



The sky was strewn with pepper-pot stars, reflected in the pond below. On the water's surface, the mirror image of Ying Yue's face floated, pale and moonlike, distorted by ripples.

"My lady," a voice behind her said. "Shall I fill the bath?"

Ying was at the edge, on her knees, bent over the water. It was an unusual position for a noblewoman, but she had never been one for following rules. She didn't turn around or get up. Instead, she raised a hand, dismissing her handmaiden. "No thank you, Li Ming. I will bathe myself tonight."

Li Ming retreated, silent as the wind.

Ying sighed. She was supposed to be preparing for tomorrow, but her stomach was in knots.

She forced herself to breathe in, then out. *You'll be fine.*

Frustrated, Ying flipped her long hair over one shoulder to keep it from getting wet. Then, reaching down, she cupped her hands together and dipped them in the water. It was icy but crystal clear. Bending close to the pond's surface, she drew her hands up and sluiced water over her face.

Something caught her eye: a splash from the far side of the

pond. Ying jumped and sat back on her heels. Her heart sped up. The back of her neck prickled.

She wasn't alone.

The ripples radiated outward until the water lapped at the edge of the pond. It was lucky the ground was paved with stones, else Ying would have been kneeling in mud.

She rose to her feet in one fluid movement and adjusted the skirt of her hàn fú, its golden embroidery scarlike against the red satin of the robe. With her eyes trained on the water, she listened, heart fluttering like a caged bird.

The ripples faded. The pond became smooth again; reflective, like glass. Ying exhaled. *Just a fish*, she thought. Earlier she'd seen carp milling about at the surface, clamoring for food, their huge, muscular bodies glinting silver in the moonlight. Surely it was one of them that had caused the splash.

The pond was an ornamental feature in the expansive gardens wrapping around Ying's private quarters. On the morrow, she was to wed the emperor's only son, Prince Shan Zhang Lin, in an elaborate three-stage ceremony. As the future crown princess and, eventually, empress of the powerful Shan Dynasty, she was afforded certain privileges.

The garden was one. She'd always loved nature, and when she had first arrived at the Imperial Palace three months prior, she had been delighted to find her own private oasis. Her first day had been spent trailing her hand through the swinging willow branches, breathing in the lush fragrance of the abundant exotic blooms, and watching the colorful carp swimming in lazy circles beneath the water. She'd marveled at the pond, its water

a delicate green and dotted with lotus flowers. It had been so beautiful. *It was* so beautiful. At the time, she'd been touched. The prince obviously wanted to make her happy.

It hadn't taken long for her to realize that that was not the case. Now that she knew better, Ying suspected the task had been delegated to his team of advisors. *It is in the empire's interest*, they would have told him, *to keep the future empress happy*.

He probably hadn't prepared her lodgings, didn't know how they looked or where they even were. He certainly never visited. And whereas back home her family was involved in every household matter, she'd quickly learned that the ruling dynasty distanced themselves from everyday, mundane life. The Shan family had servants for their servants' servants, each tier confined to their own set circle.

No, it would have been a small inner group of officials who'd deemed it prudent to keep Ying happy. But, she thought, if they'd wanted to keep her happy, they would have allowed her family to join her. If they'd wanted to keep her happy, they wouldn't have confined her to her quarters.

If they'd wanted to keep her happy, they would not have locked her door.

Ying sighed again. Three months—three long months she'd been kept here. And while the trees and flowers had lost none of their beauty, she now knew them so intimately, so well, that even with her eyes shut, she could trace each detail in her mind. She spent day after monotonous day staring at the garden's high stone walls, wishing she could take flight and escape.

Pushing her sleeves up to her elbows so as not to trip over

the draping fabric, Ying Yue picked up the fāngzhū, a concave mirror designed to collect moonlit dew. It had been sitting in her garden gathering dew every night for a whole lunar month. Considered the nectar of the gods, the dew was to be used to brew her ceremonial wedding tea.

Balancing the large square in both hands, she turned to make her way back to her room. But as she stepped away from the pond, she heard a strange sound.

She whipped around, catching a glimpse of something just slipping below the water. Her knuckles blanched around the edge of the fāngzhū. Once again, ripples marred the surface of the pond.

In the distance, a warm glow spilled from the glass door of her room, but it was too far for the light to reach her. She should be going inside. She should be preparing for her hair-combing ceremony, traditionally held on the eve of a wedding.

But something filled her mind, a silent song, reaching out to her from the pond. She couldn't explain it. After all, the garden was quiet save for a few chirping crickets.

As much as she tried to ignore it, something was calling her. The lure of the water was strong, too strong.

Carefully, she placed the fāngzhū down on the pebbled path, crept toward the water's edge, and peered at the surface. It was smooth again, reflecting the stars, the moon, the skeletal branches of the surrounding trees. And once again on the water's surface was her face, looking pale and drawn and more than a little worried.

*It's nothing.* Ying pressed a hand to her chest. Nothing more

than her reflection. Surely it was just the stress of the impending wedding, the weight of filial expectations that rested on her shoulders. Her anxiety was getting to her. She was starting to imagine things.

But then she noticed something. Something that made her heart pound, her palms grow clammy, her head throb with heat. Something was wrong—something terrifying.

It was her reflection. Yes, her reflection in the water looked exactly like her. Small, dainty cherry lips. Big, doe-like dark eyes. A cascade of black hair tumbling over one shoulder.

But that wasn't the strange thing. The strange thing was that in the water, Ying's reflection was smiling.

And Ying Yue was not.

Ying caught a glimpse of what looked like a ghostly white hand reaching from beneath the water before she turned and ran. She ran and ran, stumbling toward her rooms, panic clouding her vision. She didn't dare look back. The noises were bad enough; she thought she heard the wet sounds of something emerging, something splashing up onto the shore. In the still, almost-silent night, every sound echoed as loudly as a gong.

As Ying ran, her sleeves dragged down and tangled around her legs. She tripped and fell, palms scraping the paving stones. She heard a strangled cry and was shocked to realize it had been her own. Ignoring the grazes on her hands, she scrambled to her feet and threw a glance back at the pond. Her pounding heart slowed when she took in the surface, still and smooth.

Ying blinked. Had she imagined what she'd seen? Maybe she *had* been smiling, bent over the lake, studying her reflection. Whatever had happened, she wasn't smiling now; her face ached, as though frozen in a scream.

Squinting into the dim night, she stared harder at her surroundings. A breeze sighed, ruffling the water's surface. Was it a trick of the light, or were there arms stretching from beneath

the water, glinting white and pale in the moonlight, trying to lure her in?

Ying's pulse accelerated as she slowly backed away. She'd better not wait to find out. Gathering up her sleeves and skirts, she resumed hurtling toward her rooms. Would she make it? And even if she did, would she have time to bolt the doors? Would the creature try to follow her? What *was* it?

*The creature is me*, thought Ying. She forced herself to focus, to think only of the glass doors. She ran, her feet slapping the stone pathway, the cold air cooling the sweat on her brow.

As she passed the fāngzhū, movement flashed within. Ying dodged away from it, gasping, but then paused—the mirror was now empty, her reflection absent. As if she herself had disappeared.

Her heart hammering, Ying leaned closer, not daring to breathe. A moment passed, deceptively calm. Then her reflection slammed against the glass, face up close, hair disheveled, teeth bared. The creature raised both hands as though it—or she herself, or whatever it was—might haul itself right through the mirror.

A scream caught in Ying's throat as she realized: She couldn't outrun it. She couldn't escape.

She had to face it.

She was not supposed to know how to defend herself, was not supposed to know how to fight. As the youngest daughter of the aristocratic Jiang family, she was only supposed to learn to play the èrhú, to embroider silks, and to serve tea. But she'd railed at the injustice of her brothers learning to fight but not her.

Her parents, who were accustomed to indulging her every childish whim, allowed her to join in while her brothers trained with their masters. They never seriously believed she'd stick with it, but she did. She would memorize what she'd learned so she could practice by herself, secretly, in her room. Slowly, over the years, she built up her strength and the power behind her kicks. No one but Ying knew about the hours she spent training by herself in front of her mirror when she was meant to be in bed asleep.

She was glad of it now.

Throwing her entire body weight behind the movement, Ying stamped down on the fāngzhū. Pain shot through her foot as the mirror shattered, cracked lines feathering the glass. The creature in the mirror jerked away. With both hands, Ying raised the mirror, then swung it down, smashing it on the ground. Again and again she smashed it, until it was pulverized into a mess of glittering fragments. Tossing away the last two pieces, Ying sank into a defensive crouch. Her sleeves were long—ridiculous, even. Perhaps she could use them to strangle the beast.

With rising panic, she scanned the now-serene scene. The pond was smooth, quiet. But she knew the creature might try to emerge again.

“Lady Ying!” It was Li Ming.

Ying spun around. Her handmaiden was framed by the doorway, carrying a neat pile of underclothes in her arms. “Whatever is the matter?” Li Ming’s eyes widened as Ying Yue sprinted toward her.

“The . . . water!” Ying cried, her voice garbled. She grabbed



her maid's shoulder. As if in response, she heard a loud splash behind her. "Get out! I'll fight it off!"

"What is wrong, my lady?" Li Ming craned her neck, trying to see what Ying meant. Then she spotted the smashed mirror and gasped. It was considered bad luck to smash a mirror. Even worse, a fāngzhū mirror. According to the local superstitions, with insufficient dew to make the wedding tea, Ying's marriage would be cursed forever. "What happened?"

Ying spun Li Ming around and tried to push her back inside. "Never mind that. You need to run!"

"Run?" Li Ming repeated, her eyebrows knotted in confusion, before she twisted out of Ying's grasp.

"Don't go near the water!" Ying cried. But the maid was already walking toward it. Clearly, to her, *nothing* could be as horrific as smashing that damn mirror.

Li Ming edged toward the pond, Ying following. The creature had vanished—as if it had never existed.

Ying, still panicked, surveyed the empty garden. Nothing. The maid was staring at the water, looking puzzled. The pond was calm, the specter of Ying's reflection having completely disappeared.

"What is wrong with the water, Lady Ying?" Li Ming, clutching the pile of nightclothes, turned back to face her mistress. "Shall I call a guard? Or perhaps the animal keeper? Was it a wild creature that frightened you so, my lady? Did it cause you to drop the mirror?"

Ying shook her head and forced herself to quell her rapid

breathing. Perhaps she was hallucinating. Or perhaps this was a nightmare. Perhaps she would wake soon, refreshed, ready to fulfill her obligations, all memory of aberrant reflections lost to the murky world of dreams.

Whatever it was, it was gone. She couldn't explain it, or tell anyone, not even Li Ming. They would conclude she was of unsound mind and throw her in the dungeons.

Or worse.

"It's nothing." Trying to steady her shaking hands, she took the pile of clothes from Li Ming and clutched it to her chest. "Probably just a carp leaping from the water. It gave me a fright, that's all."

Li Ming nodded. She was a small thing, short in stature, with a pixie-like face. Looking at her made Ying want to cover herself. Compared to the maid's neat little bun and pale-blue muslin frock, Ying's shoe, crumpled hànfú and messy hair felt scandalous.

It was not the untidiness of Ying's dress, though, that caught Li Ming's attention. It was the blood blooming on the gold silk of Ying's shoe. "Lady Ying!" She pointed, the whites of her eyes showing. "You're . . . you're bleeding!"

Ying shot a glance at her foot. By now, her shoe was drenched. Seeing it made her dizzy, but she forced her voice to stay level. "It's just—the glass. The broken glass."

Li Ming took Ying by the elbow. "Come," she said with heartbreaking gentleness. "The hair combing starts soon. We should get you cleaned up."

Allowing herself to be steered back to her rooms, Ying risked one last look at the two remnant mirror shards. It was hard to tell from a distance—but she could have sworn an eye appeared, staring out from the broken glass.

Watching her.