

## Like Water

By Fung Sum Yi, Popo

Yu opened the front door, careful not to make the hinge creak. It did anyways, making his skin crawl. Holding his breath, he waited for the usual shrill of porcelain shattering or the raucous laughs from middle-aged men.

Nothing.

*Phew.* Relieved at the absence of others, Yu hurried towards the bathroom — it was sweltering today, and he needed to cool himself.

The bathroom was crude like the rest of the cottage, made of wood moulded from years of usage. Yu took off his *magua* and *changshan* and lowered himself into the cold water.

*Ouch!* He winced at the sharp, stinging pain on his left calf.

A cut the length of his thumb leaked crimson blood and diffused into nothingness in the bathwater.

*This is new, probably from yesterday,* he thought, examining the rest of his body. Bruises of varying sizes bloomed all over his skin, some a livid purple, some faded into a dull olive-yellow, showing signs of recovery, though only from the outside.

Yu never wanted to recall how he got these wounds.

Every night, his drunk and agitated stepfather would come home, clutch Yu's oversized *magua* and throw him across the small cottage. With every punch came vile words, diminishing him to a mere waste of food and space. Every degrading comment thrown at him was as measured, cold and thin as his nourishment was. With ribs protruding and cheeks sunken, Yu appeared scrawny for a teen his age.

He had always missed his parents. With swollen eyes, he sometimes saw himself flying a kite with his father and beloved mother, Niang, by a willow tree — how he wished this would be reality. For so many nights, his only hope was for the pain to ebb into eternal oblivion.

But how could he? How could he so selfishly choose to leave the world that Niang held dear?

He recalled the final conversation they had. "My sweet boy," his mother said, her voice so weak he could barely hear it.

"Niang, *Niang*. Please don't go. What will I do without you?" Little Yu sobbed, with tears trickling down his cheeks.

"My sweet, sweet boy. Need not worry. Niang will always be there with you..."

"...Really?"

"Of course... remember... do not... forget... what... you are... made... from..."

And there was deafening silence.

Yu could almost see faint wisps of iridescent blue escaping Niang, leaving behind a frail, pallid body.

He often pondered Niang's last words. *Do not forget what you are made from.*

She used to say it all the time. Whenever Yu asked her what that meant, she would always give him the same answer. “One day, my child,” she would say, caressing his cheeks, “when Nuwa decides that the time is right, you will know the truth.”

Who exactly Nuwa was, Yu never got the chance to ask, but he had spotted this name before, embedded within the beautiful calligraphy of Niang’s notebook.

He found his mother’s belongings when he accidentally opened the lid of a secret compartment on the floor. In it laid notebooks and several wooden vials, all carved with sophisticated patterns. Whenever he touched the cap of a vial, a glowing circle connecting the five points of a star would appear around it, disappearing when he let go. The symbols at each point were different for each bottle, gleaming in varying colours and intensities.

He thought it was a hallucination. It couldn’t be magic, a taboo to be mentioned in this town. The people loathed it, considering supernatural beings and their magical powers an embodiment of evil; they even spread fables to stop children from going into the deep forests.

BANG! The sudden noise broke Yu’s train of thought. It must’ve been his stepfather. His nightmare had returned.

He tip-toed out of the bathtub and patted himself dry. Hastily, he clothed himself in an attempt to preserve any remnants of his non-existent dignity. Quivering, he waited for his doom.

Instead, he heard foul words, dull thuds and bones snapping. Through the crevices of the shattered front door, he saw a gang circling a man. With swollen, bruised eyes and broken ribs, his stepfather was barely recognisable.

“Loan’s due, you swine,” bawled one of the gang members. “Where’s the money?”

“Just... just give me one more day!” Yu’s stepfather beseeched. “I promise, I promise I’ll return the full sum by tomorrow! *Please!*”

“Ain’t happening, you little rat. Said the same thing last time. Gimme the money or YOU. LOSE. AN. ARM.”

His stepfather grovelled. “Please! I, I... my son! My son!” He cried, clutching the gangster’s ankle. “You can have him! Do whatever you want with him! He’s all yours if he’s worth the debt!”

Yu froze. A cold shiver went up his spine. He sweated in horror.

*I have to go. Now.*

With quickened breaths, he scanned the corners of the cottage. *My bag.* He grabbed a crumpled sack on the floor. *Money.* He reached for the few copper coins under his bed. *Niang’s stuff.* He barged open the secret compartment, shoving the vials and books in his bag. He tied it with a loose knot, securing everything.

*GO.* Manoeuvring through the hole in one of the walls, Yu sprinted out from this damned place without a second thought. Escaping meant leaving behind food, shelter and warmth, but in the face of being sold to a ruthless gang, they did not matter anymore.

Without any destination, Yu ran for what seemed like decades. By the time he was so exhausted he couldn’t run any further, he was amidst complete darkness. Famished, cold and alone, he shivered and slowly drifted off.

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“Hey, hey buddy, you okay?”

It was an unfamiliar voice. Warily, Yu opened his eyes to see an equally unfamiliar face.

Gore was splattered over the man’s protruding fangs. Yu noticed blotches of browning blood on his ragged shirt, and the small cuts all over his body.

*A werewolf.*

Yu had heard stories from Niang about the supernatural. While most humans detested them, there was compassion laced in every sentence of Niang’s narrative, as if she had seen and lived with them.

“You good?” asked the werewolf, breaking the silence.

“What? Oh,” Yu flushed. “I’m alright. Thanks.”

“You don’t look it.” The werewolf frowned. “What got you sleeping deep in the woods?” The werewolf looked at the plentiful trees surrounding them. The warm atmosphere meant daytime, but it was rather dim under the canopy. Sunlight shone through the sprawling branches and thick leaves, leaving spots of gold on the rugged ground.

“It, it’s nothing,” Yu said. “I, I’ll just—”

“Hey, it’s okay, just relax.” The werewolf smiled softly, “I meant no harm.”

“I... I had to leave home.” Yu stammered, careful not to sound needy for help.

“You know what?” the werewolf’s expression softened. “There’s an extra room in my place. You wanna come and stay for a few nights before deciding where you’re headed to?”

Reluctant to bother anyone, Yu shook his head. “That, that’s too generous of an offer, I can’t accept it. Thank you so much for your help, but I thi— I’ll be fine on my own.”

“Well then, stay safe, buddy. Name’s Lang Ya, by the way. It was nice meeting you.”

Lang Ya took out a vial from his dirty bag. A glowing circle appeared around it.

It was almost identical to Niang’s.

It couldn’t be a coincidence. This was his only chance to learn more about Niang, to discover her past and his ancestry. In his head, timidity battled with the desire to learn, to explore, to adventure.

“Wait! I’ll go with you.” His curiosity got the better of him. “Please show me your place.”

Lang Ya grinned, offering his arm. “Hold tight.”

With Yu grasping his forearm, Lang Ya incanted lines that Yu couldn’t decipher. The vial started glowing as the cap began to unseal.

A great force sucked them into the void. Before Yu knew it, he was in the middle of a bustling village. Chinese vampires hopped down the streets, and flaming phoenixes soared across the sky.

A proud smile spread across Lang Ya’s face.

“Welcome to the Water Village”.

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*Yum.* Yu licked his third candied strawberry, unwilling to let go of the delicacy made in heaven.

“Come on,” Lang Ya crossed his arms, “even *tanghulu*’s not *that* good. Your teeth’s gonna rot someday, bud.”

“Oh, stop patronizing me.” Yu took another bite. “This is delectable! I never got this at home.”

“You’re getting real comfy living here, huh?” Lang Ya laughed. “Any ideas where you’re going next?”

“Well...” Yu looked away. He hadn’t thought about this yet.

He really liked this village — it was peaceful, and the people were kind. It felt like... a *home*. Though he had only been here a few short days, he felt a special connection to this place, like a warm tug to his heart.

“I’m not sure yet. But I’ll figure it—”

Yu flinched at the sudden darkness. Looking up, he saw thick clouds gathering above them. The sky took on a crimson hue, tainting everything a blood red. Bolts of lightning struck the ground, setting houses on fire. It was like a war scene.

“Run!” Lang Ya grabbed his arm, dragging him to the nearest shelter they could find. As Yu was about to step through the door of the wooden house, he looked back to see a bold streak of red lightning shooting towards them.

*Oh no!*

A massive blue beam erupted from Yu, so bright he had to squeeze his eyes shut. It was burning hot — burning his skin, his clothes, everything. He smelled the acrid smoke of his charred shirt. Every fibre of his being was in excruciating pain. *This is the end*, he howled in agony, *I’m doomed*.

After an eternity, the light finally dissipated. His vision swirled, and his eyelids grew heavy. He heard footsteps, screams, and the sizzles of burning fabric as the world darkened again.

Yu opened his eyes to see Lang Ya drowsing on the stool beside his bed. The werewolf woke up to Yu’s soft moan as he failed to prop himself up. *Every* part of his body was sore and weak.

“Hey buddy.” The werewolf lifted him by the arm. “Still hurting?”

“Just a bit.” His voice was as rough as crushed seashells. “What happened?”

“Lotsa things, man. Someone blasted the village, half of it got destroyed. Gotta go hiding underground. And with that thing going on inside you...”

Yu contemplated. *What thing?*

He thought hard. Gradually his memories returned. The ambush, the light, the pain, everything.

*Oh, that thing.* “I don’t know.” He sighed. “It just... came out of me.”

“No one knows how or why it happened, not even the elders.” Lang Ya deepened his voice. “But whatever is inside you, it was *qi*, and it was *strong*. Guess our enemy never saw that coming either; they panicked and backed off. For now, we’re out of danger.”

“Okay. Anyone else got hurt?”

“Well, quite a few. Mostly... by you.”

“What?”

“As I said, your magic is powerful.” He hesitated. “Too powerful, perhaps. It went out of control and did some serious damage to our side.”

Yu covered his mouth in shock. A massive wave of guilt rose in his body. Tears gathered in his eyes.

He never wished to hurt anyone. Not even his enemies, let alone innocent villagers who embraced his arrival with affection. He didn't want much, just something, *anything* to keep him away from his past life. But he wasn't so sure of even that anymore. Maybe he was what his stepfather said he was. *A waste of food and space. Undeserving of love. An unwanted existence.*

A tear rolled down his face.

*What is happening to me? What have I done?*

*What am I?*

“Tsao Yu, the glowing boy. Finally, we meet.”

An old man entered the room, his mahogany crutch thumping a steady cadence.

“Master Chang Shou.” Lang Ya greeted him with a bow.

“You've gained fame fairly quickly for a newcomer.” The master stroked his grizzled beard. It was so long it almost dragged the ground as he paced around the room.

“I'm so, so sorry, Master,” Yu whispered, “I don't know what was going on with me. I didn't mean to harm any of your people — they're so welcoming and generous. I'll do *anything* to make up for this if it helps, even for just a bit.”

“We do not assume your intentions to be ill, boy.” The old man said, “You possess extraordinary *qi*, as displayed by the recent incident. What you lack is the appropriate training to control your *qi*. With the correct guidance and constant practice, you have exceptional potential to be a great Master of Qi.”

“The damage you have brought to our village is an agonising yet irreversible truth. However, it does not do to dwell on past bad blood. Instead, we want you to improve. Your powers will be useful for the defeat of our treacherous enemy.”

Yu was dumbfounded. After nearly committing manslaughter, he suddenly became a valuable step to obliterating an unknown, evil force.

Did he have the ability for this? Could he live up to their expectations? Could he prove himself a competent wielder of *qi*?

He didn't know.

“O...kay,” he said hesitantly. “I'll try.”

“Good. Your training commences tomorrow.”

Yu's stomach churned at the thought of it.

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Training was tough.

First was finding his *qi*. The instructions weren't difficult to follow — “Ask for its presence, and it will appear,” said the instructor stoically. With a simple wave of an arm, he sent a blaze of green across the training arena. The light struck an idle rock, disintegrating it into debris within seconds.

“Your turn,” he said indifferently, as if the marvel he had just created never happened.

It should've been simple, but Yu just couldn't do it. It wasn't like he didn't try — meditating, yelling, swinging his hands around, he gathered all his might to force it out. *Come on, hands*, he urged, *now would be a good time to do your thing*. Nothing happened, of course. All that came out of him was sweat and frustration.

Sighing, he looked around to find anyone else as lost and stuck as him. Evidently, everyone could do it but him. Even the kids. Yu's heart sank when he saw the lustre of light glow between their tiny fingers.

Next to the tool cabinet, the more experienced pupils huddled around the Enchantment book and recited incantations. A Chinese vampire transferred her *qi* to one of the many trinkets in the pile. The yellow glow from her pale, stiff hands combined with the silver necklace. “*ChangeYourPurpose*,” he heard her murmur. Soon, a yellow circle illuminated the necklace and produced a five-pointed star, each tip extending to form a symbol.

“Nice!” said her phoenix friend. “What did you Purpose it into?”

“A mirror repellent.” The vampire shuddered. “I do not want to see my horrible face again.” Her face turned even whiter. “Ever.”

“I made mine into a teleporter.” The phoenix held out a copper coin. The fiery orange spellcircle had a different pattern, signifying its conjurer's identity. “I swear to Nuwa, if I hear another complaint about falling ashes when I fly...”

Physical training was what Yu was the least bad at, but his skinny limbs and small frame did not help at all. He could barely keep up with everyone else during laps, even with Lang Ya's empathetic attempts to slow down.

Lang Ya did a flawless job as a class monitor, correcting students' mistakes and encouraging the ones lagging behind, Yu obviously being one of them. Yu didn't know if he should be grateful for his help or embarrassed about needing it.

By the end of the 8-hour training, he was drenched in sweat, his legs were shaking, and he was buried in frustration. He knew this was only his first day of training, but he couldn't help but feel discouraged. With so many people ahead of him with their skills, their physique, their *qi*, how was he supposed to be the Master of Qi, their hope of victory against the unknown enemy?

Sullen, Yu perched on a shallow stone step leading to the training field. Looking at the sky, he felt like the downward trajectory of the sun itself was mocking his mood.

“Everything okay?”

It was Lang Ya. *Great*, Yu thought, *someone else to ridicule me*. “I'm fine,” he said flatly.

“You're lying.” Lang Ya squinted playfully at him. “Something's wrong.” He sat down beside Yu. “Come on, I won't bite.”

“Pretty reassuring to hear that from someone who grows fangs when he sees the moon,” Yu scoffed.

“Ouch, that hurts,” the werewolf laughed. “The moon’s not turning full for another two weeks, so it’ll be fine.” He waved a hand at Yu. “You, though. *You’re* the one who’s not fine. Tell me, what’s bothering *the glowing boy?*”

“Very funny.” Yu rolled his eyes and tried to suppress his grin. “Fine. I just feel like I’m going... nowhere. I can’t find my *qi*, I’m not as strong as all of you are, I just—” He sighed, “I just don’t know if I can be whatever your people want me to be. Maybe it’s not even *in* me to do it.”

Lang Ya nodded. “That must’ve been hard for you, bud. So many changes in so little time... Well, try to think of the good side.” He patted him on the shoulder. “Nuwa has her reasons for doing things.”

“*Nuwa?* I’ve heard this name before.” Yu recalled Niang’s words. “What does she have to do with any of this?”

“Well, She created the universe and all, so She has to do with *everything*.” Lang Ya shrugged, then turned serious for once. “See, there’s a *yin* and a *yang* for everything, both sides in perfect balance. When one side is in excess, the *qi* finds a balance, and order is restored. It’s the Flow of the Universe, Yu.”

“So... you’re saying that Nuwa sent me to restore the balance disrupted by the dark force?”

“Essentially. She didn’t grant you *qi* for no reason.” Lang Ya stared at him solemnly. “Yu, you’re destined to do this.”

“But how am I supposed to do it if I can’t even *feel* my *qi*?”

“*Qi* is like water, Yu.” Lang Ya started making fluid movements with his hands. “Soft, flexible, but penetrating. It has the power to erode the hardest rocks and metals.” He looked back at Yu. “Remember, soft overcomes the hard.”

He held Yu’s palms. “Close your eyes,” he continued. “Breathe. Don’t force it, *feel* it. Accept its presence. Allow it to *flow*.”

Yu repeated the mantra. *Breathe, feel, accept, flow.*

A tingle appeared at his fingertips. Slowly, it travelled up his arms, then to his torso, and the rest of his body. Its warmth coursed through his veins.

Then he was a small boat floating on a vast ocean. *Accept its presence*, he reminded himself, *allow it to flow.*

Soon, he was one with the waves, his breaths in tune with their peaceful rising and falling.

“I can feel it now.” Yu breathed out. “What do I do next?”

“Let it flow to your hands.” Lang Ya let go of his hands. “Expand it, let it out. Think of it as an extension of your body.”

A ball of warmth gathered in Yu’s palms. Opening his eyes, he saw glowing blue mists swirling above his hands like ink in water, changing patterns as he maneuvered it with his fingers.

It felt... good. Natural. Like it was a part of him. Like Niang’s gentle caresses when she held his hands.

Inhaling, Yu tried to guide it back into his body. The mists seeped through his fingers, and the light dissipated.

“You did it!” Lang Ya stood up and hopped about. “You flipping did it, Yu!” Yu was amazed. Gazing at his bare palms and tracing the veins on his fingers, he beamed. This time, he did not try to hide his smile.

“That was incredible,” he whispered, looking up at Lang Ya. “Thank you.”

The werewolf grinned back, revealing white, normal teeth. Without the gore or dirt, Lang Ya had a handsome face. Yu felt his cheeks heat up looking at it. He wondered how it looked upon transforming.

In the sky above them, the crescent moon seemed to be smiling, too.

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“Master Chang Shou? I wasn’t expecting you. Good evening, please come in. Oolong?”

“That would be pleasant. Thank you, boy.” The long-bearded elder hobbled into the wooden house. Under the full moon, his shadow loomed over his hunched back. “Am I correct to blame the moon for Lang Ya’s absence?”

“Oh. That’s right. He won’t be back until a couple of hours later.” Yu put the steaming teapot on the round table. “What brings you here, Master?”

“I am still in study of your history. Pieces are missing, however, and I need more information about you.” He poured the dark brown liquid into a teacup. “Understanding ourselves is important.” He took a sip of the piping hot tea. “As the great Sun Tzu once said, if you know your enemy and yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.”

“Indeed.” Yu nodded. “What do you want to know about me?”

“Tell me about your life before coming here.”

“Uh.” Yu scratched his head, “There’s not much, really. I didn’t go to school... we couldn’t afford it. So I usually spent my days by the river drawing in the mud or daydreaming.”

“No education,” Master Chang Shou concluded. He held an ink brush in his hand, which he Enchanted. It started jotting down the master’s words in a battered notebook. “Family?”

“I lived with my...stepfather.” Yu winced at the mention of him. “It isn’t a fond memory.”

“Hmm.” Another scribble. “If you don’t mind... I would like to know more about your parents. Your biological parents, that is.”

“We used to live in Hangzhou. They adored that place, especially the West Lake — they first met there. They even built a house nearby to see the willow trees every day.” Yu thought of the moments when he flew kites with his parents by the lake.

“...That was before father passed away, from a tragic robbery on his way home.” Yu looked down. “Niang was devastated, so we moved away for her to heal. But she never recovered from it.”

He composed himself and gave a bittersweet smile. “She must be happy now to see father in the afterlife.”

“Speaking of Niang,” Yu said and stood up. “There’s something that I want to show you. Just a moment.”

Yu went to his room. The once-vacant room of Lang Ya’s house was now scattered with his belongings — Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, the book that he was just reading, was lying on

his bed half-opened; atop the cherry wood dresser sat many trinkets, all skilfully Enchanted by him for various purposes. Three months was a much longer stay than he had intended. With his hard work and the extra practice sessions with Lang Ya every night, his progress was evident.

He opened the bottom drawer and took out Niang's vials and notebook. He returned to the living room and showed them to the elder. "These were hers." Yu gave him the wooden vials. "I have no idea where she got these from, but they have different spellcircles, so she must've known someone from this village... And this." He opened the notebook and pointed at the foreign words. "I don't even know what it says. Do you by any chance...?"

Yu looked to the master, awaiting his response. Eyes widening and eyebrows raised to his forehead, he exclaimed, "These!" his voice was shaky, "...*You!* You are the descendant of the noble Zhao family!"

"What?" Yu frowned. "Noble family? What do you m—"

"Ru Shui," The master grabbed his arms, "Your mother's name is Ru Shui, right?"

"...Yes." Yu didn't remember mentioning Niang's name. "How do you know?"

"Zhao Ru Shui, daughter of the noble Nine-tailed Fox, guardian of the Water Village," Master Chang Shou panted. "She was one of the most powerful wielders of *qi*. Nuwa's stones — she must have passed them to you."

"Wait. What *are* you talking about?" Yu was perplexed. "My mother was human!"

"Perfectly disguised as one in their world, yes." The master took shallow breaths. "She had exceptional talent in *qi*, even among the nobles. One of the best students in my many years of life. These," he pointed to Niang's possessions, "are heirlooms of the Zhao family."

*Nuwa's stones*, Yu thought, so that explains the items, the knowledge, the compassion Niang had. She was from here. *He* was from here.

But there was something he didn't understand. "Why did she leave, then?"

The master sighed. "A long time ago, we were at war with the humans. The damage was too severe, and Nuwa had to separate us into different realms. Ever since, the river water never mixed with well water.

"We do not speak of the humans, but Ru Shui thought differently. Unlike us, she saw kindness in them, and wanted to prove us wrong." Yu could see the fondness in the master's eyes. "When she fell in love with your father, she knew it wouldn't be easy with her family's disapproval — so she left and stayed with him in the human world."

He patted Yu on the shoulder. "You were everything to your mother, boy. The amount of love that she must've had to overcome all the obstacles and bear you was unparalleled. You are the fruit of a forbidden love. And love is the most powerful form of *qi*."

Love.

It was love all along.

This was what Niang had always told him. This was what he was made from. *Love*.

*It was love, Niang. I was made from love.*

A familiar warmth ran through Yu. He closed his eyes. *Let it flow*.

Memories flashed through his mind — moments with his parents, Niang's caresses, the villagers' kindness. *This is my Qi, my love*. He could feel its tender embrace.

Then he saw a little boy at the far end of his vision, holding a paper kite. “Will you love me?” He tilted his head and asked.

*Accept its presence. Accept your past, your present, yourself.*

Yu nodded.

The boy smiled. It was the most beautiful smile he had ever seen.

BOOM! Deafening thunder rumbled. Red lightning bolts split the sky. Their enemy had returned.

In the centre of the bleeding red storm, Yu saw a dark figure. He conjured a bolt of blue *Qi* and hurled himself up to the sky, dodging the forked lightning that came his way.

It was a woman, a... human. She looked like any other ordinary woman, but sparks were erupting from her in all directions. Her long, untamed black hair was flying in the howling wind, her green gown fluttering. Looking down, Yu could see a white dragon Master Chang Shou had conjured prowling over the village to guard the villagers.

A blast of lightning knocked Yu over, striking him to the ground. The enraged woman flew atop of him and squeezed his neck. “You...!” she screeched. “You are the human hybrid!” There was fury in her glaring eyes. “Monstrosities like you should not be allowed to exist!”

Struggling to breathe, Yu clutched at her hands, prying her bony fingers off his neck. He extended his *qi* to her hands and wheezed, “*ReadYourMind...!*”

He was sucked away by a force, and the thunder disappeared.

Then he was at a war scene. There was blood. Explosions. Deaths. Bodies. Many bodies, both human and supernatural.

“Mo Zhou! Go! Run!” a man yelled at him.

“Ma!” a girl screamed. “No! Ahhh!!”

Then their throats were slit. Blood splattered everywhere, tainting Yu’s vision red. He could feel a sharp sting in his throat.

The blood faded into a shallow, infinite lake. He saw a woman kneeling in the waters, her gown soaked into a deep emerald. Tears streamed down her ghastly, wrinkled face.

He could feel it, the agony, the resentment, the pain. “I can feel you, Mo Zhou.” Yu walked towards her. Each step he took got heavier, and he felt like he couldn’t breathe. “I know how it feels to lose someone you love.”

“No, you don’t!” Mo Zhou cried. “You don’t know what it’s like to lose them to your own people. Humans or supernaturals, *qi* or no *qi*, they should never be together!”

“But they can.” Yu held her hands. “Let me show you.”

Flashbacks of Yu’s memories emerged, all warmed by a yellow tinge. Niang, father, the Water villagers, Lang Ya, himself.

“See?” Yu said. “Love defies all odds. Like water, it is the softest and most yielding substance. Yet it can overcome the hard and rigid, because nothing can compete with it.”

He turned to face Mo Zhou. “It purifies the silt of our rigid hearts by simply being itself. There is no problem, however complex or difficult, that love cannot dissolve.”

“Love?” she reiterated. “Water?”

Then they were underwater. Yu could hear a muffled call. “Mo Zhou,” the deep voice said. “My love.”

“Mama!” a childish voice echoed. “Look what I found, a yoyo!”

Far away from them stood a man and a girl. “Come, my love.” The man smiled. “We’ve missed you. Come with us.”

“Let’s play with the yoyo together, Mama!” The girl waved at them. “There are so many here, we’ll never run out!”

Happy tears fell down Mo Zhou’s cheeks. “My loves,” she sobbed. “My loves.” Nodding, she ran towards them and embraced them with a hug.

She looked back at Yu and smiled. “Thank you, boy.”

Crashes of waves covered them, turning them into trails of sea foam.

Yu opened his eyes. The lightning had disappeared from the dark sky. Only wisps of red mist remained in the air.

Mo Zhou was gone.

A tall figure rushed towards him. “Yu!” Lang Ya panted. “Are you okay? What did that woman do to you?” He looked around. “I just saw the sky, it was crazy, everything was— *Nuwa’s stones*,” he breathed. “You did it.”

“Yeah,” Yu blinked. He still couldn’t believe it. “I... I did it.”

Exhausted, they sat by a willow tree near the lake. None of them spoke. Slowly, Yu leaned on Lang Ya’s shoulder and looked into the distance, trying to process what had just happened.

In their silence, the willow leaves rustled in the spring breeze. The glorious sun was peeking over the horizon, shedding rays of glimmering gold onto the tranquil water.