout the garden, creating a warm and welcoming illusion.

Come in. You're home. This is where you belong.

At least, that was what it seemed to whisper to him, but it was all a lie. This wasn't home, and he didn't belong here.

No, he was more like a cuckoo bird than a cat, hiding one of his own kind within the nest of vampires.

Or some nonsense like that.

The truth of the matter was that jealousy was eating him from the inside out. He was green with it. That helpless kitten was undoubtedly receiving plenty of cuddles and laughs from Junjie. Cuddles and belly rubs that should have been his alone.

Not that he would begrudge the orphan all the love and affection he could receive.

He'd lost his parents and home. Meanwhile, his own kind, out of fear and superstition, couldn't be bothered to take him in. Vampires were far less cold blooded about the child's fate.

Maybe he worried about the kid, too. This was Leo's third visit in a week, though he never dared to venture any closer to the house than this tree, which was closest to one of the walls. It allowed him to beat a hasty retreat over the wall and out of reach if a resident spotted him.

The sun had set a few minutes earlier, and he was hoping to glimpse Junjie when he took the boy out for a walk through the garden. The little guy loved to help feed the koi that swam through the man-made pond and under the curved bridge.

"You're an asshole."

Leo hissed and jumped up from where he lounged at the sudden voice below him. He looked down to find that weird fox shifter sitting beneath the tree, his many tails spread behind him. He'd heard some of the fairy tales about fox spirits and jiuweihu, but he'd never believed they existed. But then, there were a lot of things that were possible after meeting the Zhang clan.

"What are you talking about? It's not like the kid was my flesh and blood. I was trying to find him a good home." Ire and guilt sharpened Leo's voice and left his hair standing on end. His spine arched, and he bared his fangs at the fox.

Huli leaped up and braced his front two paws on the tree trunk, stretching toward the cat. His triangular ears flattered against his head and his sharp teeth seemed to grow as his lips pulled back. "That's not what I mean. All of Xiao Dan's attention is on the baby now. Do you have any idea how long I've waited for him? How hard I've worked to win his affection just to have you throw a baby between us because you can't take care of it? I'm supposed to be his baby. No one else. Just me."

“Huli.”

Both of them jerked their heads in the direction of the firm, deep voice that drifted across the yard from the house. Xiao Dan was standing on the bridge wearing a pair of dark slacks and a soft, thin sweater despite the lingering heat of the day.

The fox spirit needed no additional coaxing. He shoved off the tree and bounded over to where the vampire was waiting for him, as if he were an overgrown Tigger with too many tails. On the final bounce, the huli jing shifted into a human with chestnut-brown hair and large green eyes. The top of his head barely reached Xiao Dan's shoulder. Huli's bright smile beamed at the vampire as if he were the one and only thing that mattered in all of his world.

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Xiao Dan threaded their fingers together, but before they walked off, he stared at the tree where Leo remained hidden behind a wall of thick, green leaves. There was no way Xiao Dan should be able to see him, but Leo swore he could feel those piercing, nearly black eyes slicing through him. Leo hunkered low, trying to make himself smaller.

Yet, as Leo prepared to run, Xiao Dan lowered his gaze to Huli and looked at him so warmly, not saying a single word to Leo. They walked off together, hand in hand, moving to one of the other gardens. As they disappeared from sight, the back door slid open and Junjie appeared with the little boy cradled in one arm and the canister of fish food in the other hand. Today, the child was wearing a pair of blue shorts and a red T-shirt with a cartoon character on it. The shirt rode up on his rounded belly and Leo relaxed on the tree limb as he watched them approach the pond. Every time he saw them, there were such happy expressions on their faces. He understood all too well Huli's jealousy of the boy.

The only difference was that the child's open joy warmed all the places deep inside of Leo that had grown cold and numb with time. This was his favorite time of the entire day.

As they got close to the water, Junjie kneeled and set the boy on his feet. The child held up his left hand for Junjie to take so they could walk hand in hand to the water's edge. The koi spotted the approach of Junjie and the boy and rushed toward where they were standing, their mouths poking out of the water, opening and closing as they begged for food. A high-pitched squeal and giggle rang out.

“Gege! Fish!”

“Yes, they’re happy to see you.”

“Food! Food!”

Junjie nodded and opened the fish pellet container with his thumb, keeping a tight hold on the boy to make sure he didn’t tumble headfirst into the water. “Yes, they want you to give them their dinner.”

“Mn. Dinner.”

Leo struggled not to chuckle as Junjie poured some food into the boy’s tiny hand. The kid flung it out into the water and squealed as the fish splashed and jumped to snap up the pellets. This went on for several rounds until all the fish were fed.

Junjie closed up the container of food and left it beside the bank of the pond. He stood and led the child across the bridge and into the grassy area under the trees, drawing closer and closer to where Leo was hiding. The cat fought the urge to move, potentially giving away his location.

When they were a safe distance from the water, Junjie released the little boy’s hand, allowing him to wander through the grass. He appeared unbothered by the growing darkness, but then the child of cat shifters would have already developed superior night vision.

“Are you going to come down or stay lurking up there?” Junjie inquired without even gazing up into the trees.

Caught.

There wasn’t much point in hiding any longer.

Leo leaped from his perch and shifted into a human before his feet even touched the ground. He'd opted for a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt rather than being naked like he had during their first real meeting. Junjie didn't seem in the mood for his silliness. The vampire didn't act cold toward him, just cautious.

"Hey."

"This is your third visit in a week," Junjie murmured as he sat on the grass near where the child was gathering up some sticks.

Leo swallowed hard and rubbed a hand through his messy hair. "You knew?"

"We always know when someone has entered the boundaries of our home."

Well, that was both creepy and reassuring. It also proved that he wasn't as stealthy as he'd hoped. Each time he'd watched the two of them during their nightly fish feeding, Junjie had been aware of his presence.

"Gege! Gege, 'ticks." The little boy hurried on chubby legs and held up a handful of sticks in front of Junjie's face.

"Those are lovely sticks. Would you like me to hold them for you?"

The boy nodded and handed them over before wandering off to search for more interesting things.

"Gege? You're teaching him Chinese?" Leo blurted out without letting his brain catch up with his mouth.

Junjie's eyes narrowed on him, and Leo took a step back. "You gave a child to a Chinese family. Is it surprising to discover that he's learning some words and



phrases?”

He held up his hands and waved them. “No. No. You’re right. I wasn’t thinking. I guess I was surprised that he picked it up so quickly.”

The tiny lines of tension around Junjie’s eyes disappeared and his shoulders lowered. “He has learned only a few words. Gege and jiejie are the two most common. Oh, and?—”

The boy raced over to them and stopped with wide eyes locked on Leo. He stared for a second; then his mouth spread into a grin. With his empty hand, he pointed at Leo. “Mao!”?1

Junjie lifted his hand to cover his own mouth, but Leo caught the hint of a smile as the vampire fought to clear his throat. “Yes, you’re right. That’s Leo. He’s a mao.”

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Leo cocked his head at the two of them. “What?”

“Cat. Mao means cat.”

Leo smirked. “He is a smart little guy.”

Just as fast, the boy lost all interest in Leo and turned to Junjie, handing him a tiny purple flower. “For Gege.”

“Thank you.”

Leo sat on the ground close to Junjie and braced his hands behind him, leaning back so he could watch both the vampire and the kitten.

“He seems to have settled in,” he observed, his tone still guarded.

Junjie nodded, his eyes drifting away from the boy to the sticks and flower he was holding in his hands. “Mn. He’s very resilient despite what he’s been through. He’s woken twice with nightmares, calling for his mother, but Su Ming Yu has soothed him, and he returns to me afterward. We’ve been able to establish a nice routine for him so that he’s able to be awake during some of the daylight hours and some of the night hours.”

“You...” Leo paused and rubbed his jaw with one knuckle. “You...don’t sound too pissed at me for dumping this kid in your lap.”

“Could you have taken care of him? Fed him? Clothed him? Held him when he woke

crying from a nightmare he didn't understand?"

"Jeez! Fu-fuuudggge no!" Leo exclaimed, correcting himself at the very last second. "I told you earlier that I can barely take care of myself. Every time I looked at him, all I could think about was how I was going to screw him up. He deserves a better shot at life than what I can provide."

The thought of trying to raise the little boy was enough to make him break out in a cold sweat. His fight-or-flight instincts were hardcore triggered. He longed to shift and run up the nearest tree.

Junjie nodded and lifted his eyes to watch the toddler as he wandered the open green space without a care in the world. "Why did you pick me?"

"I didn't pick just you. I picked your entire clan. There was no one else that I knew who is a healthy, caring, responsible family unit." Leo stopped and let out a deep sigh. "And to be honest, we didn't want to wait long to get him settled. The fae are lurking everywhere, knocking off shifters and witches left and right. The kid needed somewhere safe. We thought about giving him over to a human orphanage?—"

Junjie's head snapped around so quickly Leo nearly jumped out of his skin. "You would hand a full-blooded shifter child over to the humans? Isn't that dangerous?"

Leo put up both hands while suppressing the urge to back away. "Thought about it. Simply thought about it. But we all agreed it was a bad idea. There's a good chance he won't present any outward signs of being a shifter until he's in his late teens or early twenties, but there are always some who are early bloomers. He could even partially shift as early as five or six."

Junjie's eyes widened and his pale-pink lips parted, forming the most lickable O. "He could partially shift?"

“It’s rare, but possible.”

The vampire put aside the flower and sticks the child had given him and pushed to his feet. He walked over to where the little boy had ambled and scooped him up, swinging his feet into the air and wringing fresh giggles out of him. Yet, when Junjie turned toward Leo, there was no mistaking the worry marring his handsome face.

“What’s wrong?” the cat shifter inquired.

“There’s so much we don’t know about him. We won’t be able to answer the questions he’s going to have later in life about his own kind or himself. We won’t be able to guide him when he’s learning to shift.”

Leo waved a hand at him. “Don’t worry about that. Instincts take over, and it happens naturally.”

Junjie was not soothed. If anything, his glare became more intense. “I don’t even know his name.”

The cat winced and lowered his eyes to the grass. “I didn’t know his parents personally. Didn’t even know anyone had given birth to a kitten in the past few years. I wasn’t there when he was discovered, but I poked around the place later. There was a backpack with the name ‘Erik’ stitched into the material. I don’t know if that was his name or maybe his father’s, but that’s all I got.”

With the child still in his arms, Junjie shifted how he was cradled so the vampire could look into his eyes. “Erik? Is your name Erik?”

A giggle rose, and he clapped his hands. But that response could as easily have been from the ride in his arms rather than Junjie’s words.

“Okay. From now on, you’ll be Erik. Erik Zhang.”

Leo sat up straighter, rising to his knees as if to keep his heart in his chest when it attempted to leap toward Junjie. “You’re going to keep him?”

“Yes. The clan discussed it, and while we are concerned about protecting him as we deal with Jiang Chong and the fae, it’s more important that he is in a loving, supportive home after losing his parents.” Junjie’s arms tightened on Erik and he pressed his cheek to the top of his head, but his eyes no longer met Leo’s. “I know what it’s like to lose a parent and to have no one in the world who wants you.”

“Jun-Jun...” Leo whispered; his heart squeezed so tight he was afraid it was about to be pulverized to dust. How could this man ever be alone? To him, it was as if he were made to be loved by all who met him.

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“My father was the younger brother of the man who would be my shifu. He went out into the world to make a name for himself. Along the way, he fathered a child. I don’t know if he and my mother were ever married. He died a few years after my birth. My mother didn’t want me, so she left me with the Zhang clan, since they were my only other relatives. I was only ten when I came to live with the Zhangs. Alone, possibly a bastard, and generally unwanted. Shifu showed me what it was to be loved, what it meant to belong to a family. Erik deserves that as well.”

Leo crossed his legs in front of him, a boulder sinking into the pit of his stomach. His heart broke for young Junjie and all that he’d suffered. No question, Erik was in the right place. He would find the love and support he needed to grow up healthy and happy.

Then why did he still feel like shit? There was no way he could do all the things Erik would need. He was one man in a tiny studio apartment that he rarely ever saw. He took odd jobs here and there to pay the bills. There was no difference between him and every other cat shifter out there—he looked out for himself, and that was it.

So why did that make him feel so very low?

“We’re happy to add Erik to our clan, but we still need you.”

Leo’s head snapped up at Junjie’s words and his heart raced with new life. “Really? What could you need from me?”

“To start: information. We know nothing about cat shifters. I want to tell Erik about his own kind when he gets older.”

With a shrug, Leo resumed his lounge on the soft grass. “Oh, that’s easy. We’re all about the same. We’re very solitary, independent, utterly feckless, and irresponsible.” Junjie’s frown returned with a vengeance. Leo powered on with renewed enthusiasm. “We don’t have clans or packs. We don’t hang out or even give a shi-shoot about each other.”

“Wonderful.” The vampire’s tone made it clear that it was anything but wonderful. He sat and placed the child between his legs, allowing him to play in the grass with the sticks and flowers he’d collected.

“It’s rare that we take mates. Most of the time, we just stumble across another cat shifter, fu?—”

“I don’t think Erik needs to hear about this side of his kind at such a young age,” Junjie snapped, his words trembling. His hands flew up to hover close to the boy’s ears, as if he meant to cover them if he couldn’t stop Leo.

Leo threw his head back and cackled. He barely heard Junjie’s irritated huff. Leaning on his elbow, he smirked at the vampire. “Well, our time together might be fleeting, but I promise you it’s always a night that you’ll never forget. I could give you a taste.”

“No, thank you. I don’t make any judgments about your lifestyle. It simply doesn’t fit mine.” He gathered Erik up in his arms and stood. “If you’ll excuse us, I need to get Erik something to eat. It would be helpful if you returned another time and told us more about cat shifters so we could be better prepared for Erik’s future.” He turned to the house and Leo climbed to his feet, but Junjie seemed to pause and glance over his shoulder. “Particularly ahead of our eventual return to China.”

It was as though the air had been sucked out of Leo’s lungs.

Return to China...

Those words shouldn't have been the shock they were. It made sense that they'd all return home after Yichen rejoined the clan and they eliminated the fae. But Junjie...gone...

"Yeah. Uh...yeah, I can stop by. When I have a free moment."

He forced himself to shift into his cat form and darted up the nearest tree to stop his wandering tongue. He ran from tree limb to tree limb, leaping and running, not stopping until he was on the other side of the wall that surrounded the Zhang grounds.

But no matter how fast he ran, he couldn't escape these clingy, heavy feelings of worthlessness. He needed to stop returning to the Zhang clan.

1 Mao – cat

## Chapter 6

### Zhang Junjie

Asqueal that didn't come from the child in his arms turned Junjie away from the front door. A black SUV belonging to the Variks had pulled into the driveway, and he was preparing to meet their guests. Xiao Dan had invited them over to share information regarding the fae and to plan a strategy for dealing with them and Jiang Chong. This was not a time for distractions.

An answering laugh came from Erik when they spotted Mei Lian "sneaking" up on them. She curled her fingers like a witch about to snatch up a baby. Erik's giggles filled the air as she tickled his round belly.



“He’s mine! All mine for the afternoon!” She cackled, pulling the little boy out of Junjie’s arms. He had to fight the urge to tighten his hold on the child, letting him slip away into another set of loving and safe arms.

“What are you talking about?”

“Shixiong said I don’t have to attend the meeting. Just a bunch of boring planning. I thought I would take Erik to play with some new toys I ordered for him.”

Junjie bit his tongue. The two-year-old had an entire room dedicated to toys. It was going to cost them a fortune to ship them to China when it was time to leave.

Oh, unless they could get Kai to move the toys the same way he’d moved his hoard. That could be an option.

But the important thing was, they were spoiling Erik terribly. Junjie didn’t dare chastise Meimei, because he was the worst of all.

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Erik had been living with them for over a week, and he now had a closet filled with clothes and a room overflowing with toys. He also had a small bed set up in the room across the hall from Junjie, but more often than not, he ended up sleeping in Junjie's bed.

It wasn't his fault!

How was he supposed to say no to those enormous eyes and that sweet baby giggle?

Impossible. Simply impossible.

"Are you sure you don't want to be in the meeting?" Junjie called out as she walked down the hallway.

She snorted. "Planning? Strategy? Ugh. No, thank you. Just tell me where to be and who to kill. That's enough for me. I'd much rather play with this adorable man."

Okay, when put like that, Junjie was tempted to join them. Unfortunately, Xiao Dan entered the foyer and smiled at him. "Ready to meet with the Variks?"

"Yes, Shixiong."

Xiao Dan's smile broadened. "Meimei will take excellent care of Xiao Ping Guo while he's out of your sight."

Junjie arched a brow at his older brother. "Are you implying that I am being too protective of him?"

“No, I’m not implying it.” He paused and covered his mouth with a hand as if to hold in a laugh. “I’m saying it. You’re muchtoo protective of him. The rest of us can’t get any time with him without you there to boss us around.”

“Ha!” Moon barked out as he and Chen joined them. “Shixiong burn!”

Junjie was still reeling from that assessment only to have Chen chime in. “It’s only natural. Shifu was the same way with Jun-Jun starting from the day he arrived at the sect manor. You could tell it was killing him to allow Jun-Jun to run off to play with the other disciples.”

“What?” Junjie gasped.

“Shifu never spoke of it, but I could always tell he missed his didi after he left,” Xiao Dan explained. “Your sudden appearance was a gift. You were a tie to the brother he’d lost and the son he never had.”

It was tempting to point out that Xiao Dan would always be Zhang Shi Lie’s adopted and first son, but he let it go. Shifu had always shown great love and care for him, regardless of how he’d ended up with the Zhang clan.

“Holy shit! Fox is here!” Moon shouted and was out the front door before any of them could react.

They followed at a slower pace to greet their guests to find that the former witch turned vampire was, in fact, part of the Varik contingent along with King Aiden, Ronan, and Fox’s mate, Winter.

The American vampire clan was a pleasant surprise and much-needed help upon arriving in the country. In their home country, they’d run across very few vampires. Or rather, few vampires had been willing to cross the Zhang clan, thanks to their

extreme old age and training.

But the Variks were different. Outgoing and eager to bicker amongst each other, they were the first clan they'd ever heard of to include four blood brothers. What Junjie appreciated most about them was that their moral center matched the Zhangclan's. They believed in doing no harm and protecting those who needed it most. Namely, the humans.

Moon crashed into Fox, wrapping his arms around the newborn vampire's neck. Chen was right there a second later, pulling Moon off Fox by the back of his T-shirt. Fox laughed, but he was also looking pale.

"Lesson one, baobei," Chen bit out. "Use caution with very young vampires. They are still honing control of their bloodlust and instincts. You do not throw yourself at one."

Junjie swallowed a laugh. Moon was still a baby vampire himself, but he'd always been impulsive and reckless. Thank all the ancestors that Chen lurked a step behind, ready to pull Moon from the brink of disaster.

"Oops! My bad! Sorry about that," Moon apologized while leaning against Chen. "I got excited. The last time I saw you, you weren't good."

Fox's smile was lopsided, and he breathed easier when Chen pulled Moon off him. "No problem. I get it. Winter has told me numerous times about how I almost didn't make it."

The vampire in question joined his redheaded mate and wrapped an arm across his waist, pulling him in close. "And I've also told you I'll stop reminding you when I stop having nightmares about that night."

“Welcome, Variks,” Xiao Dan greeted as he joined them along with Aiden and Ronan. “Fox, you appear to be much better. We’re glad to hear you recovered.”

“Yes, it has been a slower process than I wanted, but I understand I owe the fact that I’m even here at all to you and the Zhang clan.”

Xiao Dan waved him off. “We were happy to help. You owe us nothing.”

“Since becoming a vampire, have you been able to...you know...” Moon trailed off, seeming unwilling to say the words.

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Fox's expression scrunched up, and he lifted one hand to wobble it in front of him. "That's complicated. It's like I can feel all my old power condensed into a tight little ball in the center of my chest. I'm afraid that if I try to use magic, I'll use up all of that ball and I won't be able to protect Winter from the ghosts any longer."

"What? Ghosts try to attack him?" Moon gasped and turned to wrap himself around Chen. His head snapped from left to right as he searched the driveway and the green space before the house for ghosts lurking under vehicles or behind trees.

"No, not attack, but they love to talk to me constantly when they realize I can see them."

"Ah." Moon relaxed from where he'd been trying to climb Chen.

"I believe we should go inside and continue this conversation. This is at least partially related to why we asked you here," Xiao Dan interjected before they could get further off track.

The Variks and the Zhangs returned to the house, where they settled in the main meeting room. The rest of the Zhang clan joined them. Only Meimei and Erik were missing, but Junjie hoped she was keeping him well entertained for the time being.

After Ming Yu and Rei brought out some light refreshments and the general pleasantries were out of the way, they got down to business.

"Since my last chat with Xiao Dan, it seems that we now have a two-pronged problem that needs to be taken care of," Aiden began. "One being the fae, now led by

King Trin, and the second being your clan's maker, Jiang Chong."

"Not to mention, the humans are officially in a state of panic," Ronan added. "They're climbing out of the land of denial and are making moves to bring in some heavy guns. That's going to put more humans in danger as well as magical creatures. We need to get the fae taken care of so humans can go back to pretending we don't exist and living in peace."

"Do you even think that's possible anymore?" Ming Yu inquired.

Moon snorted. "Humans will believe just about anything if it means being able to stay in their nice, safe bubble."

Rei shook his head. "The bubble has fucking burst, my sassy vampire."

"I don't think Moon is wrong." Fox leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees and his chin propped up on his hands. "There are going to be a lot of people who argue that what happened in New England was a secret government experiment gone wrong. Hating the government is an old habit. Believing in the fae is a lot harder. Unless a werewolf shifts in front of a reporter and it hits the evening news, shifters and vampires are still under the radar. At least for the time being."

"And we still have a chance to get rid of the fae before they upset the applecart for everyone," Winter finished. "But what about this Jiang Chong asshole? Do you think we have a shot of dealing with him and the fae at the same time? Or is he a separate problem?"

Xiao Dan's frown deepened, and the rest of the Zhang clan appeared to hold their breaths, waiting for him to comment. "I honestly don't know."

Chen cleared his throat and shifted to the edge of his seat. "Over two thousand years

ago, Jiang Chong was the head of the emperor's intelligence force. He was a spy and assassin for the emperor. During his alliance with the emperor, while solidifying his place as a force behind the throne, he helped to eliminate countless people who dared to speak about the emperor one day dying. He has a long history of being the dark shadow behind a leader, whispering in their ear, concocting schemes, and removing obstacles. I will say that Trin doesn't seem the type to be easily manipulated."

"He's not," Rei cut in.

"Then Jiang Chong is likely to be more cautious when handling Trin. Jiang Chong has likely agreed to take care of the Zhang clan in exchange for Trin leaving him alone once he takes over the human world. Eliminating Jiang Chong won't help us with the fae problem and vice versa," Xiao Dan explained.

"However, I don't expect Jiang Chong to come help Trin or for Trin to help Jiang Chong if either side gets in trouble," Chen added.

Fox straightened. "A kind of 'you stay out of my way, and I'll stay out of your way' agreement."

"So, we have two distinct problems that need to be taken care of," Aiden observed as he set his empty cup of tea on the table. The vampire with the regal look and light-brown hair sat back in his chair and ran his hand over his tie as if it were a familiar gesture he completed while thinking.

Xiao Dan picked up the teapot and replenished his cup. "Actually, Jiang Chong is a problem for the Zhang clan. We couldn't ask for your help."

Aiden beamed at him and lifted his cup to Xiao Dan. "That's the wonderful thing about friends. You don't have to ask."



Winter sighed. “It’s clear that the Variks alone don’t have the firepower to take care of the fae problem. We need this Jiang Chong to not kill you, so you can help us with the fae.”

The king narrowed his eyes at his youngest son, who at least had the sense to wince and scoot closer to his mate. “While I might not care for how my son has said it, I can’t argue with his assessment. We need you.”

“We aren’t offended. The fae are everyone’s problem, particularly their leadership.” Xiao Dan turned his attention to Rei and nodded. “I am sorry.”

“No, you’re right. The fae are a problem, but I’m fine. I’ve decided that I’m not a member of the fae any longer. I’m now a vampire through marriage.”

A strange sound escaped Yichen, and he turned to capture Rei’s chin between his thumb and forefinger. “Not all fae are bad, starting with the amazing, beautiful, compassionate elf who saved my life. I dare anyone to say otherwise.”

Rei’s entire frame lost all of its rigidity and he melted, seeming to be held up alone by Yichen’s hand. “I’m so lucky to have found you first. If someone else had grabbed you before me, I would have stabbed a bitch.”

“Oh, Lord,” Xiang groaned, but it was barely heard over Fox’s and Moon’s cackles.

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“Would you stab a bitch for me?” Kai demanded in a ridiculously loud whisper right in Xiang’s ear.

“I believe we’re getting a bit off topic,” Xiao Dan announced in a rousing voice as he tried to get control of the meeting.

Aiden coughed, his hand almost covering the smile on his lips. “I think you’re right.”

“If you would like to help us with Jiang Chong, what we need is information about your gift, Winter,” Junjie interjected, trying to give Xiao Dan a hand in pulling them away from the silliness.

That got the vampire to sit up straight. “Huh?”

Junjie nodded, fighting off the chill that gripped his entire body every time he spoke of his old creator. “Jiang Chong has the same ability to disappear into the dead realm and reappear at will. It’s part of the reason he was able to keep us under his control for so long. It’s a hard power to fight against.”

“Are you sure it’s the same?” Winter shifted in his seat, rubbing the palms of his hands on his jeans. “Have any of you had him use his gift on you? I could take that person into the dead realm, and they can compare.”

“I believe we’ve all been pulled into that dark realm with him at least once,” Xiao Dan said in a low, barely audible voice.

It wasn’t that Jiang Chong had taken them inside. It was that he’d abandoned each of

them there more than once with the threat that they'd stay trapped there for eternity if they didn't obey his wishes.

"Okay. I can take someone now," Winter offered.

Total silence was the immediate response.

One of them had to speak up, but even Xiao Dan and Chen, who were always the first to jump ahead of their brothers to protect them, were now quiet. The place Winter spoke of so easily held endless horrors for them.

"I-I'll do it," Xiao Dan stammered.

Junjie shoved to his feet. "No, I'll do it."

"Jun-Jun," he argued but stopped when Junjie held up a hand.

"I was the last to enter the realm with him. I'm sure I remember it the best. This makes the most sense." He wasn't sure if he was talking nonsense at all, but no one argued with him.

"No problem. We'll make this super fast." Winter's sudden reassurance made him realize they were freaking out the rest of the Variks with their shared trauma.

Junjie forced a smile and stepped away from his chair, moving to the rear of the room. To his knowledge, Winter needed at least a little space in which to move so they could step through the doorway he created.

Winter joined him and held out his hand. "We'll never even leave this room."

"Just don't let go of me," Junjie choked out, not even bothering to hold on to his fake

smile.

“Nothing could make me release you,” he said, and Junjie believed him.

A long vertical slit appeared in the air to Winter’s left, running from the floor to almost the ceiling. It widened, revealing a vast darkness in the middle of the room. Winter motioned toward it and cocked his head, still giving Junjie the choice to enter or retreat.

Fear threatened to choke him with countless nightmarish memories, but this already felt different. There had never been a choice with Jiang Chong. Winter’s hand tightened around his, squeezing until his knuckles cracked. A painful reassurance that this was now, and Winter was not letting go.

“Okay.”

Winter walked into the blackness, and Junjie followed. The room shifted into a false night. A sharp chill that made it feel like it was now January rather than September bit into his flesh. After taking two steps, he gazed back to see the doorway seal disappearing from sight. In front of him, his family and the Variks remained in their seats, staring at the last place they’d seen them. The Variks were calm, unshaken by their vanishing act. The Zhangs were not so composed. Xiao Dan sat gripping the arms of his chair, seeming on the edge of crushing them. Chen was on his feet, hands balled into fists so tight they were trembling.

“Hey! Eyes on me!” Winter snapped.

Junjie’s head swung to see Winter’s expression had grown fierce and deathly serious. “Stay with me here. I’m not letting you go. No matter what, you’re leaving with me and returning to your clan.”

“Yes.” Junjie sucked in a loud and harsh breath. “Yes, you’re right. I’m safe with you.”

“Better?”

He nodded. “Better. I’m okay.”

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Winter stared at him for another couple of seconds before the tense lines in his youthful face eased and he smirked. “Gotta say, this maker of yours? I’m looking forward to killing him, and I haven’t even met the guy yet.”

“Count yourself lucky. Every fiber of his being is evil. This realm,” Junjie lifted his free right hand and motioned to the misty darkness surrounding them. “It was a punishment, a constant threat. My clan was much larger than it is now. Many he slaughtered rather than change. Others he killed after changing them into vampires because they were still not powerful enough. And then more, he killed and drove mad by bringing them here and leaving them for hours or days. You never knew when he was lurking near you unseen. Never knew if or when he would grab you for some imagined disobedience.”

“Yeah, we’re definitely going to need to kill this fuckstick.”

Junjie allowed himself a slow grin as he repeated the slur over in his head. Yes, that was a very good nickname for Jiang Chong. Fuckstick.

“So, is it the same? Is this what you remember it being like in Jiang Chong’s dead realm?”

He wouldn’t say he was feeling relaxed by any stretch of the imagination. At least, Junjie wasn’t on the verge of a panic attack. He could inspect his surroundings in a somewhat detached manner. “It feels the same. The cold. The darkness. Being able to see others and hear them talking, but they can’t see or hear me. The only thing missing are the spirits.”

“Yeah...” Winter drawled. He glanced about, his frown returning. “Your clan bought this land and cleared it for this house, right?”

“Yes.”

“It’s likely that anyone who died in this region moved on years ago. I doubt we’re going to see any ghosts here, unless your clan killed some trespassers.”

Junjie grunted. “Not within the walls, no. But I’m sure this is the same. You and Jiang Chong have the same power.”

“Okay. I might be able to help. We should return. Your clan is getting antsy waiting for you.”

“Wait! Can you tell if Jiang Chong has been inside our home without our knowledge?”

That thought alone was more frightening than the idea of Winter leaving him here to die while watching his family futilely fight for a way to bring him home. Since his return, the fear had lingered in the shadows of Junjie’s mind each day and night that Jiang Chong might lurk somewhere close by, and they would have no way of knowing it.

Winter narrowed his eyes and seemed to search the room. “I’ve never known another vampire to have the same power as me. I’m not sure what I’m looking for. Nothing appears out of place, and there’s no feeling of additional magic that shouldn’t be here.” He shrugged a shoulder. “You’ve got witch magic, fae magic, and dragon magic layered on your home, though. I’m not sure I’d spot something if it was here.”

“I understand. Thank you for checking.”

The vampire flashed him a stiff smile. “Let me get you to your clan, and I’ll take a peek around the rest of the building and grounds.” He’d barely finished speaking when a bright-white slit formed on Junjie’s right. As it widened, more light from the meeting space poured in. The voices of his family were less muffled. Without being told, Junjie hurried through the opening, pulling Winter with him. As soon as he stepped through, Winter slipped free of his hand.

“Be right back!” Winter called, and the opening between the two realms disappeared.

“Where’s he going?” Xiang demanded.

“I asked him if he could tell whether Jiang Chong has been in our home through the dead realm. He couldn’t tell standing in the room we are in, so he’s gone to check the rest of the grounds,” Junjie replied.

Xiao Dan zoomed across the room and jerked him into a tight embrace, his entire body trembling. “Didi,” he choked out. “You are to never do that again.”

Junjie returned the hug, closing his eyes as they burned with unshed tears. “Winter kept me safe the entire time. He brought me home to you and our family.”

His shixiong released him, and Junjie lifted his gaze up to find Xiao Dan’s eyes glistening and his smile crooked. “Of course. Just...bad memories.”

Yes. They all had terrible memories for Jiang Chong.

## Chapter 7

Zhang Junjie

“Was it the same?” Chen demanded the moment Xiao Dan released Junjie and



allowed him to return to his seat.

Junjie nodded. “It was. The darkness, the cold, the ability to see and hear you, but you can’t see or hear me. The only thing missing were the spirits, but Winter stated that’s likely because no one has died on our grounds in a very long time.”

“While we’re waiting for Winter to finish checking over your manor, we can share what we’ve learned about the fae recently,” Aiden said. “They have been doing more small attacks in suburbs surrounding Hartford, and there has been an increase in elves hunting in the forests.”

“But this time, their focus isn’t solely on humans. They’ve been targeting shifters and witches,” Ronan continued.

Moon shot to his feet. “No!”

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Junjie's hands squeezed into tight fists as he thought of Moon's friends and coven brothers Sky, Redstone, and Maddox. The earth witches, Redstone and Maddox, had been fearful of the fae's arrival, while the necromancer, Sky, had thought he would slip under the fae's notice thanks to his unique brand of magic.

Chen put his hand into Moon's, and the young vampire dragged it up to his chest. "Why don't you call them right now?" Chen suggested. "If they need to move to the manor, we can make room for them."

His mate had barely finished speaking when Moon was out of the room, his cell phone pressed to his ear.

But what about Leo?

The cat shifter had made it clear that he could take care of himself—reveled in his independence and self-reliance, even. Yet, that didn't mean he couldn't use someone watching his back and offering him a haven. A place where he didn't have to worry about the fae finding him.

Unfortunately, Junjie didn't know how to contact him. The cat was too independent, providing him with no way of reaching him if there was a problem.

"Do we know if they're preparing to do another ritual spell to expand the reach of the forest?" Rei asked.

"It looks like it," Aiden said with a single nod. "We believe their goal is to wipe out human cities to the west this time."

The elf scrubbed a hand across his face. “Which would, of course, increase the power of the fae. Fewer humans. More nature. But it would also require more magical energy from the fae realm to maintain. If Trin pursues this course, he’ll be killing our people and the humans. No one wins.”

“The problem we’ve been having is that there are signs the fae have been more active during the day than at night,” Ronan explained.

Xiao Dan reached for his teacup but didn’t take a drink from it, as if he’d gotten lost in thought. “To hide it from us, since we can’t easily monitor them with the sun up.”

“We have access to some shifters, but...” Aiden’s voice drifted off to nothing and a new chill gripped Junjie by the throat.

“What?” Xiang snapped. “River? Wyatt?”

“Wyatt suffered an injury during the last tracking mission.” Ronan picked up the story when Aiden seemed unable to continue. “He’s almost recovered now.”

“But Bel is not taking it well,” Fox chimed in.

“Why would he?” Yichen demanded. “He’s already lost his house. Then he nearly loses a mate. Fuck the world. I’d go atomic.”

“That’s what we’re afraid of.” Aiden sighed, his shoulders slumped. “Bel is a scientist. Right now, his mates are keeping a close watch on him to make sure he doesn’t sneak off to make anything frightening.”

“Like the goo,” Fox added.

“Yes, I think I’ve heard about the goo,” Chen said after clearing his throat. They’d all

quietly discussed the substance Bel had invented that melted people. As much as they wanted to be rid of the fae, something like the goo felt too horrible and dangerous.

“We have more daytime resources available,” Chen volunteered. He turned his gaze to Xiao Dan and smirked. “Huli enjoys spying on the fae and outsmarting them.”

“True. I will speak to him about it,” Shixiong agreed.

“I can also help,” Kai offered.

Xiang huffed and folded his arms over his chest. He wouldn’t be able to accompany his mate for the action since he would be stuck protecting his clan at home during the day.

“Not to be too nosy or anything,” Ronan drawled, scratching his jaw with one finger. “But you’re a dragon and practically a god, right?”

“Yes, that is correct,” Kai agreed with a prim bow of his head.

Junjie almost rolled his eyes. This was the same “godlike” creature who’d nearly lost his shit a few days ago when Meimei had shown him the social media filter that put a nonexistent chicken on his head.

“Can’t you use your magic to destroy the fae for us?” Ronan continued.

“It’s not quite so simple.” Kai seemed to deflate. He wrapped an arm around his mate’s waist as if he needed reassurance from Xiang. “I cannot differentiate between the fae other than Rei. That is only because I have spent time with Rei and gotten to know his particular magic signature. The rest are a mass of creatures with magic very different from my own. I couldn’t even pick out Trin. Killing the fae with my magic would mean killing them all, and Xiang has pointed out that it would be wrong of me

to do that.”

“It’s beginning to feel less wrong to me,” Rei muttered under his breath.

“No, it’s wrong,” Yichen growled while glaring at his elf mate. “You would regret it later. Plus, I don’t want to risk you getting caught up in that ‘killing them all,’ even if Kai can pick you out of the crowd.”

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A slow smile spread across Rei's lips. "Vampire by marriage, remember?"

"Mn," Yichen hummed as he leaned in for a kiss.

"Actually, he is feeling more vampire than fae to me because of Yichen's regular feeding from Rei," Kai interjected before Yichen could seal their lips together.

"You can sense that?" Xiang asked, but it was almost drowned out by Chen's horrified cry.

"What? You swore you were going to stop that! It's dangerous!"

Yichen dropped his face into Rei's neck and moaned. "It was just a little love bite."

"Wu Yichen!" Chen snapped.

Their didi lifted his head and glared at Chen. "Don't judge! How long could you go between bites of your mate?" Chen's mouth shut with an audible click of his teeth and bright color painted his cheeks. Yichen smirked at him. "That's what I thought."

Ronan and Aiden looked as if they were struggling not to laugh while Xiao Dan pinched the bridge of his nose. This clan was more than a handful and only growing worse with the addition of every new mate. Not that the mates didn't bring many benefits to the clan, but they also made the new lovers reckless. That was not a good thing when they faced threats from the fae and Jiang Chong.

"Yichen," Xiao Dan began slowly. "You know we don't want to interfere with your

time with your mate, but we are at war with a deadly opponent. If you become injured in battle and are separated temporarily from the one person who can supply you blood...”

Yichen extracted himself from Rei, jumped to his feet, and bowed deeply to Xiao Dan. “Forgive me, Shixiong. I was being selfish, not thinking about what is best for my clan and my mate.”

Rei leaped from the sofa as well and mimicked Yichen’s bow. “It’s my fault too, Xiao Dan. I shouldn’t have tempted?—”

He stopped talking the moment Xiao Dan held up a hand. “It’s okay. I get the picture. Just, please, refrain until after we can deal with the fae. We must consider everyone’s safety.”

“I think I may be able to get Leo to help Kai and Huli in their spying on the fae,” Junjie suggested to help move them away from more personal matters.

“Leo? Is he another shifter?” Ronan inquired.

Junjie nodded and smiled at the vampire king. “A cat shifter.”

“A very shifty cat shifter,” Xiang added.

“Really? A cat shifter? I’ve never heard of them,” Fox murmured.

“Neither have I,” Aiden whispered.

“I’ve seen a few, and those were over in Europe,” Ronan stated. “They are incredibly rare. Especially a pure-blooded one. Most would have only one shifter parent. Those offspring lacked the ability to shift and would usually pick up a few supernatural

traits, like a slightly extended lifespan or superior night vision. Nothing to catch the attention of the humans.”

Junjie wanted to remind Xiang that they didn’t know Leo or his kind very well. It wasn’t right for them to pass judgment, even if Xiang seemed correct in assessment of the man who’d pretended to be a cat in order to get free meals and belly rubs.

But all of that was forgotten when the sounds of Erik’s cries reached his sensitive ears. He balled his hands into fists, fighting the urge to jump to his feet and find out what was wrong. It didn’t matter how he reminded himself that Meimei could handle this. Everything was fine.

Except it wasn’t.

Those weren’t Erik’s hungry cries or his frustrated cries or even his tired cries.

No, something had scared him and was continuing to scare him.

Junjie sat still for another three whole seconds before he jumped to his feet. It sounded as if Erik’s cries were growing louder. Was he more frightened, or was Meimei carrying him to Junjie?

“Shixiong—”

“It’s okay, Jun-Jun. Go see if Mei Lian needs your help.”

He glanced at Fox, Ronan, and Aiden, who could all hear the crying child. They had curious expressions on their faces, but were too polite to ask how the Zhang clan had suddenly gained a child. He bowed his head to them and turned to leave, but Meimei zipped into the doorway holding a red-faced Erik. Bright tears streaked his chubby cheeks.



“Sorry, Junjie,” she exhaled. “I don’t know what happened.”

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“It’s okay, Meimei. I’ve got him.” Junjie didn’t even need to speak. Erik took one look at him and stretched his arms out to Junjie, hands opening and closing as if that action alone could pull Junjie closer. He sucked in a few ragged breaths and wrapped himself around Junjie as much as he could the moment he landed in Junjie’s arms.

“It’s okay, Xiao Ping Guo. I have you now. Nothing is going to get you,” he cooed in the boy’s ear.

Mei Lian stepped close and rubbed the top of his head. “It was the strangest thing. We were playing in the TV room with some blocks and he paused to stare at the wall as if he were watching something. As I was trying to figure out if he was seeing a bug or a shadow, he burst out into these horrible tears. It was breaking my heart. Nothing I did could get him to stop.”

“I think I’m the reason for his scare.”

The voice seemed to come out of nowhere. Mei Lian was moving before the person stopped speaking. She whirled and scooped up a nearby lamp, pulling the plug free from the socket with a single jerk. One foot planted on the arm of a chair, she raised the lamp above her head, preparing to bring it down on the would-be attacker’s head. Her brain clearly hadn’t registered that she was staring at Winter Varik.

Thankfully, Xiao Dan acted faster.

“Mei Lian, stop!” he shouted, soaring to his feet as well.

Mei Lian froze, still balanced on one foot on the chair, the lamp held high. She

blinked and horror filled her face. “Oh, shit! Winter!”

“Holy cow!” Moon echoed from the doorway, his phone still pressed to his ear. “I gotta call you back. Meimei is about to clock Winter with a lamp.”

“Meimei!” Ming Yu snapped.

“Okay! I won’t hit him.” She hopped from the chair and returned the lamp to its table. Her cheeks flushed bright red as Winter rose from his defensive crouch and lowered his arms from his head.

“Way to make friends, babe,” Fox teased.

Ronan lifted one hand above his head. “So, I have questions.”

“Yeah, me too,” Winter chimed in.

“This is Erik. The fae killed his parents. They were also cat shifters like Leo. We have agreed to take him in. He is now a member of the Zhang clan,” Junjie explained, while his arms automatically tightened around the child, squeezing him so that he felt safe.

“You have two very rare cat shifters linked to your clan now,” Aiden observed softly. “How very lucky!”

“Erik is a very special little boy.” Winter eased closer to the child. Erik lifted his head to stare at Winter and gave a whimper of discomfort. His chubby hands twisted in Junjie’s shirt, and he squirmed as if trying to get closer to him. Junjie comforted him with a kiss to the side of his head. “He can see me,” Winter continued in a whisper.

“That’s not a hard thing. I can see you too,” Fox grumbled.

“No, he means when he’s in the dead realm,” Junjie corrected. “That’s why Erik started crying with Meimei. He saw you in there.”

“Exactly.”

Junjie shifted Erik in his arms so that he could look into the boy’s teary blue eyes. His face was less flushed now, but his brown hair was sticking up in every direction. “Hi. Everything is okay now. I’ve got you.”

“Gege,” Erik mumbled. His fists didn’t loosen in the front of Junjie’s shirt, and he gave Winter quite a bit of skeptical side-eye as if he didn’t know what to think of the strange man in the dark hoodie.

“Gege is here.” He tipped his head toward Winter. “Did you see this man earlier? Did he scare you?”

Erik slowly turned his head, taking a peek at Winter only to dive back into Junjie’s chest, his face pressed into his neck. But he could still feel a tiny nod.

“I’m sorry, Erik. I didn’t mean to scare you,” Winter said in a gentle voice. “Can we still be friends?”

Erik didn’t budge.

“Winter, try this.”

Junjie didn’t need to see what Ming Yu was handing him, but he could hear the scrape of a ceramic plate on the table.

“Erik? Would you like a cookie? Ming Yu?—”

“Jiejie,” Ming Yu corrected in a whisper.

“Jiejie said you like these.”

Erik turned his head on Junjie’s chest and stared at Winter for a couple of seconds before finally sneaking a hand out to take the cookie.

“What do we say?” Junjie prodded.

“Tank yooo.”

“Good boy.” Junjie pressed another kiss to the top of his head, his heart swelling.

Instead of handing him to Mei Lian, Junjie was content to return to his seat with Erik in his lap. Mei Lian slipped around the room to squeeze into the seat directly next to Ming Yu, wrapping both of her arms around one of Ming Yu’s. The other woman blushed and whispered something to Mei Lian that made her laugh.

Junjie lifted his gaze at the sound of a soft sigh escaping Aiden. An expression of joy and envy filled his handsome face.

“When I met my boys for the first time, Winter was already older than him. I never got to see or hold them as babies,” Aiden explained.

Ronan wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “Longing for the pitter-patter of little feet through the mansion?”

“Maybe,” Aiden murmured. He seemed to wallow in dreams and wishes for another moment before shaking his head and straightening in his chair. “But not right now.”

He turned his attention to Xiao Dan. “Are you planning to take him to China with you?”

“Yes. His family is dead, and the cat shifters cannot take him in. He will return to China with us,” Xiao Dan answered firmly, chasing away any fears that the clan might be reluctant to have a human child growing up among them.

Aiden clapped his hands on his knees. “Good. Winter, can you help them?”

“I can get a birth certificate, social security card, and adoption papers all drawn up for you in a few weeks, so you won’t have any trouble traveling with him.” He paused and his lips twisted as he gazed at the boy. “If you want a Chinese passport, that will be more complicated. However, I got a guy who I think can manage it.”

“Excellent. Thank you for your help,” Xiao Dan said.

“No problem. Least I could do after scaring the small fry.” He held up a finger. “Speaking of which, I checked out most of the rooms and saw nothing to show that Jiang Chong has been in here. Right now, if Jiang Chong can get past all the magic barriers you have set up outside, I think your best warning systems are going to be him”—he pointed at Kai—“and him.” He moved that finger over to Erik. “Kai has dragon magic, but I can’t guess why a kid can see me.”

Fox snorted. “Really? You can’t?”

“What?”

The former witch threw up his hands and laughed. “He’s a catshifter. You’ve got to know the old wives’ tale that cats can see the dead. People say that’s why they’re always staring at empty space and meowing at the wall when nothing’s there. They see dead people.”

“But I thought that was all bullshi—nonsense,” Winter corrected himself at the last second.

Fox dropped his hands and glowered at his mate. “You come up with a better explanation as to why a kid can see you in the dead realm.”

“Jun-Jun, has Leo ever mentioned something like that to you?” Chen inquired.

He frowned, arms reflexively tightening on Erik. “No, but Leo hasn’t been forthcoming about the gifts of his kind. However, he has agreed to continue to visit and share more information so we can answer Erik’s questions when he gets older. I will ask him about seeing the dead realm. I will also ask if he would help Huli and Kai with their investigations during the day.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t hold my breath on either of those counts. He seems pretty selfish and useless to me,” Xiang grumbled. As much as Junjie wanted to argue with Xiang, he couldn’t.

Leo’s actions so far had been pretty self-centered, but he’d never minded because he’d never needed or wanted anything from Leo other than some companionship. Junjie had wanted a friend to keep him from feeling lonely and Leo had wanted food. It had been a good arrangement.

But now his clan and Erik needed more from him. If Leo couldn’t step up and think of someone other than himself, maybe it was time to cut ties for the sake of his family and the boy in his arms.

“Sadly, I can’t see Winter when he is in the dead realm like Erik,” Kai admitted. “What I can pick up is a ripple of magic just before an opening is formed between the realms. As long as Winter, or even Jiang Chong, is only observing, there is no way for me to know either is close.”



“I know you were hoping for some secret to detect when Jiang Chong is near but unseen,” Winter began, but he was already shaking his head. “I’m sorry to say that I have nothing for you. In all my years, I’ve never run across anyone who can sense it. Not even Fox. He can shield me from ghosts when we are near, but he has never been able to tell when I’m close to him while in the dead realm. As far as I know, Erik is the first living creature who has ever seen me.”

“Thank you, Winter. Do you know of any way for someone, who has been dragged to the dead realm and abandoned, to escape?” A slight waver entered Xiao Dan’s voice, and he appeared to pale as he spoke.

“No, but if that ever happens to anyone in your clan, call me immediately. I’ll come to wherever they are. As long as they stay in one place, I should have no trouble locating them and bringing them out.” Winter turned his gaze on Junjie, his expression hardening. “No one is getting trapped in the dead realm. I swear it.”

“I think this is a problem for Bel,” Aiden suddenly announced, snapping every eye back to him. “He needs something to focus on, and this is perfect. With his science, he might come up with a solution.”

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And if not, this will at least keep him from trying to invent something deadly to destroy all the fae everywhere. But Junjie didn't dare say those thoughts out loud.

"If he tries to take a sample of my blood again, I'm turning him into a pincushion with those damn syringes," Winter threatened.

Aiden waved off his words. "I'm sure he won't need to."

"In the meantime, the Zhang clan will begin some nighttime investigations to match our daytime efforts. Our clan has a great deal of experience sneaking through the woods at night. The fae will not escape us," Xiao Dan announced. "Rei, do you think it will be worthwhile for us to return to the fae stronghold where we last battled?"

The elf sat up from how he'd been slumped against Yichen, seeming to shake himself from his dark thoughts. "Trin never lived there after he came through the doorway, preferring to keep a safe distance between himself and my parents. He has another stronghold somewhere close by. I'm sure the old castle constructed by my parents has either been demolished in a fit of rage, or he's gone to the trouble of setting traps there if we return looking for him."

"I'll have Marcus send you the latest intelligence and maps we have of recent fae movements," Ronan offered.

"Kill Trin, and the fae will have no one left to lead them. I think the remaining survivors will leave earth and return to their realm," Rei stated.

"Kill Jiang Chong, and our clan will be safe at last," Xiang added.

That was it. That was the plan. The hope. The dream.

Free the world of the fae and get their revenge for stealing Yichen a century ago. Destroy Jiang Chong as justice for all the pain he put them through and the lives he stole from their clan.

But the first step was finding both men.

That would not be a simple task.

## Chapter 8

Leo St. George

What the hell was wrong with him?

Yes, he'd agreed to come visit Junjie at a later date so they could talk more about his kind, allowing him to share that critical information with the kid when he got older.

Except this "later date" was only a few days after their last encounter, and they weren't at the Zhang manor. Nope. He was secretly following Junjie through the woods. He'd seen a group of them leave the manor and he'd stupidly followed, wanting to know what Junjie was up to. Except he hadn't expected it to be a late-night hike, where he knew the fae were lurking. It was as though Leo had a death wish.

No. It was as though he were addicted to Junjie, and it wasn't just about the belly rubs.

Well, of course not.

One only had to take a look at the man to see how perfect he was. Large, beautiful brown eyes that watched with such gentleness and understanding. Pale-pink lips that begged silently for kisses, always poised to break into a soft smile. His entire body was slender and powerful, his movements were all grace and balance. His soul radiated patience and kindness.

But that didn't mean Junjie needed to be protected and coddled. He'd watched Junjie practicing martial arts with his clan mates, and the vampire was as swift and skilled as the rest of them. He was as lethal as any cat hunting his prey. If Leo didn't know better, he would have said that Junjie was a cat shifter.

The icing on the cake was when Junjie was with little Erik. No one in the world was more patient, loving, or understanding with a child than Junjie. Every moment Leo could watch Junjie with the boy melted him into a useless puddle of goo. The vampire shone like a star fallen from the heavens, and Leo wanted to snatch him up before anyone else could.

It was after midnight and the worst of the day's heat was long gone, dipping to something far more comfortable while he prowled about in his cat fur. The wind was light, stirring the leaves enough to mask any noises he might make as he bounded from tree limb to tree limb, following Junjie. Long gone were the fireflies and even the frogs had silenced their croaking with the fast approach of the end of summer. In the blink of an eye, the leaves would turn from green to gold. Frost would gild the long strands of grass, warning of the thick blankets of snow that would cover everything.

Somewhere along the way, he'd begun to imagine his winter nights stretched out in front of a flickering fire as Junjie stroked his fur and he read a book, but those early plans were floating away like dandelion fluff carried off on the morning breeze. Junjie was probably planning to spend the winter at his home in China, where he would now read books to Erik rather than stroking Leo's fur.

A branch snapped, and Leo froze, his eyes narrowing. That noise had not come from Junjie. His ears flattened to his head, and he hissed at the other two vampires who were trekking through the woods with Junjie. He didn't much care for either of them. Mei Lian constantly wanted to pick him up and smoosh her face into his but complained when she found cat hair on her many plushies.

And then there was Chen, who didn't want him in the house or even on their property. That was before he'd revealed his true identity to Junjie. This was the same vampire who seemed to possess a great deal of ire toward Huli. The man was an animal hater. That was all there was to it.

Junjie paused and turned his head in Leo's direction. "Are you going to follow me all night, or is there a reason for you being here?" he whispered.

Leo rolled his eyes. Of course Junjie knew he was there. Why had he ever thought he could sneak past this man?

He shifted as he jumped from his perch so that booted feet touched the ground close to Junjie. With a smirk, he crossed to the vampire without making a sound. "I thought I'd see what you were up to this evening. I didn't expect it to be wandering through fae-infested woods."

Maybe he was trying to make it sound like they'd just crossed paths, but he'd in fact sneaked into the SUV Junjie had ridden in.

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Judging by Junjie's expression, his nonchalance did not fool the vampire. He likely knew Leo had been in the vehicle the entire time.

"You should have remained behind. It's dangerous," Junjie said.

Leo sidled a step closer. "Are you worried about me?"

The vampire looked away and resumed walking through the woods, stepping over a fallen log. He held the branch of a bush as he passed by it, waiting for Leo to join him so that he wouldn't risk making a noise.

"You know, I have been running circles around the fae for months now with no problems. They can't catch me."

"Have they honestly tried to?"

Leo shrugged one shoulder. Probably not. He was beneath their notice. Until recently, all their focus had been on the humans and the vampires who'd been causing them problems.

"You need to be more careful. I was going to ask for your help, but..."

When Junjie's words drifted off to nothing, Leo hurried a couple of steps ahead of Junjie, forcing the vampire to meet his gaze. "What? What did you want to ask me?"

A frown formed on Junjie's lips, and Leo wanted to kiss it away. This man shouldn't be frowning. He was sparkling starlight and champagne bubbles.

“The fae have been doing more in the woods during the day. We think they’re preparing for another ritual that will expand the woods and destroy more human cities, but we can’t investigate it because of the sun.”

“You need me to spy on the fae,” Leo filled in.

“Mn. We’ve asked Huli and Kai to help, but there’s so much ground to cover.”

“I’ll help you.” The words were out of Leo’s mouth before he could even think to stop them.

When the hell had he ever volunteered for anything?

Fuck, he was pretty sure he’d volunteer to stand before a firing squad if Junjie asked him. As long as it got him to stop frowning.

It also didn’t hurt that the vampire had adopted a kitten into his clan without a single moment of hesitation.

“I’ve changed my mind. This is a bad idea.” Junjie twisted, slipping away from him, but Leo was undaunted. No one could escape him.

He moved quickly and silently, even on human feet, getting in front of Junjie despite the vampire’s smooth efforts to escape him.

“Tell me. What’s wrong?”

Someone cleared their throat, and they turned to see Chen glaring at them from a few yards away. His expression spoke loudly—Quit fucking around.

Junjie sighed, his shoulders slumping. “I don’t want to involve you. The fae are now

targeting shifters and witches. Hunting them. I don't want to give the fae more of a reason to come after you."

Leo grinned as he reached up and brushed some hair off Junjie's shoulder. The vampire had been letting it grow longer so that it was falling below his shoulders and hanging in his eyes. It looked so silky and soft; Leo was dying to run his fingers through it. He hadn't thought too much of it until Yichen had shown up with his long hair hanging down his back. Now he was obsessed with the idea of Junjie growing his hair that long so Leo could wrap his hands in it and cover his face with it.

"Oh, I know all about the fae's efforts to kill shifters. They attacked a dive bar not too far from your place. Declared war on the wolves drinking there."

"What?" Junjie demanded in a harsh whisper. He grabbed Leo's wrist, his touch pleasantly cool compared to the surrounding air. "Were you in there at the time? Are you all right? Were you hurt?"

"Nah. They couldn't get me." Leo pulled his arm up to his face and rubbed his cheek on Junjie's hand. The vampire let out a hiss and released him. His frown turned to a glare of irritation, but Leo didn't miss the bit of relief that rested in his eyes.

"I didn't stay to find out who won that fight," Leo continued, keeping his voice low. "But I have seen the fae stepping up their attacks in town. I don't know about the woods, though. Since they have become more aggressive, the only woods I go into are the ones near your house."

"That is wise," Junjie murmured. Leo tried to steal Junjie's hand back, but the vampire remained elusive, dodging his attempts to cuddle again. "Now that you're here, you should stick close to me."

Leo sucked in a breath and lunged for Junjie, wrapping his arms around the man's



slender waist while resting his chin on Junjie's shoulder. "Amazing! I was thinking the exact same thing."

A growl escaped Junjie, and it was all Leo could do to keep from giggling in his ear. "This wasn't what I had in mind."

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“If I get any closer, we’re going to need to remove some clothes.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Chen hissed as he marched over to them. Freaking spoilsport.

Leo lifted his head from Junjie’s shoulder and grinned at the interloper. “I’m protecting Jun-Jun with my body.”

Chen’s head jerked, and his mouth hung open as if he didn’t quite know how to respond to Leo.

“Chen, this is Leo, the cat shifter who has been visiting us and blessed us with Erik,” Junjie explained with a note of weariness to his tone. Leo was pressing his luck.

“Oh. I...” Chen stopped and shook his head, as if to reorder his thoughts. When he started again, he directed his glare solely at Leo. “We’re tracking the fae. You need to be quiet and help or get out of here.”

“I’ll handle it, Er-ge,”<sup>1</sup> Junjie instructed. “You and Meimei can continue. I’ll catch up.”

The other vampire didn’t appear happy about it, but Chen nodded and walked away, disappearing into the darkness.

“Leo.”

The cat shifter slumped on Junjie. He could hear it in the man’s voice. Junjie was

going to tell him to release him and behave, which didn't sound appealing in the slightest. He'd allowed Junjie to carry him around the manor and cuddle him in his cat form, but this was the first time he'd been able to press against him as a human. This was even better than he'd expected. Why in the world would he ever want to stop? If anything, he was more eager than ever to pull away his clothes and explore his body more thoroughly.

"Just five more minutes," he pleaded, his arms tightening on Junjie's waist while he resettled his chin on Junjie's shoulder.

"No."

"Two."

"No."

"One minute."

"Leo. The fae are killing humans, shifters, and vampires. The little boy you've entrusted to me is in danger because of the fae."

He let out a hefty sigh and loosened his hold on Junjie. Not entirely releasing him, naturally. Relaxing enough to look him in the eye. "That's hitting below the belt, you know that?"

"I have to do what is best for my clan."

"Yeah, yeah." Leo put actual space between him and Junjie and waved a hand at him. "I think I'll tag along for a bit to make sure you don't need my help."

Junjie frowned, but in the end, he nodded. "You may wish to shift into your cat form.

You'll be able to make a quicker and safer escape if there is trouble."

Leo hated to admit that his suggestion was tempting. He didn't have any fighting skills like Junjie and the rest of his clan, but he didn't want the vampire to see him as uselessly a coward. Besides, his senses were almost as strong in this form as they were when he was a cat. Still better than a human's.

"I'm fine. You worry about yourself," Leo chided, motioning for Junjie to continue along the course he'd been taking through the woods.

The vampire didn't seem pleased, but he said nothing else. He turned and headed in the direction Chen had taken. The undergrowth was thick, and the moonlight barely pierced the spaces between the leaves, but Leo had no problem seeing through the heavy gloom. As long as there was even some illumination, his eyes could adjust. While they made very little noise as they picked their way through the brush, he could hear the sounds of small nocturnal animals searching for food. An owl hooted in the distance, but there was nothing in the way of large animals near them. Was it possible that even the fae were chasing away the bigger game thanks to their murderous rampage?

As they traveled, his eyes danced over Junjie's lithe form, taking in the short swords he had strapped to his back. When he'd wrapped himself around the man, he'd also felt a few other hidden blades. The vampire was very well armed and prepared for a fight. He would prefer it if Junjie didn't have to put his life at risk, though.

They walked for about another ten minutes before they met up with Chen and Mei Lian, who were crouched beside an ancient oak tree with broad limbs outstretched in every direction. Mei Lian's whispered sigh reached his ears as soon as she spotted them, and they both stood.

"About time," she grumbled.

“Have you spotted anything?” Junjie inquired, ignoring her complaint.

Chen frowned and dusted some dirt off the knees of his jeans. “Nothing. Mei Lian was checking our position on the map. We’ve covered the area that the Variks thought we might find some activity. I was about to check in with the other team.”

“Other team?” Leo asked as he edged closer to Junjie. It was tempting to put an arm on his waist and his head on Junjie’s shoulder, but there was a new tension humming through the vampire’s frame. He was on edge, and Leo did not want to set him off.

“Xiao Dan, Huli, Yichen, and Rei are out surveying another section of these woods,” Junjie explained.

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The teasing and playfulness evaporated as a fiery ball of anger formed in his chest. “What about the dragon? Why isn’t the dragon protecting your team, too?” The dragon had to be the one weapon the Zhang clan had that would make the fae reluctant to attack them.

Junjie tilted his head at him, his thick, arched eyebrows lifting toward his hairline. “He has wrapped himself around most of the buildings of the manor, protecting Erik with the help of Xiang, Moon, and Ming Yu.”

“Okay,” Leo mumbled. Part of him wanted to argue that it might be overkill to have three vampires and a dragon protecting a child when the fae had no reason to go after him. Then again, it was a relief he couldn’t quite explain to know Erik was so safe. It was just that something inside of him also wanted Junjie to be the same level of safe. But there was only one dragon.

That settled it. He’d have to take the place of a dragon.

Leo snorted and nearly choked on the laugh he tried to hold in. The heads of all three vampires swung about and they stared at him as if he’d lost his mind. Leo clapped both hands over his mouth to hold in his giggles.

Take the place of a dragon?

Yep, he’d lost his damn mind.

Junjie put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. He dipped close to look into Leo’s eyes as worry dug lines into his brow. “Are you all right? What happened?”

Leo fell into those deep, warm-brown pools of concern. All his silly laughing was forgotten, and a hundred memories flashed through his mind of all the early mornings they'd spent together. As the sun crept toward the horizon, Junjie would sit on the patio, stroking his fur and whispering stories about other cats that had kept him company during the long, endless centuries. He'd learned to envy every one of those cats as he filled his belly with fish and cream, soaking in that affection. It didn't matter that Junjie saw him as another stray to pass the time with. At that moment, he was Junjie's stray. His one and only.

Now he stood next to him in the dark woods and something in his chest rose and cried out. It wasn't enough to be a stray, grabbing a random meal here and there, stealing affection and giving nothing in return. Peering into those large, perfect eyes, Leo wanted so much more. He wanted to be worthy of Junjie's soft heart and his beautiful soul.

"Leo?" Junjie repeated. This time he licked his lips and Leo's gaze snapped to that slight movement, following it like a cat watching a bird hop along a fence railing. Yes, he wanted to be something more to Junjie, but right now, a taste of those lips sounded best of all.

He lowered his hands from his mouth and reached for the vampire, ready to pull him in close so he could taste that concern and everything else about Junjie.

A soft rustle of leaves not too far from where they were standing drew Leo's eyes from Junjie to a point over his shoulder. His eyes widened as something metallic flashed as it caught a thin ray of moonlight. The warning was still on the tip of his tongue when Junjie moved. As he spun to face their attackers, Junjie shoved Leo behind him with one hand and reached for a sword with the other.

Yet before he could finish turning, two arrows slammed into his chest. Junjie stumbled under the impact, his heavy weight falling onto the cat shifter. Leo grabbed

him and jerked him behind a large tree. He pressed Junjie into the rough bark, his hands trembling uncontrollably, his mouth dry. He'd been about to kiss this man, and he now had two arrows sticking out of him. One of them was far too close to his heart.

"Leo. Leo, look at me." Junjie's firm voice jolted Leo's eyes up to his face. His expression was tight and pained, but his words were steady. "I won't die." The vampire punctuated this statement by pulling one arrow from his abdomen.

Leo lunged forward, covering the open wound with both hands to staunch the bleeding. "But?—"

"I won't die," Junjie repeated and pulled out the second arrow. He tossed it aside with a curl of his upper lip. "But I need to get to my clan to help them. Shift to a cat. It'll be easier to escape that way."

"I want to help," he choked out.

"Get out of here!" Chen shouted. His long sword flashed through the night, cutting down elves and blocking arrows with ease. "You're a distraction."

Chen's words sliced him to the bone, but it was Junjie's lack of argument that was the fatal blow.

"Run while we take care of them," Junjie ordered.

He darted into the fray even as blood soaked into his shirt. Each fist clenched a sword as he fought, but he turned them into silver blurs, slashing through one elf after another.

Mei Lian was just as impressive with her spear. She could make it strike with the



speed of a cobra and zip back again. No one could get close to her.

Leo shifted into his cat form and darted up a tree, but he didn't leave the scene. His eyes were glued to Junjie while indecision tried to strangle him. He possessed none of the same fighting skills as the vampires, but he wasn't worthless like Chen seemed to think. Cat shifters had more than their fair share of secrets, but once those secrets got out, all their advantages disappeared.

Yet, Junjie needed him.

Maybe not in a fight, but he needed him to not be useless.

Little Erik needed him to not be useless.

When the kitten grew up and Junjie told him stories about other cat shifters, what would Junjie say? That the only cat shifter he ever knew was a selfish, lazy flirt and coward.

A tiny nagging voice whispered, What did it matter? You pawned the kid off on him. Who cares what he or the kid thought? They're nobodies.

Leo dug his claws into the bark and hissed at himself. Junjie was not a nobody. How could someone who looked at him like that be a nobody? He took in a kid his own kind didn't want!

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No. Junjie was special. He needed to be protected at all costs.

Leo jumped from his perch and crept through the brush toward one archer hanging to the rear of the group.

Without a plan in his head, Leo shifted into his human form behind the elf and picked up a sturdy log. He hefted it, thinking he would bash the elf on the head, but he wasn't as stealthy as he thought.

The archer spun as he brought the branch down, blocking it with his bow. The creature with the sharp features and cold green eyes sneered at him. "Stupid human. Really thought you could sneak up on me?"

With his left hand, the elf palmed a dagger from his waist and slashed at Leo's stomach. Leo's heart surged into his throat as he jumped away. He swung the branch like a baseball bat at the elf's head, hoping to keep some distance between them as he scoured his brain for another plan.

Run? No, dagger in the back.

Shift and run? Nope. Too close. Elf could still catch him.

Beat him with the log? Not likely.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. He was still useless. He wanted to help Junjie, but he still needed the vampire to save him.

The elf slashed at him again and again. Each time Leo dodged or blocked the blade with the branch until the damn thing snapped.

A horrible laugh rose from the elf, but it was cut off, changing to a thick, wet gurgle. His body lurched and bowed forward. Hot blood sprayed across Leo's face. He looked down to find the point of a sword sticking out of the elf's chest. His head snapped up to see Junjie straightening after throwing the sword into the elf's back.

Junjie had saved him.

1 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)

## Chapter 9

### Zhang Junjie

"Itold you to leave!" Junjie raced across the short distance that separated them and seized Leo's tense shoulders. The cat's face was pale and splattered with blood from the elf, but he appeared fine otherwise.

"I-I-I wanted to help," Leo stammered, his eyes blown wide. It was the first time he'd ever seen Leo so shaken and out of sorts.

Junjie lifted a hand and wiped the blood from Leo's cheeks and nose the best he could. "I appreciate that, but you could have been killed."

"I'm not useless," Leo snapped, knocking Junjie's hand aside.

Junjie froze for a breath and stared at Leo. "I've never thought that about you."

“Hey!” Chen snapped. “You don’t want to be useless?” Both of them turned to see Chen and Mei Lian standing over dead elves. “Help him to the car. He’s lost too much blood. We’ll check the dead for clues.”

“Awww! This job sucks!” Meimei whined, but he barely noticed because Leo had jumped back to life.

The cat shifter gripped his arm and pulled it across his shoulder while wrapping his own arm around Junjie’s waist. The other efforts to be this close had been flirty and silly. This time, Leo radiated fear and concern.

“How do you feel? Can you walk?”

“It’s not that bad. I—” Junjie’s words fell off sharply as he gaped at the front of his shirt. Blood soaked it completely. His blood. He peeled it from his skin to find that the arrow wounds had closed but were still in the thin and tender stage. If he wasn’t careful, they would tear open with little effort.

“Let’s get you to the car before someone notices these guys are missing,” Leo prodded.

Junjie released his shirt and pulled his sword from the dead elf who’d tried to kill Leo. “I should be okay to walk on my own.”

Except his legs immediately called him a liar when they buckled on the first step. His head swam, but it cleared as Leo tightened his hold on his waist.

“How about I help you for a bit?”

The walk was painfully slow and awkward. Not because of the two arrow wounds, but rather, thanks to his outburst. He hadn’t expected to look up and see Leo facing

an elf. His brain had shut down and panic had swept through him. What right did he have to be shouting at that man? None.

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And now he was depending on Leo's support to get to the SUV, the fiery bite of bloodlust chewing on his stomach and tendons.

"Um...I'm sorry for shouting at you," Junjie began. The awkward meter shot higher, and he cringed at himself. Could someone stake him now?

"No. It's okay. Um...thanks for saving my life."

At least he wasn't the only one lost in the land of awkward.

"You're welcome." The hand he had resting on Leo's shoulder tightened as he stepped over a fallen log. His limbs felt weighed down, and Leo's racing heart beat a hypnotic song in his ear. Since his scare with the elf, it was slowing into a nice steady rhythm. The scent of the elf's blood was masking the shifter's rich scent, but he knew if he pressed his nose to Leo's throat it would come in perfectly.

No!

No biting the shifter. It was wrong.

The second Chen and Meimei joined them, he could take a nip off them to stave off the worst of the bloodlust. Later, he'd be able to hunt for a proper meal.

Someone who didn't know him. A faceless person who wouldn't remember their encounter.

Just the thought of it soured his stomach.

Why would he want a stranger when sexy Leo had been flirting with him only minutes ago?

No. It was wrong.

His brain couldn't remember why it was wrong, but it was. He needed to think about something else.

"I thought you left," Junjie said, snapping the silence that had stretched and twisted between them. "Why did you come back?"

"I didn't want you to think I was some useless coward."

Junjie stopped sharply and partially turned so he could better meet Leo's eyes. "I have never thought you were a coward. It would not have been cowardly to run. The elves we've encountered are soldiers, trained in weapons and fighting. All the members of my clan have over two thousand years of experience in combat. That's why we fight. I would never expect the same of someone who does not have formal training."

"But I'm useless. I dumped that kid on you without even asking." Leo ripped his eyes away, yet Junjie caught his chin and turned his face to meet his gaze.

"Leo, that doesn't make you useless. You were putting the needs of that child first. Yes, you should have asked me prior to taking me to Erik, but I understood your fear that I wouldn't take him in."

The cat shifter tossed up his one free hand and gave Junjie a nudge to get them moving. "My life is a mess, and I like it that way. I come and go as I please. I work when I want to work. Nothing tying me down or complicating my life. It's the way I want it, but I know that's not the kind of life you put a kid like Erik in. He's lost his

parents. He needs a lot of love, stability, and support so that he can have a chance at growing up into a somewhat functioning human being. There was no way he was going to find any of that in my life.”

Junjie nodded. He hid his growing smile behind a grimace as they started up a steep hill. “So rather than force this kid into your life where you’d both be unhappy, you found a family in which he had a chance of getting everything he needed.”

“Of course! I mean, look at your clan. You’ve been together forever and supported each other through everything. You have discipline and keep a regular schedule. From some things you’ve said, it sounds like you’ve trained and raised other kids, so having Erik around won’t be too much of a shock for you. I thought...” Leo’s voice drifted off and he sighed. “I thought he’d be happy there, and you’d eventually forgive me for forcing him on you.”

“You know, you didn’t force anyone to do anything. We could have walked away.”

Leo gave Junjie such a disbelieving glare that Junjie had to clear his throat and brush his nose, trying to hide his burning cheeks before he continued.

“We could have,” he pressed, a little quieter.

“Yeah, you could have, but I think I know you well enough after the past few months to understand that the chances of that were pretty fucking slim.”

“You’re probably right. But that’s not the point. You made a hard decision. I think most people would have attempted to take Erik in out of feelings of guilt or responsibility, regardless of whether it was the best decision for him. You examined the situation, understood that you were not the best for him, and found someone else who was. My clan and I are honored that you chose us.”



Leo huffed out a soft, breathy laugh. “You’re crazy.”

“Maybe, but we adore him. He’s so smart and sweet. I’ve never known a child who enjoyed being cuddled so much. Did you know one of his favorite things is to crawl into Chen’s lap in the evenings and have Chen read to him?”

The cat’s eyes looked as if they were going to pop right out of his head. “Chen? That Chen?” he demanded, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder in the direction they’d come from.

“That Chen.” Junjie lowered his voice to a whisper. “I think that’s part of the reason he’s so grumpy tonight. We had to leave prior to story time. When we return, Erik will be down for his nap.”

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“I don’t believe it.”

Junjie smiled at his companion. “Chen has a magnificent voice for telling stories. He’s had a lot of experience with little ones. He was with the clan for several years prior to my arrival, and he helped with training and getting the youngest new disciples adjusted to their new homes. Shifu and Xiao Dan had a way of feeling like a second father, but it was Chen who was great at taking on the role of older brother that protected everyone. Made them feel like they belonged.”

Leo touched his fingers to his temple. “My head is spinning. I can’t see it. Chen is an asshole.”

A snort escaped Junjie, and he tried to cover it up by clearing his throat. “I never said that he couldn’t be that too. It’s just that he’s a natural with making kids feel at home in the clan.”

“Fine. I guess it’s good to know that he’s not scaring the crap out of Erik.”

“You know...” Junjie drawled. “Even if you’re not taking on the role of caretaker for Erik, that doesn’t mean you can’t visit him. There are a lot of things that he can learn from you. Things that we can’t teach him.” He tipped his head to the side so that he could see Leo’s face. “I understand that you probably don’t want to share all your shifter secrets with us, but I worry about him feeling lost and frustrated as he gets older. He needs to understand himself and his kind if he’s going to be happy.”

The cat shifter chewed on his bottom lip for a moment before giving a small nod. “You’re right. I know it. I...I feel guilty because I couldn’t be enough for him.”

Junjie squeezed Leo's shoulder. "Maybe the job fate had planned for you was simply bringing him to me. Maybe your job is to help me prepare him for the life head of him. My shifu liked to say that life has many paths laid out ahead of us. There isn't only one that we must set our feet to. I ended up at one of the greatest martial arts sects in all of ancient China, but that doesn't mean that my only path was to be a great warrior. Chen is a great fighter, but he is an even better strategist. I am a strong fighter, but I am an even better healer and counselor to my clan. Ming Yu is a talented fighter, but her heart lies in being a caretaker."

This time, it was Leo's turn to tip his head toward Junjie and squint at him as if he were attempting to peer beneath all the layers to read what was written on his soul. "You don't actually enjoy the fighting and combat, do you?"

"What? Of course I do!" Junjie gasped.

"No, you don't," Chen chimed in behind them, making Junjie and Leo jump.

Junjie's head whipped around, and he almost knocked his forehead into Leo's in his rush to see that Chen and Mei Lian had caught up.

"I do!" he repeated.

"No, you don't," Meimei argued. "Everyone knows it. You're good at it, but you don't enjoy it like the rest of us do. The only thing you like is fighting with Xiang, because he's an annoying asshole and you like making him eat his words."

"We all enjoy that," Chen muttered as he came to walk on the other side of Junjie. "How are you feeling? Are you still bleeding?"

Junjie shook his head, glad to be moving on from his supposed dislike of combat and fighting. "The bleeding stopped when we started for the car. I'm fine. I..." He

stopped and swallowed hard, not wanting to continue when Leo could hear him. He didn't want to make the shifter feel uncomfortable.

"What's wrong?" Leo demanded. He halted and reached for Junjie's shirt as if he meant to pull it up and inspect the wounds on his chest.

"No, it's fine," he said, snagging his hand to stop him.

"You need to feed," Chen announced with all the tact he'd come to expect from the vampire. It was a wonder that Moon hadn't tried to strangle his mate long before now.

"Yes," he hissed at Chen. With a look, he attempted to convince Chen to keep his mouth shut, but the vampire was too dense to read the nonverbal signals he was being sent or he didn't care. Either was possible.

"Oh!" Leo released his shirt like it had caught fire in his hand. "Um. Sorry."

"There's nothing for you to apologize for."

Thankfully, the SUV they'd parked at the side of the rutted and broken road came into view and appeared to be untouched. Mei Lian jogged ahead with her spear clenched in one fist as she checked over the vehicle.

"I don't need much. Enough to stave off the craving and clear my head," Junjie continued. "Once we are at the manor, I'll shower and go hunt for a meal."

Instead of offering his blood to help Junjie, Chen frowned. "Do you think you can wait until we reach the manor?"

Junjie's heart stumbled as he listened to Chen's words. "I...I guess. What's wrong?"

“We found some interesting things on the elves we can’t make sense of. We need to get them to Rei. Mei Lian texted the other team to report that we are heading home, but she hasn’t received a reply from them.” Chen hesitated, his lips parted as if he had more to say, but the words weren’t coming out.

“What?”

“More fae are close by,” Leo finished for him.

“You can hear them?” Junjie asked.

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“Nope. Just an uncomfortable tingling sensation. Think of it as a cat’s sixth sense. It’s never steered me wrong. And right now, it’s saying that we’re not out of danger.” Leo leaned forward so he could look at Chen on the other side of Junjie. “Can he feed from me? That way, you and Mei Lian remain at full strength if we run into trouble?”

“What? I can’t do that!” Junjie wheezed in horror even as a thrill of excitement pulsed within him. While part of him might be against the idea of feeding from Leo, most of him was completely on board with the idea. He might have even allowed himself a fantasy or two featuring a very naked Leo underneath him as he sank his fangs deep inside of him.

But that was a fantasy!

This was real life.

Friends didn’t bite friends. They weren’t food.

Family was different. His clan mates had shared their blood with each other frequently, usually as a stop-gap measure until they could hunt.

“It’s not a good idea,” Chen murmured.

That wasn’t a no.

“Neither is him feeding from you or Mei Lian, leaving one of you weaker when you might be needed in a fight. We all know I’m not good in a fight, so I can afford to lose a bit. Like a pint, right?” Leo turned to look at Junjie, his smile crooked and

nervous. “You wouldn’t need more than that, right?”

“I wouldn’t dare to take even that much. I won’t take a drop.”

“But feeding from me now means that there are three vampires at full strength to take on the fae instead of two.”

An irritated groan rose from Mei Lian. “The car is good. Chen drives and I got shotgun. Jun-Jun is in the back with Leo, taking a quick bite so that I’m not the only one fighting the fae if they come after us.” Junjie started to argue with her, but he stopped when she pointed her spear at him. “He’s offering. Take it.”

Okay, she had a good point.

With a sigh, Junjie nodded and allowed Leo to help him into the SUV. The rest of them climbed in, and Chen got them the hell out of there with a spray of gravel and dirt from the tires.

They were on the road for a couple of minutes when Leo touched his clenched fist and grinned at him. “How do you want to do this?”

Junjie rubbed a trembling hand across his lips. His fangs were already sliding down into place from a mix of hunger and the promise of a hot meal waiting to be taken. “Give me your wrist. I’ll take a tiny bit from there or maybe the inside of your elbow. It won’t take more than a minute. I’ll try to make it fast.”

“Really?” Leo said in a whine.

“What’s wrong?”

Leo gave a single shoulder shrug while hanging his head. “It’s not very sexy or

romantic that way.”

It wasn't easy to ignore the snickering from the front seat, but Junjie pushed on. “I don't understand. I didn't think you wanted to do this. You seemed nervous a minute ago.”

“I was. A minute ago. But I've had time to think about it, and all the vampire movies I've watched are so sexy the way the vampire holds his victim and kisses along their neck before biting them. Besides, it's not like the mated members of your clan are all that quiet. You don't need a cat's hearing to pick up on Moon shouting, ‘Bite me! Bite me! Bite me, my sexy master!’ at the top of his lungs every morning.”

“Enough!” Chen roared, but no one paid attention to him. Mei Lian was laughing so hard, she was choking on air. If she hadn't been wearing a seat belt, she would have fallen to the floor. Junjie buried his flaming cheeks in his hands. Only Leo would have the balls to say something like that. They'd be lucky if Chen didn't pull the car over and skin Leo alive.

“I'm just saying that if I'm going to be a blood donor, it can at least be fun. I want you to bite my neck.”

Junjie lowered his hands enough to see Leo stretch out his neck and tap a prominent vein, begging for his fangs. If hunger wasn't gnawing on the remains of his brain, he would have denied Leo's request and refused to feed until they reached the manor.

But the blood loss from the damned fae arrows had left him hungrier than he'd felt in a long time. He wanted to feed, and snatching up some innocent human wouldn't cut it. Right now, he wanted to feast on Leo.

“Fine,” Junjie growled. He'd pushed him to his limit with this mix of temptation and painful need. He pressed the button on Leo's seat belt and freed him. The cat shifter



was still shrugging the strap from across his body when Junjie grabbed his arm and pulled him into his lap.

“Whoa!” Leo gasped, his hand pressing against Junjie’s shoulder to steady himself at this sudden change in the seating arrangement.

“I hope you’re not having second thoughts, because we’re now past that point,” Junjie warned.

“No, I...” Leo exhaled, and the words fell away as he seemed to lose his train of thought the moment Junjie shoved his hand into Leo’s hair, cradling the back of his head. With so little effort, he turned and tilted the cat shifter’s head just right, giving him access to the sweet spot as Leo stiffened in his lap and clawed at the seat behind Junjie.

The rest of the SUV and its occupants disappeared as Junjie buried his face in Leo’s neck at long last and breathed in his scent. As he’d expected, below the smell of elf blood was the rich, full aroma of Leo’s blood as it rushed through his veins. It mixed with his musky and soft scent. Nothing could have stopped Junjie from licking a line up his throat, pausing ever so slightly over that throbbing vein before continuing up to his ear.

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A tiny whimper broke from Leo and the hand that was trying to hold on to the seat slipped to Junjie's shoulder. Fingers dug into his muscles, egging him on. Withdrawing his tongue, he brushed his fangs across that tender pulse point while exhaling across the damp flesh.

"Fuck, Jun-Jun. Now you're just being evil," Leo moaned.

"Maybe a little. I'll try to be quick."

He struck as Leo started to speak, but the words stopped after the first syllable. His fangs sank deep, piercing the vein. A gush of hot blood hit his mouth and flowed down his throat. He squeezed his eyes shut and tightened his arms around Leo, pulling him in even closer as the most delicious blood he'd ever tasted washed across his tongue. The heat of him was incredible. It was like holding the sun in his arms as warmth and vitality bathed every one of his organs.

A groan crawled up Leo's throat and his hand slid along the front of his damp shirt. It was itchy and gross and he very much wanted to be naked with this cat. To bite all the fun places and make Leo writhe beneath him. Make him beg for everything Junjie could do to him.

"Junjie?" Chen called out. "Are you still drinking from him?"

Junjie grunted and a tiny noise left Leo as Junjie slipped a hand between them to caress his soft belly. The cat did say he gave the best belly rubs.

"You really gotta ask?" Mei Lian mocked.

“Junjie! You said you only needed a small amount. Release him.”

“No. Tastes good.” Junjie’s voice was muffled as he kept his lips on Leo’s throat.

“You’re going to hurt him if you don’t,” Meimei warned, which helped to penetrate the intense fog of pleasure clouding his thoughts.

“I’m good with him taking everything,” Leo slurred.

Mentally sighing, Junjie ran his tongue over the puncture marks several times until they sealed. He continued to lap at Leo’s neck just because he liked the taste of him.

Junjie dropped his head on the headrest and licked his lips, his eyes falling shut as he savored the very last taste of Leo. He was more than two thousand years old, and he’d spent most of his long existence as a vampire. He’d feasted on countless blood donors, but he couldn’t remember a time when anyone’s blood had tasted as amazing as Leo’s. Everything in him demanded that he keep drinking, but he would never do anything to harm the man still sitting in his lap.

“You okay?” Leo inquired.

His eyes opened so slowly and a grin spread across his lips. “I’m very okay now.”

“Holy shit!” Leo threw back his head as laughter exploded from him. “You look like you’re drunk.”

“What? I am so very not drunk,” he declared, which made Leo laugh harder.

“I don’t even know what you said. Half of that was in Chinese.”

Junjie tried to frown at him, but it felt like his lips weren’t obeying him. Now that he

thought about it, everything was feeling very relaxed. Even a bit swimmy. But he couldn't be drunk. It wasn't possible for a vampire to get drunk on someone's blood.

"Leo, move! Let me see him," Mei Lian commanded.

Yet, the second Leo attempted to shift out of his lap, Junjie's arms clamped around him, locking him in place. "No! Mine!" Junjie grunted. Pulling Leo in closer, he rested his head against the shifter's shoulder. "Hey, Er-ge?"

"Yes? Are you feeling sick?"

"Do you remember that time we found those six jars of plum wine buried in the western field and we stayed up all night drinking them? This feels like that."

"Ah," Chen said, and Junjie closed his eyes, content to listen to the steady pounding of Leo's heart.

"What's 'ah'? Is he drunk? Did Leo's blood make him sick?" Mei Lian demanded.

"No, he's not drunk. He's completely wasted."

Chen's words sounded right, but Junjie couldn't make himself care. Everything was feeling very nice right now, and he couldn't remember the last time things had felt quite this wonderful. Maybe it was that night on the hill under the silvery moonlight. Chen and Xiao Dan had been there as they'd opened jar after jar of plum wine and emptied them down their throats. They hadn't been vampires yet, Shifu had still been alive, and the world had been stretched out in front of them full of possibilities.

A warm hand cupped his cheek, and he opened his eyes to see Leo staring at him. His lips were smiling, but there was worry in his gaze.

“Did I hurt you?” Junjie asked.

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“Not a bit. Are you sure you’re okay? I’d heard rumors that shifter blood packs an extra punch for vampires, but I guess I didn’t believe it until now.”

“A very good punch,” Junjie agreed with a nod. “I want to bite you again.”

“I think it might be a good idea if we wait a little while before you get any more nibbles.”

Junjie’s grin grew even wider, and he ran the tip of his tongue over one of his fangs. “Want to bite you again.”

“Do you only bite? Or do you know how to kiss, too?” Leo purred.

“Hey! No seducing him while he’s drunk!” Chen shouted from the driver’s seat.

“I like biting and kissing,” Junjie said, ignoring Chen completely as he tipped his lips up toward Leo’s.

His eyes fell shut at the first brush of tender flesh against his lips. The soft heat mixed with the gentlest pressure to sweep him away. It wasn’t the kind of kiss he’d expected from the flirty cat, and yet it was utterly perfect in every way. He wanted it to go on. For their lips to part and their tongues to explore their mouths. He wanted to taste Leo’s moans and feel their bodies press together as the kiss grew deeper.

The only problem was...he passed out.

Leo St. George

The fae never attacked them on the way to the manor.

Of course, with Junjie passing out after becoming intoxicated on his blood, Chen felt free to make it very clear that Leo was unwanted.

Not that Leo felt insulted in the slightest.

He would have been more upset if Chen hadn't gotten fussy about his shameless flirting with Junjie, not to mention kissing a man who didn't have his full faculties about him.

So, he left the manor only to return day after day to see Junjie. His one problem was that his vampire was now avoiding him.

Junjie had stopped bringing Erik out into the garden to feed the fish and play among the trees, which seemed very wrong for Erik and the fish.

He stopped by in the afternoon to discover that Xiang and Kai had taken over the job. Erik's schedule had shifted to include a midday wander through the backyard and fish feeding.

Yep, Junjie was avoiding him.

That would not last.

While Leo didn't think he could sneak past a dragon, he believed Kai was a troublemaker and romantic at heart. Kai glanced in his direction when Leo crept through the flowers, but the sneaky dragon said nothing to give away his presence. He even helped to distract his mate with the child as Leo opened the rear door a crack

and squeezed his slender body inside.

On silent cat paws, he padded through the house where all the good little vampires and one elf were sleeping. He hurried straight to Junjie's room, where he was planning to curl up on the foot of Junjie's bed and nap until the vampire woke for the evening.

But he was in luck. Junjie was awake, and by the sound of the running water, in the shower.

Leo slipped into the room and shifted into his human form so that he could close and lock the door behind him. It was so very tempting to appear naked on Junjie's bed once again, but he was afraid that such a move would shut down any attempts to talk to Junjie before they'd begun.

Junjie exited his bathroom with a thick white towel wrapped around his waist. He'd dried the water from his pale skin, but drops fell from his hair to dot his chest and shoulders. The poor vampire gasped upon finding him in his private chambers and lurched back, only to have his foot catch on one of Erik's toys. As he was falling, Leo lunged forward and caught him by the waist while Junjie grabbed his shoulders.

"What are you doing here?" Junjie demanded.

"Surprise!" Leo giggled.

"No surprise. You shouldn't be here. Did Xiang and Kai let you in?"

"Not technically." Leo grimaced, closing one eye. "Kai might have looked the other way as I sneaked past him and Xiang with Erik." He opened his eye and let his gaze travel over all the handsome muscles in front of him. "You look to be in good health. Nothing wrong?"



Junjie cleared his throat and released Leo. He tried to take a step away to put some space between them, but Leo took an answering step forward, keeping them close and the empty air charged with something that tingled along his skin.

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“No. I’m fine. Everything is fine.”

“Ah. So, you’re avoiding me?”

“What? No. Of course not. Why would I be avoiding you?”

It was becoming almost impossible to not laugh directly in Junjie’s face. The vampire was talking faster, and his pitch was inching higher with every word.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Leo drawled, taking a step closer to Junjie. The vampire backpedaled, bumping into a low, long dresser. “Maybe it’s because you held me in your arms, licked my neck, and drank my blood like it was the finest wine you’d ever tasted. And when you were drunk on my amazing blood, we kissed.”

“For that, I most sincerely apologize. I should never have taken such liberties.”

“You took nothing that wasn’t freely offered.” He took another step closer, his gaze locked on those perfect lips as they trembled inches from his own. “And I am still offering to kiss you senseless.”

Junjie slipped past him and darted across the room, holding up his hands to keep Leo at bay. “We shouldn’t have kissed. I regret that I pushed things so far while I was not in my right mind. It was wrong of me. Of us.”

Leo’s smile never wavered. It wasn’t the first time someone had said they’d regretted kissing him, and Bastet knew Junjie wouldn’t be the last. The only difference was that Leo very much wanted to convince the vampire that the kiss wasn’t an

unfortunate decision and that they should do it far more frequently.

He slowly crossed the room toward Junjie and pointed a finger at his chest. “It looks like you’ve completely healed from your injury.”

Junjie glanced where he’d indicated. There was only flawless pale skin stretched across the hard muscles of his chest. He was exquisite, as if a marble statue had come alive and escaped the Louvre to wander through Connecticut on holiday.

“Oh. Yes. It’s very rare for a vampire to be scarred or have trouble healing from an injury. The wounds healed within an hour.” Junjie lowered his hands and narrowed his eyes on Leo. “What about cat shifters? Can you heal quickly from an injury?”

One corner of Leo’s mouth tilted upward into a smirk. “Are you planning to injure me?”

Junjie glared at him, his perfect lips flattening into a hard, unamused line.

A huffed laugh escaped Leo. “Yes, we are fast healers. Like wolf shifters, I believe. Though I never tried to do serious harm to a wolf shifter to test that theory. I don’t think we’re as fast at healing as vampires.”

“We’re not testing that theory either. It’s good to know. For Erik’s sake.”

That last bit felt tacked on, but Leo kept that thought to himself.

“I stopped by because I hoped we could talk. I was wondering if you’d learned anything interesting about the fae after our walk in the woods. Chen shooed me away when we arrived here.” Leo turned on his heel and wandered in a slow circle around the room, his hands behind his back. “Plus, someone has been avoiding me.”

“I haven’t been avoiding you.”

Leo swung about and pinned Junjie with a pointed stare. “You stopped taking Erik out for his evening walks and fish feeding.”

“We’ve switched up the schedule so I could get more sleep. Erik is getting up in the afternoons and spending a few hours with Xiang and Kai while I sleep. I take him in the late afternoon through the evening hours. Xiang and Kai enjoy taking him to feed the fish.”

“Uh-huh,” Leo drawled. It was a good explanation, and he couldn’t argue with Junjie’s need for sleep. Leo had suspected that he’d been pushing himself too hard to accommodate the little boy. But it was also a good way to avoid what Junjie would likely describe as an awkward conversation. “Well, I was just stopping by to get some fae information. You also said that you wanted me to share some info on my kind for Erik, but if you don’t have time?—”

“No! I never said that. I have time. I...” Junjie glanced at himself, his eyes widening as if he suddenly remembered that he’d been talking to Leo all this time while wearing only a towel.

Leo leaped across the room and landed on the bed with a bounce. He laid across it with his feet still on the floor and his head propped up on his hand. “I’m happy to wait while you get dressed.”

Junjie rolled his eyes as he marched over, grabbed Leo’s arm, and hauled him to his feet. “I was thinking you could go spend time with Erik while I get dressed. I’ll join you in a couple of minutes.”

“Are you sure?” Leo inquired as Junjie marched him to the door. “I could help you dress. I’d hate for you to suffer a relapse from your injury. It would be no trouble at

all.”

“Out, cat,” Junjie ordered as he shoved him into the hall and shut the door behind him. He might have been put out, but Leo could have sworn he heard a tiny bit of mirth in Junjie’s tone.

Besides, he was still in the house with a promise to talk more later. That was better than he’d been expecting when he’d gone to find Junjie. He’d been sure the vampire would toss him out with the command to never return.

Humming to himself, Leo wandered through the winding hallways until he located Erik sitting with Xiang and Kai in a parlor of sorts that opened into a courtyard garden with more elegant statues and a smaller pond. A large, retractable awning extended to block the sunlight so any of the other vampires could join them without worrying. The boy sat on the ground with a selection of toys. A bowl rested off to the side with some sliced up fruit from what was likely his afternoon snack.

Erik caught sight of him first and let out a squeal that shot straight into Leo’s heart. He had a bright-red ball in one hand and held it out to him as if he were offering to play. That child had no right looking so happy to see him. Not after he’d failed him as one of his own kind.

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You did what was best for him.

But instead of Leo's chastising and belittling voice, those words came to him in Junjie's voice. A soothing balm that swept across his soul.

Was that voice wrong?

It didn't seem like it. Erik was happy, dressed in nice new clothes, and well fed. Every time he saw the kid, new older brothers, uncles, and aunties surrounded him. No, it was easy to see that Erik was in the best possible place for him following the death of his parents.

"What are you doing here, cat?" Xiang growled.

"I stopped by for a visit. Jun-Jun suggested I spend some time with Erik while he finishes getting dressed," Leo explained with a smirk. Kai grinned while Xiang scowled. That answered the question of who was likely to help him remain close to Junjie if the vampire tried to dodge him again.

Dragon, good.

Annoying vampire brother, bad.

Before Xiang could say anything else, Leo shifted into his cat form and hopped over the vampire seated on the ground next to Erik. The little boy laughed and clapped his hands. Leo walked close and rubbed his long body against Erik's arm and across his back. Erik reached out and patted him on the head, with surprising gentleness for one

so young, and rubbed his soft fur.

Leo flopped on the ground next to one of his legs and rolled onto his back, exposing his belly and batting at Erik's hands, careful to keep his claws retracted so there were no accidents. The boy's giggles filled the garden courtyard as they played.

"You know, it looks like you've gotten fatter since you first started coming here," Xiang observed. Leo's ear pinned to his head as he glared at the vampire and hissed. "Is that your winter fur coming in, or are you eating too well?"

Leo debated whether to claw his eyes out, but it wasn't necessary. Junjie walked up behind Xiang and smacked him on the head.

"Leo hasn't gained a single ounce. He's perfect exactly as he is."

A ridiculously loud purr erupted from Leo's throat. It would have been embarrassing if Leo had known how to feel even an ounce of shame when it came to his attraction to Junjie.

The vampire picked up a cushion from inside the house and carried it to a deeply shaded area near Erik and sat. The child forgot all about petting the soft kitty in favor of taking his red ball to Junjie.

Xiang snickered as Leo lifted his head toward Erik when he found that he'd been abandoned so easily. "Doesn't matter who you are. Jun-Jun is the only one who matters to Erik."

Kai poked Xiang in the shoulder and smiled. "Ming Yu is a very close second."

A scoff tripped from Xiang's lips. "Because she's always got something good to eat."

“Mmmm...” Kai hummed. “That is true.” He shifted where he sat, peering into the house. “Do you think she has any more of those special cakes in the pantry?”

“Mooncake season hasn’t even started yet, dragon,” Xiang reminded his mate as he leaned in and placed a kiss on his jaw.

The dragon sighed, his shoulders slumping. “The red-bean ones are always the best. I could feast on those for days.”

“I’m sure you will,” Xiang mumbled.

“I think he was talking about the teacakes that she made for the Variks’ visit,” Junjie supplied as he helped Erik climb into his lap. “I think she has another container of them in the refrigerator. Please don’t devour them all. I promised the one with the flower on top to Erik after his dinner.”

“Well, since you’ve got things under control here, Kai and I are going to raid the kitchen pantry.” Xiang rose to his feet and brushed off his hands. He paused to glare at Leo. “Do you want me to toss the cat over the wall before I go?”

“No, thank you. Leo is going to tell me about his kind and spend some time with Erik.”

“Whatever.” Xiang waved an absent hand at them. He wandered into the house with Kai following behind, whispering things in his ear that Leo really wished he couldn’t hear.

When they were alone, Leo shifted into his human form, wringing another squeal of laughter out of Erik. The boy sat on Junjie’s folded legs and clapped his hands as he stared at Leo as if he were the most wonderful magic-man in all the world.



“Please don’t mind, Xiang,” Junjie said.

Leo snorted. “Or Chen? I don’t think I’ve managed to get on Mei Lian’s or Yichen’s good side either.”

“My clan has learned to be suspicious of outsiders. Over the long years, we’ve met too many who wanted to kill us. And those who didn’t want us dead usually wanted to use our strength and skills for their own dark ends.”

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With a nod, Leo leaped toward the little boy, shifting the second his feet left the ground to land a few inches away from him as a cat. He darted about the yard, up a tree and down again to wring more giggles out of the child. And just maybe show off some of his athleticism to a certain vampire.

“Xiao Dan doesn’t seem too opposed to me,” Leo continued when he changed into a human and sat beside Junjie under the tree.

“Shixiong is more diplomatic and willing to give people the benefit of the doubt, but don’t mistake his politeness for trust,” Junjie warned.

Leo chuckled, joy rising in his chest as Erik climbed out of Junjie’s lap to run over and pick up a blue dump truck. He brought it to Leo and held it in front of his nose, a steady stream of babble, English, and Mandarin pouring out of him in a run-on sentence. It was easily the most he’d ever heard the child say in one go.

“Wow, chatty guy.”

“He’s been talking more and more, recently. Chen and Shijie say it’s a sign that he’s comfortable here.”

“That was my first thought.” He accepted the truck and placed it on the ground. Growling truck noises rumbled up from his throat as he pushed it along the ground. Erik grabbed a handful of pebbles that he dropped in the truck’s bed. They spent some time playing with the truck and a couple of cars before Leo recalled that he’d come over specifically to see Junjie. Not to play with the boy.

He glanced over his shoulder to find a look of such open joy on Junjie's face. His dark eyes twinkled, and his lips drew up in an enormous grin. It was hard to believe this beautiful man could become even more heart-stopping, but it was true. Junjie was the sun when he smiled.

Junjie caught him staring and cleared his throat, his eyes plummeting to his hands in his lap. "Um...the fae. You asked about what we found. Not much, actually. Chen found some papers that he couldn't read, so we brought them to Rei. It turns out they were notes on places they had checked as potential sites for their next ritual. Rei has been working with Marcus to get our maps updated and make some guesses as to where the fae are going to search next."

"Do you think that will get you closer to the leader of the fae?"

Junjie grimaced, twisting his fingers in his lap. "Probably not. Trin has access to an entire army now and ample scouts. He wouldn't go out unless it was necessary. Huli and Kai are focusing their trips into the woods on trying to find where Trin's headquarters are. Rei will try to locate where they will perform the ritual if we can't stop Trin ahead of it."

"I won't be able to get any cat shifters to help, but I could go out searching for this Trin's hideout."

Leo hadn't even finished speaking and Junjie shook his head. "No! It's too dangerous."

"My fighting skills might not be great, but I have some excellent sneaking skills."

Junjie chewed on his bottom lip as he watched Erik. "I will leave that decision up to you, but please, don't go unless you're sure you can do it safely."

Leo leaned closer to Junjie on his elbow and tipped his face up. “Are you saying that you’d be worried about me if something happened?”

“I’m saying that Erik needs you to tell me about his kind so I can help him as he grows.”

Leo rolled his eyes. He didn’t believe that to be the only reason for Junjie’s concern, but he didn’t bother pressing him.

“Since you are here, I would love to talk to you about cat shifters, so I may better help Erik.”

Leo shrugged one shoulder and pushed into an upright position. “Okay, but I think you should also trust in nature taking her course. He’ll figure things out.”

That earned him a new frown. Junjie said a bit sharply, “We’ve recently discovered that cat shifters can see ghosts and the dead realm.”

“Oh. Really?” Leo said, lifting his eyebrows in polite interest as part of him panicked. How the hell had Junjie and his clan figured that out? Erik giggled and Leo’s eyes shot to the boy as he pushed one of his cars after a bug crawling on the ground. Right...that was how.

He looked at Junjie, who was not impressed with his response and was expecting more out of him. Especially since they both knew he was asking these questions for the benefit of the child.

He shoved a hand through his hair and scratched his head, grinning awkwardly at the vampire. “Sorry. Yes. Sort of.”

“Leo...” The heavy sigh that accompanied his name made it clear he was pushing the

limits of Junjie's astounding patience.

"No, I'm sorry. The dead. Yes, we can see ghosts. Not all of them, from my understanding. Usually just the newly dead because they have the most energy." His smile dimmed as he stared at Erik. "I take it the little guy had a scare that you couldn't explain."

"Not quite. Winter Varik frightened him by accident when the vampire came for a meeting. Winter can walk in the dead realm. So far, we've found that only Erik can see him when he's there." Junjie paused and licked his lips. "Jiang Chong can also walk in the dead realm."

"Oh, shi-ooooot!" Leo corrected at the last second. That was big news. It gave them a way to keep an eye out for the bastard. And maybe gave him an extra reason to stick close to the Zhang manor. Erik might be an excellent warning system, but his cries could too easily be mistaken for something else. Leo could at least tell them there was an invading evil vampire lurking in their domain.

"Yes, it was a surprise and offers a small amount of protection."

Leo shifted on the ground so that he could lay his head on Junjie's lap. "Well, you're in luck. I am happy to spend even more time hanging around your place at night to act as an early-warning system against this Jiang Chong asshole."

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Junjie frowned at him, his eyes flicking to Erik before darting back to him. “I wouldn’t want to impose upon your time and safety. If Jiang Chong discovers you can see him, it will make you a target.”

“I’m not worried when I’ve got such a sexy vampire close by to keep me safe.” He grinned and fluttered his eyelashes at Junjie. The vampire’s lips twitched and pinched, as if he were trying so very hard not to laugh at his nonsense.

A heartbeat passed and Junjie shocked him by slowly running his fingers through Leo’s hair, brushing it from his face. Leo held his breath, waiting to see if Junjie would repeat the motion or if it was a one-time thing. After another heart-stopping pause, Junjie continued to stroke his hair, a tiny smile forming on his pale-pink lips like a rose bud unfurling in the morning sunlight.

“The members of the Zhang clan will always protect you whenever you come to visit us,” Junjie murmured.

“I’m only worried about one clan member in particular protecting me.”

“Chen will protect you even if he doesn’t like the idea of it. He understands his duty to protect all of our guests.”

“Oh, ha ha ha. You’re so funny.”

Leo was debating getting up and tickling Junjie when Erik let out a fierce “Rawr!” and flopped on Leo’s chest. Leo’s oof turned into chuckles as he grabbed the boy and lifted him to his face so he could blow raspberries into his neck and cheeks. Erik

giggled and kicked his feet as if he wanted to escape. Yet the second Leo released him, the child stretched out across Leo's chest and closed his eyes, a bright smile on his face.

"Is this a cat shifter thing, too?" Junjie teased.

"Lying on people to get attention? Definitely." Leo lifted his hand and rubbed Erik's back. "When we find someone we like or trust, we'll lounge on them and soak up the attention until we've had enough, then pop up and go about our business."

"And how long does that take?"

"Depends on the person. Sometimes a few minutes." Leo looked up at Junjie and grinned. "You? I don't think I'll ever get enough."

A hint of red tinted Junjie's cheeks, but his hand didn't stop running through his hair. "Shameless flirt."

"I don't know the meaning of the word when it comes to you."

"I'll buy you a dictionary."

Before Leo could cook up a response, Erik shoved off him and wandered over to his trucks as though he'd not stopped for an attention break.

Junjie chuckled. "Apparently, he's had enough." The vampire watched the little boy with an expression of such fondness that Leo's heart squeezed. As if sensing Leo's gaze, Junjie glanced at him and cleared his throat. "Is there anything else you can tell me? I know you're reluctant to share your secrets, but I only wish to help Erik."

Leo's smile disappeared, and he sat up so he could face Junjie. A breeze swept

through the courtyard, carrying with it the rich scent of fading summer and the distant chirp of birds. He threaded a lock of hair behind his ear for something to do with his hands.

“I’m sorry about earlier. It’s just that...you have to understand...” He paused and frowned at the grass in front of him. “There have always been very few cat shifters in the world. The wolf shifters are pretty free with the information about their kind, but they’re almost always found in packs. They’ve got other wolves to rely on to protect their backs if they’re in danger. Cats are always on their own. We live a very solitary life. Solitary hunters. If you get into a fight, you’re on your own. So, our secrets give us an edge. I’m not trying to be cagey or mysterious or even difficult. Once those secrets are out...” Leo let his words drift off and held out his open hands toward Junjie.

“I understand. I promise that anything you tell me, or any member of my clan, will remain a secret within the Zhang clan. We will protect that information with our lives.” Junjie’s handsome face softened. “As Erik grows older, I don’t want him to feel alone or scared. I want him to understand his kind and feel pride in what he is.”

Leo nodded. It came down to whether he trusted Junjie and his clan. That wasn’t a hard question to answer. He’d given them a two-year-old kitten to raise.

“We are skilled hunters,” Leo began with a grin. “We have excellent balance and grace. Erik will still be a clumsy and awkward teenager, though. Most of that grace and balance doesn’t kick in until we’re older, like twenties and thirties. Unless he’s an early shifter. Then he might get some of that at a younger age.”

“Speaking of age, do cat shifters age slower like the wolf shifters?”

“Yes!” Leo leaned in closer to Junjie, tipping his face up to him. “How old do you think I am?”



Junjie jerked back, trying to put some more space between them as he gazed at Leo's face. "Twenty-seven or twenty-eight?"

Leo pulled away, his mouth falling open. "Ouch! I thought I aged slower. I'm twenty-six."

Junjie slapped a hand over his mouth so that Leo couldn't tell if he was horrified or trying to cover up his laugh. "I'm so sorry. I'm a poor judge of human ages based on appearance."

A grunt slipped past Leo's lips. "I guess that makes sense. You all look super young to me, but you've said that you're all more than two thousand years old, right?"

"Correct."

"But how old were you when you became a vampire?"

“Twenty-four.”

Leo whistled. Twenty-four sounded insanely young, but it had also been two thousand years ago. Everyone accomplished big things earlier in life during that long ago time. He would have been married with kids and the lord of an entire manor at that age.

At twenty-six, Leo still felt he was far too young to settle down and be responsible. Getting a regular job seemed like it was too much. He couldn't imagine it.

Thankfully, Erik ran over on his chubby legs with his ball in hand, wanting Leo to play with him. His thoughts drifted away from Junjie's old life to the present day's worries of keeping Erik and his new gege safe. The evening passed in lazy conversation for a few hours before the boy grew fussy.

“I should take him inside for lunch. He'll need to take his nap soon,” Junjie announced as he gathered the grumpy child in his arms with an expert ease.

“Okay. I should mosey on as well. Got things to do,” Leo said, even though it was a complete lie. He didn't have anywhere to be or anything to do. At least, the only thing he wanted to do was hang on Junjie, but space was a good thing.

“Thank you for the information you've given me. I will guard it closely.” Junjie walked into the house but stopped in the doorway and partially turned to Leo. “After our talk today, I'm regretting our kiss much less now.”

“Cool. Cool,” Leo replied with a slight bob of his head.

He held it together until Junjie left the room and disappeared along the hall. He thrust his fists into the air and threw back his head. “Yessss!” he hissed.

That was some damn good progress.

## Chapter 11

### Zhang Junjie

The wind cried out as Junjie sliced the air with his blade. He spun, the sword cutting another arc through the empty space around him as he methodically ran through the training exercises Shixiong had arranged for him. After so many years, it was amazing that Xiao Dan could still think of new techniques and arrangements to keep them from growing bored and complacent.

But tonight, boredom wasn't his primary concern. It was fear and worry that distracted Junjie, forcing him to go through the sequence of moves again and again until they were perfect.

He was stuck on the team who remained at the manor while most of the clan was in the woods searching for Trin's stronghold. He had a feeling his injury during the last trip had earned him a spot on the bench, even though both Xiao Dan and Chen denied it.

It was hard not to feel a bit like a loser, but at least he wasn't worried about Erik. The little boy was inside napping, Ming Yu watching him. Just a few steps away.

Last he'd seen, Moon had crashed on a couch and was snoring loudly. The fledgling vampire had made the mistake of arguing with his mate and master about accompanying him on their next excursion into the woods. In response, Chen had set his lover on a brutal training regimen that had left Moon practically crawling into the

house.

He saw Chen's point. Moon was a new disciple within the Sword of the Heavenly Garden sect. Two thousand years ago, when new disciples were joining, they went through years of training prior to joining dangerous missions or fighting alongside their older students. Moon didn't have the experience to jump into the fray.

One of the key differences, though, was that Moon was twice the age—if not older—of those new disciples. He was an independent young man, accustomed to making responsible decisions for himself and using magic as protection.

Another key difference was that Moon was Chen's mate, and Junjie would bet a million yuan that Chen was letting his fear of something happening to Moon cloud his judgment. This was all going to come to a head soon. Moon would not be content to sit on the sidelines for much longer in the name of needing more training.

As clear as this was to him and pretty much everyone else in the clan, he was keeping his mouth shut. Sticking his nose into Chen's private life was a good way to get his nose broken. This was something for Chen and Moon to figure out.

Junjie's heart went out to Chen, though. As much as his er-ge tried to maintain an aloof and untouchable exterior for the world to see, there was no missing that Chen was soft and very fragile on the inside. Shifu's death had cut a deep wound within him that had never healed. Losing Moon—particularly to Jiang Chong—could very well shatter him.

Not that he was sure he'd be any better if he were lucky enough to gain a mate within his lifetime.

With a grunt, Junjie brought his sword down in front of him and held the position, only to frown at his weapon. His stance felt overextended. That shouldn't be. Not

after so many years.

No, he was distracted.

Not by the clan being in the woods with the fae or even the Moon and Chen dilemma. It was Leo who kept sneaking into his thoughts. He hadn't seen the damn cat in two days. It wasn't the longest he'd gone without seeing Leo, but when they'd last parted ways, it felt like something had shifted between them. Some tiny bond had strengthened. He thought he'd see Leo again much sooner.

And what about the fae? Had they found him? Was he hurt or in danger? He had no idea. Leo hadn't bothered to give him a way to reach him. Of course, Junjie hadn't been smart enough to ask for one, either.

Junjie relaxed his stance, lowered his sword to his side, and sighed. Leo was turning him into an idiot. He couldn't get the cat and his infectious smile out of his head. There were more important things to worry about than whether Leo was going to visit him and Erik.

A cool wind stirred the trees, growing in intensity as if a storm was rolling in. Limbs swayed overhead and birds took flight in search of more sturdy protection from the wind and rain. Would this storm force the clan mates out in the woods to return home early?

A new thought crept into his head as he gazed up at the black clouds rolling across the night sky, blotting out the stars. Was this a natural storm, or had the dragon who controlled rivers and rains called up this storm in reaction to a fight they'd found?

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He reached for his phone in his back pocket. A quick check of the weather app would reveal if this storm had been part of the forecast. However, a strange warning itch crawled up the nape of his neck. Goose bumps broke out across his skin. Something was wrong.

Lunging forward, he planted his left foot and spun, lifting his sword up to where his neck had been only a second earlier. Metal clanged against metal, and Junjie's blood froze in his veins as Jiang Chong stepped out of a rip in the darkness, his sword centimeters away from where Junjie had been standing.

Fear and hatred seized Junjie by the throat and tried to choke him as he stared at the vampire who'd made him and his clan into near-immortal blood-sucking monsters. The heartless creature who'd slaughtered almost all the Zhang clan and the members of the sect he'd deemed unfit to serve him and the emperor. The demon who'd tormented him for years before he'd snapped.

"Hello, my would-be murderer," Jiang Chong growled. With vicious determination, Jiang Chong swung his sword again, nearly taking Junjie's head off as he woke from his shocked paralysis.

Junjie dodged the first swing and blocked the next. A cold sweat broke out across his flesh, chilling him to the bone. How was he supposed to defeat Jiang Chong? The last time they'd succeeded in "killing" him, it had taken the entire clan. This time he was alone, and he was afraid Jiang Chong knew it.

Somewhere behind him, a door opened and Moon's panicked voice rang out. "Something has broken through the protective spells!"

“I noticed,” Junjie grunted between clenched teeth.

“Holy shit! That’s Jiang Chong!”

Junjie didn’t dare take his eyes off Jiang Chong to look at Moon. It was on the tip of his tongue to order Moon to grab Erik and Ming Yu to escape on foot, and call Chen for help, but that could be part of Jiang Chong’s plan to pick them off one by one. Possibly even the fae’s attempt to kidnap some of his clan. No. It was safest in the house.

“Go back inside! Lock yourself in the armory with Erik and Ming Yu. Call Chen!” Junjie ordered.

“But I can help you!”

“No! You are my shidi! You will obey my commands. Protect Erik and Ming Yu!” A clang of his sword crashing into Jiang Chong’s punctuated every sentence.

“Yes, Jun-Jun.” The door slammed shut, and Junjie took a small breath of relief. The three members of his clan in the house were as safe as they could be. All of his attention was now on the evil monster in front of him.

“All alone. No one to save you this time,” Jiang Chong crooned. His long black hair fanned out behind him as he slipped out of reach of Junjie’s sword. “If you weren’t such a coward, though, you could have used your gift and seen my arrival long before it occurred. The rest of your clan could have been here to help you fight me.”

The demented monster’s words had a way of cutting deeper than any sword blade. Pain slashed across his heart, and Junjie retreated when he should have pressed on.

“Whether I use my gift or not, we both know what I see cannot be changed.” Junjie’s

jaw ached as he clenched his teeth. “If I am meant to destroy you today, that is what shall happen.”

Jiang Chong’s answering cackle was like ice picks piercing his ears. “Destroy me? You’ve never beaten me on your own. Always the weak student relying on his brother to carry him. I should have culled you with the others that first night.”

“Culled?” he repeated as the heat of rage burned away the icy bite of fear that had nearly incapacitated him at the appearance of his creator. “Don’t you mean murdered? You think you should have murdered me the same way you killed Cao Zimo? Or how you murdered Ming Tao? And Ruo Xuan? And Hongyi?”

“There’s no point in listing their names. I never bothered to learn any of them. A single glance was all it took to see they were worthless.”

“I don’t say their names for your benefit,” Junjie snarled. He tightened his grip on his sword and his knuckles throbbed, cracking softly. “I say them because they deserve to be remembered by someone. The same way they deserved to live a long life.”

Jiang Chong glided away from the sharp slice of Junjie’s blade, laughing as he moved behind a tree. That horrific sound echoed through the garden and wove between the trees, tainting everything it touched like an insidious poison.

“Sadly, a nobody is the only one who remembers them.”

“I’m not a nobody. I’m the son of Zhang Yuxi, grandson of Zhang Jiawei—one of the great masters of the Sword of the Heavenly Garden sect.”

“You’re a bastard at best, and the Zhang clan has just the word of that whore to go by,” Jiang Chong mocked. “Only the gods know who your true father was.”



Junjie roared, slashing at his old master as the monster preyed on his darkest fears. He didn't ask how the man had come by his secrets. He'd once been the head of the emperor's intelligence department. It made sense that the vampire knew things he shouldn't.

Jiang Chong continued to dodge and block his slashes. The one good thing was that his laughing had stopped as he focused on deflecting and evading.

Blocking out all other worries and thoughts, Junjie turned his full attention on all the skills he'd honed for two thousand years. His silver blade became a blur as it moved through the air, catching and reflecting the moonlight for a heartbeat before slipping into the swirling blackness.

Jiang Chong struggled to keep up. He clenched his teeth into a feral snarl. Sweat dampened his hair at the temples and slid down the sides of his face.

"Bastard," he growled, but the word meant nothing to Junjie as he pursued his maker through the garden.

Just as Junjie got inside his guard and was going to land a crippling blow, Jiang Chong opened a doorway to the dead realm and slipped away.

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“No!” he howled while jumping out of reach so he couldn’t be pulled into the dead realm. “Coward! Don’t run! Face me!”

The doorway remained open and Jiang Chong’s taunting voice drifted out to haunt him.

“If you wish to kill me, you’ll have to come after me.”

“I’m no fool.” There was no escape from the dead realm. In those first years after Jiang Chong had taken over the clan, he’d watched too many of his clan mates disappear into the dead realm, never to return.

“But you’ll come in to stop me from killing your brothers and sisters one by one. Shall I start with Xiao Dan and Chen Bo Cheng? They were the doting gege who always shielded and coddled you. How about that useless fledgling Chen has made? So eager to help you. So eager...to die.”

Junjie gritted his teeth and held back a scream of rage. He couldn’t go in, no matter what Jiang Chong said. It was suicide. He’d never be able to protect his family by falling for Jiang Chong’s tricks.

His creator must have figured that out as well, because the doorway closed and true fear gripped Junjie’s heart, almost stopping it dead. Now he had no way of tracking where Jiang Chong went. The bastard could move soundlessly around him, invisible until the doorway opened, and he struck.

With his fist tightening on his sword, Junjie spun in place, eyes narrowed as he

peered into the darkness. The welcoming glow of the light pouring out the windows squeezed his heart tighter. How easy would it be right now for Jiang Chong to slip past Junjie and enter through one of the many doors? Moon and Ming Yu were no match for that monster. It would be nothing for him to kill Moon, Ming Yu, and little Erik before Junjie even knew he was inside the house.

No, it was best if he kept Jiang Chong outside and occupied with tormenting him. If he was lucky, Moon had reached Chen. The rest of his clan was on its way to help him. Better yet, Kai was in the air at this moment, racing to devour Jiang Chong.

Junjie swallowed against the knot forming in his throat. A bead of sweat trickled along his neck and he tried to reach for the elusive feeling that had warned him the first time of Jiang Chong's presence. He didn't know if he was sensitive to a ripple of magic in the air, a shift in the wind. Something told him that the monster was close, and he had to find that warning signal one more time.

No cricket chirped or frog croaked. Even the wind was still, waiting for Jiang Chong to strike.

Junjie's entire body vibrated with tension as he slowly pivoted to face the house. Was he too late? Had the vampire sneaked around him and entered the manor? Should he chase after him?

Something in the air shifted on his right and Junjie moved to escape Jiang Chong, but this time he was a half breath too slow. Pain ripped through his right arm as the monster's blade sliced deep. Muscles and tendons were cut, and his sword fell from limp fingers. As Junjie spun away, he caught the tumbling blade with his left hand and raised it, blocking Jiang Chong's next blow.

"Too slow, old man," Junjie taunted. "I can kill you with my right hand or my left hand. It makes no difference to me."

Jiang Chong shouted his frustration and hammered wildly at Junjie with his sword. Junjie backpedaled under the onslaught, but he held his own, deflecting every slash.

A great roar rent the heavens, and Junjie's smile returned with a wicked bend. Jiang Chong's pale face turned almost gray and his eyes widened in their sockets. Yes, the dragon had returned home.

"What's wrong, Jiang Chong? Afraid to face a dragon god?" Junjie mocked as lightning flashed across the night sky only to be immediately followed by a crash of thunder. The bright light glinted off white scales as the dragon raced to Zhang manor.

"No!" escaped Jiang Chong in a harsh whisper, and a black doorway opened behind him yet again.

"He's going to devour you whole."

The ground shook, and another roar shattered the night as Kai landed in the garden, uprooting trees and even knocking some tiles off the roof. It didn't matter. His golden eyes locked on the dark slit in the air that Jiang Chong had disappeared into. Kai rushed for the opening, but Jiang Chong closed it before the massive dragon could reach it. Kai clawed at the air and roared, causing Junjie to flinch.

"Thank you," Junjie called out when Kai stopped his frustrated roars and growls.

The dragon huffed and turned its giant head toward him. No matter how many times he saw Kai in his true form, Junjie knew he would never stop being in awe of the creature. It was hard to believe that this magnificent creature could adore Xiang so thoroughly, but he'd seen it with his own eyes.

You're hurt! Kai's voice slipped into Junjie's thoughts as if it were his own.

“I’m healing. It’s nothing serious.”

Sorry I was slow. We encountered many fae, and I was afraid to leave my mate.

“I understand. Can you stay and guard the outside for a while? I need to check on Moon and the others.”

Of course. Xiang and the rest of the clan are returning now.

That was a relief, but a question did pop into his brain. “Why didn’t all of you return with your magic?”

Kai shifted into his human form and grunted as he glared at the mess he’d made. “I wanted to, but Xiang wanted to remain and kill the fae rather than allow them to escape. He also believed seeing my dragon flying would scare some of the fae away if they dared to approach our home. I thought it would be fine, since I was only a couple of minutes away.” His gaze slipped to Junjie’s bleeding arm and his frown deepened. “But I was too slow.”

“You weren’t too slow. It gave me a chance to fight Jiang Chong. If I were a little faster, I might have killed him.”

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Kai hummed and waved one hand at the gardens, using his magic to replant and mend the trees he'd uprooted. Displaced tiles flew from the ground and returned to their home on the roof. "It seems we both must be faster next time."

His sword still gripped in his left hand, Junjie raced to the back door and through the house. Erik's terrified cries echoed through the halls, crushing Junjie's heart. He followed them to the armory. A smile squeezed his heart. Moon had followed his instructions to the letter. The armory was located centrally, with only one entrance and exit. It was the easiest room to defend if Jiang Chong reached them.

"It's me. I'm alone," Junjie called out before he unlocked the door and pulled it open.

Even with the warning, he was still greeted with the point of a sword in his face. Moon stood in front of the door, his face pale but his expression stern. Ming Yu was at the rear of the room, a short sword in one hand and Erik resting in her other arm, tears streaking his bright-red face.

Junjie slipped in through the narrow crack in the doors and closed them behind him. "Kai scared Jiang Chong off."

"Are you sure?" Ming Yu demanded, still not lowering her sword.

"No. He's keeping watch in the garden, trying to detect where he's gone. The rest of the clan is returning." Junjie turned his gaze to Moon. "Can you call Winter Varik? Ask him to come over. He's the only one who can check the manor ground within the dead realm to make sure Jiang Chong has truly left."

Moon nodded. “That Jiang Chong. He can’t get through solid objects like doors and walls, right?”

“Correct. We should be safe for now.”

Moon put aside his sword and pulled out his phone. “I’ll get Winter here. Otherwise, no one is going to be able to sleep when the sun rises. I’ll also see if I can get my old coven here to improve the spells on the walls.”

Junjie placed his sword on the display table in the center of the room with some other weapons and reached out his left hand to Erik. “Here, let me hold him.”

“Jun-Jun, you’re injured,” Ming Yu argued, also lowering her weapon.

“It’s nothing. Nearly healed. Let me hold him. He’s terrified.”

Ming Yu looked as if she were going to argue with him further, but Erik was already leaning toward Junjie, arms outstretched. He so easily slipped into Junjie’s good left side, wrapping his arms and legs around him like a koala. Fresh tears slipped down his flushed cheeks, and he sniffled loudly.

Junjie lowered his voice and pressed kisses to the side of Erik’s head and cheek. “It’s okay. That was Kai being noisy. What do we tell that noisy dragon? We tell him ‘Bad dragon. Don’t be so scary!’ That’s what we say, don’t we?”

“Bad dragon,” Erik mumbled against Junjie’s throat. He turned his head and sniffled again. “Gege ow.”

Junjie lifted his head to see where Erik was staring. He’d been wearing a long-sleeved white shirt, but the right arm was now torn and soaked in blood. Not the prettiest thing for a child to see. Ming Yu moved to his right side to inspect his

wound, tsking and making disapproving noises as she worked.

“It still has quite a ways to heal. You’re losing a lot of blood,” she chastised.

“I’ve survived worse. Once the rest of the clan gets here, I’ll clean up.” He smiled at Erik, whose tears had stopped. “The only thing that matters is that you’re all safe.”

The pain in his arm had faded to nothing, falling to the back of his mind as he watched Erik finally take in his surroundings. His wide eyes marveled at all the weapons they’d collected over the years. And this was a small portion of what they possessed. Most remained in their home in China. One day, Erik would be old enough to begin his training. He would learn the name and history of each of the weapons, be taught how to use them. Erik would carry on the proud history of the Zhang clan and the Sword of the Heavenly Garden sect.

But only if they killed Jiang Chong.

Tonight, he’d proved it was easy for him to slip onto their grounds. Moon’s spells had provided a warning, but just that their walls had been breached. They had no way of knowing where he went once he stepped onto the property.

Winter and Moon’s witch friends could provide them with a sense of security for a short period, but to be free and safe, he needed to kill Jiang Chong at last.

## Chapter 12

Leo St. George

Something was wrong.

Very, very wrong.



It was the kind of wrong that would send Leo running off in the opposite direction, his tail down and tucked close to his body.

But he couldn't do it. Not so long as he was unsure whether something had happened to Junjie or Erik. When he was sure they were okay, he could scurry off.

For now, he was stuck pacing outside the giant double doors that barred his entrance along the driveway. His tiny paws padded along on the concrete as he debated what he should do. Normally, he'd climb a few trees, taking one of the limbs that grew close to the wall that surrounded the property.

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Tonight, the air crackled with magic, particularly near the wall. He was afraid that if he touched the stone, he'd get zapped to death.

He didn't know what to do. There was no way for him to call Junjie to find out what the fuck was going on. Pacing back and forth, tail twitching. His meows were growing more insistent by the minute, turning into long yowls as he hoped to get someone's attention. Soft sounds of movement would reach his ears everyonce in a while, but he couldn't tell if anyone was close enough to hear him.

Several minutes passed before the double doors parted enough to allow a tall, slender figure through. Leo retreated several feet, his hair standing up along his spine until he recognized the person as Kai.

"Leo, I presume," Kai said. For the first time since the dragon had come to reside at the manor, he looked tired. His hair was somewhat mussed, and there were shadows under his eyes. There were even lines of strain bracketing his mouth from either fatigue or pain. "If you'd like to enter to see Junjie and Erik, you'll need me to escort you."

He didn't hesitate. With a couple of running steps, Leo leaped at Kai, who seemed to hesitate for a heartbeat, his eyes wide with surprise, before he remembered to open his arms to catch Leo. Some of the lines on Kai's face retreated as he smiled. He cradled Leo in his arms as he carried the cat through the double doors that automatically closed behind them.

Leo's eyes skimmed the four unfamiliar cars that crowded the Zhang driveway. The air was even thicker with magic inside the walls. He could taste it like prickly cotton

candy on his tongue. At the westernmost wall, a group of three men argued with Moon. A tiny cauldron was bubbling over a fire. One of them was holding a bundle of dried sage as it smoldered in his hand, sending up a tendril of gray smoke. Chen stood at the back of the group with another black-haired man watching the argument.

“That is Moon’s old coven. Two earth witches and a necromancer. They’re working on strengthening our defenses, but it is not a simple task, considering the number of magical creatures that come in and out of this property.” Kai’s voice dipped lower, becoming gossipy. “The one standing next to Chen is human, and he’s dating the necromancer. He strikes me as the most rational one of the group.”

Leo remained in Kai’s arms as they passed the witches. Both Chen and Moon appeared worried.

“Several of the Variks have come as well. Winter is checking every inch of the property.”

Fortifying their defenses. Winter Varik running security. Winter was the one who could walk within the dead realm. It all added up to one thing.

Jiang Chong.

Without thinking, Leo leaped out of Kai’s arms and raced to the house. As he reached the front door, he shifted into his human form and barged his way inside.

“Junjie! Junjie, where are you? Jun-Jun!” he shouted at the top of his lungs as he moved through the corridor. He poked his head into one room after another, his heart racing as he searched for a single person. There were others who stared at him in wide-eyed shock as he dipped in and out of the rooms, but he didn’t care. None of them was the person he sought.

“Leo?” Junjie’s soft voice trickled along one of the many hallways, stopping Leo dead in his tracks. He turned sharply and started a different way, only to run straight into Junjie. The vampire wore a pair of soft, baggy sleep pants and a white T-shirt that made him appear paler than usual. His shaggy dark-brown hair was wet, as if he’d just stepped out of the shower.

He reached for Junjie’s arms but stopped when his eyes caught on a white bandage wrapped on his right arm. Under the strong scent of soap lingered a faint hint of blood. Someone had hurt his Junjie.

Jiang Chong.

Possessive rage burned through Leo’s veins. Bones ached and tendons strained. His body screamed to change and hunt down Jiang Chong. To rip the vampire apart.

“Leo, your eyes.” Junjie’s surprised whisper tore Leo from his swirling thoughts. He didn’t need to look in a mirror to see that his eyes had shifted. Fuck, he needed to get control of himself. He hadn’t suffered an accidental shift since he was in his late teens.

He blinked rapidly, turning his head away from Junjie as he willed his eyes to change to human. “I smell blood.” He lifted his eyes to see Junjie’s left hand fly up to his mouth as if he were searching for a stray drop.

“Oh. Shixiong lent me a bit.”

Now he had a new reason to tear Jiang Chong up. Not only had Junjie been hurt, but he’d been forced to feed from someone else. This was some Grade-A bullshit right here. Jiang Chong needed to fucking die now.

Leo squeezed his eyes shut and swore silently at himself. He needed to get ahold of

his emotions. He was going insane. Junjie was fun to flirt with, but the vampire didn't belong to him. They weren't mates. Cat shifters almost never did the mate thing. That was silly. Why settle down with one person when life could be one unending buffet?

He opened his eyes again and stared into Junjie's soft brown eyes, as they filled with worry. That gentle face with the crooked smile. The huffy attitude that was only a heartbeat away from melting with the right word from Leo.

Why settle down with just one person? Because, sometimes, you got really lucky and Bastet shined her light on you, the perfect person walked into your life, and you didn't need anyone else.

"Jiang Chong was here," Leo spit out to end the silence that had stretched too long. "He hurt you."

Junjie's expression darkened, and he dropped his gaze to the ground. The muscles in his jaw tightened and jumped as if he were grinding his teeth. "He was. He did."

"I'm guessing from the bickering witches outside, he's not dead. Well, more than vampire dead. More likeding-dong, the witch is dead."

"Excuse you!"

Leo's head whipped around to see Moon standing in the hallway with the two earth witches Kai had pointed out minutes ago.

Fuck.

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“I didn’t mean it like that. Just...you know...”

“No, I don’t know. Why don’t you spell it out for me?” the witch with bright-red hair demanded as he took a menacing step toward Leo.

“Oh, come on!” Leo threw up his hands in frustration. “It’s not like I did the whole ‘I’m melting! Oh, what a world!’ bit.” This time, though, Leo might have done his best Wicked Witch impersonation with the high-pitched voice and sinking to the floor.

Thankfully, Junjie grabbed his arm and pulled him down the hall before he could dig the hole he was creating even deeper. He didn’t know when to quit. It wasn’t like he was saying that witches needed to die. Only that a particular vampire needed to be double dead.

“Wait,” Leo called out as they got out of sight of the witches. “What about Erik? Is he okay? Did Jiang Chong get near him?” He didn’t think the vampire had laid a fang on the little guy. If he had, it was doubtful that Junjie or Jiang Chong would still be alive. Junjie would have done whatever it took to keep the child safe.

Junjie shook his head and motioned to the room they’d stopped outside of. “Jiang Chong never got close to Erik. Would you like to see him?” he whispered.

Leo nodded and Junjie opened the door, leading him into the small room overflowing with toys and stuffed animals. Anightlight in the shape of a white bunny bounding across a green field burned on the far wall. Erik was lying on his side, sleeping peacefully, with his arms wrapped around a strange but soft doll that appeared to be

an avocado with eyes. This was definitely something he'd gotten from Mei Lian. His lips were parted, and his cheeks were flushed slightly. The soft sound of his gentle breathing filled the room, and something in Leo longed to shift into his cat form and curl up next to the boy.

"He had a bad scare with everyone panicked. Plus, Kai arrived in his dragon form to scare off Jiang Chong. The roaring terrified Erik. It took a long time for him to calm down. The second he calmed, he fell asleep." Junjie knelt by the bed and ran his fingers through the boy's hair, brushing it from his forehead.

"I'm sure after some sleep, he'll be fine. He'll bounce right back. Cats are resilient like that," Leo murmured. He held out his hand to help Junjie to his feet. The vampire stared at it for a moment before giving a tiny nod and taking it. Junjie released it the second he was standing and led Leo out of the room and across the hall to his own private chambers.

Leo crossed to the center of the chamber, trying to ignore the enormous bed pushed against one wall. Now was not the time to seduce the vampire. He'd had a terrible night and was still reeling from everything that had happened. Junjie needed a friend.

The too-quiet man closed the door and stood facing it for a couple of heartbeats. When he turned to face Leo, his expression was solemn, and his eyes were closed as if he couldn't stand to even meet Leo's gaze. This was a lot worse than being overcome and afraid.

"I would understand if you wished to take Erik from us," Junjie said, his voice low and rough.

"I beg your pardon?" Leo cried. His brain locked up. What the fuck was this? The idea hadn't even crossed his mind.

Junjie's eyes jumped to his face and lines dug deep into his forehead. He seemed confused as well, but he continued. "You gave us Erik because you thought we could keep him safe. Tonight, Jiang Chong entered the grounds of the manor. While he didn't get into the house, we all know that he'll return."

"Yeah, and you're going to kick his ass when he does." Leo stomped over to where Junjie was standing, his shoulders slumped and head bowed as if he were folding in on himself at just the idea of losing Erik. Leo grabbed his shoulders, careful not to touch his injured right arm, and shook him. "Jiang Chong is temporary. You'll kill him, and everything will be fine. I forced you into taking that little boy because I thought you and your clan would give him a warm and loving home for his entire life. You'd teach him to be smart, brave, resourceful, and loving. It wasn't only about keeping him safe."

"You're sure?"

Leo leaned as close as he could, the tip of his nose touching Junjie's. "Yes! Hell, yes! Besides, I know that you'd be dead before Jiang Chong or anyone laid a finger on that boy."

"I would," Junjie agreed in a trembling voice, his eyes going wide for the first time.

Leo exhaled a heavy breath and smiled at the vampire, who was showing some signs of life. "All of the Zhang clan would. There is no better place in all the world for Erik than right here."

The left corner of Junjie's lips twitched into an almost smirk. "Surrounded by vampires."

"And an elf. And a dragon. Why not?" He shrugged one shoulder and slid his hand up to cup Junjie's cheek. "One tiny kitten in the middle of thousands of years of magic



and power. How could anyone ever touch him?”

Junjie nodded, and that soft expression lingered for another second, then Leo watched it melt away. But where sadness and worry had painted his face earlier, there was now cold hardness creeping in. Junjie stepped out of his grasp and partially turned away from him. His left hand balled into a fist at his side while the right remained limp.

“I couldn’t kill him,” Junjie whispered, his voice trembling with what sounded like low-banked rage. “No matter how hard I pressed, how flawless my every strike, he slipped away like an eel. I couldn’t manage more than a few flesh wounds.”

“He’s a sneaky, cowardly bastard. Those are the hardest to kill. But you’ll get him,” Leo reassured him.

Junjie was shaking his head almost as soon as Leo started speaking. “The moment you get too close, or he senses that he’s losing, he slips into the dead realm. You can’t follow because he’ll leave you there. You’re blind to his location. It’s just waiting until he reappears to stab you in the back. Or worse, he escapes completely.”

That wasn’t exactly worse in Leo’s book, but he let that go. Junjie needed to vent his frustration and anger about his creator, and Leo was more than happy to serve as his support.

The vampire began pacing the open space, moving from the center of the room to the bathroom doorway. “He knew the others were away.”

“The asshole must have been watching the manor, waiting for an opportunity when the fewest number of people would be home.”

Junjie grunted. He stopped and whipped around to Leo, eyes wide. “He knows about

Erik. And that Moon is a fledgling. Both are vulnerable to his attack. Moon wouldn't stand a chance against him. And Erik..."

"You're going to stop him," Leo stated, trying to infuse those words with all of his confidence, but Junjie's head was shaking.

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“Jiang Chong knows I haven’t been using my gift. Won’t use it. There’s no point. All I ever see is death. I can’t actually change anything. The death never stops. What if I were to see Erik’s death? Or yours? How would I fight him? What would be the point?”

Junjie was spiraling out of control. Panic had him firmly in its grip. His left fist was shaking and even the limp hand at his side had taken on a tremble as his pacing picked up.

Leo snatched Junjie by the waist and shoved him into the low dresser on the opposite side of the room. The vampire stumbled and landed with his butt on the edge of the furniture, just low enough to erase the two-inch height difference between them.

Junjie’s lips were still parted in surprise when Leo seized them in a hard, hungry kiss. He’d been aching for another taste of Junjie’s mouth since their first brief kiss. But this one was even better than the first. Junjie was fully aware of what he was doing and who he was doing it with.

The vampire stood frozen for a couple of frantic heartbeats before he wrapped his arms around Leo and pulled him in even closer. Tipping his head to the side, Junjie deepened the kiss. His lips parted even farther, welcoming Leo’s tongue inside to explore his mouth. His new domain, because Jun-Jun was his now. There was no explaining it to his heart and brain. Some instinct burrowed within him had lifted its head and declared Junjie to be his.

The tip of his tongue traced one long fang, and he shivered. He wanted those sexy things in him. He wanted lots of Junjie’s sexy parts inside of him, but the fangs were

a great place to start.

The kiss went on and on, deep and demanding. Junjie kept his hands locked on Leo's shoulders, but Leo felt no need to remain so still. This perfect body had been on display for him so many times. It was now time to touch.

Wandering fingers slipped under Junjie's shirt to caress his flat stomach and muscular pecs. A thumb brushed across one nipple and a tiny noise escaped Jun-Jun's throat. Leo backtracked to rub and pluck at that tiny nub until it hardened under his fingers.

More noises slipped from Junjie, and those powerful hands found Leo's body. Strong fingers dug into his shoulders and slid to knead the muscles in his ass. Fuck, that felt so good, but it wasn't enough. He needed more. To help Junjie. Of course, to help take his mind off things.

Leo broke off the kiss and dragged his lips across Jun-Jun's jaw. "Bastet, I need to taste more of you."

"Who?" Junjie gasped as Leo's deft fingers dipped below the waistband of his sleep pants. The elastic was stretched and worn. So easy to slip these over Junjie's hips and down his long legs.

"Bastet. Ancient Egyptian goddess of cats. Try to keep up," Leo murmured against Junjie's neck.

"Hard to think when all the blood in my brain has drained into my cock."

Leo grinned into Junjie's throat. "Let me help you with that." He lifted the vampire's shirt to his pits and kissed his way along his chest, but Junjie jerked away.

"Huh? What? What are you doing?"

Leo turned his lips to the right and licked Junjie's nipple. "Hush now. I'm going to suck your cock."

Junjie blinked. Then the most beautiful smile Leo had ever seen broke across his face. "Okay."

He nearly laughed, but he held it in, not wanting to press his luck. Junjie could suddenly wake from his horny stupor and tell him to stop. And he didn't want to do that.

Leo dropped to his knees and kissed his way over Junjie's sleek chest and flat stomach. One day, he would worship every inch of this delectable man. Today was essentially fast food.

At least that was what he'd thought until he got Junjie's pants to his ankles. Thank you, Bastet. Leo had enjoyed some variety in his sex life, but it had been a long time since he'd had a thick, uncut cock like this. Junjie was a fucking feast. His own dick throbbed and his empty asshole clenched. He was happy sucking Jun-Jun off tonight, but eventually his ass was getting stretched by that beast.

"Everything okay down there?" Junjie called out.

"Just thinking about all the wonderful things I want to do to this magnificent cock."

"Less thinking. More sucking."

Leo grinned up at Junjie, his fingers digging into the vampire's muscular thigh. "I so love the quiet ones. You're always the most fun in bed."

Junjie opened his mouth to likely issue another order, but Leo didn't give him the chance. He licked a long, slow stripe up the vampire's cock from his sac to the tip. A

bone-rattling moan rumbled up Junjie's throat as he tilted his head and reveled in Leo's touch. His hands tightened on the edge of the dresser and the furniture let out a complaint over the sudden abuse.

He wrapped his fingers around Junjie's cock and stroked him, carefully pulling back the hood of flesh to reveal the plump head hidden inside. He pressed his lips to that bulbous top in an openmouthed kiss, letting his tongue play along the slit. Leo steadily worked his way along his cock, taking more of him with each pass.

A deep ache throbbed in his jaw from the stretch to fit him, but the weight of Junjie on his tongue was heaven. A hint of soap remained from his shower, but the taste of his pre-cum was washing it away. He wanted to press his nose to Junjie and breathe him into his lungs.

But the sounds coming out of Junjie were his favorite. There had been moments when getting Junjie to speak was likeholding a seance for a pouty ghost. But get Junjie's dick in Leo's mouth and there was no silencing him. A steady stream of words and desperate groans rained from his lips.

Fingers twisted in his hair, holding him still while Junjie thrust, fucking his mouth as if he could no longer control himself.

Leo dropped his hand from Junjie's cock and fought with the button and zipper of his jeans. His cock throbbed with every thrust past his lips, his orgasm threatening to break loose in his pants or in his hand. He had just seconds to decide.

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As soon as he gripped his own dick, he began to purr. There was no stopping it. The rattling vibrations traveled up his throat and caressed Junjie's cock. The vampire gasped his name, and Leo could feel him swell. It was too late, and Leo loved it.

Junjie came hard, shouting and pouring semen down Leo's abused throat. It took only a few more strokes and Leo was following right behind Junjie, spilling all over his hand and onto the floor.

Only when they were both spent and he'd licked Junjie's cock completely clean did he allow the man to slip from his mouth. He smiled up at the vampire and made a show of licking his lips.

"That was a very evil trick," Junjie stated, still sounding breathless. "I didn't know you could purr while in human form."

Leo took a deep breath and let out a long, loud purr that seemed to shake his entire body. It wasn't a hard feat, though. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so happy or sated. When he finally convinced Junjie to climb into bed with him, the pure joy of the moment was likely to kill him. But what a wonderful way to go.

"Anything to get you to smile at me," Leo murmured.

The grinning vampire blushed and looked away as if he were searching for a way to escape. Leo needed to save him from any awkward feelings.

"I do have some bad news," he announced. "I've made a mess down here. On your floor. On myself. If I could borrow a towel?—"

“Oh! Right!” Junjie bent to grab the waistband of his pants to jerk them up, but Leo snagged a fistful of his T-shirt with his clean hand, trapping him there.

Leo pressed a quick kiss to Junjie’s soft lips. “Actually, a shower and a change of clothes would be amazing, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course. I’ll place some clothes on the counter for you.” Junjie gathered up his pants and set about getting a towel and some clothes together for Leo. The cat pulled himself together as best he could and followed Junjie into the bathroom. He wanted to snuggle the vampire more, but it was clear Junjie needed some breathing room to settle his emotions and thoughts. He was dealing with the threat of his creator, fears regarding Erik’s safety, and now the newly sexual aspect of their relationship. That was a lot.

Hell, Leo was pretty sure he should be panicking, but he wasn’t. This just felt right. Maybe he’d panic later. The only thing that mattered to him at the moment was that Junjie and Erik were safe.

Once he was alone, Leo jumped into the shower and scrubbed off the day’s filth. He paused to sniff all the soaps and shampoos within the shower, chuckling to himself that he was now going to smell like Junjie. He might have done the same when he picked up the sweat pants and T-shirt waiting for him. There was the soft scent of laundry detergent, but under it was Junjie’s personal scent. He was going to be wrapped in Junjie.

As he stepped out of the bathroom, the vampire leaped up from where he’d been seated on the edge of the bed.

“Everything okay?” Junjie inquired.

Leo smirked. “It was a shower. I’m pretty good at those. Relax.”



“Yes, I’m...yes...” Junjie shoved a hand through his nearly dry hair and sighed. “I’m awkward. Everything I do is awkward. I don’t know what I’m supposed to say now.”

Leaning in close, Leo pressed a kiss to his racing pulse in his neck. “Nothing. There’s nothing you’re supposed to do or say. We did that because we needed a release after today’s scare. You needed a few minutes where you weren’t panicking about Jiang Chong.” Leo stepped back and cocked his head at Junjie. “But I’m sure the Variks are still here, as well as the witches. You need to check in with your clan, right?”

“I do, actually.”

“Good. Then I’m going to crash in Erik’s room with him. That way, you won’t worry about either of us while you have your meetings, and I can be there for him if he wakes.”

So much of the tension that had lined his face disappeared in an instant. “Really? Will you be comfortable?”

“There’s plenty of room in Erik’s bed.” As soon as he finished speaking, he turned into the big orange and white tomcat Junjie had first met months ago. He sat at Junjie’s feet and let out a loud meow.

Junjie’s expression softened. “Thank you. If you need anything, feel free to come find me.”

Junjie led the way out of his room and across the hall to Erik’s room. He opened the door a crack, allowing Leo to slip inside. He padded over to the little boy’s bed, hopped on, and curled up in an empty spot at the foot. This way he was close enough to watch the boy without crowding him. Also, Junjie would feel at ease. Winter might have checked the property, but Leo could see those walking through the dead realm as well. He was added protection for the boy that no one else could provide.

The vampire paused beside the bed and gently rubbed Leo's head, a soft smile playing on his lips. "Thank you so much," he whispered before he left the room.

Yep, he was stuck now. There wasn't a thing in the world he wouldn't do for that Junjie.

## Chapter 13

### Zhang Junjie

Xiao Dan was distracted. It wasn't hard to see when Junjie had to pull back on a thrust because it looked like his shixiong would not block it in time. Of course, they were all more than a little distracted. Xiao Dan had invited Junjie to the rear garden to spar because he'd caught him brooding about Jiang Chong.

Two nights had passed since Jiang Chong had sneaked onto their property. The witches and Kai had done what they could to layer more protection. Winter had examined the place, and Leo had even gone over the grounds. There was no sign of their vampire creator. But he would return.

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“Maybe we should take a break,” Junjie suggested.

“I think that was supposed to be my line,” Xiao Dan said with a sheepish grin that slipped away almost as quickly as it formed.

“We’re distracted. No one can concentrate.”

Xiao Dan slid his sword into its sheath. “True, and it is my job to keep everyone focused. Shifu would have?—”

“Shifu would be struggling too if he were in your shoes,” Junjie cut him off. “I witnessed him lost in thought during those times the emperor was being troublesome. Most of the students didn’t notice because there were so many other teachers whocould step up and help.” Junjie poked Xiao Dan in the shoulder and gave him a weak smile. “You don’t have to figure things out alone.”

“Mn.” Xiao Dan nodded but didn’t return Junjie’s smile.

Junjie swallowed his sigh as he also placed his sword in its sheath. With the last of summer dwindling away, the nights had grown cooler. The fireflies were long gone, and even the chirping night insects had become quieter. The wind rustled leaves, but a new scent was creeping into the air. Autumn was waiting to sweep through the land and Junjie couldn’t wait.

Longer nights. The smell of dried leaves and apples. Cool, crisp nights and soft, heavy sweaters. Trees changing colors, painting the world with bright golden yellows, fiery reds, and brilliant oranges.

He couldn't wait to see Erik playing in the leaves, a little knit hat covering his head. After more than two thousand autumns, this one promised to be something new.

"Erik has started saying Meimei," Junjie recalled suddenly.

"Really?"

"Yes, except it doesn't quite come out as Meimei. It's more like Meimeimeimei as he toddles after her."

Xiao Dan huffed a soft laugh, some of the tension at last sloughing off his shoulders as they wandered through the garden. "He seems to have settled into our home nicely. More than once I've caught him leading Chen by the hand into the library for story time."

"He likes to help Ming Yu in the kitchen by tasting everything," Junjie added.

Xiao Dan nodded. "He also fell asleep the other afternoon on Huli's tails."

Junjie's eyes widened. "The fox didn't mind?"

From what he'd seen, Huli had kept his distance from Erik since he'd entered the house, as if he expected Erik to chase after him and pull his tails. Or worse, steal Xiao Dan's attention away from him.

"He's coming around. Apparently, Erik is an excellent audience when Huli wants someone to appreciate his beauty or skills. Recently, I've caught him shifting back and forth from human to fox, as if he's trying to coax Erik into doing the same thing. So far, Erik just laughs and claps at his antics."

"I don't know who is keeping who out of trouble there," Junjie murmured. Leo was

also spending more time with Erik, which was a good thing. The little boy needed as much exposure to shifters as possible. He needed to feel comfortable in his own skin, understand that he wasn't alone in the world. That would not be the easiest task growing up surrounded by vampires.

"I've been thinking recently...about what is in Erik's best interest," Xiao Dan started slowly.

Everything within Junjie froze solid. He couldn't move, couldn't even draw a breath. This was the moment. Since Erik had first joined the clan, Junjie had expected Xiao Dan to declare that a clan of vampires had no business raising a shifter child. But Shixiong had put up zero resistance to the idea of keeping Erik. He'd even argued that their clan had a long history of raising children, educating them, and training them in the martial arts of their sect. Erik would be no different because he was a cat shifter and they were vampires.

"Shixiong..." Junjie pleaded, not knowing what words to say. Was it selfish of him to beg for Erik to remain with them if it wasn't what was best for the child?

"I was thinking that maybe we should send him to China with someone ahead of the rest of the clan."

Junjie's relief was so great, he was lightheaded. He swayed on his feet for a second and nearly had to sit before he fell over.

"Junjie?" Xiao Dan demanded, grabbing his elbow when he noticed Junjie wasn't doing so well.

"I thought you were going to say that we needed to give him up."

"No! Of course not. He's been with us for nearly three weeks now, and it's obvious

this is where he belongs. The entire clan loves him too much to give him up.” He released Junjie’s elbow. “I was thinking that maybe you and he should travel to China ahead of the rest of the clan. Take him out of danger and start getting him accustomed to what will be his permanent home. We’ll have the matter of Jiang Chong and the fae settled soon. Then we’ll be headed home. It just makes the most sense that Erik travel ahead of us. I believe Winter said he’d have the paperwork necessary for the boy completed in less than a week.”

The last of Xiao Dan’s words became a messy blur in his ears. His brain was stuck on an earlier part of his speech—that he and Erik leave for China ahead of the clan. Xiao Dan wanted to send him away.

“Why me?” Junjie asked in a low, rough voice.

“I thought it made the most sense. Out of all the members of the clan, Erik is closest to you. He would adjust to the new home and setting most easily with you.”

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Junjie didn't know what to say. His tongue lay like a dead fish in his mouth. The thought of returning home with Erik, showing him the enormous manor and grounds that awaited him, was very appealing. But there were snags to that dream, beginning with him not wanting to leave his clan behind. A fight was coming—a big one—with the fae and Jiang Chong. He needed to be there, to stand with all of them. Part of him wanted to believe that Xiao Dan was trying to get him out of the way, but he knew better. His martial arts skills were as strong as the rest of the clan. He was an excellent fighter. This wasn't about doubting him.

The other concern was Leo.

Things had shifted between them. Junjie had no regrets about what happened, but he didn't quite know what came next. He was damn sure it wasn't stealing Leo and running off to China with him and Erik. But leaving now meant never knowing if there could have been something more between them. Was Leo supposed to be the mate he'd been hoping to find, like Chen, Xiang, and Yichen had found theirs?

He wanted to get to know Leo better. Dreamed of spending time together when they both weren't afraid of being murdered.

But was it selfish to want to remain behind to find out what kind of future he could have with Leo? Erik needed him.

“Junjie?”

“I don't know what to say,” he murmured. He stared at the sword sheath in his hand and frowned. “I wish to do what is best for Erik, but I don't want to leave my clan as

they face such dangerous foes. Even with the Variks at your side, you'll still need me. Have you considered sending Ming Yu to Luoyang with Erik?"

"I have. My concern is that Erik has latched on to you as his central parent." A smirk twisted Xiao Dan's lips. "He may call you gege, but his eyes say baba." He allowed that word to hang in the air, pressing on Junjie's heart, before he continued. "Erik is comfortable with you, but I worry he will be further traumatized if he doesn't have you with him while he's traveling and learning a new place."

"You are being quite evil, Shixiong," Junjie grumbled.

"Unless you have another reason for wanting to remain in the United States. Possibly a small, furry reason that loves fish and belly rubs."

"Is that what this is? An attempt to weasel information about Leo and me?" Junjie lifted his chin and shrugged a shoulder. "Sure. I'll tell you about Leo, if you're equally willing to answer questions about you and Huli."

A horrible choking noise escaped Xiao Dan as if he'd sucked in a great gasp of air and it had gotten lodged in his throat. Junjie had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

"What?" Xiao Dan croaked. "Me and Huli? What questions could you possibly have? There's nothing going on between us."

Junjie rolled his eyes. "Don't try that with me. I'm not Chen or Xiang. Huli might be the most self-centered, immoral creature I've ever met, but he worships the ground you walk on and would do anything you asked. That includes behaving according to your moral code and putting his life in danger for a bunch of people he doesn't care about at all. Everything he does is to make you happy, which he is actually quite good at."



Xiao Dan frowned at Junjie and let out a huff. “Well, this completely backfired on me.”

With a chuckle, Junjie settled on a stone bench set under a maple tree. It faced the rear of the house, giving them a good view of the lights glowing through the windows. Even from his distance, he could hear Erik’s giggles as he played with Yichen and Rei. Both of them had started off very uncomfortable with the little boy. Yichen had never spent much time with the younger children in the sect, and Rei had never been around human children. Erik offered a wealth of new experiences.

Thankfully, Erik was very outgoing and seemed to sense that Yichen and Rei needed help, so he would be the one to seek them out with toys and show them how to play with him. After a couple of playdates like this, they caught on, learning to relax and following the child’s lead.

“Chen and Xiang can complain about the fox spirit all they want, but if you make each other happy, what do I care that he’s not human? We aren’t technically human any longer,” Junjie continued.

Xiao Dan sat next to him, a tiny smile playing across his lips. “Huli is...special.”

Junjie kept his snarky comments to himself. This had to be one of Xiao Dan’s first times actually talking about the fox spirit. For as long as he could remember, his shixiong had spent his time either defending the huli jing or denying that there was anything between them other than friendship. One had to watch Huli for only five seconds to know that he was hopelessly infatuated with Xiao Dan. But if you watched them a bit longer, Xiao Dan would inevitably soften toward the fox, and it was clear there was more going on in his heart than mild affection.

“I was there when he was simply a fox learning some human words. I was there when he shifted into a human for the first time.” Xiao Dan shook his head, his smile fading

away. “What if he is attached to me simply because he’s not spent time getting to know others in the world? What if he’s meant to give his heart to another fox spirit?”

“In all the legends about huli jing and jiuweihu, there’s little of them giving their hearts to anyone. They’re known for being sneaky and selfish. They take. In this instance, Huli wants very much to take you, but he’s also willing to give all of himself over to you. That’s got to count for something. Maybe you should think about trying to meet him halfway.”

“And will you be following your own advice with Leo? Your relationship with the cat shifter has progressed even further than mine with Huli.”

Junjie tried to ignore the sudden burning in his cheeks. There was no such thing as being quiet enough in a house full of vampires with superhuman hearing. With Chen, Yichen, and Xiang gaining mates, it was in all their best interests to learn to be selectively deaf. Sadly, when Leo had driven him over the edge with his mouth, he couldn’t even claim that he’d tried to be quiet. Nope. The cat had broken him, and all of his clan had heard it. As well as some of the Variks.

“That was...it was just a stress reliever. We’re friends. That’s all. He’s only interested in having some fun, while my focus is on protecting Erik and getting rid of Jiang Chong.”

“Mn,” Xiao Dan grunted in agreement, but that noise didn’t sound as if he particularly believed Junjie.

“It’s the truth. Leo isn’t the type to get involved with a single person. Cat shifters prefer their independence and don’t want to be tied to one person. Besides, he’s probably sticking close to make sure that we’re a good match for Erik. Once he’s sure the child is in good hands, he’ll move on.”

“Erik has been in good hands for almost a month now,” Xiao Dan countered. He turned his head to pin Junjie with a hard stare. “He might spend more time with Erik, but you’re the one who has his full attention.” He sighed and rocked to the side, bumping his shoulder into Junjie’s. “I understand not wanting to get your hopes up too high. Leo is a fascinating person. You should get to know him better. I think I might have been premature in suggesting that Erik leave for China early. Jiang Chong has no actual interest in the boy, and the clan is stronger with you here to help fight him and the fae.”

Junjie nearly threw his hands up in the air. Had Xiao Dan been sounding him out with this idea, or had he been fishing for information about him and Leo?

“You’re a damn evil vampire when you want to be,” Junjie grumbled. “It’s not just about you being a good influence on Huli. He’s also been a bad influence on you.”

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“Possibly,” Xiao Dan replied with a wide, wicked grin. He stood, turned to face Junjie, and bowed. “Thank you for the sparring match and conversation. They have helped to clear my head.”

“You’re welcome.” Junjie also rose, intending to go inside to put his sword away. “Do you know if Winter is coming over to check the grounds this evening?”

“I believe that is his plan. They’ve done the best they could to protect us, but we can’t keep asking Winter to check over the grounds every night.”

A knot formed in Junjie’s stomach. The last of his slightly irritated amusement disappeared. “I’ve noticed that Leo hasn’t been leaving for long periods since Jiang Chong’s attack. He’ll leave for a bit during the daylight hours, but quickly return by sunset.”

“We’ve done what we can to warn us about intruders.”

The silence that followed held a new heavy weight. Xiao Dan didn’t need to say it. Each of them had been blessed with a unique gift when they’d become vampires. All useful in their own way. Xiao Dan could create glamours to confuse and frighten attackers. Chen could control ice and use it as a weapon. Yichen could read, speak, and understand any language. Xiang could walk in daylight. Ming Yu could aid their healing, speeding up the closure of the very worst wounds. Mei Lian could actually walk on water. She wasn’t too enamored of her gift because there had been almost no call for it.

They’d all initially believed that Junjie had the very best of all their gifts. He could

follow the thread of life for a person, giving him a glimpse into the future. Sadly, all he seemed to see was death, so he'd stopped looking.

There was more to the future. He sometimes saw battles and could glimpse sneak attacks prior to them happening. It was just that he'd soon discovered that he had no way of stopping the death of a clan mate, no matter how hard he tried.

He knew Xiao Dan and all the rest of his clan wanted him to use his gift to steal a peek into the future, gain a hint of when Jiang Chong might strike again. Anything to give them an edge or at least allow them to sleep while the sun inched above the horizon.

"I'll...think...about using my gift. I can't promise anything."

Xiao Dan's hand landed on his shoulder and squeezed. "We all understand, and we don't wish to pressure you."

Junjie nodded, unable to speak past the tightness in his throat. He would do anything for his clan, but to peer ahead and see someone's death, knowing there was nothing he could do to stop it...

No, he wasn't ready. He had to, but not yet.

## Chapter 14

Leo St. George

"Psst...Leo."

Leo's ears perked up, and he looked around for the person who'd whispered his name.

It was that golden time about an hour or two before the sun rose above the horizon. All the little vampires and one tiny kitten were snuggled in their beds, snoring. The only exception was usually Xiang, who was waking up and grumbling about the earliness of the day.

It was also the time when the Zhang household lowered its guard against Jiang Chong. If the wily asshole had been plotting something, it was too late. He needed to scurry off to his hidey hole if he didn't want to burn up in the sun.

The one fear that remained was a fae attack, but there was enough magic tingling in the air that there was no way the fae were getting inside without setting off a hell of a lot of alarms.

Leo had been padding across the wooden floors on silent cat paws. He'd just slipped out of Erik's bed and poked his head into Junjie's room to make sure the vampire was also sleeping. Normally, he would make a few patrols through the house and grounds, staying until the sun rose. Afterward, he would leave for a bit. Maybe pop by his studio apartment and wonder why he even kept the damn thing. Within an hour, he was wishing he was with Junjie and headed back to the Zhang compound.

But this morning, Rei was standing at the end of the hallway for Erik's and Junjie's rooms. He cocked his head at the elf, who waved for him to follow. The elf darted away without making a sound, and Leo scampered after him. Rei continued to the foyer, a playful grin spread across his lips.

Leo shifted into his human form. "What's up?"

"We're making a breakfast run. You wanna join us?"

Leo blinked at the elf, stunned silent by the invitation. "Uh...seriously?"

Rei jerked his head toward the front door and led the way out. “Sure,” he said as they crossed the front porch. “You’ve been pulling some long hours, keeping the little family safe. You deserve a break. Kai is making sure Xiang is up and mobile.”

The cat shifter was still trying to digest the “little family” comment as Rei let out a short, sharp whistle. A couple of seconds later, a larger-than-normal orange fox with a flurry of fluffy tails behind him came bounding out of the miniature forest behind the house. On his last spring before slamming into one of the SUVs, he shifted into Huli the human.

“Is it happening? Are we really going to do it?” Huli asked, bouncing on the balls of his feet. The fox spirit looked as though he were going to vibrate right out of his skin.

“At this point, I think only the gods can stop us.” The elf leaned on the SUV tailgate and rested his foot on the bumper. “All I’ve heard out of Kai’s mouth for the past forty-eight hours are his raptures about the fried potato planks.”

Fried potato planks?

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He was trying to figure out which of them had it confused when it dawned on him. Someone had introduced Kai to hash browns.

The dragon showed up a minute later, appearing his usual dapper self in slacks and a light V-neck sweater. “Xiang is awake and checking all the locks and windows in the house. The clan will be safe while we are away.”

“What about Moon? He’s coming, right?” Huli turned to the manor and lifted on his toes as if the fox couldn’t stand still.

“I think he’s still in negotiations with Chen,” Kai murmured.

Rei huffed. “That doesn’t sound good. Grumpy puss keeps tightening the leash on Moon. That vampire is going to bite soon.”

Huli snickered. “From what I’ve heard, Chen likes it when Moon bites.”

Leo cleared his throat to stop his bark of laughter from escaping. Rei didn’t bother to hold his in.

Kai rolled his eyes. “Chen is terrified of Jiang Chong killing Moon. Xiang said that Moon wouldn’t be a vampire now if he hadn’t almost died because of the fae king.”

Huli broke the heavy silence that settled over them. “If Moon can’t go, is there anyone else who can drive?”

Rei shook his head. “I’m still getting lessons.”



“Definitely not,” Kai snapped.

All eyes fell on Leo, who shrugged. “I don’t drive often, but I can handle the SUV.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when the front door burst open. Moon jogged out, jangling a ring of keys and a car fob above his head. “I’m free! I’m free, but only for an hour. We gotta be back well before the sun is up or Chen is gonna have kittens.” Moon almost stumbled the moment his eyes locked with Leo. “No offense.”

The cat shifter chortled and held up his hands. “None taken. Congratulations on your freedom.”

Moon giggled. “Thanks. Now let’s load up and get us some breakfast!”

Their group piled into the SUV and Moon peeled out of the driveway, handling the vehicle as though he meant to jump the gate. Thankfully, he allowed the double doors to swing open so he could safely drive through.

They rushed along the road, the windows down and the wind flowing through to pull at his hair and caress his face. From the front passenger seat, Kai complained about Moon’s excessive speed and how the rolling death box was going to kill them all.

Rei cackled from his spot in the middle. “You need to relax, Kai, and enjoy it. You’re a dragon. What do you have to worry about?”

“It’s not so much myself that I worry about, but the other occupants of the car. Vampires are not invincible.”

The elf sighed. “You remind me of Yiyi. He’s constantly saying that I can’t stand on the roof while he’s driving.”

“You stood on the roof?” Leo gasped.

“Elves surrounded Yiyi the first time. It was the easiest way to shoot the enemy with my bow and arrow and then launch myself into the fight. The second time was when we were being chased by Black Dogs from the Wild Hunt. Nasty stuff.”

“Insane,” Leo exhaled.

“I’m jealous!” Huli shouted and turned toward the driver. “Moon, can I?—”

“No! Absolutely not!” Moon cut the fox spirit off as he tried to make his plea. “There will be no standing on the roof while I’m driving. Everyone is staying inside the car. I am not explaining to Chen how we ended up on the morning news.”

“Maybe Kai would be less afraid of cars if he stood on the roof,” Rei suggested.

Leo lurched upright from where he’d been lounging against the door. “Oh! Oh! Could you imagine if Kai was standing on the roof in his human form but with wings?”

Kai half turned to them. “Hmmm...that does sound interesting.”

“Can you do that?” Huli chimed in.

“I can, but I’ve never tried to be a human with wings. Are you thinking bird wings, or leathery wings like a bat?”

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“Oh my fuck, no! No standing on the roof!” Moon repeated. “If anyone tries it, I’m turning this car around and no one gets breakfast.”

The silence was instantaneous.

Leo scratched his jaw and spoke only when he was sure he wasn’t going to bust out in cackles. “So...um...have you been doing this breakfast run a lot?”

“Nope,” Rei said. “Kai wanted to provide Xiang with a meal one morning, and Moon suggested a breakfast run. It was the first time Kai and I had ever done drive-through.” He paused and cocked his head. “Or fast food, for that matter.”

Kai turned in his seat so that he was facing the occupants in the back, his face alight with joy. “Have you ever done fast-food breakfast? They have so many options for potatoes. They have these planks of fried potatoes and these little tots. I love all the potatoes. Plus, every place we visited had these adorable tiny sandwiches.”

Rei leaned his head toward Leo. “In case you missed it, Kai is a huge breakfast fan.”

“It’s a shame there isn’t a Waffle House this far north. We could get some hash browns scattered, smothered, and covered.” Leo sighed.

“I don’t know what that means, but it sounds amazing. Moon! We must find the house made of waffles!” Kai declared.

“No!”

Leo dissolved into another round of giggles. He'd known this would happen, and he couldn't help stirring the pot. "Waffle House is a normal building. I discovered it on a summer roadtrip to Florida with friends. They have lots of ways of making hash browns, like smothered in onions and covered in cheese."

"So we can't drive there now?" Huli inquired.

Leo shot a sympathetic look at the fox spirit. "No, too far. But I think I can try to recreate it if Ming Yu doesn't mind me borrowing her kitchen."

"That would be the better option," Moon added. "Just clean up your mess and don't ruin any of her pans."

"Anyway, Kai has been wanting to do another breakfast run, and Huli has never done drive-through before," Rei continued. The elf's expression turned sly as he peeked at Leo. "Now that we have you trapped in the car, we can get all the dirt."

Leo swallowed hard and glanced out his window, trying to measure whether it was moving too fast for him to jump out. "Dirt? What dirt?"

"Don't be like that," Moon teased from the driver's seat. "We're the mates. Not the Zhangs. You can talk to us."

Huli leaned around Rei and smirked. "I'm still a mate-in-training, but I will get Xiao Dan eventually."

"Yes, you will!" Moon cheered.

"But you and Junjie, you're mates, right?" Kai asked. "You'll be coming with us all back to China after the fae are defeated."

“What?” Leo gasped, but no one seemed to notice because Rei interjected.

“Of course he’s coming with us. He’s totally lost over Junjie, and then he’s got that adorable munchkin to help raise. How could anyone walk away from those chubby cheeks?”

“I don’t think Junjie’s cheeks are particularly chubby,” Huli murmured.

“He was talking about Erik,” Moon corrected him.

The conversation swirled around him for a moment about the perfect roundness of Erik’s cheeks as Leo succumbed to panic.

Leaving Erik and Junjie behind was always the plan.

He couldn’t stay. He was a cat. There was no pinning his people down. They went where the wind blew them, reveling in their freedom. They didn’t do the mate thing.

Except he’d heard of a few special cases that many other cats had sneered at. Cat shifters who’d found mates and settled into nice, long comfortable lives with their one person, raising a litter of kittens.

Waking every day with his arms wrapped up in Junjie. Seeing the vampire’s smile as soon as he opened his eyes. A lifetime of Erik’s giggles. Being there to see him shift for the first time. Teaching him to sneak and hunt. Watching Junjie teach him all his amazing martial arts skills.

Not to mention the rising feelings of jealousy and possessiveness that were leaking into his brain ever since he’d sucked Junjie’s cock. That really didn’t make sense. Junjie did not have a magical dick. But now, he didn’t want to leave the vampire’s side. Looked forward to spending all his time with him.

While having a mate meant sacrificing all his rambling freedom and shouldering heavy words like responsibilities didn't seem so bad, it would also mean leaving the United States behind and traveling to the Zhang home on the other side of the globe. Could he actually leave behind everything he knew for such a foreign place?

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“Leo? Leo, you still in there?” Rei snapped his fingers at the tip of Leo’s nose.

Kai made a tsking sound. “See what you’ve done. You’ve broken him. Junjie won’t appreciate us returning him broken.”

“I’m sure he’s not broken,” Moon said in an exasperated tone.

“Nope. Not broken,” Leo replied suddenly. “Brain just locked up. Mates, huh? Cat shifters aren’t much into mates.” He rubbed his chin as his mind scrambled to come up with something to placate his companions.

Huli snorted and turned in his seat so that his shoulders were resting against the back of Kai’s seat while his legs were folded in front of him. One benefit of being short was that the fox spirit could squeeze himself into strange positions. “I’ve read the legends about fox spirits. We don’t do mates. We’re supposed to seduce and kill people. Steal their souls. And while that might sound like a lot of fun, nothing could ever make me ruin my shot at having Xiao Dan. He’s the most amazing human ever. I’ve lived a thousand years, and I’ve met a lot of humans. Wanted to kill most of them. But not Xiao Dan.”

And that was a horrifying speech.

By the lack of reaction from the rest of the car, they must have heard similar things from the fox spirit’s mouth.

“I believe what he’s trying to say is that if you’re lucky enough to find the person whose heart matches your own, don’t walk away from him. Treasure them always,

because it is unlikely you will find another like him,” Kai stated.

“Isn’t that what I said?” Huli demanded.

“Not even close,” Rei muttered.

“Hey, if you’re not Junjie’s mate, that’s fine with us,” Moon cut in before Huli could continue along his bloody path. “I think at one time or another, we’ve all had those loose, no-strings relationships.”

Kai’s harsh whisper suddenly cut through the SUV. “You tie up your mates?”

“No!” Moon snapped.

“Sometimes,” Rei purred.

And that was more than Leo needed to know about Rei and Yichen’s sex life.

“The point I’m trying to make,” Moon pressed on, talking through clenched teeth, “is don’t lead Junjie on. We love him. He’s a sweet and caring guy, and we don’t want to see him hurt.”

Wow! He was actually getting the shovel talk. No one had ever threatened him like this over someone. Of course, he’d never stuck around long enough to receive the shovel talk, so there was that.

Both Rei and Huli shifted in their seats to pin him with very frightening “we can make it so no one finds the body” looks.

“We love Jun-Jun,” Rei said, enunciating each syllable.



“Whoa! Hey!” Leo put up his hands in front of him while pressing into his seat. “Jun-Jun is important to me, but neither of us is using the ‘M’ word. I think we’re focused on dealing with Jiang Chong and the fae right now while keeping Erik safe. I don’t want him hurt, either. Our expectations are pretty low right now.”

At least, he hoped they were. Junjie hadn’t hinted anything about Leo being his mate, and he was still making plans to return to China without Leo. However, the thought of watching Junjie and Erik board a plane and put an entire world between them was enough to make him queasy and his fingers cold.

“Fucking fae,” Kai grumbled as he sank lower in his seat. “Fucking Jiang Chong. Why can’t I just get rid of one of them? I’m a powerful dragon, feared by even some of the gods, but I can’t wipe out the fae.”

Moon reached across and patted the dragon’s slumped shoulder. “That’s because you’re a good dragon, and you don’t want to hurt innocent people.”

“Jiang Chong’s slippery too. I bet the gods would have trouble catching him,” Leo added.

“Besides, look where we are!” Moon hit the turn signal and slowed the SUV as they reached the brightly lit parking lot of the fast-food joint. Thankfully, there wasn’t a long line for the drive-through at five in the morning. “Potatoes make everything better.”

Moon attempted to park so they could go inside to order, but Huli and Kai wouldn’t have it. Huli needed to see the talking box and witness how food was passed through a window. Poor Moon had to wrangle all their chaotic orders. Leo tried not to laugh too hard as Kai, Rei, and Huli attempted to order everything off the menu.

In the end, they had to wait for someone to bring out their many bags. Four bags were

put aside while one was passed around during the drive home. The smell of grease, fried foods, and coffee permeated the vehicle even with the windows down. Conversation had ground to a halt. There were happy noises and the occasional urging to try something.

Leo sipped his coffee and met Moon's smiling eyes in the rearview mirror. Of all the people in the car, only the two of them knew what it was like to be human, or at least pass for it. The elf, fox spirit, and dragon had largely been on the outside, but it was the Zhang clan that had brought them into something bigger.

But Moon surprised him with another thought. "I know cats are typically loners, but this is what it means to be in a clan. Enjoy."

As Rei laughed at Huli's expression as he bit into a breakfast sandwich and Kai offered Rei some creamer for his coffee, Leo had to admit he liked this a lot. More than he ever would have expected.

### Chapter 15

#### Zhang Junjie

Junjie followed the whispers toward Erik's room. The little boy was supposed to be helping Ming Yu with her baking while he ran an errand with Yichen, but he swore he could hear Erik's giggles coming from his room.

As he drew closer, he picked out the sound of Leo's hushed voice giving instructions to the child. Junjie bit his lower lip to hold in any noises as he crept to the open door and peered inside.

Leo and Erik were near the entrance to the room, on their hands and knees, with their backs to him. Leo held perfectly still, and Erik's behind was in the air, wiggling as if he couldn't contain his excitement.

"When we're hunting, we have to be very quiet and sneak up on our prey very slowly. Like this." Leo edged closer to the stuffed rabbit placed in the center of the room, not making a sound.

He paused, looked over his shoulder, and motioned for Erik to follow his lead. The giggling two-year-old inched forward with a soft shuffling noise as his clothes rubbed against the carpet.

"When we get close to our prey, we pounce, not letting them escape."

Leo illustrated by leaping onto the fluffy white bunny. He wrapped his arms around

the toy and rolled onto his back, holding the rabbit to his stomach.

Erik let out a loud roar and launched himself at Leo, landing across his stomach and the bunny. Leo let out a fake cry of fear and Junjie could no longer hold in his laughter. The scene was too adorable.

“Oh, no! There’s a spy!” Leo shouted. “Go pounce on Jun-Jun!”

Erik pushed to his feet and lifted his hands into the air, his fingers curled into makeshift claws as he ran to Junjie. Before he reached the vampire, the little boy jumped toward Junjie as if he were pouncing on him.

Junjie bent and caught him under the arms, lifting him high above his head. Bright laughter filled room and squeezed his tender heart. Junjie pulled him in close and pressed kisses to his neck, earning more squeals of laughter. After that quick break, he set Erik on his feet again.

Erik didn’t hesitate to spin and hurry to where Leo was leaning up on one elbow, the fluffy bunny toy resting in front of him. Erik pounced on the bunny, making adorable growling noises, but as he settled on the floor next to Leo, he wrapped his arms around the doll, cuddling it.

“I had no idea that pouncing lessons needed to start so young,” Junjie said as he lingered in the open doorway.

Leo flashed him a broad grin. “If you can walk, you can pounce.”

Junjie lowered his eyes to Erik as he petted the rabbit’s extra-long ears and pressed a kiss to his pink nose. “Your protégé doesn’t appear to be a ruthless killer just yet, though.”

“Yeah.” Leo huffed a laugh. “A well-fed cat doesn’t tend to be a vicious hunter.” He reached out and tickled Erik’s belly, wringing more giggles from the boy. “And Jun-Jun keeps us very well fed, doesn’t he? We’re turning into lazy kitty cats.”

The idea had a certain amount of appeal. Junjie couldn’t say that he minded having two happy, well-fed, lazy cats in his house if they were Leo and Erik.

“Did you get your errand completed without a problem?”

Junjie nodded as he stepped farther into the room and sat near Leo and Erik on the floor. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you arrived.”

Leo brushed off his apology with an easy wave of his hand. “Xiao Dan said you’d be back soon. Besides, this one was making quite the mess with the flour while helping Ming Yu. I thought I’d take him off her hands for a bit and get him cleaned up.”

“Since you’re here, would you mind telling me more about cat shifters?” Junjie prodded.

Erik pushed to his feet and wandered across the room to his toy chest, where he started searching for a particular item.

“Yeah. Sure.” Leo ran a hand through his hair, brushing it from his forehead. His smile didn’t waver, but there was a cautiousness that tensed the lines around his eyes. It was something Junjie was growing accustomed to seeing. The cat shifter was trying to be forthright and honest with him, but there was no fighting a lifetime of guarded behavior. “Was there something specific you had in mind?”

“How old were you when you shifted for the first time?”

The lines disappeared from his face, and Leo let out a soft breath.

“Sixteen...mmm...maybe seventeen. I think. Well, that was when I completely shifted. I was fifteen when I partially shifted for the first time.” His grin turned into a smirk, and Leo leaned his shoulder against the bed while turning to face Junjie. “I’d gotten into a fight at school with some kids who were bullying me.” He rubbed the side of his nose, and his eyes darted away from Junjie as if in embarrassment. “I might have been a bit of a runt in school and thought if I ran my mouth, it would help to make up for my lack of size.”

Junjie fought to control his expression. His heart swelled for young Leo. The man was barely 175 centimeters now, so he could easily imagine a scrappy and thin boy with wild auburn hair and a mouth that didn’t quit.

“Just as the fight was starting, I sprouted fangs and claws that were not human. I ran to the woods before my tail came in.” He clicked his tongue. “I ended up hiding there for the rest of the day. My parents found me in the woods as it got dark. I was covered in dirt and leaves. My dad thought the whole incident was hilarious. My mom was less than amused.”

“Were you in trouble?”

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“Nah. Nothing I couldn’t talk my way out of.”

“I believe that.”

Leo winked at him. “The fangs and claws were gone when my parents found me, but it took another day for me to get rid of the tail. They ended up homeschooling me that entire year until I could fully control my shifting. We couldn’t afford another accident. When I returned to finish schooling, we’d moved to a different district.”

Junjie hesitated, but finally pushed the question out. “Your parents? They’re both cat shifters?”

Leo nodded. “Yep. I grew up in a kind of weird household. My parents weren’t married and if an adult asked them, they’d say they were just friends with benefits.” That last part, Leo leaned toward Junjie to whisper, as if Erik could understand that term. “But I was their third kid together, and a late-in-life baby, too. My siblings are way older than me. They lived together, but then they’d also take turns disappearing for a few days, claiming they ‘just needed a break from this family thing.’” Leo even made the quote signs with his fingers while rolling his eyes. “It was all bullshiii—hogwash. They loved each other and enjoyed having a family together, but they’d also been raised to be independent, free spirits.”

“They panicked at the idea of being tied down but secretly loved it,” Junjie supplied.

“Yes! Exactly.” Leo groaned and rolled his eyes again. “But they loved me and taught me how to be a cat, even if it was a little demented at times.”

“Are they...” Junjie’s words drifted off, not wanting to stir up old pain for Leo.

“They’re still alive and kickin’. Last I heard, they were up in Canada. I haven’t seen them since I left the house at nineteen, which was a year later than they wanted.” Leo shrugged and grinned. “But I’m a lazy cat. They were excellent teachers, though. Made a lot of the cat things feel easy.”

“Was it hard to learn to shift?”

“Nope. Not at all. When your body is ready for the shift, instincts kick in. Mine was already getting close when I had that partial shift. The fight kicked my teenage hormones and survival instincts into overdrive. Later, safe in my own home, my dad spent a lot of time with me, shifting back and forth. My mom didn’t shift as much, but she has the prettiest tortoiseshell coat. My dad is a tuxedo black and white cat.”

“Neither of your parents was orange and white like you?”

Leo shook his head. “Nah. I was just grateful I didn’t end up an all-black cat. There are still some people that have some crazy superstitions about black cats.”

There was a crash on the other side of the room as Erik pulled two large plastic cars out of his bin and dropped them on the floor. He seemed happily lost in his own world, playing with his toys and content to have Leo and Junjie nearby.

“We won’t know what color Erik’s cat will be until he changes for the first time, right?” Junjie inquired.

“Pretty much.” Leo glanced over his shoulder at Erik, and his smile softened. “I think he’d be an adorable calico, but he could be a sleek black cat or even one of those with the leopard-like spots.”



“He’s going to be perfect no matter what his cat looks like when he shifts,” Junjie announced with complete confidence. “I...just worry.”

“About?”

“What if we’re not enough when it comes time for him to shift? I don’t want him to be frustrated or get hurt trying to shift too early. What if?—”

Leo’s low chuckles cut off Junjie’s sentence and drew his gaze away from the child to the shifter’s handsome face. A piece of hair had fallen in front of his eyes and Junjie had to twist his fingers together in his lap to keep from reaching out to move it.

“You’re so cute and sweet sometimes, it’s a wonder that I don’t get a cavity from being near you,” Leo purred. “All you need to do is tell him that he’s a cat shifter and remind him that one day he’s going to shift. When the time is right, his body will know what to do.”

But that didn’t feel like enough. The words balanced on the tip of his tongue.

Come to China with us. Be there to guide Erik as he grows into a young man.

Don’t leave me...

He couldn’t say any of that. They barely knew each other. Sure, Leo knew far more about him after spending months spying on him in his cat form, but that didn’t count. There was no way he could ask Leo to move away from the place he called home.

Besides, deep down, he knew his desire to have Leo accompany them wasn’t purely for Erik’s sake. He wasn’t ready to let the cat go. He wanted to show him his home and his world. There were so many things he wanted to discover about Leo. They needed more time together. Years. Decades. Centuries, if possible.

Leo sat up straight, his legs bent in front of him and his body moving a tad closer to Junjie. “I wouldn’t worry too much. You’ve got Huli with you. I’m sure shifting is shifting. I wouldn’t be surprised if seeing the fox spirit change from fox to human helps Erik along when he gets older.”

That earned a frown. He’d forgotten about the huli jing.

“While I don’t have a problem with Huli, I don’t know that he’s the best influence and teacher for a young boy,” Junjie hedged.

In return, Leo leaned in closer, the arm he was partially supporting his weight on bumping into Junjie’s and staying pressed against his. Leo tipped his face up toward Junjie, and the most wicked grin spread across those soft, plush lips. His voice dipped so very low, seeming to caress the inside of his ears in the most tantalizing manner. “Are you saying that I’m a good influence?”

“You have your moments,” Junije murmured.

“How about we make this one of those moments where I’m nota very good influence?”

A tiny voice in his head screamed that this was a bad idea. This was not the time or place, but it felt like forever since he’d last kissed Leo. His entire body moved closer without him commanding it to, as if he were magically drawn to Leo and he couldn’t stop himself.

Just one kiss.

What harm would it do?

One small, brief?—

“Gege, car!” A bright-red plastic car suddenly appeared right before his eyes, stopping mere centimeters from crashing into his nose. He jerked, his heart leaping into his throat. A gasp broke from Leo as he jolted upright and away from Junjie.

It appeared his brain needed an extra couple of seconds to register that he hadn’t even heard Erik’s approach from the toy chest. He blinked, his eyes focusing on the smiling two-year-old who was dragging the large bunny by the ear in one hand and holding one of his favorite toy cars in the other.

“You little stinker!” Leo snatched up the child and cradled him in his arms while blowing raspberries against his neck and cheeks. “Did you get jealous? Are you not

willing to share your precious gege with me?” With each question, he tickled Erik more, wringing wild laughter from the boy.

After nearly a full minute, Leo put Erik on his feet only to have the child collapse in Junjie’s lap. The car had been lost in the initial struggle, and the rabbit was also forgotten. It didn’t matter. Erik rested his flushed cheek on Junjie’s chest and wrapped his fingers in Junjie’s shirt.

“My gege!” he shouted at Leo, but there was a wide grin on his face as if he were expecting Leo to attack him again as “punishment.”

“Oh, really?” Leo picked up the rabbit that rested between them and wedged it into Erik’s lap, causing more giggles. He scooted closer and wrapped one arm across Junjie’s back, drawing them in close so that they were touching from shoulder to thigh. “Well, you need to learn to share, but I’ve never met a cator kittenwho could take from me what I wanted.”

Erik lifted his head from where it rested on Junjie’s chest. He pointed at Junjie and proclaimed, “My gege.” He pointed at Leo. “My kitty mao.”

Leo’s lips twitched as he looked at Junjie. “Kitty mao?”

Junjie shrugged. “Learning a language is always a work in progress.”

“Fine. I’ll be a kitty mao.” Leo dipped his head and placed a quick kiss right behind Junjie’s ear before resting his head on Junjie’s shoulder.

This. Junjie wanted this forever.

He just had to find a way to preserve it. To convince Leo to travel across the ocean with them.

## Chapter 16

Zhang Junjie

A storm was rolling in.

Junjie stepped into a small clearing and stared at the black sky. There were no moon and stars tonight. Thick, dark clouds poured across the heavens like a billowing cape, blotting out all light. A fierce wind rose and fell, causing the canopy to sway and the limbs to creak. The noise was wonderful for masking their movements, but it also hid the approach of the fae.

“Rei, can you tell if this storm is naturally occurring?” Xiao Dan inquired, lifting his voice to be heard over the rustling of the leaves.

Junjie’s stomach twisted as his mind filled in the rest. Or is the storm the result of fae magic?

Rei looked up and frowned. “I’m inclined to say yes, with a little bit of no.”

Yichen bumped him with his shoulder, his lips twisted into a smirk. “You’re going to need to do better than that, darling.”

He paid for that snarky comment. The wind shifted direction, and the vampire got a face full of his long hair. Yichen growled as he shoved it away while Rei snickered at his mate. Both of them wore their hair long, but Rei had been smart enough to weave his into a long braid before they set out. Yichen had made do with only part of his hair pulled into a high ponytail.

Junjie smoothed his expression, taking this as a sign to ask Mei Lian to trim his hair. He’d been considering growing his hair long like Yichen, but this was a friendly

reminder of what a nuisance it could be.

“I believe the storm itself is naturally occurring,” Rei continued, pausing to stick his tongue out at Yichen, then looking at Xiao Dan again. “However, there’s a bit of magic in the air. I can’t tell if Trin is intentionally intensifying the storm or if there’s more magic than normal because of the eradication of the humans.”

That was a lovely reminder that the fae were growing stronger with every city devoured by the forest and every human home that was abandoned as they moved west to safety.

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“Let’s push on. We still haven’t reached the spot Marcus indicated on the map,” Xiao Dan ordered.

Junjie marched with Xiao Dan, Huli, Yichen, and Rei through the woods to investigate a potential spot for another fae ritual as a team of Variks examined a separate location. The rest of the Zhang clan remained at the manor, prepared for yet another attack by Jiang Chong.

As much as he dreaded a massive battle with the fae, Junjie was equally tired of this stalemate they’d reached. They had been unsuccessful in locating Trin’s or Jiang Chong’s hiding spots. The fae knew where to find the Zhang clan, but they appeared unwilling to attempt a direct assault, thanks to Kai’s presence.

That left the fae with one option—send in Jiang Chong to create chaos and fear within the clan while the fae bolstered their position.

The one good thing out of all this was that Leo had promised to remain at the manor and protect Erik while he was away. That felt safer for both of them, and Junjie could focus on the task in front of him.

Out of their group, only Huli seemed to be enjoying himself. The fox would run ahead of them, sniffing the air and searching for any sign that the fae were in the area. After several minutes, he would return, running straight to Xiao Dan, circling him as if checking to make sure he’d come to no harm. His tails flicked and fluttered about him and Shixiong. The things acted as if they had minds of their own, and yet all they probably thought about was Xiao Dan.

“Do you smell any fae in the area?” Xiao Dan asked on Huli’s most recent return.

Huli sniffed the air twice and sneezed. “Hints here and there, but nothing fresh. Of course, if they’re downwind of us, I have no hope of detecting them until it’s too late.”

Xiao Dan ran his hand along the top of Huli’s head. “It’s the coming storm. No one is blaming you for that.”

Huli darted a short distance away from Xiao Dan to run up a fallen log that had one end wedged in the dirt and the other balanced several meters in the air on a flat rock. The fox stood at the top, his head held high and chest puffed up. Behind him, his nine fluffy tails danced in the wind like a cape.

“What do you think, Gege? Am I impressive now? Like one of the superheroes,” Huli called out.

Xiao Dan walked to the fox. “Huli is always impressive.” His hand moved on Huli’s head to get a spot right behind his ear and Huli’s mouth fell open, showing off rows of sharp, pointed teeth. He would have looked vicious if his long pink tongue hadn’t lolled out the side of his mouth.

Just when Junjie thought he would have to nudge his shixiong and the fox spirit into continuing their journey, Huli’s head snapped up, his ears erect and turning on his head. Junjie couldn’t tell if he smelled something on the wind or heard something above the rattling of the branches, but he was alert while the rest of their team stood silent, hands sliding for their weapons.

“Get down!” Rei shouted.

The words were still leaving Rei’s lips when Huli dove straight into Xiao Dan,



knocking him to the ground. Junjie fell to the dirt and rolled to a large tree. The wind eased, and he could hear the approach of dozens of feet as they ran through the forest toward them. Bow strings twanged and arrows thunked into thick tree trunks. He peered out from behind the wide maple to see at least twenty elves racing in their direction with bows and swords drawn. Only one of them was on horseback.

“Trin.” Rei’s voice became a vicious snarl as he launched himself from his hiding spot. The wind nearly carried Yichen’s curse away, but the vampire didn’t hesitate to follow his mate into the fight.

“Huli, the horse!” Xiao Dan pointed at the magnificent beast, sending Huli in for the attack.

The fox raced forward, getting ahead of Rei to lunge at the horse. The beast was still larger than the fox, but Huli could maneuver faster, avoiding the creature’s hoofs as it kicked and bucked. Other elves tried to attack Huli as the fox worked to unseat Trin, but they didn’t have a chance. Both Xiao Dan and Junjie joined the fight, protecting the fox and cutting through their adversaries.

Trin roared in frustration as he gripped the horse’s reins with his left hand while trying to swipe at Huli with the black onyx sword in his right. Trin’s sword swung too close and clipped the tip of one of the fox’s tails. A pained yelp ripped from Huli, and Xiao Dan cried out.

“No!”

In the blink of an eye, brilliant sunlight cut through the forest. The forest of maples, oak, and pine changed to greenbamboo. Junjie cringed for a heartbeat, his body instinctively fearing the sunlight, only to realize that none of it was real. Xiao Dan had called on his powers to wrap them in a massive illusion.

And just like he always did when he panicked, Xiao Dan had taken them back thousands of years to the time of their human existence.

Junjie glanced down to find that he was in a deep-green robe with leaves stitched into it with a fine blue thread. His throat tightened. He'd always loved this garment, but it hadn't had a chance at surviving the long years.

Close to him, Xiao Dan and Yichen were dressed in old-fashioned robes while Rei and Huli had vanished. The elves had paused for a breath, seeming stunned by the shift in their surroundings.

"You think you can stop us with this weak glamour?" A dark and twisted chuckle escaped Trin's throat, and he pointed his sword at Xiao Dan. "No one is better at glamour than the fae."

As he spoke, tiny holes dotted the air as if embers had fallen on Xiao Dan's illusion, burning holes. With each passing second, the openings were growing larger and larger. The sparkling sunlight was fading, and the bamboo stalks were disappearing. Even Junjie's emerald-green robe was fading from existence.

Shoving aside the lingering feelings of loss, Junjie jumped into the fight, slashing one elf across the throat while he was still distracted. A troll-like creature blocked his blade with his staff at the last moment and darted away with a high-pitched squeal.

"I don't need my glamour to be better than the fae's. I just need mine to distract you."

As the wind carried away Xiao Dan's words, Trin's horse's panicked shrieks pierced the night. The horse bucked, kicking out its hind legs and then its front. As the last of Xiao Dan's illusion dissipated, Huli appeared and chomped on one of the horse's legs.

One more wild kick and Huli flew off, but so did Trin.

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The elf hit the ground and rolled away from the steed. Huli flipped and landed on his feet with the skill of a gymnast. He scampered to Xiao Dan's side, bloody teeth bared. The horse shot off through the forest, leaving the fight well behind.

"Mine!" Rei snarled. He launched himself at his half brother, a short sword clenched in each fist.

Metal pounding against metal echoed through the forest. Junjie turned his attention away from the two royals fighting to focus on the rest of the forces Trin brought with him. Rei could handle his half brother. But he could do that more easily if he wasn't worried about some asshole coming along and stabbing him in the back.

The troll creature that had escaped him minutes ago now shot an arrow at him. Junjie dodged it, slipping behind a tree. As he came out on the other side, he slid a dagger from his waist and threw it at the troll. The blade spun, reflecting the flash of lightning before burning deep in the troll's forehead. He didn't make a sound as he collapsed on the ground, his bow falling from limp fingers.

"Useless elf!" Trin blocked another of Rei's slashes and countered quickly. "You've gone soft living with the humans. Mating with a human."

"Vampire!" Rei's shout rose above the metallic ring of swords and the cries of the dying. "I love a vampire. I fuck a vampire. And my family is now comprised of a big clan of vampires and a goddamn dragon!"

"Sexy, babe." Yichen cackled.

Junjie would have rolled his eyes at the pair, but two elves and what could have been a pixie were trying to circle him. He was running through his daggers as he tried to take out the oversized dragonfly. The thing was faster at dodging him than the troll. The elves were also taking turns trying to skewer him.

“Let me lend you a hand,” Huli called out. The fox spirit thundered across the field, ran up his back, and leaped off Junjie’s shoulders. A blur of orange, black, and white flew through the air, that big mouth open and aimed right at the pixie. A high-pitched shriek cut through the night and fell silent before the fox landed.

“I will kill you and no one will question my claim to the throne,” Trin growled.

“Just take the throne to our realm with the rest of the fae and close the damn door. No one will question your claim then!” Rei roared, but the fighting went on with a clang of swords.

The sky split with a bright flash of lightning, followed by ear-shattering thunder that shook the ground. Rain fell in blinding sheets, drenching everyone and everything in an instant. Vision dropped to almost nothing. It was useless to throw his last couple of daggers at the elves in front of him. The rain had made it impossible to aim or even see. As it was, he was simply trying to remain ahead of both the swords that were trying to cut him to pieces.

Luck shone on him. One elf with liquid black eyes slipped on a wet patch and the surprise allowed Junjie to get inside of his guard. With barely more than a flick of his wrist, the tip of his blade slashed across the elf’s throat, opening a gaping wound he wouldn’t survive.

Yet, as he spun to counter a slash from his other opponent, the earth trembled under the pounding of hoofs. He blocked a blow and glanced over to see more than a dozen horses with elvan riders plunging out of the deep shadows of the forest. And in the

lead was Trin's right-hand enforcer, Aire Bira.

This was taking a terrible turn. Junjie struggled to finish the fight with his current opponent before one of the approaching elves on horseback could run him down. They were outnumbered, and the weather had turned against them. The smart option was to retreat, but he fought on, waiting for Xiao Dan to issue a new order.

"Shixiong?" Yichen shouted. His shidi had come to the same conclusion. Survival meant running, but would they still escape with their lives? The sudden downpour was turning the ground into a soggy marsh. Could they even move faster than the horses and their sword-wielding riders?

"Retreat to higher ground!" Xiao Dan shouted.

"No!" Rei screamed. "I can end this now!"

"Rei!" Yichen bellowed, and a fist gripped Junjie's heart. If the elf refused to disengage from his fight with Trin, Yichen would remain at his side, protecting him until the bitter end. And if Yichen didn't leave, none of them would leave. They'd lost him once...

"Fire!"

Junjie was still trying to figure out who'd shouted that single word when the dark sky filled with arrows cutting between the raindrops to pummel the newly arrived elves. He stumbled a couple of steps as the arrows found the throat and eyes of the elf he'd been fighting. The elf gasped, only to have it change into a strangled gurgle as he crumpled to the ground. His pale-white skin changed to gray and black. Those were poison-tipped arrows.

Taking the opening, Junjie twisted to search the woods behind him. He spotted a

short slender elf with hair as white as moonlight standing on a thick tree branch several meters above the ground. A bow was clenched in her left fist while she pulled an arrow from her quiver on her hip. These arrows were much larger than the poison ones that had filled the air.

“Who is that?” Yichen demanded.

“Move your ass, Rei!” the female elf shouted.

“Fine!” Rei growled. He slipped away from Trin as more arrows flew at the would-be king of the elves. “We’re leaving.”

“Who is that?” Yichen asked a second time as he followed a step behind Rei. Junjie and Xiao Dan fell in with them, racing as quickly as they could through the trees and away from the fight with Trin’s army. Huli ran to join them, his brilliant fur soaked and matted, making him look more like a giant orange rat.

“That’s my half sister. Apparently, she wants Trin dead more than she wants me dead.”

## Chapter 17

### Zhang Junjie

No one spoke for a long time. There was only running. Rei took the lead behind his half sister as they darted between the trees and dove through the thicker undergrowth, trying to put more and more distance between themselves and Trin’s army.

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Junjie hung to the back of their group, covering their retreat with the help of more pixies and other wingless figures that looked as if they were round boulders with crude facial features and stubby appendages. Yet, despite their small statures, they could move surprisingly fast through the forest.

Junjie spent most of his time watching for signs that they were being pursued and trying to dodge low tree limbs. The storm slacked off to a steady drizzle. Low rolls of thunder grew more distant as the rain moved farther north. Rain soaked every part of his body. His boots squelched with each step and water dripped into his eyes from his hair. A distracting chill clung to his flesh, threatening to sink into his soul. Gods, he would never be warm again.

Right now, the only thing he wanted was to return home. Dry clothes, hot tea, and the sight of Leo playing with Erik in the boy's room. That would chase away this bone-deep cold.

But such a thing was a long way off.

He might not know where they were in the forest, but he felt fairly certain they were not moving in the correct direction to reach their SUV. Rei's half sister was leading them somewhere, and Junjie prayed it wasn't into more trouble. She might have saved them, but he didn't trust her. They'd made the mistake of trusting Trin, believing that he'd be more sensible than King Ash and Queen Belladonna. They'd been wrong.

After running for what felt like a good hour, they slowed as they reached an enormous tree with bright-yellow leaves. As he drew closer, he blinked. It was a



gingko tree. What was a gingko tree doing here?

His brain was still wrestling with that question when the thick bark on the trunk cracked and parted as if a door were opening within it. A round creature that stood about a meter tall with baggy clothes stuck his head out and looked left and right before gazing up at Rei.

“Young Master Olag,” Rei greeted with a bow of his head. “I figured you would be far from the human world by now. What are you doing with such a disreputable group?”

Junjie blinked and edged closer to where they’d gathered around the opening. It was odd to hear Rei talking like this. The elf was normally sassy and irreverent with a very informal way of speaking, but with this person, his intonation became more formal and even a touch respectful. Something he seemed to save for only Xiao Dan.

“We’ve moved far beyond the stage where we can ignore the mess in the human realm and still salvage our home,” the boulder with a bulbous nose and large brown eyes said. “Come. Come.” The one Rei called Olag waved for them to follow him inside the tree.

“Leave your fox outside,” Rei’s sister ordered, pointing at a bedraggled Huli with wilted ears and tails.

Huli snapped sharp teeth at her. “No! Absolutely not! Huli protects Xiao Dan.”

“No animals!”

So, naturally, Huli shifted into a slender youth with rich curls and enormous eyes. Somehow, he still appeared waterlogged and ragged. His hair clung to his skull and his dark T-shirt hung on his skinny frame. Regardless, Xiao Dan smiled at him and

threaded their fingers together, pulling him in close.

The female elf groaned and threw up her hands. “Fine. Whatever. Just get in there. We’ve lost Trin and his army for now, but I’m sure he’s got trackers looking for us.”

Yichen led the way and the rest followed him down a set of winding, uneven stairs cut straight into the tree. The interior of the tree grew warmer, with the lingering scent of pipe smoke, old books, and damp earth hanging in the air. The murmur of conversation that had been bubbling below them stopped with their approaching footsteps.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Junjie blinked, his heart flipping over in his chest. It was as if the staircase had led them to a fantasy world. The room was far bigger than he’d expected, but it maintained an oddly cozy feel with cluttered bookshelves overflowing with dusty old tomes. There was an overstuffed chair covered in an ancient handmade quilt. A tea set sat ready for guests on a low circular table.

But beyond the furnishing, there were members of the fae, but not the ones he was used to seeing—namely elves. There were a few other rocklike creatures in baggy clothes, smoking long-stemmed pipes. Tiny, winged figures that were probably either pixies or fairies flitted here and there around the room before settling up in the highest, most hidden corners. There were more with red hats that were shaped like mushrooms. Mostly, they were all small in stature, measuring a meter or shorter.

Of course, if they were the height of the vampires and the elves, they would never have fit them all in the room.

“Your Highness,” several of the beings said with bows of their head as Rei approached.

Rei crossed to the center of the room near the table with the tea set and held up his hands. “Enough. I’m sure the news has spread that I renounced the throne. I’m not the crown prince or would-be king of the fae. No more of that. I’m just Rei.”

“Sure, but if we have to choose between you and that psychopath half brother of ours, who do you think they’re going with?” a cold feminine voice drawled.

Junjie turned from his inspection of the books on the shelf to find the white-haired elf seated on the stairs. Her spine was hunched and shoulder slumped as if she were exhausted after their rescue. She shoved a hand through her stark white hair, pushing it from her face and revealing a spectacularly pointed ear with a silver cuff and chain.

Rei sighed. “Clan, this is Ellora, my half sister...” Rei paused as he squinted at the female elf and leaned toward her before finishing, “from my father’s side. I think.”

Ellora leveled a very irritated and unimpressed look at her sibling. “Yes, King Ash was my father, so technically I’m not related at all to Trin. Bless the goddess for that.”

Yichen sidled up to Rei and pitched his voice low. “I thought you said that your parents had killed off all your other siblings, and that Trin was the only one left.”

Rei brushed a quick kiss on his mate’s cheek. “I saidmost. My parents had killed offmostof their bastards. Out of the survivors, Trin was one of the few who stuck somewhat close to the royal family. The rest of those who hadn’t been slaughtered stayed away. They lived longer that way.”

“Arrogant wastrel,” Ellora muttered.

“Tedious harpy,” Rei shot back.

“Thank you!” Xiao Dan blurted out in an exceedingly loud voice, cutting off the sibling bickering. “Thank you so much for coming to our aid earlier. We had gone out following a lead that some of Trin’s soldiers had been in the area searching for a place to conduct their ritual. We weren’t expecting to encounter Trin or that he would have support like that.”

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Ellora grunted, and Rei gritted his teeth at her in a silent snarl.

Yichen rested his hand on his mate's shoulder and squeezed. He turned his attention to the white-haired elf and asked, "What's your stake in this?"

Ellora's dark eyes shifted to Rei before she spoke, her gaze moving to Yichen. "You're the vampire that was held prisoner for a century. I heard rumors you survived and escaped. Impressive."

"Rei saved my life. He's the reason I survived my imprisonment."

The white-haired elf seemed to consider this. She nodded. "Trin's plan will not only destroy the humans, but all fae and our realm."

"He's gone mad, like my parents," Rei grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Is it madness or a family trait at this point?" Huli inquired, and Junjie had to bite his bottom lip to stop his grin. The fox spirit wasn't wrong. Both of Rei's parents had been obsessed with power and taking over the human realm. Now their son was following in their footsteps. This was feeling more like an "absolute power corrupts absolutely" thing.

"Huli, hush," Xiao Dan chastised, but Rei was waving him off.

"He's right. Blood has stained nearly every change of power for our people. We are drowning in twisted plots and schemes. It's been thousands of years since our struggles have spilled across the human realm. We've been content to keep the

humans out of our mess.”

“Until now,” Ellora cut in. She shoved to her feet and descended the last couple of stairs to step into the room. “To keep the door endlessly open and conduct the ritual spells to wipe out the humans, King Ash and Queen Belladonna have been draining the magic from the fae realm. Our home is dying. That’s where I was, watching the magic get sucked away. There was no point in coming to the human realm if it was going to make me a target for Queen Belladonna.”

“But she’s dead now. Trin killed her,” Junjie murmured.

“Yeah, and I celebrated her death for about two seconds. Then I heard Trin was planning to carry on their plans of destroying the humans. He doesn’t care that he’s killing off our world and our people.”

“So, we need to close the door between the worlds,” Rei stated.

Ellora closed her eyes and shook her head. “The royal family continues to be filled with racist assholes.”

“Hey!” Rei shouted, and Junjie and his companions echoed it.

“Don’t deny it!” she shouted at him. “You’re all the same. If the fae isn’t an elf, they aren’t worth considering. They have no use outside of being servants or cannon fodder in your wars.”

“I-I-I,” Rei stammered, his gaze darting around at the other members of the fae who were watching him with large, questioning eyes.

“In His Majesty’s defense, his manner and words were always more courteous than those of his parents,” Olag interjected.

“No.” Rei released a heavy breath and hung his head. “I wasn’t much better than my parents. I respected you and others because of your perceived age and knowledge, but I’ll admit that I don’t give the other races much thought.” His head snapped up, and he glared hard at Ellora. “But I have never considered any of them cannon fodder!”

Ellora huffed and met his glare. “Well, Trin isn’t any better than Ash and Belladonna. He’s overlooked the other members of the fae, using them as scouts and grunt troops to be killed in his war against the humans and vampires. He’s commanded all the elves he can get his hands on to remain on this side of the door so they can fuel his spells and fight his battles.”

Yichen shrugged one shoulder. “Tell all the gnomes, brownies, pixies, and others to head to the fae realm and close the damn door. Leave us to kill off the elves. Less problems for them.”

Ellora pointed a finger at Yichen and opened her mouth, but she closed it again and turned her attention to Rei. “Your mate is adorably bloodthirsty, even for a vampire. I can see why you chose him.” She turned her attention back to Yichen. “The problem is that the fae realm needs the elves, regardless of whether the other races want them there. Without the elves, the fae realm will die.”

“I’m confused,” Xiao Dan murmured, and Junjie nodded. It felt as though he were missing some key part of fae lore to follow this conversation.

“Allow me to explain.” Olag waddled across the room and hefted himself into a large chair. He wiggled his butt to get settled. His hands resting on his round stomach, he directed his piercing gaze at Xiao Dan and Junjie. “The fae realm is a place of magic and nature. The magic feeds into nature, and in return, nature adds to the magic in the air. However, none of that is possible without elves.”

“But I thought all the fae were magical,” Junjie cut in.

“We are, but the elves have more depth and breadth to their magic. We gnomes are linked to the mountains and the rocks. Our magic is about endurance and strength. We know nothing of the beauty and fragility of flowers. That’s the realm of the pixies.” As he spoke, he motioned up toward the top of a nearby bookshelf where some pixies were watching the conversation. “But the elves and their magic, they can split the rocks and tell the trees to grow. They can control water and the air. There’s no element beyond their reach.”

“It’s for that reason that our people have become so snobbish,” Ellora said.

Rei nodded. “And how the elves have held control of the fae realm for so long.”

“So, we need to take out Trin and possibly some of his crazy followers, then convince most of the elves to go through the door,” Yichen stated.

“Basically.” Ellora shifted from her left foot to her right while both of her eyebrows lifted as she stared at Rei.



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“Got it. Got it.” Rei held his hands in front of him as if to ward off more of her looks. “I’ll kill Trin for you. Possibly Aire Bira. I’ve got a dragon and a vampire mate who are itching to take out a few elves, so I might have to share with them.”

“Fine, but how are we supposed to keep yet another Trin from rising to take on the humans?” Ellora tossed up her hands and paced a short distance away, only to spin back and glare at her half brother. “This has been an endless cycle of blood and mayhem.”

“I think a dragon eating a large number of Trin’s fighters will be fairly convincing that this is a battle they cannot win,” Junjie offered. “Once you spread the word that Rei defeated Trin and the door is closing, the elves should race to the fae realm.”

“Because staying means death for them,” Xiao Dan finished.

Rei was going to be the one exception to that rule. He didn’t need the magical connection to his own realm any longer, thanks to the gift and spell he’d received from the witch Zelda. But they weren’t spreading that knowledge about, because Rei had no desire to see more of his fae brethren running loose in the human world after the door was closed.

Ellora tipped her chin toward her chest and chewed on her bottom lip in thought. “Okay. That will help. But what about after the door closes, in the fae realm? Who is going to lead the fae? Who will wrangle the elves into something coherent and less vicious?”

“I’m sorry, but that sounds very much like a you problem,” Rei said.

Ellora's head popped up, her eyes wide. "What?"

"I'm staying here even if it means I die. My mate is here. My clan is here. I don't want to leave."

Some of the tension that had been gripping Junjie's lungs in a near-choking embrace eased, allowing him to breathe. Every time this came up, there was some part of him that worried Yichen would choose to accompany Rei to the fae realm. He hated the idea of losing his didi yet again.

"But you're the heir to the throne! You're the only one who can lead our people!" While Ellora was adamant about Rei taking the reins of power and becoming the savior to the fae people, she also looked like she wanted to run Rei through with her sword.

"What are you talking about? Only one? That's some bullshit right there." Rei spun slowly in place, holding his hands out to the fae that were gathered in this room. "You've organized your own underground resistance force. You're leading them into battle and trying to figure out what is best for your people. What the hell do you need me for?"

Ellora's mouth bobbed open and closed several times. Her eyes grew impossibly wide, as if the idea of her taking the throne and becoming the next leader of the fae had never occurred to her.

"You have as much claim to the throne as Trin," Yichen murmured. "The key difference is that you're not willing to throw away all the lives of your people to kill off humans. Who the fuck cares about humans? They don't even think the fae are real. The humans are more concerned with killing each other off."

"Besides, I don't see how you have much choice. You're the one elf I've seen who

gives a shit about whether the fae live or die.” Rei reached over and wrapped his arm around Yichen’s waist and rested his chin on his mate’s shoulder. “I’m content to die here.”

Ellora’s pale face flushed bright red. “Fuck you!” She whirled about and stormed up the stairs, leaving them and the rest of the gathered fae staring in shocked silence.

Olag coughed and wiggled out of his chair. “Allow me to put on a pot of tea to warm you. Rest here for a bit. That will give any trackers who might be in the area the chance to move on before you leave.”

“Thank you for your hospitality, Master Olag,” Xiao Dan stated with a bow of his head to the gnome.

“Shixiong...am I wrong?” Rei’s voice was small and soft when he spoke. He didn’t look over at Xiao Dan, but his fingers tightened in Yichen’s clothes as if he were expecting Xiao Dan to announce that Rei needed to return to his realm right this second.

“That’s a hard question. I don’t believe you would be a poor leader for your people. While you may be impulsive and a touch reckless, you’re also caring and compassionate. You might act as if you don’t worry about the fate of all the fae, but we know it is just a façade. That being said”—he paused and cleared his throat—“I don’t believe you are the only person who can lead your people. There are others who must have your strength, knowledge, and compassion. I think you could be correct about Ellora. Of course...I am biased. I would prefer if you and Yichen remained with our clan.”

“Shixiong, I think I’ll step outside to make sure the area is free of threats. Why don’t you ask for directions from Master Olag?” Junjie suggested.

“Thank you, Junjie,” Xiao Dan said.

His foot had just landed on the first step when Rei called out to him. “Be careful. Ellora appeared to be in a stabby mood.”

Junjie smirked at the elf. “You forget, I grew up with Xiang. He was always stabby.”

At the top of the stairs, he paused, straining to hear any sounds of movement or talking beyond the door, but there was nothing. Crickets chirped and the wind softly rustled the leaves of the trees. The thunder was done, and the rain had even stopped.

Moving quickly, Junjie darted outside and a short distance away from the tree, plunging into the deepest shadows he could see within the forest. He paused there, holding his breath and listening.

“There’s no one out here but us,” Ellora informed him in a dull, flat voice. “You should have stayed inside by the fire. You’re still soaked.”

Junjie silently stepped out from his hiding place and walked toward the tree. The brilliant yellow leaves made the tree appear as if it were a tiny sun bound to the earth. It took him a few seconds to locate Ellora up on one of the thick branches several meters up from the ground. She leaned against the trunk while using the point of her knife to pick dirt out from under her nails. “While I don’t enjoy the cold, it’s not a problem. It’s not as if I can catch a cold.”

“Huh. I’ve heard that not much can kill vampires.”

She threw the silver knife in her hands at him. Junjie didn’t even bother to sidestep it. He caught it easily between two fingers, spun, and flung the knife at her without hesitation. The blade embedded itself in the tree trunk barely a hand’s width from her head. The elf jerked upright, her eyes wide as she stared at the quivering blade.

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“There are many things that can kill a vampire. It’s just that most of them aren’t easy to accomplish,” Junjie continued.

“I see...” Ellora pulled her knife out of the bark and leaned on the trunk again. She seemed to resume her work on her fingernails, but it felt like she was watching him a little more closely now.

Junjie moved to the other side of the ginkgo tree and jumped into one of the higher branches. He pulled himself up easily to about Ellora’s level while keeping the wide trunk between them.

“Why are you out here?” she demanded.

“I came out to make sure the area is clear before my clan mates leave for home.”

The elf gave another soft grunt, acknowledging his words. The silence had stretched for a full minute when the words exploded out of her.

“You know I’m right, right? Rei has to return to the fae realm and take over as king. It’s his birthright. Our people will listen to him. I don’t understand why he’s being so stubborn about this. He’s already planning to take care of Trin. Why not just be king?”

Junjie smiled. She made it sound like the most natural thing in the world, and maybe it was for someone who was born into that life.

“I don’t know all of Rei’s history, but I know he suffered for years at the hands of his

parents and the court. Even if he'd not found Yichen and fallen in love, I'm not sure he'd choose to be king. That path represents only pain and misery for him. He doesn't see it ever leading to a place of hope and life." He stopped and licked his lips, preparing to tread out onto a limb far skinnier than the one he was on. "But if the fae are to have a true fresh start, to break away from the darkness and bloodshed that has plagued your people, I think their best chance is with someone who didn't grow up in the court. Someone who is fighting for the survival of all your peoples."

"You're wrong about me and Rei."

"I don't know. I've been around for a long time, and I have gotten quite good at reading people."

Ellora snorted. "A long time. What? A couple of centuries?"

"Over two millennia, actually."

"Oh," she mumbled.

"I've witnessed the rise and fall of many kingdoms and dynasties. I've known the men and women who would claim seats of great power. They've spoken words of justice and compassion, but that's not what was in their hearts." Junjie closed his eyes and sighed. "I care greatly for Rei and believe he and Yichen have many years of happiness in front of them. But more importantly, living with my clan means Rei has a good chance of finding the healing he so desperately needs."

"What do you mean? He seems fine to me."

Resting his head on the tree, Junjie rocked it slightly to the right so that it would carry more clearly to Ellora without needing to speak louder. "Have you spent much time with Rei?"

“No. This might be the third or fourth time I’ve seen him in my lifetime, but he’s still as sarcastic and sharp-tongued as the first time I saw him.”

“True, but now those snarky comments hide a wounded soul. While Yichen was a prisoner, Rei had to watch the man who held his heart as he was tortured endlessly by his parents and the court. Would you come out unchanged from that experience?”

Neither Rei nor Yichen spoke much about their time together in the fae realm. Just a few words here and there, but it was more than enough to paint a picture of agonizing existence.

“No one would,” Ellora whispered.

“Rei is a good man at heart. That hasn’t changed about him. He is an easy choice when it comes to selecting a new leader. But he carries a new darkness in his soul, and I fear he would take that new darkness out on his people.”

Ellora said nothing for several minutes, leaving Junjie to listen to the creatures of the night moving about around them. An owl hooted and frogs croaked, though there were fewer of them now that the weather was turning cooler with the approach of autumn. Wind stirred the surrounding leaves, sending down random drops of rainwater, but his clothes and hair were still soaked. What did a little rain matter now?

“What are we supposed to do?” All the heat had evaporated from Ellora’s voice, and she sounded much more fragile than the tough warrior they’d first met. “Rei...he was the crown prince. He’s the obvious choice.”

“If you don’t mind an outsider’s opinion,” Junjie hedged, earning a harsh bark of laughter from his companion.

“It hasn’t stopped you so far.”

“The next leader of the fae is a moot point if you can’t get your people back to the fae realm. If you leave Trin and his army to my clan to deal with, you can focus your energy on saving as many of the elves and other races as you can. When the door is closed and your people are safe, you can worry about who will lead your people into a brighter, more hope-filled future.”

Ellora fell silent, allowing the song of the night creatures to swell. A temporary peace had fallen over the world. It was hard to believe they’d been running for their lives less than an hour ago. Or that members of the fae could be lurking close by now.

“It’s something to think about,” Ellora said. “After so many miserable years with King Ash and Queen Belladonna, only to have Trin follow in their footsteps.” Her sigh was heavy, sounding as if it had crawled up from the darkest places of her soul. “You can’t help but want to avoid the next nightmare.”

“Understandable, but you can’t plan beyond the obstacle that lies in your path right now.”



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Junjie knew that all too well from personal experience. As much as the members of his clan wanted to explore and understand the changing world around them, there was nothing they could do, no plans they could make, until they were free of Jiang Chong.

Sadly, after so many millennia, their clan found themselves right back within the long-reaching shadow of their demented creator. This time would be different. There was no escape for him. They could finally end his life and secure their freedom.

### Chapter 18

Leo St. George

“Cat, if you don’t stop pacing, I’m going to use you for target practice,” Chen grumbled as Leo traversed the main corridor leading to the front door for the sixth time in the past twenty minutes.

Leo paused and glared over his shoulder at the vampire before he continued on his route.

Moon poked Chen in the shoulder. “Stop it. You’re just as anxious about Xiao Dan and the others. Besides, you’re jealous that Erik chose Leo to read his bedtime story tonight instead of you.”

“Nonsense,” Chen mumbled under his breath. Except Leo could hear with his superb cat hearing that Chen didn’t really think it was nonsense. The vampire was hurt by the fact that the little boy had chosen Leo.

Smirking to himself, he wandered to the entrance and peered out at the empty driveway. Junjie and the others should have returned by now. Sunrise was still several hours away, but he'd been gone too long. What kind of trouble had they encountered? Should he have gone with Jun-Jun instead of remaining behind to protect Erik?

When the vampire had asked him to watch the child, Leo had caved in an instant to those big, fearful eyes. Junjie was relying on his gift to see walkers through the dead realm to warn the clan if Jiang Chong invaded their space again. Leo caring for Erik meant Junjie could focus all of his attention on the dangers he was going to face in the woods rather than worrying about what was happening at home.

But staying behind meant worrying endlessly about Junjie.

Was this what happened when people found their mates and did things like date? This was a fucking nightmare. Why would anyone do this long term?

"Relax. They texted that they're on their way back. Everyone is safe," Chen confessed.

"You hadn't told him already?" Moon gasped. "Junjie texted nearly half an hour ago!"

"What?" Leo roared, shifting straight into his human form. He marched up to Chen, who smirked at him as he looked down at Leo. Being short sucked. And Chen had a good six inches on him. It was hard to be intimidating when you were staring up someone's nose.

"What do you care?" Chen asked, one thick eyebrow lifting as if he were barely holding in a laugh. "Afraid the comfortable existence you've managed on the good graces of my shidi is going to suddenly end?"

Thankfully, Moon was right there. The smaller vampire reached up and flicked Chen's earlobe, causing him to flinch. His superior attitude crumbled to dust. "Why do you have to be such a nosy pot stirrer? You always have to be the first one to get the best spilled tea."

Chen batted away Moon's hand as his mate tried to flick his ear a second time. "This isn't about gossip. I'm genuinely concerned about Junjie's well-being, and I don't believe this tomcat has Junjie's best interests at heart." As he spoke the last word, he captured Moon's hand and brought it to his lips, where he pressed a kiss to his knuckles. Moon showed signs of melting, and Leo could only roll his eyes.

"I think Junjie would point out here that he's a grown adult and can look out for himself," Leo grouched as he paced to the door and gazed out the side window.

Chen and Moon were forgotten as soon as he reached the window. He saw the double doors at the end of the driveway opening to allow in the Zhangs' SUV. Leo ripped open the door and zipped outside, jogging down the stairs and along the path to meet the vehicle as soon as Junjie stepped out.

"What's wrong? Did something happen? Is Erik okay?" Junjie spat out questions at an astounding rate as he leaped from the vehicle.

"Erik is fine. What's wrong is that you were gone for hours, and I didn't know if you were dead or captured," Leo snapped. Junjie's dark eyebrows shot up to his forehead and his lips parted, forming an O of surprise.

Fuck. That was a little much. Leo needed to rein it in.

But he didn't want to. He'd been worried about Junjie, and that had morphed into actual fear verging on terror as the hours ticked by. It wasn't a feeling he'd had for anyone before, and he didn't much care for it. The only thing that was going to make

things better was getting Junjie inside. They needed to be away from all these prying, judging eyes.

Leo wrapped his fingers around Junjie's wrist and pulled. "Come. I'm sure you're eager to see Erik."

Junjie grunted in agreement but said nothing else, for which Leo was grateful. It gave him a chance to get his emotions under control. Otherwise, something else embarrassing was going to slip out.

When they reached Erik's bedroom, Leo was careful to push the door open without making a sound. A bunny nightlightglowed off to one side, filling the child's room with soft light. They stepped inside, and Leo looked up in time to see the most tender smile spreading across Junjie's lips.

"How was he?" Junjie asked in a whisper.

"An angelic terror."

Junjie tipped his head so that he could see Leo's face, his own expression twisted in silent question.

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“Apparently he wasn’t in the mood for what Ming Yu made him for dinner, so there was some screaming and thrown food until we convinced him to try a little. He might have also devoured two hot dogs.”

Junjie’s gaze zipped back to Erik’s sleeping form. The child had never thrown a tantrum before, and Junjie’s concern was palpable in his taut muscles.

“I think he missed you,” Leo continued, and he almost kissed Junjie’s throat when the vampire swallowed hard. “But I read him a bedtime story at his request, which made Chen pout. It was amazing. After that, he went right to sleep.”

“I’m glad he didn’t have too bad of a night.”

“What about you? Did—” Leo cut off his words when he placed his hand on Junjie’s arm and found his shirt to be soaked and ice cold. He’d forgotten about the fierce storm that had blown through. At the time, he’d hoped that the team had made it to the car ahead of the storm breaking, but it was clear they hadn’t.

Frowning, Leo grabbed Junjie again and dragged him across the hall to his room. “Get undressed and in the shower this second,” he ordered as he shut the door behind them.

“What?”

“Out of those clothes! They’re soaking wet and cold. You’re...”

A slow smile spread across Junjie’s lips and laughter brightened his dark eyes.

“Going to catch my death?”

Leo growled and shoved Junjie farther into the room. “Shut up.”

This reversed-roles thing sucked. It was better when he was the one screwing up and getting into trouble and someone else did the worrying. All he was doing was making a jackass of himself.

He tried to give Junjie another push, but the vampire caught his hand and pulled him in close until their chests bumped. A shiver ran through Leo, but it had nothing to do with the cold that came off Junjie.

“I’ll jump in the shower to warm up, but I don’t want to be alone.”

Was it opposite day and nobody had told him?

The world was fucking upside down. He was being the worrywart, and Junjie was the flirty one. Nothing was making sense.

Fuck it.

“Sounds amazing,” he purred. There was no way in hell he could walk away from a flirty, sexy Jun-Jun.

They rushed and stumbled into the bathroom, where Junjie reached inside the shower to turn on the water to get it heating up as Leo stripped off his clothes and tossed them about. The second he was naked, he began “helping” Junjie get out of his.

Not that he was a great help, since his mouth latched on to the vampire’s bare chest. He licked, nibbled, kissed, and sucked on anything he could reach, loving the way Junjie’s breath caught. Those normally nimble and brisk fingers fumbled with

buttons. He grabbed Leo and shoved him against the wall. Hard lips captured Leo's mouth, and he could only moan into that hot kiss accompanied by the cool press of chilled flesh.

He lost himself in that kiss. Their tongues tangled, and Leo's knees went weak. The vampire kissed like he wanted to taste Leo's soul, and Leo wanted to let him. He wanted to hand himself over on a silver platter and allow Junjie to feast on him.

But Junjie was still cold and while the vampire's health wasn't in any danger, that didn't mean he wasn't uncomfortable.

With great reluctance, Leo tore his mouth from Junjie's, shifting to nuzzle his neck. "Shower. You need to get in the shower," he said between playful nibbles.

He could have sworn he heard an irritated huff from Junjie, but the vampire didn't argue as he stepped into the glass-enclosed stall that was big enough to fit them comfortably. The only thing missing was a bench for sexy shenanigans, but there were plenty of things they could do without a bench.

Leo entered the shower behind Junjie and closed the door to help seal in the warm air. His breath stopped in his lungs as his eyes locked on Junjie. Water cascaded down his naked body, forming streams and rivers as it flowed between ripples of muscles. His skin was a creamy white that he ached to lick up. And the paleness of his skin made the delectable trail of hair running from his navel to his thickening cock more eye-catching.

"Cat?"

Junjie's voice jerked his eyes up to his face. Except Junjie wasn't looking at him. The vampire had his head tipped back in the spray with both hands threading through all those dark, silky locks. Junjie was the epitome of wet dreams. He would never meet

anyone as sexy or stunningly gorgeous as Junjie at that moment.

“Stop staring and get over here,” Junjie commanded as he wiped the water from his eyes.

“Gotta say I love how bossy you become when you have no pants on.”

Junjie snorted and reached for the soap, but Leo beat him to it. He snatched up the shampoo and held it behind him.

“Let me do the work. You tell me what happened tonight.”



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The vampire said nothing for several seconds while Leo focused on pouring the shampoo into the palm of his hand and closing the cap. In fact, Junjie didn't speak until Leo turned him to face the spray and began massaging the soap through his hair.

"We saw Trin tonight."

"I'm gonna take a wild guess and say he's not dead yet."

"No."

He told a crazy tale of fighting elves, a violent thunderstorm followed by more elves, being rescued by a good elf, a flock of fairies, and some gnomes. They'd gone inside a tree to meet an underground fae resistance force.

By the time Junjie was done, Leo was rinsing the conditioner from his hair.

"My heart hurts for Rei," Junjie murmured, placing his hand on his chest. "I know he worries about his people, regardless of his words and nonchalant attitude. But I believe he also wants to remain here with Yichen. He's created a boundary that others keep hammering against. It will weaken soon if we don't resolve this problem, and Rei might cave to their demands."

"He'll return to the fae realm out of duty, and Yichen will follow him," Leo continued.

"They'll be miserable there. I know it. I don't need my gift to see it."

Leo picked up a cake of rich-smelling soap that was silky to the touch. He had a sneaking suspicion someone in the Zhang clan had made it. This was far too fine to be found in any grocery or bath store. He got his hands soapy and put the cake aside. He ran slick fingers over Junjie's chest, across tense shoulders, and down over flat abs.

"Then we'll have to kill Jiang Chong and that elf Trin before anyone can brainwash Rei into making such a terrible decision."

Junjie opened his mouth, but Leo was afraid he was going to argue, so Leo slid his soapy hands south and grasped Junjie's semi-erect cock. The vampire's words morphed into a long moan of pleasure. Bastet, I could listen to that sound all fucking night.

"Leo," Junjie choked out. Strong hands grabbed his ass cheeks and dug in, massaging muscles and starting an ache deep inside him. A horny voice in Leo's head begged for him to just stick his ass in the air and demand Junjie rail him straight into oblivion with his enormous cock.

But this evening's panic attack proved the vampire wasn't some quick fuck and be gone by dawn. No, Junjie was special. They were going slow, even if it killed him. It was the only way to give them time to figure this out.

Plus, he might want to savor all the ways he could take Junjie apart.

"What's wrong, Jun-Jun? Want me to help you forget for a bit?"

Junjie shook his head. "I want us to come so hard we forget our own names."

"That can be arranged."

Leo shoved Junjie against the wall and grabbed the bottle of conditioner. “Bend your legs. You’re too tall.” The cat shifter squeezed a very healthy amount of the thick, creamy liquid into his palm.

When he turned back, he found Junjie with his legs spread and arms outstretched, ready to pull him in close. That beautiful cock had also swelled thick and erect, begging for his touch.

Leo stepped between his powerful thighs and grasped his dick, smearing the conditioner on the member as he slowly stroked him.

“Leo,” Junjie said in a half groan, half whine.

He huffed a laugh at the vampire’s impatience, but he couldn’t blame him. His own dick ached with need, demanding attention. Another small step forward allowed him to rub hiscock alongside Junjie’s. He adjusted his grip and added his other hand, stroking them together.

The first touch of their cocks together had Leo’s eyes rolling into his head. The slick slide combined with the heat and hardness of Junjie’s dick was heaven. The hair on Junjie’s legs brushed his own, adding an enticing roughness to the mix. Large hands swept over Leo’s body in the most wonderful caress that left him purring deep in his throat.

The falling water from the shower and the rising steam gave the feeling of being in another world, away from the rest of the clan. All their troubles disappeared.

Junjie dipped his head and captured Leo’s mouth in a drugging kiss. His hips thrust upward, moving his cock in Leo’s hands while his tongue plunged in and out, matching the rhythm and threatening to destroy what remained of Leo’s self-control.

And then the vampire upped the ante.

“More,” Junjie growled. He placed one hand on the back of Leo’s thigh and the other under his ass, allowing him to pull Leo in even closer. Leo had no choice but to brace his hands on the wall behind Junjie. Their cocks caught between their bodies, Junjie thrust again and again, the sensation sending toe-curling shockwaves throughout his body. Leo shifted his hips in time with Junjie, getting lost in their slick skin and astounding heat.

Junjie broke off the kiss and dragged his lips along Leo’s jaw to his vulnerable throat. Teeth grazed, the sharp points of his fangs causing goose bumps to break out across his arms. A needy whimper broke from Leo, and he didn’t fucking care. Junjie’s last bite had been electric, and he wanted that now.

“I want to fuck you,” Junjie snarled between clenched teeth. He hiked Leo’s leg up, so it nearly rested on his hip. His other fingers dug into his ass, spreading his cheeks and exposing his greedy hole. “Need to stretch and fuck you. Possess every bit of you.” With each word he spoke, his fangs scraped skin, teasing him as they continued to thrust frantically.

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“Oh, fuck yes, Jun—” The rest turned into a shout as Junjie struck like a viper. Lightning arced from his neck to his dick. His orgasm ripped through him without warning, the entire world going white with a pleasure so intense brain cells died in its making.

Leo was coming down from his high when Junjie pulled his mouth from Leo’s throat and cried out. His pistoning hips lost their rhythm as his cock swelled and pumped his sticky load between them.

Junjie released his thigh and slid his hands along his spine in the sweetest caress while lapping at his neck. A crooked smile spread across Leo’s lips as he rested his head on his lover’s shoulder.

“You okay?” Junjie panted, his warm breath brushing across Leo’s wet skin.

“So good. You?”

“Head’s a little fuzzy, but nothing as bad as the last time I drank your blood.” Junjie lifted his head, and Leo did the same so he could stare into the vampire’s eyes. His face was beautifully flushed, and his grin was lazy. At best, he was tipsy, but not drunk.

“Leo, about the things I said during...”

The cat shifter made a dismissive noise as he turned to the spray to wash away the smears of cum on his stomach and cock. “Don’t worry about it. Everyone says crazy things during sex. There’s no blood reaching your brain. No one means what they

say.”

“I do.”

Every muscle in his body stiffened as his brain feverishly searched for a replay of what Junjie said. Stuff about fucking, stretching...Shit... stuff about possessing.

He didn't need to look around to know the vampire had moved closer. Junjie didn't touch him, but the air between them tingled along his skin.

“I didn't mean possess you like ownership. I-I just like you. A lot. And this sexual side of our relationship means something to me. I know that you're not a tied-down relationship person and I'm not asking you to change. I...I thought you should know how I feel.”

Leo's heart raced, but for the first time in his life, it wasn't with a sense of panic. No, what he felt was elation. Joy. Pure, unadulterated joy. He'd guessed at Junjie's feelings a while ago, but he was impressed with the vampire's bravery at confessing those feelings and clearly not expecting to get anything in return.

Grinning so wide he was in danger of pulling a muscle, Leo spun and pulled Junjie close. The vampire's eyes widened, and he gasped.

“Silly bloodsucker. I like you too. A lot. You're right. I don't do relationships and I'm unreliable, but I don't want to be a flake where you're concerned. I want to be someone you can rely on while we get to know each other. Tomorrow is full of things we can't plan for, but I can promise to be honest with you and help you any way I can.”

Junjie flashed him a questioning smirk and Leo groaned. He hadn't been super honest with Junjie in the past.

“Okay. I promise to be honest about my feelings toward you. Besides, you already know my biggest secret.”

“Agreed.” Junjie sealed their bargain with a slow, tender kiss that left Leo’s heart swooning. Could this man be any more perfect?

As the vampire lifted his head, his gaze caught on Leo’s neck and his smile dissolved into a frown.

“Please forgive me,” he whispered in a strangled tone.

“For what?”

“I bit you without asking permission.”

Ah. Yeah, that probably was a big deal in the vampire world. Partners got consent. Leo had just thought it was sexy.

“You are forgiven.” Leo reached up and took Junjie’s face in both of his hands. “From this day forward, you have my blanket permission to bite me whenever you want. Wounded and need blood? Bite me. Feeling peckish and need a snack? Bite me. Fucking my brains out and want to send me screaming over the edge? Bite me.”

The tension and worry disappeared from Junjie’s face, and he kissed one of Leo’s palms. “Thank you.”

Leo released him and moved so he could step into the spray of hot water.

“However, you know I can’t feed from you exclusively,” Junjie tossed out as he turned off the water. “I wouldn’t want to put your life in danger.”

Leo glared silently at Junjie's back as he thought about the vampire sinking his fangs into anyone else.

Oh, hell no.

Hell to the fuck no.



That was not happening. Ever again.

Leo let that subject drop for now as they climbed out of the shower and dried off.

“Are you planning to stay for a while longer?” Junjie inquired as he wrapped a towel around his waist.

Leo stood with his fluffy pale-blue towel held in front of him with both hands. He’d just been trying to figure out what to do next. Normally, he would stay with Erik in his cat form until the sun rose, which was still a few hours away. But after what happened, he was left wondering if maybe he should leave for a few hours to give them some space. Not that he wanted to leave.

“I could stay...if you want. Is there something you need?”

Junjie seemed to look everywhere but at Leo. They had frothed in the shower and come hard enough to make him temporarily forget how to breathe, and now this sexy man couldn’t meet his eyes?

“I was wondering if you would stay with me. In my bed. In your human form. Not all day, of course. Maybe just until I fall asleep.”

No. Stop. If this vampire became any more adorable, Leo was going to die from it. No one should be allowed to be this cute.

He tossed aside his towel and wrapped his arms behind Junjie’s neck. “How about I go check on Erik one last time while you get snuggly in your bed? I’ll join you in a

minute.”

The smile that blossomed on Junjie’s face could have stopped time. It definitely stopped Leo’s heart. He grabbed a brief kiss and shifted into his cat form. Junjie let him out of the bedroom so he could pad across the hall. With a bump of his nose, he wriggled his way through a crack in the door. His sharp cat eyes scanned the semidark room for any signs of disturbance or Jiang Chong lurking in the dead realm. He possessed the same catlike vision in his human form, but it was more precise when he was a cat.

Everything appeared fine since he’d last stopped in Erik’s room. He crossed to the bed where Erik lay under a soft yellow blanket filled with cavorting cats of all colors and sizes. There was a plush rabbit doll on one side of him and a large koi fish doll under his arm, just like the fish he fed every day in the various ponds on the Zhang property.

After getting his fill of a soundly sleeping Erik, Leo trotted across the hall to Junjie’s room, where he found the lights out and there was a soft rustle of the blankets as the vampire got comfortable. The cat jumped onto the bed and shifted into his human form so he could pull the blankets down.

“Erik?” Junjie murmured.

“Sound asleep and safe. Nothing to worry about except for the fact that I like to burrito in the blankets while I sleep.”

Only, Leo didn’t wrap the soft blankets about his body and turn away from Junjie as he got comfortable. He actually laid his head on Junjie’s chest, his ear right over the vampire’s heart, while dropping his arm across his stomach. Junjie pulled the blanket up higher so that it covered most of Leo’s chest and back.

“Comfortable?”

“Completely.”

## Chapter 19

Zhang Junjie

Junjie paced his room, his arms wrapped around his middle as if that could suppress the rolling waves of nausea in his stomach. He paused at the closed door to stare over his shoulder at the top drawer of his bureau. After a second, he resumed pacing, his footsteps silent on the floor.

The timing couldn't be more perfect. Ming Yu had taken Erik grocery shopping with her so the child wouldn't feel so cooped up. Erik needed some exposure to the outside world. Xiao Dan and Leo had tagged along as protection for both of them.

The house was quiet, and he'd prepared everything. Almost. A low table sat in the center of his room and a couple of candles flickered in the dim lighting. Incense smoke curled up from the burner, creating a calming atmosphere.

Since the fight with Trin two nights ago, the fae had retreated and not stirred up any new trouble. They'd seen nothing of Jiang Chong.

He needed to do this now while there were no distractions.

Putting it off was harming his clan. They needed the information he might glimpse, thanks to his gift.

He could do this. He could be brave for his clan. For Erik. And for Leo.

Junjie sucked in a deep breath and crossed the room to his bureau. An icy chill bit into his fingers as they wrapped the slender handle and pulled the drawer out. The only thing resting inside was a long, slender, scarf-like cloth he'd folded several times.

Swallowing hard, Junjie reached in and pulled out the cloth. He closed the drawer with his hip and shifted the cloth to his right hand while he grabbed a small case of special threads and needles from another drawer.

It hadn't taken too long to realize that his vampiric gift was the ability to see into the future. The problem was learning to focus and harness it into something he could understand. At first, he'd thought what he was seeing was nothing more vivid than nightmares.

Until those nightmares began coming true.

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Afterward, Jiang Chong had forced every manner of device into his hands. From scrying using mirrors and pools of water to kau cim,<sup>1</sup> yarrow sticks, tea leaves, and animal entrails. Nothing had worked, and Jiang Chong then became more violent in his demands.

It was as Junjie was mending the hem on one of his robes, his fingers moving along the detailed embroidery that a vision had come to him. This time, it was clear and ordered, giving him the chance to understand what he was seeing.

What was more, he could repeat the process when he closed his eyes and dragged his fingers over another bit of embroidered cloth. There was something about feeling the silken swirls and designs on the fabric that calmed his brain and organized the chaotic images lurking in the back of his mind. He'd never been able to explain it, but no one cared why his skill worked this way. The only thing that mattered was that it worked on command. Particularly Jiang Chong's command.

The one problem was that he couldn't focus his powers on a specific person or time period. His gift was more like looking out a window rather than flipping channels on a television. What was outside the window was what his power allowed him to see.

In every vision, the person he saw would be someone who was in his life. The few times he'd thought he'd seen complete strangers, he'd later discovered that they were people who were destined to enter his life within the next few weeks.

With the length of cloth and threads in his hands, he turned to the table and knelt on the small round cushion he'd put in front of it. He set the threads aside and spread out the cloth. To the left, a variety of swirling, complicated stitches filled the fabric,

but they didn't create a coherent image or even a flowing design. It was pure chaos. But the point wasn't to create what he was seeing. No, he just needed the bumps and swirls to trigger the images in his brain. Sometimes the colors he used ended up being linked to certain people, but that was about it.

For instance, a satiny gold thread he'd used repeatedly for a century was now forever linked to Yichen. But then, he'd been using his power constantly during the hundred years the fae had held Yichen, trying to get some glimpse of their missing brother.

Today, he opened the wooden case to reveal the rainbow of neatly organized threads on tiny spools. His left hand on the cloth, Junjie closed his eyes and placed his right hand on the box, the tips of his fingers lightly running over the spools. He was halfway through the box when a spark pricked his finger and traveled down his arm like an electric current. He picked up the spool and opened his eyes to see that the thread was orange.

That was...odd. He rarely ever used this color. Bright reds, shining golds, deep purples, and an ocean of blues covered the cloth already. But almost never orange.

Nimble fingers selected a long silver needle. He threaded the needle with practiced ease and stopped. A slight tremble entered his fingers, and his mouth went dry. Fear turned his entire body to ice. What was he going to see this time? Who was going to die? There was no one in his life he could survive parting with. They were all family. So precious to him.

"No," Junjie said in a low, forceful voice. He squeezed his eyes shut and tightened his grip on the needle. "Death isn't the only thing the future has to offer. There is more. Happy things. Hope. Love. Laughter. The future gave us Erik. The future gave me Leo's smile."

Without opening his eyes, Junjie picked up the cloth in his left hand and started

creating stitches in the fabric at the empty end. In times of an emergency or if the need was dire, he could sometimes kick-start his power by running his fingers over stitches he'd made in the past.

But this was a new, fresh reading. He wanted to look further into the future by days, weeks, or even a few months. That required new stitches, new designs for his fingers to follow.

He worked with his eyes closed, never seeing what he was creating as he placed one stitch after another, filling the cloth in what he hoped was a somewhat coherent design. But most of the time, they weren't. He worked until the spark that had bitten at the tip of his finger earlier snapped and crackled again. This time, the feeling began in his brain like a tiny thunderstorm was brewing.

There was no telling how much time had passed. It didn't feel as if it had taken long. But when it took hold, he pulled the needle free of the thread and set it aside. He'd learned from experience that if he didn't remove the needle, he would end up stabbing himself with it.

He rested both hands on the cloth, his fingers moving along the various stitches like a blind man reading braille. Even though his eyes were closed, colors flashed through his brain as if telling him he moved from a blue thread to green, then yellow.

But his fingers stopped as the colors swirled together and formed shapes. Clear shapes.

He was standing in the driveway before the manor. The vehicles were there, and the sky was dark. A forceful wind swept through the area, making the trees sway and the limbs rattle together. He could almost feel the coldness riding the wind, carrying with it colored leaves ripped free from their branches.

The scene rippled as if his brain was attempting to bring it further into focus, and Jiang Chong appeared. His long black hair danced in the wind. A long sword slashed the air in front of him, reflecting the lights from the house.

With his teeth clenched, Junjie held the image still as he turned it in his mind to see more. Jiang Chong wasn't alone. He was facing Jiang Chong, but he had no sword in his hand and he was completely alone. No. A step directly behind Junjie was Leo.

No! No! No!

Why was the cat shifter there? He had no business being anywhere near this fight. He should be inside as the last line of defense for Erik. Why wasn't the dragon out there? Where was the rest of his clan?

Junjie's heart raced and his throat felt like it was attempting to close completely, but he had to push on. There was no turning back now. He had to know what happened to himself and Leo. This had to be when they killed Jiang Chong. There was no allowing him to escape.

It was a struggle to get the scene from the future to roll forward as everything in Junjie's heart was screaming to stop the vision right now.

The fight lurched forward, nearly a blur in its speed. Junjie fought Jiang Chong without a sword as best he could. Suddenly, an orange blur entered the fight, chasing his old creator around the property.

But all too quickly, Jiang Chong disappeared. Junjie felt like he blinked because Leo was suddenly there beside him. Leo's lips parted, his face twisting as he tried to cry out. He pulled Junjie and the vampire stumbled forward.

As he caught his balance and looked up, it was to see Jiang Chong plunge his blade



straight into Leo's chest.

"No!" Junjie screamed. His eyes flashed open, but the image was already burned into his brain.

Jiang Chong killed Leo.

He screeched again as he clambered to his feet. He upended the table in front of him, sending the cloth, thread, and needles flying across the room. It wasn't enough. He seized the table and threw it across the room. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you, Jiang Chong!"

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Still unsteady on his feet, he moved to the bureau and swept his arms along it, throwing everything on top to the floor with a loud crash. Glass and clay shattered, but it was nothing compared to the destruction of his heart.

He swayed, mindlessly searching for something else to destroy, but the only thing that would satisfy him would be Jiang Chong. If he could kill him now while Leo was away shopping with the others, the prophecy couldn't come true.

But it never worked that way. He couldn't force Jiang Chong to appear prior to the appointed time.

"I'll kill you!" he shrieked.

A pair of strong arms wrapped around him from behind and Junjie fought them on instinct until Chen's calming voice broke through his panic.

"What did you see? Tell me. What did you see?" Chen demanded in his ear.

"Jiang Chong..." Junjie panted. His lungs were squeezed so tight with pain, he couldn't draw in a full breath. "Jiang Chong..."

"What did Jiang Chong do?"

"He...he killed Leo." Those few words broke from Junjie in a sob and his legs gave out. Both he and Chen sank to the floor. The arms that restrained him now shifted into a bone-crushing hug as Junjie fell apart. He turned to Chen and pressed his face into his neck as a torrent of tears fell from his eyes. How could this happen? They'd

just found each other. They were still falling in love, but Jiang Chong was going to steal that away like he'd stolen so many other lives away.

“We'll stop him,” Chen stated in a low, rough voice. “We will stop him. Leo will be safe.”

But there was no comfort in Chen's words. Jiang Chong had killed dozens of the Zhang clan and the Sword of the Heavenly Garden sect. Junjie had seen nearly half of them in his visions, and they'd been unable to stop a single one of those deaths. Over the years, he'd seen his brothers and sisters fall in battle and even from suicide. Not one of those deaths could have been stopped.

What made Leo different?

Nothing.

“I will kill Jiang Chong,” Junjie swore as his heart splintered in his chest.

1 Kau cim – a fortune-telling practice in which a question is asked and numbered bamboo sticks are shaken from a tube. The number on the stick that falls from the tube is matched to a written oracle that should interpret the answer to the person's question.

## Chapter 20

Leo St. George

Something was up with Junjie.

The vampire had been acting strange since he'd returned from the grocery with Ming Yu, Erik, and Xiao Dan. His face was exceedingly pale, and his eyes had a glassy

look to them, as if he'd been crying or on the verge of crying. Everything about him just seemed twitchy. He moved constantly, his hands fluttering about his body like he didn't know what to do with them. What was worse was that Junjie refused to meet his gaze.

Something had happened while he was away, and Junjie refused to tell him. It also wasn't reassuring when Chen of all people swooped in after Junjie received his initial hugs and kisses from Erik to take the boy away to play with him and Moon. The vampire might be coming around to the little boy, but Chen never stole Erik from Junjie's arms or volunteered for play time.

Grabbing Junjie by the hand, he dragged the vampire down the hall, away from the rest of the clan, until he found an empty room. "What's going on?" he demanded.

"Wh-what are you talking about?"

"Jun-Jun, I'm not an idiot?—"

"I never said you were!"

Leo frowned at Junjie. "No, but you're treating me like one. I know something is wrong. You've been acting strange. Did Jiang Chong show up again? Was anyone hurt?"

Junjie swallowed hard as he shook his head. "No, he didn't come near the manor as far as I know."

"Is it the fae? Have you heard from Trin? Did they attack a new city? Did you get news from the Variks?"

Junjie's eyes darted away from him. "There's been no news regarding the fae." He

brought his eyes to Leo and forced a smile so brittle on his lips it looked as though it were going to shatter into a million pieces. “Everything is fine.”

“Everything is not fine. Something is bothering you.”

“It’s not. Nothing is bothering me.” His grin grew sharper, and he took a step toward Leo, sliding his arms around his waist. “Maybe...maybe I’m nervous about us.” As he spoke, Junjie dipped his head and brushed his lips across his cheek. He placed soft pecks across his face to the corner of Leo’s mouth.

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Instinctively, Leo turned his head to snag another tender kiss while his mind continued to turn over Junjie's words. Okay, Junjie might be nervous about them pursuing whatever the fuck this was, but that puzzle piece didn't fit with the rest of what was happening with the vampire right now. Junjie's nervousness equaled being shy and withdrawn.

What was happening since he'd entered the house was a fearful Junjie.

No, terrified Junjie.

Something had scared the shit out of the vampire, and now he was trying to hide it.

Leo ended the kiss and pulled away to see the fear in Junjie's eyes before he could try to cover it all up with another fake smile.

"Let's continue what we started yesterday," Junjie suggested. One of his hands slipped under the edge of Leo's T-shirt and skimmed along his stomach, but Leo caught his wrist, stopping his progress.

"Here? Now?"

"Sure. Chen and Moon have Erik. We have time alone."

A hundred red warning lights blinked in Leo's head while claxons screamed. This was all wrong. "Why don't we go to your room? We'll have more privacy there." Leo released Junjie's wrist and turned to head down the hall to Junjie's private quarters.

“No!” Junjie shouted. The vampire tried to grab him, but Leo already expected it. He shifted into a cat and raced along the hall. Junjie was hiding something from him, and it was in his bedroom. Why else would he attempt to seduce Leo in one of the public rooms shared by the entire clan?

His paws slipped on the wood floors as he ran. Junjie thundered after him, shouting his name, but Leo didn’t stop. He squeezed between decorations and darted between the legs of others, keeping out of Junjie’s reach. Just as he reached the vampire’s bedroom, he shifted into his human form and threw open the door. His heart stopped.

A whirlwind of destruction and chaos crowded the normally tidy space. A table lay broken into dozens of pieces. Glass and bits of clay pottery littered the floor. A pair of candles had spilled their wax across a mat. Small spools of thread in a rainbow of colors were scattered everywhere. For a moment, he thought maybe someone had attacked Junjie in his room, but his eyes finally caught on the long, crumpled length of fabric with its kaleidoscope of colorful stitches.

Junjie’s fortune-telling scarf.

Before he’d revealed himself to the vampire, he’d seen him working on it a few times when they were trying to locate Yichen. Junjie had even talked to him about it, never expecting Leo to actually understand what he was saying.

Slowly, he turned to the hallway where Junjie stood a couple of feet away, his expression fraught with deep lines while his fingers tangled together in front of him. “You finally did a reading,” Leo whispered. “What did you see?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Junjie turned away, but Leo pounced on him. He clutched Junjie’s arms and slammed him against the wall.

“Tell me. What did you see?”

“I...”

Leo gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to shake him. “I promised to be honest with you, so we could give this dating thing a try. I didn’t expect that I’d have to drag the same promise out of you. We can’t possibly build something going forward if you’re going to keep me in the dark about things happening in your life.”

Junjie squeezed his eyes shut and choked on his name. “Leo.”

“Let me be there for you.” Leo moved his hands on Junjie’s biceps, loosening his hold enough to massage the tight muscles. “Together, we can tackle anything. Jiang Chong and the fae don’t stand a chance. We’ll protect your clan and Erik together.”

The vampire opened his eyes, and they were glassy again. He blinked and two fat tears streaked down his cheeks. “I saw...I saw Jiang Chong. He was here. At the manor. He killed...he killed...”

Leo’s stomach knotted, and a chill ran through him. “Who? Who did you see him kill?”

“You,” Junjie bawled. “He killed you.”

“Oh.” Well, that fucking sucked.

Junjie shoved off the wall, pulling out of Leo’s grasp, so that he could wrap the cat shifter up in a suffocating embrace. His entire body trembled, and Leo mentally pushed aside the prophecy to focus on the vampire who was losing his shit as he held Leo tighter and tighter.

“Baby, you need to breathe,” Leo said and then paused. He was a vampire. Did he really need to breathe? He shook aside the errant thought and stroked his hand up and



down Junjie's back. "Don't worry about Jiang Chong. I'm sure we can stop him. What you saw is a possible future, right? Nothing is locked in stone. We'll figure this out."

Junjie released him enough to look in him in the face. "All of my prophecies have come true exactly how I've seen them. I've never been able to stop a single one from happening. But you don't have to worry; I'll stop Jiang Chong this time. I'll keep you safe."

Leo didn't have a chance to comment. Junjie rushed through the hall, leaving Leo to jog after him if he planned to keep up. The vampire was on a mission, and didn't seem like he planned to listen to anyone who might want to reason with him.

"Jun-Jun, baby. Honey," Leo called to his lover. "I'm touched that you want to keep me safe, but we need to talk about this. You can't go rushing out to attack Jiang Chong. You don't know where to find him. Plus, he's a slippery fucking eel. You're going to need help. Let's go find Xiao Dan and the others."

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There was no response to his words. Junjie stopped when he reached a pair of large, heavy doors with a complicated lock. He'd seen the vampires go in and out of this room a few times, but he always gave it a wide birth. With this kind of security, they'd notice anyone getting near it, even a cat. Prior to revealing himself, he hadn't wanted anyone to notice him.

After entering the combination, Junjie opened the doors to reveal a large room full of weapons. Oh, this was taking a very bad turn. Junjie could not go off half-cocked to take out Jiang Chong alone. He'd get himself killed.

"Jun-Jun, you need to calm down and think rationally about this." Leo followed Junjie around the room as the vampire snatched up weapon after weapon and placed them on the centertable. Swords, daggers, bows, a wicked-looking staff. Things he didn't even have names for. Junjie was going to be a one-man army. "You can't be completely sure of what you saw, right? Are you sure I was dead-dead? Maybe I was just wounded. Why don't we go talk to Xiao Dan? I bet your shixiong will have some good ideas."

"Shixiong can't fix it this time."

Junjie headed to the far corner to grab another weapon, but Leo caught his arm and stopped him. As the vampire turned to meet his gaze, his eyes were wide and slightly unfocused, as if he weren't actually there, but lost in his own panicked thoughts.

"Listen to me. We'll fix this together. I'm not leaving you," Leo pressed.

"I know. We'll stop him. But I need you to stay here for a little while."

“What?”

“You can’t leave. If you leave, Jiang Chong will kill you.”

Leo’s brain was still digesting those ominous words when Junjie pulled free from his grasp and zipped out of the room. It was his own fault for forgetting that vampires could move insanely fast. That fact was hammered home as the heavy double doors slammed shut before Leo could make it past the table.

Fucking Junjie had shut him in the armory without taking a single weapon for himself. It was all a ruse. The goddamn vampire tricked him.

“Junjie! Junjie Zhang! Let me the fuck out of here!” Leo bellowed at the top of his lungs. He pounded his fists on the steel doors, but they didn’t budge an inch. “Let me out right now!”

“I can’t, Leo. Jiang Chong kills you here in front of the house. I don’t know when. Probably soon. That’s why I can’t let you leave.” The thick doors muffled Junjie’s voice, forcing Leo to strain to hear him.

“You can’t hold me prisoner forever! Let me out!”

“It’s not forever. There’s someone I need to talk to. I’ll be right back.”

He was leaving? Who did he need to talk to that required him to lock Leo up? The vampire had lost his damn mind. He couldn’t leave him locked up in the armory.

Leo stepped away from the doors to see if he could find a hidden release or some other trigger to unlock the doors, but there was nothing. Not even a set of handles on this side of the doors. The metal was completely smooth. If there was a mechanism to let him out of the room, the Zhang clan had hidden it really well.

“Keep the doors locked. Don’t let anyone open the armory or Leo will die. Do you understand?”

Leo lunged for the doors again and pressed his ear to it.

“I’ve got it. Chen has told me about your vision. I will protect that cat until you return.”

Kai! He put the dragon in charge of guarding him. Why not? Dragons were known for being able to protect treasure, and right now, Junjie was acting like he was one of the most precious things to him. Enough to make him temporarily lose his mind.

“Kai! Old buddy, you gotta let me out of here. Junjie isn’t thinking clearly. He needs help,” Leo shouted at the door.

“You have nothing to fear, cat. Junjie is leaving now to get help. I will keep you safe in the armory.”

Leo dropped his head on the door, banging his forehead on the metal. Fuck. His only hope now was for Xiao Dan to get wind of this nonsense and to set him free. If there was anyone who was sensible and calm in this clan, it was Xiao Dan.

With a heavy sigh, Leo slid down and sat on the cold floor with his back against the door. Dying at the hands of Jiang Chong didn’t scare him. But something happening to Junjie in his pursuit of Jiang Chong terrified him, and right now, there was nothing he could do to stop it.

## Chapter 21

Zhang Junjie

Leo would never forgive him for this. Not that he blamed the cat shifter. Junjie had crossed all the lines. He'd pretended to be insane, locked his would-be boyfriend in the armory, and set a dragon to guard him.

Well, maybe he wasn't pretending as much as he would have liked to be.

But none of that mattered. He'd watched too many people lose their lives at the hands of Jiang Chong. Leo would not join them. He would save Leo. Unfortunately, he couldn't take the risk of allowing Leo to run around on his own until he figured this out.

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His visions almost never provided an exact time when the events would happen. There was no way of telling if Jiang Chong was going to attack tonight or in a week, or possibly even a year. The trees in the background had looked about how they were right now. They hadn't changed to a deep orange and gold with the progression of fall. That meant Jiang Chong was likely to attack any day now.

Sadly, Leo was right in that he didn't know how to find Jiang Chong. There was no way he could track down his creator and challenge him to a fight to the death. They were left waiting for the asshole to appear.

But there was one other option. If he couldn't stop Leo from dying, was there a way to make sure that the death wasn't permanent?

And he knew of one person who might have the answer to that question.

He drew in a shaky breath as he drove up the long curving driveway to the Variks' mansion. As far as he knew, the only members of the clan not currently living within the mansion's walls were Rafe and his mate, Philippe. Bel and Winter had moved in with their mates after the fae had burned their homes to the ground.

Junjie had visited the Varik home once before, but then he'd been with several other members of his clan. This time, he was alone. He'd been afraid to draw anyone else into his desperation, mostly out of fear of someone trying to talk him out of it. There were no other options, and there was no time to wait. Bel Varik was the one person who could help him now.

He jumped out of the car and hurried up the broad staircase. The front doors burst

open and Winter rushed out. He was wearing a black hoodie that threatened to swallow up his smaller form, but there was no missing the worry that filled his bright-blue eyes.

“What happened? Has Jiang Chong struck?” Winter demanded.

Junjie shook his head. “No. Everyone is fine. I need to speak to your brother Bel.”

Winter blinked at him, his mouth open, but no words were coming out. He blinked again, and it was like his brain engaged. “Uh...yeah, he’s inside.” Winter motioned for Junjie to enter the house, and he followed behind him.

The youngest Varik showed him into one of the parlors while shooting a text off to his sibling. Junjie’s gaze skimmed the elegant decorations that covered the walls and the thick rugs that stretched over the floors. There was a regal opulence about the place that reminded him of pictures he’d seen of European palaces.

“Your clan is okay? The fae haven’t attacked?” Winter repeated as they stepped into the parlor. A dark mocha-brown tufted sofa and a matching pair of black rounded-back chairs waited for them. It was a warm and inviting room with a more modern feel, as if the Variks reserved this area for close friends rather than strangers.

“Yes, everyone is fine. There have been no encounters in the past several days.”

“And the little boy? Erik? He’s adjusted to living with you?”

For the first time since seeing Jiang Chong plunge the sword into Leo’s chest, Junjie felt like he could take a real breath. His lips moved into a soft smile, and he nodded, letting the joy he always felt when he thought about Erik blossom in his chest.

“Erik is good. Adjusting well. His sleep has improved, and he’s loving nearly

everything Shijie makes for him. His toy collection has become enormous.” As he spoke, he pulled his cell phone from his pocket. He swiped through a series of frantic text messages from his clan mates and pulled up the photo gallery to show off several pictures he’d snapped of the boy while he played. “One of his favorite things continues to be feeding the fish each day. They look forward to seeing him too.”

“Wow! Could that kid be any more adorable?”

Junjie’s head popped up suddenly. “I’m sorry. I forgot to ask. How are you and Fox?”

Winter’s grin became crooked. “Don’t worry about it. We’re good. Fox is adapting to being a vampire faster than I am. He’s eager to discover what his vampiric power is going to be. I’m praying it’s something benign like Yichen’s language skills, but with his luck, we’re going to have another pyromaniac like Ethan.”

“Hopefully, the gods will take pity on you.”

Brisk footsteps echoed through the hall a second before Bel appeared in the open doorway, followed by his two shifter mates, River and Wyatt. Bel seemed to be his usual frazzled self with his wild hair of loose curls that were completely incongruent with his neat bow tie with tiny yellow lightning bolts on a dark navy background. The wolves were more informally dressed in T-shirts and jeans. Both were even barefoot. That was something he noticed Leo seemed to enjoy. The first sign of the cat shifter growing comfortable in the Zhang manor was that he eschewed anything on his feet.

Even little Erik was the same. Every chance the child got, he was pulling off his shoes, socks, and slippers.

“Junjie!”

“Hello, Bel, River, Wyatt. I’m sorry to come over unannounced. I hope I’m not



disturbing you.”

“No! No! No!” Bel answered with a wave of his hands.

“Your timing is perfect. Bel needed a break from work,” Wyatt said, causing Bel to throw him a disgruntled look.

“I’ll let you guys talk. Shout if you need me for anything,” Winter interjected and quickly left the room, closing the door behind him.

Bel motioned for Junjie to sit in one of the chairs. He took the sofa with his mates on either side of him. “What can I do for you? Is everything good with your clan?”

The warm feeling he received at Winter’s questions about Erik continued to swell. Their concern for his clan was so very touching. Leaving behind a vampire clan who had become such good friends was going to be hard when they returned home to China.

“Everyone is good. Thank you.”

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River bounced on the couch cushions. “Winter and Fox told us you’d adopted a cat shifter. We can’t wait to meet him. Has he tried shifting yet?”

Junjie struggled to hold on to his smile while the panic in his chest rose. “Leo says he’s too young for that. Cat shifters don’t usually shift until their late teens to early twenties.”

Wyatt grunted. “That’s not too far off from wolf shifters. We’re usually in our teens.”

With a scoot to the edge of his seat, Junjie moved closer to the trio. “That’s what I’ve come to talk to you about. Shifters, I mean.”

“Sure,” River replied with a grin. “We’re happy to help anyway we can.”

“Can you change a shifter into a vampire?”

As soon as the words were off Junjie’s lips, all three faces fell. River cuddled closer to Bel, and Wyatt reached out to wrap an arm around both men. Bel’s eyes were wide and took on a haunted feel, as he slowly shook his head.

“No. You can’t. It’s...it’s impossible...and very dangerous to even attempt it.”

“What?” Junjie croaked. It was as if a hand had reached inside of his chest and squeezed his heart, threatening to turn it to dust. “But...but why? Are you sure? What if?—”

“No!” Bel snapped. He turned to River and hugged the slender shifter, pulling him in

as close as he could get without climbing into Bel's lap.

"I'm assuming you're asking for the cat shifter, Leo," Wyatt said, drawing Junjie's heart-broken gaze over to him. Junjie could only nod. His throat was raw and tight, making it impossible to sneak out any words. "A few years ago, the local wolf pack attacked our home. River suffered horrible injuries and was near death. He was losing blood too fast and couldn't heal. We were forced to give him some vampire blood to speed up the healing. As a result, River went berserk. It took almost the entire clan to hold him down, and he was still weak from his injury. If he'd have gotten loose, he would have killed the entire clan."

A tiny whimper slipped out of River, and he shuddered in Bel's arms. The vampire pressed kisses to his head and cheeks, soothing him.

"A short time later, he regained his sanity and finished healing. However, Bel and I believe that if we'd attempted to actually change him into a vampire, he would never have recovered his sanity. He would have gone on killing until he was finally stopped. There was nothing of River in that monster when it had control of him."

"Our blood and powers aren't compatible," Bel stated in a low, rough voice. Still holding River, Bel looked over at Junjie. "Have you tried drinking from Leo yet?"

"Twice," Junjie whispered. "The first time, I...I suffered an injury during a fight with the fae, and Leo offered me his blood as we ran."

"And?"

"It's not like human or vampire blood. I didn't take much, but it was like I'd become intoxicated on it."

"The same thing happened to me," Bel admitted with a small, crooked smile that

didn't reach his sad blue eyes. "Vampires have no problem taking in shifter blood, but it's toxic in reverse. Thankfully, shifters seem to live extremely long lives. We don't have to worry?—"

"I had a vision of Jiang Chong killing Leo," Junjie blurted out, cutting Bel off and silencing everyone in the room. No one breathed.

Junjie squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his head into his hands while resting his elbows on his knees. He'd come to the Variks hoping to find a way around Leo's death sentence, but this was a dead end.

Pain and panic blanketed, making it impossible to think. He didn't want to lose Leo. Not yet. Not after they'd only known each other for a few months. The wily cat shifter had been this bright spark in his long, dark life. How could that light be snuffed so quickly?

"Then...then we kill Jiang Chong before he kills Leo," River announced to the suffocatingly quiet room.

Junjie dragged in a loud, shaking breath. "I've had countless visions of Jiang Chong killing people, and I've never stopped one of them. It's as if they were fixed events in time. Unchangeable." He lifted his eyes and narrowed them on Wyatt and Bel. Those were the science-minded people. "Are you sure? Wolf shifters and cat shifters must have some differences."

"That is very likely," Wyatt admitted. "If you could get us a sample of Leo's blood, we could run some tests, compare it to my blood and River's."

A soft smile spread across Bel's face as he stared at his mate, but it disappeared when he turned his attention to Junjie. "I know what's going through your head, Junjie. You want to try it anyway. I'd be the same way, even after seeing what happened to

River. But you need to remember, if you're wrong, Leo will die regardless of your efforts. The only difference is that if you bring Leo back and he becomes a berserk monster, it will be your job to kill him."

Could he do that? Could he kill Leo if he woke a monster? There was no way that Leo would want to harm anyone in his clan.

"I don't know what to do. I can't lose him," Junjie choked out.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Bel rise from his place on the sofa and come over to kneel in front of Junjie. He took his hands, pulling them away from his face so he could meet this gaze. "We won't let Jiang Chong hurt Leo. That's what we're going to do."

"But there's no way to stop him. I've seen it happen so many times before."

"True, but that was thousands of years ago. Times have changed. We have more tech, more magic, and a hell of a lot more crafty vampires to help you. We've got someone here with the same power as Jiang Chong. That's got to make a difference."

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“Yeah!” River exclaimed suddenly. “We’ll send Winter to live with your clan until we can kill this Jiang Chong.” He stopped and scratched his jaw. “You’d probably end up getting Fox, too.”

“They’re a package deal,” Wyatt added.

A tiny spark of hope flared to life in his chest. Would that be enough to make a difference? They’d never been able to predict Jiang Chong’s movements. Taking away his element of surprise would level the field if not give them an edge at last over him.

“Okay. Thank you. I...I need to talk to Leo and the rest of my clan. Make...make some plans,” Junjie replied.

Bel gave his hands a last squeeze before pushing to his feet. “Whatever you need. I know Winter would be happy to stay with your clan for a while. He’s been very curious about your fighting style and would love to learn more. This would give him a chance to spend time with your clan while acting as an early warning against Jiang Chong.”

“And Bel is always happy to run new experiments,” Wyatt said.

“I know!” Bel gasped. He spun halfway toward his mates. “Could you imagine if we could get our hands on some actual cat shifter blood? The comparative studies we could run would be so fascinating! I can think of so many things I’d love to study.”

“Thank you again. I’ll talk to Leo and see what he thinks our next course of action

should be.”

Not that their next conversation was going to be an easy one. He might have lost it a bit when he'd locked Leo in the armory. The cat shifter would not be happy to see him. And Junjie wasn't sure any amount of groveling was going to make this better.

## Chapter 22

Leo St. George

By the time Junjie had returned to let him out of the armory, Leo had yet to calm down. His phone had three bars while he was in his prison. He was sorely tempted to call the cops on Junjie and his stubborn dragon guard, but he wasn't that big of a dick. There was no reason to fuck over the entire clan and put Erik in harm's way.

So he sat there, stewing.

Trapped by the man whose dick he'd sucked.

Oh, my fuck! He'd slept with him! Not in the traditional sex meaning, but he'd fallen asleep, curled up in his human form, in the bed together.

Heneverdid that. He was always right out the door with his sexual partners. No emotional ties.

And this was what it got him. Locked up in an armory filled with ancient weapons and guarded by a dragon. This was why he didn't date!

Thankfully, less than two hours passed before he heard the lock being worked and he jumped to his feet, ready to hit Junjie with both barrels as he walked out the front door and never returned. This cat didn't do cages.

Except Leo lost some of his rage the second his gaze fell on Junjie. The vampire looked like shit. Far worse than earlier when he'd been scared out of his mind.

No! Leo was still pissed. Junjie had locked him up. People didn't do that to people they were dating. Okay, maybe kinky people did that, but they weren't those kinds of people.

"Leo..." Junjie started, but Leo marched right past him.

"Don't! I don't want to hear it."

"Please, I'm sorry. I was afraid of you walking straight into Jiang Chong and getting killed. I had to find a way to save you. This was the only option I could think of to keep you safe while I went to see Bel Varik."

That stopped Leo dead in his tracks. His knowledge of the Variks was light, but he knew Bel was a scientist who ran all these insane experiments. He turned to Junjie, his eyes narrowed. "Why would you go see the Variks?"

"Bel's mates are shifters. I wanted to know if you could change a shifter into a vampire. I thought if I couldn't stop Jiang Chong from killing you, maybe I could at least make sure your death wasn't permanent. But...a shifter can't be changed."

Leo barely heard Junjie's trembling words. Heat filled his face, and his heartbeat thundered in his ears. "Who the fuck asked you to?" Leo shouted. He stomped toward Junjie, getting in his face. The vampire stumbled back a half step as if he expected Leo to attack him. "Whoever said that I wanted to be a vampire? I never want to be a vampire. I'm a cat shifter and proud of it. I'd rather die than let someone make me into something else."

"But Jiang Chong?"



“Fuck Jiang Chong! This is my life, my decision. You’re not taking that from me.” He spun on the balls of his feet and marched to the front door, not caring that his shouting had drawn the attention of the entire house. He tossed over his shoulder as he ripped the doors open. “Your enemy isn’t my problem anymore. I’m never returning here.”

Leo stomped across the driveway, cursing every vampire he’d ever met. Yet, before he could reach the doors at the end of the drive, Xiao Dan appeared from out of nowhere. Sneaky fucking vampire. Couldn’t trust any of them.

Xiao Dan wasn’t exactly blocking his path. Leo could easily shift and dart around him to slip out of the property, but he found his steps slowing to a stop.

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“Don’t think you can make excuses for him. He held me prisoner,” Leo snapped.

“I don’t intend to,” Xiao Dan replied, his voice low and solemn. “What Junjie did was wrong.”

Well, shit. That stole some of the wind from his sails.

“I just want you to better understand his reasoning. To better understand him.”

Leo gave a noncommittal grunt and shifted away from the vampire as he tried to decide whether to run off or stay and listen to Xiao Dan. Listening to the Zhang clan leader was dangerous. The man was too calm, too sensible, and well spoken. He was skilled at sneaking past a person’s defenses. Leo had witnessed it firsthand too many times.

“I don’t owe you or him anything,” Leo grumbled.

“Not even after months of tricking him? After all the time, care, and compassion he showed you without knowing who you truly were? After Erik?”

Leo closed his eyes and inwardly sighed. He should have kept walking.

A long silence stretched between them. When Xiao Dan spoke, it wasn’t what Leo expected.

“Thirty-seven.”

The cat shifter waited for Xiao Dan to continue, but he said nothing else.

With a growl, Leo pivoted toward him and folded his arms across his chest. “Thirty-seven what?”

“That’s how many members of the Zhang clan Jun-Jun saw die in his visions. Most of them were directly at the hands of Jiang Chong. Clan mates who didn’t develop vampiric gifts he deemed useful enough. Clan mates who weren’t as fast or strong or stealthy as he demanded them to be. Some who were killed to keep the rest of us in line.”

Leo swallowed hard and his arms loosened.

“There were others who committed suicide,” Xiao Dan continued. “People we saw as family. Jiang Chong broke their spirits or they could not forgive themselves for the acts we were forced to commit.”

Oh, shit...

“Jun-Jun witnessed each and every one of these deaths well before they happened. Sometimes days in advance; other times, it was weeks. He did everything he could to stop them. Risked his life, breaking his own body to stop it, but in the end, they all happened exactly as he saw it.”

“Fuck. Xiao Dan...”

“Of all the clan, he has the gift with the heaviest burden. It takes a great deal of courage and desperation for Jun-Jun to use his gift. I know that this time, he was doing it for his clan, for Erik, and for you. His reward was to see your death.”

Leo clenched his teeth against the rising pain squeezing his heart and lungs. It was

almost impossible to draw a breath. “He shouldn’t have locked me up,” he stated stubbornly, but the heat had evaporated from his words.

“No, he shouldn’t have. He should have talked to you. Made you understand why he was so desperate to keep you safe. He’s lost so much, and you are so very important to him already.”

His fingers curled into claws in front of his chest and Leo growled in frustration, but he wasn’t sure what he was frustrated with. Junjie holding him prisoner? Xiao Dan’s meddling? Or himself for not trying harder to understand Junjie’s fears?

Why the hell did this dating thing have to be so hard?

“Look,” Leo snapped. “I-I need to get out of here for a little while. To think. But I’ll be back.” Yeah, there was no point in denying that any longer. Even when he told Junjie he wasn’t returning, the voice in his head had snickered. “Can you...” He paused and sighed. “Can you keep an eye on him for me? Don’t let him do anything else crazy or dangerous. Don’t let him hurt himself.”

“I will.”

Leo shifted into his cat form and ran to the wall surrounding the grounds. With ease, he scaled the barrier, finding purchase in the tiny divots and imperfections in the rocks. As he was about to jump from the top, Xiao Dan’s soft words reached his ears.

“Be careful.”

Chapter 23

Leo St. George

Leo scampered away from the Zhang manor, darting into the nearby woods that surrounded three of the property's walls. He didn't get far before he shifted into his human form. It was hard to throw a proper tantrum when he was stuck as a house cat, and he was still pissed.

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Maybe not as much at Junjie as he had been. Xiao Dan had worked his magic, and Leo's heart broke for the vampire saddled with such a horrific gift. Part of him wanted to run inside the house and gather Junjie up in his arms, make any promise he had to so the vampire wouldn't be afraid for his life.

He was still a little mad at Junjie for imprisoning him rather than trying harder to explain what was happening.

He was a lot mad at himself for not trying harder to understand Junjie's emotional turmoil.

And yeah, he was peeved at Xiao Dan for telling him this information and making it so that he couldn't be righteously mad at Junjie any longer.

What the hell was he supposed to do? An adult would return and sit down for a long talk with Junjie. There were things he needed to know.

Ugh. Adult. Talking. Two things he wasn't good at in the least. It would be easier if he returned and kissed the vampire silly. But as appealing as that sounded, it wouldn't fix anything.

Plus, he'd just made a huge scene storming out of there. How would it look if he turned right around and forgave Junjie for everything?

With a heavy sigh, Leo folded his arms over his chest and leaned one shoulder against a tree. The problem was that he'd gotten all worked up, and he wanted to wallow in being angry for a bit longer. But that wasn't happening. Now all he wanted

was to find his Jun-Jun and make sure he was okay. Xiao Dan would make sure he didn't do anything else rash, but Leo wouldn't stop worrying until he saw it for himself.

Movement caught out of the corner of his eye had his head snapping to the left. His sensitive hearing hadn't picked up the approach of any person or animal, but then Huli was quite good at moving without making a sound when he wanted to be stealthy. He half expected to see the fox sneaking up on him, preparing to pounce.

Instead, he made out the ghostly outline of the one person he didn't want to see—Jiang Chong.

Leo gasped and stumbled away from the tree. It was too late to pretend that he didn't see him. They were staring at each other now, even though Jiang Chong remained within the dead realm. If he shifted and ran, he could get inside the manor grounds before Jiang Chong caught him. Maybe.

As he was debating his next step, the vampire tilted his head to the side as if he were also weighing his options. In the end, he held up both hands to show that he wasn't holding a weapon. Did that mean he wanted to talk?

With his heart lodged in his throat, Leo took a tiny step back, moving away from the tree, and nodded at the vampire.

A vertical slit formed in the air and the darkness shifted, becoming deep for a moment as Jiang Chong stepped into the living realm. Leo took two more steps, maintaining several feet of distance between them. Vampires were fast, but he could shift into his cat form in the blink of an eye. As a house cat, he was fast and nimble, making him almost impossible to catch.

“Devious, isn't he?” Jiang Chong purred as the opening between worlds closed

behind him. Leo's eyes slipped over the vampire. He was everything one might expect a vampire to be. Pale-white skin almost to the point of possessing a blue tint, brown eyes that appeared nearly black, sharp features, and sleek black hair. His clothes were modern while also possessing an old, foreign feel to them. But where Hollywood had made vampires sexy, everything about Jiang Chong screamed danger.

"Who's devious?" Every hair on Leo's body stood on end and every muscle was tensed. One wrong move, one twitch from Jiang Chong, and he was gone. There was nothing he could say that was more important than getting to the Zhang clan with a warning that he was near.

"Zhang Xiao Dan." His tone was so casual and nonchalant, like the vampire hadn't a care in all the world. "He has always been quite good at presenting himself as a caring soul, the voice of reason, but, at his heart, he is a manipulator. He is skilled at convincing others to do his bidding, whether or not they wish to."

"I've noticed."

It seemed safer to play along since the vampire wanted to talk. Any information was useful, and it was always better to learn as much about your enemy as possible if you wanted to take him down. And considering how terrified Junjie was of Jiang Chong, Leo wanted this monster dead.

"You have to be cautious around him and his wheedling ways."

Leo offered the vampire a stiff smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I'm sure he learned much from his master."

Jiang Chong's gaze became like a razorblade, sharp and ready to slice off a layer of Leo's flesh. "I have no quarrel with you, shifter. This is your one warning to stay out of my way. This is my clan, and I mean to reclaim it. When they accept me as their



master once again, I will take them to China and leave this realm to the fae. That is our agreement.”

“You don’t intend to slaughter them?”

A harsh, stilted laugh broke like shards of glass from Jiang Chong’s throat, leaving Leo inwardly flinching. “What would be the point of that? How can they do my bidding and serve me as I reestablish my power within China if they are all dead?”

Of course, the Zhang clan intended to fight Jiang Chong with everything they had. They would rather die than submit to his rule. But what about Erik? Would a threat to the little boy change how far they were willing to go to get free of this madman?

“Though...” Jiang Chong drawled, a tiny smirk forming on his pale thin lips. “There is one who must die.”

Fuck! Did he know about the kitten?

“He nearly killed me once. An example must be made of him, so the others don’t get the same idea that they have a chance of escaping.”

“Junjie,” Leo whispered, unable to stop his lover’s name from slipping from his lips.

Jiang Chong clenched and bared his teeth in a hiss. “Yes! The bastard child who had no business learning the arts of the Sword of the Heavenly Garden sect. Once I get rid of him, the rest of the clan will fall in line. They’ve become far too soft over the years.” Jiang Chong paused, and his expression grew speculative, while a wintry smile returned to his lips. “The clan could use a cat shifter with your skills. Your presence in your cat form is unassuming and nonthreatening. You can get in places other can’t during the daylight hours and gather valuable information about our enemies. With the power of an entire vampiric clan at your back, you could go far in

this world. Rule the humans instead of hiding among them.”

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Yep. Jiang Chong was insane. Completely certifiable. Had to be if he thought for a second that Leo would consider that offer.

But the trick was going to be getting away from him and to the clan to warn them before Jiang Chong could catch him.

“You know, that’s an interesting offer.” Leo took another step, putting more distance between them. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“This isn’t something you can turn down,” Jiang Chong said.

“Yeah, I kinda figured it was something like that.”

In the blink of an eye, Leo was in his house cat form and running as fast as he could into the woods rather than the gate. There was a tree that he used frequently at the rear of the property that had a limb that stretched close to the wall. It was a bit of a leap, but he could make it with ease. This would either slow Jiang Chong, or more likely, cause him to set off the warning alarm.

There was little noise through the brush, but he could feel the vampire following close behind. He could imagine Jiang Chong cursing him under his breath.

Leo flew up the tree and out across the limb. He was moving so fast it felt like his paws were barely touching the bark. At the very end of the limb, he jumped. Fingers scraped across his stomach as Jiang Chong stretched for him but just missed.

The cat flew over the wall and landed hard in the soft grass. He stumbled a few steps

and caught his balance again as he raced to the house. He was aiming for the rear door, but he heard voices out front.

Junjie's voice.

"I know he's still angry with me, but I can't sit by and do nothing. I need to search for him. Bring him back to the safety of the clan house."

Leo's heart stopped at his lover's frightened words. He changed direction and ran for the driveway. As Junjie came into view, he heard the door close while the vampire walked toward the driveway gate. Whomever he'd been talking to must have gone inside.

A yowling meow erupted from Leo's throat as he sped to Junjie, praying that he was still ahead of Jiang Chong. He couldn't risk slowing down to look behind him.

"Leo?" Junjie gasped.

The second he had Junjie's attention, Leo shifted into his human form. "Jiang Chong!" he shouted.

Those two words were barely past his lips as the house behind him erupted in bright lights and noise. He could make out Moon shouting the same thing. The vampire had crossed inside the walls to kill him and Junjie.

Panic filled the vampire's face as he stared at his empty hands. In his panic to find Leo, he'd run outside without a single weapon on him. Leo reached him and captured his wrist. With a hard jerk, he pulled him to the house. If they moved fast enough, they could reach the armory and Junjie could grab what he needed while the rest of the clan ran to intercept the bastard.

They didn't get more than two steps.

Jiang Chong sliced through the air, stepping from the dead realm into the living world, coming between them and safety with ease.

Leo barely had enough time to register that death was standing in front of them. Junjie whipped Leo behind his larger frame, drawing Jiang Chong's attention to him. The asshole took the bait and slashed his sword through the air at Junjie. His lover had no choice but to dodge and block as best he could.

Fuck. This. Shit.

House cat might be his preferred form, but it wasn't his only one. And Junjie was worth giving up all of his secrets.

Gritting his teeth, Leo called on the magic that bubbled and hummed in every cell of his body. It took a second to remember how, but he forced his body to shift into a Bengal tiger. He was over five hundred pounds of muscle, teeth, and claws. And he was fucking pissed.

His roar made the ground tremble and every bird in the vicinity took to the air.

Both Jiang Chong and Junjie stopped in their tracks to stare openmouthed at him. He tried to take advantage of their shock by lunging at Jiang Chong. The vampire snapped from his wonder in time to dodge out of the way. Leo chased after him, swiping massive paws at him with long claws extended. He just needed to land one good hit to disembowel the man.

"What the hell?" Xiang shouted from the house.

"Who brought the tiger?" Chen demanded.

“It’s...Leo.” Junjie sounded as if he were still trying to process what he was seeing.

The arrival of more of the Zhang clan must have unnerved Jiang Chong because the asshole created an opening in the dead realm and slipped into it, nearly disappearing from sight. Leo started to jump in after him, but Junjie’s desperate cry of “Don’t!” reminded him of the warnings his lover had given more than once. Never follow Jiang Chong into the dead realm. The bastard was too quick and would leave Leo to rot there.

With a roar and a flick of his tail, Leo retreated, following the shadowy vision of the vampire with his eyes. The only problem was that the farther Jiang Chong moved away from him, the harder it was to see him. He made another frustrated noise in the back of his throat and shifted into his human form.

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“He’s close, but I’ve lost sight of him. Go inside. Get a sword,” Leo ordered while still searching the area for any ghostly sign of him.

Junjie wrapped his fingers around his wrist and squeezed. “You’re not armed either. Come with me. Protect Erik.”

“Your clan needs me out here searching for that asshole. I’ll help them while you get a weapon.” A smile lifted one corner of his mouth and the words, “I’m not leaving you again” were balanced on his tongue. But as he turned his head to look at Junjie, he spotted Jiang Chong behind his lover, the opening between the two worlds already appearing like a gaping wound in the sky.

There was no time to shout a warning. He twisted his hand to grip what he could of Junjie’s arm and pulled him away from Jiang Chong. He lunged forward, putting his body between the monster and his vampire.

The sword plunged through his chest in a flash. The first sharp pain was cold and biting, stopping everything, as if it had been the entire world on pause. But just as quickly, someone tapped the play button, and they all lurched forward. The sword came out with a gush of blood. He lurched back, key body parts no longer functioning properly. Junjie shouted and Leo tried to turn to him, but he was falling.

Damn. Junjie had been right.

Chapter 24

Zhang Junjie

“Leo!”

Junjie fell to his knees with Leo in his arms. Blood poured out of his chest, soaking his clothes. Around him, he could hear the rush of feet and the metallic clang of swords, but he couldn't lift his tear-streaked face from Leo as life drained out of him.

The cat shifter slowly blinked green eyes at him and a crooked smile tried to form on his pale lips, but it fell away. “Don't worry about me. Gonna...be...fine.”

“I can't save you,” Junjie sobbed. He didn't think his heart could break again, but for Leo, it had shattered. There was nothing left now but a giant hole in his chest that would never be filled.

Leo's lips moved, forming the words “It's okay” but no sound came out. His eyelashes fluttered and shut as a last breath slipped from his body. And then nothing. He was gone.

“Leo!” Junjie screamed before burying his face in Leo's neck and giving in to wretched howls of pain. How could he lose him so quickly? They'd known each other for such a short amount of time.

How was he supposed to go on without Leo's devilish smile? His laughter? Even just having that orange tabby cat greet him each sunset, searching for some fish and belly scratches.

He didn't know how long he sat there crying over Leo, holding his corpse so tightly in his arms, but a hand landed on his shoulder and squeezed. With a shuddering gasp, Junjie loosened his hold and looked up to find his entire clan surrounding him and Leo, tears lining several faces. Blasts of ice and snow coated some of the grounds from where Chen had used his gift to stop Jiang Chong. Even now, tiny snowflakes drifted down to land on their heads.



“Jiang Chong?” Junjie choked out.

Xiao Dan squeezed his eyes shut, and he swallowed hard. “He suffered a few slashes, but he escaped over the wall. We didn’t want to leave you.”

“Mao Gege! Mao Gege, wake up!”

Erik’s angry voice snapped Junjie’s head around to see the boy held tightly in Ming Yu’s arms. However, he was struggling against her, attempting to break free while shouting at Leo to wake up. Junjie almost crumbled a second time, but he held it together enough to rise up on his knees and stretch out his arms toward the child.

“Give him to me,” Junjie directed in a rough voice.

Her eyes filled with worry. “Are you sure?”

He could only nod. There was no sneaking more words past the lump in his throat.

She handed Erik to him and the child immediately repositioned himself so that he was facing Leo. Junjie gathered him close and resumed his seat on the ground beside Leo’s body.

“I’m so sorry, Xiao Ping Guo, but Leo is gone,” Junjie whispered as he pressed his cheek to the back of Erik’s head. “But we will always love him and remember him.”

“No! Wake up! Mao Gege, wake up!” Erik shouted. His sweet voice trembled with anger.

Junjie was at a loss. He didn’t know how to explain to Erik that Leo was dead and gone forever, just like his parents. It seemed too cruel. Maybe it was best to take him inside and try to put him to bed. He was too young to understand death.

He squeezed Erik tight in his arms, trying to soak in some of his warmth before handing him to Ming Yu. But he never got the chance.

Leo shot upright, sucking in a huge gasp of air, only to choke on it as he fell to the ground in a fit of coughing.

Everyone standing near Leo jumped several steps away. Mei Lian screamed. Junjie sat frozen, not believing his eyes, while the two-year-old threw his chubby hands up in the air.

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“Yay! Kitty mao wake up!”

“What the fuck? Did you change him?” someone demanded. Possibly Xiang. Junjie wasn’t sure. He couldn’t think. He gawked at Leo as the supposed dead man rolled onto his side, roughly dragging air into his lungs.

Leo had been dead. Junjie was sure of it. He’d felt that last breath leave his body. His heart stopped beating. He was dead.

Leo groaned and rolled onto his back. “Shit, that hurts.”

He was alive.

Leo was alive.

He didn’t know how it was possible, but he didn’t care. His Leo was alive.

The cat winced and stared up at him. “Hey. Sorry. Don’t be mad.”

“Mad?” Junjie repeated. “Why would I be mad? You’re alive. You were dead, but now you’re alive. I-I-” he stammered, his voice breaking as his mind called up the look and feel of Leo’s lifeless body in his arms minutes ago.

Leo grunted as he pushed up into a sitting position. Rough hands cupped Junjie’s face, brushing away cold tears on his cheeks, followed by soft kisses. Erik laughed between them and Leo smirked as he pressed two kisses to the top of the boy’s head. He turned his attention to Junjie and his smile softened. “I’m sorry I scared you. I’m

okay, I swear. Just sore.”

“I’m so fucking confused,” Yichen grouched, interrupting their reunion.

“Language,” Leo and Junjie admonished in unison.

Junjie glanced up at Yichen to see the vampire roll his eyes. “Whatever. Am I the only one freaked out that Erik has the power to wake the dead?”

“What?” Leo released his hold on Junjie so he could look at the grinning two-year-old between them.

“And you said you weren’t a bakeneko!” Kai accused.

“Yeah, that was a total bakeneko thing to do,” Xiang agreed.

Leo stared at Junjie, his expression flat and unamused, as if he were silently telling Junjie that this was his family and their insanity. But Junjie was struggling to argue with them. Bakeneko were known for their ability to raise the newly dead. He just never heard of one raising themselves from the dead, which left them with Erik...

Junjie reached out trembling fingers and pressed them to Leo’s neck, right over his pounding pulse. “You really are alive.”

“Yes,” he hissed as he grabbed Junjie’s fingers and pressed kisses to them. “I’m really alive. Not some zombie or a vampire or anything else. Erik and I are not bakeneko.” His smirk became a touch crooked, and he shrugged one shoulder. “I’m a cat shifter. We have nine lives.”

The pieces fell into place.

Junjie had been wrong earlier. He was mad, and he was thinking about taking a few more of Leo's lives.

"You knew?" Junjie demanded. "You knew when I told you that Jiang Chong was going to kill you that you wouldn't stay dead. You knew and didn't tell me!"

Leo threw up his hands and winced at the sudden movement. "What? No! It doesn't work like that. I can die and stay dead."

"Inside!" Xiao Dan shouted above their heads. "This needs to be discussed inside. Ming Yu, could you—" He hadn't even finished speaking, and Shijie swooped in and scooped up Erik from Junjie's arms. "Chen, could you stop the snow? While it's an appreciated break from the summer, I'd rather we not get buried."

"Oh, yeah. Sure," Chen stammered. The sparse flakes drifting from the dark sky stopped and what was on the grass was melting.

With help from the rest of the clan, Leo and Junjie got to their feet. A hundred questions filled Junjie's brain, but he bit his tongue as Xiao Dan led them into the house and the main meeting room. Many of them were covered in dirt, sweat, and blood from their fight with Jiang Chong, but no one was willing to put this meeting on hold to clean up. Leo had just announced that he had nine lives. What the fuck!

"Yeah...um...sorry," Leo started. He scrubbed a hand through his messy auburn hair. His green eyes skimmed the room, but Junjie didn't miss how the cat appeared reluctant to look at him.

"Leo, you're entitled to your secrets," Xiao Dan said patiently. "However, sharing this one with Junjie might have mitigated some complications that arose."

"Yeah." He sighed, his shoulders slumping. After another deep breath, he turned to

Junjie and picked up Junjie's ice-cold hands. He squeezed, infusing some of his own warmth into the vampire. "I'm sorry. I should have told you, but this nine-lives thing is one of my kind's biggest secrets. We don't tell anyone about this. As you can guess, it would cause something of a riot among the other races. Worse if the humans were to ever get wind of it. We're lucky they think it's a silly superstition with cats."

"But I thought you were going to die. If you had said something..."

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“I know, and I can die. Even before all my lives are up. If Jiang Chong had beheaded me, I wouldn’t have returned. My body has to be largely intact when I die. My body can heal from a lot of wounds, but I can’t regrow body parts. I’m a cat, not a lizard.”

“So, stabbing you can return from,” Chen observed.

“And drowning,” Xiang added.

“Strangulation,” Mei Lian chimed in from where she sat next to Ming Yu and Erik.

“Can we not list all the ways Leo can die?” Junjie snapped. He was still trying to recover from Leo’s last death.

“Pretty much, yeah. Assuming I have lives left,” Leo agreed with a nod.

“Erik’s parents...” Ming Yu’s voice drifted off without her finishing the thought.

Leo hung his head, his fingers tightening on Junjie’s. “I don’t know how they died, but the fae burned their bodies to ash. There’s no coming back from that. Doubt anyone would even want to try.”

“Is there any way to know if something might have happened to Erik...before the cats found him?”

Junjie’s stomach twisted. He knew what Xiao Dan was really asking. Was it possible that the fae had killed Erik when they killed his parents, but he’d been lucky enough not to have his remains destroyed?

Leo's head snapped up. "Erik has never died. As far as I know, that gift doesn't kick in prior to a cat's first shift. Right now, Erik is nearly human. His eyesight is like a cat's, and he probably has sharper hearing. But until he's a teenager and shifts, that's all he'll have."

"Speaking of shifting..." Junjie narrowed his eyes on the cat shifter next to him.

His lover's smile became wide and tense. "Yeah...um...I should have been clearer that when I said cat shifter, I kind of meant all cats."

"Kind of?" Junjie repeated. He was still feeling grateful and relieved that Leo was alive, but there was a rising frustration that left him wanting to strangle him as well.

"Yeah, I mean, I haven't tried to shift into all the different species of cats, but it's my understanding from other cat shifters that we can change into any cat species." Leo lifted his hands in front of him. "As you might guess, it's not very practical to walk about as a tiger or cheetah. Most of us stick with house cats. We can go anywhere. Most people pay little attention to us, and there are even a lot of people who are happy to take us in and feed us."

"No kidding," Junjie muttered.

"Sneaky bastard," Rei said with a chortle. "How many of you spies are wandering around out there?"

Leo made a face at the elf. "Not that many at all, and there are plenty of us who won't go near humans in our cat forms out of fear of being discovered."

"This is astounding," Xiao Dan whispered. "I would never have guessed that cat shifters were so complicated."



“I understand your reticence in sharing this information. If humans or even other shifters found out about this, your kind would be hunted and imprisoned.” Junjie paused and his gaze drifted across the table to where Erik was sitting in Ming Yu’s lap playing with one of his plastic trucks. “But this is critical information that we would need for Erik when he gets older. If you don’t accompany us to China...” He couldn’t finish the sentence, and Leo didn’t seem willing to say anything either. His thumbs moved across Junjie’s fingers in a gentle caress.

“I’m sorry. This thing with Jiang Chong happened faster than I expected. It spiraled out of control,” Leo mumbled.

“Not helped by Junjie panicking and locking you in the armory,” Chen added.

Junjie wanted to throw an evil look at his er-ge, but there was no point. He was right. If he hadn’t panicked, if he had sat down with Leo and talked to him about what he saw, maybe Leo would have trusted him with this valuable information.

“So, Leo, if that is your real name,” Mei Lian taunted. “Do you have any more great secrets that we should know about?”

Leo released Junjie and shoved his hands through his hair, moving it from his face. He took a deep breath, but there was no wincing. Was the wound in his chest fully healed now? He exhaled loudly. “I don’t think so.” He thrust his hands out in front of him and waved them. “No, seriously. Honestly, I don’t think so. Shifting, nine lives, cat vision, seeing the dead. That’s the big stuff. If there’s something else, I’m not trying to hide it from you. It’s just that I take it for granted and don’t realize you don’t know.”

“Thank you, Leo,” Ming Yu said. “We appreciate the gravity of the trust that you’ve placed in us to keep your secrets.” She stood with Erik in her arms. “I’m going to change this stinky boy and get him something to eat. If you need somewhere to sleep

or a change of clothes, Leo, I am sure Junjie can give you a hand.”

Shijie swept out of the room, her head held high after making that declaration, Mei Lian following close on her heels. It was clear that no matter what Leo said now, she had decided that he was one of them and belonged under their roof, despite the secrets he’d kept.

Xiao Dan coughed softly, lifting his hand to his mouth to hide his smile and doing a poor job of it. “Yes. Well. Jiang Chong is gone for now. I’m relieved to find that Moon’s and Kai’s warning spells are still working, even if we can’t see him right away.”

“He doesn’t plan to kill you all,” Leo blurted out. He stared at Junjie, his expression growing pained. “Only Jun-Jun. He...I ran into him after I stormed away. He said that he wants to reclaim the clan and take you back to China, where you’ll become the ruling power there. I’m assuming he means that he’ll become the ruling power. But he plans to kill Jun-Jun because he’s the one he blames for nearly dying all those years ago.”

“Fuck him. Not gonna happen,” Moon grumbled.

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Kai shoved to his feet, towering over all of them. “No one is going to harm Junjie.”

Warmth spread from the tips of Junjie’s ears, down across his face, and to his chest. His clan—his family—loved and protected him. There was no greater feeling in the world.

His gaze shifted to Leo, who was watching him with worried eyes. Having a clan was something Leo knew nothing about, but Junjie wanted to change that. He wanted Leo to be with him always so that he could enjoy that same love and safety.

“It doesn’t matter what Jiang Chong’s intention is. He will have to kill all of us to get to Junjie. We will not bow to him ever again,” Xiao Dan said.

### Chapter 25

#### Zhang Junjie

The meeting ended after that declaration, and Junjie led Leo to his bedroom, where it looked like someone from his clan had attempted to straighten up the mess he’d made. Some sensible part of his brain recognized that Leo was covered in blood. He needed a shower and a change of clothes.

The rest of Junjie’s brain had tromped off to commiserate with his battered heart, leaving him to operate on autopilot.

While Leo was in the shower, Junjie returned to his bedroom to gather some clothes for him to wear. He slid open a drawer and his heart skipped. Beside a neat stack of

his T-shirts was a folded pile of Leo's clothes. Over the past month, Leo had been coming and going from their home so often that Junjie had washed a pile of the cat's clothes with his own. He'd placed them in the drawer so Leo could find them later but had forgotten about them in all the chaos they'd gone through recently.

Junjie took the change of clothes and sat on the edge of his bed, the garments clenched in both hands. Emotions swirled inside of him, forming a great vortex. He was overwhelmed. He told himself that he should be relieved that Leo was alive and okay. But every time he attempted to tamp all his emotions down, they slipped away from him.

"Well, that was a horrible shower."

Leo's sudden announcement had Junjie's head snapping up. How long had he been sitting there staring at the clothes? Leo now stood in the open bathroom doorway, his wet hair slicked back and a fluffy white towel wrapped around his waist.

"I'm sorry?" Junjie said, still trying to empty the clutter from his brain.

"You should be. I spent that entire shower hoping you'd join me." The smirk lifting one corner of his mouth made it obvious he was trying to be funny, but laughing was not one of the things Junjie was feeling.

Leo strolled across the room and Junjie's eyes locked on the spot where Jiang Chong's sword had gone through his chest. The wound was gone and there was a faint red line in its place. Even that was fading as he watched the rise and fall of his chest, leaving his skin flawless.

"Are you truly okay?" Junjie asked.

The cat picked up one of Junjie's hands and pressed it to the red line. "Completely

healed, inside and out. No wound. No pain. All gone.”

“Can...can I ask...”

“You can ask me anything you want, and I promise to tell you the truth.”

“How many lives do you have left?”

Leo’s smirk became a soft smile as he leaned in to whisper into his ear. “Six.” He straightened and gave an embarrassed shrug. “I was reckless when I was young. Reckless and stupid.”

Six.

That was a good number. A very good number. Just hearing it made the knot of tension in the center of his chest ease. He could breathe easier.

“But no more stupid and reckless,” Leo declared. He put a hand under Junjie’s chin, tipping it up to meet his stern gaze. “I am cherishing each of my remaining lives because that’s time I get to spend with you. Assuming you still want me.”

“Yes.” Junjie tossed the clothes resting in his lap aside as he shoved to his feet. He captured Leo’s mouth in a blistering kiss that left the cat clinging to him, a deep, loud purr rumbling up from his chest. He pushed his tongue into Leo’s mouth, claiming him piece by piece.

The scent of his soaps rose from Leo’s hair and skin. Just another thing marking the shifter as his, making his possessive heart join Leo in purring. His hands ran up Leo’s back, pressing them together even more tightly. Leo brought his arms up, winding them behind Junjie’s neck.

“Mine,” Junjie growled as he dragged his lips across Leo’s jaw and down to his neck.

A shiver ran through Leo and his arms tightened on him. “Really? You think you can claim all of me?” Junjie could hear the enormous smile in his words.

Challenge accepted.

Junjie lifted his head from Leo’s neck. He grabbed Leo’s towel and ripped it off. “Definitely.”

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Before the cat could give his cocky response, Junjie dropped the towel so he could pick Leo up and toss him onto the bed. His lover cackled as he bounced on the center of the mattress. The sound brought a smile to his own lips, and he stripped off his clothes. As he straightened from shoving his pants and underwear to the floor, he found Leo watching him, his greedy gaze gobbling every centimeter of him.

“I bet you have no idea how gorgeous you are,” Leo murmured.

“The only thing that matters to me is that my appearance pleases you.”

A devilish grin spread across Leo’s face as he wrapped a hand around his erect cock and started stroking. “You know your looks more than please me.” He bent his legs and spread them wide, giving Junjie a very clear, debauched view of everything.

Gods, he loved Leo’s sense of freedom. His complete comfort in his own skin. It was contagious. With Leo, he felt like he could do or say anything without worrying about being judged or falling short of other’s expectations.

A hand slid down his chest to fondle his cock. He moved it in time with Leo’s, which earned him a deep, throaty groan from the cat.

“Fuck. I can come from watching you do that.” He clamped his hand on the base as if to stave off his rising orgasm. “But I want that monster between your legs in my ass. Not that I have any clue how it’s going to fit.”

Junjie smirked. “It fit in your mouth. I can get it to fit in your ass.”

Leo purred. "I love your confidence."

The vampire crawled onto the bed between the shifter's legs and picked up one foot. He pressed a kiss to his ankle bone and worked his way slowly up his leg, loving the feel of the hair on his leg brushing across his face. Adorable sounds of pleasure slipped from Leo's parted lips, and he squirmed when he reached the inside of his thigh. Junjie bypassed Leo's cock, earning many howls of complaint as he pressed a few tender kisses to the soft flesh along his hip.

"Please, baby, give it a little suck," Leo begged.

Junjie's shoulders shook with silent laughter. His cat was too cute sometimes.

"I would like that very much," Junjie whispered as he nuzzled the side of Leo's dick, his lips brushing the dark red head as he spoke. "But I have my eyes on another prize."

"Whaaaa—"

Leo didn't get his question out. It changed into a shout as Junjie shifted where he was sitting so he could flip the cat onto his stomach. Gripping his hips so that his ass was in the air, Junjie leaned in and licked him with the flat of his tongue from sac to hole. A string of muffled curses flew from Leo's throat and into the pillow where his face was pressed. But those curses turned to pleas as Junjie made a feast of Leo's ass. He licked, sucked, and fucked that stubborn hole with his tongue, loosening muscles.

With patience and care, he worked in one finger and another, stretching his lover as much as he could. His body was dying to plunge deep into Leo, but he didn't want to hurt him.

"Jun-Jun!" Leo sobbed as he got a third finger inside of him. "I can't take anymore."



I'm gonna come and I want you in me first."

Junjie frowned. "I don't want to hurt you."

"I like a little pain with my pleasure. Go slow and use a lot of lube. Oh, gawd! Please say you have lube!"

For that, Junjie was willing to leave Leo's ass so he could dig the new bottle of lube from his nightstand. Thank goodness for delivery. This had not been something he'd wanted to add to the clan's communal shopping list.

Once opened, he spread a very healthy amount on his cock and pressed some into Leo. He positioned himself behind his lover and pressed the thick head to his opening. As he pushed inside, he clenched his teeth against the wave of exquisite pleasure rolling through his body. So much heat. So fucking tight. Leo's muscles clamped down on his dick. It was only when he heard a muffled whimper from Leo that he froze, his brain rising above the fog.

"Are you okay?" he demanded.

"Fine. I'm fine. Just go slow." Each word was sharp and clipped. Not believable at all.

Junjie rubbed one hand up Leo's spine, trying to relax some of the tension humming through his body. He tried to press forward again, but a hiss from Leo stopped him cold.

"I did a poor job of preparing your body. This is too much pain," Junjie declared.

"If you did any better of a job, I would have been coming before your dick was anywhere near my ass," Leo grumbled.

Junjie attempted to pull free from Leo's amazing body, but the cat's hand shot back to grab his thigh, stopping him.

"No! Don't stop!"

"Leo, my precious kitten, I'm hurting you. We can't continue this way. I will suck you off. I promise you'll enjoy it as well," he said around the lump growing in his throat. Never in his life had he hated some part of his body. He'd never expected it to be this.

Leo stared at him over his shoulder. "I don't want to give up yet. Change positions with me. Let me ride you."

*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:34 am*

Junjie agreed. He'd do anything to make Leo happy, except physically harm him.

He pulled free and lay in the middle of the bed while Leo sprang to his knees and moved so that he straddled Junjie.

Of course, now that Leo was getting into position, Junjie's cock was growing soft. Humiliation burned through him, threatening to choke off his air. He closed his eyes, no longer able to meet Leo's warm gaze.

"I'm sorry," Junjie whispered in a rough voice.

"You have nothing to be sorry about." The sound of Leo fumbling with the lube reached his ears. "Look at me, Jun-Jun." Only when he opened his eyes did Leo continue. "None of this is your fault."

"I hurt you."

"And I was too eager to have you. I was the one to rush things." As he spoke, he wrapped a lube-slicked hand around Junjie's dick, stroking him to life. "Do you know how long I've wanted this cock inside of me? Since that first time I saw you step out of the shower. I was just a house cat stretched out across your bed, and I swore I'd died and gone to heaven. I came up with so many evil schemes and fantasies about you bending me over and fucking me so hard."

Leo's fist and words wove a spell to wash away the burn of humiliation. His dick swelled and throbbed with new life.

“Now you’re all mine.” He lowered himself onto Junjie’s dick, pushing the thick head past that ring of muscles.

“Only yours,” Junjie choked out. He meant it. His heart, body, and soul belonged to Leo. He would treasure every second they had together. His precious kitten.

Leo bounced on Junjie, taking more of him a centimeter at a time. By being on top, Leo could control his descent and, more accurately than Junjie, gauge how much he could take before the pain became overwhelming.

Of course, the most dangerous thing about Leo was not his tight ass squeezing the last of Junjie’s sanity from his brain. It was his mouth, because it never stopped running.

“Fuck. I can feel you getting thicker. Knew you’d be perfect. So big. Ruin me. Make me yours.”

Junjie gripped Leo’s cock and stroked it, turning his words to babbling gibberish as he started moving faster on Junjie’s member, taking more of him.

“Help,” Leo yelped. “So close. I need it all. Help me take all of you.”

On Leo’s next drop, Junjie thrust upward, burying himself completely inside Leo’s incredible heat. Leo threw his head up, his muscles clenching around Junjie, massaging until Junjie was sure his control was going to snap.

He forced himself to list all the swords in the armory by name as he gained control of his rising need to come.

Junjie must have taken enough time to let Leo’s brain reboot, because as they moved together, Leo found his tongue again. Filthy words poured from his mouth, spurring Junjie on to pound him harder and faster. The only problem was that he was on the

bottom. He couldn't get the angle and leverage he wanted.

With a snarl, Junjie wrapped one arm across Leo's back and flipped them so that Leo was on the mattress. But it wasn't enough. He withdrew from Leo completely. Before the cat could yowl in protest, Junjie turned him onto his stomach. He plunged into him in one long, seemingly endless stroke that had them both moaning.

"Bastet, fuck me! My new favorite thing is bossy Jun-Jun," Leo cried out as he pushed up on his hands and knees. "I can see why you like this position."

Junjie grinned as he fucked slow and deep into Leo, drawing out every thrust so that Leo's toes curled.

"Full. So full. So good. Don't stop. Never stop." The cat's words were slurring as if he were becoming drunk on the brutal, bone-crushing ecstasy.

Springs squeaked, and the bed groaned with every thrust. The smell of sweat and musk overpowered the last lingering hints of soft soap.

Junjie lowered his head to Leo's neck and licked away a bead of sweat. He peppered his skin with tender kisses. A whimper escaped Leo, and muscles tightened on Junjie's cock as if in warning.

"Bite me!" Leo pleaded, his voice cracking.

"Leo, no," Junjie said even as his fangs slid down against his wishes. "You lost enough blood tonight."

"Please. Just a little one. So close now. Bite me, and we'll both come so hard."

It was stupid.

And dangerous.

And Leo was a terrible influence.

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Junjie's fangs sank in on the next hard thrust. Leo screamed and his body clenched around Junjie's cock, holding him so tight that it was nearly impossible to keep thrusting through the orgasm. The hot sweet blood spilled across his tongue and Junjie let go of his tight control.

The orgasm slammed into him, knocking the air from his lungs as he pumped his load into Leo's welcoming body. Everything trembled. He'd barely closed the wound on Leo's neck before he pulled them both onto their sides as he collapsed.

"Fuck," Leo panted. "I mean...just...fuck..."

Junjie closed his eyes and smiled as he tried to catch his breath. His cock was still nestled deep in Leo's ass, and his lover was in his arms. His entire body hummed with pleasure. He was sated to his very core.

"If I spent one of my lives on that orgasm, it was totally worth it."

Which reminded him...

"No more biting for at least a month," Junjie declared.

"What? Why? I'm all healed, and you couldn't have taken more than a sip. I've lost more blood with a skinned knee."

"Punishment. You kept too many secrets from me."

"True. True." Leo snuggled closer, resting his head on Junjie's shoulder.

“But...” Here it came. “You’re punishing yourself, and that’s not fair to you.”

“It is. I should be punished for letting my fears drive me to imprison you.”

Leo hummed for a moment in thought. “Okay, but you locked me up for only two hours. That’s barely long enough to count. I say your punishment should last for two days. That seems fair to you. Besides, you’ve learned your lesson. We both have. Does anyone really need to be punished?”

Junjie pressed his face into the top of Leo’s head to hide his smile. The cat was so sneaky, he loved it.

“Maybe I should think of another, better punishment.” As he spoke, Junjie shifted his hips, withdrawing slightly, only to push in deep. The slide was toe curling as Leo’s tight channel was slick with the lube and his cum.

“How are you still hard?” Leo groaned and gasped at the same time.

“I find I have a faster recovery time where you’re involved.” He thrust inside Leo again, while one hand strayed across his chest to pluck at a nipple. “Should I stop?”

“No! Geez, no! Don’t ever stop. My body will catch up to yours soon.”

“Good. We’ll take it much slower this time,” Junjie purred into Leo’s still tender neck. “As punishment.”

## Chapter 26

Leo St. George

Voracious vampire.



Leo paused on his trek down the hall to locate Junjie and pressed his hand to his lower back. Even with his superior healing, everything below the waist was tender or aching.

They'd had sex. And then more sex. Then fooled around while cleaning up. They'd passed out together in a tangle of sheets and limbs, only for him to wake up to Junjie's wandering hands and perfect mouth. The last two orgasms had felt like they were nothing more than the dusty remains of his balls. His sac held hollowed out eggshells that would shatter if someone dared to touch them.

But true to his word, Jun-Jun had bitten him just the one time, no matter how much he'd begged.

Fuck. There was nothing sexier than feeling those fangs drag across his skin.

Despite his intense sexual appetite, Junjie was still the responsible adult. He was the one with the willpower to enforce the no-biting rule—even though Leo might have left many lovebites all over Jun-Jun's body. The vampire was the one who'd gotten them properly cleaned up and snuggled together under the covers when all Leo wanted to do was fall asleep in a cum- and sweat-covered mess.

Regardless of all the body aches and broken sleep, Leo wouldn't change a damn thing about last night. Being held in Junjie's arms, falling asleep to the sound of his soft breathing, it was all heaven. It was hard to believe that in a month's time, he'd gone from just feed me, fuck me, and then don't touch me to...this was what he wanted for the rest of his life.

Not to mention that Jun-Jun had become a package deal with Erik. The kitten called to a paternal instinct he hadn't even known he'd had. Teaching Erik how to be a cat shifter and watching the little guy grow in a loving environment had become so important to him. He wanted to be there for Erik's first shift. His first hunt in his new

form. Learning all the things his cat body could do. Leo needed to be there for those moments.

Straightening, Leo continued through the large manor. He didn't find Jun-Jun and Erik in the child's room or the other parlor he liked to play in, so he checked the kitchen and finally the backyard. They were feeding the fish.

In the distance, a soft roll of thunder moved across the dark sky. The sun had set an hour ago, but it looked closer to midnight. Light raindrops pattered on the cover of leaves, whispering of the coming rain. With a smile, Leo stepped into an alcove off the kitchen and grabbed a large, black umbrella. As he walked outside, he opened it. The softwhooshandthunkdrew Junjie's gaze over his shoulder and he grinned at Leo before turning his attention to Erik. Fish food pellets flew across the pond and plunked into the water, only to be gobbled up immediately by the koi. Neither the child nor the fish appeared to mind the rain.

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When Leo had Junjie beside him under the umbrella, he wrapped an arm around his waist, pulling him in close.

“Wo...” he started and stopped to lick his dry lips. Junjie’s brow wrinkled, but his smile never wavered as he looked at Leo. This was harder than he expected. On multiple levels.

“Wo ai ni,”<sup>1</sup> Leo tried again, forcing each sound past the growing tightness in his throat.

Junjie didn’t say anything. His eyes widened to giant saucers, and his lips parted to form a soundless O. The fish food container slipped from dead fingers and hit the ground hard enough to lose its lid. Fish pellets scattered everywhere.

“Yay! Feed the fishes!” Erik shouted.

That worked wonders for snapping their frozen state. Both of them quickly bent to gather up the food faster than Erik could begin tossing it all into the pond.

“Shi-shoot! Did I say it wrong? Or maybe Google Translate had it wrong, and I cursed your grandmother. I knew I shouldn’t trust Google Translate, but I also didn’t trust your clan mates to give me the right phrase.” He was babbling. He knew it, but couldn’t stop. The torrent of words just kept pouring out as the fear and embarrassment mounted in the face of Junjie’s silence.

The vampire stopped his words at last by grabbing his chin and capturing his wayward mouth in a hard kiss. All the terror and awkwardness washed away under

the sweet press of those lips.

Junjie pulled away and beamed brilliantly at him. “Say it again,” he whispered.

“Wo ai ni,” he repeated with more confidence this time.

“I love you, too.” Their lips met in another sweet kiss that felt like the vampire had wrapped his arms around his soul.

The kiss didn’t last long, though. A little arm landed on Leo’s shoulder as Erik’s head knocked into the side of his and Junjie’s. “Whoa knee! Whoa knee!” the boy shouted.

Leo’s shoulders shook, and Junjie threw his head back as laughter burst from him. He gathered the giggling two-year-old in his arms and they stood. Leo shifted the umbrella over all three of them as the rain increased, but it didn’t touch any of them in their private haven.

Junjie held Erik balanced on one arm while he tickled Erik’s belly with his free hand. “Yes! We love you, too!” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Junjie gasped, and his wide eyes snapped up to Leo.

Grinning so wide his cheeks hurt, Leo leaned in and pressed a kiss to Erik’s cheek. “Yes, we love you.”

When he looked at Junjie, the vampire’s eyes were now watery, and he was rapidly blinking as if fighting to hold in the tears. “No, don’t cry. I know my accent is horrible, but it’ll get better with practice,” he teased as he kissed away one of the tears that escaped.

A choked laugh escaped Junjie. “Idiot,” he mumbled. “I can’t believe you learned that phrase for me.”

“I wish I could say they were the first Chinese words I’d learned, but I’ve been listening to you guys say gege, jiejie, and shixiong for months now. However”—Leo stopped and held up one finger as he smirked—“these were the first words I ever researched and taught myself for you.”

“That is the sweetest gift anyone has ever given me in my entire life,” Junjie whispered, appearing as if he were going to cry again.

Leo put his arm around Junjie’s waist and pulled him in close. “I wanted to do this not just to show you how much I love you, but it’s also my way of saying that I want to go with you to China. I want to go wherever you go for the rest of our lives. No more wandering and being useless. You and Erik have become my everything, and my six lives aren’t worth anything without you both in my life.”

“Really?”

He nodded because he suddenly couldn’t talk past the lump in his throat. “Yes. I want to be there for all of Erik’s firsts. I want to teach him how to be the most amazing cat shifter ever. And I want to learn how to be the best mate I can be for you.” He lifted his free hand to brush the back of his fingers across Junjie’s tear-streaked cheek. “You deserve the absolute best in this world, and I want to be the one who makes you smile every night.”

“I love you, Leo St. George. I want you to come home with Erik and me. Join my clan. Be part of my family. You’ll never be alone.”

“Sap,” Leo muttered as he kissed Junjie’s cheek. “You’re turning me into a sap.” And he welcomed it. This was his family. The Zhang clan was his family now, and he was going to destroy anyone who threatened them.

“I can’t wait to show this to everyone.”

Junjie and Leo turned toward the house at the same time to find Moon standing under the roof with his phone pointed at them, clearly recording their not-so-private moment.

“But as much as I don’t want to break this up,” Moon continued, tucking the phone away in his pocket. “Rei just received a message from Ellora. She knows where Trin and his army are going to be tomorrow night.”

Leo’s stomach sank as though he’d swallowed a boulder. Another fight with the fae. Junjie and the rest of the clan were going to be walking into another dangerous situation. And Leo was going to be right there with them to make sure his mate didn’t come to harm.

“Xiao Dan has called a meeting.”

Junjie grunted. “The Variks?”

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Moon gave a single sharp nod. “Aiden and Ronan are on their way over to join in the planning. I’m going to call my old coven to see if Sky, Mad, and Red can lend a hand in the fight.” His gaze shifted to Erik between Leo and Junjie, and lines of worry dragged down the corners of his mouth. “We’ll also figure out somewhere safe to put Erik so that we all know he’s protected.”

“Thanks, Moon. We’ll be in shortly,” Leo said.

The young vampire darted into the house, and Leo cupped Junjie’s cheek. “We’ve got this. Erik will be safe while we go take care of the fae. After tomorrow night, Trin’s reign will be over and the fae will return to their own world. If we’re lucky, Jiang Chong will be there too.”

“Yes,” Junjie agreed with a hiss. “I have a score to settle with my creator.”

“We can end this at last. Erik and our clan will be safe.”

“Our clan.” Junjie closed his eyes and turned his face into Leo’s palm, placing a soft kiss on his rough skin. “Wo ai ni, my precious kitten.”

“Wo ai ni, my mate.”

1 Wo ai ni – I love you

Chapter 27

Zhang Junjie

Thunder rumbled low like a distant beast's growl rolling across the black sky, and Junjie shivered. Kai was anxious about the coming battle, and his building anger was churning up the heavens. Building moisture made the air thick and heavy, as if one good poke would send the rain falling onto their heads. A breeze stirred the leaves that rattled loudly on the branches overhead. The scent of death lingered and teased his nose.

As if sensing his unease, a large head bumped Junjie's thigh. He smiled at the sleek black jaguar that stood next to him and rubbed his head. Leo had opted for a somewhat bigger feline form for this fight, and Junjie was grateful.

"I get why River and Wyatt had to stay behind," Rafe Varik drawled as he leaned his shoulder against a tree near where Junjie hid. "But why is he here? Should we be worried about the fae getting in his head and controlling him?"

A disgruntled huff escaped Leo, and Junjie smirked.

"When have you known any cat to listen to anyone?" Moon asked.

"That's a good point," Philippe agreed, a smile dancing within his words.

"With Winter on the other team fixed on taking out Trin, we need someone who can spot Jiang Chong while he's in the dead realm," Chen cut in sharply. "Now everyone, focus. We need to find Jiang Chong and protect the first team."

"The glamour is in place, but I can't hold it over the entire field for long. We need to find Jiang Chong quickly and draw him to us," Xiao Dan whispered.

Junjie pushed away from the tree he'd been hiding behind and stepped closer to the edge of the field, putting himself out in the open while Leo growled and soundlessly climbed the tree closest to him so that he was right above Junjie.



“I don’t think we’ll have a problem getting him to come to us,” Junjie said. After all, their creator was still very determined to kill Junjie after his failure of a student had come so close to killing him.

The planning with the Variks had taken nearly an entire night, but they’d decided to break into three teams. The first team comprised Rei, Yichen, Winter, Xiang, Kai, Aiden, Ronan, and Mei Lian. Their goal was to kill Trin and any of the elf wizards who were attempting to cast the spell to wipe out more human towns. The hope was that once they took out Trin, Rei could seize control of the fae army.

The second team comprised Junjie, Leo, Rafe, Philippe, Chen, Moon, Huli, and Xiao Dan. Their goal was to eliminate Jiang Chong and then, hopefully, join the fight against the fae.

The final team of Ming Yu, Fox, Ethan, Marcus, Bel, River, and Wyatt gathered at the Varik mansion with Moon’s old coven. In Junjie’s mind, their only task was to keep Erik and the most vulnerable of their two clans safe.

How Moon had ended up on the team to fight Jiang Chong was still a mystery to Junjie, though. That fledgling was one fast talker when he wanted to be.

Junjie stared out across the large empty field ringed by thick woods. A narrow stream cut through the center. The water wasn’t particularly deep, but Rei suggested that the running water would help to fuel the spell. Kai was hoping to turn that against them. Junjie was looking forward to seeing fae magic take on the magic of an ancient dragon, but right now, his only concern was for Jiang Chong. They had a score to settle.

“Don’t let your emotions cloud your judgment,” Xiao Dan said in a tight voice. Shixiong was always good at reading his mind and his moods.

“He killed my mate,” Junjie bit out.

“Your mate is also alive and hiding in the tree above your head. You must remember your duty to your clan and the Varik clan.”

“Movement! Ten o’clock.” They all turned to where Rafe pointed across the field. Shadows shifted among the trees before the pale ghostly glow of will-o-wisps penetrated the darkness at last. Several battalions of armed elves stepped out of the woods. In the middle of the armed fighters was a circle of elves in robes with floating balls of light around them. They were walking slowly but steadily toward the stream in the center of the field.

But there was no sign of Trin or his right-hand woman, Aire Bira.

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It was a painful understatement to say that the fae vastly outnumbered them. Even with a dragon on their side. Ellora was supposed to bring her army of resistance fighters, but they didn't know how many she had on her side or what kind of damage they could do.

“Shit!” Xiao Dan swore suddenly, ripping Junjie's gaze from the movement of the fae army.

Xiao Dan was kneeling on the ground, curled up in the fetal position. Huli flew from where he'd been lurking in the shadows, shifting into human form the second he reached Xiao Dan. He laid an arm across his bowed shoulders and pulled him in close.

“Gege, what happened? Where are you hurt?” Huli demanded.

“It's the fae magic,” Xiao Dan panted. “I can't hold my glamour in place on the field. The closer those wizards get to us, the more their magic burns through mine.”

Junjie swore under his breath and stared at the field. The glamour Xiao Dan had created had been barely noticeable. A few changes to the field and sky. Things that most wouldn't see even if they were searching for them. The hope was that Jiang Chong would walk into their trap without realizing it, giving himself away. They hadn't considered that the fae could disperse Xiao Dan's glamour.

But Jiang Chong would have.

A chill ran up Junjie's spine and he spun, turning his back to the field and the fae

army. He scoured the wooded area where his team waited for the first sign of Jiang Chong. Thunder crashed again; the heavenly boom came closer this time as the storm bore down on them.

“There!” Huli shouted, pointing at Moon.

The young vampire didn’t even have a chance to move. Philippe dove across the short distance separating them, hitting Moon square in the chest and taking them both to the ground. They were briefly lost in the brush while all eyes turned to the blade that poked through a hole in the very air.

Jiang Chong stepped through the opening, a grin slashing wide across his face. “We have unfinished business.”

The monster’s words must have served as a signal, because a cry rose around them in the woods and more than a hundred elves poured through the trees with bows and swords raised. Trin had gifted Jiang Chong his small army to use.

“Leo! Keep your eye on Jiang Chong!” Xiao Dan shouted as they all dove into the fight. Without Xiao Dan’s glamour spell to help give them some warning of Jiang Chong’s presence, Leo was the only one who could see the vampire when he dipped into the dead realm.

A fierce roar erupted from Leo as he jumped from his perch in the tree and raced toward Jiang Chong. Junjie followed on his heels, leaving the rest of his team to fight the fae. Gunshots rang out above the cries of the dying. Philippe and Rafe had no training in bladed weapons but were excellent marksmen. The air crackled with magic from both the fae and Huli. Junjie exhaled, and it came out as white fog. The temperature of the forest had dropped more than twenty degrees in a matter of seconds, thanks to Chen and his ice magic. Frost crawled up the trees and gilded the grasses at their feet.

But Junjie didn't let his gaze waver from Jiang Chong and Leo. The jaguar was almost a liquid black blur as muscles stretched and danced under smooth fur. He leaped at Jiang Chong, and the vampire moved to bring his sword down. Yet Leo shifted from a massive jaguar to a tiny house cat in the blink of an eye. The vampire didn't have the chance to adjust his attack. Leo landed right on his face and kicked off, supplying Junjie with the perfect distraction to attack.

Their blades clashed, and Junjie laughed at Jiang Chong's surprised expression. His haughty demeanor was long gone. He might have caught them off guard, but they were not about to be beaten so easily.

"I never expected to have another chance to kill you," Junjie bit out as he deflected each of Jiang Chong's slashes. His old creator had gotten faster over the years, but so had Junjie. For two thousand years, he'd regularly trained with his clan, determined to be a powerful defender of his brothers and sisters. He was not about to let such an evil threat defeat him now.

"You would never have gotten so close the first time if it had not been for the rest of your clan," Jiang Chong snarled. "You could never defeat me one on one."

"That may be true, but I don't care. I will always have my clan and my mate at my side to see me through any adversity. Together, we will destroy you."

Just saying those words lifted an ancient weight from his chest. It was as if the words Shifu Shi Lei had whispered in his ear a hundred times had clicked into place. He wasn't alone or an outsider because of his birth. The Zhang clan was his family and his home. Leo was his mate. They would always be there to support him. There was no need for him to face Jiang Chong alone.

It began as a small bubble. A giggle. But soon the laughter broke forth, shaking Junjie's entire body as he continued to match Jiang Chong.

“Have you gone mad?” Jiang Chong demanded, taking an extra step back to disengage from Junjie. He stared at Junjie as if he’d lost his mind, but for the first time in his entire life, everything felt right.

“No. I finally figured out how little you matter.”

Jiang Chong snarled and lunged at Junjie. The clashes of their swords rang out again and again as their battle raged over the woods. Junjie was vaguely aware of the rest of the clan fighting swarms of fae around him, but he couldn’t take his eyes off his creator for even a second.

He caught flashes of orange in his peripheral vision. Those flashes were usually followed by horrific screams as Leo, now in his Bengal tiger form, took down any member of the fae who got too close to him and Jiang Chong. No one could aid the monster across from him. Tonight, this had to end.

Muscles burned, and a cold sweat tricked down from his temples. A knot formed in his stomach, and a realization rose in his mind. He was slowing down. The fight was stretching too long. Jiang Chong was giving him no opening to steal the advantage.

Patience.

It was almost as if Shifu were whispering in his ear as he fought with Xiang back in the training ground of their youth.

“Patience...and trust in your training.”

The panic receded, and he could breathe a little easier. Jiang Chong had never trained with them. He’d always stood on the sidelines and barked orders. Only Shifu—and later Xiao Dan—had actively participated in their drills, gently correcting their stances and movements so they were perfect. Jiang Chong had never practiced the

Sword of the Heavenly Garden sect techniques and fighting style.

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The more he trusted in his training, the more fluid and natural his motions became, while Jiang Chong's started to be rushed and sloppy. The elder vampire's face twisted with rage, and his waxy pale cheeks grew slick with sweat.

At last, Jiang Chong made a misstep and Junjie was there for it. He slashed, catching the vampire across the chest. The rich scent of blood blossomed in the night air, but it was foul like rotted meat to him since he'd discovered the sweetness of his mate's blood.

Jiang Chong cried out in pain, and a black doorway opened behind him. Junjie tightened his hand on his sword, mentally preparing to follow his maker into the dead realm. He would follow him wherever he must to end his life.

But before Jiang Chong could slip away, Leo bit down on the vampire's leg and tossed him back toward Junjie, away from the black doorway. The vampire stumbled, barely catching himself and blocking Junjie's strike.

For the first time, real fear flashed across his face, widening his eyes and parting his lips in a soundless cry. There was noescape. Leo was patrolling the area, forcing him to remain in the living realm.

Junjie laughed as Jiang Chong tried again and again to escape. At each attempt, Leo was right there to jerk him back, and Junjie added another cut to his body so that blood now soaked his shirt and pants. It dripped from the fingertips of his empty hand, painting the forest floor.

"Are you happy now? Is this what you wanted?" Jiang Chong's voice shook as he



shouted at Junjie.

A smirk toyed with Junjie's lips. "Not quite. We're almost there."

Jiang Chong was still digesting his comment when Junjie gave Leo the tiniest nod of his head. The tiny black cat had sneaked around Jiang Chong and was behind him. In the blink of an eye, Leo became a massive Bengal tiger again.

The giant cat lunged at Jiang Chong, sinking sharp teeth and long fangs into the vampire's leg. Jiang Chong screamed and twisted as Leo pulled him off balance. As he fell, Jiang Chong attempted to swing his sword at Leo. In two quick moves, Junjie blocked the swipe at his mate and lopped Jiang Chong's head off.

Jiang Chong fell dead while his head rolled to a stop against a fallen log.

"Spit that out," Junjie admonished. "You're not allowed to eat something so disgusting."

Leo lifted his head to Junjie, making a show of sticking out his massive tongue and wiping it with his paw as if he had tasted something nasty.

Junjie stood over Jiang Chong's lifeless body for several seconds, deaf to the sounds of fighting through the woods and across the field. This monster had been a shadow across their lives for two millennia. Even after they'd escaped him, he'd continued to haunt their memories and dictate their actions. He'd swooped in the moment their clan had been at their weakest, when they had been in deep mourning for their shifu and many of the clan elders.

"We are free at last, Shifu," Junjie whispered.

"Chen!"

Moon's blood-curdling scream sliced through Junjie's moment of peace. He swung about to find a sword and three arrows sticking out of Chen's chest, pinning him to a tree, his pale face splattered with blood. Xiao Dan and Huli were barely holding their own a few hundred meters away, but elves surrounded them completely. Meanwhile, Moon had gotten separated from Chen and was standing near Rafe and Philippe, who were reloading their guns as fast as they could while more elves raced toward them.

"Leo, protect Moon!" Junjie shouted as he ran for Chen.

They had all been giving him space to defeat Jiang Chong, but they were out of time and strength.

Junjie sliced through several elves who were preparing to attack Chen while his er-ge struggled to remove the arrows from his body. Junjie reached him as he pulled the first one free.

"Forget me! Protect Moon," Chen snarled. His voice was weaker than Junjie had ever heard it as blood poured out of him and pain coursed through his body.

"Leo has Moon?—"

"You dared to hurt my mate." Moon's low voice was a cold wind that froze everyone.

"Shit," Chen swore and pulled frantically at the arrows, his hands slipping on the blood. "Moon! Don't! Baobei, I'm okay. Please, don't!"

Junjie dared to look over his shoulder, and his heart stopped. Gone was the sweet laughing Moon they'd all come to adore the past several months. The blood witch that Moon had put aside for his own safety had returned, and he was fucking pissed.

Moon sliced the knife in his right hand across his left palm. He lifted his left hand as

if he were sprinkling seeds on the ground. Beads of blood dropped from his hand and hung frozen in the air like shining red stars. The tips of his fingers changed from a dark burgundy red to black as the color crept up his arms to his elbows. His golden-brown eyes glowed blood red, and the elf soldiers took a hesitant step back.

“Moon, you swore to never use blood magic again!” Xiao Dan called from across the forest.

“Oh, this isn’t blood magic, Shifu,” Moon said with a mad cackle. “I talked with Sky, and he had a different opinion about my magic. He says I’m not a blood witch anymore, but a necromancer.” He’d barely finished talking when he thrust out his left hand, sending the drops of blood he’d had hovering in the air flying out.

Junjie gasped and staggered a step. Some unseen force had slammed into his chest, pushing him off balance. Strong hands grasped his shoulder, and he glanced to see Leo in his human form standing behind him, holding him steady.

“You okay?”

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Junjie nodded. “Help me with Chen. He’s the only one who can get through to Moon.”

“Okay, but it seems to me that Moon’s got shit under control. Literally.”

Junjie lifted his gaze to where Moon was standing to find the bodies of the elf soldiers they had killed were climbing to their feet in front of their master. Moon had raised the fucking dead. The living elves standing among them screamed and ran toward the field, trying to put as much distance between them and the zombie army.

“Yeah, that’s creepy,” Rafe muttered.

Junjie couldn’t argue with that. He pulled free of Leo’s hold and rushed to a frozen Chen. He quickly pulled the last two arrows out of Chen’s chest and held the vampire up when Leo jerked the sword from his stomach. Chen’s legs instantly gave out, and Junjie caught him while keeping one hand pressed to the largest wound.

“Talk to him, Chen-ge. You can feel the rage rolling off him. Make sure he’s truly in control of this,” Junjie murmured in his ear. “Moon is still in there. He’s only doing this out of fear. He loves you.”

Chen gave a jerky nod and used Junjie to get back to his feet. “Moon? Baobei? Look at me. Please.”

Moon’s head snapped to his mate and those glowing red eyes made Junjie swallow hard, but Chen didn’t hesitate to close the distance between them, his trembling hands cupping Moon’s blood-splattered cheeks.

“Baobei, I’m okay. I promise.”

“They hurt you. They tried to kill you.” Moon’s voice shook, and tears clung to his lashes before spilling down his cheeks.

“But they didn’t kill me. I’m still here with you. Are you here with me?”

“I’m here. I swear.”

Chen released one of his cheeks and grabbed his hand. He lifted it up between them so Moon could see the blackness covering his skin as if he had been charred to a crisp. “Are you in control? Because this is scaring me. The last time you used magic, you weren’t in control and it nearly destroyed you.”

A smile lifted the corners of Moon’s mouth, and he blinked, changing his eyes from red to golden brown. “No pain. I’m in control. I promise.” Moon raised Chen’s hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. “Sky told me how to tap into necromancy with my blood magic. It was a more natural outlet for me since I’m a vampire now.”

Moon winked and slipped away from Chen. He spun with his arms wide, and more dead fae climbed to their feet. He waved his right hand toward the field where the fae were fighting the first team and Moon’s dead army joined in the fray, evening the odds at last.

“So, he’s a vampire necromancer now?” Philippe asked.

Moon grinned at them. “Not a full-blooded one like Sky. I can’t see ghosts and the underworld minion language still sounds like gibberish to me, but I can command the dead.”

“And this is what you’ve been chatting with Sky about the past few weeks?” Chen demanded in a low, even tone.

Junjie knew that tone and took a step away from Chen.

Apparently, Moon knew that tone as well, because the fledgling vampire had the good sense to drop his head to his shoulders and flash some very big “I’m sorry” eyes. “Maybe...” he whimpered.

“I’m killing the necromancer when we’re done here,” Chen muttered.

“Okay, but can we kill the fae first?” Huli bounded close in his fox form, all nine of his tails dancing behind him in his excitement. “Especially since Moon was nice enough to create an army for us.”

“He has a point,” Leo agreed. “I like fighting with an army at my back.”

Chen glared at Leo for all of two seconds before he finally sighed. “Fine. Let’s go kill the fae army with our dead army. We can’t let the dragon have all the fun, anyway.”

## Chapter 28

Leo St. George

Leo had never been the type to go diving into a fight. In fact, he’d always gone out of his way to avoid getting drawn into any kind of scuffle. But the fae were different.

The fae had killed Erik’s parents.

They’d hurt Jun-Jun and his clan.

Those reasons were more than enough to get him involved. Junjie and Erik were his everything. His family.

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And no one was allowed to touch his family.

With nothing more than a thought and a touch of magic, Leo shifted into an enormous Bengal tiger. In a heartbeat, the entire world became more. Through his tiger eyes, the dark forest was brighter, smells were sharper, and sounds reached him from greater distances. In his human form, his senses were enhanced, more than a normal human, but nowhere near as strong as when he was in his cat form.

He prowled closer to Junjie, bumping his head against his mate's thigh before rubbing the entire length of his body along Junjie's leg. His mate's scent was so strong now—a hypnotic blend of plum blossoms, freshly laundered linen, and sandalwood incense. All the things that made him think of home and love.

Of course, Jun-Jun now had Leo's scent on him because the vampire was his alone.

A low chuckle preceded some excellent head scratches. Leo chuffed. Jun-Jun always knew the best spots to scratch.

"I think you need to save the scenting of your territory for later," Junjie chided playfully.

He was right, but Leo couldn't help himself. He circled Junjie just the once and sat next to his lover. Huli bounded over and Leo blinked at the larger-than-average fox. He'd always thought his nine tails were what made him appear bigger, but the fox standing in front of him was only slightly smaller than his own stature.

"Kai is having trouble with the wizards. Shall we go help him?" Huli's voice was



brimming with excitement and mischief, which was all the enticement Leo needed.

Leo turned his face up toward Junjie, his heart squeezing at the soft smile that greeted him.

“Yes, please help Kai. We’ll focus on stopping the wizards first and then help the others against the fae army,” Junjie said.

That was all he needed to hear. His mate would be right behind him.

Leo and Huli darted from the thick line of trees. Waist-high grasses that had browned under the summer sun covered the field. The rich scent of dried leaves, damp earth, and death teased his nose. He split off from the crazy fox and hunkered low so that his chest grazed the dirt as he stalked the fae wizards that circled a section of the stream. The clang and scrape of metal on metal nearly drowned out the burble of the water as he rushed around rocks and along its banks. The closer he got to his target, the more Leo’s heart hammered in his chest and his breathing quickened to short pants.

Moon’s dead army and the shiny white dragon were doing an excellent job of keeping the wizards occupied. The massivelizard darted overhead like a pissed-off hummingbird, pausing only to claw and scratch at the glowing blue magical barrier that surrounded the six wizards. Moon’s dead warriors hammered on the shield as well but made no progress at getting inside.

He peered into the protective bubble while still hidden in the grasses and behind Moon’s zombies to watch the wizards. There were three on each side of the stream. Their long, colorful robes with voluminous sleeves reminded him of something he might see in a D&D drawing of a wizard. The only things missing were the long, white beards and the pointy hats. Each held a long staff topped with a different color glowing crystal.

Magic crackled and snapped in the air, but it didn't seem to affect the dragon, as their spells bounced off his scales. However, either the dragon or the wizards were stirring up the wind and turning the black clouds into bubbling tar. Lightning danced behind the clouds, shooting across the sky, and the thunder rumbled after it. The electric charge was building and that couldn't be a good thing. He needed to act now if they were going to save the humans from more devastation.

The last spell had swept east, destroying major cities such as Boston and Providence. Even as far north as Montreal. They were speculating that the next spell would go west. Hartford was on the chopping block, but were these wizards now strong enough to wipe out places like New York and Philadelphia? They couldn't take that chance.

Leo sniffed and bumped the blue wall where it met the ground. It felt solid. He followed it around to where the stream cut through the center of the field. If he'd been in his human form, he would have snickered. The bottom of the barrier stopped just at the top of the water.

Staying low, Leo slipped into the water and swam under the blue dome. The sounds of the fighting were muffled as he surfaced above the water within the dome. A tiny whimper reached him, and he glanced back to see Huli pacing along the bank, whining at the water while his triangular ears were pinned to his round head. Leo rolled his eyes, and the fox jumped into the stream. When he surfaced beside Leo and scrambled up onto the bank, all of his fur was soaked and sticking to his slender frame. Huli had lost of his fluffiness, making him appear to be an overgrown orange greyhound with too many tails.

Leo chuffed in amusement, but a sharp gasp cut it off. He looked up to find that a wizard had spotted them. The jig was up.

A roar erupted from his throat, startling the rest of the wizards before he leaped at the nearest one in sky-blue robes. The elf tried to block Leo with his staff, but it didn't

stop the massive tiger as they tumbled to the ground in a heap. The poor creature felt like a sack of bones. Leo's stomach roiled, and he clung to an image of the first time he'd seen Erik. The child had been sitting alone on the couch in that empty house, his round cheeks streaked with dirt and tears, appearing so utterly lost and fragile, his entire world shattered because of these monsters. With that rising rage, Leo had no trouble ripping the wizard's throat out with his teeth.

More panicked screams rose from within the bubble, and Leo glanced over his shoulder to see the jiuweihu pouncing on a wizard and breaking his neck. His tails snapped behind him with what could have been glee or malice. With Huli, it was hard to tell the difference.

Leo stared at the elf he'd killed, the light extinguished from his green eyes. He wasn't a killer. He wasn't even much of a hunter in his cat form. A lazy feline, Leo preferred his meals served in a bowl with a side of chin scratches.

But these monsters wanted to kill his mate and his sweet boy, Erik. They had killed countless humans. No way was he letting them steal the family he'd just found.

A sharp electric snap and crackle filled the air. Leo lifted his eyes, blood dripping from his fangs, to find that the spell holding the dome in place had broken. Kai landed in the field with a ground-shaking thud while Moon's zombie army poured into the circle held by the wizards. Leo leaped aside to not get trampled by the hoard. The rest of the team was a step behind them. Leo paused for a moment to watch Junjie as he fought with two short swords. His every movement was a graceful dance of death. With each turn and slash, another elf fell dead. And he did it to protect the clan. Leo could do the same.

Not that he was so awfully needed.

The dragon was doing a marvelous job of snatching up the remaining fae wizards in

his teeth or stomping them under his feet.

“Ahhh!” Moon screamed.

Leo jumped across the stream to where the vampires had gathered around Moon as he hopped, while shaking his hands.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Moon swore, the words blurring into each other.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” Chen had his hands extended to Moon as if he wanted to pull the necromancer into his arms but was afraid to touch him.

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“I’m fine. My dumbass fault,” Moon answered with a slight hiss in his words. “I tried to raise that elf wizard Leo killed, but that thing’s brand of magic doesn’t go well with my magic. It was like trying to cram an American plug into a European outlet. Bad news. Don’t do it.” He turned to Chen and gave a full-body shiver before he offered a lopsided smile. “I’m okay now.”

Chen’s fingers curled and his eyes narrowed on his mate. The vampire looked as if he were seconds away from strangling his beloved fledgling.

Xiao Dan cleared his throat, but it sounded like a choked laugh. “We should hurry to help the others. Trin’s attempts at another spell have been stopped, but we need to destroy the fae king to end this once and for all.”

“Of course, Shixiong,” Chen agreed, dropping his hands to his sides.

They raced across the field, the remains of Moon’s zombies in tow. Leo stretched out his long, muscular body, loving the power that coursed through him with every step. Maybe he had been spending too much time as a house cat. Now that Junjie and the Zhang clan knew his secrets, he could lounge about the clan manor in whatever cat form he wanted. Chasing Huli across the manor grounds as a tiger or leopard could be fun, too.

But that errant thought slid right out of his brain as they reached the crowd of fae and vampires who encircled two combatants—Rei and Trin.

At one spot in the circle, Ellora held Aire Bira on her knees with a long knife pressed to her throat. Sweat and blood streaked both fae women. Their eyes stayed locked on

former Crown Prince Rei and King Trin. The winner of this battle held the outcome to the ongoing war.

If Trin won, the fae would swarm the Zhang and Varik clans, wiping them out.

But if Rei won, he could seize control of all the fae, ending the war.

With Junjie at Leo's side, they worked their way over to where the other team had gathered close to Yichen. The vampire's face was pale and his brown eyes were glassy as he watched his mate fighting with an impressive display of speed and skill.

Junjie placed a hand on Yichen's shoulder and squeezed.

"I want to help him," Yichen choked out. "I want to race out there, Jun-Jun, and kill Trin for him."

"But you can't," Junjie replied.

"Then let me do it," Kai broke in as he came to stand on the other side of Yichen in his human form. "It'll only take a second."

"Rei wants to do this alone. He had unfinished business with his mother, and Trin stole his chance to end things with her. He also feels like Trin used and betrayed him when he ascended to the throne. Rei says he doesn't want to rule his people, but he wants what is best for them."

"And that's not Trin."

The fight ranged across the large circle that had formed, but it was utterly silent as the fae and vampires watched with breath held as they waited for a victor.

Trin and Rei were splashed with blood, and more red smeared their swords from the hits they'd scored on each other. Trin was dressed in shining silver armor that helped to protect him from more than one of Rei's strikes. On the other hand, Rei wore a much lighter leather armor on his chest and arms, which seemed to at least give him a speed advantage over Trin.

"You've abandoned your people," Trin snarled as their swords clashed against each other. "What right do you have to interfere in their future?"

"I may not want to be their king, but I also won't allow you to drive the fae to complete ruin." Rei blocked a slash from Trin and spun away from him. As he did, he swung his sword out so that the tip sliced between two silver plates at the back of Trin's right knee.

The king shouted and his leg gave out beneath him, sending him to the ground on one knee. But Rei didn't race in for the kill. He lingered several feet away, as if waiting to see if Trin still had some trick up his sleeve.

"Thousands upon thousands of years ago, when the stars were still being born, and the goddesses walked through our realm each spring to wake the flowers, the door between worlds first opened," Rei said in a low, firm voice as he circled his half brother. "Bridging the two worlds was never to conquer the human world, but to provide them with a brief gift of our magic. It was to teach us to appreciate the world we have and be grateful that we don't have half the messes the humans do."

"We have magic. We are stronger, faster, and more skilled than humans. They don't deserve this world they are destroying," Trin countered, sounding as if he were chewing up each word before firing it at Rei. The elf king didn't rise. He just watched each step Rei took, reminding Leo of a crocodile waiting for the perfect moment to strike its prey.

“We have no right to judge what they do with their world,” Rei snapped. “And by trying to conquer their realm, you have drained our home of its magic. Your greed is killing our people. Take. Them. Home.”

“Lies!”

Trin soared to his feet, lunging straight at Rei. The elf had been waiting for him to act because he had no problem backpedaling and spinning out of the way.

Leo dragged his claws through the dirt, part of him aching to jump in and end this struggle at last. He might not be big on fighting, but the mounting tension was driving him mad. How was Yichen even standing still? If this were his Jun-Jun, he would have charged in twice already. Muscles shifted and tensed under his fur as he prepared to pounce all of his considerable girth onto Trin, but a gentle hand came to rest on the top of Leo’s head. Long, slender fingers threaded through his fur, stroking away some of the unease winding up in him like a spring. Leo tipped his head up to see Junjie staring at him. A smile played on his pale lips while worry still weighed heavily in his eyes.

“Rei will succeed,” Junjie murmured.

The words were barely off Junjie’s tongue when horror struck.

Rei was in retreat and the heel of his boot caught on a divot of dirt. The entire world seemed to slow as Trin rushed him while Rei fought to regain his balance. Rei lifted his blade to block Trin, but the elf king batted it aside with his own sword before plunging it right at Rei’s heart. The elf twisted his body at the last second, narrowly dodging the blade.



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Yichen's panicked scream rang out across the silent field, but Leo's eyes remained locked on Rei as he flashed his half brother a wicked grin. Rei brought up his left hand to reveal a small knife clutched in his fist. Trin had no time to react as Rei slammed it into Trin's neck up to the hilt.

Blood sprayed out across both of them. Trin released his hold on his sword, allowing it to fall to the earth with a heavy thud. He staggered back three steps, a horrible wet gurgling and choking sound rising from him. He collapsed to the ground, and a heavy silence crashed over the field. The fae king was dead.

Yichen ran to Rei and caught him as he fell. One arm cradling him from behind, Yichen eased him to the ground while checking his wounds. Leo ran with the rest of the vampires and shifted as he reached Rei and Yichen. Philippe muscled his way to Rei's other side and began pulling gauze and bandages from a black bag.

"Shhh, Yiyi...I'm okay," Rei crooned, though his voice sounded breathless with fatigue.

"You're covered in blood," Yichen growled.

"Come on. You know it's not all my blood. They're just little wounds, and they're already healing. Look at how Philippe is bandaging me up nicely. The bleeding will stop in a minute. Besides, who here hasn't been stabbed?"

"Um...not me," Rafe interjected.

"Me neither," Aiden chimed in.

“Shut. Up.” Rei ground out those two words between his teeth. He turned his attention to Yichen, who was still too pale and seeming as if he wanted to kill a few more fae as payback. “My Yiyi, I will heal and we are going to spend eternity together. Possibly annoying your family the entire time. Doesn’t that sound wonderful?”

“You’re evil, and I love you.” Yichen silenced Rei’s nonsense with a slow, sweet kiss.

Leo turned his attention to Junjie, ready to point out that the Zhang clan was free, but his gaze caught on the many hundreds of elves still circling them.

This was not over.

## Chapter 29

### Zhang Junjie

Just as the fear that had gripped Junjie’s throat loosened its hold, Leo wordlessly shifted into a lion. He stepped away from Junjie and moved to stand several meters in front of where Rei was sitting on the ground. Junjie gazed past his mate to see a blood-soaked Ellora crossing the field toward them, a bow in one hand and a sword hanging from her hip. Behind her lay Aire Bira’s lifeless body. Was she now coming to finish off Rei?

Leo opened his mouth, and an earth-shattering roar swept across the field and hammered against the surrounding tree line. He almost pitied the humans who invariably heard a lion’s roar in the middle of Connecticut. Huli strutted to Leo’s side and let out his own warning bark, which wasn’t nearly as impressive. Junjie had to bite the inside of his cheek. Leo’s roar was enough to make Ellora pause in her approach. Huli’s bark was simply adorable.

Either way, it didn't detract from the fact that both Leo and Huli were stepping forward to protect Rei and the clan. As Kai and Moon moved to Leo's other side, Rei spoke up from his healing cuddle with Yichen.

"Okay, okay. I'm touched. The lion and the huli jing with all the tails are impressive, but when you throw in a dragon and horde of zombie soldiers, it gets over the top. I'm pretty sure Ellora is coming to talk." Yichen and Philippe helped Rei climb to his feet.

The elf's color was improving, and it looked as if Yichen had taken a moment to wipe some of the blood from his lover's face. His movements remained slow and ginger as he shuffled around Leo with Yichen at his side. He patted the large cat on the top of the head, his eyes wide like he couldn't quite believe he was touching a lion.

"Moon, I think you can call off the dead army now," Rei said in a low voice.

"Call them off?" Moon repeated. His words jumped a full octave higher than he normally spoke. "Um...okay. I can do that. I think..."

"Moon? You know how to end the spell, right?" Chen demanded. Junjie dropped his face into his hand and closed his eyes. They were both trying to be quiet, but their voices carried across the empty field on the wind.

"You see, Sky was a lot less clear about how to call off the dead when I was done with them. The big focus was on raising them."

"Moon!" Chen hissed.

"What? It's not like I could practice something like this. I intended to use it if things went bad. And things went really fucking bad!"

The conversation grew more muffled as Chen hurried to his mate's side, wrapping him up and whispering what were likely reassurances in his ear. Moon had a point. Chen had been severely injured and hadn't been looking all that great less than an hour ago.

Thankfully, the zombie elves started collapsing to the ground, first one by one and then in great groups, until they were all lifeless heaps once again.

"It's always something," Yichen mumbled under his breath.

Rei leaned over and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "That's what keeps it interesting." He gave a final pat to the top of Leo's mane and took a step forward, meeting Ellora away from the rest of the Zhang and Varik clans.

"What now?" Ellora demanded when Rei was standing in front of her.

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“I beg your pardon,” Rei gasped, seeming to choke on the words. “What do you mean? You all go home. Back through the door. Scoot! Close the door and forget about the human realm for a few millennia.”

For several heartbeats, Ellora stared at him as if he were dense or just insane. “And that’s it? You’re staying here? We close the door, and you’re going to die. Have you lost your mind living with the vampires and-and...” Words dried up on Ellora’s tongue as her wide eyes skimmed over the various creatures that were now part of the Zhang clan.

“Probably a little, but if my parents and Trin were anything to go by, my family wasn’t all there to begin with.”

Ellora’s glare turned dark and Junjie held his breath, waiting for the woman to hit him with her bow. “What are we supposed to do? You were the crown prince when Queen Belladonna was killed, but Trin stole the throne from you?—”

“I actually abdicated, but you weren’t there for that. It was a whole mess,” Rei interrupted.

“Prince Wistari Elnaril Rey?—”

“Shhhh!Don’t say my whole real name!” Rei shuddered. “By the gods. In the human world, it sounds like you’re summoning a demon.”

“What the fuck are we supposed to do?” she screamed at him.

Rei at last sighed and reached behind him with his left hand to motion for Yichen to draw closer. When his mate was standing beside him, Rei placed an arm on his shoulder and leaned on Yichen for support. The elf might be healing from his fight with Trin, but it was clear that he was weak and still in a lot of pain.

“King Ash and Queen Belladonna were a nightmare. We hoped Trin might be better since he didn’t grow up immersed in the court like you were, but he was as bad as his mother. Countless generations of your family have ruled the fae. There’s no contingency plan if there isn’t someone in the direct line of succession,” Ellora continued. “You saved us from Trin, but you’re abandoning us to anarchy once the door is closed. How are the fae supposed to rebuild in chaos?”

All the joking and teasing disappeared from Rei’s expression, and lines dug in around his mouth and across his brow. Gone was the young man of mischief. “Ellora, I’m not the right answer.”

“But—”

Rei held up a hand, stopping her argument in her throat. “I’m an easy answer. I’m the answer no one has to think about, because I’m just the next in line. But that’s a line of people who have made terrible decisions for our people. I don’t want to be king.” A tiny smirk lifted one corner of his mouth. “That’s not modesty talking. We both know I have none of that.”

“What you want is a brighter, more equal future for all of the fae, and sticking with more kings like Ash and Trin won’t give you the future you want,” Yichen added.

Ellora’s shoulders slumped, and the tip of her bow dug into the dirt. “What am I supposed to tell them?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got an idea.”

Rei pushed off from where he'd been leaning against Yichen and walked farther into the field to where Ellora's and Trin's armies gathered together, staring awkwardly at each other as if they couldn't decide whether they were still enemies.

The former crown prince lifted his hands above his head and then jerked slightly, lowering them.

"My people, listen to me," he started, his voice ringing out. "Your royal family has served you poorly for too many long centuries. They've led you down a dark path for their own benefit, and it's time to return to the light that has always graced the fae. It's time to go home." Rei paused and Junjie strained to listen to the indistinct murmur of conversation. He couldn't understand what was being said, but it didn't sound riotous, which was a step in the right direction.

"While the fae may be able to conquer the humans, it will drain our magic. Our home will be left barren and without magic. Our kind will wither as well. It's time to go home and replenish our strength." Rei paused and motioned to his half sister. "Ellora carries the royal spark of magic, but without the evil that tainted my family. She will lead you home. After some time has passed and the fae are on the mend, I ask that each of the heads of the various clans send a representative to the sacred pool. There, the clans will meet and devise a new, fair system of ruling the fae with Ellora's help.

"In the meantime, I will remain here in the human realm after the door has been closed as penance for how my family has harmed both the humans and the fae." Rei finished with a bow to the gathered fae. Junjie picked up a soft moan, though, and Yichen hurried forward to help him rise.

Time ticked by, and no one moved. There was a low rumble of conversation among the members of the fae before slowly, one by one, they headed into the treeline, disappearing from sight. The fae were leaving.

Ellora walked over to Rei and punched him in the shoulder. “Asshole.”

“Ow!” Rei whined, rubbing his arm. “What did I do?”

“You lumped all that on my shoulders. What do I know about designing a new government?”

Rei grinned and shrugged. “You’ll figure it out. This isn’t your first trip to the human realm. You’ve seen how they fucked up their own countries, and you’ve seen how our parents made a mess. Just don’t do that.”

“Such an asshole,” she muttered, but there was a faint smile teasing her lips. “I’m assuming you’ve actually got some secret spell or plan to stay alive after the door closes. You’re too self-centered to throw your life away for something our parents did.” She shook her head and walked to where the armies were still filtering in the trees. “Keep your secrets. If the gods have any pity, I’ll never see your face again,” she called over her shoulder.

“You know, I’m almost going to miss her,” Rei declared to Yichen.

Junjie laughed, but the sound became lodged in his throat when he spotted a lion bounding through the tall grasses toward him, his tongue hanging out past long fangs and wide golden eyes staring at him. Junjie’s entire body tensed, and he squeezed his eyes closed, waiting for the bone-jarring impact of Leo colliding with him.

But the tackle never came.



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Instead, a pair of strong arms wrapped around him while Leo's giggles danced in his ears.

"Did you really think I'd crush you?" Leo snickered.

"You have been enjoying yourself too much in your much larger cat forms. I don't know what to expect from you," Junjie countered. He hugged Leo back, his heart soaring in his chest. Their lips touched, and another giggle bubbled up that Junjie couldn't stop. They were free. They were free and whole again. Yichen was home with their clan, and Jiang Chong was dead.

At last, he could allow himself to dream about the next stage in his life—bringing Erik and Leo to their new home. He could show Leo the section of the manor that had his private rooms. Rooms that could now be redesigned to fit the little boy and his mate! There would be walks through the various gardens and down through the orchard. The clan owned a great deal of land, and they were far from other neighbors. Leo could shift into any cat form he wanted and run without worrying about being seen by an outsider.

Of course, this would also be the first trip for Kai, Moon, and Rei to their home as well. Kai would likely settle in quickly, but Moon and Rei would experience their world for the first time. Excitement bubbled through Junjie, and it was only Leo's low chuckle that drew him from his thoughts.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but you've been humming happily to yourself for nearly a full minute. I'm going to assume you're thinking about the celebratory sex we're going to have."

Junjie swallowed hard, and Leo didn't miss it. The cat tossed his head back, sending his laughter skipping through the field.

“Busted! You weren't! What were you even thinking about?”

“Taking you home to China with me and all the new things I get to share with you and Erik.”

Leo was still chortling when he reached up and cupped Junjie's cheeks with his hands, tilting his head for a kiss. “My sweet, soft vampire.”

“That's right,” Aiden's voice cut across the murmur of conversation. “You'll be planning to leave now.”

And like that, the celebratory mood dimmed. Going home meant leaving behind the friends they'd found in the United States. Junjie pressed a quick kiss to the tip of Leo's chin and slipped away to stand next to Xiao Dan, along with Yichen, Xiang, Mei Lian, and Chen.

“The Zhang clan owes you a great debt for your assistance during our stay in the United States. Without your help, we would never have been able to save our Yichen, defeat the fae, or destroy Jiang Chong at last. You have fought by our side and offered a friendship that we will forever treasure.” Xiao Dan bowed deeply to Aiden and his mate. Junjie and the rest of his clan followed suit.

Aiden extended his hand to Xiao Dan with a wide smile, and Xiao Dan took it. “The Variks are honored to have met your clan. We're grateful for the chance to lend you a hand during these trying times. We've learned so much from you, and I hope we can continue this friendship even though a great distance will soon separate us.”

Xiao Dan nodded and lowered his hand to his side after shaking Aiden's. “I'm sure

we will. I think there is much that we can still learn from each other.”

“You know, love,” Ronan drawled as he draped his arm across Aiden’s shoulders. “Once things are quiet here, we could go on an extended vacation to China. It’s one region in the world neither of us has traveled to. Assuming our friends wouldn’t mind some visitors.”

“We’d love to have you!” Mei Lian shouted, cutting off Xiao Dan’s answer.

Junjie stepped over to Winter. “You spoke of coming to stay with us for a time so that you could study the Zhang fighting techniques. I would like to formally invite you and Fox to stay with us as long as you would like. Both Chen and Xiao Dan are excellent teachers and would be happy to have you as a disciple.”

“Wow,” Winter exhaled. He shoved a hand through his messy hair and laughed, his eyes incredibly wide. “Yes. I’d...I think I’d love that. I’ll talk to Fox, but I think he’d jump at the chance. We just need to wait until he’s a little stronger and more in control of his new instincts.”

Junjie nodded. “Understandable. The invitation stands for whenever you are ready to visit us.”

“Whoa! Wait!” Rafe cut in, holding his hands in the air. “We’re making all these great long-term plans to travel to China, but that’s months or even years down the road. These guys aren’t leaving the States immediately. We need to plan a party before they leave town. One last Varik and Zhang shindig to end all shindigs.”

Winter snorted. “I think we’d be better off letting Marcus and Ethan plan it.”

“What?” Rafe gasped. “That stick-in-the-mud? No way!”

Philippe leaned against Rafe and patted him lightly on the chest. “Your family knows your parties far too well. We’ve just survived one chaotic mess. I think it’s too soon to go through another.”

“You too, mon ange?” Rafe cried. “But I would definitely go more sedate for a family party. Only a couple of strippers and one champagne fountain. We already have the tiger with Leo. I wouldn’t need to order a second.”

“Marcus will handle the party planning.” Aiden sighed.

That was probably safer, but Junjie suddenly found himself wondering exactly what a Rafe party would be like.

## Chapter 30

Leo St. George

Incoherent sounds poured out of Leo’s mouth. Not words. Not even remotely close to words. Just noise that degenerated to cursing.

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Junjie stopped midthrust and lowered his head to Leo's shoulder, his entire body shaking with laughter he was trying to hold in.

"That..." he panted and had to try again. "That's not a word. It's not anything."

"I know," Leo groaned, thrusting upward so he could take all of Junjie's cock instead of letting this tease simply stop because he got a case of the giggles. "You can't teach me Mandarin and fuck me at the same time. There isn't enough blood going to my brain." That sentence ended with a long moan as the vampire started moving.

Leo's poor brain had recently hit a roadblock with their language lessons, so Junjie had gotten the brilliant idea that they needed to come up with a new reward system to help Leo expand his vocabulary. Junjie's "Let's learn the names of clothes" by taking them off his body had turned into sex and Leo not remembering a damn thing other than how good it felt to have Junjie sliding inside of him.

As it was, he was already so close to orgasm, he could barely remember his own name at that moment. He wrapped a hand behind Junjie's neck and pulled the vampire in for another deep kiss, letting himself get lost in the ecstasy of being completely wrapped up in his mate.

"Wo ai ni," Leo whispered against Junjie's lips. He could feel the smile spread across his mouth.

"At least you haven't forgotten how to say that," Junjie teased. "Wo ai ni, baobei."

"I'll never forget those magic words. Now switch places with me."

Junjie pulled away enough to arch one thick, black eyebrow at him before shrugging. After winding his arms around Leo, Junjie rolled onto his back, allowing Leo to straddle him.

That was better. Now he was in control.

He put his hands on Junjie's hard pecs and slowly lifted himself up to where that thick dick almost slid free. He plunged down. Junjie hissed, his fingers digging into Leo's thighs as he pushed his head into the pillow. That long column of his throat was exposed, and Leo had no choice but to lean forward and lick it.

Everything about Junjie was so fucking sexy. From his lean, muscular body to his longish, messy hair that called for his fingers to those dark eyes alight with hunger and need. He would never tire of looking at this man of his, hearing the noises he made as he inched closer to losing all control. Leo rose and so slowly sank on his cock, squeezing the muscles in his channel so tight. Junjie's lips parted on a fractured cry, revealing the sexy tips of his fangs.

Leo lowered his head and bit one of Junjie's pert nipples as he sped up his movements. Junjie's hips thrust upward as if he could no longer hold still.

"How good's your grasp of language now?" Leo taunted. His hot breath skimmed over the damp flesh of Junjie's nipple.

His only answer was an incoherent snarl as Junjie grasped his hips. He didn't question how the vampire knew the exact right spot, but Junjie adjusted the angle of his thrust enough that when he slammed into Leo, he hit his prostate. The world lit up like a two-hundred-foot Christmas tree. Junjie pounded into him again and again as Leo's cock rubbed on Junjie's stomach. It was the perfect combination to send Leo's orgasm screaming through his body. All he could do was hold on to Junjie's shoulders, shouting into his chest while he tried to move in time with Junjie's thrusts.

As the last of the delicious wave washed through him, Junjie lost all rhythm, his movements growing jerky as he cried out. Leo purred, loving the feel of Junjie filling him.

The vampire wrapped his arms around Leo and sighed as he recovered from his orgasm. "I think you're right."

"I'm always right," Leo replied without opening his eyes. He shifted his head, burrowing his face deeper into the crook of Junjie's neck. "But what am I right about this time?"

"Sex and teaching you Mandarin don't go together."

Leo huffed a laugh and pressed a kiss to Junjie's jaw. "Yeah, you should know that you have me completely distracted anytime you flash even the tiniest bit of skin. I can't think of words and whether something has a rising or a falling tone."

Junjie shrugged. "I guess I can ask Chen to give you lessons."

Leo placed his hands on the mattress and pushed up so that he could glare at his mate. "You wouldn't dare."

"From what I understand, he's been making progress with Moon, and Erik has learned a lot from him."

A tiny whine escaped Leo, and he slumped on Junjie. "But he's so grumpy. He's only nice to Moon because Moon fuckshim. And he's nice to Erik because he's freaking adorable. How could anyone not be in love with that little man?"

Junjie's smile grew at Leo's indignation. "Everyone loves Erik."

Leo grunted and rolled off Junjie to flop on the bed. With a few wiggles and some adjustments to the blankets, they snuggled facing each other. Leo frowned at Junjie's chest, tracing the tip of his finger along the pale skin.

“What’s wrong? Is learning Mandarin bothering you? If you don’t want to, you’ll always have one of us with you?—”

“No! That’s not it!” Leo suddenly broke in. “I mean...that’s not all of it.” He paused and chewed on his bottom lip as he tried to figure out how to explain his growing anxiety. Only a few weeks had passed since the great fae mess had been taken care of, and the household had largely shifted to making plans to begin the great trek back to China. And that included all the new mates who had joined the Zhang clan.

“I’m just...frustrated and nervous. Erik is learning Chinese faster than I am. I swear that kid has double the vocabulary I have.”

Junjie chuckled and pressed a kiss to the tip of his nose. “You can’t compare yourself to Erik! He’s a toddler. His brain is geared toward learning a new language right now. He also doesn’t care about whether he’s repeating the word correctly or even if he’s using it right. You’re weighed down by all of that. You’re afraid of making mistakes. He’s not.”

“Lucky,” Leo grumbled, earning several more kisses across his face.



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“If it’s too much, we can stop with the lessons. You don’t have to learn Mandarin if you don’t want to. I’m sure one of us will always be close by to translate if you need it.”

Leo shook his head. “No, I want to learn it. I want to know everything about your language and culture. I want to understand who you are and your history. It’s important to me because it’s so much of who you and your clan are. But...I...I feel stupid. I’m not learning it fast enough.”

Junjie gasped softly and scooted lower on the bed so he could meet Leo’s eyes. “You’re not stupid, and I don’t understand your need to learn it quickly. We haven’t set a date for our return yet. And there is no rule stating that you must be fluent in Mandarin before we set foot in China. That’s nonsense. You’ll learn it at your pace, and that is fine. You don’t need to worry about what Moon or Erik are doing.”

“But what if I embarrass you?” Leo gasped and his eyes snapped wide open. “What if I’m trying to talk to some other ancient vampire or powerful creature and my Chinese is so bad that I insult them?”

Junjie pressed his lips together tightly, but Leo could tell the vampire was trying so very hard not to laugh right in his face.

“What?” Leo said flatly.

“We talk to very few other vampires in China, and we’ve met no one else more ancient than our clan.”

Leo's brain sort of melted as he tried to take in that thought. "Whoa."

Junjie kissed the center of his forehead softly. "Yes. The Zhang clan is ancient. Everyone else must worry about insulting us. I dare anyone to make a snide remark about your accent or any mistakes you might make. See if they survive that encounter."

Leo's heart might have flipped in his chest. On some level, his brain knew that Junjie was thousands of years old and that his clan was powerful and ancient. But this was his Jun-Jun. The guy who was working through a stack of books on proper potty-training techniques. The vampire who was worried about getting their koi back to China safely because he was sure their two-year-old would be able to tell if they swapped in new fish. The same man who'd fucked him senseless.

"Besides, Kai is technically a god, and I've listened to you teasing him countless times. You don't seem worried about insulting him."

A tiny smile played on Leo's lips. "Yes, but Kai and I are family now. He's not allowed to eat me if I piss him off."

Junjie ran his fingers along Leo's cheek and down his jaw. Leo couldn't help lifting his chin, soaking in that affection, while a low purr rattled up his throat. He loved every time Junjie touched him. Every little stroke and caress. It didn't matter if Leo was in his human form or cat form; the vampire was constantly touching him. He didn't know if Junjie did it because he could tell Leo loved it or because he found it reassuring to touch Leo whenever he wanted. Either way, it was heaven.

"Leo, you are my mate. I love my clan, but my heart lives with you now. If you want to remain in the United States and set up a home here, then that is what we will do. My happiness is with you."

For several frantic heartbeats, Leo could only blink at him. “You’d leave your clan for me?”

“The Zhang clan will always be my clan, whether I live with them in China or here with you.”

Leo’s voice flattened. “You’d leave Erik?”

A snort escaped Junjie. “I never said that. Of course, he would remain here with us. We’re a family, and he is going to need all your knowledge and experience as he grows up.”

Leo wanted to laugh, but he couldn’t. His heart was melting for his sweet mate. It didn’t need to be said that the Zhang clan was very attached to Erik and where that child went, so went the rest of the clan. Xiao Dan also seemed quite determined to keep them all together after they’d suffered such a long separation for Yichen.

“No, I want to go. I want to see your world and your home?—”

“Ourhome,” Junjie corrected.

“I’m nervous, I guess. It’s a big step. I’ve never been out of the United States.”

“It’s okay,” Junjie whispered as their lips met in a slow, sweet kiss. “I’m never leaving your side.”

Leo sighed, wrapping his arms around his lover and mate. Together, forever. Just Leo, Junjie, little Erik, and their crazy vampire family. Perfect.

Epilogue

## ZHANG XIAO DAN

Xiao Dan wandered through the building that had steadily become a home to his clan over the past several months. This place was never supposed to be more than a haven until they could finally bring their missing didi back to China.

But their brief stay had stretched for much longer than expected.

And they'd made friends.

And several of his clan mates had found great love.

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This house had become more special to them than anyone had expected. While Xiao Dan and his clan were eager to return home, there was also some reluctance to leave their American home. There were sweet memories sprinkled among the bad.

“It might take me a few tries, but I think I might be able to move the entire house to Luoyang.”

Xiao Dan jumped at the sound of Kai’s voice. It took an extra couple of seconds for his distracted brain to register what the dragon had suggested.

“What?” Xiao Dan gasped, only to shake his head. “No. No. Why would we do that?”

“Because Shixiong has been stroking that wooden post and lost in thought for nearly a full minute,” Kai replied, sending heat rushing into Xiao Dan’s cheeks. “Shixiong loves this house, and I want Shixiong to be happy.”

“I am happy. This property has more wonderful memories in it than I expected. Our home in Luoyang is more than big enough to accommodate our clan mates comfortably. We don’t need to add this one to it. Thank you for the offer, Kai.”

Xiao Dan made a mental note to be careful with his words around the powerful dragon. He was eager to please and could make the absurd possible.

“What will become of it after we leave?” Kai inquired.

“I had thought to sell it, but I’ve decided to keep it as a second home for our clan. I am sure that Moon and Leo will wish to return out of homesickness for the place of

their birth, and the rest of the clan has expressed an interest in visiting. Aiden has kindly offered to check on the buildings and grounds from time to time for us.”

Kai grunted. “Good. Xiang likes this house, and I don’t like the idea of strangers walking these halls.”

Without another word, Kai continued on his way, leaving Xiao Dan with a bemused smile on his lips. His world was certainly more interesting now with a dragon in it.

Not to mention an elf, a fledgling vampire who could raise the dead, and two cat shifters.

Maybe the Zhang clan had stagnated for too many centuries, stuck in a familiar rut.

Those days were now long over with the new training schedules, diaper changing, bedtime stories, language lessons, and so many new personalities coming together. It was blissful chaos that Xiao Dan looked forward to every evening when he woke.

He paused in his aimless wander in front of the open doorway leading to the ancestral hall, where all the memorial tablets had been set up for their lost clan mates. A thin trickle of smoke curled up from the trio of incense sticks that were nearly burned down to the end. Chen had already made his evening stop to speak to Shifu.

Xiao Dan held his hands together before his chest and bowed to the tablets. “May you all be at peace. Your clan is safe and content.”

It may have taken them a century, but they were finally complete.

Xiao Dan turned from the ancestral hall, but his next step faltered as he mentally replayed that last thought. Something didn’t feel complete.

Chen had Moon, who was a mate and a shidi in need of guidance and training.

Yichen had Rei, an elf who was also adept at keeping Yichen on his toes.

Xiang had a dragon. His hands were full.

Junjie had gained a mate and a son.

Ming Yu and Mei Lian were destined to be mates if they'd stop dancing around each other and talk about their real feelings. Regardless, Xiao Dan knew better than to stick his unwanted nose into that lesbian love story.

That just left...himself.

But there was no question of who he wanted. There had only ever been one person for him. It was never the right time, or he'd feared being selfish when his clan needed him.

With everyone settled and the trek home so close, maybe it was time to claim that mischievous fox spirit as his own.

Except, where was Huli?

He'd said that he would pop by at sunset to help Xiao Dan pack up some of his belongings. That more realistically meant that Huli planned to lounge on his bed and talk while he watched Xiao Dan wrap breakables and fill boxes. Regardless, he should have been there by now. Huli might be flighty, but he was always prompt when Xiao Dan promised to spend time with him.

Xiao Dan continued through the house, pausing in the kitchen to ask Junjie if he'd seen Huli that evening. The vampire lifted his eyes from the snack he was preparing

for Erik to shake his head.

Odd.



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He stepped outside through the door off the kitchen and strolled through the rear garden. The stars were twinkling overhead in a clear sky. The night air had become crisp and cool now that they were deep into October. Leaves were now 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 when 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 played with Erik.

Another flash caught his eye to his left. This one definitely 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.

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

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.

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 again, 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 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.”

Oh my God,Jocelynn Drake! You’re evil!

I am. I really am.