

The Girl with Ghost Eyes
M. H. Boroson
November 2015
Talos Press

CHAPTER 4

I have heard people say that anyone who watches the Night Parade will go mad. The monsters that populate the Night Parade are among the strangest of the ghouls and devils that trouble the human world.

For so many years, I had seen signs of the monsters' passage through Chinatown, and occasionally, at night, I heard unearthly sounds of music, of festivities, coming from the street. I always heard it between eleven and one, the hour of the First Earthly Branch, when the forces of yin and shadow are at their peak; between eleven and one, when Father always insisted I remain indoors. Tonight I was looking for help in the unlikeliest of places.

After Mother died, I swore I would never hide from monsters. But now I was actively searching them out, and not just one monster, or two; tonight I was going to find the Bai Gui Yexing.

Among the horde of monsters, there had to be something that could help me find my way back to my body.

**

I decided to wait for the monsters at the intersection of California and Dupont. It was here, in the evenings, where Father often stood with an iron basket, burning paper offerings for the dead. It was here where Father performed his public rituals. These red brick walls were grimed with soot from Father's festival rites. Here I would feel at least a little comfortable facing a horde of spirits.

A street lamp flickered at the corner. A pedestrian walked near me, his shoulders hunched as though it was cold out. But it wasn't cold. On some level, he could tell tonight was different. He didn't slow down or stop to read the bulletins posted on the walls. I watched him go, hoping he made his way to shelter.

Ding-ding-ding, went the cable car as it slowed to a stop. Ding-ding. Ding. The men climbed down, their queues swaying behind them. They were heading home or going out to gamble, and though none of them could see or sense me, they swerved around me as they walked, as a stream shifts around a stone. I marveled once more at the ways the living accommodate the things they cannot see.

"Pungent tofu?" asked a boy. He was wearing a straw hat, and he held out a plate of tofu. He was pale-skinned, and his eyes had the glazed look of someone who has spent far too many hours working.

"Pungent tofu?" he offered again.

"You can see me?" I asked.

There was no sign of comprehension on his face. "Pungent tofu?"

I looked in his eyes and saw infinite sadness, infinite loss. There was a hollowness behind his eyes that seemed to go on forever. That was when I realized the boy was dead.

"Pungent tofu?" asked the ghost again, extending his plate of fermented soy cake.

"Not right now, but I thank you," I said to him.

Ding, went the cable car as it started to move again. Its driver had clamped it back on the fast-moving cable. Ding-ding, it picked up speed, ding-ding-ding, and there was another sound under it. The sound came dimly over the din of a Chinatown night, but it was clear, and it was

music. The plucking of a pipa strummed through the air. The pipa sounded like water on stones, like wind brushing through trees, and behind it, they came walking.

It was the Bai Gui Yexing, and they came hopping, crawling, flapping, creeping, scraping, prancing, and floating, the devils in their multitudes. The shapes of the advancing creatures made me dizzy. So many were things I'd never seen, or never believed in, or had never heard of. The Daolu Registers list eighty thousand demons, but not even that could give name to the shapes in front of me.

In the unearthly crowd I observed the familiar monstrosities before I could make out the incomprehensible and foreign. A red crowd of huli jing, fox spirits, followed the patriarch fox. He was a proud old beast boasting five bushy tails and a laughing cleverness behind his eyes. I had seen huli jing before, but they'd been younger than the master of this skulk.

In the air near the five-tailed fox, ghost fires glimmered. When a fox walks through a graveyard, the last breaths of the recently dead climb out of men's throats and follow the fox. They burn for weeks, a dim blue, floating flame.

Watching the foxes, I swallowed. The mischief of the huli jing may be innocent and it may also be cruel. Stories assailed my memory. The huli jing could be seductive vixens, harmless pranksters, or malevolent forces. I had no way to tell how dangerous these were. There were fox spirits who lived among people as wives and friends. Others engaged in mischief, turning a miser's gold into moths, and there were some of a more malicious bent, who would push a blind child down a well.

A pair of old shoes clattered near the foxes. The shoes were empty, but they proceeded with a man's careful stride, following the rhythm of the music. A snake with two heads slithered past, singing to itself; colors of peach and sand mottled its sea-green scales. Nearby floated a paper lantern in whose glow I could see oversized features, eyes and a mouth and a protruding tongue, all crude and much too large, like a child's drawing of a face.

Next I saw a woman's head. The head was no different from any Chinese woman, with her hair long and braided, but her body was far from the head. An elongated neck stretched out under the head, dozens of yards long. Her body traipsed behind, in a white, two-piece outfit, with broad sleeves and dark patterns along the blouse. Her neck curled around itself, writhing like a snake.

My mouth was open, my eyes wide. It felt like I was witnessing the dreams of opium smokers. I did not blink.

Shuffling along the ground was something like a centipede, only it was about three feet long, and it had a duck egg for a head. Someone had drawn a face on the egg in grease pencil. The head turned this way and that, looking about.

My mind felt hazy, as though I were dreaming, and I watched the Night Parade progress. There was a puff of black smoke that moved as though it was being carried along by a wind, but there was no wind, and the smoke did not disperse as smoke does. Within the little cloud I could make out the features of a human face, made of smoke.

A man came walking. His skin was of a dark blue and he was taller than a human man standing upon the shoulders of another. He was barefoot, and his feet were reversed, heels in front and toes in back. His lips were long, an arm's length from the rest of his face, and swung about as a dog shakes its tail. Gray birds flew around him, and he spoke to them in their language.

"Pungent tofu?" asked the boy again. He swayed on his feet and stared at me with hollow eyes and an uncomprehending face.

I couldn't respond, too caught up was I in the ghastly figures of the Night Parade. The corner of Dupont and California would never be the same to me. If I managed to get back to my body, the streets would feel transformed.

A three-legged toad came hopping. It was the size of a cat, and I heard a clinking behind it, as of coins. It moved in an irregular gait, leaping and lurching down the road, bulbous eyes glancing in all directions.

A head was walking down the street. A human head, except it was waist height, and turned upside down. Its hair moved beneath it like the legs of a caterpillar, brushing the road with innumerable tiny follicles, and the inverted head continued down the way.

Up in the air, floating like a bat above the rest of the monsters, there was a white woman. Or segments of a white woman. Her head was flying there, and she wore a wide-brimmed hat over dark blond hair. She had a beautiful face, a young face. Men would fall in love, go mad, or write poems, if they saw her face, but her innards dangled under her throat. Her heart throbbed, her lungs pulsed, and coils of intestine bobbed as she flew through the night. She was a horror and an affliction, and she radiated malevolence. I saw her silhouette pass in front of the moon, and I shuddered.

There was a blue-skinned man in Buddhist robes, with one huge eye in the middle of his forehead. He carried a gosewood staff, like Father's. I'd heard of the blue monk, Lan Heshang. Travelers had encountered him in the mountains and in the woods. When the travelers spoke to him, he said nothing. But still, he had my attention. His gosewood staff suggested he knew how to work spells, and he might follow a Buddhist moral code. The blue monk might be able to help me.

My attention turned again to the woman's flying head with its trail of organs. During the day she must steal men's breath with her beauty, and at night she tore free of her body and flew to prey on their spirits. She was as deadly and soulless a predator as any in the spirit world. I thought I needed to tell Father about her, but if he killed her, it would be a disaster. To the world it would look as though a Chinese immigrant had murdered a young white woman and cut out her guts. The backlash from such an event would be horrific beyond belief.

The crowd of monstrosities continued, surging like a waterfall, and I felt exhausted simply from watching the freaks. My eyes glazed over, my mind barely able to catalogue the glut of horrors before me. Things that were unnatural or supernatural, things that had no place among men, found their own place among the Night Parade. The Bai Gui Yexing was a dance of nightmares, a community of the fearsome, freakish, and unwelcome.

Perhaps, I thought, that is how the white folk see Chinatown. We live together in a community of outsiders, united only by being different from those around us.

And with that I made up my mind. I was going to talk to the least foreign of these ghosts and goblins. The blue-skinned monk, who carried a gosewood staff, whose Buddhist robes and shaved head marked him as a soul-searcher.

I stood from my perch and began walking toward him. "Pungent tofu?" the boy ghost asked again.

"Maybe later," I said, to be polite. I knew better than to trust the food and drink of spirits. He looked despondent, holding out his tofu, and I walked toward the blue monk.

Something whinnied, and I was nearly trampled by a kind of creature that had the shape of a couch. A hairy couch. It clopped past on its wooden legs, snorting at me in derision.

"Blue monk!" I called out as I approached him. "I need your help."

He turned to face me, and I saw that mud had dried upon his orange robes. His hands

were blue as corpses and twice the size of a man's hands. There was old dirt lodged beneath his fingernails. He held his staff in one hand, and with the other he idly rubbed his chest, regarding me with the eye in the center of his forehead. The eye was as big as a man's fist, and it looked bored.

I bowed to him. I started to speak, and then I stopped, unfamiliar with Buddhist forms of address. "Shifu," I guessed, addressing him as a teacher, "I am trapped in the spirit world. I need help to return to the world of the living."

He blinked his big slow eye and said nothing.

"Will you help me?" I asked.

Saying nothing, he looked up at the sky, and around at the revelry of monsters. He blinked his enormous eye. Then he lifted his staff and turned away, rejoining the procession.

I stamped my foot in anger. If the blue monk wouldn't help me, then I had no idea which among the monsters might. Without the Buddhist's help, I remained trapped. "His mother's cock," I cursed -- and then I heard a soft snigger.

A big orange cat was trotting toward me. It looked like it had been in many scraps, but still it carried itself with the pride of a tomcat. One of its eyes was larger than the other, and it had two tails. I blinked. "Mao'er?"

The cat spirit stopped trotting and bowed its neck. "Miao, Dao girl," he said.

"Mao'er, can you help me?" I blurted.

A lazy look swam from his smaller eye to the bigger one. "Help you, Dao girl? Why should Mao'er help?"

"I helped you once, long ago."

The cat spirit gazed at me, shrewd and aware. "Mao'er be a cat, remember," he said. "And never was a cat born that honored its debts."

I sighed. I'd been a little girl, maybe nine years old, when my father caught Mao'er stealing whale oil from the lamps. Unable to capture the cat itself, Father bound Mao'er's power in a bottleneck gourd.

When I first saw Mao'er, a group of boys had him cornered. To them he looked like a mangy orange cat, with a forked tail. They poked him with sticks, yanked on his tails, scorched his fur with matches.

I looked at him and saw what he was. A spirit cat, a strange and changing thing, a creature of mischief and reckless appetites.

On that day long ago, the boys tormented him for what felt like hours, and I could not interfere. It would cost Father too much face if his daughter was seen fighting with boys. So I turned and went into the temple. Father paid me no attention and I walked into the back room. I found the gourd where Mao'er's power was held, and I broke the seal.

Three boys had gone to the infirmary that day, suffering from animal scratches. And that night, late, a cat yowled outside our basement door, and I had gone to speak with it.

Years had gone by and now I was trapped in the spirit world, in need of an ally. Mao'er sat back on his haunches, watching me through uneven eyes. "It's true a cat spirit honors no debts," I said.

"And has no friends!" he added.

"A cat spirit honors no debts and has no friends," I said. "But you like me."

His eyes narrowed, and he looked away. "No like anyone," he said.

"Except for me."

He looked back, scowling, then licked his paw and said, "Need help nownow?"

"Yes, Mao'er," I breathed. "I need your help now."

The shift was too fast for me to see. One moment I was looking at an orange cat, and a moment later I was looking at a girl of maybe fifteen years, wearing a faded orange qipao dress, its sleeves long and embroidered. She squatted on the ground and licked the back of her hand. "Need catch mice?" she asked.

I stared. I had never seen Mao'er change shape before, and the transformation was unnerving. The girl had Mao'er's eyes; the whites of her eyes were forest green flecked with earthy brown, and her eyes held the same mischief and brightness.

"No," I said to her, "I'm not looking to catch mice. Mice, I mean."

Something hot swooped over me. I turned and saw a man's bald head flying past, mounted on a kind of wagon wheel. The wheel was on fire, and yet the flames did not seem to be consuming it. I blinked and the burning wheel had flown off.

The Night Parade had passed. I saw the tofu boy hurrying to catch up, and the strumming of the pipa receded into the distance.

The girl yawned, and the inside of her mouth was a cat's mouth, lined with a cat's teeth around a cat's sandpaper tongue. "Need fight?" she asked.

"No," I said, "no fighting."

The cat-girl pouted. "No fight?" she asked, disappointed.

"Can you help me back to the world of the living, Mao'er?" I asked her.

She looked away and stretched. Slowly, carefully, she stretched her spine one way and then the other. She was a slender, tattered thing, and oddly beautiful. "No," she said, "nono. But can catch mice. Miao."

CHAPTER 5

That night we traveled Chinatown together in the spirit world. Mao'er had returned to his feline form. Skulking along on padded paws, he showed me his favorite places to hide, under shadowy staircases in dim alleys. We roamed my town, taking unfamiliar paths along familiar roads.

"Mao'er sneak in there, steal dry fish," he said, indicating a warehouse on California with a flick of his whiskers.

"But that's an Ansheng warehouse," I sputtered.

"Yesyes?" he said.

"Father has warded it."

The cat sniffed in disdain. "Mao'er know back door."

I stared at him. "Mao'er," I said, "is there a... back door... to my father's temple? Or to our quarters?"

He shifted again, but this time he took on the shape of a hefty little boy, with buckteeth and one protruding eye. "Mao'er try," he said. "Lamp oil yum, miao. No way in. Mean, miao, mean."

I sighed. Of course Father had warded our home and his temple. Every floorboard, every corner was protected by talismans, shielded by bagua mirrors, with door gods mounted at the entryways and wood blocks beneath the thresholds. Of course it was.

Mao'er showed me a narrow passage between two brick buildings off Fat Boy Alley. The passageway opened to a slightly larger niche. It was almost morning, and I curled up in the niche and slept.

**

My dreams were troubled by monsters. No one could witness the Bai Gui Yexing and come away from the experience undisturbed. All night I saw them, the distorted faces, the freakish apparitions. The sadness of the tofu boy, the malice of the flying head, the indifference of the blue monk, all of it drifted through my dreams in a chop suey of horrors.

I woke, disturbed, hungry, and worried. "Great Boqi," I prayed, "eat these evil dreams." I could not afford to allow my vital energy to be sapped by nightmare, not here, not now, when so much was at stake. If Mr. Liu wanted to kill my father, it probably meant the one-armed man had something planned, something big and ugly, and he saw Father as a threat to his plans.

Whatever he was planning, I was certain, it would not be good.

Once I was back in my body, I could warn my father, and he would know what to do. So my path was clear. Stay intact in the spirit world, and find a way to return to my own skin. I stood and stretched under the tarnished brassy light of the moon.

If I stayed trapped here long enough, it would eventually start to seem normal, the days lit by moonlight. But I had not been here long enough for that. I found the spirit moon disturbing.

Near me was a pile of dried fish. It was a gift from Mao'er, no doubt. But the cat was nowhere to be seen.

I took the dried fish and chewed on it. It was better than I expected; there was dried salmon, dried tuna, dried squid, dried cuttlefish sliced into salty strips, and some fish I could not give a name to. All of it was salty, oily, and chewy. In my mouth, the flavors tasted lovely but felt somehow dulled, as though I was eating shadows. Which, I supposed, I was.

I stood, stretched, and went to find Mao'er. He wasn't in the alley, so I started walking toward Jackson, chewing the fish.

It had been two days. For two days I'd been away from my body, cut off from the workings of the human world. For two days, Mr. Liu had been gloating over what he'd done to me. How he'd played me for a fool. How he'd outwitted me, cut me, and trapped me.

Or maybe he hadn't been gloating. He might see it as no greater a victory than drinking a cup of tea. That he had defeated me might be inconsequential in his eyes, no greater an achievement than killing a moth.

I walked along, and the thought of Mr. Liu made my spirit body stiffen with outrage.

I swallowed the last of the dried fish. I was determined; I was going to thwart Mr. Liu's plans, and I was going to punish him. That one-armed vermin would pay for cutting me. I needed to find a way out of the spirit world. I needed to make a way.

Mao'er was crouched and quiet on Dupont south of Jackson when I found him, intent on hunting. He had a cat's shape once more, and his two tails were flat to the cobblestones behind him. I approached him and he half-cocked his head in my direction.

"Mao'er hunt. Hushy hushy now, Dao girl?"

I looked toward the street, where the cat had been hunting moments earlier. A tiny spirit was walking slowly across the cobblestones. It was milky white and small enough to fit in the palm of my hand. It had tiny white human arms and tiny white human legs, but where a man has a torso and a head, the spirit had an eyeball.

A full-sized, human eyeball.

I blinked.

An eye was walking across the street. And it was looking straight at me.

"Yaoguai," I said. The eyeball spirit was clearly one of the ghosts and goblins, freakish creatures that have no relation to the human world. It was the kind of thing my father would destroy without hesitation.

Even after all my years of seeing monsters, even after witnessing the Bai Gui Yexing, I continued to be both fascinated and repelled by the outlandishness of spirits.

I watched the creature proceed. Its legs took short, determined strides. It was a human eye with tiny arms and legs attached, and the eye was watching me. It made its way across the street and never took its eye off of me. It was creepy, but there was something familiar in its gaze, something that evoked a feeling of having known it all my life. I couldn't identify what was familiar about the eye.

"Don't hurt it," I told the cat spirit.

He hissed. "Dao girl starve Mao'er?" He shifted into the shape of a hefty little boy with a mouth full of sharp teeth, swishing two tails behind him.

I turned toward him, still keeping an eye on the eyeball spirit. "I will bring you spirit mice, Mao'er, and saucers of whale oil. Leave this spirit alone."

He gave a soft hiss. "Mouses good. Oil yumyum. Dao girl better deliver. Or Mao'er piss on your shoes, Dao girl. Miao."

We both turned our attention back to the eye. Mao'er shifted back into the shape of an orange cat and scampered into the shadows. I knew I'd see him again. He wouldn't forget the food I owed him.

I crouched down and faced the little spirit. Some of the yaoguai can change shape and size, and many have unexpected strengths. Yes, the eyeball spirit looked harmless, but in the land of monsters, it is always best to be prepared -- and feared.

I tried to make my voice sound impressive, like my father's. "My name is Xian Li-lin. I am a Maoshan Daoshi and a killer of monsters. What manner of monster are you?"

Tilting its eyeball up to look at me, the spirit huffed. "Hardly polite to call someone a monster when you've only just met."

I blinked and stared. "A yaoguai is lecturing me in manners?"

"Harrumph," he said, crossing his arms. His gaze somehow seemed harsh, disapproving. Familiar. "I will lecture you in manners, girl," he said, "and you will listen."

I smiled, leaning back. "What will you do to me if I don't listen?" I asked. And then I said, under my breath, "Little monster."

The spirit had no face other than its eye, but in that moment I could have sworn he was scowling. "If you continue to be rude to me," he said, "why would I guide you back to your body?"

CHAPTER 6

"What did you just say?"

"You heard me," the eyeball said, uncrossing his arms and crossing them again behind his back. He looked... smug.

"You know how to lead me back to my body?"

He nodded.

It's strange to crouch on a street corner talking to an eye. It's hard to look into an eye and talk to it. But this yaoguai had just offered me hope. He claimed he could lead me back to my body, back to my life.

"What will it cost me?"

"Not a thing," he said. "But I expect you to be polite."

"All right," I said, though I did not relish the thought of having to be polite to one of the yaoguai. "What shall I call you?"

He looked surprised. "I..." he said. "I don't think I have a name."

I raised an eyebrow at that. "I can't address you respectfully if you don't have a name," I said. I thought for a moment. "How about Mr. Yanqiu?"

He hesitated. "Mr. Yanqiu," he said, thinking. "Mr. Eyeball. Yes, I think I like that."

"Mr. Yanqiu, please will you lead me back to my body?"

He gave me a scornful look. "Maybe later."

"Later? I need to get back as soon as I can."

"You called me a monster, young lady. And I will not lead you anywhere until you apologize for it."

My mouth dropped open. I had agreed to be polite to him, but the little monster wasn't going to make it easy for me.

"Mr. Yanqiu, Shifu," I said, addressing him as a teacher, "I lose much face for insulting you. Shall I knock my head to the earth nine times?"

"That will do nicely," he said.

"What did you say?"

"You offered to knock your head to the earth nine times, and I accepted."

I looked at him, startled. "But..." I said. One only knocks one's head to the earth before the truly great, like Empress Dowager Cixi or the Emperor, yet manners dictate making the offer.

"You made an offer," he said, "and I'm accepting it. Do you want to find your way back to your body or not?"

Frustration made me clench my fists. I was angry, resenting the little monster extorting me. I felt shame, both for my behavior and for my powerlessness. I hated the fact that I needed to humiliate myself to get what I needed. Could the spirit really guide me back to my body? He claimed he could, and he made that claim without me telling him anything. Somehow he'd known that was what I wanted.

I had little choice. I could humble myself before this monster and maybe make it back to my body, or I could save face and stay trapped in the spirit world. Holding back anger, I positioned myself on my hands and knees. I closed my eyes and prepared to smack my forehead to the ground.

And then the eyeball laughed.

His laugh wasn't grumpy and cruel as I expected. It was a light laugh, playful, warm, and welcoming.

"I'm only teasing you, young lady," the eye said. "Come on. Get up and follow me."

Eyes wide, I stood and brushed myself off. "Little monster," I said under my breath.

"I heard that," he replied.

**

Mr. Yanqiu's tiny legs made him walk slowly, so I lifted him to my shoulder and let him ride. I turned where he said I needed to turn, followed where he told me to go. Lefts and rights, we walked through a fog between life and death, tracing mystic steps along the spirit side of Chinatown.

"We're getting closer," I said. "I can feel it."

"Of course we are," he said.

Through a thin sheet of mist I saw Father's temple. Its wood and brick were almost the same vivid colors I remembered, hardly dampened by any of the spirit world's ash-and-gold moonlight. I started walking toward the temple.

"Not there," Mr. Yanqiu said. "That isn't where we are going."

I turned to him, puzzled. "But that's where I left myself. My body."

"Turn right," he said. "Two blocks down, on Dupont."

I did as he said, stepping through the afternoon crowds, until we arrived outside Dr. Wei's infirmary. Dr. Wei was Father's friend; they often smoked cigars and played fantan together, all the while arguing about tradition versus progress. Dr. Wei incorporated American medicine into his practice, and supported the young Emperor's reforms. Father argued that the old ways are best, that the Empress Dowager knew best, and that China should remain as it had always been.

Outside the infirmary door was a string of talismans painted on cloth. They were Father's talismans, as strong as they come, to keep out spirits and diseases, but a new talisman had been added. A talisman I'd never seen before.

My name was written on it, in ghostscript, surrounded by a drawing of a door. I gazed at it, amazed.

My father had posted a talisman that granted me passage through his magical barriers.

Father had always been so distant, so powerful. I was stunned that he'd gone to such an effort for me.

I was so grateful that tears almost came to my eyes. Father had made a talisman for me, just for me, so I could come find him here. It was unlike him to be so considerate. A rush of emotion swept through me, all of it confused. And yet I still didn't understand why my father wanted me to enter here, the infirmary, and not our home.

I turned my head to face the eyeball spirit. "Is he injured?"

The eye looked away, saying nothing. It felt to me as though he was protecting me from knowledge that might cause me pain. His gesture reminded me somehow of the look on my father's face when he's hiding something. When Father looks away, blinking too fast, I can always tell that he's lying.

I stopped and thought for a moment about the eyeball on my shoulder. It was a strange monster, one of the yaoguai, and it had no relation to the social order. Something was wrong. My father would never summon a yaoguai into Chinatown. And how was it that Mr. Yanqiu was able to navigate the passage between the world of spirits and the world of men? He had no kind of red string to guide him.

There was something I was missing. Without something like a red string, the spirit on my shoulder shouldn't have been able to find his way across the realms. Not unless he was anchored somehow, tethered, as though he was part of a living body.

I thought for a moment about the human body, the amazing dynamism of it all: the way vital energy flows along meridians, from the Bubbling Springs up to the Cinnabar Field, giving life to the spirit of each organ, the spirit of each limb, the spirit of each...

And then I had a sinking feeling. It felt like a piece of glass had fallen from the top of a building, fallen slowly and in infinite quiet, and shattered to a hundred pieces at the bottom.

"You," I said to the eyeball spirit riding on my shoulder. "I know what you are."

He looked at me, curious. "And what am I, Li-lin?"

I couldn't speak. I felt words choke in my throat. "You're his eye," I managed to squeeze

out. "You're the spirit of my father's eye."

Mr. Yanqiu leaned back quietly.

"But it makes no sense," I continued. "In order to send you to me in the spirit world, Father would need to... he would need to..."

I couldn't bring myself to say the words out loud. *He would need to gouge out one of his own eyes.*

The eyeball nodded. "He's recovering in the infirmary now. You're unconscious in the cot next to his."

"Why would he do something like that?"

"He could tell your red string had been broken. You needed a guide to bring you back to the lands of the living. He sent me."

"No," I said, "no. It makes no sense. He wouldn't. He wouldn't do that. Not for me."

The spirit of his eye looked at me sharply. "But he did."

Mr. Yanqiu was the spirit of my father's eye, but he had been without conscious thought until Father's spell. He didn't know Father as I did. My father wouldn't do this for me. There must have been some other reason, something I didn't grasp yet.

I lowered my head and walked to the infirmary's front door. The string of cloth talismans formed a barrier, and I felt it push against me, a sensation like a gathering wind. There was no going forward against the force of the barrier. But then the talisman with my name on it opened a path for me. It felt like a tree had been interposed between me and the wind; I heard the roar of it go on to each side of me.

I moved past the barrier, and Mr. Yanqiu dropped off my shoulder with a yelp. I turned to see him flopped face-first on the ground behind me, pushing himself up. "How undignified," he said.

"You can't make it past the talismans."

"Obviously not," he said, brushing off dust from the street with his tiny hands. He had the injured look of a man whose pride had been wounded. My father's spell had locked him out, excluded him. Treated him like any other strange monster.

I looked at the eyeball spirit, concerned. "Listen, Mr. Yanqiu. I'm going inside to join spirit with body. I'll probably be in there for a few hours, to talk with Father and Dr. Wei. Do you think you'll be safe out here until I can come back?"

The eye gave me a shrewd look. "You won't come back," he said. "Once you're back in your body you won't even be able to see me."

I blinked at that. "You don't know," I said. "You don't know that I have yin eyes, do you?"

"Yin eyes? That means you can see spirits, yes?"

"Yes."

With a tiny white hand he scratched his chin, or, where his chin would be if he had a face. "Am I a yin eye?"

"Hm," I said, stalling. "You are... that is, Father does not have yin eyes. But now, you are a spirit, and maybe it depends which eye you were. I do not know whether you are yin."

"Harrumph," he said.

"Do you think you will be safe?" I repeated.

"I can take care of myself," he said, with a scowl in his voice.

I walked to the door. My body would be resting inside the infirmary, unconscious, and my father would be there too. Missing an eye, recuperating under his friend's care.

The door opened, and one of Dr. Wei's apprentices rushed out, his braided queue shaking behind him. I saw the door closing behind him, and darted through while it was still open.

The infirmary was active. Dr. Wei, his wife, and three other apprentices were there, tending the needs of a few sick people. Like so many other good things, the infirmary was paid for by Mr. Wong; it was open to anyone who paid dues to the Ansheng tong. The English-language papers liked to portray the tongs as crime syndicates, but they are so much more than that. Sick people would go untreated, corpses would go unburied, immigrants would find no place to work or live, and ghosts would go unexorcised, were it not for Mr. Wong's philanthropy.

I found my body resting in a cot on the second floor of Dr. Wei's infirmary. I approached my body. Her lips were parted, and I could hear her breath dragging in and out. Without hun, the higher soul, the body's breath would be shallow; it would generate less and less qi, or life force.

I had gone out of body before, but never for so long. My body looked so young. So innocent. The face I saw was almost a child's, untouched by evil, and not the face of the broken-hearted widow. My mouth seemed limp, my cheeks sallow in the infirmary's lamplight. Bare of my usual expressions, silly or caustic, my moon-shaped face looked bland as tofu. Stretched out on the cot, my body seemed small and fragile.

The best weapons seem small and fragile. And I hadn't forgotten about Mr. Liu. I knew my skin would be marked where he had cut me, and I was going to use every weapon at my disposal to make him suffer. I was going to teach him that Rocket's wife is no one to be trifled with. He would pay for cutting my skin. He would pay for costing Father his eye.

I glanced to the next cot over, where Father was sleeping. The entire right side of his face was wrapped in bandages, and bandages covered much of his scalp. Graying hair poked out from between the bandages. Under a trimmed, gray-white mustache, the edges of his mouth were turned down, as if in a disapproving frown. Father was so sleekly built that he seemed to leave almost no impression on the cot.

He had never struck me as small before, and yet here he was, resting, wounded. He gave a soft whimper in his sleep. He was in pain. If I knew my father, he had refused to take opium for his pain.

He was in pain, and I hated it. He was suffering for me, because I had fallen into a trap. If I had waited for him, asked permission like an obedient daughter, he would not be suffering now. But I had thought I could make my own decision, and now my father would pay the price for my transgression. My father was half-blind, and it was my fault.

Why had he done it? Why had he sacrificed his eye for me? Conflicting emotions surged through me. I was tempted to feel cherished, but that couldn't be right. There had to be more to it. I was missing something. And I would have no way to learn what it was until he awoke.

The loss of my father's eye was one more debt I owed him, one more debt I could never repay. But there was something I could do.

I was going to find the man responsible for this, and I was going to crush him.