

WINDMILLS

Lyndi Alexander



The Color of Fear 1

WINDMILLS

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ZUNAYA THRESHOLDS

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AUSTIN TX

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*For all those who carry hope uppermost
in their hearts, even in the face of the
darkest evil*

风向转变时,有人筑墙,有人造风车

When the wind of change blows,
some build walls, while others build
windmills.

CHAPTER 1

“Shuai? Shuai, come on! We’ll be late!”

Lin Kwan scoured the alley behind the noisy Hong Kong tenement. Smells of evening meal preparation and the voices of mothers calling their children came from the doorway behind her. Dusk transformed the tall buildings of the neighborhood into tenebrous, hulking giants that swallowed the hearts of those lost among them.

Hers included.

She’d been buried in a computer textbook instead of paying attention to her small cousin, so when her aunt called them for dinner, Kwan had to go find her. Shuai had apparently decided Kwan’s neglect deserved the punishment of a game of hide-and-seek. During the day, it might have been all right. Now that the world had changed, the game was no longer fun. It could be deadly.

“Shuai, Aunt has called us.” She stopped, listened. “Fine, I’m going in without you.” She dragged her feet, grating them over the rough edges of the sidewalk toward their door. Surely a six-year-old wouldn’t stay out here in the dark alone.

“Kwan, stop!” Shuai knocked over a garbage can with a loud clatter in her effort to hurry to Kwan’s side. But she’d waited too long.

“Come play with *us*,” rasped a male voice from the shadows on their left. “We like girls.”

Another voice, its timbre one of menace: “We love girls. We love them to death.”

Shuai peeped in fear, grabbing Kwan’s right leg. Kwan struggled to extricate herself from the child’s grip.

“Let go, *bao bei*. I need to think.”

Three young men dressed in black emerged into the fading light, as she finally pried Shuai’s hands off and stepped in front of her. *This is what comes of shirking your responsibility.*

She stood tall, even though her knees threatened to give way. She might be only sixteen and just a slight-bodied girl, but she had skills that might save them.

“Go away,” she called, hating the frightened edge in her voice. “You do not want our kind of trouble.”

The man on the right, with a jagged scar that covered half his cheek, laughed.

“What trouble can a couple of sweet chickens like you be, hmm?”

Kwan crouched next to Shuai, whispering in her ear, “Listen to me and listen well. When I fight them, you run home to mama. Do not stop. Go straight there and lock the door. Do you hear me?”

Her dark eyes wet with apology, Shuai nodded.

A crunch of rock behind Kwan warned her. She stood quickly, letting the movement act like a spring, spinning as she leapt into the air, catching the closest attacker on the chin with a roundhouse kick.

“Now, Shuai!”

She heard light footsteps running away as the second man’s hands fell on her shoulders. She landed hard then brought her knee up into his crotch. He fell back with a cry.

The third man kicked her in the ribs then tried to grab her from behind. She stumbled to the right, a wave of

pain nearly driving her to her knees. Her right hand fell on the garbage can lid. She seized the handle and sprang upright, bashing the metal into his face.

As the darkness thickened, settling on them like a black cloak, she dropped the lid and ran toward her door. She had no choice—the men were only shadows now, and she couldn't keep track of them.

A movement just in front of her as the scarred one slapped her face, something sharp in his fingers. A slice of pain yanked her attention back to herself. She bounced off the wall of the building with a limp thud and slid to the ground.

Her courage faltered, until her sensei's face appeared in her mind. *Li Zhong would never concede defeat. You cannot, either. Get up, Kwan. Get up.*

She shoved herself upright, swaying to the left as Scar-face reached for her. She seized his wrist and slammed his knuckles into the bricks behind her. His muttered curse, and subsequent comments of his recovering companions, revealed their places, as she spun away, running along the rough surface of the building, heading for the door.

Just another few meters.

As she reached the door, it flew open; two men armed with large metal cleavers jumped out onto the stoop. They yelled at the attackers, warning them to leave the premises or die. Kwan slipped inside.

She staggered down the hall to a safe spot before she collapsed against the wall, trying to catch the breath that strained her bruised ribs, agony with each intake of air. Blood ran down her cheek, and her eye was a miasma of misery.

Apron streaked with pot drippings, her fat aunt Ehuang waddled down the hall, long black hair wound into buns at the sides of her head, hands flailing.

“Oh, Kwan,” she moaned. “Your pretty face.”

“That doesn’t matter, Aunt,” she said. “Is Shuai safe?”

Aunt Ehuang nodded, gathering Kwan into pudgy arms, squashing her against a fleshy chest.

“She told me you saved her. You saved her, Kwan.”

The neighbors who’d come to her rescue returned inside, locking the door.

“They’re gone,” Bin said. He waved a finger at her. “You should know better.”

Her first impulse was to protest it wasn’t her fault Shuai had ventured outside at dusk despite the rules. But that wasn’t the way of a respectful young woman.

Besides, if you’d been watching her, she wouldn’t have gotten out the door.

Guilt burning into her cuts like hot salt, she looked at the floor and gave him a half-bow.

“Yes, sir.”

“Dinnertime,” murmured Aunt Ehuang, an arm around Kwan’s shoulders. She drew her into their small apartment and locked the thin wooden door.

Barely the size of the living room in her parents’ old house, for those in Ehuang’s neighborhood, it was a mansion. Candles glowed on the tables in anticipation of the nightly power shutdown, throwing shadows on the shabby sofa and chair, the rolled futon mat in the corner of the living room where her aunt slept and the narrow bookshelf packed with aging hardback volumes. Kwan and Shuai shared a tiny bedroom off to the left. A two-meter square kitchen and a small bath completed their living space.

Ehuang set out three bowls of rice, one for each of them, with stringy boiled chicken and spiced vegetables in a pot to share.

“Wash your face, love.”

Kwan took a candle into the bathroom, a tiny space with barely room for a sink, a toilet and a large metal wash-tub to catch the water from their shower. She studied her

face in the meter-square mirror, one of Ehuang's luxuries, purchased in the time when her aunt had been considered quite beautiful. Before she'd lost a husband to the war and eaten her way into a cushion of comfort.

A worn washcloth and warm water cleansed the blood from Kwan's cheek. The bastard had used a nail or piece of glass—some jagged object—to slice her skin open a few centimeters. She eyed the laceration with a critical eye. Probably medical attention was needed, but it would be more dangerous to go out now, even for a few stitches, than just to tape it closed. Her side hurt, but she had full range of movement. Nothing broken, then. She'd survived, and her obligation to protect Shuai had been fulfilled.

Zhong's lessons have been valuable.

Steeling herself, she cleaned the wound with a sharp bite of antiseptic, its pungent smell burning her nose as well as her skin, then patted it dry. A few short pieces of her aunt's medical tape sealed it closed. The bruise behind it hadn't yet finished acquiring its full purple bloom. By morning, she'd have quite the souvenir.

Her aunt called, impatient.

"Your food is getting cold."

"Coming, Aunt."

She took another few moments to brush her tangled hair. Her grandmother had taught that a young woman of good breeding should brush her hair one hundred-fifty strokes each day. Kwan knew others considered the dark silk that came halfway down her back one of her finest attributes.

When it was smooth, she twisted it into a thick braid and secured it with a tie.

The American teacher at school had always teased her about looking like the anime cartoon girls with her wide-set almond eyes—dark brown, almost black, brooding. That was before the Second Holocaust had stolen his life like a thief in the night.

She joined her cousin and aunt at the small dining table; they'd already started eating. Somehow, Aunt Ehuang managed to make sparse rations taste delicious. They were fortunate she had a way with spices.

Halfway through the meal, the power cut out. Aunt Ehuang sighed.

"I listened to the news today. More deaths in the States."

Kwan put down her chopsticks, her appetite lost.

"Do you think..."

"I don't know about your parents, *bao bei*. Shin is important and educated. He and Su Wei will be protected by the government."

"But how long will that government remain?"

The question had eaten at her for nearly a year, ever since her biochemist father Tzu Shin and her mother Wei had defected from China to the United States in the wake of the Second Holocaust, leaving her with Ehuang. The pandemic had caused millions of deaths worldwide, if the radio could be believed, two-thirds of them Caucasian North Americans.

Ironically, the release of the bioweapon had been an accident.

The silver-and-black ship of Cambodian registry *had* entered the Port of San Diego that early January morning for the purpose of murder. Its cargo holds contained barrels of concentrated powder containing a botulinum derivative. The retrovirus had been targeted to Caucasians, designed to exploit whites' genetic vulnerability to cystic fibrosis. The self-styled Universal Jihad Front had intended to parcel out the poison to its operatives, with a plan to decimate select global business and political centers.

What actually happened became the subject of much conjecture, once survivors could get close enough to the contaminated ship to investigate. The ship crashed into its berth, spilling the contents of its belowdecks vats into

the Bay, releasing giant clouds of poisonous gas into the air. The bodies of the Jihadists aboard were not wasted by disease but riddled with bullet holes.

Half the population of San Diego died in the first fifteen minutes.

All along the West Coast, people of all races suffered the effects—difficulty swallowing and speaking, respiratory failure and eventually paralysis and death—within hours. As the strain mutated, other ethnic groups suffered and died as well. Soon, air currents flowing over the Rockies swept the toxins into the upper atmosphere high over the Plains and ravaged the great cities of the eastern United States over the next several weeks. The poison traveled with the winds and with people escaping to other nations, who only carried death with them.

Kwan's father had long awaited an opportunity to get his family out of the People's Republic of China and seized this one with both hands. Contacts in the US Embassy had smoothed the way. He'd taken his lab-assistant wife and a hefty supply of Chinese healing herbs, hoping to contribute to developing a cure for what had by then come to be known as the Second Holocaust.

"I can't risk you yet, Kwan," he'd said, his jaw set hard against emotion. "Until we conquer this plague, you must remain here. The Pacific countries are farthest from the poisoned winds. You should be safe with my sister."

"But when will I see you again?" Kwan, just turned fifteen, had clung to her mother, who held her as tightly.

"When it is fate's wish." His face closed in that expression that meant discussion had ended.

Then they were gone.

Now, her aunt tried to add a hopeful note to the conversation.

"At least some news still comes from the States. Someone must be in charge, making sure information flows."

Kwan chewed her lip. She didn't like not knowing. She'd have risked the virus, if only her father had given her the choice. *But a lotus flower does not question authority.*

And exactly who had determined that young Chinese women must emulate a lotus flower? Not Kwan. Particularly not in this new era where the entire world waited to see when death would strike. Uncertainty sent those who thrived on chaos into the streets, like those men who had attacked them earlier. Why obey the law when life might be sucked away at any moment?

Dinner finished without anything further being said. Shuai cleaned the dishes and stacked them. She and Kwan then got out their school books. Formal school didn't meet every day, not with the uncertainty of power supply and the question of safety, but Ehuang insisted her girls must be educated, so they would be ready when the world righted itself. She was certain it would. Someday.

Pressing a cool compress on her swelling cheek, Kwan wished she could be as sure.

CHAPTER 2

Three days later, when Kwan came back from the produce market, arms weighed down by two heavy bags, Ehuang met her on the front stoop.

“A letter!” she cried. “A letter from your father.”

Surprised beyond speech at first, Kwan followed her inside and dropped the bags on the threadbare sofa.

“But how? No mail has been delivered for weeks.”

“A messenger brought it. He wore a blue uniform.” She handed Kwan a white envelope.

“A messenger?” An average person could not afford the services of a private messenger. That meant the letter was something special. Somehow, Tzu Shin had been able to bypass not only the contagion in the States but the barriers to Hong Kong imposed by mainland Chinese leaders, in order to place this in her hands. “Did he ask for anything?”

“No. He gave it to me and vanished into a crowd.”

She studied the missive, noting the first postmark on it was six months earlier.

“Six months?” she whispered, holding the envelope to her chest as if she were embracing her father. Who knew what might have happened since this letter was written? Was he even still alive?

Disregarding the possibility the letter could be contaminated, she tore it open.

My dear Kwan,

Even in this tragedy we have seen take the lives of so many, I continue to experiment to preserve hope. The American government has taken me to a safe place where my work may proceed, and the remedy seems promising. In light of the growing number of mutations and the continued death toll, even among those of Asian and African descent, we must continue our research and develop a cure.

However, the stock of fresh herbs I brought from China is severely depleted. I know I ask you to risk your life, but you are strong. You must come to the United States with a fresh supply of the mountain strain of Zi Su Ye seeds. Intact, it could make the difference. Also some starts of the jin yin hua plant—the European strain does not work as well against the virus. Once we have the beginnings, we can cultivate them here.

You cannot send them. There is no mail. Do not let the Zi Su Ye leave your hands, protect them with all due care, or the future of mankind may be lost.

We are staying with childhood friends of ours, the Hsus, in San Francisco, in California, near Chinatown. The address is enclosed. I trust you can make this journey. Do not come alone. Find a strong man

to come with you. Perhaps your mother's cousin Chen. If I had another alternative, my daughter, I would use it, but it is difficult to trust anyone.

Come to us, Kwan. Come quickly.

He closed with blessings for her and his sister's family but no other endearments. It wasn't his way.

She read the words three times before the implications sank in. When she finished, she handed it back to her aunt.

"He...he wants me to come to the States."

"Ridiculous." The older woman read the letter, finishing just as astonished as Kwan. "What does he think, that you are some sort of superhero? To get perilla seeds from the mainland, and then to take them all the way across the ocean?"

Impossible, indeed. How could she do such a thing? Everyone knew the mainland was locked up tight. Even if she could obtain the seeds her father wanted, how could she transport them to the States? The world governments had shut down all flights in an effort to stem the tide of death. More than 10,000 kilometers of water lay between her and her parents.

What were you thinking, Baba?

"Besides, Chen is old and sick now. There is no way he could accompany you, even if he wanted to do something so insane." Ehuang dropped the letter on the sofa and shuffled into the kitchen, one bag of vegetables in her hand. She kept muttering all the way there, and while she shelved what Kwan had bought.

Kwan retrieved the letter, looking at the thin paper this time for the familiar handwriting, the pen strokes that reminded her of her father's presence, his dry jokes,

his infrequent but heartfelt compliments. Tears burned her eyes as she allowed her longing for her lost parents to settle in. If only she could be with them...

A few minutes later, Ehuang hustled through again, a little more purpose in her step as she retrieved the second bag of food.

"If it were possible, Kwan, think how wonderful it would be to save the rest of the world from this disease."

Torn from her memories, Kwan's lips turned down in a frown. She'd been thinking more of herself and her personal need to be with family, not saving the world.

"I hope we have more than four minutes," she said, remembering the advancing geometric wall of destruction in a Madonna video.

"What?"

Kwan laughed at her aunt's confused look. Ehuang would not have seen any of the Internet videos she and her friends shared behind closed doors.

"Nothing." She folded the letter and tucked it into a pocket of her brown slacks. "What do you suggest I do?"

"Me?" Ehuang's eyes opened wide. "What do I understand of international espionage?" The older woman broke into laughter that rocked her belly. Then she grinned. "But we are acquainted with someone who is *quite* knowledgeable."

The realization hit Kwan at the same time. Her sensei Li Zhong had trained with the military before he'd retired from the People's Army to teach his classes and live out his life alone. Perhaps he would know.

She was halfway out the door before her aunt gave her permission.

The neighborhood buzzed with mid-afternoon activity. Many of those she passed wore white face masks, a reminder of the SARS outbreak in the last decade. It was April, a year after the Second Holocaust event, and the tem-

perature in their island city rose as summer approached. Warm temperatures usually meant the spread of germs as everyone moved outside, especially now that power was rationed. So many people in such a small space, even after the SH had taken its victims—two hundred and fifty square kilometers still holding more than three million people.

She had to shove her way along the sidewalks through haggling housewives and old men chewing betel quid, reminiscing about the old days. Even now, Hong Kong remained a financial hub, perhaps more so since the old American grip on the world market had faded along with their numbers. Businessmen in suits, talking intermittently on cell phones—when they could find service—hurried along the streets, cutting in front of the occasional bus or taxi.

Kwan could have ridden her bike, the preferred method of transportation for most of the islanders after the SH. Before, the government had frowned on the congestion it caused, preferring citizens to use the moving sidewalks and other public transportation. Considering the allotment of electric power and cost of gasoline, they'd relaxed their rules.

But this day she found it quicker on foot.

The streets grew narrower, and the sidewalk more populous as she approached the neighborhood, just over a kilometer from her aunt's house, where Zhong kept his home and teaching space. The small storefront was wedged between two abandoned stores that had become rooming houses of a sort, filled top to bottom with wire cages of varying sizes. Often one person, but sometimes a parent and child, crowded into the small spaces, and that was where they lived until they could find affordable housing. Even before the SH, this practice had been condemned by the city fathers and the world alike; afterward, people

were just grateful to be alive and didn't complain so loudly.

She stopped in front of a fresh-painted doorway, not bothering to knock as she turned the knob and went in. The room beyond was occupied by a dozen small boys and girls in white ghis being directed in a series of *lian quan jiao* forms by a similarly dressed stocky, muscular man. His dark gaze barely flicked to acknowledge her entrance and her bow in his direction. She smiled and continued along the back wall to await Zhong in his office.

Kwan had become one of Zhong's senior students in the year and a half she'd studied under him. At first, her aunt insisted on paying for her lessons, but the money had run out not long after Kwan's parents left. Instead, Kwan taught the younger students and also cleaned the building to be able to continue her studies.

She knew Zhong bent the rules for her. He liked her. Not that he'd say so. But he had stepped into the shoes of the father she had lost to his work, and she considered him family. Her picture hung on his wall, along with several others, next to the shelf with Zhong's own trophies, collected over a fifty-year lifetime.

The only other photo sat next to a jar of ashes, the cremated remains of Zhong's wife, a teacher who'd died of cancer before the SH. There was nowhere on the small island to bury her; even those in graveyards rested for only four or five years before they were disinterred and disposed of. He could have rented a niche in a funeral home, but he chose to keep her close. He never spoke of her.

The room otherwise was unremarkable—walls painted white, a bamboo mat on the floor. A gunmetal gray desk with six drawers held the sensei's records, and three unpadded metal folding chairs for Zhong and his guests, should he have any.

She chose the one at the far side of the room with an angled view out the window. The crush of people passing outside made her think about what differences there must be between life here and life for her parents in the United States. So many dead...

“What brings you here?”

Zhong’s black headband lay perfectly straight across his brow. His sculptured jaw clenched as he studied her.

He knows I want something. She was about to speak when his eyes narrowed.

“What happened to your face?”

“My...? Oh. My cousin was late coming in, and we had trouble with some nightboys.”

“Some?” He cocked a brow. “How many?”

“Three.”

“Three.” The corners of his lips twitched upward. “How many of them are walking without a limp?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t seen them.” She’d have guessed at least two had a pretty substantial limp, but it wouldn’t be modest to say so.

“You’re something.”

The pride in his tone filled her with warmth, but he wouldn’t say more than that. She wasn’t sure she wanted him to. She changed the subject instead.

“I received a letter from my father today.”

That raised an eyebrow. “From the States?”

“Yes. It was mailed six months ago.”

“At least you know they were well then.” He wiped his strong hands on a towel hung by the desk then took a seat behind it. “The first news in months. This made you happy, yes?”

Had it? She hadn’t really considered it in those terms. Of course she was glad to know her father and her mother had survived so far. She was proud that his work mattered. But the letter meant so much more.

“Master, he needs my help.”

“How is that? What help does he ask?”

She explained her father’s request for the Zi Su Ye and jin yin hua seeds.

“Western medicine must not have the answers for this illness. He says if I bring them, he will be able to grow enough to use medicinally.”

Zhong’s gaze had grown skeptical as she spoke.

“You speak as if he expects you to ride your bicycle around the corner and carry them to him like a forgotten lunch.”

She gritted her teeth.

“I am not a child, Master. I know what he asks is difficult. I need guidance. This is why I came to you.”

“What does your aunt say?”

Kwan hid the smile that tickled her lips. She’d thought about this on her way over. Her sensei was a man who set aside his ego, but that didn’t mean he’d lost it.

“She says she knows no one but you who could help me accomplish this.” Essentially what she’d said, anyway, so it wasn’t a lie.

“Hmmp.” Zhong pursed his lips and crossed his arms in front of his chest. He wasn’t convinced. She’d have to try harder.

“Master, the plague has not yet finished with the world. Even though the first wave took the greatest toll on the white Americans and Europeans, it has begun to eat away at the rest of the ethnic populations. If the mutations continue, we’ll all be dead in the next twenty years.”

Zhong eyed her.

“Is that so? Your father sets our execution date?”

“Our teacher said this. My father merely confirms that the peril has spread outside of the original target.”

“Your teacher. I see. So, you are tending well to your studies?”

She tried not to roll her eyes. Zhong was a stickler for self-improvement, and not just in the study of martial arts. But this wasn't the time.

"Of course, Master. As you always instruct."

"Mmhmm." A hint of amusement in his eyes showed her he'd noted her irritation. "And you're sure your father must have perilla—Zi Su Ye—from the mainland?"

She pulled the letter from her pocket and offered it to her sensei, but he only shook his head. When he wouldn't take it, she read it over and verified the request.

"From the mountain region, he says. It should be fresh. And the Asian honeysuckle."

He leaned back in his chair, took a long breath in and blew it out slowly.

"Well, then, I'd better start making inquiries."

CHAPTER 3

His thoughts in flight, Li Zhong left the home of Tzi Ehuang wondering whether Kwan's father's sense had been released into the clouds like the virus he studied.

Each family in China was permitted only one child. Instead of protecting his, this father expected his barely sixteen-year-old daughter to cross the Pacific Ocean, her arms full of magic beans that might or might not work to turn the curse of the Second Holocaust around.

Sorrow for the state of the world ached in Li's bones then coalesced in his heart. Perhaps it was true what the government said, that the Americans had brought this scourge upon themselves by their arrogance and interference. He thought not. If this disaster had done nothing else, it had demonstrated in tragic proportion what happened when all those who sought a positive direction for the world failed to work together. And the world needed a positive direction so badly.

He made his way back to his small studio through the crowded streets. Even in mid-evening, the crush of humanity that called Hong Kong home remained boisterous and determined to suck every bit of life from the day. Young women with too much makeup and skirts too short strolled

along the edges of trash-filled alleys, hoping to make a few yuan for groceries. Young men congregated, looking for easy marks to rob. Neither would find their desires granted by Li Zhong.

As he passed, they fell silent, hesitating, looking up from their card games, mild flirtation fading from their eyes. He'd lived nearly six decades, the last one here on Hong Kong, but he knew none thought of him as an old man. His reputation as a martial arts master likely made up part of that respect, but an undercurrent of fear lived there, too. The word was only whispered, now and then, after a dark moment of recognition.

Spectre.

The ghost who walks through shadow.

Zhong had left his years in the service of the People's Army behind, but his reputation had not vanished as easily. Hong Kong was not so far from the mainland, and connections remained. The distant detritus of Zhong's silent, deadly work as an assassin for the Ministry of State Security trailed him like remora, hungry to suck up the bloody leavings. An occasional job for hire came his way. He turned down the ones for money. Some he had been less able to refuse, especially when his former masters called. He found it more palatable to grit his teeth and endure a few days of service rather than have his retirement revoked and be dragged back to active duty.

He took his key from the pocket of his jacket as he approached his storefront.

"Good evening," he said to the careworn old woman crouched on the concrete stoop next door. She nodded to him, her toothless smile half-hearted, then went back to feeding a small mouse some crumbs from her pocket, trying to coax it close enough to pet.

"Come on, then. If you're such a big man, do it."

"It's just a mouse."

Zhong cocked his head. He had a gift for picking out menace in a crowd, whether it was an auditory or visual clue. A sense for something that wasn't right. This one came from the left, near the edge of the street.

He brought his dark gaze up to scrutinize three boys near the end of their teens, all dressed in the thuggish style that was popular. Their attention was on the old woman and her mouse. One seemed to be encouraging his companion to stomp the thing, shoving him forward.

"Gentlemen," Zhong said, pitching his voice with just the mild flavor of a threat.

The boys froze, caught on the edge of his rapier stare.

"Move on," he said. "*Dong ma?*"

The old woman looked up then, perhaps sensing the tension, and drew her ragged skirts around her with a mighty fuss. The mouse disappeared into a crack in the wall. Using a worn cane, the woman pushed herself up to her feet.

"Shameful," she muttered. "Shameful." She shook the cane in the direction of the hoodlums then hobbled back inside the building.

Her movement sparked action from the boys, who split up and vanished into the crowd. Zhong waited until he was sure they were gone and went inside, locking the door behind him.

He crossed the room in the dark, aware of the uncurtained windows across the front—too easy to find a target when one was silhouetted against interior light. This trick had worked for him many times. A lingering bit of spicy incense in the air centered him, as always. The footfalls of his boots echoed in the large empty space where he taught his classes.

He continued through to his office, where he closed and locked that door as well before turning on a light.

The first few moments, he allowed himself to take in the quiet, to experience the peace of privacy. Then, a small

prayer in memory of his wife, a gentle touch to the jar that held her ashes.

He'd hoped, when he'd blackmailed his way out of the army, that he could live quietly the rest of his days with Meilin, giving back something positive to the world by teaching the youth of the city. But fate never saw fit to grant wishes, at least not in the way one expected. Meilin became ill, then passed across the veil, and they'd never had the family Zhong had hoped for.

Yet, he'd been given these others, these young warriors he'd been training at the time when the world crisis struck. He'd reassured them and made them strong at a time when even the strongest in the world were falling apart. Although he'd never admit he had favorites, he had always been partial to Lin Kwan—such a delicate flower, slight as a bird but with the heart of a dragon.

He still remembered the first day she had walked in, tentative in a black cheongsam and trousers with black slippers. Her long hair hung over her face, hiding eyes that would steal one's soul. She'd watched the other students work through their forms for twenty minutes or more, studying their moves. Slowly, her slouched shoulders straightened, her body taut and her bearing more confident.

Her aunt enrolled her in class, counting out the tuition from a jar of small-denomination coins.

When Kwan had come to her first class, her hair had been tucked tight into a bun, loose clothing gave her plenty of room to move, and she'd been ready to take on her mock opponents, fire in her eyes. He'd thought once she might aspire to be one of the few women in the Tianjiao Special Guard Corps, that elite group of bodyguards who could earn a hundred times the wages of most women in China. But her heart was not so narrowly focused. She wanted to know everything.

In a few months, she'd progressed through the forms, learning all he could teach her, but also more—about the sciences, and the world, and the people around them. Her mind was a sponge. There seemed to be nothing that frightened her.

Even this demand of her father's.

It frightened *him*.

So many negatives to such a mission, not least being the need to travel to the contaminated zone.

The Far East had been spared the worst of the contagion by virtue of location, and the natural direction of the winds. Hong Kong had even less contact, except for those who'd escaped the States for the island by air or boat before the government had interdicted flights. Even if one believed the reports that the illness targeted those of Caucasian descent could be propaganda, spread by the government, word on the street told of huge losses in all the countries where whites lived, especially their grand neighbor to the north, the former Soviet Union.

So to travel into the heart of the pandemic was...insanity.

Yet not only had she been called to go there, but first she would have to obtain a supply of herbs from the mainland. As if one could simply pop in and out again.

He shook his head as he filled his small kettle with water for tea then set it on the hotplate. He reached for the cloisonné tin of tea leaves that had been Meilin's favorite, and he cursed to see his hands shook. He was afraid. He didn't like it.

Then there was crossing of the ocean, another barrier that was more dangerous than Kwan could ever imagine. It was not just the dangers that lived beneath the water's surface, but the monsters that would likely accompany them in human form. So much was negative or evil...

And what good could come of it?

Rumor said the retrovirus continued to mutate. Once it had taken the vulnerable in the white cultures, it began to work through those of mixed race and, finally, the other races as well. Some people seemed to be immune, and they held on, but who knew how long that would last?

“The war isn’t over until you know your enemy is dead,” he said, almost a whisper.

The mantra had kept him alive through the end of the Cold War, the KGB and even against Japanese yakuza a time or two. You shot or stabbed or poisoned, then you did it again, just to make sure. There would be no real difference with this. If Tzu Shin was right, and he could eradicate the virus—or at least inoculate the public against it — then the world’s lifeblood would stop trickling away, and it would begin to heal.

By saving this one life, he could contribute to saving them all. Perhaps make up for some of the pain he’d inflicted over the years.

He poured the hot water over the leaves, watching the essence of the tea release into the water in brown-green coils as the tea infused, the gentle scent of the brew coming to him like a familiar lover’s perfume. He’d spent too many nights alone here in this small room, thinking of the old days, thinking of the future, thinking of anything except what should happen in the insignificant life of one Li Zhong.

It had been a dull contemplation.

Now he’d been handed an opportunity to bring himself back to life—not just to life but to a life worthwhile once again. The more he thought about the travel, the new sights, the new sounds, the excitement of it all, the more he couldn’t help the genuine smile that kept coming to his face.

Not so fast. What of your obstacles?

The herbs were a problem, but not an insurmountable one. He still had contacts in several branches of the army.

He would use his connections to learn where he could purchase the quantities of seeds desired, although there would be questions asked. *Questions I'd prefer not to answer.*

The more immediate problem he shared only with his doctors.

But that only strengthens my resolve to have one more adventure before the end swallows me into the darkness.

He chuckled and raised his cup in a toast to his wife's picture.

"What do you think, Mei? Shall I tell them I've decided to take up farming in my old age?"

As if anyone would believe I'd be a farmer.

But, if he were lucky, they wouldn't ask too much.

Kwan seemed committed despite the tenuous connection she had with her father, so many thousands of kilometers away. If she pursued this mad course of action, he'd be mad enough to accompany her. She and the Spectre, standing back-to-back, would present a much deadlier target than either of them alone.

He'd been concerned about her injuries, her swollen face, but she'd been too proud to confess she'd made an error. When he'd asked her about what she'd done to the street bullies, he hadn't really needed to hear her answer. He knew she had the skills to keep her alive but, more important, to leave those who would harm her dead.

Those were skills she would need in that new world across the sea.



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