

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

# The Orphan and the Jeweler

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## **Chapter 1**

*"Before my first sunset in Zhou, I was insulted; stripped of currency, clothing, and dignity; and left for dead in a puddle. I have since been told I was fortunate to escape so lightly." —Abd al-Hazir, Xiansai Chronicles*

Smiling into the rushing wind, Jia leapt from a chimney and fell toward the jagged tiles of the gambling house's roof. Her dagger bumped lightly against her lower back. In ten minutes, she would use it to kill a man. In a second, she would have to deal with the prospect of landing.

None of that mattered right now. She was flying.

Zhou was a ten-mile-long, mismatched jumble of elegant stone temples and shanty taverns, fortified towers and sagging tenements, all crammed into the cradle of the Guozhi mountain range. Since roads were seen as a waste of precious space, it was more a city of hidden, crooked alleys than streets and plazas. Anything could happen to the careless down there, and often did.

Jia rolled as she landed, her padded armor taking the silent brunt of the impact, and was back on her feet and sprinting in half a second. Up here, she could choose her own path. No dead ends or last stands. Just miles of rooftops and freedom in all directions. She could pretend that she had no obligations. That she was free to go anywhere.

Windows flashed by, the sour-faced gamblers within too occupied by their losing hands to notice her. However, Elder Brother Qiu, sitting by the man he was assigned

to kill, did. He raised an irritated eyebrow at her recklessness, and she waved cheerfully. Being spotted by members of the Tenth Family didn't count as a failure of the test. They were *trained* to see things.

Nine Great Families ruled Zhou, each named for the industry it dominated within the city. The Tenth Family had no name other than its number. Its monopoly was crime: theft, smuggling, vice, and murder.

The family had raised Jia since she was an infant. She wasn't the only one. Most strays and foundlings who survived Zhou's deadly streets ended up on the Tenth's metaphorical doorstep sooner or later. The Tenth Family gave these orphans food, a bed, and useful training. And when they turned eighteen, it gave them a choice.

They could leave with a generous bag of gold and choose their future. A great deal of the world was *not* Zhou, and there were many places where a young man or woman with a unique education could find a happy life.

Or, they could join the Tenth Family. And kill.

Jia had chosen the latter but wanted the former. She wanted to leave, to explore the world, but the Tenth was under attack. She couldn't abandon her family.

She sprang off the edge of the gambling house into the nestled stonework of Tong-Shi's temple<sup>1</sup>. It bristled with spirals of statues and intricate friezes, and was as good as a staircase to the right feet.

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<sup>1</sup> Tong-Shi is the father god of the Xiansai pantheon. He is believed to be omnipresent but not omniscient; this means that he is generally depicted with a somewhat overwhelmed expression.

She climbed, rising above the squalid patchwork of the city, her boots scuffing across upraised palms and bowed heads, her fingertips trailing over the stone parables showing Xiansai's fifty-nine noble gods seducing, betraying, and fighting one another. Jia paid no attention. The Tenth had little use for the complicated theology of its homeland, with one notable exception.

Jia paused at the frieze depicting *The First Theft*. A statue of the laughing little god Zei ran across the sky, pursued by the wrath of the heavens.

"The trickster Zei crept among the sleeping gods," Elder Sister Rou had told the orphans of the Tenth many years ago. "With clever hands and a wide grin, he stole from his brothers and sisters until his pockets jingled. Then he scampered across the black sky, spilling jewels in his haste to escape. Most of them stayed where they were, becoming stars, but some blazed to the ground, shattering into a million pieces..."

Legend said that Zei was caught and banished from the heavens until he returned every stone. A thousand stories began that day, each more preposterous than the last. Xiansai worshiped fifty-nine gods, but it only loved one: Zei, the grinning trickster who fooled emperors, seduced river goddesses, and traveled the world disguised as a humble jeweler.

The thumbs of countless luck-seeking orphans had rubbed the head of the fleeing god almost smooth. Jia passed hers across his gleaming scalp and ran down a stone gutter into the fog of sweet wood smoke and acrid steam that hung over Zhou like a blanket.

Minutes later, she crouched on the edge of a roof, waiting. Li, thirteenth heir to the great Builder family, staggered out of a tavern below, supported by a prostitute who wouldn't be smiling if she knew what he had done to six of her sisters. Jia reached for her dagger...

... just as six Landholder thugs spilled from the alley. Li shouted, drew his fine dueling sword in a silver blur, and shoved the woman at them to buy time. A Landholder impatiently ran her through and pushed her aside. She crumpled, sightless eyes turning toward the sky.

Jia froze.

One of the Landholders lunged. Li batted the blade away with his own and slapped the would-be assassin, laughing. The thugs charged together, and Li gave ground, his sword darting about to deflect their clumsy slashes. None of them spared another glance for the fallen woman.

Jia realized that she had drawn her dagger. She stared at it. Her trainers had told her she was ruled by her passions. She took a deep breath.

She was here for only one death. Waiting was the best strategy. The Landholders might kill Li for her. Then, they'd go drinking to celebrate, and laugh and dance, *and the woman would still be dead.*

Jia sighed, then sprang into the melee below.

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In the lowest level of the Shifting Estate<sup>2</sup>, Stepfather Yao laid a cup of steaming tea carefully before Jia.

"Drink," was all he said.

It was a dark liquid in a plain porcelain cup. It was rumored that the tea tasted faintly (and briefly) of cinnamon for those who had failed their test. The rumor was stupid. No one who failed was allowed to leave the Stepfather's office alive.

She exhaled sharply and gulped it down. It tasted like cinnamon.

"That was a foolish thing you did," said Stepfather Yao, folding his hands over his considerable belly. "Seven men are dead. I just asked for one."

Yao was not soft, despite his appearance; Jia had seen him break the back of one of Jagged Liang's watchmen with a single blow. The Stepfather was second only to the leader of the Tenth, the grim and silent Broken Man. She put her hands on the desk between her and Yao so she could glare at them if they trembled.

"That woman," she said, knowing that the observers had told him everything, "I could have saved her before Li butchered her like the others, and the Landholders killed her for no reason."

"One of them did," Stepfather Yao corrected.

"The others didn't punish him. They barely even noticed."

"No," Stepfather Yao said, eyes narrowing. "But they were not your assignment."

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<sup>2</sup> The Shifting Estate is the bastion of the Tenth Family and rumored to teleport about the city. In reality, the Tenth uses many "Shifting Estates," but encourages and embellishes the rumors whenever possible.

"I did what I—" she began. Stepfather Yao slapped the desk.

*"They were not your assignment!"*

"I don't care!" Jia shouted. "The Great Families war in the streets like it's a game! The woman worked for us, Stepfather. She was family, and they killed her!"

Stepfather Yao folded his hands.

"And so," he said, all traces of rage gone, "you jumped into the middle of a sword fight with only a dagger, and killed seven men."

"Six," she said. "Li tripped over one of the Landholder corpses and broke his neck."

"Amazing," Yao said. "But careless. There were so many witnesses."

A stone hand closed over Jia's heart. Being seen on her first mission meant failure, regardless of the circumstances. Failure meant the tea she had just drunk was poison.

"But somehow, none of them saw you," Stepfather Yao said, smiling.

"Congratulations, Little Sister."

Jia melted into the chair, dizzy with relief.

"Thank you, Stepfather."

"And if you are ever that reckless again, 'punishment' will be too gentle a term for what will happen to you. You must understand that we are at war with Jagged Liang, and every soldier is needed..."

Jia straightened as Yao spoke of obligations, distracted by... something odd. The Stepfather's office was a small but lavish room, with the desk between them, a cabinet, and a doorway in the left wall, leading to the Stepfather's private chambers. She could have sworn she'd felt a breeze...

She blinked. A bony old man in threadbare robes and battered sandals shuffled out of the doorway, sniffing the air, his wispy beard quivering. He noticed her, nodded gravely, and crossed over to the cabinet, quietly smacking his lips. After selecting an especially fine teacup, he surveyed the room with the gentle confusion of a guest wondering where his host kept the sugar.

Jia glanced between Stepfather Yao and the old man. Was she supposed to ignore him? Rise to greet him? Was this another test? Was she failing it?

Annoyance flashed across Stepfather Yao's face.

"What in the name of all the Hells are you looking at?" he said, turning around. His jaw dropped at the sight of the elderly intruder happily spooning cubes of crystallized burrower venom into a teacup.

"Guards!"



## **Chapter 2**

*"But even nude as a peeled chicken and tied to a stake atop a bonfire, crafty Zei had more tricks than the ocean has secrets."* —Zei and the Tiger's Thirty Tails

Five busy minutes later, Stepfather Yao sat at his desk, frowning at the old man who had somehow breached the most secure level of the most secret fortress in all of Xiansai. Yao had immediately sent news of the intrusion in the usual way to the Broken Man, who was... on business, but that was only a formality. Intruders died.

Aunt Xa and Uncle Hao, two of the Tenth's deadliest assassins, stood on either side of the unwelcome visitor, blades drawn and ready to strike at the Stepfather's word. Apparently ignorant of the implied threat, the old man beamed at the luxurious surroundings and turned his attention to the desk between Yao and himself. He sighed.

"I am *famished*," he said. "Do you have anything to eat?"

"Of course," Yao said, turning to Jia, who waited unhappily by the door. Perhaps she had expected to be sent out of the room. Were she any other little sister, he would have done so. But Jia was different, and always had been. She needed to be harder. He pretended not to notice that Aunt Xa, who'd once bitten out a man's throat, was shooting concerned glances at the girl.

"Bring us a plate of cakes from my larder, Little Sister. Then make some tea from the brown pot."

Jia hurried away and came back with a plate piled high with cakes. The old man's eyes widened as it was set before him.

"All right, my friend," Yao said when Jia had returned to the larder to make the tea. "Who are you, and how did you find your way in here?"

"Through the secret passage behind your bookcase," the old man said, staring at the cakes as if they were telling him secrets. "May I have that chocolate one with the yanberry stripes? It looks marvelous."

Yao frowned.

"I asked your name."

"Yes, I heard you."

"And?"

"I thought you were joking!" The old man laughed, flinging his hands into the air. "Everyone knows Covetous Shen!"

"I, sadly, do not," Stepfather Yao said. "Help yourself to the cakes, my friend."

Covetous Shen's jaw dropped at this unexpected generosity, and he lunged at the plate.

"Now, I would like to know why you have..." Stepfather Yao trailed off in amazed horror as Shen demolished the pile of cakes as if it held the antidote to the poisoned tea Jia was making.

"... why you have come here," Yao managed finally. Aunt Xa and Uncle Hao appeared hypnotized by the carnage.

The old man answered in muffled detail, spraying pieces of cake across the desk.

"I don't believe I understood that," Stepfather Yao said.

"I am not surprised," Shen said, swallowing the last bite. "It is a very complex plan."

"No," Yao said, taking a calming breath. "I could not understand what you said through your mouthfuls of cake."

"I apologize. Let me explain again... Oh, here is the tea!"

Porcelain clinked as Jia returned and set the steaming pot and two cups on the desk.

"Thank you, Little Sister," Yao said, and poured Shen a cup. Minute swirls the color of polished oak betrayed the dark tea's deadly contents, but the old man would never taste or feel a thing. He would fall asleep, and that would be it. But there was still the matter of—

Shen seized the cup and downed it in one gulp.

"Oh my," the old man said, breathing out steam. "That was delicious. May I trouble you for some more?"

Brow furrowed, Yao poured another cup. Shen sipped the tea and sloshed it thoughtfully around his mouth.

"Let me ask once more," Stepfather Yao said. "Why are you here?"

Covetous Shen pursed his lips in solemn thought, and he tasted the tea again. Delight bloomed across his face. He leaned conspiratorially toward Stepfather Yao.

"Is that scorpion root I taste?" he said, as though one of the deadlier poisons known to man were an unexpected hint of almond.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is. And if you want to—"

"It's poisonous, you know."

"I know it is," Yao said, gritting his teeth. "And if you want the antidote—"

"Oh, there's no antidote," Covetous Shen said, pouring himself some more tea.

"It's one of the deadlier poisons known to man. Luckily, I once spent an unfortunate month trapped on an island packed with scorpion roots and venomous snakes. I had to eat them to survive, of course. The experience left me quite immune to most poisons!"

Stepfather Yao glared at Shen. There was a mystery here. Yao hated mysteries. He met Uncle Hao's eyes and nodded.

The Great Families sent their magical prodigies to Caldeum's Yshari Sanctum to meditate on the wise use of power so they could return to Xiansai and use it unwisely. The Tenth Family preferred more direct approaches to murder, and trained its own in the use of subtly applied force on internal organs.

Uncle Hao raised his hand, mouthed a word, and closed his fist. The lanterns hanging from the ceiling flickered and swayed as if caught in a dark wind.

In the silence, Covetous Shen noisily slurped his tea. By all appearances, his heart was thoroughly uncrushed.

Beads of sweat dripped from Uncle Hao's forehead. His bloodless fist trembled in the air.

A tremor built. The desk shuddered. Covetous Shen finished his tea with a happy sigh and set the cup down.

The teapot exploded, sending glass shards in every direction.

Growling, and only marginally aware that his assassins were frantically checking themselves for poisoned scratches like frightened children, Stepfather Yao tipped the heavy desk out of the way with one hand, and pulled his knife. Covetous Shen sat, unmoving, brow creased with polite concern. Teeth bared, Yao drew back to strike...

... and paused. His forehead ached, and not from a scratch.

Letters could be intercepted, and messengers could be tortured for information. Through considerable expense and some painful enchantments, Stepfather Yao and the Broken Man had obtained another, more secure method of communicating at a distance.

Yao had carefully pictured the intruder when he had arrived, and had muttered the sending word under his breath. He hadn't expected a response.

A hundred mental whispers coalesced into a single powerful thought from the Broken Man.

*Give him whatever he wants, and pray he leaves quickly.*

Yao's breath caught in his throat. The Broken Man had taken control of the Tenth during the Purge, when the entire city was turned against the family. He was over six and a half feet of scarred flesh, muscle, and mended bone, and the only man Jagged Liang, the most powerful woman in the city, considered a rival.

*Pray he leaves quickly.*

The Broken Man was afraid of Covetous Shen.

Stepfather Yao sheathed the knife and looked, truly looked, at the intruder.

Battered, dust-stained robes. Heavy pouches. And that smile...

Everyone in the Tenth had once taken the Orphan's Test and rubbed the head of Zei for luck. Everyone knew the legend of the trickster god, trapped in the mortal realm until he retrieved the jewels he had stolen from the heavens.

Licking lips that were suddenly dry, Yao said, "Who are you, grandfather? Who are you, really?"

"Just a humble jeweler," Covetous Shen said with grand satisfaction. "And I wish to hire young Jia for a most interesting assignment."

### **Chapter 3**

*"The warrior's wife offered Zei an emperor's ransom in precious jewels, or a night of unbridled debauchery. Of course, for Zei, that was hardly a choice at all."* —Zei and the Night of Unbridled Debauchery

The Shifting Estate was five subterranean floors of sleeping quarters and training halls connected by a fortified spiral staircase. Jia followed Covetous Shen up the winding steps sullenly. Somehow, the news of the visitor had already spread. Worried eyes peeked through murder holes, and frantic whispers echoed down in the dark as Xiansai's deadliest assassins jostled for position, trying to see.

Jia growled. She was never going to hear the end of this.

"I know you're not him," she said.

"Not who?" Shen said cheerfully.

"Zei! You're not Zei!"

"I never said I was."

"You never said you weren't!"

"Ah, but if I must spend the entire night telling you everything I am and am not, we won't have time to break into Jagged Liang's tower."

The whispered conversations outside the walls cut off abruptly, and a hundred indrawn breaths sucked the air from the stairwell. Jia stopped dead.

"*What?*" she shrieked.

Shen peered back at her around the curve of the staircase.

"Oh, didn't I say? Yes, we are going to steal secrets from the Tower of the Advisor. Isn't that wonderful?"

Zhou's laws were determined by a ruling council made up of one man or woman from each of the nine Great Families. As none of the Great Families was foolish enough to trust the others or work together with them, they had long ago created the role of advisor.

This powerful and dangerous position was generally held by a successful merchant raised from the teeming masses. He or she brought important matters<sup>3</sup> to the attention of the ruling council and executed its orders<sup>4</sup>, giving the Great Families time to hold masquerades and plot the assassinations of loved ones. Advisors worked entirely without oversight and were the de facto rulers of Zhou. They also rarely lived to see the end of their one-year term.

This meant that the current advisor, Jagged Liang, was... unusual. She had used the increasing reports of demonic attacks in the bordering Dreadlands and the rest of the world to remain in power for four years, and had survived sixteen assassination attempts. Before she became advisor, the Great Families had filled the city watch with the dregs of their personal armies; Liang reformed, fired, or outright killed the drunks, spies, and criminals, leaving a well-trained and better-compensated force that answered only to her.

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<sup>3</sup> I.e., important to the Great Family that paid the advisor the most.

<sup>4</sup> See above.



In short, Jagged Liang was the sole guardian of order in a city that thrived on chaos. And that put her directly at odds with the Tenth, which prospered from satisfying the whims of the rich and powerful. A silent war had been escalating for years now. Her watchmen raided storehouses and slaughtered Jia's adopted family in the streets. In return, uncles and aunts paid visits to watch houses and made sure the entire city could see the flames.<sup>5</sup>

No one, not even the Builders and the Landholders, hated each other more than the Broken Man and Jagged Liang.

Jia leaned against the wall. *And we're going to steal from her.*

"I'm dead," she said.

"Only if her guards catch us," Covetous Shen said, flapping his hands dismissively. "Or we fall during the climb."

"Climb?" Jia said, holding her forehead.

"Oh yes. We will be ascending the outside of the tower." Shen frowned. "Now that I'm hearing the plan out loud, it does sound quite risky. Luckily, you have a secret weapon."

"Yes? What's that?"

"Me!" Shen said, and he vanished around the curve again. Jia felt her family watching her.

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<sup>5</sup> When a contract calls for a subtle assassination, Stepfather Yao sends an elder brother or sister. Aunts and uncles are sent on assignments only when it must be made abundantly clear that certain individuals have *severely* displeased the Tenth Family.

"Be strong, Little Sister," one of them said, reaching through a murder hole to touch her shoulder. "Be silent. Be careful."

"Hide in plain sight," said another.

Jia sighed. The last was a quote. From the *Book of Zei*.

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Covetous Shen bounded from the estate's false storefront, and Jia followed glumly. Rugged cobblestone streets reeled through clumps of sagging, multilevel tenements that blocked the stars above.

But not the entire skyline. Half a mile away, the serrated shape of the Tower of the Advisor rose haughtily from the surrounding squalor, waiting for them.

Covetous Shen stood absolutely still in the center of the uneven street. In the soft moonlight, his tangled beard almost glowed, and the faintest memory tickled the back of Jia's mind...

And it was gone. She shook her head and started toward Shen. Maybe the old fraud was having second thoughts.

No. He was hypnotized by the sight of a distant street vendor up the winding curve of the road leading to the tower. The sizzle of meat sent curls of fragrant smoke looping toward them.

"We should head over the roofs."

"There are curried beef vendors on the rooftops?" Shen said with awe. "I have been gone from this city of wonders for too long."

"No," Jia snapped. "It's safer."

"Ah, yes," Shen said, nodding seriously. "Safety is most important. Have no fear. If we need to jump off roofs and battle seven men, I shall let you go first."

He tottered toward the street vendor, leaving Jia gaping in his wake. He must have overheard, of course. But Stepfather Yao hadn't mentioned the roof...

The vendor's cart and grill were built against an open kitchen, connected to its soot-stained walls and ceiling by a complicated array of chains and gears; it looked as though the entire contraption could be pulled back in a hurry so that the slab of iron over the cart would swing down and seal the shop. Jia caught up just as Covetous Shen nudged apologetically through the small line of people waiting their turn. He then ordered everything on the grill.

"Everything, grandfather?" the vendor said, his brow crinkling beneath a wide straw hat with upturned edges. He ignored the grumbling crowd; selling everything at once meant he could go to bed early with a pouch full of gold.

"Absolutely!" Shen said. "My young friend and I have a hard climb ahead of us and—"

"We were here first, old man," growled a middle-aged woman with tired eyes and a heavy, clucking bag over her shoulder.

"Were you? Impossible!" Shen said. "I would have noticed such a beautiful woman in line before me. But no one should go hungry!"

"Vendor!" he shouted, slamming his hand down. "Meat for all my friends!"

Jia pushed past the faintly smiling woman and a street performer with a huge eighteen-stringed matar on his back.

"What are you *doing*?" she hissed.

"Preparing for our secret mission," Shen said in a whisper that was probably heard across the street. There was a sizzling sound.

"You're making a scene!"

"Ah. You may be right," Shen said. "I will proceed more subtly."

"Grandfather," the vendor said, his eyes wide. "Your—your hand!"

Shen looked at him. He looked at the hand he'd slammed down... on the red-hot grill.

"No harm done!" the old man said, leaning onto the grill with his other hand. "I am quite resistant to burns, and it is chilly tonight. Now, where is my meat?"

"Money first," the vendor said, wincing at the continued sizzle.

"Oh, of course. My apologies." Shen straightened and sorted through his pouches with both hands, muttering. Finally, he brightened and brandished a ruby. His palms were unburned.

"Will this do?"

Eyes moved from the hands to the ruby, then to Shen's wrinkled face. Someone whispered, "Jeweler," then, "Zei," and this time, even Jia was... uncertain. The jewel. The unblemished skin that should be scorched. The poison. The magic. Who *was* he?

Still, she was young, and her natural cynicism bounced back hard.

"You call this subtle?" she said.

"It's not the largest one I have," Shen said, looking concerned.

"It could buy this street!" Jia said. "And you're spending it on a cart's worth of beef?"

"Can't you smell it? A ruby is hardly a fair bargain for such delicious meat!"

"You're a fool," Jia said.

"Beauty makes fools of the best of men," Shen said, winking at the woman with the sack of chickens. She blushed like a priestess. "But you have a good point.

"Vendor, include that wondrous hat, and this paltry ruby is yours," he said, waving the gem above his head. The vendor's eyes were locked to it.

"Stop flashing it around," Jia said. "Do you want to get killed?"

"By these fine people?" Shen said, handing over the ruby and shoving his new hat onto his head. "They seem trustworthy to me. Besides, who would kill someone over my jewels?"

"Only most of the city," Jia said. "Stop shouting about your damn jewels."

"I am more than happy to share," Shen said, adjusting his hat. "I have plenty."

On cue, three scrawny thugs swaggered from a nearby alleyway. Jia moved one foot softly behind her and let a dagger slip silently into her hand, concealed by the nervous crowd. These idiots weren't wearing the mark of the Tenth, which meant

that they were unauthorized freelancers<sup>6</sup> and unlikely to go away because she asked. In fact, they would probably try to kill her. She would just have to kill them f—

A wandering patrol of the advisor's city watch was approaching from the opposite direction. Perfect. And here she was in her inconspicuous assassin's armor.

The vendor could apparently see the future as well. He hauled the cart backward, and the iron roof began to swing closed.

Covetous Shen caught it with one hand and lifted it back up without any sign of effort.

"Is that," he said, "ginger wine I spy on the shelf behind you?"

Pulling desperately on the unyielding handle, the vendor nodded.

"I will pay you an opal for each bottle," Shen said. His voice echoed off the high buildings above.

The vendor froze. The bald thug dropped his cudgel.

"*Really*, an opal for each bottle?" Jia said.

"I haven't drunk nearly enough ginger wine in my life," Shen said solemnly. "It is one of my greatest regrets."

Gambling his life for opals, the vendor passed Shen a bottle. Shen tossed it to the bald thug without looking.

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<sup>6</sup> The Tenth did not have a good sense of humor about competition in Zhou. Freelance thieves, con men, and fences either paid the family a percentage of their earnings, or lost a percentage, usually of something vital.

"Wine for my friends!" the old man declared. "And now that we have an audience, we will need music!"

An audience? Jia looked up. People leaned out of their open windows, trying to see what was going on. This never happened. At night, Zhou was a city of locked doors and closed shutters. You didn't try to find out what all the noise was about unless you wanted it to come upstairs and introduce itself.

"May I borrow your matar, young man?" Shen said to the street performer.

"May I have some wine?"

"A fair bargain!" Wine and instrument were exchanged. Shen staggered under the weight of the matar. "These are heavier than I remember. I will need both hands.

"You there!" he said to the bald thug. "Help our vendor friend pass the wine around. Everyone else, sing along if you know the words!"

Everyone knew the words, especially since they were dirty ones. Not many songs about Zei were clean. When he got to the part where the peacock queen found Zei in the tree with her three sisters, the woman with the chickens and the bald thug were holding each other and howling laughter.

More and more people spilled into the street only to have bottles shoved at them. The city watch arrived, blowing whistles to summon guards to handle the chaos. Reunited with his matar and blessed with Shen's hat, the street performer strummed maniacally and sang along with his new friends. The vendor shouted for his wife to wake up, then told her to hide the bag of opals and bring more ginger wine and raw meat from the cellar...

Several blocks away and ten minutes later, Jia and Covetous Shen stood at the edge of the courtyard surrounding the Tower of the Advisor. As they watched, the last of the foot patrols left in the direction of the impromptu street festival.

"You cunning old devil," Jia said. "You did all of that on purp—wait, you brought a bottle of wine?"

"I get thirsty on long climbs," Shen said, flicking the cork free with a practiced thumb and draining the bottle halfway in three gulps.

Irritated that a man at least four times her age was forcing her to be the adult in the situation, Jia said, "You can't go up that tower drunk, old man."

"Why not?" Shen said. "I've ascended thousands of towers. Sobriety has never improved the experience."

"You'll fall!"

"Oh no, no. I am too frail to fall. Though I haven't tested the theory, I am certain I would float gently to the ground."

"Fine," Jia said, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Let's go. When I give the sign—"

Shen was already scampering across the courtyard. She cursed and followed, expecting the cry of a guard at any moment. None came, though there had to be archers on neighboring roofs. Shen's luck appeared to be rubbing off on her.

He reached the tower, tucked the bottle into his vast network of pouches, and scrambled up the first ten feet of sheer wall like a rabid monkey. Jia had to use every trick of leverage and muscle to stay with him.



Zhou fell away beneath them. Darkness ruled the sleeping city, except for the miniature Festival of Zei<sup>7</sup> Shen had created and the radiant clusters of torchlight and lanterns marking the Eternal Market to the east.

Eventually, Jia noticed that Shen was more or less going straight up the wall. Paying attention now, she saw irregular notches cut cleverly into the polished stone, invisible from below.

"Someone else has been climbing this tower," she said.

"Oh yes," Shen said, not even slightly out of breath. "My son comes here quite often."

"Son?" Jia said. "But you keep insinuating you're a—"

"Celibate? Never. Women would flip mountains into the sea before they allowed that."

"No, a god. And *please* don't talk about s—about celibacy," Jia said, blushing.

"Why not?" Shen said innocently, pausing to scratch his bearded chin, one bony hand wedged in a crevice.

"Because you're..."

"Immensely handsome? Pleasantly scented?"

"Old."

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<sup>7</sup> Xiansai celebrates many holidays devoted to making a fool of oneself in public, but none of them matches the sheer pants-on-the-head depravity of the annual Festival of Zei, which includes fourteen different citywide parades, astonishingly vulgar reenactments of the god's numerous adventures, and the traditional flood of tricks and practical jokes that almost always result in entire neighborhoods being rendered uninhabitable for weeks.

"That is true," Shen said, nodding regretfully. "I am old. Too old, in fact, to carry this heavy bottle of wine any farther. Catch."

He dropped the bottle, and she barely caught it before it would have plummeted past her to smash against the cobbles far, far below.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Drink it," Shen said. A gust of wind sent his robes rippling as he braced a sandaled foot against a tiny crevice. "Then, you smash the bottle to scare away hangovers!"

"I'm not going to... All right, does that really work?"

"Possibly," Shen said. "Personally, I enjoy hangovers. They remind me of..."

He trailed off. The silence was so unexpected that Jia felt driven to fill it.

"Remind you of...?"

"Oh, memories," Shen said, grinning down at her.

For the first time, Jia really looked at him. Beneath that oddly familiar beard and the easy smile, she'd seen the briefest glimpse of... sadness, locked behind high walls and a fortified gate. A gate that was closed again.

"You were talking about your son," she said, tucking the bottle into her padded armor.

"Oh, yes. He races up this tower more often than he should. You see, he and Liang are secret lovers."

Jia's hand froze in midair.

"Jagged Liang? The advisor whose tower we're hanging from? That Liang?"

"Absolutely," Shen said happily. "They've been in love for many years. Decades, at least."

"That's impossible," Jia said. Songs had been written of the advisor's lack of interest in romance. Liang had turned down a hundred proposals from various members of the Great Families; it was, Jia thought, one of her only redeeming qualities.

"Not impossible. Just surprising. You may wish to whisper at this point," Shen added. The advisor's window loomed above.

"And this son of yours," Jia said, certain Shen was playing with her. "Is he also a famous seducer of women? A god in disguise?"

"Oh, didn't I say?" Shen said. "You know him as the Broken Man."

Jia slipped. Faster than falling lightning, Shen reached down and caught her wrist with a grunt. Her boots dangled in open space, hundreds of feet in the howling air.

"Careful," was all he said before he swung her toward the wall. She clung to it a moment, face against the cold stone, finding her breath.

"No," she finally managed. "We're at war with Liang's city watch. They hate each other."

"Passion is certainly involved," Shen said, moving again. Either the subject or the near fall had drained the easy humor from his voice.

The window was only five feet above now.

"You're wrong! The Broken Man wouldn't betray us." She heard the desperation in her words, and hated herself for it.

"He was loyal to her first," Shen said kindly. "And the Tenth is a distant third."

"Third? Then what's the second?"

"I am glad you asked!" Shen said brightly. "That is the secret I brought you here to discover."

And with one sinewy arm, he hauled her by the back of her armor to the ledge of the window.

A blade of moonlight pierced the advisor's bedchamber, illuminating a lush carpet, a firepit, and a bed. Jagged Liang faced the wall, drawing a robe over her bare back and pale shoulders.

Naked to the waist, the Broken Man stepped out of the darkness behind her, more scars than skin. Two killer's hands slipped around her throat, pulling her chin up gently, gently, to kiss her...

It was the rooftop all over again. Jia was through the window with her dagger drawn before her brain had time to catch up.

Jagged Liang jerked out of the Broken Man's arms. Her mouth opened...

... and the Broken Man covered it, holding the advisor back. He stared at Jia, his face unreadable, and she knew that he couldn't let her leave alive. Neither of them could.

She wasn't going to escape the way she had come. Jia lunged over the ledge and held a hand out for Covetous Shen... who wasn't there. The wall down to the

courtyard was completely devoid of any lunatics with delusions of godhood.

Cursing, she spun around just in time to see the Broken Man reaching for her...

She slashed his wrist with her dagger, ducked beneath his arm when he recoiled, and sprinted for the last exit left to her—

"Guards!" Liang roared from behind. Two watchmen burst through the door, her only hope for escape, swords drawn. Without thinking, Jia pulled Shen's bottle from her armor and flung it at the nearest one's head. It rang him like a bell, and he staggered sideways. She darted outside the silver arc of the other guard's slash, plunged her dagger into his forearm, and caught the sword as it fell.

She wheeled about, ignoring the guard's shrieks, and just barely deflected—oh gods—Liang's blade. The woman had killed dozens of the Tenth's assassins. Jia's family. And the Broken Man, its protector, was *in love* with her...

Blood trailing from his wounded wrist, the Broken Man charged across the bedchamber. Liang swung once, twice, and Jia, hissing with rage, moved with the momentum of the strikes, parrying along the edges of the advisor's blades, spinning...

... and, piling her heartsick fury into a single scream, Jia hurled both dagger and sword at the Broken Man's chest.

He slapped them out of the air and kept coming.

She turned and ran from the bedchamber, down the hallway, to a winding staircase. Armored boots rang on the steps below. Up was the only choice.

Up was death, she knew. She was going to die, and her family would go on suffering for the Broken Man's lies...

She reached the moonlit top of the tower. It was oddly calm. It was also, of course, a dead end.

Jia ran to the edge of the roof, panting, just in case someone had been thoughtful enough to install a ladder since her ascent. No. A straight fall all the way to the courtyard far below. She could make it back down to the advisor's window and the handholds, but not in a hurry. And by the shouts, the guards were almost here.

Jia closed her eyes. There was a story. A story about Zei...

*Chased by the Lords of Fire, clever Zei climbed to the very top of the sky. And when they mocked him, Zei planted a kiss on the blushing cheek of the dawn, and leapt...*

Jia opened her eyes. Steel scraped on stone behind her as the guards advanced. She might never travel to the horizon as she wanted to, but she could fly one more time...

She turned away from the drop, her heel against the edge of oblivion. At least twenty smirking guards held her in a half ring of spears and fine blades. Twenty soldiers who might go on to hurt her family.

She sighed, and charged.

A sword cut at her throat, and she wasn't there. A spear thrust at her back, and she let it pass behind her before grabbing the haft and tearing it out of the guard's hands.

Oak rang on steel as she bashed the spear's handle into helmets, and a guard fell to the roof, screaming, when she plunged the tip neatly through a gap in his legplates, into his thigh. Jia fought on, knowing she was going to lose. They herded her to the yawning edge, and a lucky slash cut her spear in half. One of them grabbed her from behind, and, snarling, she sank the spear into the top of his foot, whirled out of his arms, and buried the point in his chest.

The haft splintered. She snatched the sword out of the guard's hand before he fell from the tower, and leapt into the thick of the men who would be her killers. Each sweep of her blade deflected multiple blows; each strike found flesh. Laughing, she danced and spun and fought on, and on...

When nine guards remained, one knocked her down with a gauntleted fist, and another kicked the sword from her hand.

Dizzy, she watched the moonlit shadow of the axe rising above her head, and heard someone... someone running up the stairs...

The Broken Man exploded out of the stairwell, seized two guards by the neck, and threw them off the tower. He wheeled around and caught a spear behind his head just as the tip brushed his skin. His backhand crushed the spearman's helmet.

Jia dove for her sword, retrieving it in time to parry a thrust at her chest. His torn knuckles dripping, the Broken Man rose up behind the unlucky guard, took his head in two massive hands, and squeezed.

The remaining five guards backed away, knowing the Broken Man by sight. But Jia knew he wouldn't spare them. Like her, they were witnesses...

... but Jia realized, frowning, that the Broken Man could have let her die.

The man that frail old Covetous Shen had called his son killed three more men in a handful of seconds. The last two he bashed together until they stopped moving, and he tossed them down the stairs.

He turned, blood running from a dozen wounds.

"She's your mother," he said.

Jia stared blankly at him. Shen's secret. Liang and the Broken Man had been in love for decades...

"And you're..."

"Yes."

He hadn't been trying to hurt her. He'd been trying to stop Liang, who didn't recognize her.

She had his eyes, Jia noticed; this was the first time she could remember him ever looking at her.

"I knew he'd bring you here," he said. "No matter the cost."

If this were one of the stories she'd heard as a child, she would have thrown her arms around him. Instead she slapped him, and would have given anything to take it back.

"I'm sorry," the dark-eyed giant said. "I am a target. I couldn't make you one."



Silk brushed stone to her left. Jagged Liang was watching her from the shadows of the stairwell. Now that Jia was aware of what to look for, there was no denying that she and the advisor were nearly identical.

Setting her jaw, Jagged Liang turned without a word and walked back down the stairs.

"She hasn't seen you since you were born," the Broken Man said. "She wouldn't have sent the guards after you if she'd known it was you."

"I'm not sure I believe that," Jia said, remembering the cold fury in her mother's eyes.

"You don't know her," her father said, but the huge man sounded unsure.

"And you do," Jia said flatly.

"Since we were children fighting for food on the streets," he said. "But when I joined the Tenth and made it my family, she set off alone."

Jia felt unwelcome admiration stir in her heart. Her mother, through sheer cunning and will, had worked up from the streets, making the right connections, becoming the advisor, surviving...

... to turn into Jagged Liang, who hunted the assassin children of her lover. Jia could not forgive her, even if she asked.

"We should talk to her," the Broken Man said. "Now that she's seen you..."

Jia checked a sigh as understanding dawned. *He's loyal to Liang first, me second, the Tenth third, but he wants to keep all of us...*

"We will never be a family," she said. "Understand? She won't stop just because you love her. This ends with her death or the streets red with our blood, *and you know it.*"

"She's your mother," he said.

"No," Jia said, dropping to her haunches at the edge of the roof. "She's your lover. I'm an orphan."

And she climbed down, leaving him standing alone on the tower, surrounded by the dead.

## **Chapter 4**

*"Shadows disappear in daylight. Holes can be searched. Hide in plain sight, and you will never be found."* —Book of Zei

Hours later, Jia sat high atop Tong-Shi's temple again, with her back to Zei's frieze and her feet dangling in open air. Dawn was close. The Council Stronghold glittered with lantern light like a necklace at the throat of the dark Guozhi Mountains. The chimneys of the Buried Forge burned a deep crimson.

She wanted to leave. The Tenth was her family, but her brothers and sisters were—mostly—not children. They enjoyed this life, this constant battle. And she, when it came down to it, did not.

Jia knew she would die fighting a senseless war for the love of her family and the foolish loyalty she still felt for her father. She wanted to leave, but duty would keep her here.

"Hello, Granddaughter," Covetous Shen said, plopping down on the ledge beside her.

"Why did you do it?" Jia said.

"A child should know who her parents are," Shen said, swinging his feet in space.

"How else can she know what not to become?"

"More jokes," Jia said, turning away.

"Am I joking?" Shen said sharply. "Your mother wants to rule this city unopposed, and takes steps to eradicate all of the Great Families. Your father knows

that she will not stop at nine. Soon, their doomed love will not be enough, and this country will endure yet another civil war. Be wiser than they, Granddaughter."

Jia stared. The easy smiles were gone. In their place was more sorrow than a hundred lifetimes could bear.

"Should I also know who my grandfather is?" she said finally. Shen turned to consider the frieze of laughing Zei fleeing the wrath of the gods. In profile, both faces were exactly the same.

"What a handsome young man," Covetous Shen said, smiling slightly.

"What should I do?" Jia said after a moment's silence told her that Shen wasn't going to say anything else. "Try to make peace between my mother and father? Run and hide?"

"Do whatever you want," he said, brushing her cheek. "Life can be so very short."

"For mortals, you mean."

Shen said nothing at first.

"Look at all of this." He swept a hand across Zhou. "Once, it was grassland spotted with small tribes. There were flowers.

"Then the world changed. People told stories and watched the skies for directions from beings more powerful than themselves. The stories became laws and obligations, and the tribes grew and fought each other. They believed that they had no choice. And they waited for omens."

He casually pointed at the sky. A burning comet, a molten ball of twisting fire and trailing ash, exploded through the heavens. Cold with awe, Jia turned to Covetous Shen.

"That wasn't me," he said, eyes wide.

She laughed.

"Listen to me," he said, watching the star pass over their heads, falling southwest toward the distant lands beyond the island of Xiansai. "You have your father's heart and your mother's rage. I knew it from the moment I saw him carrying you home for the first time. I asked to hold you, of course. You pulled my beard most fiercely."

At last, Jia remembered: her tiny fingers tangled in his wispy beard ablaze with moonlight. She should have been too young to recall that night, but the memory was hers all the same.

"Now," Shen said, "you are a child of the Tenth Family, and my granddaughter. But you are not bound by our decisions, and not a soldier in our battles."

He took her chin gently and looked at her.

"No matter what anyone tells you, you are free," he said.

In the light of the falling star, Shen seemed immensely tired, incredibly old. She knew without asking that he would follow it. It meant something to him.

It meant nothing to her.

For a long time, they sat in companionable silence. Then Shen sniffed.

"Is that salted pepperfish?" he demanded, standing.

Jia raised her eyebrows.

"You'd better go see," she said. "They might run out."

"You are right," Shen said, nodding urgently. "Hold this for me. I am certain we will find each other again."

He dropped one of his innumerable pouches in her lap, pressed his lips to the crown of her head, and skidded down the temple's gutters in pursuit of the incredible smell.

Jia looked inside the bulging purse. On top of a number of flawless diamonds was a cracked and blackened gem. It was, Jia realized, a type of protective jewel, one meant to deflect magical attacks. Like the kind Uncle Hao had leveled at Shen earlier in the evening.

She waited until dawn burned on the horizon, and she rose, stretching her legs and tucking the pouch into her armor. She could return to the Shifting Estate for breakfast. She could apologize to her father. Or she could find passage on a ship and see lands she'd only read about.

She could go anywhere.