

THE TALE OF TELSHARU

BOOK ONE OF THE
TALES OF THE SEVENTH EMPIRE



—PREVIEW—
(THE FIRST 13 CHAPTERS)

VALERIE
MECHLING & SAMUEL
STUBBS

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BY
VALERIE MECHLING
& SAMUEL STUBBS

Inquisitive
Books

an imprint of InquisitiveDesign, LLC

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(Preview—the First 13 Chapters and other material)

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TALES OF THE SEVENTH EMPIRE

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Inquisitive Books
Published by InquisitiveDesign, LLC
Tempe AZ 85282, USA

www.inquisitiveDesign.com

Cover Design by Sarah Anderson, ~sarahndipities~ (sarahndipities.blogspot.com)

Book Design by S. Todd Stubbs, InquisitiveDesign (inquisitivedesign.com)

ISBN: 978-0-9834006-0-8 (Hardcover)
ISBN: 978-0-9834006-1-5 (Paperback)
ISBN: 978-0-9834006-2-2 (eBook—ePub)
ISBN: 978-0-9834006-3-9 (eBook—Kindle)

Based on the First Edition—Second Printing, September 2011

Printed in the United States of America
LightningSource, Inc., La Vergne, Tennessee USA

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Ashley Stubbs
Wife, mother, friend.
Without whom this book would not be.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing is said to be a solitary art. With two of us behind the wheel, we have already bent that axiom. Of course, the solitary nature of writing always vanishes as soon as it moves into the work of publishing. We have been fortunate to work with a number of extraordinary people during this journey, whom we would be remiss not to take the opportunity to acknowledge here.

First and foremost, we would like to thank our editor, S. Todd Stubbs, who believed in us before we entirely believed in ourselves. His dedication to our work has been tireless, and we are ever grateful for his vision and enthusiasm.

High praise is due to our cover artist, Sarah Anderson, who has created a masterful interpretation of our story. We feel very lucky to have worked so closely with such a talented artist.

A heartfelt thank-you goes out to our beta readers, a group of people who offered their enthusiasm, their criticism, and their suggestions that have helped make this book what it is today. Amanda Carroll, who also took our wonderful author photos, Michael Page, Chris and Allison Peterson, Joshua Rowley, Scott Sackett, Anthony Morris, and Joy Stubbs. We would especially like to thank Whitnee Page, who went above and beyond in her efforts to strengthen and fine-tune our work.

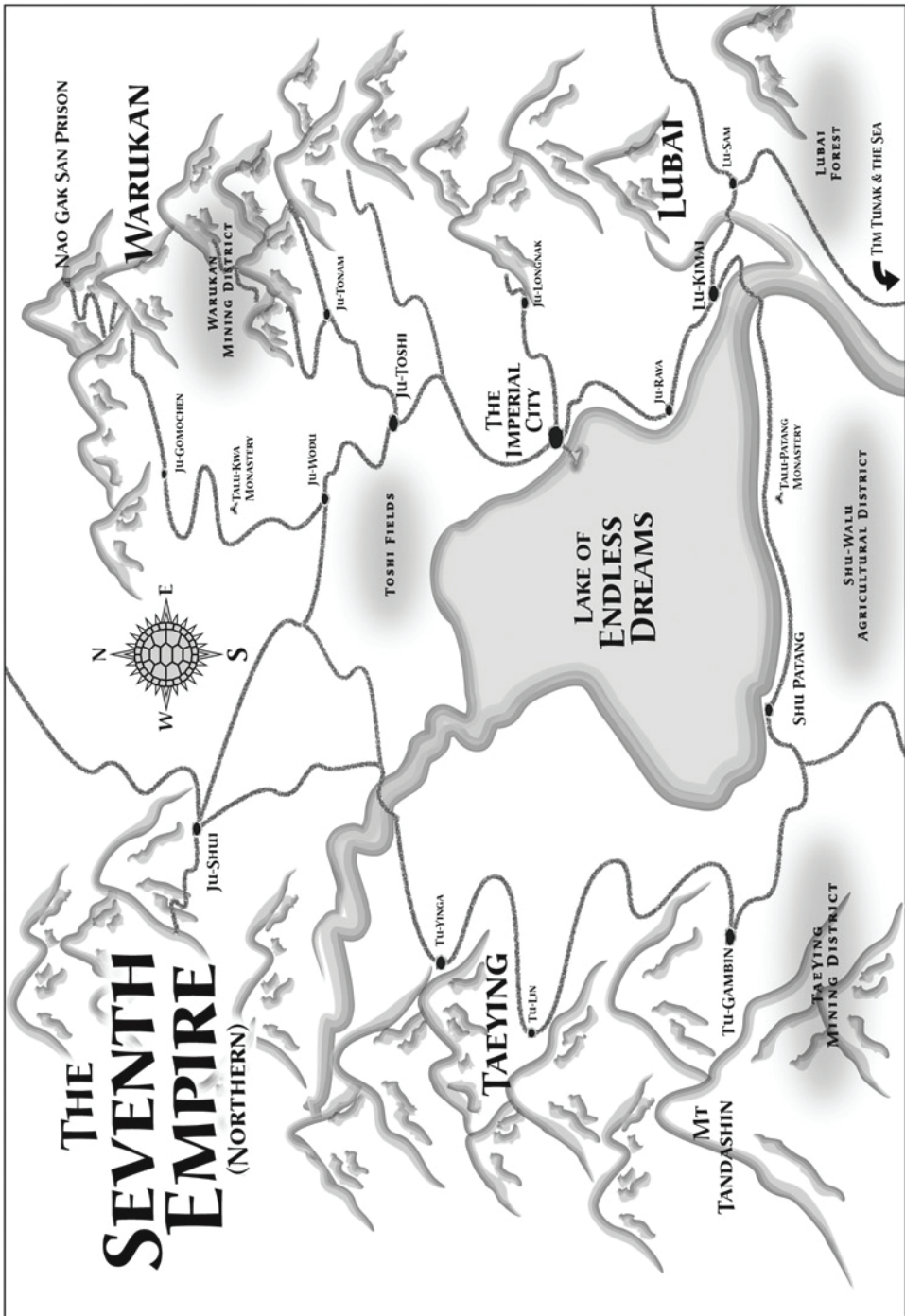
To our families, we extend much love and appreciation, for the never-ending support and encouragement they have offered as we have persisted with this dream of ours.

Lastly, we would like to express our immeasurable gratitude to Ashley Stubbs, to whom this book is dedicated. To one of us, a beloved wife, to the other a dear friend, but to both of us she has been a sounding board, a voice of reason and inspiration, and our very first fan. She has been endlessly patient, and our stories would not be nearly as good without her.

CONTENTS

(Chapters and sections removed from this excerpt have been grayed-out.)

Acknowledgments	vi	Chapter 23	162
Contents	vii	Chapter 24	166
Maps		Chapter 25	171
The Seventh Empire (North)	viii	Chapter 26	181
The Imperial City	ix	Chapter 27	188
Cast of Characters	ix	Chapter 28	192
Excerpt from Hanu Zan (poem)	x	Chapter 29	200
		Chapter 30	205
Prologue	1	Chapter 31	213
Chapter 1	5	Chapter 32	219
Chapter 2	14	Chapter 33	224
Chapter 3	26	Chapter 34	237
Chapter 4	38	Chapter 35	243
Chapter 5	42	Chapter 36	252
Chapter 6	49	Chapter 37	261
Chapter 7	60	Chapter 38	264
Chapter 8	63	Chapter 39	269
Chapter 9	69	Chapter 40	278
Chapter 10	74	Chapter 41	285
Chapter 11	85	Chapter 42	294
Chapter 12	89	Chapter 43	309
Chapter 13	92	Chapter 44	314
Chapter 14	100	Chapter 45	321
Chapter 15	104	Chapter 46	330
Chapter 16	113	Chapter 47	337
Chapter 17	116	Epilogue	340
Chapter 18	122		
Chapter 19	129	Appendices	
Chapter 20	138	A: Pronunciation	342
Chapter 21	152	B: Characters	343
Chapter 22	156	C: Glossary	346



CAST OF CHARACTERS

Telsharu: (tel-SHAH-roo)

Traitor to the Seventh Empire and the only known apprentice to the legendary hero Hanu Zan.

Daryun: (DAR-yoon)

A formerly houseless, wandering swordsman.

Aisina: (eye-SEE-nah)

Daryun's wife. The daughter of a spice merchant.

Kamgue: (KAHM-gway)

The Khudang-yun, or "divinely-chosen one," emperor of the Seventh Empire.

ShianMai: (she-AHN-my)

The fiercely loyal youngest daughter of the Emperor Kamgue.

Xansul: (HSHAHN-sool)

Popular scion of the noble house of Long.

*Tim-Tunak is a new country
Hard-won by most devoted toils.
Water Hyacinth in turmoil,
Hero grows weary of the fight.*

*Hard won by most devoted toils
Hero's love claimed by the Khudang-yun.
Hero, grown weary of the fight,
Wanders, nameless, into the unknown.*

*Hero's heart, once claimed by the Khudang-yun
Discovers a gift, a street child.
Nameless, they wander into the unknown
Forbidden paths, Pupil with Master.*

*Discovering this gifted street-child:
Once a blessing, soon a curse.
Delving the mysteries, Pupil betrays Master,
Reluctant Hero returns for protection of all.*

*Once a blessing, now a curse;
To hold back the hordes of the damned
Reluctant Hero, for protection of all
Defends the Loathsome, Hero's one-time friend.*

*To hold back the hordes of the damned,
Master fights Pupil, beloved now scorned;
Defends that loathsome, one-time friend,
Called by the Guardians, which binds.*

*Master fights Pupil, beloved now scorned;
The purity of soul, it blinds.
Called of the Guardians, he binds—
With Pupil's blade, seals the assassin's curse.*

—Excerpt from *Hanu Zan* by Fao Duman

PROLOGUE

It was difficult to remember light, after being entombed by darkness for so long. Light was like a distant visage, like a memory dimly recalled from childhood, until it might be mistaken for a fantasy. Time was as difficult to recall as light. It seemed to flow unnoticed, unchecked around the bottomless hole, which held consciousness barely clinging to sanity.

The darkness possessed its own sort of beauty, he supposed. The darkness had become his companion, of sorts; when one is utterly forsaken by the world, one comes to appreciate the strangest of companions. Mice and other filthy creatures were of little interest to him. Their passing most often earned his indifference, for there was not much he could do about their presence around him. He was far filthier than they; so many of their lives had come and gone while he hung here, rotting. He could feel the restraints, cutting into his skin as sharply as the first day. *How long ago—? No, not worth considering.* The flow of time was impossible to account for, enveloped in this darkness.

In the distance, he heard a familiar set of soft, whispery footsteps. He couldn't stop himself from cringing. Even that slight flex of his muscles brought a spasm of pain, as the chains and other bindings bit into him. A stabbing torment in his chest made him grit his teeth to keep from moaning—with his jaw clamped shut, he was incapable of a scream. The most he could manage was an angry growl. Better to make no sound.

This time the whispery-footed monks did not come down to cause more agony. The steps paused, as though to observe for a moment, then passed on. It was only a matter of that perpetual time before they returned to deliver the promised torture, but he still drank in deep, grateful breaths at the reprieve. At least, as deep as the torment in his chest allowed.

Heavy metal cuffs that were far too small dug into his ankles and wrists. Chains and sturdy straps bound his limbs and torso tightly to the stone wall behind. A helm of sorts kept his head locked in a forward position and prevented him from uttering more than unintelligible murmurs and growls. He could feel the metal protruding from his chest, but diverted his thoughts from that particular agony. Instead, he considered his bondage. There was never any release, never any relaxation, never a hair's breadth of freedom; 'Whisper-Steps' made sure of that. The bonds were checked, double checked, and tightened, again and again. Any normal man would have gone

mad, or died. He had done some of both, but the natural release of madness or death was not available to him.

Besides the sounds, other voices sometimes murmured to him. Voices that did not sound in his ears, but murmured to his soul. They tingled around the edges of the wound in his chest. Not pleasant voices, no. Though he could not distinguish their distant words, these voices hissed with a unique brand of malice. Sometimes he wondered if he were mad after all, and these voices were symptoms. It seemed like they had always been there, murmuring just beyond the range of comprehension.

After 'Whisper-Steps' left, he decided that it was time to try again. He took a deep breath, and reached out with his mind. He strained in the exercise that was becoming familiar to him. Though he did not move a single muscle, his body was tense with his mental effort. He reached into those recesses, reached toward the voices. He attempted to simultaneously concentrate on and ignore the throbbing wound in his chest. The voices seemed strongest there.

It was impossible to judge, but he felt that he grew a little nearer every day. The voices seemed so close, even now. Just beyond his range, they murmured and seethed, and he was sure that they wanted him to hear. He strained further. His body twitched, jarring against his bonds. But he focused, driving his mind a little closer. It hurt as much as his physical bonds did; his mind was bound in ways he barely understood. But still he stretched, fighting against the pain and the fear.

Then—he connected. For a solitary moment, frozen in time, he experienced his first breath of freedom since being chained here.

It lasted only a moment; with that single touch, he had power. Power to change, power to command. It took all the willpower he possessed to hang on for that moment and deliver the order: *FREE ME!*

He broke away, heaving breaths in through his nose. *Had the order registered? Had his control been firm enough?* It had been so long since he had exerted any kind of command—his mental muscles were as abused as the physical ones, and he had no guarantees that his command had worked.

It was impossible to tell how much time passed while he waited to see if anything would happen. If the order had not worked, would his guards still have noticed? *Would it be reported? Would death come for him at last? No, better not to hope for that. Not yet.*

A part of him would welcome death, if it ever did become possible. But the other part craved vengeance. That part was the stronger.

Sound in the distance. Heavy footsteps marched toward him, footsteps that thundered like two trees stomping across the ground. 'Stumpfoot.' He could not suppress the rage that scoured him at this familiar sound. Rage was embedded in him from a lifetime's worth of indignity and frustration and helplessness at the hands of his captors.

'Stumpfoot's' keys rattled in the lock. With that ominous clang, 'Stumpfoot' entered and approached him, like he always did. He was still wrapped in darkness, with no way to tell what would happen. He held himself tightly, to keep from trembling against his bonds.

He felt a touch through the bindings across his chest. He cringed, and the bonds bit him tighter. The touch moved relentlessly, and for a moment the bonds tightened even

further. He drew a pained breath—but then everything was loosening. The bonds across his chest dropped away, and he heard them hit the floor.

He couldn't dare to hope, but even the freedom to breathe easily was intoxicating! He drank in the stale air, letting it fill his lungs to capacity. It had been so long—

A sharp pain seized him—not like the dull pain of the bindings, but instant and all encompassing. It was the wound in his chest. The wound that should have killed him. The wound that left a sword still piercing his heart.

'Stumpfoot' grasped the sword with fingers that even sounded thick. That simple touch of the sword sent waves of agony shooting through him. With a single, demonically strong wrench, 'Stumpfoot' snapped the blade of the sword away, leaving a fragment of steel embedded in his chest.

Indescribable sensations rippled through him. It was no longer simply a physical pain. Pure agony seized his soul—and his mind as well, scathing them in a blaze of heat and raw cold at the same time. He felt his bonds fall away—not just physical fetters, but the true bonds that had held him captive for so long.

He opened his eyes.

It wasn't sight, exactly. Sight had been stolen from him years ago by his hateful master. Sight in its usual sense would never return. But he could see nonetheless—or perhaps *sense* was a better word. He looked out through *the Void*, that space-between-spaces, the ethereal realm that cradles the physical world. The space around him was etched with *Aura*, as though the physical environment were outlined in pale chalk upon the darkness. And yet, with power restored to him, he could “see” far more than what sight had ever provided. He could sense life and health, strength and emotion.

In this way, he could see the man he called 'Stumpfoot': a large soldier in an unfamiliar uniform, who stared at him blankly. The eyes were dull and uninterested, and if he could have put a color to them, he would have guessed gray. 'Stumpfoot' still held the hilt of the broken sword, the tip jagged. But, its counterpart, the shard, could still be felt, rooted in his chest, a broken fragment barely protruding—its other end penetrating his heart. It would only be noticeable if his chest were bare. He would need that shard to remain where it was, for now. *Until vengeance is paid.*

“Give me the sword,” he commanded. His voice croaked, and he nearly coughed. How long had it been since he had spoken? *Not worth considering—*

'Stumpfoot' dully handed over the hilt of the broken sword. He tested the weight of it. It felt familiar in his hand. He reached back and stabbed 'Stumpfoot' through the chest. The soldier crumpled to the floor without a reaction. As viewed in the Void, rich colors spilled from the body, but he took only passing notice of the blood. *Too bad I could not make better use of him*, was his passing thought. *But one such as this is useless to me now.*

The door to the cell stood open; no one had noticed 'Stumpfoot's' subversion. Yet. 'Whisper Steps' would not be far, and more would wait beyond the walls of his imprisonment. He stalked forward, broken sword in hand, drinking in his returning powers. It was almost like being restored to his previous life. *What had he been called then? It was so distant—Telsharu. He had called himself Telsharu. “Heart of the Warrior” in the old tongue—still a worthy name.*

Telsharu moved forward through the cell door.

* * *

Nao Gak San—the emperor’s prison for the discarded. Some were political prisoners, whom the *Khudang-yun* had banished beyond all forgiveness. Others were traitors, who were given to torture until they broke or died. A few were military prisoners, generals, or assassins the emperor had taken a “liking” to. More than a few of the prisoners were innocent. Their crimes were the guilt of others outside the prison. Regardless, those sent to Nao Gak San were sent to rot, rather than be granted the deliverance of a quick execution.

But even among such renowned company, Telsharu was a special case. *Telsharu the Cursed, they call me now.* None of his fellow prisoners had faced down the emperor himself, the ‘chosen of the Guardians of the Divine Heavens,’ as his title implied. None of those men had faced their former masters in a duel—the great hero Hanu Zan, who had ended the duel by Telsharu’s blindness. Certainly, none of them bore a wound through their hearts—a cursed wound which both maintained Telsharu’s life, and drained his strength.

Telsharu stumbled through the main gates of Nao Gak San. His legs trembled, and he leaned heavily on the broken gates to keep from falling face first into the snow.

So weak! In his prime, Telsharu wouldn’t have broken a sweat manipulating and fighting these soldiers, or even the emperor’s elite assassins. But now he hung, shivering, on the brink of death, forbidden by the cursed shard from passing through those dark gates. Certainly, he still had power. But what was the benefit of all his Awakened powers if he was too weak to swing a sword or throw a punch? Death would be better than uselessness.

No. Death would come later, eventually. Now, there is vengeance to be paid.

The tower of Nao Gak San rose only a few stories into the air, belying the many layers buried into the mountainside—layers of dead guards and screaming prisoners. He could still sense the Aura of blood and violence, even at this distance. The sinister-looking tower had been heavily guarded—inside, and along the outer wall. *So much death, so much waste! But there was not time to turn them to my purpose.*

Telsharu looked over the snowy mountains with sightless eyes. He resented the shivers he could not suppress. His rags provided no warmth, and his Inner Spirit was so weak, it could not warm him. The wound in his chest drained his power and concentration. He would need shelter, and soon. Nao Gak San would hardly provide a refuge, for there were many still living, trapped in the bowels after he had collapsed the staircase. There were enough of the Awakened below; they would surely find an escape. *No, I must press on.*

Once Telsharu had restored his strength and his power, vengeance would be his. *I will face the Khudang-yun again, he thought. And this time, I will triumph!*

CHAPTER 1

Daryun rubbed a brown sarong across the washboard and hummed quietly to himself. It was an old song, from the Taeying region. One did not hear it sung often anymore. All the old songs had gone out of style. It was a tragedy to Daryun that he was the only one who seemed to recognize that fact.

Holding up the sarong for a moment after wringing, Daryun marveled in his own contentment. Just five years ago, he never could have predicted this for himself. For most of his life, he had been a restless, nameless, “houseless” wanderer, with nothing more than his sword and whatever meager meals he earned through temporary labor of the worst sort given to riffraff. The *Lochi*, or the “houseless,” went disrespected everywhere in the Seventh Empire of Divine Heaven, where one’s family connections were everything. To be unclaimed by any house, great or small, was a mark of the greatest shame.

Daryun’s wandering days had come to an abrupt end one day in a small northern town called Ju-Shui, and Daryun was only now finally coming to accept his new, stationary and respectable life.

“I am fairly certain it is clean,” said a melodic voice, “Though your deep study makes me suspect otherwise.”

Daryun smiled. His wife came to take the sarong, and she briskly hung it on the line. He watched her, still somewhat bemused. Jahel Aisina shone like a precious gem in his eyes, though he knew she privately thought herself plain. She was tall, barely a hands’ breadth shorter than he. Her raven-black hair was parted in the center and swept on either side of her face into a neat bun at that nape of her neck. Daryun loved her neck. It was long and graceful. And her eyes! Her luminous green eyes were as deep and mysterious as the southern jungles.

Aisina turned and caught his gaze. She put on a look of sternness generally reserved for students. “It is not polite to stare so, sir.”

Daryun bobbed his head. “Greatest apologies, *Sha-rayang*.” She stifled a giggle. Only the highest ladies of the present Imperial house had rights to be called *Sha-rayang*. “I mistook you for my fair wife.”

She rolled her merry eyes. “Will you be sitting there all day, sir, or are we going to dinner as you promised?”

He rose immediately to his feet. “Let me get dressed, and we shall be on our way.”

Daryun dressed carefully. He knew Aisina treasured their visits to her father’s house, the more so because they were so rare. He arranged his woven sarong carefully around his

legs then donned a loose tan shirt. He picked out his cleanest sandals, and looped the rope to disguise the fraying ends. He retied his hair into a neat tail. Daryun debated for a moment about taking his sword. But carrying a sword in small towns drew unnecessary eyes. And now with a wife and a respectable position, Daryun actually did care about drawing too much attention. Instead, he locked his sword in the trunk at the foot of their sleeping mat. He then turned to his wife.

Aisina was wrapped in a delicately embroidered sari of white. Threads of green and crimson showed trees and red birds with wings extended. The sari wrapped from shoulders to ankles, and she too wore her finest sandals. She had painted her face, but gently, so the paint didn't show, but her cheeks glowed and her eyes twinkled with greater luminosity.

Daryun drew a flower from the air—a single red orchid. With gentle fingers, he tucked it into her bun, just behind her ear. “You are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

She laughed. “Only to you, you old fool.”

“Far too old for you,” he replied. His fingers brushed her cheek.

“You will ruin my paint.”

“The Divine Heavens forbid!”

She pushed him away. “Let's go now, or we never will!”

They crossed their small garden and outlying buildings to the gates. Their property was small, but it was more than many people in similar circumstances had claim to. Outside their protective walls, they entered their neighbor's large fruit orchard. Hand in hand, they walked through the trees, enjoying the cool breeze. Daryun exulted in the feel of her hand—the silky soft skin of her fingers, the smooth calluses of her palm. The smell of fruit was heady in his nostrils. A gentle breeze rustled the branches. A single lock of Aisina's hair pulled free of her bun. With a smile, Daryun tucked it back.

The orchard let into the outskirts of town. As they walked into the town proper, Daryun released Aisina's hand for sake of propriety; though with their unusual status as co-heirs to House Jahel, it was acceptable for them to walk side-by-side. Daryun clasped his hands behind him. It still felt strange to move about without a weapon. Not that it really mattered. Daryun had grown accustomed to the appearance of being dangerous. Normalcy felt strange.

Ju-Shui was a town of moderate size; not so large as many of its southern cousins, but prosperous due to trade between Taeying region to the south and west, and Warukan to the east. The houses of the artisan class were most common here—craftsmen and merchants, bankers and shopkeepers. They had properties similar to Daryun and Aisina's, with protective walls. Within these walls, they built their wooden houses with peaked roofs commonly covered in straw thatch. Even this far north, many houses were built on stilts. Few wanted to risk a bad monsoon season.

On the far outskirts of town, they came to the gate of Jahel House, the home and business headquarters of Jahel Goshunak, Aisina's father. It was easily one of the most prosperous houses in the area. The wall was tall and imposing, painted in bold shades of blue and bronze. The gate was a solid edifice of wood, reinforced with iron bars. The

gate-guard admitted them without question. Daryun proceeded with his wife up the walkway toward the big house. It too was painted boldly in blue, and bore one of the few tile roofs in Ju-Shui. Personally, Daryun found the place rather ostentatious, but knew better than to express such an opinion to his wife or to her father.

Daryun's father-in-law waited for them on the veranda. Jahel Goshunak was a wealthy businessman, and it showed in his dress. He wore a neat white sarong with some light embroidery in dark blue. His sarong and shirt were immaculate, and his sandals were of the finest wood and cloth. He wore a single long chain around his neck; it bore a spice box and a golden key, signs of his office. His very bearing was that of an important man, though he was not of impressive stature. Despite Daryun's greater height, he had never once escaped an encounter with Jahel Goshunak without feeling as though the shorter man looked down upon him.

"Welcome," said Goshunak stiffly, "My house is warmer for the presence of my children."

Daryun offered a short and formal bow, matching Goshunak's formality. "Gladly we greet our honored father and Jahel-*dul*."

Aisina wouldn't stand for the formality. She crossed up the short steps and warmly embraced her father. Daryun glanced around to see if anyone could see this breach, but no eyes were visible. Aisina smiled at her father. "Thank you for inviting us."

Goshunak softened visibly. "You are always welcome in this house," he murmured to his daughter. He looked up to Daryun and said, "Come in, come in, the meal is waiting for us."

The interior of the house showed even more signs of wealth. The wooden floors were finely polished and the sliding panel-walls were of highest quality. Some archways were hung with curtains, with colors of the most expensive dyes. Large hangings of landscapes and calligraphy hung at regular intervals, and they too appeared to be very fine. The air was lightly scented like blossoms.

In the dining room, a low table was already set with fine china as though they were important clients or politicians Goshunak was trying to impress. "Mistress Sunli has outdone herself this evening," he said, naming his head cook, a cousin to Aisina's late mother. "Best be seated, she'll be after my soul if the soup gets cold."

They were soon seated—Daryun directly across from Goshunak, with Aisina along the side between them. Moments later, Mistress Sunli herself came bustling into the room. "Cousin," she said to Aisina, nodding as to an equal. She gave a lesser nod to Daryun and murmured, "Jahel-*sadul*." She turned to Goshunak. "Shall we?"

A few minutes were taken up by the ladling of soup, with compliments from Daryun and Aisina. Fortunately, the soup was good, seasoned with a flavorful *kilitu* spice that sang on Daryun's tongue. It stood to reason that spice would abound in the house of a spice merchant. But no delicacies could outweigh the judgment riding heavy in Goshunak's gaze.

Mistress Sunli returned before Daryun's father-in-law could extend his claws. "Well?" Mistress Sunli asked, "Is everything satisfactory?"

"Your cooking is a constant delight, as flowers after fresh rain," Daryun said,

“Never have I had such soup in all my days.”

“You married quite the flatterer, Cousin,” Mistress Sunli commented. “Were I you, I should lock him away so his tongue could not get him carried away by someone more easily enchanted.”

“But then I could not myself enjoy him,” said Aisina.

Mistress Sunli barked a laugh. “And only you would enjoy one such as he.” She chuckled and shook her head. “I shall bring the next course now. *Jahel-sadul*, I have prepared golden dragon-fish just for you, as I know it is your favorite.”

“I thank you,” Daryun replied with a slight bow.

Mistress Sunli bustled out. Daryun caught Aisina looking at him. “Why do you always have the fish?” she asked, “You know it is never as good as what you are used to.”

Daryun shrugged. “It brings fond memories back to me.”

Their meal was arrayed between them in a collection of bowls and platters. The aroma was mouthwatering. *Jahel House* could not compete with some meals that Daryun had eaten, but those meals were long ago and the scents wafting to him now were far more tempting than his and Aisina’s daily fare. After bowing to one another, the three of them began to eat.

The dragon-fish was slightly old, but not so old as he had feared. It was baked, wrapped in leaves, and covered with a vegetable sauce seasoned with *kilitu* spice. There were sticky sweet buns, full of flavor. And rice, covered in a tangy sauce mixed with other local vegetables. To drink they had fruit juice from the very orchards they had passed through, lightly spiced. Every flavor tingled pleasantly on Daryun’s tongue.

Daryun looked at his wife. Aisina ate delicately, savoring each mouthful. He knew that she loved the spice; growing up in this household, she was accustomed to a rainbow of flavors unusual for the northern provinces. Daryun smiled. It was so like her, to enjoy each taste as though it were new.

“Tell me,” said Goshunak, “For I do not receive enough news from you. Does your *shutao-kai*—your school for fighting—prosper?”

“We are doing quite well,” Aisina replied. “The school continues to grow, with new pupils each month. I take the larger portion of students, the beginners, while Daryun focuses on the more advanced, myself included. It is working out well.”

“So I hear, so I hear,” Goshunak murmured. “Apparently building quite a reputation in town.”

“We certainly strive to do no dishonor to your name.”

Goshunak toyed with his food for a moment, appearing to mull over an idea. “I wanted to speak to you about something, daughter. You may not like it, but I want you to hear me out.”

Daryun sighed internally. *Here it comes*, he thought. Daryun had suspected that Goshunak’s brooding would soon come to fruition. Daryun busied himself with his meal, though it was unlikely he would be spared. Aisina was an unusual woman who did not conform to the social norms, which dictated that women should listen and obey. *Granted, many women would argue that they are in control, despite what the men*

think.

“What is it, Father?”

“I want you to reconsider taking up the spice trade. You know the business, and it would be a waste not to use the training of your youth. You are the rightful heir to my business.”

“I owe much to your house and your name, and I shall always be grateful,” Aisina responded, her voice gentle but firm. “It saddens me that I cannot be of service in this way, but I hope to honor you through my service at the *shutao-kai*.”

“You knew the names of spices before you knew the names of animals or colors! The trade has been part of your life since you were born. It’s in your blood! You cannot continue to turn your back on your true calling.”

“I think of little else but how I can honor the powerful name you have given me. I do this in the way fate has dictated, at our humble *shutao-kai*.”

“You cannot possibly be happy teaching those urchins to kick and punch each other. Surely that is not enough for you.”

Daryun cleared his throat. Goshunak glared at him, but that was to be expected. “We cannot all find success as illustrious spice merchants, honored Father. And there is always a need for teachers of the art of fighting, of *shutao-aman* teachers, particularly teachers as skilled as Aisina.”

“I have no doubt that she is skilled,” Goshunak snapped. “It is her skills that I do not wish to see wasted.”

“I am very happy there, Father. Fate has been very kind with its gifts.”

“I don’t understand how you could do this to me. You do not know what I have dealt with, the scorn I’ve endured, having my daughter marry—”

Daryun inserted the words for him. “—A *lochi*, a wanderer.”

Goshunak’s face was hard. “There is no denying it.”

“Father!” Aisina protested. “They simply do not understand Daryun’s skills. He is an incredible swordsman—”

“I’m sure his skills are great,” Goshunak interrupted, “But that does not negate the fact that you belong in the spice business. I want you to quit wasting your time playing teacher and follow your natural calling.”

You see our whole life together as a waste, Daryun thought, as though speaking to his father-in-law. The words were not needed, for Daryun knew Goshunak’s opinions. *You never intended to let Aisina marry me, but her stubbornness won out.* Goshunak had intended to marry Aisina into a more prosperous house than their own, or perhaps to merge houses to create strength in the field. But Aisina had abandoned everything for the houseless wanderer Daryun. Aisina was the most stubborn woman Daryun had ever met, and neither his nor Goshunak’s arguments had swayed her against this hopeless arrangement. *Not that I regret it,* he thought now to himself. *I am simply unworthy of her.*

He spoke once more to his father-in-law, this time aloud. “It is her desire to build our *shutao-kai* which makes her so invaluable. Her desire to teach far outweighs her desire to market spices. It makes a difference, *Jahel-dul*.”

Aisina spoke up. “You will find another to take up your business, Father. You know there will be a hundred boys at your gate the day you start looking for an apprentice. On the day when you are taken to the Divine Heavens—may it be long in coming—Daryun and I will still try to honor you as Head of Jahel House. In the meantime, I have made my choice, and I beg you to continue to honor it.”

Before Goshunak could offer further argument, Mistress Sunli returned. “You must try this cake,” she declared. She presented three small dishes containing a sponge cake, and a dipper of fruit sauce.

“*Tamay* sauce!” Aisina exclaimed.

Daryun nodded to Mistress Sunli. “We are lucky it’s in season—it will be bad in a few days.”

Aisina glanced at him slyly before saying to Mistress Sunli, “I always know that Daryun will come at least once a year because of this sauce.”

Mistress Sunli chuckled. “Then we must take advantage of his weakness. Eat, eat! You must tell me what you think of it.”

Daryun ate a small bite with relish. *This is worth the visit—even if it means dealing with Goshunak.* “The cake blossoms upon the tongue like the tree that bore its fruit for your table.”

Mistress Sunli struck him lightly on the shoulder, but he could see a smile tugging the corners of her mouth. “Too much flattery is like too much spice. A little goes a long way.” She turned again to Aisina, who was savoring her cake with a smile of ecstasy. “I have heard some talk of your school here in town. At first there were questions, with the merchant-name of Jahel attached, you understand. But now they’re speaking highly of *Shutao-kai* Jahel.”

Aisina did not look at her father, and neither did Sunli. *A little spiteful, cousin?* “It has not been without our fair share of hard work and worry,” said Aisina.

“I know those like old friends I once hated,” Mistress Sunli replied. “Eat well, my dear.”

When Mistress Sunli was gone, Aisina turned directly to her father. “I know that I do not honor you in the way you would wish,” she said humbly, “And of our school. I know it is not the life you would choose for me. But, please, find joy in your heart for *my* joy.”

Goshunak met his daughter’s eyes for a long moment. Misgiving echoed within Daryun. *I wish this were not necessary,* he thought while looking at his wife’s pained expression. *I still do not understand what she sees in me. Yes, she loves the children, and she loves teaching in the shutao-kai. But she does not fool me—if it were not for me, she would still be working in her father’s house. If it were not for me, both of them would be spared this pain. What could she possibly see in me that is worth this?*

“I cannot say that I like your decision,” Goshunak stated. “But I *do* want you to be happy. And who knows? Perhaps one day your *shutao-kai* will bring good fortune to the House of Jahel.”

Aisina half-smiled. “Your wisdom leaves me constantly amazed.”

Not soon enough for Daryun, it was time for them to depart. Goshunak rose and

led them out to the gate. There was almost something like normalcy from Aisina's father in those short steps across the courtyard. She walked first out of the gate. Daryun was about to follow her, when Goshunak put out a hand to stop him.

"Sir?"

Goshunak's face was a study; Daryun could sense the emotions roiling under the calm exterior. "My house has made grave sacrifices," Goshunak murmured. "To make a destitute *lochi*, my heir. I hope that you appreciate—"

"I do, sir. Your benevolence is far beyond what I could ever ask of you."

Suddenly Goshunak's façade crumpled. Daryun watched the sadness bubble to the surface. His father-in-law's face was tortured, full of fear and uncertainty. "Please take care of her. I do not understand why, but she loves you—she trusts you. Please keep her safe, and happy."

His concern puzzled Daryun. "These are the constant feelings of my heart, *Jahel-dul*. My life has little meaning in it without the happiness and safety of your daughter."

Goshunak nodded, and began to reassemble his composure. "I thank you. Though we do not often agree, I hope we can find mutual purpose in this."

Daryun bowed. "Yes. Good evening, *Jahel-dul*."

"Good evening to you—Son."

Aisina's eyes were curious when Daryun caught up to her. But they walked back through the town without speaking. A few of the townspeople nodded as the couple passed by; others went about their business. With the day winding toward evening, most of the villagers were already in their homes, their gates closed for the night. The sun was touching the horizon when Daryun and Aisina passed the edge of Ju-Shui and into the surrounding fruit orchards.

Amid the sheltering trees, Daryun walked closer to his wife. The sun was beginning its final descent, but the breeze was still warm. Daryun marveled again that she had chosen him, that she had given him love and purpose and her own name. Her skin seemed to glow in the evening light. She caught him watching. "What is it?"

Daryun shook his head. "I do not deserve you."

"Let's not have that discussion again. I do not much care for your views."

"I meant only that I am overwhelmed by your beauty and grace. You must admit, you are an overwhelming sight to behold."

"Overwhelming—and terrifying!" she teased, "The horror! How can you bear to look at me? The very sight is too much."

"I can hardly resist looking at you."

She jabbed him lightly in the ribs. "Behave yourself, sir, or I shall have to call my father back to take care of you."

Daryun groaned. "Please, if you have any mercy in your soul, spare me that."

He thought he might have gone too far in his teasing, but she just laughed.

* * *

Late that evening, Daryun slid quietly from the sleeping mat. Aisina was a light sleeper, but Daryun made use of his prodigious skill to sneak away without waking

her. He had many memories of sneaking in utter silence, moving through the Void to mask himself from view. Compared to some of those memories, this quiet exit was nothing. Softly, he slid open the thin wooden door and slipped out into the night.

He stood on the porch for a moment. The moon was well into the sky, three-quarters full and shedding white light upon their courtyard. The night was warm, humid, and very still. No breeze, no rustling branches, even the animals were asleep. It was as if the world itself were holding its breath.

Daryun could feel a stirring through the Void. Daryun considered for a moment. The Void was a vast expanse, everything beyond himself. It was the ethereal emptiness around the physical world. There were always shifts and movements and breezes across the vast emptiness of the Void, but this stirring was different. This was deliberate, sinister. This, he could not ignore.

Reluctantly, Daryun closed his eyes to focus. He reached out through the Void with his mind, spreading his trained awareness through the expanse. The deeper he went, the stronger he could sense the stirrings. They were dark, far darker than anything he had sensed in a long time. Feeling more nervous now, Daryun pressed further, reaching toward the source of the disturbance.

Like a vise, something out there in the Void clamped down on his consciousness. Daryun drew in a startled breath. His vision was suddenly obscured.

Moonlit mountains, covered in snow. Deep into the north, far from any town, with only a cart track to indicate any life is near. A tower is situated against the mountainside. Its edifice stands among the mountains like a watchman, stern and foreboding. A wall encloses the tower, but the guards face the inside.

Nao Gak San. Daryun felt a chill tingle down his spine at the sight of the emperor's prison for the forsaken; for those who, in his judgment, deserved worse than death.

Something rumbled beneath the many layers the prison held below the surface of the world. The tower shook a little; snow tumbled from the peaked roof. Dust fell from the stones. The guards exchanged worried glances, and officers called out the alarm.

The tower's main entrance burst open. Shattered pieces of wood and metal flew in all directions, and half a dozen men were pierced by the flying shards. They fell with screams that echoed against the wall and the surrounding mountains. Through the remains of the door, layers of shattered defenses lay in ruin, destroyed by an inhuman onslaught.

The figure of a man literally flew through the debris, skimming over the ground until he was past the first ring of guards. Men were shouting, men were screaming, men were dying. The Void trembled.

The man fought, and other men died. A wound in his chest bled, but it was impossible to distinguish his blood from the blood of so many victims that stained his rags. He fought with a broken sword, but the jagged tip wounded his foes more than a whole blade would have. He spun and kicked and sliced with unnatural speed, and his blows fell with a strength that belied that terrible wound.

Daryun watched, horrified, but held immobile by the strength of the vision. He watched as all the guards of Nao Gak San died, watched as their blood stained the snow. He saw the strength of their enemy, how unstoppable was the force that had

been unleashed.

After the last guard fell, the warrior turned. He approached the gate and paused before it. He drew back one fist, and with the strength of the Stone Hand, he punched. The wood shattered. He stumbled through, and nearly fell into the snow. He leaned on what was left of the gate, one hand pressed to his heaving chest. After a moment, he raised his eyes to the sky—blind, pure white eyes that burned with a terrible hatred.

Free, at long last!

Daryun gasped again, and finally banished his view of the Void from his consciousness. But the vision continued to burn behind his eyelids. There was no question in his mind. Telsharu the Cursed was loose upon the world once more. Daryun breathed deeply—in through his nose, out through his mouth—trying to calm a heart that raced wildly against his will. Those sightless eyes burned against the back of his eyelids—that face of shadow and evil.

Children for generations had been told tales of wicked Telsharu to frighten them into obedience. Even adults felt a thrill of fear at the sound of his name. Nao Gak San was supposed to hold the Cursed One for all time. But somehow, the terrible assassin was free, and no one—*no one!*—was free of danger.

Daryun had promised to protect Aisina. But to *stay* and to *protect* did not necessarily mean the same thing, in this case. *She will never forgive me for leaving her*, he thought, *But, I will never forgive myself if she comes to harm. I must do my part. I was permitted to see this for a reason. I must stand against the Cursed One. Because if I don't, if he is allowed to roam free—*

Daryun remained on the porch long into the night, his eyes distant as he pondered. Meanwhile, the stirrings in the Void continued.

CHAPTER 2

The House of Yang sparkled in the night. The entire complex glowed far brighter than any of the surrounding residences, almost as if the house were on fire. It lit up the entire Blessings District! The House of Yang had outdone themselves, as usual. Most of the *Yu-gaochi*—the ‘great houses’—spent far too much time, effort, and wealth simply trying to impress each other. But, that was the way of the great houses.

Xansul walked to the front entrance with a brisk step, brandishing the beautifully inscribed invitation and proceeding through the entryway without waiting for it to be checked. He scanned the open courtyard with a bemused eye.

The eaves and columns had been draped with silk bunting in red and gold. Dragons were painted on cloth banners that hung between the eaves. The assembled nobles and courtiers milled around the courtyard. Fires burned in pits standing at each corner of the courtyard, and lanterns were strung between the house and the wall making a bright fan of light. The elite of the *Yu-gaochi*, the ‘great houses,’ talked among themselves. From what Xansul could hear, they spoke mainly of the elaborate decor—if it were this grand on the outside, there was no telling how much the House of Yang had invested inside where the actual party would take place. Xansul chuckled under his breath.

One of the members of Taejun house glanced over at him with a raised brow. Xansul gave him a broad smile. “Good evening, Suosem. Is it not a beautiful night for a party?”

Taejun Suosem smirked. “Is that Xansul who is speaking? For Xansul, is not every night good for a party?”

“Quite so! It is a miserable night indeed that is not spent with friends, drink, and song.”

A curled ram’s horn trumpeted, and the doors were thrown open. The first son of the great house of Yang, Yang Xomin stepped out and spread his arms to welcome them. “Friends! The humble House of Yang thanks you for celebrating with us the anniversary of our most revered father’s birth, and invites you inside. Please, enter.”

With a certain amount of decorum, the crowd surged forward. Xansul was among the first. He lightly trod the steps, but veered right.

“Yang-*sadul*,” he greeted Xomin, “Glorious to see you this evening, old friend.”

Yang Xomin’s nod to Xansul was slight, and his eyes were disdainful. “My

father appreciates your attendance this evening, Long-sar.” He gestured to the door, where the others were filing in. “I bid you, join us inside.”

“And miss this chance to irritate you?” Xansul threw a hand to his breast. “Why, it is as if you do not know me at all, after our many years together.”

Yang Xomin sighed now. Xansul’s house was too powerful for Xomin to insult him directly, but Xansul knew how his levity irked the heir to Yang House. “I have many of my father’s guests to attend to, Long-sar. Please excuse me.”

“Of course.”

But as Yang Xomin turned to walk inside, Xansul stayed close by his side. “I did so want to compliment you on the taste of the decor,” Xansul said. “Although, you and I should have a private word or two about your personal choice of clothing. Black? You, sir, should simply never wear black.”

“What’s wrong with black?” Xomin retorted before he could stop himself.

“*Everything!*” Xansul threw up his hands, startling Xomin with his theatrics. “Why, just, *everything!* It’s completely wrong for your complexion, dear fellow, it washes you out entirely. You should go with something that will make you stand out, like blue. Yes, blue, I think.” Xomin sighed in frustration and defeat, and ushered his guest inside.

Within was a great hall, whose high roof was held up by scarlet-painted columns. A great number of lanterns hung from strings and poles, giving the evening a false, cheery brightness. More of the scarlet-and-gold banners had been draped from the columns and the thin wooden walls. Half the room had been littered with low tables. Many of the gathered house members were already seated on elegantly embroidered cushions on the wooden floor, sipping from small cups and talking with their neighbors.

“How festive!” Xansul exclaimed. “Where is your most honored father? I simply must give him my good wishes!” Beside him, Yang Xomin sighed again.

At the center of the largest cluster reclined the focus of the party’s attention: Xomin’s father and the Head of their house, the ancient Yang Kalabei. Seizing Yang Xomin’s arm, Xansul led the way straight to the old man’s table. On the way, Xansul swept past several hangers-on of lesser houses and paid no heed to their disapproval. Upon reaching the table, Xansul fluttered an extravagant and outlandish bow.

“Most honored and revered Yang-*dul!* It is with deepest pleasure and greatest honor that I present to you the fond wishes of the House of Long upon this anniversary.”

Xansul gestured behind him, and one of his house attendants came scurrying up. He bowed deeply and then laid his burden before the Yang-*dul*: a flat white box tied with a piece of yellow ribbon. Old Yang Kalabei looked at the box with a dubious gaze.

“Go on,” Xansul urged, “You simply must open it!”

Yang Kalabei extended his trembling hand. His son Xomin stepped forward to assist. In a moment, they had the box open. Xomin held up the gift, and his frown deepened. “It’s a...”

“It’s a *robe*, honored sir! And a very fine one, too! This robe is made of silk from

the Tim-Tunak region, and the embroidery was hand-stitched by seamstresses in Ju-Vahalan. The water hyacinth pattern was inspired by the epic poem *Hanu Zan* by the magnificent artist Fao Duman. And if I do say so myself, it is a most elegant garment, well befitting your most revered self, Yang-*dul*.”

Yang Kalabei’s face was a frozen mask. “We thank the House of Long for this most—ah—extraordinary gift.”

“You must try it soon, sir. It will make such an excellent addition to your wardrobe. If you like, Yang-*dul*, I would be happy to recommend some truly wonderful clothing dealers. The right colors will take off ten years! It would be such a marvelous change to see you in some decent outerwear, truly sir.”

“That will be all,” Xomin interrupted. “Thank you for your thoughtful gift, Long-*sar*. My honored father has other guests to attend to, now.”

“Indeed so! Xomin, you old toady, you shouldn’t allow me to monopolize your father’s time so egregiously! How terribly rude of us both.” He bowed dramatically to Yang Kalabei. “It’s a glorious party, Yang-*dul*. May the Divine Heavens always guide your steps.”

The old man nodded graciously, Xomin fumed, and Xansul swept off without a backward look.

He quickly wormed his way to Taejun Suosem’s table. Around it sat a mixed group of men and women, most of them close to Xansul’s age. Yang House attendants moved about, offering small platters of delicacies and drink. Xansul took the first cup to come by, a strong drink called *ukai*. He glanced around the table—most were immediate members of powerful houses, like Xansul himself. Others were from lesser houses. Xansul took passing note of those who were lucky to be included in such an auspicious group.

Several men across the table were speaking loudly—not quite arguing, but the discussion was certainly heated. “What are they nattering about?” Xansul whispered loudly to one of his neighbors.

“Ooh,” the young woman responded, not bothering to lower her voice, “A prisoner in the north escaped.”

“And what could possibly be so interesting about that? One more piece of scum to litter the roadside, if you ask me.”

“This isn’t any prisoner that escaped, Long-*sar*,” interrupted Saoden Tumo. He was the highest-ranking person at the table, though Xansul did not envy him. Being third-son himself was far more comfortable. Xansul enjoyed all the benefits of being within the immediate family of a very powerful house, with none of the heir’s responsibilities.

“Oh? Well do tell,” Xansul responded. “What frightsome creature shall make us cower behind closed doors tonight?”

Saoden Tumo glanced around, and then leaned in. Xansul and the others did likewise. “The emperor doesn’t want the word of it to spread, and he has detained all the official messengers. But I have it from one of the inner palace guards, who overheard the report to the emperor himself.”

“Go on, tell us Tumo!” Xansul pressed. “You’ll kill us all with curiosity.”

Tumo smirked, completely in his element. “From what this guard tells me, the breakout was at Nao Gak San.”

Two of the women gasped and covered their mouths in astonishment. Others shuddered. Several of the men muttered under their breaths. However, the younger Taejun Suosem nodded. “I have a source that says the same.”

“But how?” one of the women protested. Her name was Dansu Zian and she came from a lesser house, though one that was quickly gaining power and authority. “How could anyone get out of Nao Gak San?”

“That is the true mystery,” Suosem said, playing along with Tumo’s storytelling. “There were no survivors to tell of it.”

“Oh come now,” said Xansul, “If there are no survivors, then how do they know it was not some accident, some great tragedy that befell the place?”

“Dear Xansul, do you think warriors cannot tell the difference between a natural disaster and a great battle, when the results are left for the sun and the crows?”

Dansu Zian spoke again. “But who could possibly have done such a thing?”

Tumo and Suosem exchanged weighted glances. They leaned in closer still. Xansul felt the table might soon cut into his chest from his pressing so hard. “They say,” whispered Tumo, “That it was Telsharu the Cursed who escaped.”

There was hardly a breath at the table. *Could it be possible?* Xansul wondered. “A myth,” he scoffed aloud. “There is no such person, at least not a real one—and if there was, he couldn’t possibly be as terrible as the legends say.”

Another young woman spoke up. Yarchung Yaeta’s voice was high and nervous. “Surely Long Xansul is right. My father always told us that the stories of Hanu Zan and evil Telsharu were made up to make disobedient children obey their parents.”

“No, they’re quite true,” Tumo assured them. “My man at the palace says the emperor himself turned pale at the mention of Telsharu the Cursed.”

Xansul snorted. “The emperor wears a mask, even in private. No common guard or messenger would be allowed to see the emperor’s face—*all honor be to him*,” he hastily added. He flapped a hand at Suosem and Tumo. “Hanu Zan could not be a real man. Who could possibly slay a thousand enemy warriors in a single afternoon? Spirit-tales, that’s what it is. The hero Hanu Zan and his enemy Telsharu alike are both absolute fiction.”

A quiet yet firm voice spoke up for the first time. “There is some truth to the matter,” said Chian Jo, the oldest of their group, though still a young man. His was an ancient and powerful house. “My grandmother told me stories as a child, of when she was a child and saw Hanu Zan with her own eyes. He was a real man, no matter what the stories say about him.”

The company mulled this over. It was Dansu Zian who finally broke in. “But if they really lived, that would make them over a hundred and fifty years old now—maybe older. How could Telsharu the Cursed possibly still be alive?”

“They do not call him the Cursed for no reason,” Tumo responded. “It’s said that the emperor himself cast a spell upon his enemy Telsharu, and bound him away in

Nao Gak San for all eternity.”

“Not so eternal, if the fellow can break out on a whim,” said Xansul.

“Not a whim,” Suosem retorted. “They’re reporting more than a hundred and fifty dead in the emperor’s prison! It wasn’t an idle man who did that.”

Yarchung Yaeta spoke up. “I doubt it was a single man who did it. It must have been a prison riot. Think of all those terrible people on the loose!” She shivered.

The table erupted into discussions of how this Telsharu, or any of the prisoners, could have escaped from the infamous Nao Gak San. Tumo and Zian thought there must be traitors among the guards. Suosem and Chian Jo talked of the powerful *shutao-aman*, or discipline of fighting, it would take to defeat so many men. Yaeta told a neighbor—at length—that the guards must have gotten lazy, to be overwhelmed so easily by weakened inmates. Xansul stared at the ceiling and twirled a lock of his hair between his fingers.

“Do you suppose we could move on to another topic of discussion?” he complained. “This one is growing quite drab.”

“Try not to damper our fun, Xansul,” said Tumo with some irritation.

“I? It is my greatest desire to improve the merrymaking and inanity of our class. I! I am the very soul of enjoyment, you daft *lochi*, and any man who says otherwise shall have a cup of *ukai* splashed all down his robe for so disturbing my inner harmony!”

The others laughed, but Xansul stubbornly folded his arms indignantly across his chest, and stared off, as though truly insulted.

“Oh come now, Long-sar,” pleaded Dansu Zian, “You know we revere your skills for shunning reality and honor your wasting our time with frivolities.”

Xansul eyed her, but his face was solemn. “Very well,” he said, “I shall accept what passes in this group for an apology.” He brusquely rose to his feet and dusted his hands. “I think I’ve had enough conversation about tiresome men whose only occupation is the rough-and-tumble in the dirt. Quite uncivilized, if you ask me.”

“I think you do us a misjudgment, Long-sar,” Dansu Zian protested. “Hanu Zan was a national hero! I find him fascinating!”

“Do you?” asked Xansul. “My way seems clear, then. Dansu-*raya*, I have just the thing for your entertainment, and my own as well!”

Without preamble, Xansul moved to the front of the room, where a small raised platform rested, full of musicians taking a small rest between sets. Xansul raised his hands for the attention of the assemblage.

“Dear friends and honored guests of Yang House! What a marvelous party we have to enjoy this evening. At the utter *pleading* of my friends—you can see them sitting right over there—I have humbly acquiesced—at their *insistence*—to recite for you all a ballad of my own composition!”

Yang Xomin’s face was a study in sobriety, but Xansul relished in the other man’s embarrassment. As Xansul met her eyes, Dansu Zian’s cheeks developed the faintest tinge of pink. He grinned at her roguishly before continuing.

“You all know the epic poem *Hanu Zan* by Fao Duman of course. And it’s a

lovely piece to be sure! But so dreadfully long! Stanzas upon stanzas upon stanzas. Takes nearly a day to read the whole thing! And there are so many more *luxurious* things we could be doing with our time. And so I humbly present for you *The Short Life of Hanu Zan* by Long Xansul, third-son of Long House.”

Xansul struck a dramatic pose, his shoulders back and one foot extended, with his arms held out. He spoke with all the fine oratory developed by the *Yu-gaochi* and their tutors.

*“The west wind blows through mountain holds
Hanu Zan the hero bursts from his mother’s womb.
At the shutao-kai, Son is always fighting, always naughty.
Mother does not like Son’s four kasan,
The Ruffians are soon driven from town.”*

He had their attention, that was certain. Many eyes were wide, startled by this impertinent re-telling of Hanu Zan’s tale. A few, though, had raised their hands to cover their smiles. *As long as it amuses a few, I’ve done my work.*

*“Heroes journey to the Imperial City,
Befriend the young emperor-to-be,
Young Emperor is very clever!
“Bring me the east, west, north and south”
Finds friends to do his work!*

*At dawn, the Hero persuades the north
At midday, the Hero captures the south
At dusk, the Hero conquers the west
But at night, the Hero gives up beloved
—the Emperor is much more blessed!*

*The Hero runs from Imperial City
But gains a naughty pupil.
Master fights student, student locked up.
Tells us to clean up our messes
And, stay restfully at home.”*

Xansul took a hearty bow and could not suppress his own smile as he saw the laughter in the eyes watching him. “I covered all the important parts, yes? And in so much less time than any epic poem!”

“While leaving out all the interesting details!” Dansu Zian protested, but there was mirth in her expression. “And you make Hanu Zan a fool!”

“Well, what’s the difference?” Xansul replied. “And anyway, one who spends his whole life waving a sword when there are so many other interesting things to do *is* a fool.”

Apparently, Xomin could not stand it any longer. He too climbed upon the raised stand. “We thank the noble son of Long House for this—engaging rendition—and

now would like to enjoy the next set.”

Xansul obligingly stepped down, and the musicians began to pluck at their instruments once more. He made his way back to the table, and sat next to Dansu Zian. She gave him a small, coy smile. “I did not think a man such as you would enjoy something so—energetic.”

Xansul laughed aloud. “Now you know better! For a beauty such as you, I would climb Mt. Tandishin.”

He availed himself of another cup of *ukai* and downed it in one gulp. He took the next cup that came by, but sipped at it more slowly. Around him, the table was lively. After a moment listening to the conversation, Xansul exclaimed in disgust, “Politics? Politics? How is this any better than tales of long-dead renegades?”

“It does have some relevance to our lives,” Chian Jo said quietly.

“Though not so great a relevance as drink and song, I think.”

Chian Jo smiled. “It depends on the life.”

“As I was saying,” Tumo spoke up, “The emperor—may the Divine Heavens bless him—is raising import taxes again. Do you know how that will cut into house profits?”

Xansul grunted sourly. “The emperor will not allow the houses to be hurt too badly. His own profits are dependant on our stability.”

“Then he should deal with these bandits, these—revolutionaries!” Suosem exclaimed. “The Sunga Tobai have disrupted trade throughout the entire empire!”

“And the assassinations have all the houses jumping at shadows,” Zian added.

Xansul waved a hand. “There is no evidence that this ridiculous pack of rowdies you call Sunga Tobai have anything to do with the assassinations.”

Chian Jo shook his head. “The rumors among the people are convincing on this matter. Over the years, I have learned to listen to rumors this fervently believed.”

“I have heard a new such rumor,” said Tumo, again with an air of mystery. His listeners could not help leaning in. The lantern light glinted in his dark eyes. “The rumors seem to agree on this—that the Leader of the Sunga Tobai group is a *Seyin-Kotsu* of the Silent Wind.”

The listeners murmured to themselves. “A True Master?” Chian Jo mused. “But they are so rare! Each *shutao-aman* is lucky to have one or two True Masters in the whole country! How could one fall into such a wicked gang as the Sunga Tobai?”

“A *Seyin-Kotsu*,” whispered Yarchung Yaeta in awe. “No wonder the Sunga Tobai group is so powerful. True Masters are the strongest *shutao-yun* in the world. Not many could stand against a *Seyin-Kotsu*.”

“Let alone one of the Silent Wind *Shutao-aman*,” agreed Suosem. “Xansul,” he queried suddenly, “Didn’t you study at a Silent Wind *Shutao-aman*? Who do *you* think it is?”

All eyes turned to Xansul. Some were surprised. Others, like Suosem, were edged now with suspicion. Xansul, however, laughed. “Don’t remind me! The worst six months of my life. ‘Boy, stand straight!’ ‘Boy, punch harder!’ ‘Boy, you are too heavy on your feet! Enemies will hear you a province away!’ I’ve never been so humiliated in all my life!”

“You were only there half a year?”

“Thank the Divine Heavens! I have the fortune to have four cousins and a brother who excelled in *shutao*, so my revered father relented, and I found other pursuits more suitable to my talents.”

Dansu Zian laughed. “Like drink and stories?”

“Quite so, Dansu-*raya*. *Someone* in Long House needed to relax and find a little amusement in life. Fortunately, that someone is me.”

“But surely you remember the *Seyin-Kotsu*,” Tumo prompted. “Or those who were close to becoming Masters.”

“I was a boy!” Xansul protested. “And who cares about a few withered old men anyhow? Believe me—the old master *I* studied under could not lead a night time raid against the latrine, much less the *Yu-gaochi*.”

The group broke once more into half a dozen debates. Suosem was still convinced of a Silent Wind *Seyin-Kotsu* leading the Sunga Tobai group. Zian countered that a renegade *claiming* to be a master from that school must be the leader of the revolutionaries. Yaeta seemed to think the Sunga Tobai group as a whole owed allegiance to some foreign prince. Xansul listened, bemused.

On the far side of the room, Yang Xomin rose. A hush slowly overcame the guests. “It is our great honor to have the fireflower makers here tonight for these celebrations.” Many of the guests clapped or murmured their appreciation. “We invite you now to move outdoors to view the fireflowers.”

Most of the guests rose and began making their way back toward the entrance. Xansul congratulated himself on such perfect timing. Cushions had been set on the veranda and the grounds, and the Yang attendants milled about just as they had inside. Xansul’s companions mingled with other partygoers to watch.

The first fireflower exploded in the air above them, showering the sky with gold sparks. “Ooh!” the crowd exclaimed. Soon another erupted above them. People all across the Imperial City would watch the display. Xansul stood for a moment, and let the red light bathe his face. With his companions sufficiently distracted, Xansul made his way to the side entrance of the Yang compound. He staggered a little, still with a cup of *ukai* in hand. He smirked at the single guard. “Some night, mm?”

The guard, looking like he might roll his eyes or scoff, were Xansul any lower ranking, merely nodded. “Leaving so soon, Long-*sar*?”

“The companionship is not so congenial as I had hoped,” Xansul responded with a wink.

The guard leered, and opened the gate. “Best of luck to you then, sir.”

Xansul staggered out into the streets of the Blessings District, trying to avoid gatherings of people who watched the exploding fireflowers. He crossed the main roads into Market District. This was the working hub of the Imperial City, where the shops and stalls and businesses were found. This was also the most popular district for visitors—there were wayhouses and teashops, entertainment and eating establishments. Because of the fireflowers, there were still plenty of people about, despite the late hour.

He stumbled his way through the small streets and alleys between the buildings, making his way eastward across the district. As the fireworks at Yang House lit the streets at odd moments, he could see many people watching from open windows and rooftops. Xansul took another drink of *ukai* and staggered on.

His meandering took him to a street where courtesans stood calling out to potential customers.

One of the girls, Chijang, recognized Xansul immediately. “Xansul!” she called, and the other two, Risaya and Ito, chimed in.

“Good evening, ladies,” he responded with an extravagant flourish.

“Good evening noble sir,” said Chijang.

“Come with us, Xansul.” Risaya smiled coyly.

Xansul let the women escort him into a nearby building. As he stepped through the door, he left his drunken act behind. He stiffened up and immediately set his cup of *ukai* down.

“Thank you once again, ladies.” Xansul bowed politely and headed for the back door.

“Won’t you ever stay with us?” Ito complained.

Xansul smiled. “I’m sorry.”

“Xansul, you are too much of a gentleman for your own good. Give the boys our love.”

Xansul bowed again, and walked through the back door into a small alleyway.

He climbed up a low fence and leapt to the roof of the adjoining building. From there, he scrambled silently across several rooftops, always heading toward the western edge of the city—the so-called Hope District, where the poor were quartered.

He came to Wharf Street. These were the worst of the slums—lean-tos outnumbered actual structures. The clumsy shelters were often mere sticks and cloth with dirty straw. They were cramped close together until there was barely room to breathe freely, but it still smelled of fish and filth. He slipped into a shanty. The room within was small and cramped, but would typically be shared by an entire family of *lochi*. These ‘houseless’ were second-, perhaps third-class citizens—especially in the Imperial City. Xansul reached for the wicker basket kept there. Quickly, he changed clothes, exchanging the embroidered robes of Xansul the *Yu-gaochi* for a simple loose shirt of homely cloth and soot-black *samping*, a short wrap of thick cloth secured by a sash. He pulled out a jar and used the contents to smudge his skin and dull his hair. He took special care to cover the Long crest tattooed on his upper arm. Thus attired, Xansul slid back out into the night.

The pathways through the slums were quiet; the *lochi* and the poor went about their nighttime business with caution, when they went out at all. Xansul slinked from shadow to shadow, keeping a wide eye out for any movement in the darkness. He was careful not to move *too* carefully. He didn’t want some overly wary watcher to suspect that he was anything more than a poor man moving about the slums in the night. His mind, however, was far more attentive than his eyes.

Deep into Hope District, Xansul found a cluster of sturdier buildings. Here he

waited, alert. He remained completely still, timing his breaths to the movement of the air around him, exactly as in his earliest training. Two men walked past him, but neither took any notice of Xansul. A man wrapped in black also passed, and though he glanced in the direction where Xansul stood, he too moved on. Xansul tested the winds with the utmost care. Only when he was satisfied that there were no watchers or waiters did he press on around the corner.

A single rap at a stout wooden door, and it slid open a crack. Passing through revealed that the door was far thicker than most found in the central region, which favored thinner materials. The guard quickly shoved the door shut behind Xansul and sealed it.

“Good evening, Luang,” Xansul greeted the man. “Are they assembled?”

“All those in the region, sir. They wait for you.”

Xansul strode down the short, dark corridor. Another guard waited at the only door. He slid the door open for Xansul.

The room was dim, and it was difficult to determine its size. It felt cluttered; many cabinets, trunks, and racks stood along the walls and about the room. They held an assortment of articles, from clothing in varying sizes and styles, to weapons of as many kinds. Several mirrors hung or stood about the room, and there seemed to be pots and paints enough for a woman’s dressing room.

In the center of the room was an odd assortment of cushions and low chairs. Most were occupied by an equally odd assortment of people. The majority were men, and a pair of women. They were fighters, an assassin or two, a handful of merchants, many of them *lochi*, and a handful of the *Yu-gaochi*, who like Xansul himself, risked everything to be here. Yet, no one would guess their stations, looking at them. Each wore the same clothing of dirty black, just like Xansul. Their faces were smudged, their hair grimy with soot. Yet these were leaders among the Sunga Tobai, who quietly stood against the emperor’s corrupt tyranny.

“I heard an interesting rumor this evening at the House of Yang,” said Xansul in a low voice. “They’re saying that Telsharu the Cursed has escaped from Nao Gak San.”

Some men grunted, while others raised their eyebrows in near-astonishment. A few grinned, including both of the women.

“What do you make of it?” asked Siaying, one of the women.

Xansul shrugged. “It may be true,” he mused. “All the stories agree that the emperor bound him away, still living, though barely. And if the *Yu-gaochi* are to be believed, the rumors come from reputable sources. The question is, can we make use of them?”

“Do we know that this Telsharu is as wicked as the emperor says?” asked a fighter called Daoshi. “If he’s an enemy of the emperor, perhaps he’s a friend to us.”

“Possibly,” said Xansul, “But it will take some pretty talking to convince the common people. The emperor has had a century to villainize; conferring on him the title ‘Cursed One.’ And no one can deny the heroics of Hanu Zan.”

“We need a hero of our own,” said Siaying.

Xansul met her eyes for a moment. “I heard another rumor at Yang House,” he

said. “They’re saying now that the Sunga Tobai group is led by a *Seyin-Kotsu* of the Silent Wind.”

Siaying laughed. “About time they caught on! Who else could sweep into *Yugaochi* sleeping chambers with no sound, and murder without a breath?”

“Or penetrate the Danuo Samat unnoticed by a single guard,” said Luang, “Without leaving so much as a footprint?”

Xansul raised his hands. “Regardless of the rumor’s origin, we must use it to our advantage and never to our weakness. As you move about your circles, I want you to speak of a secret student of the Silent Wind. No one from Imperial City—a stranger, from the Taeying region, a *Seyin-Kotsu* who knows firsthand of the emperor’s corruption.”

LianDa’s eyes were large and very bright. “Like Hanu Zan,” she whispered.

“You know the way to spread the rumors,” Xansul said. “It must never be tracked to us. But we need the people, especially the poor, to believe in something. Otherwise, our efforts mean nothing. We can’t really give them the hero Hanu Zan. But with the idea planted, perhaps they will be more willing to follow *us*, when the time comes.”

The leadership of the Sunga Tobai nodded in silent agreement. These few men and women were good at what they did, but more importantly, they were *good*. Xansul trusted each with his life, and the lives of those he cared about most. And he knew that they trusted him just as explicitly. They would lead the larger bodies of the Sunga Tobai under his direction, even when they did not always comprehend his orders. Their trust and obedience would bring them victory.

“We have work to do yet tonight. I have a few last-minute adjustments to the schedule, please listen closely.” Xansul moved to one of the tables near the center of the room where a myriad of objects were scattered across the table. Xansul imagined the average person would overlook the mess as rubbish. But a careful eye, knowing what to see, could make out a sketchy map of the city. Tall cups marked guard posts on the city wall. An inkpot hovered outside, representing the imperial palace on its solitary island. Within the makeshift wall, several small bowls represented a handful of the great houses, and pots of face paint showed the location of lesser houses. A small golden pin, seemingly dropped at random, showed their present location in the slums.

“Chilgu, you are moving to Saoden House, instead of the guard post. Your task is the same.” The named man nodded. “Luomin, I would like to move you to Long House.” Luomin raised his eyebrows, along with several others. Xansul looked around, keeping his face calm. “Tonight is our biggest push yet. I don’t think we can count on going unnoticed any longer. The people are aware of us. I do not wish to bring suspicion down on my house—or any of our allies—by *not* having a presence there tonight.” Xansul turned back to the makeshift map. “Tuodim,” he called over his shoulder, “You are to move forward at Yang House tonight.”

The others grew very still. Tuodim was a young man, younger than Xansul was strictly comfortable with having in the group. But, Tuodim’s skills as an assassin could not be denied, and Xansul needed him. Tuodim’s dark eyes glinted.

“The rest of you already have your assignments,” said Xansul. “The time has come.

Our city shall tremble under the silent footsteps of Sunga Tobai tonight. We will meet again in two days' time. Go in safety."

They moved with quiet steps, though not as silent as Xansul. For a moment, he watched them go, then turned back to the map. He began to disassemble it. If an enemy found this place, it would mean no good for the Sunga Tobai. He'd rather leave less for any infiltrator to find.

"*Seyin-Kotsu?*"

Xansul turned. Three men waited for him—Miangu, an assassin almost as skilled as young Tuodim; a former fighter-for-hire named Shonik, and a 'wizard', as Xansul liked to call him, named Hiengsi, whose skills were peculiar, somewhat mysterious, and regularly useful to Xansul.

"What is *our* target tonight, *Seyin-Kotsu?*" asked Shonik.

Xansul looked down at the disrupted map, and his eyes lingered on the inkpot, still lying undisturbed apart from the mess. "Tonight, friends," he declared, "We visit the very bosom of our enemy, merely to see whether we can return unscathed. And should we succeed, we shall visit the emperor again, with far less delicate intentions."

He looked at his men. Their eyes were glinting in the light. "It's time."

CHAPTER 3

ShianMai walked along the garden path, holding up her sari so it did not drag upon the stones. The path wound its way through the grounds like a serpent through the jungle. Thick trees and vines disguised the signs of civilization. ShianMai carried a map of these grounds embedded in her mind. She knew where to find each well-disguised turnoff that led to the abodes of the emperor's concubines and their families. She knew the hidden paths that led to the streams, the wells, the ponds, the guard posts, and the tree fort that her brothers had constructed under their mother's distant but watchful gaze. ShianMai loved the gardens and enclosing jungle. She was at home here.

The imperial palace crouched upon a small island on the Lake of Endless Dreams. The island was connected to the Imperial City by a single white stone bridge, which was always heavily guarded. The imperial island-complex itself was divided into three tiers of security. ShianMai hardly ever saw large portions of the island—for example, the innermost palace was reserved strictly for the emperor and those few he invited within his jealously guarded privacy. Or, the outermost layer of security on the island, where the emperor housed his most elite warriors and officers, and where the *Yu-gaochi*, those belonging to the great houses, came to visit when the emperor deigned to host them. Which was rare, these days.

ShianMai spent most of her time in the middle layer. This portion was made up of manicured gardens and the various buildings artistically concealed within the gardens housing members of the emperor's family. Small hillocks met low ponds full of colorful fish crossed by arched footbridges, connecting small gazebos where private matters could be discussed. Elegant birds landed on the lily pads and sang a sweet evening chorus to one another as the sun set on the beautiful imperial gardens in this middle layer.

"ShianMai, you're back late this evening," said a familiar voice from behind. "Old Udokar keep you?"

Strolling up the path were her brother Mongnik and his wife Taemal. Mongnik looked like ShianMai, though masculine, and several years older. He had an olive complexion with dark brown hair, and a round face. His wife Taemal, however, was from the south. Her skin was darker than ShianMai and Mongnik and their siblings, and her jet-black hair hung to her waist. She was exceptionally petite, a full head shorter than ShianMai, who was not very tall herself. Her eyes were nearly as dark as

her hair, and shone like black jewels. Though Taemal was very quiet, ShianMai felt a certain amount of fondness for this particular sister-in-law.

“My dear tutor thinks very highly of himself,” ShianMai replied to Mongnik’s question. “However, I value his lessons enough to put up with his ego.”

The three of them continued along the garden path, heading toward the western part of the grounds. “Does he teach you useful skills, then?” Mongnik asked.

“Very useful,” ShianMai admitted. “A whole course on innate voice-recognition that I think will please Father greatly.”

“That is always good,” Mongnik agreed. “Does Udokar treat you well?”

“I am not sure he even knows who I am, to be honest. Just another pupil, to him.”

“No, that would not surprise me. Though Udokar has a great mind for the sciences, he’s not much for individual people.”

Taemal spoke up in her gentle voice. “Will we see you this evening?”

“Of course,” ShianMai replied. “And Father insisted that Mother come as well.”

Mongnik nodded. “We will talk more then, I want to hear what you have been learning.”

The three of them reached a fork in the path, and ShianMai paused to watch them go down the other track. The whole family had been surprised when Mongnik had announced his engagement to the reserved little Taemal. ShianMai still remembered the objections. After the death of their brother Kuojan, Mongnik had become second-son in the Imperial House of Sha. And he had been on the path to his own success long before Kuojan’s passing. Mongnik ruled the entire Taeying region in the emperor’s name, and did so justly and honorably. It had always been assumed that a political marriage would be arranged for him, like all the other royal children. But Mongnik had no interest in politics, and somehow he had convinced the emperor to approve his match with Taemal. He went about his own business with a remarkable lack of maneuvering, content in his quiet marriage and his quiet rule of a peaceful region to the west. In some ways, ShianMai envied him. Mongnik was one of the few imperial children who had earned such a restful life.

Their father was not an easy man to please, at least long-term. *And that’s an understatement*, thought ShianMai. ShianMai had watched the emperor use up his older children. The pattern was always the same. He always started out by staying in the background, nurturing and distantly affectionate. There would come a time when one would do something to please him, and he would show them favor for a time. But that favor always faded. The *Khudang-yun*, the Great Emperor, seemed to grow disillusioned with his children, until he rejected them, one by one. It had been happening for over a hundred years now, through dozens of children over the emperor’s divinely lengthened lifespan. There were only a few of them, ShianMai included, for whom the pattern had yet to come to fruition.

She continued along the garden path. The evening air was humid, but not uncomfortably so. She passed a small wooden house built into one of the hillocks, with an open porch that led out straight into the gardens. Several small figures came running from the veranda as ShianMai passed, shrieking at the tops of their lungs.

“Shy-shy! Shy-shy!” the children screeched, and in a moment, they had enveloped her.

ShianMai laughed and hugged the children close. “I thought you would have been heading up to the pavilion already.”

“Not yet,” said the eldest, Taoshu, a sturdy seven-year-old with skin paler than ShianMai’s, but deep brown eyes that would break plenty of hearts before long. He spoke with a measured tone, careful with his words. “Mama told us to wait for you.”

“A-cause the party’s *moved*,” said four-year-old Januya. “And she wants you to go to the right place!”

“I wanna go to the party!” wailed two-year-old Daoshi. “Sommi’s gone already!”

Taoshu shook his head. “Somayin just left. We’ll probably get there the same time.”

Januya took ShianMai’s hand and tugged it slightly to recapture her attention. “The party’s in the field just past Li-lam’s house. It’s starting soon, Shy-shy!”

“I better hurry home then, my dears,” ShianMai said to her young niece and nephews. “I need to get dressed.”

“You *are* dressed, Shy-shy!”

“I can’t wear *this* to the party, now can I?” ShianMai gestured to her plain cream sari, which she had worn to lessons. Januya shrugged. “You could, but I think Sha-*dul* would be mad.”

“You’re probably right. And that is why I need to change. I will see you at the party, all right?”

“Ya-ya,” said Januya. She grabbed her brothers’ hands and dragged them back up to the little house. ShianMai waved to them, then continued along the stone path through the grounds.

In the westernmost corner, nestled up against the imposing walls and surrounded by obscuring trees, rested the house of ShianMai’s mother. It was one of the largest residences on the grounds, and there were more than a dozen. It was made of deep brown wood, with several adjoining rooms, each with its own peaked roof. A wide veranda fronted the structure, with steps leading to the main entrance.

In the early days of their royal marriage, ShianMai’s parents had lived together within the inner palace. Each of their five children had been born there. But over time, the Lady Hiangni had grown distant, from her husband and children and life at large. Eventually it became apparent that Hiangni was not right in her mind. She grew increasingly uncomfortable with life in the imperial palace, and after a series of awkward incidents, the emperor decided that Hiangni needed a place of her own. Though nowhere in the imperial complex could ever be entirely private, this secluded corner provided as much solitude as could be found. Hiangni seemed to enjoy the privacy and quiet.

ShianMai walked up the steps into the house. Like the others on the grounds, the house had an open floor plan. Large potted plants blended with the trees outside to create a natural feel within the walls. There were no actual doors in the entire structure, only archways that were occasionally curtained off for privacy. Past the entryway,

there was a large open living chamber. It contained a small cooking area for private meals, and a floor littered with cushions and low tables for eating and entertaining. A light breeze blew through the room from the gardens outside, bringing the smell of evening into the house.

Hiangni sat propped up on a small heap of cushions with two attendants standing by. Her hands were busy over a small easel. It was the same image as always—Hiangni had been painting that same landscape for over ten years. It was not a place that ShianMai recognized—rolling hills that were lush and green, with a hint of dark jungle in the distance. A single, solitary stone rose upon the nearest hill, jagged and out of place. ShianMai or their attendants always removed each painting as soon as it was finished, but ShianMai doubted her mother would notice, even if the walls were papered with them. Hiangni's eyes were blank and empty as she looked up at ShianMai's entrance.

"Good evening, Mother," ShianMai said, and kissed the top of her mother's head. "How are you feeling today?"

"Well, thank you." Hiangni's voice sounded tired and distant. ShianMai scanned her mother's face. With the fading light it was hard to tell if she were paler than any other day. Her brown eyes were dull and unfocused. "The baby and I had a lovely afternoon strolling about the gardens."

ShianMai repressed a sigh. "Mother, I'm not a baby any more."

"Of course not, dear."

ShianMai looked to the attendants who immediately bowed. "Please ready her for the party—her best set of evening clothes."

"Yes, Sha-*rayang*."

As the attendants moved toward her mother, ShianMai headed for her own sleeping chamber. She opened the clothespress at the foot of her low bed and began pulling out her favorite set of formal wear. She carefully removed her sari and hung it up so it would not wrinkle. She pulled on a pair of voluminous periwinkle trousers, and then shrugged into the loose yellow robe that went over them. She tied the wrap around her waist as she moved to kneel before her small mirror and the articles around it. She twisted her hair up into a casual knot and inserted a pair of jeweled pins to hold it in place. Several strands trickled down, and ShianMai arranged them artfully. She then picked out a brooch her father had given her on her last nameday and pinned it to the collar of her wrap. She picked out a pair of yellow slippers and carried them as she moved back into the main room.

The slippers she placed by the entrance, then went to check on her mother. It took the attendants no little effort to help Hiangni change clothes, as she lost track of what they were doing every few moments. Once she was dressed, the attendants brushed her hair and pinned it up. ShianMai walked out to the front veranda and clipped a blossom from one of the trees for Hiangni's hair.

"Thank you," ShianMai told the attendants. "We will not require your assistance this evening." They bowed once more and departed.

With her mother's arm tucked tightly into hers, ShianMai led the way to the front

entrance. They put on their slippers and headed into the gardens.

Evening had fallen in full, and the smells and sounds were rich in the deepening dusk. Birds chirruped to each other, crickets hummed, and small toads croaked in the little ponds amid the trees and hillocks of the grounds. ShianMai breathed deeply, and she took in the smells of grass and flowers in the fading sunlight that had warmed the earth throughout the day.

Her mother spoke. "Are you well?"

ShianMai looked over at her mother, but Hiangni's bemused gaze was on the garden path. ShianMai's father had summoned the best physicians from across the Seventh Empire to diagnose his wife's condition, but to no avail. There was no telling why her mind was addled. And so ShianMai's father had sequestered his wife to her lonely house on the grounds, with ShianMai and a few house attendants to look after her, with all the other children married and with homes of their own. Hiangni had spent years like this—some moments were more lucid than others, but her consciousness was not stable.

"Yes, Mother. I am quite well."

"Do they treat you well? These...do...they...do they?"

"Yes, Mother." They walked around the edge of the large central pond, where grounds keepers were carefully extracting several brightly colored fish. The water sparkled off the fish scales.

"Where...is Kuo?"

ShianMai's heart caught in her throat for a moment before she forced herself to relax. *If I remind her that he is dead, she'll only forget again.* "Kuojan isn't here right now, Mother."

Hiangni sighed and wrung her hands. "Don't...leave me...like Kuo?"

"No, I won't leave like Kuo did. I promise."

That seemed to soothe her mother a great deal, and she walked at ShianMai's side in companionable silence. But ShianMai had to suppress pained thoughts of her older brother.

On the far side of the pond, they found a large clearing full of people. A stream bordered the meadow on one side. A pavilion stood on the lawn opposite the stream, with a large space left open in the middle. The clearing was presently full of romping children, while the adults were clustered at the pavilion. All wore formal evening robes and slippers, and all bore some physical resemblance, though it was harder to place on some than on others.

The children called out greetings as ShianMai and Hiangni entered the clearing, and they collected a train of small children as they crossed over to the pavilion. Some of the small ones were ShianMai's siblings and half-siblings, and others were her nieces and nephews, but they all wore happy smiles on their faces as they delivered ShianMai and her mother to the pavilion. There, the greetings were more formal and subdued, but ShianMai caught true welcome on a few faces.

"Good evening, ShianMai," said GonoChak, one of her favorite half-brothers. He was the son of a concubine, and so not a member of an Imperial house proper.

However, their families still resided in the imperial complex at the pleasure of the *Khudang-yun*. Gono's wife, Samjalin, also stood in greeting.

"Are you well?" Samjalin asked. "I hear good things of you from Gono."

"Thank you. I am very well."

"Do you know when the *Sha-dul* is coming?" asked Gono. '*Sha-dul*' was the informal name only members of the household could use for the emperor. It referred to him as Head of Sha House, but only until Hiangni passed into the Divine Heavens. When she passed away, unless the new emperor was from their house, the House of Sha would become another of the *Yu-gaochi*, and that title would pass to Hiangni's eldest child. The emperor, Kamgue, would then be free to marry again—and create with the next new spouse a new Imperial house.

I pray that is long in coming, thought ShianMai.

"I do not," ShianMai replied, "But I imagine he will be here soon. It is almost time."

Mongnik and Taemal waved from along the far edge of the pavilion. But before ShianMai could take two steps in their direction, another pair of figures stepped into her path.

"Hello ShianMai," said her half-sister Yomtak in a tone that was not the least bit friendly. "You remember my fiancé?"

"*Sha-rayang*," he inserted with a bow. Like most people, he ignored Lady Hiangni, though she was a blood relation of his father. Lieutenant Wu Shoumul was tall and broad-shouldered, and the younger girls in the family were all in a titter about him in private. Personally, ShianMai found him as repellent as his betrothed. Beside some honor earned through his military service, he would have little to pass to his children beyond his name, as he was only a minor scion of her mother's birth-house.

"I hear you had some trouble in lessons today," Yoma's mouth twisted in a smirk that ShianMai was all too familiar with. "JaLien was just saying—"

"That I'm cross-eyed and have no manners, no doubt," ShianMai interrupted. "Will you excuse me please?" Without further interruption, she took her mother's arm and veered in the opposite direction from the easily affronted Yomtak and her fiancé.

"Be kind," said her mother.

"Yoma is so proud of this engagement. It's not like she has any inheritance, the daughter of a concubine. The Wu family—bless our honored ancestors—have no idea what a snake they are bringing into their house."

"Be kind," was the repeated response.

ShianMai headed for the center of the pavilion and the source of the festivities. A low divan of woven fibers had been set directly under the peaked roof. Her half-brother Shisael perched next to his radiant wife TuLian, who held their newborn baby. The tiny infant was no more than a bundle of blankets from this angle.

"Disgusting. Like a little naked rat."

ShianMai turned. "I didn't think you were coming."

Her full-brother Dokumun rolled his eyes. Standing next to him, ShianMai felt more than a bit dwarfed; she barely came up to his chest. Dokumun had broad shoul-

ders and olive skin like their father, but his curly brown hair and those deep brown eyes were clearly their mother's. His downturned eyebrows echoed his perpetual frown.

"Like I could miss this," Dokumun grumbled. "His High and Mighty Lordship of Everything would string me up by my toenails."

"Be kind."

Dokumun glanced at their mother, then back at the proud parents and their many admirers among the siblings. "You know, the longer I spend outside these walls among average people, the stranger our family seems."

ShianMai raised her eyebrow. "You can say all the nasty things you want, but we both know you'd never do anything more than that. Father knows it, too. Or he really *would* string you up."

Doku said nothing, but he punched her in the arm. Hard.

Out of the bushes and trees around the pavilion, a dozen or more imperial guards entered the clearing. They wore combat uniforms of black and gray, and all were heavily armed despite being in the heart of the imperial complex. After thoroughly inspecting the area, an officer lifted his machete into the air and called out, "All clear."

Moments later, a small unit of the elite guards followed. The emperor called them his *Siang-Tonu*, his Defenders of Law. But most other people called them the imperial assassins, for they were well known as the brutal killers of the *Khudang-yun*. They were the-elite-of-the-elite, those warriors entrusted to protect the divine emperor himself. They wore uniforms of crimson and black, with matching masks that utterly obscured their faces. ShianMai had never particularly liked the *Siang-Tonu*. The faceless warriors were intimidating and cold. But perhaps the emperor wanted everyone to fear them. Perhaps he used that fear. *Father is far wiser than I am; there must be a purpose in it*. Everyone in the pavilion rose immediately to their feet as the imperial assassins entered their midst, escorting Kamgue, the *Khudang-yun*, emperor of the Seventh Empire.

ShianMai's father carried about him an air of power and authority that would mark him as a ruler even if he wore rags. They could see little of him beyond his mask. It was said in the marketplaces that the golden mask of the *Khudang-yun* was his real face, granted to him by the Divine Heavens. ShianMai knew that to be fiction, but even here, with his family, the emperor did not remove the sheath from his face. It made looking upon him somewhat discomfiting, his expression immovable and unreadable. When standing, the emperor was of average height for a man, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist not gone soft. His hair, when it could be seen, was iron-gray, as it had been from ShianMai's earliest memories. His golden-brown eyes were sharp like a raptor's, peering at them through the slits in his mask.

The emperor walked up the stone-paved path toward the pavilion. Everyone was quiet and respectful as he approached. However, before his mother could stop him, ShianMai's youngest half-brother came trundling up on stubby little legs shrieking, "Apa, Apa!"

Everyone drew breath, but the emperor only laughed and scooped the small boy into his arms. With a surprising strength for an old man, Kamgue flung the chunky

toddler into the air and caught him. Little Puonak giggled wildly, and everyone broke into nervous titters.

Puonak's mother came hurrying up, her face flushed. "I'm sorry, Sha-*dul*," Jaenik said with an awkward little bob. "I keep trying to teach him..."

"Quite all right, my dear," said the emperor. He embraced mother and child. "Will you accompany me into the pavilion?"

The other concubines were not *quite* hateful as they watched Jaenik take the emperor's arm to walk into the pavilion, but it was a close thing. ShianMai understood their resentment—most of them and their children had already been passed over by the emperor, and received little in the way of affection from him anymore.

"I overheard Paeming and Li-lam talking the other day," Dokumun muttered to ShianMai as their father began greeting the family. "They're worried that His High and Mightyship is about ready to take another concubine. It's been about as long as it was between Jaenik and Ju-kian before her, you know, and I suppose he gets bored with them after they have a few children."

"Don't be disgusting," ShianMai told her brother. "He has not bored of her yet—Jaenik's expecting again."

"Should I be thrilled? With another baby brother or sister? You know, normal people only have five or ten brothers and sisters. I have a friend at the university who is an *only child*. Can you imagine that? Wouldn't that be nice?"

"His parents probably cannot afford more children," ShianMai insisted. "Better an only child than risk growing destitute and becoming houseless."

"Oh come now. Haven't you ever dreamed of life on your own, allowed to take risks or make your own decisions? If you say 'no,' I'll know you're lying."

"I will take all the risks necessary to earn Father's favor," ShianMai responded quietly. "You can waste your time at University all you want, but the only real hope for success will come from pleasing the *Khudang-yun*. Otherwise, I'll be shuffled off into a political marriage with some ridiculous, pompous second-son of a nothing house. And who knows what will happen to *you*. You tempt fate every day with your attitude."

"Let me tell you about attitude—"

Another voice from behind interrupted their conversation. "You have spots on your robe, Uncle Dokumun. You'd better not let anyone see."

Their nephew Yusan was only nine, but he was the son of their eldest brother and well aware of his position. Though the emperor had never declared an heir, their eldest brother Yaosong was convinced it would be him or one of his own children. *I do not understand why Father has still not put him aside, like the others*. If all went according to Yaosong's plan, then the annoying boy before them might one day be emperor—and both ShianMai and Dokumun privately hoped they were never around to see it.

"I could probably make some spots on your face, if you would hold still a minute." Dokumun held up a clenched fist.

Yusan frowned at him. "You wouldn't dare. My father—"

"Is over there licking *my* father's boots. You should think about joining them, if you don't want my foot up your—"

“Be kind,” their mother quietly interrupted.

“You’ll see, Doku,” Yusan said viciously. “One day, you’re going to end up like Kuojan. Just you watch.”

The younger boy hurried away, but Doku and ShianMai were left in a somber sort of silence with their mother. Any mention of dead Kuojan was enough to leave them melancholy.

ShianMai resisted the urge to glare at their eldest brother. Yaosong chatted lightly with his wife and some of the other siblings. Yaosong was first-son of Sha House. Upon their mother’s death, he would be the leader of their house. He was also one of the leading candidates to be named the emperor’s heir. And all the emperor’s children knew that Yaosong was determined to receive that nomination, no matter what he had to do in the process.

“There is no reason to suspect him,” ShianMai said. “He’s not some foreign barbarian. He would not kill his own brother.”

“Sure,” Doku replied. “Just like there’s no reason to think he’s an arrogant—”

The pavilion abruptly quieted, as Kamgue had raised his hand for their attention. Out on the lawn, the youngest children and grandchildren still chased each other, but their shrieks were muffled. The air was warm and sticky as the adults turned their attention fully to him.

“We gather here this evening to welcome our newest member. Shisael and TuLian have asked me to give my blessing to their daughter. The time is now.”

Everyone quickly found seats on the various cushions spread about the pavilion. ShianMai and Dokumun helped their mother onto a divan and sat at her feet. They naturally grouped themselves by family-within-family. The concubines gathered their children about them. ShianMai’s other full-siblings were with their spouses and children, leaving her and Doku to sit with the emperor’s wife, their poor crazy mother Hiangni. The atmosphere was relaxed. *This is about as informal as we ever get*, ShianMai noted to herself. *At least while Father is around.*

ShianMai’s father took the new baby in his arms, holding the bundle out before him.

“We welcome this child into the circle of our family and give her the name Chiani.” Many of the women sighed with contentment upon hearing the name. “We bless her, with all the power granted unto us by the Divine Heavens, that this child might grow strong in wisdom and grace, that she might serve this family and our humble empire. We give unto her all the rights and privileges of our distaff house.” *Which isn’t much, all things considered. Being the illegitimate child of the emperor is worth a comfortable abode—and not much else. Maybe a good marriage, if she’s in good standing with him.* “Let it be recorded that Chiani was thus blessed on this day, that all the world might recognize her as one of our own. So let it be.”

He raised the girl-child into the air, and everyone clapped. Conversation broke out as the emperor handed the baby back to TuLian.

Dokumun was as cynical as ever, though ShianMai noted that he kept his voice down. “Only an emperor would bless a girl baby that she’ll grow up to serve the empire.”

“Power is the only thing that protects a member of this family,” ShianMai replied. *That, and Father’s favor. That is what I must seek myself, unless I want to end up married to someone completely worthless, like Wu Shoumul.*

The families with small children began drifting away, wishing a good evening to the emperor and those who remained. Doku looked like he intended to slip off too, but ShianMai glared at him. “Don’t shame Mother by disappearing. You need to at least talk to Father before you go. You’re an adult; you can act like it every once and awhile.” He muttered something unpleasant-sounding under his breath, but remained seated.

The emperor walked among the clusters, talking with his sons and daughters and their various mothers. “For that matter,” Dokumun murmured to her, “This is only the tiniest portion of our ‘family’. Half of the *Yu-gaochi* have been spawned by our gracious father. Mother is his *fourth wife*. Fourth! And that’s not *counting* the concubines! Do you realize how many children he’s had in the last century and a half? And grandchildren. And great-great-great-great grandchildren.”

“Only one of those so far.”

“There will be more before long. That’s the problem when you live forever, I guess. You outlive all your posterity.”

“He will not live forever,” said ShianMai. *One day he will pick an heir and move on. And oh! how Yaosong hopes it will be him!*

Doku and ShianMai were joined by their brother Mongnik. He kissed their mother’s cheek before sitting on the floor. The three of them faced the pavilion at large, watching their father’s progression around the room.

“How is the university?” Mongnik asked Doku.

“Well enough, I suppose. At least I am not trapped here.”

Mongnik nodded. “That is why I love my position. I have been doing a lot more traveling, these past few months. Cooped up here in the palace you just don’t hear about a lot of problems in the empire.”

ShianMai asked, “What kind of problems?”

Doku interjected. “Most likely he’ll tell us all the rebel-rumors, sweeping the empire with their wicked ways.” He turned mocking eyes on their brother. “Are you afraid of the Sunga Tobai too?”

Mongnik, however, spoke seriously. “The Sunga Tobai deserve some respect, and I don’t mean a pleasant kind. They’ve been disrupting trade throughout the empire for almost a year now. The lesser houses are afraid for themselves, and now the great houses are starting to get nervous. The army has been deployed to protect *merchants*. Do you remember the last time that happened? I do not. I think the Sunga Tobai deserve far more attention than our honored father cares to acknowledge.”

ShianMai frowned. “If they are that much of a nuisance, why haven’t they been wiped out?”

Mongnik’s voice dropped to a murmur. “Father *has* tried to eliminate them. He hasn’t tried all that hard yet, but all attempts have been unsuccessful so far.”

Dokumun and ShianMai exchanged glances. “How is it possible?”

“I do not know,” Mongnik replied, “But it is a trick that many would care to

learn. Father's warriors have never been bested like this before. Whoever is leading the Sunga Tobai—they know what they are doing. Either that, or someone on our side is not trying hard enough.”

Their oldest brother Yaosong strode over. Without ado, he moved to sit among them. As he sat, his elbow brushed a cup filled with red liquid perched on the edge of their mother's chair.

The little cup tumbled slower-than-life as ShianMai watched, the red fruit juice within heading directly for Yaosong's crisp white trousers. On Yaosong's other side, Dokumun began to turn, his eyes widening in slow motion as the cup tipped. ShianMai realized in an instant that Doku—already in disgrace—would be blamed for Yaosong's clumsiness. With anyone else, it would not be a major incident, but with Yaosong, the repercussions would be blown out of proportion. There was no telling what would happen to Doku. Compassion seared ShianMai.

As she watched the cup in that endless moment, the back of ShianMai's eyes burned and her insides seemed to light on fire. There almost seemed to be a brilliant flash of light, though it seemed to be inside of her, not without. At the same instant, her father looked directly into her eyes. She saw his eyes widen behind his mask.

ShianMai blinked. Time resumed its usual pace. Her heart was inexplicably racing. She looked back at Yaosong, but he had struck up a conversation with Mongnik. ShianMai searched, but the cup was nowhere to be found. For a moment, she thought she was going mad, but then she saw Dokumun's eyes searching, just like hers. The cup was gone, vanished.

The emperor was watching. ShianMai felt his gaze upon her, and a slow flush crept up the back of her neck. Her heart continued to pound and the back of her eyes burned almost to watering. Her breath came faster.

“What is the matter with you?” Doku asked.

“I do not feel well.” ShianMai avoided her father's eyes and got to her feet. “I think I will greet Father and go to bed.”

Dokumun studied her face for a moment. He also rose. “If you get to leave, then I'm going too.”

The two of them bid farewell to their brothers and helped their mother to her feet. ShianMai guided Hiangni toward the steps out of the pavilion. They met the emperor there.

He briefly brushed his fingertips across Hiangni's cheek. “Sleep well, my dear.” Hiangni did not reply, but gazed out into the gardens away from him. The emperor turned to ShianMai. “Are you well, daughter?”

“I have a headache, Sha-dul.” *I wish I could stay and speak with him!* she thought with regret. *He seems in a good mood tonight, perhaps I could speak to him about my lessons—* But the pounding in her head was growing worse by the moment, and she feared to imagine what she might accidentally say, in such a state. Better to wait for the prime moment, when she wasn't so off-balance. “I think I could do with some sleep. Dokumun and Mother agreed to walk me home.”

Kamgue nodded, but his hawk-eyes were enigmatic as he patted her cheek. *What*

did he see? she had to wonder. Did he know where the cup had gone? ShianMai didn't like the sudden chill that crept up her spine at her father's touch.

"Good night to you all, then." He gave Doku a piercing glance before returning to the family gathering.

ShianMai did not speak as they walked along the still-warm path, and her brother seemed to catch something of her mood. A fierce ache was building behind her eyes, pounding against her temples. She was glad for the quiet.

In the distance, they heard a low booming noise. "What is that?" ShianMai queried.

"One of the great houses threw a big party tonight," Doku responded. "That will be the fireflowers."

"What a waste! Fireflowers are so expensive."

Doku shrugged. "The *Yu-gaochi* like to show off their wealth."

At their mother's house, ShianMai helped get their mother into bed. Hiangni wished her a vague goodnight. ShianMai walked back out to the main room. Doku was sprawled on some cushions nearby. ShianMai drank a full cup of water and stood near the open window drinking in the night air in equal measure.

"Do you ever feel—different?"

Doku snorted. "Besides living in this monumental madhouse, you mean?"

She sighed. "Father's position necessitates our family being different."

"Whatever you say. It's still a madhouse. A madhouse-menagerie."

"Can't you ever be serious?"

"Only if I must. And even then I find it debatable."

ShianMai set her cup down. "I think I will sleep now."

"Don't let the madmen get you in the dark."

"Good night, Doku. See you in the morning."

"If luck continues to forsake you."

In her sleeping chamber, ShianMai gently folded her evening clothes, exchanging them at the clothespress for her nightshift. Beneath the soft sheets, she pondered the disappearing cup. It was long after she fell asleep before Dokumun made it to his own bed.

CHAPTER 4

The village of Ju-Gomochen nestled into the northern mountains like a cub seeking comfort from his mother. The homes at the farther end of the village were terraced into the hills themselves, climbing above the village proper. Ju-Gomochen was small, but prosperous for a village of its size. There were several mines in the region, and the people thrived on the backs of their metalsmiths. This happened to be convenient for Telsharu's purpose.

He waited until evening to enter the village, with shadows in the streets that would disguise any oddness about him. It was almost unnecessary. The few villagers who looked his way quickly averted their eyes. Telsharu smiled—though they barely glanced at him, their subconscious minds recognized the danger of his presence. Anyone who actually looked into his sightless eyes trembled with fear, and most of them ran from him outright. In the other villages, it had hardly mattered. Here, it mattered—for the time being. Telsharu covered his eyes with a cloth and kept his head bent to avoid drawing attention.

Through his sightless vision, he could sense the forge-fires of a half dozen smiths still at work. It was almost a kind of taste, how Telsharu could tell which metals they worked, at what heat, and with what emotions the smiths themselves toiled. Emotion was often the clue, the trigger that was needed to discover something essential. And emotions could be exploited—there was power in that, power indeed. Telsharu hummed an old song to himself as he walked straight to the forge of a sword-smith and entered.

The man was not very tall—a full head shorter than Telsharu—but he had broad shoulders and arms thick with muscle. He pulsed in shades of unseen color, which indicated that he felt great pride, probably about his work, yet he was also deeply content. Telsharu praised his own unconscious decision to come here. The smith was perfect.

Upon catching sight of his visitor, the smith set down his tongs and stepped forward. “How might I serve you, sir?” He tensed upon seeing the disconcerting ragged cloth wrapped around Telsharu's blind eyes.

With slow, non-threatening movements, Telsharu reached to his waist and drew his sword. To his Aura-vision, the sword shimmered with a dark malice. The broken tip blazed to Telsharu's eyes, but he knew it would appear as nothing more than jagged metal to the smith. Keeping his voice low and even, Telsharu asked, “Can you repair it?”

The smith relaxed, his eyes were now focused on the blade. “May I?” he asked, holding out his hands to inspect the damaged sword.

Trying to disguise his reluctance, Telsharu handed over his weapon. For several moments, the smith carefully studied the sword, while Telsharu carefully studied the man. Finally, the smith returned his gaze to Telsharu. “It will never be as strong as it once was,” the smith declared at last. He pointed to the jagged tip. “The manner of the break, you see. Now, I could create you an identical piece, very inexpensive—”

“This was given to me by my father,” Telsharu lied. “I wish to restore it for sentimental reasons.”

“Ah. That is another matter. I can restore it, and a jeweler won’t be able to see the join. As long as it’s not being used in battle—”

“Perhaps a mix of the two?” Telsharu suggested. “It needs to withstand *some* wear, you understand.”

“Of course, of course. Now, about the price—?” Telsharu could “see” the man considering his customer’s rags.

Telsharu began to manipulate the man’s judgment with subtle weavings of emotion that he manipulated in the Void between them. A little nudge, enough to suggest. In the same moment, he shook a small cloth purse. “I care only for your best work—and promptly.”

The man’s eyes brightened. “At once, sir!”

Telsharu watched, bemused, as the smith set to work. *So simple*. All he had to do was suggest to the smith’s Inner Spirit that the little bag was full of coins rather than rocks. Suggestion was ridiculously simple. One of the first rebukes he had ever received from Hanu Zan was when he had begun to manipulate the emotions of others around him through the Void against their Spirit. “Every man deserves to think and feel for themselves,” Hanu Zan had scolded. “It is dishonorable for you to force what you want on someone else.”

Well, Telsharu had learned quickly that honor was impossible to judge in war. His work depended on making snap judgments; quick actions with quick results. But, he knew destroying the emperor would require unconventional means.

At least the smith’s greed had not overcome his craftsmanship. As Telsharu watched him work through eyes that did not see, the smith heated the blade next to the metal that would reform the broken point. Telsharu was keenly aware of the small shard still embedded in his chest. Each pump at the bellows, each swing of the smith’s hammer shot pain through the fibers of Telsharu’s being. The sword, though broken, still had power over him. *Keeping me alive*, he gritted his teeth, *also binding me to the emperor*. That *I could do without*. Like a conscious creature, the sword did not want to lose that hold. Yet, Telsharu was the stronger. He would use the blade’s binding power for his own purposes.

Soon he too was sweating from the heat of the forge, but he did not move to wait outside or come back later like a typical customer. He watched the smith’s every motion. The shorter man did not seem disturbed by Telsharu’s presence, and went about his pounding. Telsharu’s knowledge of sword-smithing was very limited; Hanu

Zan had once made him try to work at a forge, but the experiment was an utter failure. Telsharu had ended with a chunk of weak, badly tempered metal that would not be suitable for nails, and had to be thrown out. But, in spite of his limited knowledge, Telsharu could see the smith knew what he was doing. He moved with confidence and surety of movements that came only from long experience. With each passing moment, the sword's Aura brightened in Telsharu's "vision," until he could hardly bear to look upon it.

To look upon it, but with sightless eyes thanks to Hanu Zan. Telsharu's sight was a view of the Void, the expanse beyond consciousness. The Void was everything around him. *Everything and nothing, all things and people and creatures displayed as their true selves*, he thought. After Awakening, Telsharu had learned to manipulate things through the Void with his mind. It was an incredible power shared by very few. The colors and shades would mean nothing to an un-Awakened person, and Telsharu used the words only for lack of any better. But the brightening Aura was quickly reaching its climax, and Telsharu was squinting against it.

After a final quenching, the smith held up the finished blade. "What do you think? Not bad, mm? Needs sharpening, of course, but perhaps you'd like to try a swing first?"

The blade almost seemed to hum as the smith pressed the hilt into Telsharu's hand. The entire sword glowed painfully bright in Telsharu's Void-vision from base to new, pointed tip. The hilt felt sure and comfortable in his hand, like always.

"Feels like new, eh?"

"It will suffice for now." Telsharu held the blade straight out, and pushed his own Inner Spirit into the blade, dimming the Radiance of the emperor's power slightly. Expending even that small amount of energy tired him. He quickly sheathed the sword, and turned to leave.

"Pardon me, honored sir, but my pay?"

Telsharu paused. Without turning around, he dropped the bag of rocks to the ground, and then continued walking.

Annoyed, the smith grumbled as he scooped up the bag and examined its contents.

"Ahhh!" the man shouted, but was instantly cut off. In a flash, Telsharu drew the newly made sword and thrust it directly through the smith's heart. The man's eyes widened, surprise plain in his Aura. As his heart stopped beating, his life pulsed up the blade of Telsharu's sword, his Aura bleeding up the blade, dimming the terrible brightness. Telsharu took deep, satisfied breaths, feeling strength return to his muscles. The blade still exuded the emperor's malice, but he could easily sense the difference—no longer did his body serve the shard embedded in his chest. Now it served him. *A necessary sacrifice.*

The drained body of the smith dropped at his feet, gray and dull. Telsharu walked back out to the village street. Night had fallen in full. But that did not stop Telsharu from seeing the quick movements of two dozen men who probably thought themselves hidden in the shadows. *Imperial soldiers?* These must be among those who were tracking his escape from Nao Gak San, and heard the shout of the smith. Seen through

the Void, darkness could not hide them. They were nervous, but only because of their duties, not because they expected to face him. They would not see *him* coming until it was much too late. They were vulnerable.

Hanu Zan had always sought to protect the vulnerable.

Telsharu smiled. He walked forward into the village, pulling the cloth away from his sightless eyes. *Let them tremble. Let them try to flee. It makes no difference now.* Telsharu was free. Free to pursue revenge.

CHAPTER 5

Morning was Aisina's favorite time of day. She loved the briskness in the air, the sense of limitless possibility. She loved the bright sunshine, the warmth upon her skin and hair. She loved the smell of the orchards beyond the walls of the home she shared with Daryun.

Their holding was large, hers and Daryun's, considering their circumstances. The property itself had been her father's wedding gift, and one most appreciated. Daryun and Aisina had constructed and planted everything within their gardens themselves. As they had gained more students—and with them more income—they had used the money to improve their property. They had three separate buildings now—their private little house, a bathhouse, and their schoolhouse for the fighting arts, their *shutao-kai*.

The school consisted mainly of one large, wood-paneled room. Equipment was limited; it contained a small rack of wooden practice swords, a handful of battered shields for practice, and an equally battered bag stuffed with rags and sand for punching and kicking. Despite this, the *shutao-kai* itself was clean, neat, bright, and orderly. Aisina allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction.

These morning hours were reserved for the advanced students. At *Shutao-kai* Jahel, they did not use an elaborate rank system like many other fighting schools. There were no symbols of rank, no colored tassels or crests, and no elaborate titles. Daryun wouldn't put up with such things. Some students expressed a desire for those signs of recognition and advancement—mostly to show off to family and friends. Unfortunately, those students often left without progressing very far in their training. Instead, there were novices, there were adepts, there was Aisina, and there was Daryun.

Presently, Daryun instructed a small class of those deemed worthy of his teachings. Typically, when Aisina felt one of her beginning pupils was ready to advance, she recommended the student to Daryun. Her husband needed only a moment's glance at the child to judge. Sometimes he said they were not ready, but over the years, Aisina had gotten better at identifying the marks, though she still could not tell them at a glance. Few of her recommendations were rejected anymore.

Daryun glanced up at her from where he sat in the meditation circle. They both sat cross-legged in loose shirts and *sampings* over trousers, all of deep green to match the students'. Aisina closed her eyes and began the regular breathing. Ten counts in

through her nose, hold for ten, out through her mouth for ten, hold for ten. She fell into the rhythm easily, and it triggered the regular exercise without prompting.

Aisina reached inside herself as Daryun taught. It started with an awareness of her body. She could identify each muscle, feel each ache and discomfort—and she soothed each one individually. She took her time, bringing her physical awareness to a peak, and then releasing it. When her body was completely relaxed, she reached further within. In the next layer, she found her mental and emotional turmoil—concerns about her father and his continuing disapproval, worries about finances and the students, and her deep-rooted concerns about Daryun’s incessant craving to wander. He claimed that this urge no longer existed, that he had left that life behind upon their marriage. Her worries remained, however. She forced herself to ignore the concerns, for now. She did not justify them or try to deal with them. She simply stilled her mind and heart, refusing to allow anything to disturb her inner and outer calm.

She was ready to reach through to her innermost self—the Inner Spirit or Radiance. It had taken years of training for her to reach this far. It took a high degree of self-discipline that Aisina did not naturally have in order to master her Inner Spirit. But now she could reach within almost instinctively, to connect with her true self.

Warmth seemed to fill her from head to toe. She was suddenly and acutely aware of the others in the room. With her Inner Spirit prompting her, she was able to notice subtle signs in their body language and posture. She could tell who was agitated, who was nervous, who was distracted, thinking of other things. A few were close to achieving mental stillness, and a few more who were approaching the initial physical control. Finding her inner Radiance gave her unique insights.

After a time, Daryun ended their meditation. They all bowed to one another across the circle. “Outside today for arrow exercises,” he instructed. They all moved out to the small shooting range set up in the garden. But Daryun was the only one who picked up a bow. Aisina and the others formed a line near the targets.

Daryun called for the newest students in their class to step forward. These were the least experienced. Daryun raised his bow and nocked a blunt arrow. “Your task is merely to detect the arrows,” he told them. “In your beginning classes, you learned to trust. You know now that my arrows will not hit you. This time you must detect where the arrows will come and where they will strike. Only you will know how well you succeed.”

“Yes sir!”

From down the range, Daryun began to fire. Each student only got a few arrows before they had to switch places. Most of them forgot their lessons entirely—Aisina could see that they lost their inner stillness as soon as the arrows came shooting their way. *They will learn, eventually.*

The next group was more advanced. They practiced dodging. Instead of shooting to one side or the other, Daryun shot his arrows directly at them. The arrows were blunt and padded, so they would receive nothing more than a welt if struck. It also meant the arrows flew much slower than real arrows.

One of this group was starting to “see” the arrows coming—an older woman

named Tolyuk Shan, who had studied with them from the start. Aisina could see Shan's inner stillness, and flickers of what Daryun identified as Radiance, sometimes called the Inner Spirit. Shan moved with an unnatural speed, seeming almost to blur out of the arrows' path. A few of the arrows still struck. But she was getting better.

"Jahel Aisina."

Shan offered a nod as the two of them exchanged places. Aisina closed her eyes for a moment. Deep breaths, in through her nose and out through her mouth. She calmed her nerves, and then focused on her distant husband.

The first arrow sent rocketing waves across her Inner Spirit, and she darted out of the way just as it shot past. Drawing speed from within, Aisina easily swept past the second. With complete clarity, Aisina could feel the third arrow coming on the heels of the second. With a burst of Radiance-fueled speed, Aisina reached out with both hands, in a gesture of prayer.

She caught the arrow.

For a moment, there was silence. Then the students broke out into cheers. "Jahel-*raya!*" Shan exclaimed, and the others followed suit. Daryun gave her a smile and a nod. Aisina flushed with pleasure.

But the celebration did not last long. Attuned as they were, they all heard running footsteps long before the runner passed the gate into the Jahel property. Those who had attained mental focus could hear the urgency in those steps, and the tinge of fear. A ripple passed through their focus, and the cheers died in their throats. Aisina took a measure of comfort from Daryun's steady calm. She knew her husband would be alert to any danger. He simply strolled to the entrance of their property, by all appearances as if there were nothing out of the ordinary.

The gate opened, and the runner entered with sandals still upon his feet. It was Gushon, one of the beginning students. He was sweaty and mussed—clearly, he had run all the way from the village. His eyes were wide with excitement and fear as he looked at Daryun. "Jahel-*Kotsu!*" the boy exclaimed, "There's news in the village! My father said I should come tell you, that you need to know."

Daryun placed a steady hand on the boy's shoulder. "Be calm, then share this news."

Gushon took a steadying breath as he had been taught. Aisina nodded her approval. He straightened to face Daryun properly. "There's been word of an escape—from *Nao Gak San*, Master Jahel! They say nobody's ever escaped from there before, but somebody has, and took most of the prison down!"

The students murmured among themselves. However, Aisina knew Daryun well enough to see the utter lack of surprise in his face. This was more than his usual stoic calm. Somehow, Daryun already knew, had already heard about this unthinkable event. *What else does he know?*

"There's more," said Gushon.

"Please, go on," said Daryun.

Gushon's eyes were still wide. "Villages south of *Nao Gak San* have been deserted, sir. Some burned by flames out of nowhere. Some are empty, and no one knows

where any of the people have gone. Others have left their villages, heading south to safety. But they say that in some of the villages a *single* warrior attacked them. Just *one man!* And sir—” Gushon’s voice dropped to a whisper. “They say it’s *Telsharu the Cursed*—that he’s the one who escaped and destroyed Nao Gak San, and the villages. They say he’s coming again to kill the emperor.”

The students were utterly silent. No one moved, as though they were all figures made of painted stone. When Daryun spoke, it was like someone came stomping through to shake them awake from some terrible dream.

“It is impossible for us to know the truth of this message,” Daryun said calmly, “However, we must each do our own part.” He spoke to Gushon, and to all of the students. “Some of you train with me because your fathers see honor in it for your families. Some of you are here because it is fun. But I tell you this: that your true purpose in studying *shutao-aman* is one I hope you never have to face. For the fighting arts, while seeming innocent at times, are nevertheless the tools and foundations of war. Your training may one day help to protect this very village. Some among you will find your purpose elsewhere, as you are called to protect strangers in some other place.”

He looked around at his students. They were very serious; but now Daryun smiled, to take the dread from their hearts. “Most likely you will remain innocent students of this *shutao-kai*, and face no more violence than the smack of my wooden sword when you move too slowly.”

His students relaxed, a few smiled. Yet Aisina was still suspicious. Daryun’s words spoke with far too much assurance. *Protect strangers in some other place.* She could not resist the need to speak. “Our humble village of Ju-Shui is fortunate to have a powerful *Kotsu* here to provide his protection.” And she bowed.

The students followed suit. Daryun bowed in return, but when he straightened, his features were closed off again. To Gushon he said, “Thank you for bringing this news. Tell your father and his friends that they need not fear, though if they wish to move their families, they would not be seen as fools. One’s family should always be a man’s first and foremost thought.”

Yes, came Aisina’s bitter thought, *but you do not mean it quite the same for yourself as you mean it for these boys and their fathers, do you husband!*

Gushon ran back to the village to spread word of the Master of *Shutao-kai* Jahel who did not fear the legendary Telsharu the Cursed. *You fool,* thought Aisina. Daryun chivvied the students back to work.

Aisina spent her morning with the advanced students, and ate with them the cold lunch she had prepared. Shan sat beside her in companionable silence, and Aisina was grateful—she did not trust herself to speak, at present. The afternoon she spent with the beginning students, while Daryun took on private lessons with the most advanced pupils. The majority of Aisina’s students were quite young, some barely more than toddlers. Daryun encouraged such early instruction. A few were older, a few adults, and these were trusted to guide the younger students through their exercises.

Finally, her last class of the day ended. The students bowed and she dismissed them. A few lingered to show her techniques they had ‘mastered’, to get her approval.

A few of the youngest bounced about the room for a short time until their parents or attendants came to fetch them. It was nearly dusk by the time they all were gone, everything put away, and the gates locked for the night.

She came to stand by Daryun on the veranda. They watched the last vestiges of daylight fade into darkness. Aisina knew that his mind was elsewhere, some memory where she did not have place. Aisina was not distressed. Impatient, perhaps, but not distressed. Aisina always had to work a little harder to find her inner calm. This time, she merely waited; ready to see what fool-brained excuse or scheme Daryun would try this time. *It's always something, with him.*

But Daryun said little. After staring out at the night sky for some time, he reached out and put his arm around her shoulders. Aisina allowed the embrace. Daryun kissed her on the forehead, and held her for a moment longer. Then without a word, he turned and entered their house.

He continued in silence as he disrobed and prepared for sleep. Uncertain, Aisina followed suit. She did not know how late it was when sleep finally claimed her.

* * *

Daryun looked at his wife's sleeping face with a trace of sadness. Even in sleep, Aisina did not appear entirely restful. A crease remained between her brows, a slight downturn of her lip. *Sometimes I wish we had never wed, came his unbidden thought. I wish I had not brought such trouble to you.*

He rose silently from their pallet and moved to one of his chests. The hinges were well oiled and made no sound as he lifted the lid. He lifted out the clothing and other articles that filled the top half of the trunk, to reveal the contents underneath.

Daryun extracted two sets of clothes that had seen better days, ragged things in unfashionable shades. The patches in the garments were neatly stitched, but that did not disguise the wear upon the fabric. One set, Daryun donned. From the trunk, he retrieved an old rucksack, into which he packed the second set of clothes.

He moved aside a few more things—a handful of old letters and drawings, and a second handful of maps. He selected a pair of sandals whose state matched the clothes he wore. Then, at the very bottom of the trunk, he uncovered his old sword.

Daryun lifted the sword and held it for a long moment. The day before his wedding to Aisina, he had placed the sword in this trunk. He had not touched it since that day. It brought him a sense of regret. Not the sword itself, he corrected, for he harbored it no ill feelings. But he regretted the necessity of current circumstances.

I must do my part. Daryun's right hand tightened on the sword hilt. *It is my duty as Master of this shutao-kai, if nothing else. The Cursed One will stop at nothing to tear the empire to shreds. I must do my part to stop him. Aisina will be safer here. I can only hope that this business will resolve soon, so I may return quickly to her side.*

He stood and tied the sheath to his waist. The sheath was plain, well worn like the rest of his ensemble; he quietly slipped the sword into it. He shouldered his pack and picked up his sandals, which he would don out on the porch. *And thus, I become the wandering swordsman once more.*

Daryun looked again to Aisina's face. *Be safe, be well, I love you*, he thought in blessing. From under the pallet, he withdrew the letter he had composed earlier in the evening. She would be upset, to be sure. Perhaps she would think him a vagabond, just as her father still did. But in any case, Daryun prayed to the Divine Heavens that she would be safe, while Daryun went forth to do his duty.

* * *

She woke suddenly. She was completely disoriented, bewildered by strange and colorful dreams full of death and fire. It took Aisina several moments to calm her clamoring pulse and rediscover herself on the sleeping mat, tangled in her covers.

Alone.

Where was Daryun? Where was her husband? She couldn't hear him anywhere in the house. Sometimes when he could not sleep, he rose to meditate and ponder. But unless he was being particularly still and silent—and she had to acknowledge that possibility—he was not in the house. Aisina quickly rose, threw on a robe and went out to the veranda where Daryun most often meditated during the night.

No sign of him.

Feeling the stirrings of panic, Aisina scoured the house, and then moved to the school building. Both were empty of anyone but her. She walked through their small garden full of vegetables, then their even smaller garden of flowers. She went to the gate—still locked from the inside. But Aisina knew that meant nothing. Not if he was *really* gone.

Aisina knelt there, at their gate. *Their* gate. Belonging to *both* of them. Wasn't that part of marriage?—standing together, man and wife, against trial and tribulation and threat and disaster?

Suddenly, she could *see* him. The picture in her mind was so clear it was eerie. She saw Daryun walking down a jungle path under a hot afternoon sun, his clothes ragged and covered with mud, heading into rocky hills with that old sword upon his hip. He had a look of determination about him. The image quickly faded, leaving nothing but the darkness and the locked gate before her.

Aisina felt anger growing within her. She dashed the tears away. "You great fool," she whispered. She threw herself to her feet. Aisina was not a fatalist. She was not a weak-willed woman. She was not a coward. She would face this with straight shoulders and her iron resolve.

He had placed the note under a fresh red orchid, her favorite flower. She picked the petals and crumpled them in her fingers, one by one, as she read his words. He scorned himself both for leaving her, and for leaving her in secret. He condemned himself for bringing danger upon her in the first place. His greatest joy and his greatest regret, he called her. Those words stung. Then, her determination took control.

"I knew, and I warned you when first we met, that I would bring nothing but danger and heartbreak into your life," he wrote. "I am grateful for the time we have had together. It is because of you that I must leave. Tonight. I should not have waited so long. It is my duty as *Kotsu* of *Shutao-kai* Jahel to do what I can to stop this threat.

I do not know if I will actually make a difference. But I cannot sit by and do nothing while innocents are dying. Not when staying with you might mean bringing such danger down upon you. I swear to you and the Divine Heavens, I will do everything in my power to protect you. You have my solemn oath.”

The letter was unsigned. But Aisina silently cursed his unwritten name. For a time, she cursed him, that she had ever known him, given him the ability to cause her such pain.

Yet, despite Aisina’s tendency toward anger and spite, she did not hold grudges. Her anger faded, leaving her with a determination of her own.

Of two things she was certain. The first was that despite his flaws, his past as a wandering houseless swordsman, and his foolish conviction that Aisina was made of fine porcelain—Aisina loved her husband. Loved him more than she had ever loved anything or anyone. The second was that she *must* carry on. Other women might collapse under such circumstances, might grow desperate and foolish. But Aisina knew her own strength. She would persevere. *And you will come home to me once more, Daryun. We will be together again.*

CHAPTER 6

Xansul relied almost solely on moving through the Void as he approached the outer wall of the imperial palace. Human senses could be dull, or deceptive. Like many students of the *shutao-aman* that sought to utilize a consciousness of the Void, he had been blindfolded for days at a time on many occasions during his training. The exercise had taught him to rely on his ability to ‘see’ the Void, rather than on his sense of sight. After his Awakening, Xansul had learned when to use his physical senses, but also when to rely on his grasp of the Void instead of his eyes and ears. Penetrating the fortress-like home of the emperor was a time for the latter.

Guards along the wall glowed in the Void, vibrant with life and emotion. Xansul thought once again how fortunate it was that there were so few *Seyin-Kotsu*, the Awakened. If more than they few could so easily read the hearts of men—the greed, pride, lust, fear, hope, anger, love—their society would change dramatically. It would completely alter how human beings related to one another. *Maybe that would not be bad*, he mused, *but it certainly would change things*.

Focus. Xansul approached the wall. It was a sheer face of stone that rose many stories high. The stone was mostly smooth, but with heightened sensitivity, Xansul could easily detect minute flaws and joints between blocks. He approached the wall and reached for the first such joint above his head. He began his ascent.

No ordinary man could have made this climb. Even the average *shutao-yun* would find it virtually impossible. But Xansul was an Awakened student of the Silent Wind.

So few people understood Awakening. It was not a magical event, as so many supposed. Xansul thought that Enlightening would be a better term, but who was he to change a millennium-long tradition? After years of spiritual study and physical hardship, Xansul had finally come to his awareness of the Void. He had finally grasped the mysteries, understood the lessons of his masters, who spoke of becoming one with the universe. Xansul had reached beyond himself—and found an entire world of power and energy and spirit, there for any who knew how to look.

Through his precise manipulation through the Void, he controlled the air around him. His focus was disciplined and precise. The air, under his direction, seemed to buoy him up. He felt light, almost weightless, as he slid in silence up the face of the wall. He could feel each shift in the wind far before it reached him. He could hear guards’ footsteps on the wall above. Like some unnatural creature of the night, Xansul flew over the edge of the wall and silently landed on the walkway while the guards

were turned in other directions.

Xansul did not bother to attack the guards. There was no need, and he wanted to penetrate as far as possible without raising alarm. Crossing the long white bridge undetected was no mean feat, and there was much farther to go.

Moving in silence was one of the primary skills of the Silent Wind *Shutao-aman*. Silence always seemed, to the uninitiated, easier to achieve than it actually was. It was a simple enough matter to be quiet, though it often hampered rapid motion. True silence was an entirely different matter. Only one completely attuned to the world around oneself could perform such a feat. It required one Awakened to the Void.

Xansul closed his eyes for a moment, and opened his mind to the great expanse around him. He could hear and feel the slightest breeze. Calmly he matched his breathing to the subtle weavings of the air around him, and in return it matched him.

Soon, he had control of the wind, and he wrapped himself in it. Twisting here and there, the air now matched his very movement. Like a dance he moved completely synchronous with the shiftings of the air. He was completely masked. Initiates of the Silent Wind could nearly be undetectable at times, but only a *Seyin Kotsu* could go truly unseen. Still, acting through the Void so directly required an almost constant meditative state. Upon exiting this “meditation,” Xansul would feel the weight of the physical world hit him again. The longer he maintained it, the more strength it would take from him later. Learning to use this power wisely and conservatively was as important as learning to use it at all.

Xansul circled along the outer wall, staying low to avoid detection by the guards. He came to the narrowest gap between where he stood and the next secure layer of the palace. It was the width of 30 or 40 paces. Spreading his awareness through the Void, Xansul checked to be sure no one would see. When he had the precise moment, Xansul gathered the power of air around and behind him. He ran crossways and launched.

Propelled by his leap and borne up by the manipulated air, he soared across the intervening space. If anyone had seen him, dark against the dark sky, only detectable by stars that winked as he passed, they would have thought him a ghost. His *samping* and trousers were bound tight to his body so they would not flap in the wind. He landed on the next wall. He quickly ducked behind a rampart. A guard marched past, oblivious.

Here, Xansul descended from the wall. He would have to cross the vast imperial gardens in order to reach the third and innermost palace. On his last official visit as son of Long House, Xansul had mapped out several possible routes through the carefully tended jungle gardens. In his mind, he had picked the least-traveled paths between the homes of the emperor’s wife, concubines, and their many offspring. Once down from the wall, Xansul immediately set off through the gardens. He spread his senses through the Void as far as he could, monitoring every presence. He could tell which minds were sleeping and which were still awake despite the lateness of evening. He passed a guard post full of alert sentries, the small house of a concubine still awake with an ill child, a garden where two young people were wrapped in a tight embrace. Each time he came close to a waking mind, Xansul slowed. Though he fully trusted

his own ability to stay silent and invisible, he would be cautious, here so close to the emperor's home.

Finally, he reached the innermost palace wall. Xansul took a few moments to examine the structure, to seek out anyone who might happen to look this direction during his climb, and to scour through the Void for the presence of others on the other side of the wall. He timed the passing guards to determine the best possible moment to begin his climb. When he felt most secure, Xansul left the trees and walked straight up to the wall. Still masked by the wind, Xansul reached for the first joints in the wall.

A mental sense of something in the Void alerted him. Xansul ducked, just in time. He felt the breeze of a blade passing over his head, close enough to slice a few of his hairs. Immediately Xansul whirled around to tackle his enemy, but he caught only air. Xansul turned again, more cautiously seeking his target.

An imperial assassin crouched in the shadow of the wall, a pair of daggers extended toward Xansul. The twin blades glinted in the moonlight, wickedly sharp. Xansul felt a prickle on the back of his neck as he examined his enemy. The assassin was garbed in black-and-crimson robes, black boots and gloves, with a full black mask and hood that completely obscured the face. But what made Xansul's hair stand up was that the assassin, too, manipulated the Void to mask his presence. In fact, he was more hidden than Xansul himself.

The assassin lunged. Xansul quickly drew his *shukran*, the crescent-moon knives which felt most comfortable in his hands. He diverted the first descending dagger, but the assassin's left blade hooked through his handguard and caught. Xansul took advantage and arched his first *shukran* toward the assassin's body. The assassin angled to the side, just out of range. But before he could act further, Xansul kicked him square in the chest. The assassin fell back catching himself in a crouch. Without hesitation, the assassin leaped toward Xansul again. His twin knives flew like a flurry. Xansul warding off the left with his *shukran* and lowered his shoulder to one side barely in time to avoid having his throat slit. The assassin used the opportunity to move in and ram Xansul with his elbow. Xansul grunted and stumbled backward; the assassin seized his opportunity and fell upon his victim—

“Who's there?”

The sudden voice disrupted both fighters for just an instant. As the assassin dove forward, he was caught unaware by Xansul's right *shukran*. The blade rammed through the assassin's chest. Xansul felt the assassin tense up, then give a muffled, strained moan. Finally, the body went limp, and rolled off Xansul. Xansul, momentarily forgetting the disruptive voice that had just saved him, heaved an audible sigh of relief. Even for a *Seyin-Kotsu*, defeating one of the imperial assassins was no small feat.

“Who's there?” The voice repeated more earnestly. Xansul woke from his brief daze, and silently pulled back further into the foliage of the garden.

The voice came from Xansul's right, along the wall. A girl stood there, looking directly toward them. Not just any girl at that—this was the *Sha-rayang*, the emperor's youngest legitimate daughter. Xansul paused uncertainly. Had she seen him? Was it possible? Both he and the assassin had been supernaturally hidden, essentially invisible

to the un-Awakened. Detection seemed unlikely. Who was this girl? Her emotions were strangely obscured.

Something in the Void flared, and the girl was outlined in blinding brightness. Xansul felt an overwhelming pull, a need to speak to her. There were no words to express the intensity of that draw; it was like nothing he had ever felt before. Xansul did not think, he simply found his feet moving him toward the young *Sha-rayang* as her eyes still scoured the night.

* * *

The night air was still and close, and the grounds were very dark. No moon lit the trees and buildings, but ShianMai strode in the confidence of long familiarity. She luxuriated in the feel of the night air blowing through the hair she let spill down her back. ShianMai enjoyed her few moments of quiet freedom. She knew she ought to be inside and asleep by this hour, but ShianMai drank in the night air like cool water on a hot afternoon. The peace of the moment was undeniable, particularly in comparison to the hustle and bustle of the day—of any day in this place. In the week since little Chian's naming, she'd had hardly a moment to herself. Sometimes she just needed a chance to unwind and meditate.

There was a spot by the inner palace wall—a small clearing, barely big enough to be called a clearing at all. The regular guards of this section were familiar with her nighttime habits, and they gave her privacy in this place. ShianMai liked to think of it as the one place that was truly hers. The little space was lined with a thick wall of trees, and backed by the stone wall. She crossed a tiny footbridge over a stream, which filled the air with pleasant gurgling. A guard on the wall noticed her presence, and he quietly walked away down the wall so she would be alone. *Thank you*, she thought in his direction.

Beside the wall, a pile of carefully sculpted stones created a natural bench. It was almost a throne; she could imagine the clearing as a great hall, full of babbling and gurgling voices. In this hall, there was no one to boss her about, no one to correct her mistakes during lessons, no one to tell ShianMai that the days of the Great Empresses were far gone, and to pay proper obeisance to their favored emperor.

ShianMai sighed. Having an active imagination was certainly not an element of correct behavior for someone of her age, gender, and station. She let the vision of her hall disperse like fog in the wind, until nothing but tatters remained. Her clearing seemed bare now by comparison, just a dark spot in the jungle.

It was not that her position was particularly bothersome. Being an Imperial Princess was certainly a comfortable rank to be. But there was still so much out of her control. So much in her life depended on the favor of the emperor—her father who barely seemed to notice her most of the time. *He is kind, but little more can be said.* Very soon, a marriage would be arranged for her, and unless ShianMai found a way to influence the emperor, she would have no say in the matter. *There must be a way to earn his favor. If I am to make any difference in this world, first I must please him.* She moved toward her makeshift throne, mulling it over.

She had hardly sat down when something peculiar happened, all at once, exactly like the evening when the cup had mysteriously disappeared. The back of her eyes burned and her heart suddenly started to race, and she suddenly felt like there were eyes staring into the back of her head. ShianMai whirled around. From the corner of her eye, it looked as though two men all in black stood in the trees down the wall from her clearing. But when she had turned all the way to face them, they vanished.

“Who’s there?” she called out.

There was no response. Everything was quiet and still. She scanned the trees, but there was no sign of the two men or anyone else. As her heart began to slow back to its natural pace, ShianMai turned away, shaking her head. Bizarre fantasies, she chided herself.

A hand covered her mouth.

“Don’t struggle,” whispered a calm male voice. He pulled her deeper into the shadows under the trees. “I will not hurt you.”

Immediately ShianMai’s training went into effect. Years ago she had been taught what to do if she was ever kidnapped, and her voice-recognition lessons only added to her reactions. Go along with it at first. Get him talking. Slowly, she nodded. The hand moved from her mouth—but not far, in case she screamed. “Who are you?” she asked, trying to match his quiet calm. “What do you want of me?”

“Of you, *Sha-rayang*?” He chuckled. “Why, of you I wish nothing more than your company for the few unworthy moments I shall steal of you.”

The fact that he knew her identity shouldn’t surprise her; the emperor’s children were well known in the capital city. But it still sent an odd tingle down her spine. ShianMai mentally dismissed the sensation, focusing instead on registering her captor as she had been taught. A few more phrases, and she would have the key triggers from his voice. “Who are you?”

He was so quiet she couldn’t even hear him breathe. “You have no need of my name, *Sha-rayang*.”

“Are you one of the *Sunga Tobai*?”

A small catch in his breath meant she had startled him a little. “I’m afraid that is information you—and your father—are not privy to. My apologies.”

Within the palace walls, an alarm gong began to toll. Without thinking, she started to turn toward him.

“Ah-ah-ah—” he said with surprising gentleness as he grasped her chin and turned her face forward. “I know you wish to admire my good looks, but that would not do.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Again you ask questions which I must not answer.” His voice was hardly more than a breath in her ear. “My question for you, though—I wonder how you noticed our little tussle?”

“Our?”

He paused, seeming to consider. “Have you ever trained in one of the *shutao-aman*, Princess?”

“No,” she responded honestly. “Why?”

“Well—it does not matter now.”

The alarm gongs abruptly ceased, and they left an eerie silence in their absence. ShianMai couldn’t even hear her captor’s breathing. The guard’s footsteps on the wall seemed overly loud.

“*Sha-rayang?*” the guard called from above. “Lady, are you safe?”

She could feel the hand hovering, waiting to attack or silence her as necessary. But some compulsion answered through ShianMai’s frozen lips. “Leave me be! I am well enough but for all this disturbance!”

“Very good, *Sha-rayang,*” the guard responded. “But I must ask you to remain here for the time being. Someone will escort you back to your residence.”

ShianMai sighed, loud enough for the guard to hear. “Do not bore me with your foolery. If an escort is necessary, then send him swiftly. I do not wish to be inconvenienced.”

The guard was obviously stung. “As you command, *Sha-rayang.*” He hurried away.

“Very well acted,” said the voice behind, “But perhaps a trifle overdone, as you are generally known for your sweet temper.”

How does he know these things? “The guard is gone. You may go now too. Make your escape.”

“I’m not waiting for the guard. I could leave at any time without him noticing.”

ShianMai hesitated. “Then why do you remain?”

He laughed. “Did not I tell you before that, depraved creature that I am, I but crave your fair company?”

“Do you often force your own undesired company upon your victims, or am I merely the subject of some grave misfortune?”

“Ah-ah-ah, *Sha-rayang,* you wound me. If my company is so undesirable, then I shall force myself upon you no further. Farewell.”

She felt the merest brush of air, like a caress. She whirled. He was gone; vanished as a shadow into the night.

When her escort arrived shortly thereafter, ShianMai waited with composure upon her rocky throne. When opportunity arrives, one must act quickly to seize the moment. It was one of her very first lessons in politics. “*Sha-rayang?*” The soldier peered uncertainly through the darkness at her equally stony expression.

ShianMai pierced him with her gaze. In no uncertain terms, she said, “You will take me to my father. Now.”

* * *

It took a long series of imperial commands, glares, and outright defiance to get into the inner palace to see her father, particularly with all the unrest due to the infiltrator. Warriors and officers scuttled about as though a giant insect nest had been upturned. She passed progressively higher ranks as she marched deeper into the palace. Each offered the same protest as the first—that she should not disturb the emperor at so late an hour, without his summons, with no warning. But her pure determination

shook their resolve, and she pushed past them as though they were not there.

The inner palace was built around the emperor's vast throne pavilion, but that chamber was rarely used. ShianMai followed the semi-circular hallways to a room directly behind the throne pavilion. Once more she bullied her way past the guards. The emperor's council room was mostly empty. Three men sat at one end of the low table, with cushions heaped on the floor around them. The man sitting rigidly on her left was Kitu Jitso, one of her father's generals, whose stiffness came from many war wounds earned in the emperor's service. Opposite him was the sharp-nosed Zhouran Shoi, leader of the *Siang-Tonu*, the emperor's elite. Though several generals of war had come and gone during ShianMai's lifetime, Shoi had always been there, lurking at her father's side. He wore the black-and-crimson of the imperial assassins, but without the mask and hood. His face was lined and creased with age, but his black eyes had never lost their intensity. His expression held barely-suppressed fury.

At the end of the table sat the *Khudang-yun* himself. ShianMai felt a shock as she looked upon Kamgue's face, rather than his golden mask. It was not often that she saw her father's face in the flesh. The last time had been four years ago, when the two of them had shared a private dinner on her nameday. Though he had watched over her growing up, it had always been from a distance. They shared no special closeness, which was partially why ShianMai felt so desperate to earn his favor. She did note, though, that he was looking older than she remembered. His skin was olive toned, like her own, though it was going gray with age. His face was all hard angles and creased frown lines. Though his wrinkles were those of a man in his older years, they in no way indicated outwardly that he was nearly a hundred and fifty years old. He was nowhere near that feeble. *The Divine Heavens really do preserve him.* His sharp gold-brown eyes pierced ShianMai as she stopped at the table.

The emperor's companions rose to their feet and bowed, hands-on-thighs and bent at the waist in proper fashion for a member of the immediate imperial household. "Sha-rayang."

Now was the test against the emperor's fickle mood. Would he reject her offhand? Treat her as a child? Or was there a chance today that he would listen?

"Daughter," he acknowledged her. *A good sign*, she thought. "I hope you were not disturbed, but there is no reason for concern. You may return to your rest."

ShianMai quickly said, "Sha-dul, I have news of your interloper. I hope you may find my observations of use."

Kamgue raised one gray eyebrow. "What news? Come, daughter, sit with us and share this news."

Invited to sit! ShianMai almost cavorted. Instead, she made her way up the table with utmost dignity. Kitu Jitso slid down so she could sit at the emperor's right hand. Her insides thrilled at this honor, but she kept her face calm. She folded her sari neatly around her knees. When her father nodded, she spoke.

"In the gardens, I was accosted by a shadow-warrior whom I believe to be a member of the Sunga Tobai."

"I suspected as much," said Kitu Jitso, "Only these ruffians would have the

nerve—”

The emperor raised a hand to forestall Jitso. Of ShianMai he demanded, “Did he touch your person? Were you harmed in any way?”

“He covered my mouth to prevent a cry for help. But he did not touch me otherwise.”

Again, the emperor pierced ShianMai with his hawk’s gaze. “Did you see this man’s face, daughter?”

“No, he kept himself at my back. But he spoke to me—” She continued with forced composure, “And he is obviously noble-born, possibly one of the *Yu-gaochi*.”

Shoi hissed through his teeth, and Jitso exclaimed, “A noble?”

Kamgue seemed startled at this. “Explain your conclusion.”

“Your tutors have instructed me in patterns of speech, *Sha-dul*. This man did not bother to mask these markers within his voice. He was obviously well educated, and the rhythm of his speech clearly indicated advanced training in both music and oratory common among the *Yu-gaochi*. His accent is native to this city. His very cockiness seemed to indicate a member of a great house.”

The emperor exchanged glances with his two advisers. “I am most pleased with your powers of observation, daughter. Did you notice anything further about your visitor?”

ShianMai pursed her lips. “I have heard rumors that say the supposed Leader of the Sunga Tobai group is a *Seyin-Kotsu* of the Silent Wind *Shutao-aman*.”

The emperor nodded. “We have heard these rumors.”

“I know little of *shutao*, but his skill was obvious. He moved without sound, even his breath was timed to pass without notice. And he boasted of his prowess. It did not seem idle. I suspect that those rumors have basis in truth.”

“*Tsokubak!*” Kitu Jitso swore, and pounded his fist on the low table. “If only those stubborn Silent Wind masters would cooperate!”

“There are ways to make men talk,” said Shoi. His eyes glinted above his sharp nose. “Though I doubt the masters know anything. They have never been the most useful group.”

“But a noble!”

Kamgue leaned backed into his cushions and surveyed ShianMai for a moment. She worked to keep her face serene, as though this sort of thing happened every day. She tried not to stare at his face; it was so strange to see him without the golden mask. A smile began to play at the emperor’s mouth. “An idea has come to me, how we may catch our ardent opponent from the Sunga Tobai. Do you wish to hear my plan, daughter?”

“Yes, *Sha-dul*.”

“We have these few suspicions: that we have a traitor among the *Yu-gaochi*, who—by all appearances—seems to have a liking for this fair daughter of ours, else he would not have stopped in his flight to accost her.” ShianMai felt that strange tingle again roll down her spine. Kamgue met her eyes. “If you were to hear him speak again, could you identify him?”

“It might take me a few minutes of conversation. But there is no doubt that he would reveal himself.”

“Then it seems to me that we must devise a way to invite our interloper to visit under more—sociable circumstances.”

Shoi raised his brows. “You hope to expose him among the *Yu-gaochi*?”

“Yes, we will have to invite all the great houses and many of the lesser. It will have to be an event that no one can miss to make sure he will be here. But it would be well worth the effort, to catch a noble traitor, particularly if he turns out to be high-ranking among these insurgents.”

“What will you do with him, *Sha-dul*?”

Kamgue waved a dismissive hand. “What is done with any betrayer? He will be treated accordingly.”

ShianMai remembered the last traitor to the empire—a merchant who had been sentenced to a life of slavery and sold to a galley captain. Not an enviable life, but it was still life. ShianMai couldn’t remember any traitors among the *Yu-gaochi*. But she imagined that the punishment would be far greater. “What kind of event will flush him out?” queried Jitso.

ShianMai spoke. “*Sha-dul*, if I may make a suggestion?” He nodded his approval, and she suppressed a flush of pleasure. “It seems to me that the perfect event would be the Great Debates. Presently only a few of the lesser houses plan to participate. But if we were to host the debates, philosophers from all the great houses would be sure to come. I could enter myself, to discuss philosophies and seek out this traitor.”

Never before had she been the subject of so much concentrated approval from her father. “Perfection,” he declared. “Shoi, have my social secretary begin the preparations. Make certain to invite all the *Yu-gaochi*. I do not care about their petty feuds, make it clear they are expected to attend me that evening.”

“Very good, Khudang-yun.”

The emperor clasped his hands. “It is settled. We shall host the philosophical debates this year, and sniff out our traitor in the same. Daughter, you will need a sign to identify the traitor when you have found him. We will sort it out. In any case, I am pleased with tonight’s work. The traitor thought to challenge us, but instead left us the clues to his undoing.” He nodded to Shoi, and something seemed to pass between them. “I bid you all a good night, but I must return now to my rest.” ShianMai rose with the others, and the three of them bowed to the emperor before departing.

ShianMai could not have hoped for a better reception. She had performed her duty as a daughter of the Imperial house, and earned the outright approval of the emperor. *It is only a start*, she reminded herself. *But, I owe thanks to this traitor nonetheless!* Cheerfully she rejoined her escort, and there was a definite spring in her step as she led the way to her mother’s house in the gardens.

* * *

Xansul returned to the meetinghouse deep in the slums of Hope District. Luang, the guard, immediately let him pass through. With a yawn, Xansul moved down the

hall to the gathering room.

Only a few members of the group had returned. Most of the Sunga Tobai leadership was absent. Many would be occupied throughout the night on their various missions. The former fighter-for-hire Shonik sat at his ease on a pile of cushions. Still, the bald man looked ready to attack at any moment. Beside him, pretty Siaying puffed a small pipe that sent rings of violet smoke into the air. Hiengsi the ‘wizard’ paced back and forth nearby.

Xansul threw himself onto the bare floor and began removing his gear. He pulled off each piece of armor and set it on the floor, creating a black pile beside him. He suppressed a grin as he sensed impatience mounting around him.

“Well?” Siaying finally demanded.

He looked up. Shonik, Hiengsi and Siaying all waited. As he continued to strip off his equipment, Xansul began his report.

“I penetrated the gardens, but I was intercepted before I could mount the innermost wall. I had to leave the gardens before I could attempt any further progress.”

“Intercepted?” Siaying asked.

“I fought one of the *Siang-Tonu*.”

“One of the *Siang-Tonu*?—an imperial assassin?!” she said, using the ancient name.

Shonik whistled. “It’s said the assassins are unbeatable.”

Siaying was staring at Xansul. “We marvel at your extraordinary skill, *Seyin-Kotsu*, to accomplish such a thing.”

Xansul frowned. “I did not feel very skilled tonight. When the assassin first came upon me, I did not see him in my other-sight.” They nodded, as familiar as any un-Awakened could be with his Void abilities. “I nearly lost my head. But we had hardly started fighting when we were interrupted.”

Hiengsi spoke up in his nasal, demanding voice. “Interrupted? By whom? What happened?”

“It was very strange. There was an Imperial Princess in the gardens, and somehow she heard our scuffle—the assassin must have made some little sound, the clumsy fool—though that is strange. And then I felt—” Xansul paused, picturing again that strange flare in the Void. “I am still not certain what happened. I questioned her a little, to see if I could understand it. But she seemed completely ordinary, un-Awakened, and untrained. I can make no sense of it.”

“You were that close to a member of the imperial family,” said Hiengsi, “And you didn’t kidnap her?”

“Or kill her?” Shonik echoed.

Kill her? thought Xansul. He could see the young woman, so composed, even with an enemy at her back. Shonik’s blood-thirst left a sour taste in Xansul’s mouth. “What happened in the Void—I have never seen it before,” said Xansul. “I had to talk to her, though it did not answer any questions.”

“Just—talk,” Hiengsi scoffed, “To an Imperial Princess.”

“*Seyin-Kotsu*,” Siaying protested, “You have seriously endangered yourself! I

cannot believe you exposed yourself to one of the emperor's own family! He has unnatural powers, what if you are exposed?"

Xansul took a deep breath. *My most devoted friends, always my interest at heart.* "I know. I should have simply left. But I do not like unexplained happenings in the Void. I understand the risk, and I will pay the price for my action, if it comes due."

"You could have at least kidnapped her," Shonik insisted.

"They were already alerted to my presence," Xansul said, "The alarm gongs were ringing. I had to flee before the guards came. I couldn't exactly carry off a struggling princess."

Shonik's brow furrowed. "But then—why not simply kill her? One less *Sha-rayang* would not hurt the world any."

Xansul spoke firmly. "It did not feel right. My friends, you must trust my judgment. This is what the Sunga Tobai is founded on—this trust that you have given me, as you gave to my father before me, to lead where my instincts and my training indicate." He met their eyes, unyielding. "Do I still have that trust, always so freely given?"

"Of course, *Seyin-Kotsu*," said Shonik, abashed. "Forgive our questioning."

"I welcome your questions, Shonik. I would never ask you to follow without the ability to speak out, as the emperor does. But sometimes forces I sense in the Void do not speak clearly to me, and I must take a leap of faith. I only ask your patience while I follow the path laid for me."

As the others went back to their duties, Xansul settled once more into polishing and sharpening his knives. Their questions raised ponderings of his own. His friends must know that he would eagerly strike down the emperor at the earliest opportunity. But surely not every member of his blood was equally evil. Xansul felt certain that leaving the *Sha-rayang* unharmed had been the right thing to do.

They would simply have to trust him, as they had sworn to do.

CHAPTER 7

It came as no surprise to Aisina when a few days after Daryun's sudden departure, her father decided to pay her a visit.

Jahel Goshunak did not arrive on foot, as Aisina herself would have done. Her father was prosperous, and he liked to show it in very visible ways. It was late in the afternoon when his carriage came pounding up the lane. Aisina's students, who were practicing out in the garden, all turned toward the gate at the sound of wheels and horses' hooves. Voices added to the ruckus as the Jahel driver shouted at the animals. Horses were not common in Ju-Shui, which was not a particularly wealthy town. Mules, and sometimes oxen, yes—particularly for merchants' caravans—but horses were a sign of wealth, and their whinnies broke the stillness of the air.

One of Aisina's assistants moved to the gate. There, an attendant of Jahel House spoke in a loud voice. "Jahel Goshunak, Head of Jahel House, seeks entrance to visit his daughter, Jahel Aisina."

Aisina's student did not even look to her before opening the gate wide. The Jahel-*dul* was widely known for his temperament, a man not to be trifled with. The students turned to the gate and gave deep bows.

Goshunak strode through the gates with another two attendants behind him. His short frame was puffed with self-importance. *Oh Father*, thought Aisina, *your pride could smother the whole town*. Goshunak came to a halt. He barely glanced at the students before fixing his gaze upon Aisina. "Daughter, we will speak together."

Aisina bristled. "Jahel-*dul*, I will be happy to speak with you when my class is over. Would you be pleased to rest inside—"

"Now, Aisina."

Her students' heads were still bowed, but Aisina could sense their bows deepen. She took a deep breath to calm herself. Ten counts in, hold for ten, out for ten. *Be still, my Spirit*. She looked to her students. "We will end early today. If any of you would like to stay late tomorrow to make up the time, I will be happy to meet with you then."

The students bowed to her, then many of them bowed again to the Jahel-*dul* before making their way out of the *shutao-kai* and away. When the last of them were gone, Goshunak dismissed his attendants, who closed the gate behind them.

"Let's sit," Goshunak suggested when they were alone. "I am not as young as I once was."

Aisina suppressed a sigh. She led her father into her house. They knelt across the

small dining table from one another. Aisina did not offer to make tea or any other niceties. She focused on her Inner Spirit. *I must be calm. I must be one with myself.* “How may I serve you, Jahel-dul?”

“I want to talk to you about this situation that you’ve gotten yourself into,” said Goshunak. He was obviously trying to be civil, but he was clearly having a hard time of it. His mouth was twisted as though he’d bitten into a sour fruit.

“I am grateful for your concern. I will manage my life as well as I can.”

“You are not going to talk to me about what has happened?”

“With all respect, I do not believe it will make any difference.”

“Do not take that tone with me, Aisina,” he snapped. “Five days! *Five days* have passed since that vagabond left, and not a word from you! Mistress Sunli comes in raving about some market gossip that says my daughter’s *lochi* husband has up and left her! Do you have any idea how this looks?”

Aisina could not contain her retort. “How it *looks*? Do you care only how it *looks*?”

Goshunak’s brow lowered, and she could see true anger in his eyes. “This is not only about my pride, daughter. Whether you like it or not, you are a member of this house, and your actions—and those of your miscreant husband—affect our reputation and our trade. This whole affair could ruin Jahel House, and leave you with nothing.”

As if I care about your business! Aisina thought, but she bit her tongue. She repeated her pattern of deep breathing, trying to restore her calm. “Rumors pass quickly, Father. The gossip-mongers will tire of the story soon, and when Daryun returns, everything will be as it was before.”

“What makes you think the *lochi* will ever come back?”

“He will return.” *I know he will.*

“You cannot put your faith in a *lochi*, I’ve always taught you that! Those houseless wanderers have no sense of honor, no sense of dignity, no permanence. They’re cheap labor, who you can trust only as far as you can throw a pebble. I should never have agreed to this, I should have married you off to a son of some good merchant as soon as you came of age—”

“Honored father, is there any other way I can be of service before you depart?”

At this interjection, the color in Goshunak’s cheeks deepened, and he pounded a fist on the low table. “Do not make light of this!”

“I am not.” Aisina raised her eyebrows. “You cannot believe I take this lightly.”

Goshunak’s voice lowered, and real concern appeared in his eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Aisina bowed her head. “I apologize that my actions have so disturbed you. You have made it very clear that you do not support my marriage, that you believe my husband is worthless, and that you believe my time here at our *shutao-kai* is wasted. Though it is one of my ardent desires to serve and to please you, in this case, I thought it better for your health to remain silent.”

A breeze had picked up outside, and leaves rustled outside the thin walls. They could hear the wind brushing the roof of the little house. Farther away, one of the horses whinnied. The scent of rain was on the air.

When Goshunak spoke again, his voice was mild. “You were the most stubborn

child,” he said quietly. “I have sometimes wondered if you would have been this stubborn, if your mother had been alive longer, if she’d been there to raise you as women do.”

“Mother encouraged my independence behind your back,” Aisina confided. “She knew no more children would follow, and she wanted me to be a strong Head of House.”

Goshunak chuckled a little. “That does not surprise me.”

He paused for a moment, looking at hands he had clasped before him. Finally, he looked back at Aisina. The fire of anger was gone from his gaze. “It is not easy to have such a headstrong daughter.”

“I know.” Aisina leaned forward, forcing him to meet her eyes still. “Father, now is when I need your support the most. It is my hope that you will trust me in trusting my husband.” Goshunak’s face twisted, but she pressed on. “He is a good man. He has always done well by me. But, there is more to him than I know. I have faith that we will be reunited. Please do me the great honor of supporting me as I continue my work here—our work here.”

Goshunak took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I will—do my best.”

Aisina bowed to him over the table. “You are ever wise, *Jahel-dul*.”

He rose to his feet and Aisina followed. Before leaving the room, Goshunak stopped before her. Their eyes met for a long moment, and Aisina could see the concern in his gaze. “Will you be all right?” he asked. “I do not like you being here by yourself.”

“Thank you for your concern. I will be fine.”

He reached up and cupped her cheek in his palm, for just a moment. It was the most affection he’d shown in a long time, and Aisina felt the prick of tears in the corner of her eye. Goshunak did not linger long. He swept out of the house and strode across the little garden to the gate.

He turned back and raised his hand in farewell. “Be well, daughter,” he called. Then he was gone.

Aisina lingered on her front porch. She listened to the *Jahel* driver chide the horses, their hooves clattering as they carried her father back toward his home on the other side of town. She listened to the breeze continuing to pick up, the distant sound of thunder rolling in. The breeze was crisp, and it tugged strands of hair free of her bun, whipping them about her face as it whipped her sarong against her legs. The night grew dark unnaturally fast as the storm clouds drew close. Aisina loved that heavy feel of the air, and she stayed out until the rain began to fall in earnest. As she prepared for bed, she listened to the heavy patter against the roof and walls.

That night, Aisina had strange dreams. She dreamed of a walled city square she’d never seen before, full of people whose faces she could not clearly make out. The people were lit in the colors of fire, deep reds and sharp oranges, backed by heavy shadows. Their movements were rigid and jerky, almost inhuman. They held up a single figure before them, a man whom the people reviled. She could see them screaming, their faces twisted in rage and hatred, but in her dream she could not make out their words. But she could *feel*, and she knew that their greatest hope had been dashed, betrayed by this solitary figure. Her heart ached with theirs—for she knew that feeling all too well. Aisina dreamed the despair of those faceless people as it echoed her own.

CHAPTER 8

Telsharu stopped one evening for supper at an eating-house in a town called Ju-Toshi, which was several days' journey north of the emperor's capital. Telsharu had been through Ju-Toshi many times in his life, but this was his first visit since escaping Nao Gak San. He was surprised by the changes and growth, but equally surprised by how much had stayed the same. This eating-house had a sign of a fox above the door, and was called Fortune's Nine Tails. It had been one of Telsharu's favorites back in the day. He was most pleased to find it still in operation, though the name was now Fortune's Favorite, and many of his treasured dishes had vanished or changed names. Regardless, he found that the food was still good, and far better than anything he had eaten on his long journey south.

He sat out on the veranda in the deepening evening. A few other patrons were finishing their meal at the outdoor tables. Most of the rest of the patrons were indoors, where a performer was entertaining the diners with songs about the Seventh Empire's greatest heroes and villains, including Telsharu the Cursed. He couldn't help a small smile at the irony—if any of the eating-house's patrons knew that the real Telsharu sat just outside eating his own meal, they would probably flee in terror. Fortunately for them, Telsharu's only intention this evening was to savor the food of the Fortune's Favorite.

It was a busy night for the eating-house, so the serving girl didn't glance at Telsharu's face when she took his order. Thus, to Telsharu's amusement, when she arrived with his drink and looked up into his blind-white eyes, she spilled it all over the wooden floor of the veranda.

"A thousand pardons, sir," she stammered, and knelt to wipe up the spill. Telsharu kept his face impassive as she fetched a new drink. Returning with his fresh cup, she bowed deeply. "Forgive this one's clumsiness, sir," she mumbled, and she scurried away from his blind gaze.

Eventually his meal came, and this serving girl had been forewarned by the first—she stared unabashed into his face as she set his meal before him. She would have been mortified to learn that he could clearly see her staring, albeit not with his eyes. Telsharu was aware of her attention, but was glad to be left alone to his meal and drink.

He lingered there for quite some time. Evening darkened into full night, but Telsharu ignored the slight chill. Within, a storyteller was now regaling the listen-

ers with the tale of Hanu Zan and the Dragon of Tonudum. That one had already been popular when Telsharu was young. It had changed little in the intervening century. Telsharu listened mostly to the storyteller's cadence, the rise and fall of his voice, the response from his listeners. It filled Telsharu with a strange sort of nostalgia. He remembered how as a small boy, he had loved to listen to tales of Hanu Zan and other heroes of the Seventh Empire. But that childhood had been stolen from him, along with so many others.

A small flicker in the Void suddenly caught Telsharu's attention. He did not move physically, but continued to sip casually at his drink. Yet he quested out through the Void with his mind, seeking the source of that motion, red-hot with intensity.

It spoke to the skill of the source of the flicker that Telsharu could not immediately locate him. After that first intense flash, there remained only the gray dullness of every-day surroundings. But Telsharu continued to search, scanning the area from whence the flicker had originated and reaching out from there.

A second red-hot flash drew Telsharu's mental eyes. Peering again through the Void, he quickly identified the location—it was near the office of the local political liaison from the emperor, who served as magistrate in this town. The walls were stout, but hardly impenetrable. He quickly identified the life-signs of over two dozen men inside, soldiers by the feel of them. *What are they guarding?* With the emperor, politics were never as straightforward as His Imperialness liked to pretend.

It took one more flash and a quick tag on Telsharu's part, then he was able to identify and lock his Void-vision onto the person bearing such great intensity, which had drawn Telsharu's attention. It turned out to be, not one, but a group of men approaching the office, each burning with that passionate glow of a zealot. Only Telsharu's long training had exposed them; to the average Void-Awakened, they would be invisible even through the Void. Telsharu was relatively certain that—skilled though they were—they would still be visible to physical eyes. Only Awakened ones would be able to vanish entirely, and they were not Awakened.

As they approached the walls of the government office complex, Telsharu watched with interest. The men moved with sure, unhurried motions. For a few of them, a trace of anxiety appeared, but was quickly suppressed as they worked on scaling the wall.

Obviously, these were rebels against the empire—who else would sneak into a government complex, heavily armed in the darkness of night? He more than suspected they belonged to the Sunga Tobai, whose name was whispered either with excitement or as a curse by those who spoke of their calculated rebellion against the Seventh Empire. Rebellions were not new—there had been one or two when Telsharu was growing up—but the Sunga Tobai seemed to have both money and passable leadership, which was unusual as far as rebellions went.

In fact, as Telsharu thought about it, the Sunga Tobai group was already doing in part what Telsharu himself intended to do—undermine and shame the emperor,

cast doubt into the minds of the populace, subvert others to fight against the emperor. With a little prodding in the right direction, the Sunga Tobai group might just serve Telsharu's purpose.

Telsharu rose to his feet. He drained the rest of his drink, checked his reforged sword in its sheath, and leapt from the veranda into the night.

* * *

Yundak's steady hands continued to climb the stone-and-mortar wall, occasionally laying anchors for the rope in the cracks. He could not completely remove his anxiety. His was a recent command assignment within the Sunga Tobai, created specially for Yundak. Many of the men in his troop came from similar situations as his own. Yundak had once been a fisherman on the Lake of Endless Dreams. Happily, he had labored under the emperor's banner, giving of his catch to the imperial stores. But when his wife fell ill and their debts could not be paid, the imperial collection agents came like vultures to a carcass. In debtor's prison, Yundak learned of the death of his wife and newborn child. Never again could Yundak ignore the empire's atrocities. So, though he felt somewhat overwhelmed by his new rank and position, Yundak was determined to succeed—if not for his sake, then for his newfound family, the Sunga Tobai.

Cautiously Yundak approached the top of the wall. Two guards stood watch along the top. If his information was correct, two more guards should be coming to replace them any moment. Yundak waited in silence. The fresh shift arrived right on schedule. As the previous guards departed into the side tower, Yundak went into action. In a flash, he was up on the wall, with a dagger unsheathed in his right hand; it pierced through the nearest guard's neck. Before the second soldier could react, Yundak threw a high wide-sweeping kick. The grapple mounted on his boots slashed the second guard's neck, dropping him without a sound.

In a few short moments, the small company of Sunga Tobai rebels was atop the wall. Yundak strode with two others around the south wall, toward the gate. They had to move swiftly to reach it before the patrols made their full circle. The Sunga Tobai fighters moved on cautious feet, following Yundak. There were two more soldiers in the small guardhouse by the gate. Yundak leapt out in front of the guardhouse door and gave a sharp whistle. The two guards rushed out to confront him. But their advance was cut short by attackers on either side. The guards were overwhelmed within moments. With them out of the way, Yundak turned to open the gates for the larger rebel force that waited outside. All seemed to be going according to plan—

"Intruders!"

"It's the Sunga Tobai!" The clashing sounds of open battle immediately rang out into the night air.

Yundak cursed under his breath. Those few rebels on the opposite side of the courtyard would be dead before he could reach them. The guards began to pour out of the barracks, thundering across the courtyard. Yundak knew that by opening the gate to the rebel force outside, there would be many casualties. Casualties that the Sunga

Tobai could ill afford. Yundak opened his mouth to give the order to retreat, when out the corner of his eye, he saw a figure leap from the shadows into the fray.

His men on either side stared with wide eyes. This man, however brave, had surely just leapt to his death. Nevertheless, the fool had provided the perfect diversion. Yundak felt hope rekindle within him. Perhaps their mission would not fail after all. Hesitation was a luxury unafforded in combat; Yundak made the snap decision to continue the mission. He turned and pushed open the gates, calling to his men on the other side. "Fight! For the Sunga Tobai!"

The Sunga Tobai warriors rushed through the gates and moved to check the guards. Yundak and his select group needed the diversion in order to complete their mission. To everyone's surprise, they rushed forward to find their job being performed by a single fighter. Yundak looked on with wonder as the shadow-fighter fought—not only alive, but holding the entire garrison at bay!

"Quick! To his aid!" Yundak shouted. "I must get to the magistrate, before he can escape!"

Taking one last incredulous look at the shadow-warrior, Yundak headed for the western tower.

Another spear thrust toward Telsharu's head. He diverted it to his left. With an extra burst of strength, he pulled the weapon further along its current course. The blade pierced through the chest of a man behind him. In a dizzily fast movement, Telsharu snapped the spear's shaft at the head and spun it around, shoving the sharp broken end through the weapon's original bearer. A stirring sensed through the Void forewarned another sudden movement coming from his side. Telsharu jumped back, spinning the broken shaft to deflect two arrows heading straight for his heart. He jabbed the broken spear downward, pinning a guard's foot to the ground, then deftly beheaded the helpless soldier with the drawing of his blade.

Too simple. Again, his reforged blade burned with menace through the Void. These men had some skill to be sure, but they paled in comparison to the soldiers who had guarded Nao Gak San. The difference was greater still when he compared enemies of bygone years, whom he had battled on an entirely different level of skill. In truth, for Telsharu the most difficult task in this skirmish was masking his true prowess in combat. He had to fight far below his potential, or risk giving away too much to both his enemies and hoped-for confederates, the Sunga Tobai. Still, he had to perform with enough skill to win him those potential allies.

A swinging arc of Telsharu's sword relieved another guard of his head. In the same flowing movement, Telsharu misdirected another pole-arm and grabbed the wielder's neck. He pushed the guard back into his comrade's sword, and used the body as leverage. In a swift leap, he jumped over the falling guard and came down into a violent storm of guards, blades, and polearms.

This group was dispatched without effort. Telsharu stood very still for a moment while blood and bodies cooled around him. Reaching out through the Void, Telsharu

found what he was looking for in the guardhouse beyond.

The sulfury black fire-sand had far more uses than just for the decorative fireflowers. Indeed, almost immediately after the Alchemists had invented fire-sand, military groups had implemented it for destructive purposes.

By now, most of the rebels had engaged the remaining guards. With Telsharu's help, only two of the rebels had fallen. The guards' training was falling to the rebels' passion. *Perfect*. Inspired by his seemingly invincible swordplay, the rebels were able to burn away their lingering fear. However, Telsharu was wise enough to see that the guards outnumbered them. Though he didn't fear for his own well-being, Telsharu knew that if too many rebels fell, fear would seize their hearts yet again.

"The magistrate is dead!"

The rebel leader's call was the signal for Tesharu's flashy escape plan. He quickly scooped up a fallen spear and thrust it into the ground. Using his own momentum, he vaulted himself toward a nearby brazier used for lighting. With a whirl of his blade, Telsharu sent hot coals sprawling toward the store of fire-sand. Soldiers watched in horror as the embers struck the exposed barrels.

The fire-sand exploded.

Chaos erupted. Guards ran back and forth, as the rebels retreated. But all that the Sunga Tobai saw as they looked back was the figure, possibly half-god-half-man, silhouetted by the explosions of fire and debris behind him.

Yundak was not as superstitious as some of his men, but still he felt a sense of awe as he approached the soot-stained figure later that night. The great warrior had ensured the escape of all Yundak's remaining men before following them out. He had obviously experienced no trouble in following them, though Yundak had led them on the secret path back to their hideout. Yundak experienced the uncomfortable thought that this stranger could probably find their hideout with or without being led there.

A few of the men were injured, and they waited to be tended by the team's only medic. Yundak used this time to evaluate the stranger, now that he could be seen properly. In good clean torchlight, the stranger no longer looked like a divine savior or even the hero of legend. He was tall, but his shoulders slumped dramatically. His clothing was ragged, ill-fitting, and filthy—and not only from the soot they bore from his trick with the fire-sand. The most disturbing part of all were his eyes. His blind-white eyes seemed to see through the very heart of a man and into the darkness of his soul.

Yundak gave start, then disguised it by offering the stranger a small bow. "I offer you my deepest thanks, stranger. Your quick blade saved many lives among these men tonight."

The stranger's voice was low and hoarse. "I watched you for a time—your plan was good, just one pair of eyes in the wrong place. I thought my assistance might be of some use to you."

"It was. Truly!" Yundak replied. "In such circumstances, not many would join our fight."

“I have admired the Sunga Tobai for some time—I am glad that my paltry skills have at last served your cause.”

Yundak considered this statement. He then considered his obligations to his men, and the oaths he had sworn as a leader of this group of Sunga Tobai. He considered the seemingly humble stranger before him. Yundak was wise enough to realize the man was far more than he seemed—his martial skills only accentuated that danger. But, were there not others among their ranks with dangerous skills—and motives? The Sunga Tobai did not always attract the most upstanding citizens, but they made good use of those who did come.

“What say you, stranger?” Yundak finally asked. “Will you take up your sword again for our cause? The Sunga Tobai could use one such as you, and I would be glad to have you at my side when we face the emperor’s soldiers again.”

The stranger smiled, and Yundak suppressed a shiver. “I would be glad to join my cause with yours. For the moment, our purpose is the same.”

For the slightest moment, Yundak wondered what would happen when their purposes no longer coincided.

CHAPTER 9

Daryun wandered. It was perhaps imprecise to call it wandering. He did in fact have a destination, and he always moved in a southeastern direction, towards the capital. But he took no care for a specific course, and though another man might have succumbed to the temptation, he did not hurry. That was not his way. Caution and observation were the hallmarks of his training.

Not so many years before, Daryun had lived his life in exactly this manner—wandering from place to place, sometimes taking work as a fighter-for-hire, sometimes foraging from the land and sleeping in jungles, fields, hills or by roadsides. Some villages had driven him out as a vagabond. Others had welcomed his sword and the protection it afforded. Neither course had really mattered much to Daryun, whose sole purpose had been for all those years simply to wander.

It was in the service of one particular merchant that Daryun had met the young woman who would eventually become his wife. Jahel Goshunak, the head of his merchant-house, had been training his headstrong daughter to take over the family business, never mind that Jahel Aisina had no desire to become a spice merchant. The Jahel-*dul* was not pleased to find his precious daughter eyeing one of his caravan guards, even if he were so obviously skilled a swordsman as Daryun. The sword-for-hire was one of the *lochi*, the houseless—which made him, by reputation, an untrustworthy vagabond.

Daryun shook his head, continuing down the jungle path in that same southward direction. He was still somewhat amazed at how everything had come about. Daryun was methodical in his nature. He planned things out. He pursued the plan as closely as possible. He followed through on his commitments. He did not stop with a task half-complete. He was rarely impulsive, and over time, he had lost his more rash instincts in favor of steady contemplation. He prided himself on thoroughness.

His wife, though— She was everything he was not. She was impulsive to the core, though their marriage had steadied her somewhat. Aisina was not irresponsible by any means—she would have made a successful spice merchant, if that calling had spoken to her. But she had a soul of passion that seemed to cry out for the *shutao-aman*, and so that was the path she had chosen, even marrying a wandering swordsman.

The strap of his pack was wearing into his shoulder, so Daryun stopped to adjust it. He also examined his clothing, to ensure that each piece of his disguise was in place. He was no longer attired as Jahel Daryun, the master of a successful *shutao-kai* and

appointed-heir of a prosperous merchant house. Instead, Daryun dressed in tattered trousers that had seen too many summers, a loose shirt intended for a larger man, and no shoes: just the callused soles of his bare feet. His small pack was stuffed with a few morsels of food, and one extra set of similarly ragged clothes. In fact, the only part of his ensemble that made him look anything but a wandering beggar was the sword that hung from his hip. Though the sheath was plain and worn, it was clean and the wear was that of long use. Daryun had not drawn the blade since sheathing it at home. He hoped he could go much further without that particular need arising.

Despite all his attempts at physical disguise, his most important efforts could not be seen by most of those he met. The true core of Daryun's disguise required mental and spiritual effort—a disguise of his presence in the Void. It was not the shield of an assassin, which would erase any trace of him in the Void. No, this was an actual disguise, meant to mask his identity to anyone who might try to discern through the Void who or what he was—especially anyone who could see in the Void as easily as they could see the world around them. Combined with his physical disguise, helped by the grime in his skin and hair, Daryun was effectively hidden from all who might recognize him.

With the pack strap adjusted, Daryun pressed on at a steady pace. Travel afoot had always been lengthy and arduous, depending on what region one happened to be crossing. The Seventh Empire was a vast and varied land created from several smaller kingdoms and nations. Some had joined so long ago that they did not remember being separate. Others had more recently allied with the divinely chosen emperors and empresses of the Seventh Empire. Each region of the empire had its own governor, its own local government, and therefore its own individual level of maintenance, militia, wealth, and poverty. Once Daryun reached the central region, home of the capital city, the going would become easier on well-traveled roads. But for now, he slogged through muddy trails after the morning rain, and within the confines of his mind, he maligned the northern governor's incompetence.

Around midday, Daryun's path crossed a slightly better-kept road. This rutted and puddle-ridden track was the main highway through this region. Daryun used a large leaf nearby to wipe the worst of the mud from his feet and legs. Much of it would be replaced before long, but at least his legs felt a bit lighter for the moment—there was nothing quite like carrying one's own weight in mud on every step.

Daryun pressed on through the afternoon, following the highway as it continued in its southeasterly track. He passed the occasional traveler or merchant caravan, but they paid him little heed. Daryun made excellent progress. He had to admit that it felt good—like stretching one's legs after sitting still too long, Daryun stretched his abilities and stamina after his respite in Ju-Shui.

It was well into afternoon when he found the turn-off he was seeking. This smaller path dove directly into a narrow nook between two grassy hills. It was barely wide enough for a cart, and three men side-by-side would be one too many.

The track started uphill almost immediately. This way would eventually lead into the foothills and up into the northern mountains of the Warukan region—the same

mountains that held in their embrace the tumbled tower of Nao Gak San. Though those mountains were still far off, the roots started here.

Afternoon was heading toward evening when the path broke into a rocky clearing. A monastery was built into the hillside. An intricately carved archway, decorated with some long forgotten script, was the only entrance, and the gate appeared to be shut tight.

Without hesitation, Daryun marched straight to the gateway and pounded on the gate with his fist. The sound echoed against the surrounding rocks, and there was a short moment of silence. Soon the sound of footsteps responded.

The bolt slid back and the gate swung wide. An initiate in a brown robe peered out at him. "Welcome to Talu-Kwa. What service might this one be?"

Daryun offered him a small bow. "If it pleases you, I have come to visit Sonu Zhang."

The initiate's brow furrowed. "Forgive this one's impudence, sir, but could it be that you seek the monk Dao Zhang?"

"Forgive this one's ignorance. Yes, the monk, Dao Zhang."

The initiate returned the bow. "This one would be happy to show you within, while Brother Zhang is summoned."

"If it pleases you, I would be glad to accompany you."

The initiate let him inside, closed the gate, and slid the bolt home once more. He led Daryun across the courtyard and up the steps into the monastery proper. Most of the complex was a terraced garden, with steps leading up to different shrines, temples, and dormitories. The main building, to which Daryun was lead, was ancient; it most likely had stood from before the foundation of the Seventh Empire. The entire structure was composed of dark stone veined with green vines. Large archways were the dominant feature of the architecture. Inside, most of the space was given to an enormous shrine, there attended by the monks and their initiates.

The initiate led Daryun past the shrine, out into a smallish garden grotto. The walls were ringed by flowering vines to disguise the stone. A small stream trickled through one of the terraces, into a small pond, with a complement of singing frogs and birds.

"Please wait here," the initiate said, "And this one will inquire of Brother Zhang's availability to greet you."

"If it pleases you, tell Brother Zhang that his old friend, Daryun, has come to see him."

The initiate bowed and left the garden. Daryun took a seat on one of the stone benches and let his eyes rest on the little pond. Colorful fish swam within, unconcerned by the rest of the world. A breeze tried to stir his clothes and hair, but it quickly died.

There were no footsteps, but he could still sense Sonu Zhang's approach. Daryun rose to his feet and turned to face the newcomer.

Sonu Zhang wore the white robe of his order, with the hood pulled up over his bald head. His face had aged considerably since last Daryun had seen him, several years ago. But there remained in Sonu Zhang vitality that Daryun recognized well. He felt a strange pang. Before he could contain himself, he and Zhang were embrac-

ing, pounding each other on the back.

“It has been too long!” Zhang exclaimed. He pulled back, holding onto Daryun’s arms. “Let me look at you! You haven’t changed much, you old boar—perhaps a bit softer around the edges, but nothing anyone else would notice. You look fit.”

Daryun brushed away the words and Zhang’s grasp on his arms. “I might say the same for you, Sonu-*Kasan*, my old friend. This life seems to suit you, which I never thought I’d hear myself say.”

“I am called Dao Zhang now,” he prompted. “All monks take the name Dao.”

“Of course. Forgive me.”

“Come,” Zhang laughed, “Let’s sit, and you can tell me what brings you here—if I do not already know.”

They sat again beside the pond, and Zhang appeared perfectly at his ease. “Tell me of your life! Where have you been? I haven’t heard a single rumor that hints at your whereabouts, and you know how I keep up with the times.”

“I do know, and that is part of why I have—”

“No sir! Tales first, then business,” Zhang insisted.

Daryun sighed, but it was mostly show. He knew Zhang like they were brothers, and knew that they were likely to talk until dawn if they got carried away. In brief, he told Zhang of his marriage to the merchant’s daughter, opening a *shutao-kai*, and the end of his wandering until the present circumstances.

“Married!” Zhang said in wonder. His mirth was muted now, and Daryun recognized the true joy shining from the monk’s eyes. “I never thought I’d see the day, truly I did not. Not after... Well, I am very pleased for you, my friend. She must be a fine woman.”

“The very finest,” Daryun agreed. “It is only the graveness of present circumstances that persuaded me to leave her side.”

Now it was Zhang who sighed. He turned to stare to the northeast, the direction of Nao Gak San.

“You saw it?” Daryun asked quietly.

“Of course I saw it.” Zhang’s voice was deep with ancient sadness. “So much death all at once has not been felt in a very long time. I’m surprised the very mountains didn’t erupt in protest.”

“Have you seen—?”

“The Cursed One marches across this land like a disturbed giant. It is impossible for me *not* to see his doings, his thoughts. Murder rides with him in his heart. He goes to attempt again the assassination he failed to bring about a hundred years ago.”

A cold breeze blew through the little garden, as though a messenger straight from the mountains. Daryun’s flesh prickled in the chill. “He is heading for the Imperial City, then?”

“Where else? Though there will be many others cut down before he reaches that destination I fear.”

Daryun leaned forward. “Come with me.”

“I knew that you would come eventually, to ask me that.”

“I need you, Zhang. Together we’ll be able to track him, take him—”

Zhang was shaking his head. “You do not understand,” he said with pain in his voice. He gestured around at the monastery. “This is my life. This place, this—existence, it’s all I have. It’s all I want.”

“What about fighting to protect the greater good? Our boyhood pact has never been needed more. You know what will happen, if we don’t do something.”

“I know that if I leave now, the whole of my life has been for naught.” Zhang met Daryun’s eyes, and his expression was grave. “I owe a debt for the lives I took as a warrior, and this is how I make restitution. You have found something much the same, up north with your young wife, teaching children. But this—*this*—is my life now. Now is not the time for me to leave. Until I get an assurance otherwise, here I stay.”

They looked at each other for a long moment. It had been years since they last met, but Zhang had changed less than Daryun himself. “Still stubborn,” Daryun murmured.

“Speak for yourself. *I* am perfectly reasonable.”

Daryun looked once more to the northeast, toward Nao Gak San. The Cursed One was there no longer, but Daryun thought he could still sense the lingering malice. “Truly, you will not come with me?”

Zhang shook his head. “However, I will give you what help I can. The path of death and chaos has traced its way southward, and the visions have haunted me some days now. His presence is very strong—I have felt it particularly from the direction of Ju-Toshi. I suspect he has been up to some mischief there, though not to the extremes of Nao Gak San. I suggest you begin your search there.”

“I will.”

Zhang half-smiled, but his eyes were unhappy. “I do not envy you, my friend. This time will not be pleasant.”

“No,” Daryun agreed.

“Will you have some tea? Sit with an old friend before you go?”

“I cannot. You know my time runs short.”

Zhang rose to his feet, and the two of them bowed deeply to one another. “I will pray for you,” said Zhang. His eyes grew distant, and Daryun knew that his friend saw more than the little garden around them.

“Though many wars have been fought in this land, and many terrible measures taken, none have been greater than the duty handed down to you. All your predecessors will stand with you, when the time comes. In time, the name of Hanu Zan will pale to that of Daryun.”

The monk’s gaze returned to the present and Daryun’s upraised eyebrow. “That was a bit melodramatic, Sonu-*Kasan*.”

Zhang did not laugh. “I will pray for you, my friend,” he repeated. “I fear you will need all the prayers you can get. Go—you must not delay in your pursuit of the Cursed One.”

Again, they bowed to one another, as well-respected friends do. “Farewell,” said Daryun.

Zhang’s eyes followed him as he left the little garden. The monk’s enigmatic gaze was not particularly comforting.

CHAPTER 10

On the appointed day, the great houses and many of the lesser made their way across the great stone bridge into the imperial palace. People came in droves. None of the great houses consisted of a single, nuclear family. The name of a great house was worth much in the society of the Seventh Empire, and with the importance of family in their culture, even distant cousins were included within the ‘house’. For the most part, this actually worked to the advantage of each house. The more scions they had, the more tentacles they possessed to sink into various parts of the empire.

They came with all their trappings. A lesser member of each family bore the flag of their house, and they walked in clumps around that banner. Most had dressed in similar colors, as though this further cemented their alliances. The *Yu-gaochi*, the great houses, used this opportunity to casually flaunt their wealth by displaying the expensive garments and accessories of their members. The lesser houses tried to achieve the same grandeur, though they usually ended up looking merely tawdry.

Atop the outermost palace wall, ShianMai watched them arrive with several of her half-siblings and their children, although the latter were as often as not dancing and playing in the background, rather than watching the arrival of the *Yu-gaochi*. ShianMai wondered if her siblings found the nobility as fascinating as she did. *Fascinating, threatening, disgusting, and enticing—all at once.*

There was the House of Yang, led by the ancient Kalabei on a palanquin, with his obnoxious, effete son Xomin at his side. *Divine Heavens help me if Father ever considers marrying me to that imbecile.* Behind them came the House of Saoden, with their many unctuous sons who simpered every time ShianMai came within two arms’ length of them. They were followed by the influential House of Long, which was well known to hold members of many talents. Behind them came the House of Wu, one of the most ancient and respected houses, and the birth family of ShianMai’s mother Hiangni. They would be well-received by the emperor, who was technically brother-in-law to the *Wu-dul*. The Wu family never passed up a chance to show their close connection to the emperor, as the family of his current wife.

“Stop gawking at them,” came a voice in ShianMai’s ear, “They’re not all that pretty, and soon they’ll be hooting at each other like chatter-monkeys.”

ShianMai elbowed her brother in the ribs, but Dokumun took the blow as though it were nothing. “Why must you always sneak up on me?”

“You’re on the edge of the wall. I can’t come at you front-wise until I learn to fly.”

ShianMai let it pass. Her eyes automatically returned to the *Yu-gaochi* still entering the imperial complex. “We have no idea how much truly goes on within those ranks. Politics are only the beginning, only the surface of what the *Yu-gaochi* do. They could hide any number of traitors among their ranks. No wonder Father dislikes hosting them.”

“Although,” said Doku, serious for once, “It has to be to His Mightiness’s advantage to have them under his eye every once and awhile. You have to admit it’s fun to watch them grovel.”

At that moment, one of the emperor’s attendants came to summon the members of the Sha family. ShianMai and Dokumun joined their siblings as they all headed down into the outermost section of the palace complex to join the festivities.

The army was the most frequent tenant of this section of the palace. Training grounds and barracks filled most of the space, along with offices for military personnel. A full company was housed on the island, whose principal duties included manning the vast white bridge that spanned right into the Imperial City.

However, amid the training grounds stood a vast stone pavilion. Columns held up a roof that tapered up to a single point. Within, stone benches rose in tiers, terraced into the island’s rocky hillside. ShianMai and her family walked around to the rear entrance of the pavilion, which faced the path up to the inner palace.

They had to wait while the rest of the family was assembled. The emperor had insisted that they all present themselves, though the families with smaller children would be excused shortly after the opening of the debates. ShianMai knew his insistence was for much the same reasons as the great houses’—in the Imperial City, a large family was a show of strength and solidarity. The *Khudang-yun* would not want to miss the opportunity to flaunt his enormous posterity.

Kamgue himself joined them with Hiangni at his side. ShianMai’s mother looked regal in a crisp silk robe of deep red, with golden embroidery in House Wu-style cranes. However, she paled in comparison to the emperor. He wore a long gold mantle over a royal blue sarong stiff with gold embroidery in fantastical shapes. His mask was carved in a formal and almost outlandish style and covered in gold, which deepened his eyes and made his brow seem more stern. It was as though he deliberately wanted to appear as more than a man. This did not surprise ShianMai—her father often used such tricks to keep the *Yu-gaochi* in line.

The emperor and his wife walked to the front of the assembled family. ShianMai could hear several of the concubines grumbling to themselves. Though they each had brought honor to their families by taking a place in the imperial household, it was Hiangni’s place to stand at Kamgue’s side. ShianMai felt a flush of pride on behalf of her mother.

A deep gong tolled. The emperor proceeded into the chamber, followed by the family. As ShianMai made her way into the room, she drank in the sight.

The pavilion had been created for events like this. The center was sunk into the floor, and the audience in tiers that rose surrounding the stage. The great houses had

laid claim to the closest seats around the sunken stage. A large box was cordoned off specifically for the Sha family. Sitting on the floor of the stage itself was a magnificent throne carved with dragons and tigers and other creatures that matched those on Kamgue's mantle.

At the entrance of the emperor and his family, all those in attendance knelt and abased themselves, and remained kneeling as the emperor led his family around the large circular stage toward their seats. It was a deliberate motion; again, Kamgue showing off his posterity. ShianMai felt the eyes of the *Yu-gaochi* more heavily than usual. It occurred to her—not for the first time—that she and Doku were the only unmarried members of the emperor's family proper. This made ShianMai the only eligible Imperial Princess left for some son of a great house to ensnare. The hair on the back of her neck prickled at the thought, and she kept her eyes firmly on the emperor.

The imperial family quickly settled themselves in their designated seats. Kamgue graciously took Hiangni directly to her seat—she would sit at his left hand, while their eldest son Yaosong would sit at his right. When his wife was settled, the emperor walked to the center of the stage; not quite alone, as a foursome of his feared, faceless guards accompanied him.

In the center of the stage, three stands had been erected—two for the debaters, and one for the moderators. Each bore a thin wooden podium. Behind each of these was another larger stand with seats. The debaters and moderators would rotate through the course of the event, and these seats were for those not currently speaking. The emperor strode to the moderators stand and looked out over the assembled nobility. At his invitation, the *Yu-gaochi* rose from their abasement and took their seats once more.

“To all these houses, great and small, the Imperial House of Sha bids you welcome.” The emperor's polite greeting was met with thunderous applause. “Welcome to our grand debate—an event that we hope will inspire some to thought, and inspire all to a greater unity amid division. For though we are opposed in opinion, we are united by commonality of thought.

“We and our advisors have carefully considered the names of scions within each house to determine those among you who are best suited, both as speakers and as moderators. We invite those named to come forward and take their places on these stands prepared for them.”

He began to read out names. He started with the moderators—each one a stuffy older member of a great house who would not allow the young too much sway. When they were named, their house provided decorous applause to mark the honor. These illustrious *Yu-gaochi* made their shuffling way down to the moderators stand, and the *Khudang-yun* began to name the first set of debaters, those who would stand with their backs to the emperor.

“Taejun Suosem.” The Taejuns erupted into applause. ShianMai watched the young man bound his way down toward the stage. He was tall, with medium-dark hair. He wore formal attire in his family's chosen shades of green and bronze. *A decent sort. One I wouldn't mind getting to know better.*

The emperor called a Kitu and a Galama, and the named houses responded with

growing enthusiasm each time. A single young woman of Wu House joined the men, another mark of favor from the emperor. The last name was one of the sons of Long House—an arrogant, useless buck that her father had chosen at random among the men of a likely age. *Not one I would have chosen!* The named debaters took their seats on the stand, their backs now to ShianMai.

“And now for their opponents,” said the emperor. “Saoden Tumo.”

ShianMai knew simply looking at Tumo that he was not the one they sought; he was far too stocky, loose around the middle. But the emperor still needed to show favor to Saoden House—and for the same reason he had selected men from Fao House and Kiang House. The emperor continued through his list, waiting for the applause from each name to die down before proceeding to the next. All spots but one were full when he looked up.

“For the last seat we have chosen one of our own,” the emperor declared, “A fine orator in her own right. Our last debater is our daughter, Sha ShianMai.”

The imperial household erupted into spontaneous applause, and ShianMai liked to think that it was mostly sincere. Their father rarely chose any of them for events like this, preferring to sow favor among the *Yu-gaochi*. Many of the lesser houses also showered her with their applause, but their reasons were political. Amid her family’s enthusiasm, ShianMai rose and walked down to the floor, then up to the debaters’ stand. She took her seat at the end of the row, and ignored the eyes of her fellow debaters, though she once again found her skin prickling.

Kamgue summoned the first moderator, who rose and joined the emperor on the moderator’s stand. They clasped forearms, and the emperor pronounced, “Chian MingDal, these debates are now yours!”

As the emperor made his way to his throne with his bodyguards, Chian MingDal summoned the first of the debaters on each side to take their place at their appointed lectern. ShianMai took a deep breath, preparing herself mentally for the voice-registration process drilled into her by her father’s tutors. Everything came down to this. It did not help ShianMai’s nerves that she could see her father the emperor watching closely.

“As is tradition,” Chian MingDal intoned, “We shall open these debates with matters of philosophy; those matters which form the very core of our beings and our society. I speak, of course, of *Sai-aman* and *Kura-aman*: the disciplines of Radiance and the Void.

“I shall pose a question, and each debater shall have time to respond before we open the floor to rebuttals. After the decreed time, we shall move to the next question. By virtue of my kinship to Saoden House, I shall rebuke favoritism and allow Taejun Suosem to speak first.

“According to tradition, each of our first debaters will have the opportunity to state and summarize their side of the argument before I pose the first question. Taejun-sar, the floor is now yours.”

Taejun Suosem puffed out his chest proudly. As the first speaker, he would choose the side of the debate his entire team would have to defend, and leave ShianMai’s team

to debate the side he did not choose.

“I am honored to be chosen for these debates,” Suosem declared in a clear voice. “I am grateful to be given this opportunity to improve my skills at debate and my thoughts on these matters, for I am a flawed and imperfect being—as are we all.”

ShianMai admired his opening—with those simple words, he had already declared which philosophy he would be arguing.

“No one here can claim perfection—that would be false and vain. We all face our own failures, each and every day. The only perfection that we can see is found in the world itself and cosmos around us. It follows that we would want to take part in that outer order. Many have found ways to unite with perfection. The *Seyin-Kotsu* call it becoming ‘one with the Void’—making less of themselves and their imperfection by becoming more ‘Void’, and more *one* with the perfect cosmos. Only when that complete unification occurs can one become perfected, as is my constant aspiration.”

ShianMai applauded politely with the audience. She had to admire the son of Taejun House—his opening remarks struck well to the heart of this philosophical debate, without the usual obnoxious preamble. Of course, these debates were old and tired, and the debaters were only going through the motions before they moved on to the real debates. Suosem bowed deeply to the moderator, who turned now to Saoden Tumo.

“I too give thanks to our beloved *Khudang-yun*, and to this noble assembly,” said stocky Tumo, “As my counterpart has so eloquently said, we are all flawed creatures, and I am no exception. To claim otherwise would be to blaspheme against the Divine Heavens. However, it is those self-same Heavens that have given the spark of life to us all. Acknowledging the presence of divinity, we must also acknowledge Their hands in the creation of all things, their divine touch upon all the physical realms. Therefore, all physical creations have some spark of divinity within them—including us. Even though we have an imperfect shell, there is a perfect inner Radiance within each of us. This Inner Spirit is what gives us the strength for our daily strains, but those trained to channel their Radiance have the divinely-granted strength to do far more than the common man. By uniting with our Inner Spirit, we are thus perfected.”

Again, ShianMai joined in the applause. She had *registered* the voices of both men, and as expected, neither were the voice that had spoken to her in the gardens. However, she did learn many other things about them from their speaking—including the fact that both men sincerely believed in the philosophies for which they argued. *Interesting.*

Chian MingDal raised his hands. “My question is thus: In the presence of our beloved ruler, we must acknowledge the long-held tradition that our emperor and his predecessors were either divinely appointed, or children of divinity themselves. From this belief, how can *Sai-aman* or *Kura-aman* be proved or disproved?”

This time Tumo was allowed to speak first. “The philosophy of *Sai-aman* lends itself perfectly to this natural order. *Sai-aman* holds to these truths: as the Divinity of the Heavens created this world and everything upon it, it stands to reason that some residue of Their power remains within us, Their favored and crowning creation. We are heirs to Their creative power. The divine Inner Spirit allows us access to some small

portion of divine perfection and power. The emperor, as the divinely appointed, has been given greater measure of this power, that he might rule more wisely over us all.”

“Taejun-*sar*?” directed the moderator.

Suosem nodded. “I am often amazed by the followers of *Sai-aman*, who would put themselves on the same plane as the gods. It seems to me an indefensible arrogance.”

Some of ShianMai’s fellow debaters made sounds of anger; there were mutterings from the audience as well. But Taejun Suosem merely held up his hands.

“I would never presume to guess at the nature or purposes of the gods. But it is well apparent to me that the only true perfection in our world is decidedly *not* found in creatures such as us. In the modern era, some philosophers of *Kura-aman* have argued that there are no divine beings whatsoever, and the only ‘divinity’ is the Void that surrounds us. But regardless of that truth, we must acknowledge our own flawed nature. This brings us to the conclusion that true ‘perfection’ can come only from uniting with the Void.

“With regards to the divine appointment of our beloved *Khudang-yun*, it is clear to me that the emperors and empresses of old were true believers and practitioners of *Kura-aman*. Only thus could they gain the wisdom and power necessary to unite and rule such a magnificent land as our empire.”

ShianMai was somewhat disappointed by this speech from Suosem; it did not have the luster of his opening statements. She wondered if he was an atheist; many followers of the Void-philosophy did not believe in divine beings at all. Many other *Kura-aman* disciples considered the universe itself and all things together to be God. But in light of the moderator’s question, it would be hard to openly admit that one did not believe in the divine appointment of the *Khudang-yun*, whose very title meant ‘Divinely Chosen One.’

Tumo and Suosem stepped down to make way for the next set of debaters. Thus, the debates progressed—the moderators would pose a question, and the debaters would answer as articulately as they were able. Some were certainly stronger orators than others, and some had better grasp of the particular arguments, no matter how tired. The audience reacted verbally to those arguments that stirred them, either in favor or against. One such argument came about halfway through the line of debaters. The other woman speaker, Wu Tian, was faced off against the dashing Kiang WonDulin. The question posed to them concerned intuition.

“All of us have heard of the ‘true vision’ of the Void,” said Wu Tian, a close cousin of ShianMai’s. “Few have progressed far enough in their study of *Kura-aman* to earn the true vision. However, there are detailed and well-respected accounts from philosophers, artists, and warriors of the Void describing this phenomenon.

“With regards to the subject of intuition—these men and others have ascribed intuition to the Void. They describe intuition and visions as external ‘ripples’ across the Void. A *shutao-yun* who during a battle feels the flicker of an arrow about to pierce him, is feeling the fore-running ripple in the Void, and thus is able to dodge aside before the strike of the arrow in reality. *Kura-aman* can clearly and rationally explain all matters of intuition.”

There was much muttering from the audience—and ShianMai’s team—following this pronouncement. Kiang WonDulin wasted no time jumping to the rebuttal.

“Oh yes, the Void-practitioners are quick to thank their ‘Void’ for what the heavens themselves granted unto us, their creations,” he responded. “This ‘true vision’ and the ‘well-respected’ accounts are as often as not attributed to men who were either imprisoned for treachery or killed because their outlandish theories were traitorous. While we do not live in a day of witch hunts or superstitious mobs, it is still well to remember that these are nothing more than the theories of the irrational, parroted by the gullible.”

This ad hominem attack brought loud outcries from the audience, but WonDulin pressed stubbornly onward. “*Sai-aman* offers the far more rational explanation of ‘radiant spirits’ who offer warning to the physical beings by connection through a mutual Inner Spirit. The spirits whisper to us, and through study of our own inner Radiance, we can gain greater insight and clarity into their communications with us. For that matter, many philosophers have conjectured that it is in fact these radiant spirits that the Void-seers are viewing with their ‘true vision.’”

Kiang WonDulin was nearly driven off the stand by the angry protests from the supporters of *Kura-aman*. If the *Yu-gaochi* had been any less decorous, they would have been throwing rotten food at the speaker—though in less decorous circles that often descended very quickly into an all-out brawl. Fortunately, the *Yu-gaochi* were able to maintain some of their dignity. The evening was young yet, and this was only the first of many debates. ShianMai already despaired of finding the Sunga Tobai interloper—how would she identify him among so many? Obviously, it would not be among the first group.

Resignedly, she rose to take her turn, opposite the scion from the House of Long, Xansul, a simpering ass, by all accounts. He bounded up the steps to the stand and turned with a dramatic flourish. He was not particularly tall, but his shoulders were broad and strongly set. His hair was deepest black, and it shone like a woman’s. His clothing was more richly embroidered than her own, and even at this distance she would have sworn he wore face-paint. He had a jovial smile despite the gravity of the event. ShianMai almost rolled her eyes. *He thinks this a joke. Maybe Father does not trust me as much as it seems to put me against such as he!*

Their moderator spoke in a clear, confident voice, which re-commanded the attention of the audience. “Regarding the nature of intelligence—from the philosophies of *Sai-aman* and *Kura-aman*, how do we prove and explain our own mind, in comparison to the base creatures who exist around us?”

Long Xansul was permitted to speak first. He gave the moderator a ridiculous little bow, and then turned to the audience-at-large. “As my wise and loquacious counterparts have discussed, the philosophy of *Kura-aman* indicates a looking beyond of oneself. But these arguments are ones we have *all* heard, over and over again. Isn’t it merely tradition that we argue these things? I’m not too sure about traditions that *encourage* arguments. It seems to me a much better use of our time to contemplate the depths of *ukai* and the looking at and partaking of current fashions, don’t you?”

The moderator was not amused. “We are discussing Void and Radiance, Long-sar.”

Long Xansul waved an airy hand. “Void, Radiance, both, neither, what does it really matter? To me, these philosophies are like flowers. We are always debating whether this is perfection or this is how you obtain perfection. I mean to say, someone’s always going to say that the orchid is the most beautiful, but others prefer a lotus. Really, it’s like the East wind and the West wind. They’re always blowing, aren’t they? And it doesn’t make a great lot of difference either way, it only matters if you’re sailing, I suppose. But with the others, it’s only in your mind, and for everyone it’s going to be different, isn’t it?”

The moderator, along with everyone else, was staring at him. “What is your point?”

The fool opened his mouth to speak, froze, then scratched his chin thoughtfully. “You know, I seem to have misplaced it.”

The audience laughed, and Long Xansul smiled good-naturedly. ShianMai was fuming at this blatant, disrespectful mockery.

“You haven’t said one word in support of *Kura-aman*,” she said, restraining from a shout. “*Sai-aman* declares that it is the spark of that divinity within each of us which gives us the ability to reason. Even though we are an imperfect shell, there is a perfect intelligence within us. I might argue against it today, for I fear there is no intelligence in you whatsoever.”

Long Xansul didn’t respond to this jibe, though some among his family were protesting. He spoke more seriously in response. “I wonder, is it unreasonable for us to conjecture the possible truth in *both Sai-aman* and *Kura-aman*?”

“How could such opposite philosophies possibly co-exist?” ShianMai scoffed. “To believe one is to disbelieve the other.”

Long Xansul shrugged, but ShianMai thought she saw a guarded expression come over his typically vacant face. “It is said,” he pressed, “That the hero Hanu Zan, that valiant fellow, after leaving the service of our beloved *Khudang-yun*, sought solitude in the mountains, though I can’t imagine what drove him to such inanity. It is said that there the poor fellow Awakened for a second time and found himself able to call upon both his Inner Spirit *and* the Void. Is not Hanu Zan called the Master of the Two Ways? And further, he instructed his infamous pupil Telsharu the Cursed in these two ways, and though the pupil regrettably was corrupted and turned against his master and our beloved emperor and all that,” he waved his hand vaguely, “He nevertheless became a master of both as well. Is it so hard to conjecture that these ‘two ways’ are nothing more or less than the unification of *Sai-aman* and *Kura-aman*, mastered by the greatest hero, and the greatest villain, our great empire have ever known? I say to you that, depraved creatures that we are, we have only the most finite understanding of these matters. Instead of closing our minds with these single-sided debates, we would be better to examine the teachings of the great Hanu Zan.”

ShianMai did not actually hear the great laughter that met these remarks. She stood, stiff and frozen, exactly where she had stopped when her trained ear had registered the phrase “depraved creature.” Her mind was moving faster than usual, in a

strange and offbeat contrast to her frozen muscles. Something deep within her had instantly recognized, cataloged, and identified the speaker who had spoken from behind her, one dark night in the imperial gardens. “*Didn’t I tell you that, depraved creature that I am, I but crave your fair company?*”

Only a moment had passed, and the room still rang with mocking applause. Stiffly, ShianMai went into motion. She very clearly met her father’s eyes. With deliberate motions, ShianMai reached into her sash for her handkerchief. She made sure it was the handkerchief—the other articles she carried would send different signals. ShianMai raised the kerchief to dab her face.

Kamgwe gave only a slight nod to acknowledge the signal. He remained calm and collected in his throne, as he always did. ShianMai’s father was the very soul of composure. It was his coolness that often made his enemies tremble.

Somehow, ShianMai stumbled through the closing remarks, remarking upon the enlightenment of *Sai-aman*. She must have said something witty, because the audience laughed and applauded, but a moment later, she could not recall what had come from her lips. She could not truly hear Long Xansul’s response—every word sang in her ears like a gong, sounding forth his true identity. At the end, the audience was laughing again, but whether in mirth or in mockery, she could not say.

The emperor rose. He immediately had the attention of every eye in the room. ShianMai’s heart pounded in her breast.

“We thank our noble guests for this lively discussion of philosophy,” said the emperor. “Always it is fruitful to hear the thoughts of our philosophers, that we all might gain a bit more wisdom. Our charge as ruler of this great and magnificent land has ever been to rule in wisdom and justice.

“We have a serious matter to speak of, on the matter of justice.” The emperor’s voice grew stern—and ShianMai could see many of the *Yu-gaochi* shift uncomfortably at his tone. “You have heard, perhaps, of the rebels who call themselves the Sunga Tobai, men with evil in their hearts who seek to disrupt the natural order. It grieves me deeply to admit that this conspiracy has penetrated here, in the heart of the Seventh Empire, the *Yu-gaochi*. But we shall nip this poisonous growth in its infancy, forbidding the roots to penetrate any further into our ranks. Any noble who supports rebellion against our person is a traitor, and will be treated accordingly.”

“Long Xansul.” The audience gasped audibly, and mutters of confusion erupted throughout the crowd. Kamgwe pressed on over them. “For high treason against the empire and disruption of peace among the people, you are hereby accused. Arrest this man.”

The *Siang-Tonu* moved in. Like shadows of the night, they whisked through the crowds. The *Yu-gaochi* gave way to the eerie masked assassins. Their scarlet and black robes flashed, and three of the assassins leapt toward Xansul.

The crowd erupted with cries of protest when Xansul reacted more swiftly than anyone could have anticipated. As the nearest assassin came upon him, his open palm whipped out and struck the assassin in the chest. Spinning and kicking, Xansul sent the next assassin sprawling backwards. Three fluid strikes dropped the third assassin,

and Xansul turned to dodge towards the exit. But there were several more assassins between Xansul and his way out.

They struck relentlessly. ShianMai had never seen the *Siang-Tonu* in action before, and she was stunned at their speed. The three assassins who had been ‘dispatched’ rose and again joined the fight. Xansul was soon overwhelmed. He snapped a swift kick at one assassin’s head. But the assassin dodged it with impossible ease. He grabbed Xansul’s arm, and jerked with one downward motion.

ShianMai winced. Xansul growled in pain as the assassin dropped his dislocated arm. Another assassin struck the back of Xansul’s neck, and Xansul crumpled to the ground, temporarily paralyzed. He was dragged before the emperor’s dais. The audience watched in silence, without any more cries of protest. His display of martial skill had obviously exposed him. He was not the fool for which everyone had always taken him. A pall washed over the crowd as they awaited the judgments to be pronounced upon the betrayer.

Xansul was dropped in a crumpled heap before Kamgue. All eyes were upon the *Khudang-yun*, his face hidden behind that golden mask. ShianMai’s breath caught as the tension mounted around her. Her father paused for a long moment, examining the traitor as though he were some peculiar specimen brought for the emperor’s inspection. Again, it was the emperor’s collected calm that was so terrifying—the very absence of anger made the watchers hope for an outburst of rage, to lessen the tension.

When the emperor finally spoke, his voice was clear and aloof. “Xansul, son of the House of Long, you are accused on charges of treason against the Seventh Empire. We hereby accuse you of sedition, sabotage, and murder, enacted as an affiliate of the heathen rebels calling themselves the Sunga Tobai. These crimes are most foul in our eyes. How do you plead?”

Xansul’s head was dragged back by the hair and held there by one of the *Siang-Tonu*. Xansul coughed several times before he could respond. “You claim to be a force of justice,” he said with a voice full of scorn, “Ha! Whichever way I plead will end up the same. You will pass your predetermined judgment upon me, even if I were innocent as a newborn babe! What justice is there in unwilling dictatorship? The *Yu-gaochi* only follow you out of fear of your *justice*. Your rule is a *mockery* of justice! I would find more justice in the wild jungle than I find here at the feet of my supposed ruler. Perhaps you could send me there. I think I’d prefer the company of apes!”

The *Yu-gaochi* didn’t know whether to laugh or to gasp in horror. Everyone in the room was clearly astonished by this impudent speech. Yet ShianMai felt herself moved. His earlier speech had been its own form of rebellion carefully disguised, which she could recognize now with this outward show of courage. *He’s a well-spoken traitor, at least.*

ShianMai saw movement among the members of Long House. It resolved into the Long-*dul*, Xansul’s honored father, making his way to the front so he could be clearly seen.

There was much of Xansul in this man, or perhaps the other way around. They had the same light brown skin, the same strong set to their shoulders, though the

Long-*dul*'s were starting to slump as he passed into his elder years. His face, however, was set into grim lines as he made a deep bow to the emperor.

The *Khudang-yun* nodded slightly. "We recognize the Head of Long House."

Xansul's father looked directly at the emperor, without a glance for his son. "The House of Long renounces he called Xansul, once of this noble house, but now branded traitor—and now *Lochi*. Long knows no son called Xansul."

The emperor nodded. "A tree cleared of dead branches grows ever the stronger."

As ShianMai looked between the two men, she wondered if all was as it seemed. A house holding such a traitor would never be entirely free of suspicion, no matter what they did to save themselves.

The Long-*dul* bowed again, turned, and shuffled away. Kamgue turned to Xansul, who met his eyes with a fierce gaze. "Take him away."

Xansul was given no chance to escape. The *Siang-Tonu* bound him tightly—he groaned in protest when his shoulder wrenched—and a hood thrust over his face. Four assassins formed a tight square around him as they dragged him to his feet. Two grasped his arms and marched him forward. Still, Xansul did not stumble, but walked with sure footsteps. His very confidence was eerie. Apparently the *Siang-Tonu* didn't much care for this—one of them punched Xansul in the kidneys, and he doubled over in pain. The assassins dragged him away. The image of proud dignity was marred, but still ShianMai did not think it was destroyed.

After such upheaval, the *Yu-gaochi* would not focus on the event, not with one of their own declared a traitor, and their gossiping would disturb the emperor's event. Thus in his infinite wisdom, Kamgue called an end to the debates. He graciously thanked the great houses for their continued loyalty, and with his wife again upon his arm and his masked *Siang-Tonu* around him, the emperor proceeded out of the pavilion.

In the aftermath, ShianMai could hardly think. The *Yu-gaochi* were in disarray; some orderly souls among them were trying to reassemble the great procession for their departure, but few were cooperating. Instead, they were talking and in some cases shouting and arguing among themselves, about what had happened and their feelings on the matter—some at the top of their lungs. The room was pandemonium. ShianMai did not know what to make of the outcome. It was far more sudden than she had anticipated. *I pleased Father—didn't I? That's what is important*—It felt like she was convincing herself.

When her brother came for her, she allowed Dokumun to lead her away from the seething pit of chaos that was all that remained of the Great Debates.

CHAPTER 11

It was exhilarating to feel pleasure again. Pleasure had been a distant dream within the dungeons of Nao Gak San. The closest facsimile had been imagining in minute details the torture and death of his captors, followed by the emperor. But revenge always had a sour aftertaste—albeit one Telsharu had learned to live with—which made *true* pleasure seem doubly sweet.

True pleasure he found in the clever games played by the Sunga Tobai against the emperor's government, and insinuating himself into their ranks and their trust. It was a game Telsharu played with remarkable speed. If he had been a god-fearing man, he would have attributed his rapid success to divinity. However, Telsharu merely congratulated himself on fine-honed skills that had not rusted during a century in prison.

A century! The time still astounded him when he stopped to consider it. The time in Nao Gak San *had* seemed interminable, but it had still been a blow to discover that the world around him had changed. Parents now told *tales* of him to frighten their children! Everyone he had known was long dead, and their children were doddering elders with grandchildren of their own. The factions that had been in power during Telsharu's life meant nothing to the present; the great houses had changed, in their allegiances and influence. In Telsharu's day, the *Yu-gaochi* had been a force to reckon with. But in modern times, by all accounts, the nobility were little more than titleholders who enjoyed a good party.

It was for this reason more than any other that Telsharu so enjoyed his association with the Sunga Tobai group. When first concocting his plan, Telsharu had thought to use the great houses to accomplish his purposes against the emperor. But there was such *pleasure* in this open rebellion! He didn't have to be subtle, he didn't have to hide his motives, he didn't even have to temper them very much—each member of the Sunga Tobai had some reason to hate the emperor and his imperial government, and to a person, they wanted to see the emperor brought down. Telsharu didn't really have to manipulate them—he simply encouraged them. Each day among the Sunga Tobai was exhilarating.

However, one night when he rose and joined the men, he found their usual spirit severely dampened. In the Void he could plainly see his men filled with doubt and confusion; a few simmered with anger on low flames, while an equal few showed the roots of fear and cowardice. Was it something to do with him? *No, impossible. It must be some other thing.* Telsharu walked into their midst for the evening meal, determined

to seek out the problem.

The source was immediately apparent. “Who is that?” he murmured to one of the men.

Lodu looked up toward the head table, where a stranger sat beside Yundak, the band’s nominal leader. “He’s a man from the capital,” Lodu replied in the low voice. “The men call him Wizard, but he calls himself Hiengsi. They say he’s one of the high-up leaders, there in the capital.”

“*Wizard*,” scorned Telsharu as he made his way to the table. In this day and age, Telsharu was mostly unimpressed with any who gave themselves such titles. Though such men did possess some little skill, they were mostly accomplished as a distraction. They made pretty lights and little explosions to frighten the uninitiated, while others accomplished the real work. Given free access to a supply of fire-sand, Telsharu could do just as much. The fact that Hiengsi was apparently part of the tightest circle of the Sunga Tobai only increased Telsharu’s suspicion of the leadership’s judgment. But for the moment, Telsharu needed to keep that disdain to himself.

Yundak nodded as Telsharu took a seat on the floor beside him. The men had quickly accustomed themselves to the fact that Telsharu could see, after a fashion. To his allies, it was a source of mystery, not one of fear. For their comfort, he wore a clean bandage over his eyes—but this only seemed to increase his mystique. But for the sake of place with Yundak, Telsharu did not encourage his reputation with the men. They would remember his humility later, when he would most need their real respect, rather than the awe they freely offered.

Telsharu decided to address the matter directly. “Clearly something has happened. Will you share the news?”

Hiengsi gave Yundak a dark glance, but Yundak merely shrugged. He leaned over to whisper to Telsharu.

“Hiengsi brought terrible news from the capital, and it’s spreading faster than he intended.” Hiengsi glared, but Telsharu could see the distinct uneasiness in the man’s Aura. “Our great leader—Leader of the Sunga Tobai—has been arrested. Turns out he was a nobleman, an important one, and a powerful *shutao-yun*. The emperor found him out somehow and arrested him in front of all the *Yu-gaochi*. For a nobleman, a mere insult will earn you death. Being the leader of a rebellion—”

“One of ours, he came running back to our meeting-place as soon as he could get away,” Hiengsi added. “Told us what he’d seen with his own eyes—said the *Yu-gaochi* were faster to wash their hands of our Leader than listen to the truths he spat back in the emperor’s face. Cowards.”

“And now the emperor has him,” said Yundak. “The execution will be later in the week.”

Telsharu nodded slightly, letting no expression show on his face. “And there’s no telling what he will reveal, under the emperor’s thumb.”

“Exactly,” Yundak replied. “The rest of the leadership has gone into hiding, and most of the nobles that supported our cause have fled the capital entirely.”

“The Leader is a strong man,” Hiengsi insisted. “Torture is not a perfect tool, and

he will hold out. He would rather die than expose us.”

“He was a *shutao-yun*, you say?”

Hiengsi nodded. “Of the Silent Wind *Shutao-aman*, a powerful *Seyin-Kotsu* in his own right.”

Then there is little hope for him. The emperor’s methods are far more—effective—than crude torture.

Telsharu leaned back thoughtfully. He had heard little about this Leader before now—the common men of the Sunga Tobai did not seem to know much about the man. Deep respect was evident in both men’s voices, yet there was a strange hesitancy about Hiengsi. His Aura did not give anything away, which actually indicated a lot to Telsharu, but not enough.

“What was his name? The leader?” Telsharu asked, keeping his tone neutral.

Hiengsi glared at him—something a blind man would not have noticed—but Telsharu just raised his hands. “Your protection is somewhat futile at this point.”

“He’s right,” Yundak agreed. Telsharu could see curiosity budding through Yundak. Hiengsi sighed.

“His name is Long Xansul.” As Telsharu and Yundak looked on, he continued in a heavy voice. “He’s the third-son of Long House, long known as a flippant fool by most. But he kept up the charade for years to protect his true purpose: leading the Sunga Tobai from almost the very beginning.”

“A real *Seyin-Kotsu*—” Yundak mused. “Imagine working with a True Master!”

Again, that strange hesitancy rippled through Hiengsi. As the man paused, Telsharu began to probe at those feelings—carefully so Hiengsi wouldn’t notice, but enough to get a better idea of the man’s emotions. “Yes,” Hiengsi finally replied. “I’ve never seen his better.”

Telsharu’s probe clicked, and he instinctively responded. “Obviously someone was better or he wouldn’t have been identified.”

Hiengsi bristled. “Or he was betrayed!”

Telsharu snorted loudly, and knew that he drew eyes and ears. “We’re not in some tale, he’s not a hero, he’s just a man! Hasn’t he ever done things you thought were foolish or not in the best interest of the Sunga Tobai group?”

Hiengsi’s silence spoke loudly. Telsharu continued. “I know the men of Sunga Tobai; these men are loyal, and they believe in the cause. If this Long Xansul was as good a leader as his men indicate, then I don’t believe there could have been a betrayer so close to him. It must have been through his own flaws that he was discovered.”

Hiengsi’s Aura was slowly being overcome by doubt. Telsharu lowered his voice and continued, “No one is perfect. Not even great leaders. He made mistakes in the past, and obviously he made a mistake that cost him.” *Just like me. Only I doubt Long Xansul will return, not from the emperor’s clutches.* “We can only hope that it won’t cost our whole group. Our mission is too important.”

Telsharu didn’t press the matter further. He spent the rest of the meal chatting lightly with Yundak, but with his Void-senses he watched the play of emotion across Hiengsi’s Aura. Apparently, this Long Xansul was exactly as Telsharu had pegged—

imperfect. Whether Long had Awakened to the Void or not, he had made choices that did not sit well with his underlings, and now they would watch him pay the price for it.

After everyone was fed and watered, they all went back to the sleeping chamber to begin their preparations for the night's mission. Telsharu, along with the others, dressed in night-black trousers, shirt, and *samping*, and then rubbed soot into his exposed skin and hair. He strapped on pieces of hardened leather armor to protect his most vulnerable parts. Then he donned his weapons—his sword, of course, though he was one of the few to bear one. Most of the others had staffs and knives, and a few bore simple clubs. Some of these men had never had any martial training before joining the Sunga Tobai. But Yundak was doing good work with them. Though he gave them few techniques and little actual instruction, he drilled them endlessly in those things he did show them, so that when they were in the moment, their response would be automatic. In every mission, a few were injured or killed, but Yundak's training had saved many lives already. Telsharu admired Yundak's patience with the raw beginners. Telsharu himself tended to avoid them.

The men were mostly assembled when Yundak stepped into the room. He too was all in black and heavily armed. The men assembled for the unofficial inspection that always preceded their missions. Yundak walked through their ranks, acting as much as a mirror as a commander—rubbing in soot and readjusting clothing as often as he checked blade edges and equipment. All the men received a look-over, even Telsharu. It was not condescending; Yundak gave every single man the impression that they were intimately important to the mission, and that he was concerned for their safety.

Yundak looked around at them all; then he glanced to Hiengsi. "Are you ready, master wizard?"

"I am ready."

Yundak nodded. "Let's go."

As the men began filing out after him, Telsharu mused again about the Leader, this Long Xansul. His weakness had been proven, for he had been arrested and would soon be executed. Weakness did not inspire men. Telsharu slowly began to smile. On this night's mission, Telsharu would show his own strength. Yes, he would show the men true leadership. *The time is almost ripe. Things have played so perfectly into my hands, perhaps Divinity does want me to succeed. Soon, the entire Sunga Tobai will know the meaning of true leadership.* Grinning, Telsharu followed Yundak and the men out into the night.

CHAPTER 12

The town of Ju-Toshi positively reeked to Daryun's Inner Spirit. He had felt an "itch" begin some distance outside of the town, and it grew stronger with every step he took. By the time he strode through the gate into the town proper, Daryun had no doubt whatsoever that the Cursed One's taint of violence lay upon Ju-Toshi.

Everywhere he went smelled of smoke. Dust and lingering wisps hung in the early morning air, creating a dirty fog over the town. Few people were out in the streets, though it was already late in the morning. Those few who were out and about walked quickly with their heads bowed, refusing to meet his eyes. Everything in Ju-Toshi had that same sense of *wrong* that Daryun associated with his vision of the Cursed One. Daryun let his Inner Spirit guide him to the strongest concentration of fear, sorrow, and pain.

The smoke was stronger as he moved southward through Ju-Toshi. It was a prosperous town of moderate size, and Daryun could tell that the streets were usually kept clear, the buildings, and walls clean. The overlay of dust and ash and grit were fresh and seemed out of place.

More people appeared the further into the town he walked. These too, who typically would have been clean and well-kept, wore clothing stained with soot and ash, their hair mussed and ragged. Some had streaks of tears through the grime upon their faces.

At last, Daryun came to a small square set near the city wall. A building on the southern edge of the square was in smoking ruins; the wall around the property had collapsed entirely, and half the building was down as well. The husks of several caravan wagons stood in a semi-circle before the property. A line of corpses lay out in the square covered in mismatched pieces of cloth. Women tended the dead and the injured, while a large group of men worked in the still-smoking ruins, perhaps looking for survivors, or for anything to salvage. Men formed a water line, but they moved as if their arms were very weary. People throughout the square had burns large and small, and an assortment of cuts, scrapes, and injuries.

Daryun went immediately to the water line. He tapped one of the most weary-looking young men on the shoulder. "If it pleases you, this one will take your place."

The youth bowed. "My gratitude, sir." Daryun took his place in the line and the youth staggered away toward the group of tending women.

For a while, Daryun said nothing. He fell into the rhythm of the steadily passed pails of water heading toward the still-smoking ruins. On his right was a youth who looked nearly as exhausted as the first. On his left was a man of more sturdy stuff, who, stained with soot, had obviously been in the thick of things.

Daryun spoke between buckets. "Wish I knew the full of what happened." He kept his voice mild, unassuming.

The man snorted. "Don't we all."

"Who do you think it was?"

"Do we really need to guess?" replied the other man. "Covered head-to-toe in black, speeches against the emperor? Of course it was the Sunga Tobai."

Daryun mulled this over. News of the Sunga Tobai had spread throughout the empire, to the remote northern town of Ju-Shui. His father-in-law had brought back tales of the resistance from his merchant contacts. The Sunga Tobai disrupted trade all over the empire, and so, of course, Merchant Jahel had railed against them. Looking at the burned husks of the caravan wagons, Daryun felt in agreement with his father-in-law—a rare occurrence.

"But why here?" Daryun prompted, accepting the next water pail and passing it on. "Why would the Sunga Tobai care about this place?"

"They fight the emperor, and I guess the *Yu-gaochi* as well. For these scoundrels, disrupting house trade is as good a way as any, no matter who gets hurt."

This made more sense. So, this had not been a regular merchant house then, but one of the great houses. This kind of attack was sure to anger the *Yu-gaochi*. It was a strong move. Too strong for the Sunga Tobai—but was it too strong for the Cursed One? Daryun looked again at the destruction in the square. This spoke strongly of *his* leadership.

Daryun's theory was confirmed but a moment later. The youth on his right spoke up. "Did you hear him, though? The blind man? He spoke like a prophet."

"The blind man?" Daryun prompted, his mouth suddenly dry.

The youth nodded, and there was a strange light in his eyes. "It was after the explosions. Everything was on fire. But the blind man stood on that wall—" He pointed to where the front wall of the burned property had stood, "—and told us how the emperor has ruined everything, how he treats us like slaves and we take it, but we shouldn't, we should stand up for ourselves and fight—"

"Nonsense," said the older man. "He's a lunatic. Look what he did."

The youth shrugged, accepting a bucket from Daryun. "Maybe he's mad. But when he looked at me, I could really feel something—I've never felt like that before. I wanted to go fight with him."

"Blind men can't see," the man insisted. "He couldn't have really been looking at you."

"He was definitely looking at me. I could feel it."

The man snorted again but said nothing further. Daryun's skin seemed to tingle as they continued to pass water up the line. Before long, the last of the fire had been put out, and the line was disbanded. The sun was coming up in full now. The men of

the water line were sent to help with the corpses.

Daryun joined the group who were loading the dead into carts. They would have a proper ceremony, but for now, they needed to get the bodies out of the sun and the square. Daryun found himself beside an old woman in a soot-stained sari. She had lost one of her sandals. Her graying hair was coming out of its bun, and her face was stained with ash. Two tracks made streaks down her face, but her tears were no longer present in a face full of determination.

The two of them prepared another body for the carts, that of a young girl. The matronly woman wiped the girl's face with a damp cloth, clearing the worst of the grime and blood. Burns covered the girl's body and large swatches of her sarong had been burned away. Daryun covered her exposed body with a cloth proffered by the matron. He then carried the girl's limp form to the waiting cart.

When he returned, the matron was kneeling next to the body of an old man. He looked peaceful, like he was sleeping, but with the gray tinge of death about his skin. Daryun knelt opposite the woman. Fresh tears were making their way down her face.

"They had no right to do this," she whispered. "Their war with the emperor does not belong here."

"It is wickedness," Daryun agreed.

She took the old man's head into her lap and cradled it. "We're expecting our first grandchild. I've never known a man more excited to be a grandfather. How am I going to tell the children?" She began to weep openly, hunched over the body of her husband, trying to conceal her shame.

Daryun rose to his feet. He looked down upon the weeping widow, his heart clenched within him. "I will find the one who did this," Daryun declared. "He will pay for what he has done here, and so much else."

The widow looked up at him, her face sparkling with tears. "Who are you?"

"A stranger."

He left them to mourn their dead. There was nothing more Daryun could do. Determination once again welled up inside him. The Cursed One had returned, and now the entire Seventh Empire would burn in his terrible revenge. The Cursed One might be wrapped up with the Sunga Tobai, but his eventual mission was clear. One way or another, Daryun would find Telsharu in the Imperial City, home of the Sha emperor.

With furrowed brow, Daryun started south.

CHAPTER 13

A cacophony of sound met the ears. The vast city square known as “Traitor’s Gate” for the renowned temple at its center, was full of people, and their voices reverberated against the surrounding walls. Jugglers and tumblers roved about performing for the people, hoping for coins to be thrown. Food-sellers also wound through the crowds, and those bearing sweet and sticky treats were doing brisk business. An air of anticipation hung over the vast square, and more people arrived as the sun drew closer to the horizon.

To the unfamiliar eye, Traitor’s Gate might at first appear small and somewhat shabby. It was an ancient temple of wood, later set atop a square stone platform. The wood had been painted and renovated many times over the centuries since its construction, but each time with loving care. The temple was as ancient as the Seventh Empire, or perhaps even older. It was said that the Imperial City had been built around the Gate, starting with the square that shared its name.

The temple was open at the front, with wooden columns that bore elaborate and ancient carvings depicting the Guardians of the Divine Heavens of old. Stone steps had been added when the temple had been placed upon its stone platform, and stone lions stood as guards on either side of the steps, one with jaws clamped shut, the other with jaws open wide in a defiant roar. Tall wooden gates enclosed the rear portion of the temple. Ancient artifacts had once been enshrined there, but in the face of increasing vandalism, they had long ago been removed to the imperial palace, kept safe somewhere in the bowels of the island. The gates were carved with many ancient symbols, but largest of all was the seal of the Seventh Empire—two dragons entwined around the symbol of the sun. The seal seemed to look over the interior of the temple, where an altar stood ready to receive offerings. Though, on days such as this one, those offerings were of a grisly sort.

None of ShianMai’s half-siblings had been invited, and most of her full-siblings had elected to stay at home in the palace. For her eldest brother and his family, staying away was a matter of dignity. “Mingling with commoners and rag-tag *Yu-gaochi* is decidedly not my favorite form of entertainment,” Yaosong had sniffed. For Mongnik and his tender wife, avoiding the spectacle was more sensible: “Just because a man’s a traitor, doesn’t mean we have to make a sport of him.” Dokumun was probably lurking about somewhere, but ShianMai was effectively the only full member of Sha House present.

That this made her a target of the *Yu-gaochi* was part of her purpose for attending. When she had asked her father's permission to attend, he had studied her for a long moment. She saw the speculation building in those enigmatic eyes. His response had been somewhat discomfiting, though she would not have admitted it. "There is no doubt that you have proven your worth, daughter. Perhaps you will continue to be of such use. Yes, you may attend, and I encourage you to mingle with the *Yu-gaochi* and gauge their reactions to the event." She was gratified for his attention, but hoped desperately to live up to his expectations.

Familiar wooden platforms had been erected around the Gate. Sometimes the stands were erected in the Square of Divinity, but just as often they were set here at Traitor's Gate. The platforms were erected whenever the emperor made a public announcement and people gathered to listen, for public festivals or market days, or events such as today's. The platforms were erected by the great houses, who vied for the closest proximity to the emperor's platform at the center. Usually, ShianMai would have been relegated to her mother's side, cooped up with the family. But without the family present, she was free to wander as she pleased, so long as she remained close enough to satisfy the bodyguard assigned to her person.

ShianMai took note first of those who attended. It did not surprise her that the House of Long was nearly absent. Only the Long-*dul* and his attendants could be seen. He sat alone; no one dared to mingle with the traitor's family. The Longs had repudiated their traitorous son, so the ostracism would not last forever. But today especially none of the *Yu-gaochi* would want to be associated with Long House.

But there were others missing too. Sometimes it was just a face here or there, faces that ought to be here, made conspicuous by their absence. The atmosphere among the *Yu-gaochi* was nervous and on edge, not at all in accordance with the festive feel of the common people. It might have been her imagination, but it seemed like the nervousness was strongest among the houses who had missing faces.

Other houses were better represented. The House of Yang in particular was well accounted-for. In fact, ShianMai had already avoided Yang Xomin several times. When she caught him looking her way again, she hurriedly turned away and headed for another group.

She nearly tripped over Galama Edotam. "Forgive me, cousin," the young man said, grasping her by the arm until she regained her balance. "In a hurry?"

"I have some particularly—ardent pursuers."

Edo laughed. In reality, the relationship between them was much more complex. He was a descendant of the first wife of the *Khudang-yun*, and an esteemed member of the Imperial House of Galama in his own right. It was odd to be the thrice-great aunt of someone two years her senior—one of the peculiarities of her father's many households. Despite the complication of their connection, however, Edo was one of her favorite distant-relations, for his mild nature and easy laugh.

"I share your pain, though for me it is not so sharp," Edo said, "I am only second-son of Galama House. A prize, but not nearly so great a catch as a blood-daughter of the emperor, may the Divine Heavens always guide my most honored grandsire."

ShianMai, however, grinned wickedly. “I am given to understand that a certain daughter of Kiang House has eyes for the second-son of Galama.”

Edo glanced to where the scions of Kiang House sat grouped together. One young woman saw his gaze and quickly whispered in her companion’s ear. That lady blushed prettily and avoided his eyes.

“These games are most tiresome,” Edo complained to ShianMai. “Though I find her lovely, I can never catch her for a moment’s private conversation. At times I despise women.” ShianMai raised a delicate eyebrow, and he recovered hastily. “All but you, fair cousin, of course. Would that all were more like you.”

“I thank you, cousin—I think.” She patted his arm. “But all in good time. Now tell me, how fares your father?”

Of equal if not greater strangeness than her relationship with Edotam was her relationship with Edo’s father, the present Head of Galama House—a man twice her age, to whom ShianMai was technically a great-great-aunt. Yet this was, as ever, a norm for the households of the emperor.

“I should not tell you,” said Edo in a low, conspiratorial voice, “But my father is deep into trade agreements with Long House. This whole affair has made him very nervous. Yet, the Long Family may be more willing to negotiate, now. It’s just a matter of how the *Khudang-yun* decides to treat the House of Long afterward.”

“And your brother?”

Edo snorted. “Giddy as a boy with his first sharp knife. I do have to admit the baby is adorable, but my brother’s mind has been completely addled. There’s no getting any adult conversation from him now, it all comes out as baby-nonsense.”

“Wait ‘til you have *your* first child. Then we shall see who does more baby-talking.”

“We shall see,” he agreed. “But in any case, I am being terribly rude by hoarding your attention. I’m sure you have rounds to make.”

This was true, so ShianMai bid him a fond farewell. She then continued to make her slow progress around the platforms, tailed by her silent and watchful bodyguard. She stopped to speak briefly a few times, but these were scions of lesser houses who barely deserved her notice. However, a few warranted a much greater portion of her attention.

First of these was Taejun Suosem, one of the debaters and a well-known associate of Xansul’s. Today he was somber, dressed in a brown-and-gold sarong that might almost have been called drab. He bowed deeply to ShianMai, and she offered him a cordial nod in return. “Sha-*rayang*, your beauty radiates more brightly than the sun this afternoon. You have never appeared so lovely.”

She thanked him politely, then casually commented, “I am surprised to see you here, Taejun-*sar*.”

She could almost hear the cold calculations taking place in his brain. “Why so, Sha-*rayang*? I am as eager as any to see this traitor put down.”

“Of course.” ShianMai played her game carefully, letting enough show to mislead, but acting as though it was completely sincere. “I know that Xansul was a friend of yours.”

“Friend?” he scoffed. “An acquaintance, perhaps. Xansul always posed as the ridiculous fool, but I was no less the fool for playing into his game.”

“Then you think it was a game he played, his ridiculous exterior?”

“There can be no doubt. If Xansul was a pawn of the Sunga Tobai, as our great emperor has affirmed, then obviously he was not the fool he has pretended to be—since childhood.”

“Quite a long-lived deception,” ShianMai murmured. “It makes me wonder what other deceptions are seeded through the *Yu-gaochi*.”

She could sense a hint of nervousness about him. “I wonder as well. But assuredly your honored father—may the Divine Heavens always bless and guide him—knows that I, and my family, are loyal to the *Khudang-yun*.”

I wonder if Xansul had any true friends. Not that it mattered. ShianMai could detect the true repudiation in Suosem’s voice—he scorned Xansul and everything he stood for. And for now, that was enough for ShianMai. “My father recognizes true loyalty, *Taejun-sar*.”

Suosem bowed deeply. His face showed no relief, but there was less tension in his frame. “The *Khudang-yun* is ever wise and benevolent. I do wonder, though—” He pretended thoughtfulness. “Surely the *Lochi* Xansul could not have been alone in his scheme. A lone *Yu-gaochi* among common folk?”

“I have wondered much the same, *Taejun-sar*. I have supposed that others were involved, even among our own ranks. But surely my honored father along with his *Siang-Tonu* would have wrested such information from the traitor.”

“And what would have been their first move, upon his capture, knowing he would be subjected to the *Siang-Tonu*?”

Dangerous, she thought to herself, seeing where these thoughts led. “They would surely flee.”

Suosem’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Look around, *Sha-rayang*. I may be jumping at shadows, but I notice many faces missing today, with no accounting for their absence.”

She did look around. Casually, as though she was merely enjoying the view of the square. She looked again at the houses missing members that ought to be present. Some perhaps had a legitimate excuse. But there was more than one or two. *It’s obvious, for anyone who bothers to look. How could they think to disguise it?*

“Some may be home sick,” she murmured, “Or away on business, or at their outer holdings.”

“Perhaps,” he said simply.

“But to think that so many, *Taejun-sar*,” she whispered in a sincere voice of protest, “What you suggest—how could we ever know who is traitor and who is friend?”

“That,” he replied, “Is exactly what I intend to find out. I have many friends among the *Yu-gaochi*, men and women in high places and low, but friends that I trust, and even the ones I don’t trust I can still ply for information. Others will come to you, *Sha-rayang*, pleading cries of innocence. You will see. They dare not approach the *Khudang-yun*, who may lash out. But you, beautiful lady, you are real and benign. They

will come to you, and perhaps you will learn more of who is honest and who is false.”

ShianMai knew he was right. No wonder so many of the *Yu-gaochi* had their eyes upon her. They all craved protection from the emperor’s uncertain wrath, and the favored imperial daughter was a safe way to send such messages of innocence to the *Khudang-yun*. And in their desperation, ShianMai saw an opportunity.

“Taejun-sar, will you help me?” ShianMai met his eyes directly. “The *Yu-gaochi* must be cleansed of this infestation. This is a task with which you and I can earn my father’s favor.”

A hint of greed flashed through his eyes. Suosem took her hand and bowed deeply over it, where he swore, “My honor to yours.”

“I will send word to you. Be watchful.”

He nodded. “Ever and always, Sha-rayang.”

The two of them parted, lest they draw attention by lingering. ShianMai walked away with a deep sense of triumph. This, she decided, would be her best chance to further please her father. He did not have the time or the patience to deal with the *Yu-gaochi*, especially individually. But it was a task perfectly suited to ShianMai. She could make a difference for the security of the empire, all under the guise of being a socialite. *It’s perfect.*

ShianMai conversed lightly with a few more of the *Yu-gaochi*, asking about children or newly-minted hobbies. She pretended to flirt with some of the eligible young men, but never enough to encourage them. The last thing she wanted right now was to be ensnared in some romantic mess. Broken-hearted males her age were not pretty creatures, and they were nothing compared to their dowry-hungry fathers.

Amid her rounds, however, ShianMai also had a few more conversations like the one with Suosem. A few were members of Xansul’s former circle—Dansu Zian, for instance, as well as Chian Jo—but some were not. All came to her, quietly professing their house’s allegiance to the emperor. Some, ShianMai believed, whether through her ability to read voices or through instinct. On others, she reserved judgment. For now, she took no action; she simply listened. The *Yu-gaochi* came to her exactly as Suosem had predicted, and for the moment, ShianMai was content to let it be so. By the time she made her way up to her family’s platform, she was feeling quite accomplished.

The *Khudang-yun* sat in the imperial box directly facing the Gate, almost looking like a statue. He was dressed in stiff gold brocade robes, with his ornate mask glinting in the deepening light of the sunset. Four of his masked *Siang-Tonu* created a square of black-and-crimson around him. Her father’s eyes signaled ShianMai, for though the rest of his face was hidden behind that golden mask, she could clearly see the orbs of his eyes fixed upon her.

His voice carried easily to all those around the imperial platform and the surrounding area. “Permit our favored daughter to sit beside us. We would speak with her.”

ShianMai worked to keep her heart from pounding as the masked guards allowed her within their protective square, and she took a seat beside her honored father. She

could practically feel jealous eyes boring into her back.

Kamgue continued to watch the *Yu-gaochi* and the common crowds beyond. When he spoke at last, his voice from behind his golden mask was low and carried only to ShianMai's ears.

"I perceive your game, daughter; but I wonder if you comprehend the many-headed monster which you have just mounted."

ShianMai did not let any emotion—like the surprise she felt—show upon her face. "I did not think flirting was so dangerous a game."

"It is, when accompanied by suspicions and disquiet, particularly among children of the *Yu-gaochi*."

ShianMai was impressed at her father's uncanny ability to know everything that happened around him. "Sha-*dul*, I seek only to serve your interests. The *Yu-gaochi* seek to avoid your suspicion through my favor. But I do not believe that this traitor worked alone, even among the *Yu-gaochi*."

"I am also certain that you are correct. However do you really hope to root them out using the *Yu-gaochi* themselves?"

"Yes, that is my hope. Sha-*dul* you see much and hear of more, I know this of you. But I hope to sniff out some remainders of his conspiracy, now while they are vulnerable, or some other fool will just take his place and continue to fight against you and all you stand for."

The emperor looked away, and ShianMai fancied that he was considering her words. She had been brash and perhaps overstepped the propriety of her newly-acquired closeness to the emperor. *But he must know that I am right, that I can go where he and his spies cannot. Surely, I can be of use to him!*

Strangely, when his gaze returned, the emperor's eyes were more tender than she had ever seen. "I care little for the Sunga Tobai. Their rebellion will soon be quashed, and I have more urgent matters which demand my attention. Daughter, I will permit you to continue these games simply because I know they will bring you satisfaction. You are too much like me in this regard. However, I will first have your promise that you will be *very* careful. You have proven your value, in public and in private, and this puts you in danger on many fronts. Will you swear to me that you will use caution?"

ShianMai was touched by his strange, seemingly sincere concern for her. "I promise, Sha-*dul*."

Kamgue looked to the central square. She thought he must be looking at Traitor's Gate, where Xansul would be led very soon. "I will assign a bodyguard to you. One of my own, who will protect you inside the palace and out."

"I do not want a caretaker, Sha-*dul*. I am not a child."

"It is only for your protection. He will not interfere in your business except to protect you from harm. He will be as silent and as invisible as your shadow."

ShianMai's rebuttal was cut short. Shouts from the crowd drew their gazes to the edge of the square. The people were closing fast and tight along the southern entrance to the square, and their shouts and jeers rose quickly to a great roar that echoed against the surrounding walls.

The prisoner was carried through the crowds toward Traitor's Gate. All his limbs were bound, and he was gagged. His wardens, all from the *Siang-Tonu*, ominous in their black-and-crimson robes and masks, dragged him toward the temple. Xansul was barely visible as he was hauled through the crowds. The people themselves reviled him. The rags he wore were splattered in rotten food, muck, and mud, and foul names were called out to him. Their apparent loathing raised the hair on the back of ShianMai's neck.

"Why do the commoners despise him so?" she whispered.

"He disappointed them." Kamgue's voice was casual, but he watched the prisoner with a strange intensity. "The common people always hope that rebellions will improve their lives, without realizing that the disruption inherent in any rebellion actually complicates the situation, for everyone. In the Sunga Tobai, they thought that they saw a chance for the mitigation of their suffering. In getting himself captured, this poor fool disappointed their hopes. Now they hate him for it. The *Yu-gaochi*, you'll notice, are little better."

She *had* noticed. Where the commoners were hateful, the *Yu-gaochi* were contemptuous. From not far away she heard Yang Xomin exclaim, "Serves him right for falling in with this *Lochi* rebellion!"

Sunga Tobai or no, he'll be glad to be rid of Xansul. Xomin always viewed him as a rival, no matter how ridiculous the Long-sar always pretended to be.

At last the *Siang-Tonu* reached the temple. Shedding the commoners, the assassins dragged their prisoner up the stone steps to the continued shouts from the crowd. Clearly, Xansul was not going quietly—it took the combined efforts of four *Siang-Tonu* to keep him marching steadily into the temple. The *Siang-Tonu* dragged their prisoner straight up to the altar. It seemed like such a beautiful place, at first glance, with all the artistry of a previous era. But no one who had grown up as ShianMai had could look upon the place with any amount of serenity. The altar bore the stains of old blood, which spilled down the stone steps leading up to the temple.

One of the *Siang-Tonu* grabbed Xansul by the hair and yanked, forcing Xansul's back into an excruciating-looking arch. If he cried out, the sound was muffled by his gag and drowned by the crowd's continued cries.

Xansul's father had been forced into the role of herald—a degradation, to be sure, but a small price to pay in light of his son's betrayal. ShianMai studied the elderly Long-*dul* as he stepped forward to stand in front of the Gate, below where his son was held at bay. The Head of Long House looked older today than he had at the debates, as though the whole affair had visibly aged him. But he allowed no sadness or despair or anger to cross his face. ShianMai admired his control.

The Long-*dul* raised his hands for quiet, but the *Siang-Tonu* actually bought it for him, with weapons a bit too close to the crowd for comfort. The crowd was quickly hushed. Xansul's father, the Long-*dul* faced the emperor and bowed deeply.

"We thank the Divine Heavens for our great *Khudang-yun* and his divine wisdom for the judgment which has been wrought, and the justice to be carried forth this day." The Long-*dul*'s voice carried powerfully despite his age.

“Xansul, formerly third-son of the House of Long, has been accused and found guilty of murder, sedition, and treason. Our favored and beloved emperor has found this traitor unrepentant of his misdeeds. For this cause, the *lochi* Xansul has been sentenced to death.”

Scarlet light from the nearly buried sun spilled across the square as if stalking Xansul’s blood. The *Long-dul* stepped aside, and the crowd gave full voice to their rage. The shouts and screams echoed against the surrounding walls as if there were ten times as many citizens in the square.

The *Siang-Tonu* turned to face the emperor. All eyes followed theirs. To the common people, the emperor might as well be a god, such was his detachment before them. The *Yu-gaochi* saw little more of him than the common people, and only on special occasions were they permitted to hear his voice. He was the *Khudang-yun*, their emissary from the Divine Heavens, and divinely guided himself. They were unworthy of him. ShianMai felt truly and deeply honored by her growing relationship with her blessed father. The emperor gave an exaggerated, ceremonial nod. Light from the setting sun flashed off his mask, bathing it crimson.

One of the assassins unsheathed his sword. Its wicked blade flashed with deadly sharpness. ShianMai could see Xansul desperately trying to escape, but the *Siang-Tonu* had no trouble in holding him fast.

For a moment, ShianMai pictured the face of the man, imprinted before her eyes—not broken and bound, but laughing and excited as he had been at the debates. For a moment, she could imagine the hope he had engendered among his followers—she did not doubt that he had been a leader of men, though depraved and ignorant as they must be. She could sense their hope even now, that this man, this True Master, would somehow fight his way free and lead them all to victory.

The blade pulled back. ShianMai realized her hands were clenched tight, but she could not pull her eyes away. The blade shot out, in sudden silence, straight through Xansul’s heart.

There was no scream—the prisoner was gagged—but after the tumult of the crowd, the silence was more terrible. The executioner withdrew his blade and began to casually wipe away the blood on Xansul’s rags. Another of the *Siang-Tonu* stepped forward with a fire-hot brand, burning the traitor’s mark into Xansul’s flesh. Xansul’s blood joined the stain of others’ on Traitor’s Gate.

No one cheered, though ShianMai had seen them do so after other public executions. The entire crowd simply watched Xansul of the Sunga Tobai crumple and lie still upon Traitor’s Gate.

APPENDIX A: PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Vowels. In the languages of the Seventh Empire, as represented in the Roman alphabet, all vowels are “pure,” as follows:

a	=	â	=	‘ah’ as in ‘spa’
e	=	ě	=	‘eh’ as in ‘bed’
i	=	ē	=	‘ee’ as in ‘bee’
o	=	ō	=	‘oh’ as in ‘grow’
u	=	ū	=	‘oo’ as in ‘food’

When combined, as a diphthong, the two sounds are simply spoken together in sequence, one after the other with no stop between:

pao	=	pâō	=	pah-oh (≈ ‘pow’)
ai	=	âē	=	ah-ee (≈ ‘eye’)
shian	=	shēân	=	shee-ahn

Consonants. Most consonants are similar to their English counterparts. ‘J’ is always pronounced as in ‘joy,’ and ‘g’ is always pronounced as in ‘get.’ Three consonants that can *begin* a word are worth noting:

- ‘X—’ at the beginning of a word sounds similar to English ‘sh,’ but is actually pronounced as a kind of soft hissing ‘h’ sound (It is an “unvoiced velar fricative” sometimes spelled *hsh*.)
- ‘Ng—’ can also be used at the *beginning* as well as at the end of a word or syllable. Though awkward to English-speakers, an initial ‘ng’ is the same as the final sound in ‘sing.’ (It is a “voiced velar nasal.”)
- ‘Kh—’ is a guttural sound pronounced like a ‘k’ but at the back of the throat, as if clearing the throat, as in the word ‘Kazakh’ as spoken by a Kazakh, or the Yiddish pronunciation of the ‘H’ in ‘Hanukkah.’ (It is a “voiceless uvular plosive.”)

Emphasis. Emphasis will usually fall on the first syllable of one- and two-syllable words, or on the second-to-last syllable in words of three or more syllables.

Daryun	=	dâr’ · yūn	=	DAHR-yoon
Aisina	=	â · ē · sē’ · nâ	=	ah ee-SEE-nah
Goshunak	=	gō · shū’ · nâk	=	goh-SHOO-nahk
Xansul	=	xân’ · sūl	=	HSHAHN-sool

When a word has a capital in the middle (like “MaryAnn”) that syllable takes the strongest accent, and the first syllable becomes a secondary accent.

ShianMai	=	shē’ · ân mâ’ · ē	=	SHEE-ahn MAH-ee
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A hyphen indicates a new word, with its own accents.

Khudang-yun	=	khū’ · dâng yūn’	=	KHOO-dahng YOON
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The *-yun* at the end of the name *Khudang-yun* is a title-ending (or “honorific”), and should be treated as a new word, with an accent of its own.

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