

Chapter Three

They might have won the impossible battle against Shan-Yu and the Huns, but it was a grim march to the Imperial City. Not one of the soldiers laughed or sang or smiled. Even Chi Fu didn't wear his usual smirk. A stranger passing by could have mistaken them for a funeral procession.

Mulan trailed the others, Shang slumped over Khan's neck in front of her. She kept her hand on Shang's shoulder, steadying him as Khan clopped along the icy pass. The Tung-Shao Pass, where they'd defeated the Huns, was hours behind them now, but there was no end to the snow. Worse yet, even as they plodded down the mountain, it seemed to only get colder, not warmer.

Worry festered in Mulan. Shang was getting worse.

More and more frequently, she and Khan stopped to let the captain rest. Yao and Ling and Chien-Po tried to hang back and keep her company, but with Chi Fu watching, she'd told them to go ahead with the others.

Over the day, she fell far behind the rest of the soldiers, but Shang needed the rest. What began to trouble Mulan was his temperature—every few hours, his skin glowed with fever.

Here she was, teeth chattering and skin rippling with goosebumps. Practically freezing, while Shang was burning up from inside. But she couldn't risk taking off his blankets and exposing him to the cold. Seeing him struggle against the heat, hearing him grunt with pain and mumble deliriously—they were punches to her heart.

Only once before had she felt so helpless: when Baba had been called to war. Desperation to save him had swelled in her chest, just as it did now. Desperation, then determination. But with her father, the way to save him had been clear: she'd gone to war in his place. With Shang—what could she do other than ease his suffering?

I'll think of something, she thought as she kicked at the snow. She trudged onward. Shang's mumbling faded, and worriedly, Mulan searched for his pulse.

"How's he doing?" Mushu asked, head hanging low. Seeing how heartsick Mulan had been the past day, the

dragon looked sorry for the comments he'd made earlier about her surviving instead of Shang.

"Not great," Mulan said quietly. She brushed her hand across Shang's forehead. As the captain slept, the sweat on his skin dried into flakes of ice. "But his fever's down. A little."

"That's fantastic news," Mushu exclaimed. He added, "He looks way better. More color in his cheeks." To demonstrate his point, the dragon pinched Shang's skin.

The captain did *not* look better. His face stayed deathly pale. His lips were blue from the cold, and his hair was thick with frost. "Mmm . . ." he mumbled in his sleep.

"See?" said Mushu. "Even he agrees."

Mulan gritted her teeth. She didn't add that Shang's wound hadn't ceased to bleed. It'd slowed, but every time she checked his bandages, the blood was still warm, still fresh. There was nothing she could do to stop it.

Trying to hide her despair, she urged Khan to walk faster.

Her cricket, Cri-Kee, hopped onto her shoulder and chirped. It sounded consoling, but Mulan sighed and kept walking. The sun hung low on the west horizon; it was almost nightfall. The sooner they caught up with the others, the better.

She couldn't stop replaying that moment she'd shot the

cannon. She *should* have drawn her sword and been prepared to counter Shan-Yu right after she fired. But what had she done? She'd watched, grinning like an idiot—because her plan had worked.

Shang had paid the price for her mistake.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, Mulan berated herself. If she'd been a better soldier, they'd be marching to see the Emperor now while shouting to all about their victory. Instead, she'd gotten their captain gravely injured.

Shang let out another ragged breath, and his features contorted with agony.

Mulan touched his forearm. "I'm here," she said, even though she knew her words wouldn't help him with the pain. She couldn't bear seeing him suffer like this.

I'll never forgive myself if he dies, she thought miserably. *If there are any gods listening, please . . . please spare Captain Li's life. He's a good man. He doesn't deserve to die.*

Of course, she got no reply. She hadn't expected to.

Mulan blinked away her tears and wiped her nose on her sleeve. Crying over Shang wasn't going to help him. Getting him to warmth and safety, and to the Imperial City—that would.

The troops weren't as far ahead as she'd feared. If she squinted down the path, she could make out Chien-Po's burly figure marching down the hill. The end of the

mountain path was near; she could see a forest not too far away. Past the forest, they'd meet the Yellow River, and they'd follow its course north toward the Imperial City. Even from where she stood, she could make out the Emperor's glittering palace.

So near, yet so far.

At best, it was two days' journey. But for Shang, each hour was a battle to live. She could hear the pain in his breath; she could see it whenever his chest rose and fell.

"Chi Fu was right," she said wretchedly. "This is all my fault."

"Don't listen to that catfish," Mushu said. "Chin up. You're strong, and you're smart. Heck, you defeated an army of Huns. You'll get the captain through this."

"I hope so."

"Keep talking to him," Mushu suggested. "Make your voice soothing, like a good cup of tea."

Mulan rolled her eyes, but she desperately wanted to believe the dragon's words.

"You can make it, Shang," she said to the captain. She touched his arm, then clasped his hand, warming his cold fingers with her own. "Whatever battle you're fighting in there, I'm going to help you."

"That's it," Mushu encouraged. "Keep going. Maybe you should give him a little kiss."

“Mushu!”

The dragon shrugged. “Hey, it works in all those folktales.”

“That’s enough,” she said, turning away so Mushu wouldn’t see the blush creeping across her cheeks. Of all the crazy ideas! “Let him sleep.”

For a moment, Mulan was glad Shang was unconscious and probably hadn’t heard the dragon’s suggestion to kiss him. She squeezed his hand again. “Sleep, Shang. We’ll catch up with the others soon.”

They couldn’t be more than an hour from the bottom of the hill. She tugged on Khan’s reins with her free hand, but the horse wouldn’t budge. Khan whinnied.

Then—

Shang’s hand grew warmer, and his breath steadier.

Mulan jolted, relief swelling in her heart. “Shang?”

“Is it morning already?” he rasped, coughing.

“You’re awake.” Mulan instantly dropped his hand, remembering that he was her commanding officer. She fumbled for her canteen. “Here, have some water.”

Shang tried to sit up.

“Easy,” she said. “You’re on my horse.”

Shang winced, then laid his head back down on Khan’s neck and let out a groan. “Where are we?”

“Half a day from the Tung-Shao Pass. Maybe less.”

“Where are the others?”

Trust Shang to get straight to business, even when he was critically wounded. “Up ahead. Not far.”

She paused, already dreading the answer before she asked, “Is the pain better?”

A shadow passed over Shang’s face. Suddenly, he looked vacant and lost. “Is my father here? I heard him speaking earlier to Chi Fu. Tell him I’m almost finished with my training.”

“Your father? But Shang, your father is—” Mulan stopped. Shang *knew* his father was dead. Chien-Po had found the general’s helmet on a battlefield, strewn with the slaughtered soldiers of General Li’s army. Shang had taken his father’s helmet and hung it on his sword among the fallen in the snow. They’d all respectfully watched him do it. “Shang?”

Mulan put her palm against the captain’s cheek. His skin burned with fever, much hotter than before. “Shang, wake up.”

Mushu crept to Shang’s side and waved a claw in front of the captain’s face.

“I don’t want my father to see me like this,” Shang mumbled. He blinked drowsily. “Is that a snake on my stomach?”

“Who are you calling a snake?” Mushu said, offended.

Mulan snatched Mushu away. "Leave him alone," she whispered through gritted teeth.

"You might want to take a look at him," said Mushu. "Um, his eyes are looking glassy, and his skin's red. He's not looking too hot. Well, if you want to be totally accurate, he *is* looking hot—"

"Yes, I know," Mulan interrupted, a note of panic in her voice. She slipped off her horse and dragged Shang off Khan's back, lowering him onto the snow with a grunt. She peeled off the blankets Chien-Po had wrapped over his body, then gently lifted his head and carefully dribbled the water from her canteen through his parted lips.

"Shang," she said, tapping his cheek with her fingers. "Shang, it's Ping. I'm here. Wake up. Talk to me."

Shang's head bobbed to the side. "Ping?"

"Yes," Mulan said. "I'm here."

"You know," he murmured, "I was so frustrated with you at first."

Mulan tilted her head.

"You were the worst soldier I had ever seen, Ping. Do you remember? Always last in every exercise. You couldn't run, you couldn't shoot, you couldn't fight. I was so certain that you were completely unsuitable for war—I sent you home." Shang let out a dry chuckle, and for a moment, his eyes opened. "And yet, you surprised me."

Mulan inhaled. *Good, good. Keep him talking.* “Surprised you how?”

“You worked hard,” Shang continued. He sounded far away, almost delirious. “You got better, and you got smart.” He closed his eyes. “No, you were always smart. I didn’t see that at first. But I did see that when *you* got better, everyone else wanted to improve, too. You inspired them to work hard, Ping.” His voice drifted. “You had faith in them. But I . . . I didn’t have faith in you.”

His eyes opened again, surprisingly clear this time. Mulan could see her face reflected in his pupils, framed by pools of deep, deep brown. “I’m sorry.”

“Shang, there’s nothing to be sorry about.”

Shang reached for the canteen. He held it himself, hands shaky, and took a long sip. Then he exhaled. “Ping, I know I’m dying.”

“You’re not.”

“I can feel it.” Shang set down the canteen, and his hand fell to his side on the snow. “You should leave me here.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Mulan said firmly. “You’re coming with me.”

Shang coughed, and the corners of his lips lifted into a wry but tired smile. “Still can’t follow orders, can you, soldier?”

Shang coughed again, and Mulan reached for the stack

of blankets Yao and Ling had made as a pillow for him. She carefully arranged it under his head. Sweat beaded his temples, and she patted his skin dry before it froze. When he blinked again, this time his eyes were bloodshot.

“Shang, are you all right?”

He let his head sink into the makeshift pillow. “I thought I saw my father earlier.”

“I know,” Mulan replied quietly. “You called out for him. You must have been dreaming.”

Shang turned his head, his gaze meeting hers. “In my dream, he was still alive.” His voice was tight, and Mulan could tell that he hadn’t yet had the chance to grieve for his father. The news of General Li’s death had come too suddenly. “My father was a general for twenty years. He died protecting China. Ever since I was young, I wanted to follow in his footsteps.” He managed a weak laugh. “But here I am, about to die after my first battle in command.”

“You aren’t going to d—”

“I wanted to become a general like my father,” Shang interrupted. “I wanted to win battles and bring honor to my family name. Is it selfish—to wish I could keep living? Is it dishonorable of me, Ping? I want to continue protecting our country, our Emperor.”

“No,” said Mulan. “It isn’t selfish or dishonorable at all.”

Shang lay back, letting his head settle into the blankets.

“The Huns won’t be the last of China’s problems. The Emperor will always face new threats, new invaders. He needs to have strong, brave men at his side. Men like you, Ping.”

“Shang,” Mulan said, trying again, “stop talking like this.”

“Now that it’s all over, now that my time on this earth is done, do you know what comforts me the most?”

He waited, so Mulan gave in. “What?” she asked quietly.

Shang lowered his voice. “That I’ve made a friend like you, Ping. Someone I can trust completely.”

Tears pricked the edges of Mulan’s eyes. This time, she didn’t try to hold them back. She knew she couldn’t. She swallowed, choking on her words. “Stop talking like this. It’s *my* fault you’re wounded.”

“I would never have thought of firing that last cannon at the mountain,” Shang confessed. “I went after you to get the cannon back, but you—you saved us. It was an honor to protect you.”

How strange, then, that Mulan’s tongue grew heavy. There was so much she wanted to tell him. That it was her fault he was hurt; that if only she’d been more alert, she would have anticipated Shan-Yu’s attack. She wanted to tell him he was the best leader their troops could have hoped for; a lesser man would have left her to die at Shan-Yu’s hands, but

Shang was not only courageous—he believed in his soldiers, and treated them as part of his team. She remembered how proud he'd been during their training when she'd defeated him in one-on-one combat. The satisfied smile that'd lit up his face as he wiped his jaw after her kick—she would never forget it. She wanted to tell him that she admired him and had always wanted his friendship.

Yet not a word could crawl out of her mouth. Only a choke, and a guttural sound she barely recognized as her own, except that it burned in her throat. She turned away and fumbled with her canteen so Shang wouldn't see the tears sliding down her cheeks.

“What will you do now that the war is over, Ping?” Shang asked. “Will you go home?”

“Home?” Mulan repeated. She hadn't thought about that yet. Would things be different when she returned home, now that she'd served as a soldier in the army? Or would they go back to the way they had been? How could they, though, after everything that had happened . . . everything she'd done? “Yes. I would like to.”

Shang reached for her arm. “Your family will be very proud of you, Ping. I heard that you'd taken your father's place. He was an esteemed warrior. My father always held him in high regard.”

Mulan kept silent. How could she tell Shang that she

was really a girl? That she'd stolen her father's armor and conscription notice to join the army?

Yes, she'd done it to save her father from having to serve again. He was an old man now. He walked with a cane and had never fully recovered from his battle injuries fighting for China decades ago.

Just thinking about it made her heart heavy. The last night she'd been home, she'd stolen a glimpse at Baba practicing his battle stances with his sword. Not even a minute into his exercise, he'd collapsed, clutching his injured leg in pain. Seeing that, she knew he wouldn't survive. She *had* to be the one to go in his place.

But her reasons didn't matter. She'd disobeyed her parents, *dishonored* them. They must have been so angry when they found she'd left.

They had a right to be angry. She'd not only disobeyed them, but worse, she'd lied to them. She'd deceived them.

The same way she'd deceived Shang.

Oh, how she wanted to tell him the truth! But not now. Not like this.

The silence dragged on. Mulan knew she should say something, but what? Shang's words had been so honest, so sincere. He thought of her as a true friend, someone he trusted. Little did he know that she'd been lying to him this whole time.

You think he's a great captain, she reminded herself. That was never a lie, and now . . . now you think of him as a friend, too.

"I'm glad to be your friend," she said quietly.

Shang smiled again. A smaller smile than last time—Mulan could tell he was struggling not to show his pain. "Will you do something for me?"

"Yes, of course," she blurted. "Anything."

Shang stared up at the clouds drifting across the sky. Mulan looked up, too. Geese threaded the clouds, like they were sifting through snow.

"Take my ashes home to my mother," he whispered, "so I might be buried beside my ancestors. It will mean so much to her."

"Shang." His name clung to her throat. It hurt to speak. "You can't give up. You have to fight on. You have to live."

"Tell her . . . not to be sad. Tell her I'm with Father."

Mulan bit her lip. She was trembling, and not from the cold. The bleakness in Shang's face, the certainty in his words that he was going to die. It couldn't be!

A swell of heat burst in her throat, and she had to fight not to let the tears come. She would not let Shang's words shatter her, not without a fight.

She took his hand—his cold, limp hand—and entwined her fingers in his. She squeezed gently. "Yes," she whispered. "I promise. But you—"

“You, too, Ping,” Shang interrupted. “Don’t blame yourself.” That small smile again. It pained Mulan to see it more than it comforted her.

She clenched her fists until her nails bit into her palms. A silent sob escaped her throat. Her lungs burned. “You have to keep fighting. We’ll be in the Imperial City in a few days. Just hang on, Shang. Please.”

“At least now I know. . . .” He stopped to gather his breath, then closed his eyes again. “Now . . . I know . . . that China will be in good hands.”

Chapter Four

It was dark by the time Mulan made it down the mountain and caught up with the other soldiers. Lighting a lantern to help guide their way to the camp, Mulan saw Shang's breath curl into the cold air. She shivered. It was warmer down off the pass, but the air was still chilled, and she knew it would only get colder as night went on. She adjusted the blanket over Shang's body, then chirped to hurry Khan along.

"Almost there," she chanted, not sure whether the reassurance was meant more for her horse or for the sleeping Shang. "Almost there, almost there."

The soldiers had made camp along the outskirts of a small forest around the base of the mountain. The sight of

a blazing fire with smoke unfurling into the sky, a pile of freshly cut wood, and a cluster of sturdy, wind-blocking tents lifted Mulan's heart. *And* Khan's, it appeared. Once the horse saw the fire, he picked up speed.

"Ping!" Yao and Ling hurried over to help her lift Shang off Khan's back. Chi Fu saw her, too. He crossed his arms and glared at Yao and Ling.

"Where do you two think you are going?" he shouted. "Come back here."

"We're going to cut some more wood," Ling responded. "Be right back!"

"Insubordinate ruffians!" Chi Fu harrumphed, then pushed open his tent flap to go back inside. He glanced back, fixing a stare on Mulan. "I knew Captain Li wasn't ready to lead. I knew he didn't deserve such a great responsibility. And look now; if his soldiers had learned to follow his orders, he wouldn't be dying."

Yao raised a fist at the Emperor's counsel. "The captain isn't dead!"

But Chi Fu had already swiveled on his heel and gone inside his tent.

Mulan bit her lip and turned to her friends. "Thanks for your help."

"We were worried you got lost," replied Ling. "How's Captain Li doing?"

Mulan shook her head. Her eyes were swollen, her voice raw. "Not great."

Yao's shoulders slumped. He was usually the most belligerent of the group, but even his bruised black eye looked sad. "We caught some pigeons. Chien-Po's making soup. I'll bring you some."

"All right," Mulan said tiredly. How long had it been since she'd eaten? How could she be hungry when Shang was fighting for his life? Still, she forced a smile. "Shang could use some good, hot soup. Are there any more tents?"

"Take mine," Ling offered, pointing. "We made it ready for you."

Mulan looked at her friends gratefully. "You guys are the best."

"It's the least we can do," Ling replied with a shrug. He picked up Shang by the shoulders, Yao lifted the captain's legs, and they walked with her to the tent.

"What are you doing?" Chi Fu cried, popping out to observe the soldiers carry Shang into Ling's tent. "I said no one is permitted to help Ping."

"We made camp," Yao argued. "What does it matter if we help him now or not? So report me."

"And me."

"And me," Chien-Po chimed in, holding up a soup ladle.

Chi Fu grunted, and he scribbled furiously on his scroll. "I will."

Chien-Po shrugged. "Dinner's almost ready," he said, as cheerfully as he could muster. A pot bubbled over the fire, and Mulan inhaled, savoring the delicious aroma of hot, freshly prepared soup.

As the soldiers crowded around the pot, eagerly slurping, Chien-Po helped Mulan and the others settle Shang into Ling's tent.

Most of the tents in the camp were patched together out of saddle blankets, capes, and animal skins, but Ling had managed to procure one of the Huns' tents. Several wooden poles propped up its triangular roof, and the material was thick muslin, like the tents in their training barracks at the Wu Zong camp. Chien-Po could barely fit inside.

"We made him a bed out of some wood," Chien-Po said, gesturing at the makeshift bed in the center of the tent, outfitted with a thin pallet of extra blankets. "He'll be more comfortable traveling that way. We will help you carry him tomorrow."

Mulan's heart warmed and her spirits lifted. Her friends had thought of everything. There was even a little stool and a bucket of clean water with a neat stack of cloths next to it.

She dipped one of the cloths into the bucket, wrung out the excess water, and started peeling away Shang's bandages to clean his wound.

Yao and Ling returned with two steaming bowls of soup. "I'll eat later," Mulan said. *Too much to do now.* She filled

another cloth with snow and placed it on Shang's forehead.

Ling crouched beside the captain and tried to feed him some soup. "He's still unconscious."

She nodded. "He woke up a couple hours ago, but he's been out since then." She swallowed, trying to stay positive. "He's stopped bleeding, so we won't have to cauterize the wound." She let out a small sigh of relief. "And I don't think it's infected, which is good news."

Her voice fell soft. "But I can't get his fever down."

The wind whistled outside, shuffling the tent's flaps. Mulan leaned against one of the wooden poles and started removing her armor. She hadn't realized how tired she was, how her muscles ached and her body demanded rest. She could hardly keep her shoulders up.

"You need to eat something," Yao said, observing her.

"You need to sleep," Chien-Po said, noting the dark circles under her eyes.

Mulan shook her head. "The only reason Shang is injured is because he saved me from Shan-Yu. It's my duty to take care of him."

"We could all take shifts."

"You three have been a great help already. We fought hard today, and we all need our rest."

Her voice was firm. No one dared argue.

Yao patted her shoulder. "All right, Ping," he said

reluctantly. "You got it. But let us know if you need anything. We'll be right outside."

"I will," Mulan promised.

Her friends left the tent, and Mushu crawled out of his hiding place in Mulan's pack and went to her side.

Mulan knelt and covered her face with her hands. "What if he doesn't wake up, Mushu?" she whispered. "What if he dies?"

Shang's request to have her take his ashes home to his mother haunted her. Even *he* thought he was going to die.

"This is all because of me."

"You've got to stop blaming yourself," said Mushu, climbing on top of the stack of cloths. "What happened to Shang is not your fault."

"If I had been a better warrior, if I'd been more prepared for Shan-Yu's attack, none of this—"

"Hey." Mushu reached out a claw to pat Mulan on the shoulder. "If not for you, *everyone* would be dead. You can't forget that. You protected your people. You saved your country. You can't save everybody."

Mulan didn't reply. Deep down, she feared Mushu was right.

Staying awake was hard. She rubbed her temples. They throbbed, the pain shooting up behind her eyes. She'd

promised herself she'd watch Shang all night, but she was so, so tired.

The fire outside was dying, and Mulan left Shang's side briefly to feed its embers. The sky was black and starless; all was quiet in the camp. Yao and Ling, who were supposed to be on guard duty, had nodded off, and when she went back into her tent, she heard Mushu snoring. Even Cri-Kee was asleep, comfortably resting on top of Mushu's scaly stomach.

A pang of loneliness tugged at Mulan. She leaned against the tent pole and looked at Shang. He hadn't moved since they'd arrived at the camp; hadn't made a sound, either. The only reason she knew he was still alive was the slight rise and fall of his chest, the occasional flinch of his brow, and the faint tinge of color in his cheeks.

She'd had no success at all getting him to drink Chien-Po's soup. Every time she'd tipped the bowl to his parted lips, the soup just dribbled out of his mouth. Once or twice his teeth clenched, as if he were in terrible pain.

So she watched him, waiting for any sign that he might awaken. But he didn't.

The broth was cold now, almost frozen. She picked at it with a chopstick, then sipped the liquid dribbling from underneath the layer of ice on top. Once the ice cracked, she tilted the bowl toward her lips, forcing the broth down with one gulp.

As she drank, she closed her eyes and tried to imagine

she was drinking her grandmother's porridge. What she wouldn't give for a hot bowl of fish congee, sprinkled with green scallions and topped with a dollop of sesame oil! She'd even have willingly downed one of her mother's herbal soups; Fa Li used to make red sage soup almost every day when Mulan was growing up. How she'd hated the smell and pungent taste. She used to pick out the chopped pieces of the root and chew on the sweet wolfberries instead.

She missed home so much.

"If you wake up, Shang," she said aloud, "I'll take you home for dinner. No, not for my cooking. I still have a lot to learn. But my grandmother . . . my *nai nai*, she's the best chef on this side of China. Her pork dumplings would wake a dead man just to eat them." She cringed at the saying, but forced a laugh. "What do you say?"

She waited.

No answer, of course.

Feeling foolish as well as dejected, Mulan set the bowl aside. Her stomach still growled, but not as urgently as before.

She lay down by Shang's side, propping herself on an elbow, and gently swept his hair off his face. His jaw was still tight, but his forehead was smooth, and his breathing was quiet. He looked more peaceful than earlier.

Then she curled up and rested her head on her hands. She wondered if Shang was dreaming—of his home, his

family, his friends back in his town. She hoped so. She hoped he was fighting to live.

She realized how little she knew about him. She knew nothing about his family other than that his father had been the Emperor's most trusted general. She didn't know anything about his life growing up, either; what he liked to eat or read, even where he was from.

As their leader, Shang had avoided socializing with the troops. He'd never joined in drinking games or jokes. After meals, he had always retreated to his tent to study battle plans and maps.

Then again, no one had ever sought him out. Now Mulan wished she'd gotten to know him better. She hadn't realized until now how dedicated Shang had been to ensuring the regiment became a team. Most other captains probably wouldn't even have known her name. But Shang would run alongside her and the other recruits to make sure no man was left behind, he sculpted each soldier's individual weaknesses into strengths, and he had even risked his life—for her.

Stop thinking like that, she thought miserably. *You sound like he's going to die.*

She watched his chest rise and fall, the movement so imperceptible she wondered if she imagined it. She couldn't even hear him breathe. Reaching for his wrist, she kept her hand over his, feeling for his pulse.

Still there. Still faint.

“Shang is not going to die,” Mulan whispered aloud. She choked back a sob. “He’s not.”

But even she couldn’t persuade herself. Moisture tingled in her eyes, and the swell in her throat hurt more and more as she tried to hold in her emotions. *He’s not.*

Hot tears trickled down her cheeks as she unfolded her arms and sat up. She wiped her face, tasting the salt in her tears as they slipped into the corner of her mouth.

Her hands trembled at her side, and her head felt light. Fatigue was catching up with her, and she blamed it for her doubts.

Need to sleep, her body begged. Just a little. Just for a few minutes.

No. The world swayed. Her eyelids half closed. Must watch Shang. Must. Watch.

You can’t take care of him if you don’t take care of yourself. Sleep. Just a little.

Just a little. Finally, Mulan crawled away from Shang’s side and retreated to the back corner of the tent, leaning against a pole. She hugged her arms against her chest and stretched out her legs over the frosted grass. Her breathing slowed.

She didn’t know how long she slept—minutes or hours—before a burst of wind brushed her cheek and woke her.

Moonlight seeped into her eyes. Had the tent’s flap

come loose? Mulan jerked upright with worry and started to get up to close the flap against the chill breeze.

But then she froze.

It wasn't moonlight at all, or a loose tent flap.

It was a man, leaning over next to Shang. He was dressed in a military uniform, but he wasn't one of Shang's soldiers, and they had to be days from the closest village. That was odd.

But even odder—he glowed. Was she dreaming? Mulan rubbed her eyes. He still glowed.

From his hair to his boots, he radiated a soft greenish blue, as if someone had put a lantern in the deepest part of the ocean. His ghostly face shone so brightly Mulan couldn't make out his features. His voice was low and soft. "Please don't die," he said to Shang. "It is not yet your time."

Careful to stay shrouded in the shadows, Mulan rose. She didn't recognize the stranger, and his uniform was blue like the rest of him, so she couldn't identify his rank. But she could tell his armor's quality was better than Shang's. A clue that he was an officer of high rank.

A general!

"My son," the general said, "can you hear me?"

Mulan held her breath. *My son?* If the man was Shang's father, then he was . . . General Li.

No, that's impossible. General Li is dead. I must be

dreaming. I must be so tired I even know I'm dreaming. She shrank back in her corner. General Li's body shimmered with watery blue light—and his boots, Mulan saw, barely touched the ground.

Definitely can't be real. I should go back to sleep.

But she couldn't. Not while General Li wept over his son's body. She watched his shoulders shake as he exhaled. It was a ragged, sorrow-ridden breath, one that touched Mulan to the core. If this ghost, this *spirit* truly was Shang's father, she had to do whatever she could to ease both their suffering.

She took a step toward him. If General Li saw her, he didn't acknowledge it. His attention was on his son.

"Do you remember, Shang, when you were a child?" he said. "Even then you were already my best student. Do you remember how your *ma* would scold you for studying military history instead of the classics, and how you turned her zither into a target for your shooting practice? I had to reprimand you, but inside, I was so proud. You weren't afraid of anything, except disappointing me. And when it finally came time for you to lead your own regiment into battle, I . . . I had such high hopes for you. But I should not have underestimated Shan-Yu's army. I failed you, my son."

Mulan pursed her lips, unsure how to address a ghost. "General Li?"

Shang's father turned to her, and a quiet gasp escaped Mulan's lips. The general's resemblance to his son was striking; they had the same probing, dark eyes, the same square jaw and earnest brow. But unlike Shang, gray streaked the general's hair along his temples, and a carefully groomed beard dressed the lower contours of his face.

Mulan composed herself. "I'm Ping. I'm your son's . . ." She stumbled over what to say. *Recruit? Soldier?* "I'm your son's friend."

At that, General Li's expression softened, and he bowed his head. "Ah, I see. Thank you for watching over him, Ping. You will be released from your duty shortly."

Mulan frowned at his words. What did he mean, she'd be released shortly? Was Shang going to die?

She started to ask him, but the question clung to her throat. So she said instead, "General Li, pardon me for asking, but—but how are you here?"

"Shang will not make it through the night," General Li informed her sadly, without answering her question. "He will join me in the Underworld."

"Sir," Mulan croaked, her voice crawling out of her lips, "what are you saying? You can't mean that Captain Li is going to d—"

"Yes," General Li cut her off. "I thank you for all you have done. But there is nothing that could have saved my

son. Shang's spirit is already on its way to Diyu. In the morning, he will pass on."

Diyu. Her grandmother had told her stories about the Underworld when she was a girl. About how every person, good or bad, descended into Diyu upon death for judgment. There, King Yama, the ruler of Diyu, would judge one's time on Earth and determine how long one must stay in the Underworld as a ghost. Some would have to wait a year, others centuries. Some would never leave. They became demons.

Be a good girl, Grandmother Fa used to say, or King Yama will turn you into a demon! Respect your ancestors—or none of their ghosts will greet you when you descend to Diyu and guide you through the Underworld.

Mulan blinked. All those tales . . . they were just folklore. Legends. Weren't they?

"No," she whispered, shaking her head at General Li. "No. There has to be a way to save him."

"I'm afraid there is not."

"You're a spirit," she reasoned. "And yet, you've managed to break the boundaries between here and Diyu. You must know of a way I can save Shang."

General Li hesitated. His face was sorrowful. "I shouldn't be here. My family owes you its gratitude, Ping, for watching Shang over these last few hours—"

"No," Mulan said. "You don't." She curled her fists, sucked in a deep breath. "*I* owe Shang *my* gratitude. It's because of me he's dying. Your son saved me from Shan-Yu. If not for him, *I* would be dead. It is I who owe him a debt. And I will do whatever it takes to save his life."

General Li studied her. "Anything?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Tell me if there's a way to save him. I heard what you said—that it isn't his time to die yet. He is a good man, your son. Please help me save him."

General Li stroked the sides of his beard, considering. "There is a way," he said at last. "But it is impossible."

"Tell me."

"The only way is to change King Yama's mind," the general replied. "But Shang's name has already appeared in King Yama's book of judgment. He cannot be erased from it."

"It is only impossible if I don't try," Mulan said fiercely. "And I will."

"You are a man of unusual fortitude, Ping." A trace of hope lifted the general's voice, but only slightly. He nodded. "You will need it, if you are to save my son. Though I suggest you wake up first."

Mulan tilted her head. "What?"

Her vision blurred, and the sound of a large gong boomed. She jerked awake, hitting her head on the tent pole

behind her as her ears buzzed and rang. She clutched her temples.

Hadn't she just been standing next to Shang? Now here she was back in the corner, her armor in a pile beside her.

She kicked the ground in frustration. *Was it really only a dream?*

She sat up, glanced at Shang. He lay motionless as before, but he was still breathing.

That was a relief. Then she remembered what General Li had said—that Shang would die in the morning.

Mulan peeked out of the tent, glimpsing the black, black night. Not one star in sight. Sunrise was perhaps several hours away.

She sat back down, clasped her arms together, and shivered. Mushu and Cri-Kee were asleep, and there was no sign of a gong.

Maybe I'm going crazy, she thought. *First, that dream about General Li. And now this.*

Then—

“PINGGGGG,” a beast roared. The gong sounded again. *BOOOMMMMM!* Another roar. “PINGGGGG!”

Chapter Five

Mulan hastily put on her armor and grabbed her sword, then swept aside the tent's flap and went outside to confront whoever—or whatever—was yelling for her.

But there was no one. Nothing.

The camp was still as before. Even the embers in the fire had died out by now. All was dark, and only the rhythmic wheeze of sleeping soldiers accompanied her.

Mulan frowned. She could have sworn she'd heard something, but she must have been wrong. Still, as she turned back to her tent, something rustled in the distance.

"There you are," a deep voice rumbled.

Mulan immediately whirled and held up her sword. She half expected to see the Huns surrounding the camp, but she was still alone.

Or so it seemed.

“Stop dawdling.” The intruder spoke so loudly he ought to have woken the entire camp, but no one stirred. Did they not hear his thunderous voice?

“Are you a soldier or a tombstone? Didn’t anyone tell you we’re in a hurry?”

Mulan ventured out into the camp, following the direction of the voice. She carefully stepped over her sleeping friends, then headed toward a thick tree trunk in a dark corner. “Who’s there? Show yourself.”

The intruder growled. “Show myself? I’m standing right in front of you. Look up.”

Mulan raised her eyes, then jumped back, startled.

Not a tree trunk at all, but an immense stone lion! He was as tall as Khan and as wide as her tent. His round eyes were orange as persimmons, and an enormous, elegant jade pendant adorned his neck. He flexed his front paws into the snow, revealing dagger-sharp claws.

Mulan brandished her sword and opened her mouth to yell for her fellow soldiers, but the stone lion moved, stepping into the moonlight with one massive paw.

She gasped. “What . . . what are you?”

“I am ShiShi,” the stone lion announced, proudly and regally. He peered at her, as if waiting for her to look impressed. Mulan remained silent.

“I am the guardian of the Li family, responsible for aiding every Li hero for over twenty generat—”

“So you’re here to help Shang?” Mulan interrupted. She glanced back at her tent, where Mushu, her own guardian, was still fast asleep.

ShiShi frowned. “You didn’t expect to do it alone, did you?” He squinted at her, then sniffed with disdain. “No wonder the general sent for me. You’re punier than I expected. Small and unpunctual, two worrisome traits in a soldier.”

Mulan overlooked the insults. Her eyes widened at ShiShi’s words, and hope flared in her heart. “Shang’s father sent you?”

“You promised him you would save his son, did you not? I’m here to help you fulfill that promise . . . although now I’m beginning to think it’s a fruitless quest. You’re no match for the Underworld.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” said Mulan. “Will you take me there?”

“Climb on my back,” ShiShi huffed. “Be careful when you take the braids, and don’t pull on my mane.”

His mane was thick and curly, despite being made of stone. She reached for one of the elaborate braids, then hesitated, wondering whether she should wake Mushu to bring him with her.

No, he'd just try to talk me out of going. He'd say it's too dangerous.

Dangerous or not, she'd made up her mind. She wouldn't let Shang die, not if there was a chance to save him.

"Hurry, little soldier," barked ShiShi. "We don't have much time."

Mulan grabbed ShiShi's braids and settled on his back. Before she could ask another question, ShiShi let out a terrible roar.

Suddenly the earth gave a terrible quake, and the ground beneath them split. As Mulan jolted back from the tremor, her sword fell out of her grasp and clattered onto the ground.

"My sword!" Mulan shouted, trying to jump off ShiShi to retrieve it. "Wait, it's my father's!" But the lion couldn't hear her, not as the earth trembled and his roar echoed across the camp.

"I hope you have a strong stomach, little soldier!" shouted ShiShi. Then, without any further warning, ShiShi leapt through the hole.

And down, down they fell into the depths of Diyu, the Underworld.