

VOYAGER 15

SNEAK PEEK

HEAVEN TO WUDANG

JOURNEY TO WUDANG: BOOK TWO

KYLIE CHAN

1

Leo and I sat on the mats across from each other in the Fragrant Lotus training room. His dark face was rigid with concentration as he held the chi on his outstretched hands.

I held one hand on his forearm, watching as the energy flowed through him. 'Float it to the other hand.'

He lost it and it snapped back, hitting him in the middle of the chest. He bounced backwards but didn't fall, then he sagged, leaning on the floor. 'This is so damn *hard*.'

'That was a pathetically small amount of chi for anybody to generate, especially an Immortal,' I said. 'You ate meat, didn't you?'

He didn't reply but his face said it all.

'Alcohol too?' I said.

'Not alcohol,' he said.

I felt the answer through his arm. 'Well, I'm glad you've forgiven him.'

He saw what I did and pulled his arm away. 'That is none of your business and you're not supposed to be able to do that.'

I didn't pursue it. 'You have a choice here, Leo. Either give up trying to do energy work; or give up meat, alcohol, and sex. You can't do both, you have to choose one.'

'But I'm a Shen,' he said, softly protesting.

'Shiny new and green as grass,' I said.

He grimaced.

The door flew open and Chang, my secretary, charged in and planted himself in front of us. 'They're taking my job!'

Leo waved one hand and his wheelchair rolled to him. He pulled himself into it. 'You salute your Master when you enter. Where is your respect?'

Chang fell to one knee and saluted me and Leo. 'Lord. Lady.' He rose and gestured impatiently. 'They say I am no longer to serve you, ma'am. Stop them!'

Yi Hao came in, her expression desperate. 'I'm sorry, ma'am, I didn't expect him to react like this, I thought he'd be happy not to have to do it.'

I pulled myself to my feet, and Leo held one arm to steady me. 'Yi Hao was my secretary before you were, Chang. You were there on a temporary basis. I explained this.'

'I thought she couldn't be trusted.'

'That's why we're going down to the Earthly this afternoon. I'll find out, one way or the other, and if she's trustworthy she can resume her post.'

'Let him do it, ma'am,' Yi Hao said. 'I'll do something else.'

That stopped Chang and he stared at her.

'She's a tame demon, she doesn't have free will,' I said. 'If a human or Shen orders her, she must obey. She's seen that you want the job, so she's ceding to you, even though it'll make her miserable.'

'And the fact that you're making such a fuss about this proves that you're not worthy to do it,' Leo said. 'You need to let go of your attachments, and accept circumstances with serenity and grace.' His face went strange. 'Where did that come from?'

'You were just connected to the universe while we were doing chi gong,' I said. 'Well, that's what it feels like anyway. Some of it rubbed off.'

'I think I'll spend more time connected to it then,' Leo said, musing. He glared at Chang. 'Cede the position. You deserve to be moved back in with the dog.'

'I don't want to serve the dog again!' Chang said, desperate. 'I'm better than that...' He stared at us for a long moment, then fell to one knee and lowered his head. 'I will report to Master Lok immediately.' He rose, saluted us, and went out without looking back.

I exhaled a huge breath. 'Finally!'

'What if Lok doesn't want him?' Leo said.

'Then I'll put him to work in the gardens,' I said.

'Oh, good idea.' Leo concentrated, attempted to lift himself out of the wheelchair, and failed. 'Okay, I give up. Meet up with me again after I've been vegetarian for a few days.' He spun his chair to leave.

'Martin will understand,' I said.

'Martin's been trying to make me abstain,' he said without looking back. 'He said the same thing you did.'

'Don't forget you're driving me to Kwun Tong in an hour to meet with the Demon King.'

'Don't go, ma'am,' Yi Hao said. 'Don't see him. He's ...' She searched for the words. 'He will hurt you again.'

'Don't you want to be sure that I can trust you? That you won't turn?' I said.

'Not if it puts you in danger.'

'I won't be in danger, half a dozen Celestials are coming along. We'll be fine.'

She shuddered, and dropped her voice. 'Protect me, ma'am.'

I pulled her into a quick hug. 'Don't worry, I will.'

Leo drove me through Kwun Tong to the meeting place. We had to meet on the Earthly; the Demon King couldn't come to the Celestial Plane and I wouldn't travel to Hell if I could avoid it. The streets were two lanes either way, passing between multi-storey factory buildings with plain concrete sides and tiny windows.

Leo checked the building numbers carefully, and pulled into the correct one. The entrance of the building would easily allow two trucks to pass as they went in. Just inside the ground

floor on the left stood three enormous lifts, large enough to hold the ubiquitous Hong Kong blue lorries.

The ground floor was deserted and the small windows let in rays of grimy sunshine that lit up the floating dust. Leo drove to the edge of the vast space, and parked the car next to the wall. A pile of bricks covered the back wall, strewn haphazardly on the concrete. Paint marked the floor, taking the shape of the objects that had been sprayed with it.

The Tiger and several of the Wudang Mountain staff came into the building through the entrance, knelt to salute me, and waited quietly behind us.

'This is a bad place to meet,' Leo said softly his wheelchair behind me to my right. 'Difficult to defend.'

'He'll stick to the protocol,' I said. 'Not even the Tiger could teleport in, we're safe.'

'I wish I had your confidence.'

The noise of the traffic outside stopped, and the only sound was the breeze whistling through the broken windows of the factory. All ten floors of the building were empty.

Someone shouted at the entrance, and a red and gold palanquin was carried into the building. About twenty young men surrounded it; demons in human form. All of them appeared to be in their early twenties, of all races, tall and muscular and wearing only a skin-tight pair of black bike shorts. They were all impossibly handsome; some carried the sedan chair and others flanked it.

'Is he insulting me?' Leo said.

'He's probably insulting both of us,' I said.

The sedan chair stopped and the Demon King stepped out in Celestial Form. His perfectly white, strikingly beautiful face was surrounded by a huge mane of red hair that stood up and then fell down his back past his waist. His scaled armour and boots were red and gold.

The Tiger summoned an outdoor table for me, and I stepped forward to talk to the Demon King. He saluted me and I saluted back, then I gestured for him to sit. He bowed slightly and gestured for me to sit first.

I had an uncomfortable feeling of *déjà vu* and wished that John was doing this. Now that I was clear of the demon essence, I felt the King's dark nature even more intensely. It was sinister and charismatic, and I just wanted this done and out.

I sat at the table, and my staff repositioned themselves to the optimal configuration. The King's men also moved to stand behind him, mirroring my own Retainers. The Demon King sat and smiled across the table at me, his face alight with warmth.

'You failed,' I said.

He raised one hand slightly. 'I forgot for a moment it was you; and, as usual, straight to the point. You're alive, Emma, and clear of the demon essence. I didn't fail.'

'If the Xuan Wu Serpent hadn't intervened I would have died.'

He dropped his head slightly and an expression of remorse swept across his face. 'I acknowledge that I caused you a great deal of suffering and that you nearly died.' He raised his head and saluted me again. 'I apologize most sincerely for my misjudgement, madam.'

'You owe me one, George.'

He waved one hand to indicate the demons behind him. 'These are a gift to make up for it. Enjoy them until your man comes back, then dispose of them.'

I glanced around at the handsome young men. 'I think you underestimate me, Wong Mo.'

He shrugged. 'Okay. Worth a shot. Come and live with me, and you can have as many of these as you like.' He leaned over the table and grinned. 'Three, four at once, they're remarkable. You should try, how about I send you one or two, just for a sample?'

'Give it up,' I said.

He sighed theatrically, his shoulders moving with the movement. 'Guess I'll just have to give them to the Mothers, then. That's what they were originally bred for, I have to keep making them, they don't last long.'

I inhaled sharply. 'I'll take them then.'

He waved me down. 'No, no, if you're not going to use them as sex toys then don't bother. That's all they're good for, they can't even speak.'

'I'll still take them.'

He shrugged again. 'Suit yourself.' He waved the young men forward. 'Serve the Dark Lady.'

The young men moved mechanically to stand behind my staff, seemingly unfazed by their fate.

'Will you still bring me Kitty Kwok?' he said. 'She needs to be stopped, and she's human. I can't do it.'

I nodded once. 'We made a deal. You cleared the essence from me; I agreed to bring her to you. You will have her.'

'Is there anything else I can do to atone for it, Emma?' he said, his face still warm and full of affection.

'Yi Hao, Er Hao.' I waved my two demon servants forward without looking behind me. 'These are my demons from One Two Two's Nest. I want you to tell me if they are the original demons, or copies; and if they are programmed to turn. I want your assurance that I am safe with them, because I love them dearly.'

He turned his attention to them, and his face lit up. 'If you can love these two demons then maybe there is room in your heart for one more.'

'You said you'd love me as snake broth,' I said.

He leaned back, and his expression grew wry. 'You'll never let me forget that, will you? It was a spur of the moment thing, Emma, it was only competitive bullshit. You know I was just talking out of my ass.'

'Will you check my demons for me?'

'I will.' He waved them closer. 'Come here, little ones, I will not harm you.'

'Or hurt them,' I said.

He nodded acquiescence. 'Of course.' He waved to them again and they sidled towards him. 'I hear you were willing to sacrifice the Tiger's wives – one of whom is your own best friend – for these two tiny demons.'

'The wives had the whole Tiger's army defending them. All these demons had was me,' I said. 'Any creature that chooses to seek humanity and attain the Tao is worthy of protection.'

'You need to concentrate on the bigger picture, sweetie. Ah Wu would have protected the humans before any demon.' He gestured towards the demons. 'Kneel.' They hesitated, and

he spoke more brusquely. 'Down!' Yi Hao approached and knelt before him. He put one hand on the side of her head and concentrated, and she remained rigid with fear as he studied her. 'Demons are demons and they don't have a real life at all. Even if they choose to turn and pursue the Way, they're not worth anything.' He snapped back, then waved Er Hao forward. She knelt and he touched her head as well, then released her. 'They're not copies. They're nothing special. No programming.' He glanced up at me. 'How were you identifying the copies, if these ones were suspect?'

'Touch them loaded with shen energy...' I hesitated. Had I told him too much?

'Don't worry, Emma, I don't have access to shen energy. You can tell me,' he said.

'Touch them loaded with shen energy and you get a similar effect to a Shen touching them without protecting them. They go black.'

'And these little ones go black in response to shen energy as well?' the King said, turning his attention back to Yi Hao.

'They do.'

'They shouldn't do that.' He studied the demons. 'They are probably the result of some of Simon's breeding experiments before his Mother was destroyed. Or...' He leaned hungrily towards them. 'Maybe they're the spawn of that Mother he made himself.' He grinned at me. 'The one he made from your friend.' He put his hands on his knees. 'I would love to take these two and tear them apart and see what's inside. They're fascinating.'

Yi Hao and Er Hao snapped to their feet and scurried to hide behind me.

'Don't worry,' I said, putting my hands behind me to touch them without looking away from the King. 'I won't let him hurt you.'

'We trust you, ma'am,' Yi Hao said, but her voice quavered with fear.

'Can I trust them?' I said. 'You said they were probably specially bred by One Two Two. Are they agents for Kitty or the Death Mother? Are they spies?'

'They are tame demons, and they are yours. They have been tamed with the Fire Essence Pill and cannot turn on you. You can trust them.'

'Go back to the others,' I said, and they ran back to my group. 'Tell the Tiger to summon tikuanyin tea for me.'

'Allow me,' the King said, and the pot and cups of priceless crackled green glaze appeared before us. He poured for both of us and raised his cup. 'Warn the Celestial about the demons those two have created, that are programmed to explode. I never thought I'd see the like again, and here they are. So wrong. Probably just a small part of their arsenal, Emma, be very careful. They may have copies that are even undetectable with shen.'

'How badly do you want the Death Mother and Kitty taken down?' I said.

He carefully replaced his cup on the table. 'Badly enough to enlist your help. Particularly Kitty, she is an unknown quantity; I've never seen anyone do what she's done – she's well on the way to some sort of twisted Immortality. She can survive in Hell unassisted, but she's still human enough that I can't break my vow to Ah Wu and deal with her myself.' He lifted his tea cup again and studied it. 'To be honest she scares me. I think she has designs on my throne.' He gazed at me over the rim of the cup. 'She has links with the other Centres; being human, she has no limitations on her travel. She helped Six make those hybrid stone elementals using Western stones.'

'Will you assist the forces of Heaven to find and stop them?'

His blood-coloured eyes were intense over the rim of the cup. 'Are you speaking as a representative of the Celestial here? A simple ordinary human female, mortal, un-Raised, and only holding your title in a temporary capacity?'

I raised my tea cup. 'That I am, Wong Mo.'

He took a swig from his cup. 'You're doing it again.'

I sipped my own tea; perfectly normal tikuan Yin. 'Thank you.'

'I will by needs have to walk a very fine line, Dark Lady. Assist you too much and I will appear weak to my subjects; they will see me as a puppet of the Celestial and turn on me. If I do not assist you enough, these two bitches may not be taken down, and they could threaten my throne.' He placed the tea cup on the table and turned it in his manicured fingers. 'One of the most delicate dances I have ever performed.'

'In this case we share a common goal,' I said. 'I don't want to see either of them on your throne either.'

He put his hands on either side of the tea cup and inhaled deeply, throwing his head back and closing his eyes. 'Oh, but I would so like to see you on my side.' He opened his eyes and they burned into me. 'Even without the demon essence, you are so dark and powerful and destructive – so attractive and intriguing. No wonder Ah Wu found you irresistible; you appeal to both his demonic and Celestial sides.'

'You could tell me what I am as a show of good faith,' I said.

'I could,' he said. 'But I already cleared you of demon essence. I think that's enough for now. I have your word.' He picked up his tea cup and drank again. 'You have the phone. If I get any leads I'll send you a text or something. Right now I think Kitty's on the Earthly overseas, and the Death Mother is in south east Asia somewhere, like Laos or Vietnam. You're still weak anyway, Emma, rest and send in agents, and we'll both see what we can turn up on the intelligence side.'

He disappeared. I rose and turned back to our group, and the table also disappeared.

I sighed and sagged. 'Now what am I going to do with these?'

'Start a massage parlour for the Hong Kong ladies that pop across the border on the weekend to have their nails done. You'd make a fortune,' Leo said.

'Liu,' I said loudly. 'Find something for these demons to do, will you?'

'Sure thing, Emma. We'll use them for binding practise until they expire.'

I studied one of the young men carefully; Liu was right. The demon was so tiny that he would last a maximum of six weeks; and from the blank look in his eyes, he wasn't even aware enough to care.

The next morning we went shopping together in Pacific Place; some things just couldn't be bought in Heaven, designer shoes among them. Simone told stories about school as we drove, seemingly uncaring as to whether anyone was listening.

'And so I told her, that there's only one vampire left in the world, and he's a Retainer of the House of the North living in a graveyard in London,' she said. 'You should use the disabled space, Leo, you have the right. Use the label.'

'I'm not disabled,' Leo said, turning the car off in the Pacific Place car park.

Simone continued talking as we got out of the car. 'So she said, "is he hot?" and I said, if you like your guys short, skinny, and old.'

'What did she say?' I said.

'She said, "but vampires are gorgeous". I told her, never have been, and the last one left looks like a ferret.'

'He doesn't look like a ferret!' I said, then stopped. 'Okay, maybe he does.'

'You are being rude to poor Franklin behind his back,' Leo said as the wheelchair floated out of the boot of the car and unfolded itself.

'She's going to London to have a look,' Simone said.

'Isn't that too far from her Centre?' Leo said as he floated to sit in the chair, then wheeled it next to us.

'Nah, she's one of the Tiger's kids, she'll go with her dad on the next wife trip,' Simone said. 'So I have to warn Franklin, here comes another one, be ready with the girl repellent.'

'It would be better if you just didn't tell people about him,' I said as we walked out towards the shopping centre.

'He asked me to,' she said. 'He loves blowing their romantic brainless little notions out of the water. He says it's the most fun he's had since he swore off, and that's more than two hundred years.'

'He's a vegetarian vampire,' I said with amusement.

'And he's not into girls,' Simone said.

'Well, not so much as not into girls as not into anything,' I said. 'He's just asexual, Simone, he isn't interested at all. Most of them were like that, the "sexy vampire" thing is just the mythology growing around them.'

'That explains why he has no looks, charm, or charisma,' Simone said.

'Not even any gay sparkle,' Leo said.

'Gay sparkle?' I said with disbelief.

'Gayer than me, and that's saying a lot,' Leo said.

'We are evil,' I said.

'No,' Simone said. Her face went slack and her eyes turned inwards, then she took Leo's and my hands. 'That's evil.'

She shared what she was seeing with her touch. Somewhere up ahead and below us in a maintenance area of the shopping centre, there were two large forces facing off, with a third entity standing panic-stricken nearby. One force was dark and cold; one was demonic; and the third seemed to be human and scared out of its wits.

We dropped our hands and ran towards it. Whatever was happening, the human was in peril.

There was a stairwell to our left halfway along the underground corridor that the car park shared with the train station for entrance into the shopping mall. The stairs led up to ground level; the standoff was below us.

We went down the stairs, Leo making his chair float above them. At the bottom there was a door, and a grimy mop and bucket leaning against the wall. The landing smelt of stale cigarettes and urine.

Simone pulled at the door; it was locked. She raised both hands with palms towards the door and I put one hand on her arm. 'If you can unlock it without blowing it off its hinges, we will have the element of surprise.'

She put one hand over the lock and the door opened. 'Blowing it off its hinges works both as a surprise and a warning.'

The Shen we'd sensed above were facing off in a corridor on the other side of the door, with plain concrete walls and floor and bare white-painted pipes through the ceiling. At the end of the corridor, and facing towards us, was a young European of about sixteen. He was the same height as Michael with sandy brown hair and didn't appear anything special. An older European man stood behind him, taller and slimmer with the same colour hair – probably his father. The third person was a young Chinese man, the same height as the young European man and heavily-muscled, standing with his back to us in a long defensive stance.

Older man is human. European kid is a demon type that I've never seen before. The one facing away from us is a half-Shen, seems reptile, may be one of Daddy's, Simone said.

'Stay back,' the Shen said without turning away from the young European. 'Leave now. I will protect you.'

The older man put one hand out. 'There's nothing to protect anybody against. My son won't hurt you. Please, whatever you are, just let us go.'

'I don't want any trouble,' the young man said. 'I won't hurt anyone, I promise.'

I stepped forward to stand next to the Shen. 'Stand down,' I said without looking at him. 'I'm Emma Donahoe, Regent of the Northern Heavens, First Heavenly General. This is Princess Simone Chen and Lord Leo Alexander. We'll handle this demon, you don't need to destroy it.'

The Shen stared at me. 'What the hell are you talking about?'

'I'm not a demon!' the young man shouted, his face fierce with fury. 'I'm not... I'm not...'

His father put his hand on the young man's shoulder and spoke soothingly. 'Don't lose it Tom, deep breaths, you can do it. Hold on, lad, you can't change here, these people know what you are!'

The Shen and I both stepped back; the skin on the young man's face had disappeared.

'Snake Mother,' Leo whispered behind us.

'Can't be,' Simone said. 'The only male Mother-type is the King himself.'

'What the *hell* are you people talking about?' the Shen said, turning to glare at me again.

I raised both hands. 'Okay. You.' I pointed at the older man. 'What's your name?'

'Ben O'Brien,' he said. He pressed his hand harder into Tom's shoulder and the young man's face returned to normal. 'I'm his father, and he won't hurt anybody.'

I raised one hand towards the Shen. 'What's your name?'

'Vincent Pang,' the Shen said. 'Your name is Emma? You know what I am?'

'Yes.'

'Then you probably know more about me than I do.'

'Ben. Do you know what your son is?' I said, turning back to the Europeans.

'I know that his mother was something vicious and powerful, and that we had to get away from her before our son turned into something similar,' Ben said.

'Was she Chinese or European?' I said, noticing Tom's slightly Eurasian features.

'Chinese,' Ben said. 'Do you know what she was? What he is?' His face filled with hope. 'Can you help us?'

'None of them has any idea what they are?' Simone said, incredulous.

'Strange as it sounds, I think that's the case,' I said. 'Tom's half demon, Vincent attacked him because that's his nature, being what he is.'

'What am I?' Vincent said.

'You're half Shen, and probably my half-brother,' Simone said.

He turned to stare at her. 'You can see what I really am?' He took a couple of steps back, and appeared ready to run.

'Don't be ashamed, don't be concerned,' I said quickly. 'Your father – if you share the same father with her – is the most powerful Shen in the Heavens, second only to the Jade Emperor himself.'

'All that stuff is *real*?' he said.

'Have you changed to turtle or snake?' I said.

He hesitated. Admitting to changing to either was huge; it was understandable that he'd prefer not to share.

'Do you change, Vincent?'

He nodded once sharply.

'And you ask me if the Shen are real?'

He sagged against the wall and looked as if he was about to cry. 'I thought I was an experiment or something. I change into this horrible thing, and I have this urge to kill people like him.' He bent and put his head in his hands. 'I'm not a monster at all!'

Simone went to him and pulled him into a fierce hug, and he let go into her shoulder.

I went to Ben and Tom. 'Now, what to do with you two? Tom, when you change, what do you change into?'

'Can we take this somewhere where we can sit, rather than standing around here talking about it?' Simone said. She patted Vincent on the back. 'He's broken down and he's heavy.' She pulled back to look into Vincent's face. 'You have a family now, we can help you. Come with us.'

'Anywhere but the Shang,' I said.

Leo concentrated. 'Coffee shop upstairs at the Conrad is empty.'

'Ask LK Pak to join us, please,' I said. 'Let's go.'

This extract is not final and should not be quoted for review purposes.

Extract is copyright 2010, 2011 Kylie Chan

***Heaven to Wudang* by Kylie Chan, published by Voyager, will be out in June 2011**