



Destined choices

It was ridiculous really; choosing a bodyguard like he might choose a new pair of shoes. And yet it was so ingrained in the very culture of his country that it was to be 'expected' that he should require a bodyguard, because it was to be 'expected' that his royal siblings would want to kill him. How terrible and sad. But he just had to remind himself that it was the very reason he was even going along with it all. To make any kind of changes he had to be the person at the very top. No other position would do. So he would undergo the traditions and the expectations of the Twelfth Prince of Xing, and he would become Emperor, for his people.

The bodyguard was necessary then, he supposed, to live long enough to get to that point.

"The potential personal guards are lined up for your inspection Your Highness." An old Yao House Servant bowed and made a low sweep with his arm toward the entrance to one of the smaller courtyards. Ling nodded to him as he passed but the old servant just bowed his head lower, only following the Prince when he had entered the pretty garden. Ling knew his 11 older siblings would have already chosen from the potential bodyguards, in accordance with Xingese tradition, so what was left for him to choose from was a rather short line.

There stood a line of about seven people, perfectly poised and with respectfully lowered eyes. They could have been made of wax for all the movement they made. Ling felt silly really, walking along a line of people to pick out the guard he wanted to accompany him for the rest of his life. How was he supposed to know if they would get along? Or that they would enjoy the same foods as he did? Or have his sense of humour? Or have any sense of humour at all!? He moved down the line as he reflected, letting his qi roam over the candidates to sense their own, but found nothing but the usual desire to serve in these men who had been trained in combat and stealth.

Ling stopped. There was an eighth candidate, hidden by the side of an older man at the very end of the line. She was so small he hadn't even noticed her, but when his qi had hit hers he felt the force of it like a physical blow. The desire to serve was almost a part of her very being, it bubbled inside her like water in a kettle - she wanted do her duty and do it as well as she possibly could. Ling moved closer, past the man with the severe eyes, and took a closer look.

The young girl could have been barely his age, but he could see that she had been trained intensively already just by her posture and her unflinching gaze at the floor. Her qi felt similar to that of a stray cat Ling had snuck food from the kitchens to for a time; stubborn with a will like iron, but loyal (so loyal) and fierce. He couldn't believe she hadn't been chosen yet. Her short hair was pulled into a small bun, though her bangs fell in front of her face, and she wore black loose fitting clothing quite similar to what the man beside her wore.

"This girl," he said, trying to hide his admiration for ambition as strong as his own, "she's been in the line this whole time? Any of the other Heirs could have picked her?"

"Yes, Your Highness." Came the standard reply from the old servant. Ling frowned slightly at the four toneless syllables he heard so many times a day, but he had long ago stopped trying to get the servants to be less formal.

"What's your name?" He asked the girl directly with a friendly smile, ignoring the loud gasp of horror from the House Servant. Ling knew that addressing the potential bodyguards himself was unacceptable in the eyes of his culture, but while he ultimately had to go along with these traditions as Prince, he wasn't adverse to bending the rules either. At first he thought she was simply going to ignore him, but he looked closer and realized she just didn't know how to respond. Her eyes were still locked as she gazed at the floor just before his feet, though they had widened considerably and her mouth clenched as if she were trying to figure out how to form words. "Well I'm going to need to know your name if you're going to be the personal bodyguard of the future emperor of Xing?" Ling added playfully. She was the perfect choice.

He got the added pleasure of her head snapping up and her dark eyes finally meeting his own in surprise, and couldn't help but grin when her face began to colour in a mangle of embarrassment and shock. Her hands twitched at her side and Ling got the feeling that she wanted to cover her face with them to hide her flustered appearance. But she was better trained than that.

"A-ah, my name is Lan Fan, M-my Lord. I live to serve you." "Mine's Ling. Nice to meet you, Lan Fan."

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