

Centuries ago, near the start of the Zhou Dynasty, a group of women ventured into the wilderness and founded their tribe. Tired of the strict patriarchal society, they rebelled against society's rigid expectations of women regarding every matter of life. They were determined to seek a better purpose rather than becoming a simple housewife. At first, the women were outcasted and forced to survive independently. It was tough, but through trial and error, they gained knowledge by watching nature and wildlife. They took up modesty by wearing white veils that covered their face, leaving only their eyes visible. The young maidens swore to celibacy, covering their faces to all men and women outside the tribe. They dedicated themselves to a selfless lifestyle and forbade all other worldly pleasures and vices.

The women had a sustainable livelihood, growing their food and building their own homes. Still, the most critical skill they had learned was medicine. They learned the art of healing by observing nature, living off the land, and using plant and animal-based remedies for sickness or injury. The women did not discriminate and were willing to help any traveler who came to their camp. They also took in orphaned babies, raising them and teaching them their way of life, passing their knowledge through generations. As the years passed, word spread of the tribe and their immense medical knowledge. Many clans and colonies wanted to take advantage of the tribe and use their knowledge for personal gain. The current emperor of Haojing, King Wu, sought the women's help as he had fallen deathly ill. The council was desperate after various cures had been tried and failed. The tribe's Elder and other women headed to the kingdom and miraculously healed the King. In return, King Wu offered the tribe protection, riches, and resources, but it came with a cost. The maidens had to swear to serve only the kingdom and its people. The women were willing to heal any person, but it wasn't their choice in the end; they had been forced into the Kingdom of Zhao, prisoners once again.

The Holy Medicine Tribe lives a tough but peaceful life, attending to the people's needs and staying loyal to the royal family. For thousands of years, the tribe has remained the same,

taking in girls and devoting themselves to medicine and the needs of others until their deaths.

What happens when a young maiden tries to escape her traditions?

Northern China: 857 B.C.E, Zhou Dynasty

The smell of the rich pinewood forest burned my nose; I breathed in the fresh morning air, admiring my surroundings. The Hengshan Mountains are remarkably untouched except for our tribe, a vast forest of greenery and wildlife. I've become accustomed to the scenery through my years in this forest, but at the same time, I craved more. I wondered, *what was behind those mountains?* I sighed, deciding to stop my daydreaming and focus on the task. I hoisted the basket on my back, carrying an extensive array of herbs, fruits, and animal by-products. All of which would be used to make great medicine. Stepping carefully around my environment with my eyes glued to the ground, I began searching for valuables. As I stepped over a decaying log, I noticed a colony of ants marching across the wood. I leaned down close to the ants, studying them for a moment.

"Ah! Black Mountain Ants, Elder Xu Jin will be impressed," I gleam.

I gently set down my woven basket, pulling out some jars to quickly collect as many of the ants as possible. These ants were famous for their vast array of treatments, improving liver health, increasing energy, and prolonging life. Using the palm of my hand, I quickly scooped the ants into the jar, being cautious not to touch the ants for long as they shoot toxins out as a defense mechanism. While not deadly, it wouldn't be a good time either. I continued collecting all the ants until the line had run out. Even with over 100 or so ants, the quantity of powder they'd produce would be negligible. Sealing the jar, I gently set it in the basket with the rest of the herbs and continued.

"It's getting dark soon; Lang Jie doesn't like when I stay out late. Maybe it's time to start heading home," I mumble.

Taking my time and strolling down the beaten path, the sudden smell of ash and ember became apparent. *A fire?* I thought, scanning the skies for any sign of smoke. The forest looked natural, but the sudden smell took me off guard. I glanced around cautiously, and the anomaly I had been looking for stood out. A small patch of trees burnt to a crisp, but strange enough, the surrounding pine stayed in perfect condition. *A controlled burn?* My curiosity got the best of me, and I walked toward the patch of forest. Observing more, I saw some of the trees had been perfectly cut in half, their other pair lying beside them. Slashes on the trees, and upon closer inspection, I noticed blood smears. It looked like a battlefield, but this was far into Zhao territory. *Who could be attacking? Possibly bandits?* Suddenly a hand reached out, gripping my ankle. I screamed, falling to the ground and desperately trying to escape the grasp of whoever.

“Help me..” a hoarse voice spoke.

I managed to calm myself down, following the arm of the person gripping me to see a man. Instantly my instincts kicked in, allowing me to ignore the danger of the situation and assess his condition. The man was pale and had various injuries, from minor scratches to deep wounds; he was bleeding heavily, along with a severe burn from his collarbone across his chest. It was miraculous he was even still alive. His clothes were strange: a white coat, chest bare, and gold embezzling decorating along the collar and buttons; a red cape, matching pants and boots, with similar designs etched into the fabric and leather. His attire was nothing I had ever seen before, but it gave the impression of someone with high status. Lying next to him was a longsword that looked almost glowing, made out of shiny metal. The blade was stained crimson red with dried blood. My theory of some sort of battle taking place here seemed to be correct. I gazed towards the injured man again; I knew he wasn't from our Empire, but I didn't care; I wasn't going to let this man die. Without haste, I collected the things that had fallen out of the basket. I needed to bandage his wounds, but I had no cloth, so I opted for my clothing.

I ripped the fabric at the base of my skirt, composing my *ruqun*. Lifting the man, I tied a makeshift shaft at the most vital injury along his abdomen. I effectively stopped the blood flow

until I could bring him to a safe place to treat his wounds. I paused, thinking over my options for the patient. It was against the rules of our tribe to treat any outsiders since we became a part of the Zhao Empire centuries ago. Not to mention, bringing a man to a tribe of maidens would certainly not go over well with the Elders. However, I knew of an abandoned mill near the mountain's base close to the river, so it would have to do. The night was closing in; *I better hurry to bring him indoors before the royal night patrols came around.* The man was quite muscular, requiring me to use all my might to lift him. I carried him over my back, moving my basket of herbs in front of me. I also picked up his sword, assuming he would want his weapon back. Luckily, the mill was close by.

The journey was short, and we made it after stopping to rest just a few times. I set the man down on the floor. The conditions weren't ideal, but such luxuries weren't an option in life or death. Carefully I removed his clothes to get a better look at his injuries. I had no idea how old these wounds were, but I applied my basic knowledge. Standing up, I looked around the mill for a pot, going outside to the river to collect some spring water. The first thing about wounds is you always need to clean them first. I leaned down near the river bank's edge, scooping up a hefty amount of water and going back inside the mill. I sat down next to the stranger, ripping off the fabric of the sleeve of my robe; I soaked it in water and applied the cool water to the affected areas. There were two main areas of concern, his abdomen wound and chest burn. Once I cleaned all his injuries, I looked in my basket. Most remedies require a few days of preparation, but I don't have any, so I'd have to work with my limited resources. Scraping together some herbs and natural resources, I swiftly put together an ointment to help combat infection and soothe his wounds. It isn't the best work I've done, but with a lack of tools, it will have to do. I start applying the garlic paste to all the open wounds, even the minor ones. Then using more of my makeshift cloth from my clothes, I begin wrapping up the wounds so they don't get exposed to the open air and can heal. For the burns, I don't have anything on hand; the most I can do is wrap it up for now. I would have to return another time with better materials. I moved to stand,

collecting my things and setting them down on a wooden table. I'll need to go into town to get some supplies to treat his injuries better. I let out a yawn; it was late, and the moon shining through the thick canopy outside signaled my return to the tribe before the elders noticed.

The next day I returned to the mill, basket in hand, with a fresh set of remedies to treat his wounds. Lightly humming as I walked down the path, I soon arrived at the mill, but a blade was the first thing that met my eyes. Screeching, I dropped my basket of materials on the floor and raised my hands above my head.

"Don't hurt me!" I quickly stammered out.

The man I had just saved the night before was on the other side of the blade. His dark eyes pierced right into my soul, and even in his injured state, he kept a fighting stance. The blade glistened in the morning sun, still soaked in strangers' blood. The man clutched his stomach, but his eyes didn't dare falter from mine. I could get a better look at his appearance in the morning light. His skin was tanned, and he had long dark hair, his side bangs unkept, and blood tangled in his strands. He had sharp features, thin monolid eyes, and an unwavering, brooding expression. I gazed over him, seeing that blood had soaked through the cloth; he needed his bandages changed.

"I'm a doctor! I'm the one who saved you last night. Please, let me clean your wounds," I said.

My claim eased the man a little as he lowered his guard. Cautiously, he sheathed his sword, moving back away from me. I urgently ordered him to lie in the makeshift hay bed I had prepared just the night before. I then began to do my work, using the water from yesterday and the new cloth I had bought to clean his wounds and then rewrap his bandages. The man stayed silent, but his eyes glued on me, evidently still eyeing me as a threat. He studied me carefully, observing everything from how my hands worked while treating him to the white cloth veil tied

around my head. His hand would cautiously move up, attempting to pull the material away from my face, but I jumped back.

“You mustn’t do that!” I barked, shooting him a warning look. Who did he think he was?

The man just laughed, obviously amused by the whole situation. When he spoke up, he had a relaxed smile on his face. “Tell me, mortal, what is the location in this realm?”

I eyed him suspiciously. It was the first time I heard him speak, and his vocabulary was quite strange. Hesitantly, I answered: “This is the Kingdom of Zhao. Now answer me this, who are you?” I felt I had earned the question after saving his life.

“Me? Well, you’re looking at the one and only Dragon King, Water Deity of the Heavenly Realm.”

I stared at him, a shocked expression on my face. The Heavenly Realm? The same realm which the gods, goddesses, deities, and immortals ruled? It seemed impossible; what was a god like him doing in the Human realm?

“Hm.. you must have really hit your head, didn’t you?” I gave a mischievous grin,

The teasing caused the stranger to get an annoyed look on his face. Suddenly, the water in my pot started shaking and shot out in one big water spout, entirely soaking me. I screamed, looking over at the clay container and then at the man in shock. He had a proud smile on his smile.

“As I said, Dragon King. It is unfortunate to end up among such mortals... but I had no choice when the Demon Princess was out for blood. I’m shocked she left me alive when I was in such a weakened state. Though, I do believe her chase isn’t over.”

I stare at the man, my jaw gaping open. What heavenly affairs had I stumbled into? It seemed I was way over my head. I moved my hand over and pinched myself, convinced I was in some hallucination or dream, but this was reality. Then right on cue, the ground below us started shaking, a deep rumbling being heard. Stumbling on my feet, I moved to stand and raced outside. The forest was violently shaking, the ground ripping apart at its seams and

spreading apart. In horror, I watched as a thick black smoke emerged from the ground. Slowly a creature would slither up to the surface, 30 feet in length. A monstrous-looking python snake would appear, facing the hat and bearing its sharp fangs, an eerily glow in its eyes. The Dragon God would stumble out of the hut behind me, an irritated expression on his face.

“Great, a *Bashe*, just what I needed..” he sighed.

The terror spread on my face as I gazed at this titan of a monster, feeling star-struck.

Just what had I gotten myself into?