



MARK OF THE WARRIOR

BREATHMARKED

Book Two



SHANNON LEE
AND FONDA LEE



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PROLOGUE



Sai gripped his mother's hand tightly, his palms sweaty even in the biting wind that presaged winter. The magnificent Sun Pagoda loomed before them as they stepped down from the carriage. Sai had to tilt his head back to see the top of it. Five floors of double-layered red timber frame and wide columns supported the pagoda's huge green tiled roofs. Intricate carvings adorned its deep eaves, and the top of its golden steeple pierced the clear autumn sky. It sat atop the tallest hill on the eastern edge of Yujing, so that even standing outside the grand structure, one could see the whole capital city of East Longhan sprawled across the plain below.

Under other circumstances, Sai would've been awed by the ancient pagoda, by the broad and orderly streets that dwarfed the two lanes of the small town where he'd been born, by the sight of men and women in black tunics with yellow sleeve cuffs walking about imperiously with swords sheathed at their waists. Ordinarily, Sai would've wanted to ask a thousand questions about all these unfamiliar sights and customs. Instead, sorrow and worry stopped his voice.

If only Jun were here. Sai could practically hear his brother's voice in his head, chattering away enough for the both of them, pointing out everything that caught his eye. He'd be excited rather than intimidated by the Sun Pagoda, bouncing up and down on the balls of

his feet and exclaiming, *Wow, imagine standing on top of that thing! I want to go up there!* With his brother by his side, Sai knew he could bravely face anything.

But Jun was not here, and neither was their father. Sai hadn't spent a single day of his scant six years apart from his family until ten days ago, when two Aspects of Virtue, a man named Compass and a woman named Water, had arrived at their family's home and turned their lives upside down. Sai's parents had told him the day would come when he would have to leave them to fulfill his destiny as one of Dragon's chosen, but it was a day he tried not to think about. When the fateful moment arrived, however, Jun had acted before Sai could—like he always did. He'd shown off the forbidden martial arts they had been secretly learning from their father, and before Sai could even comprehend what was happening, Jun and Baba had been banished from East Longhan. The entire family should've been together in Yujing to see Sai off to his training, but instead, Sai and his mother were alone in this strange place, and where a brother should have been, all Sai had was a lump in his throat and an annoying voice in his head.

Two Aspects were walking across the paved courtyard to meet them, their black clothes flapping in the wind. Sai recognized Water, the young woman with the kindly voice and long plaited hair who'd arranged to bring them here. With her was a woman older than Sai's mother, with graying hair held so tightly in place with silver pins that even the strong hilltop wind didn't disturb the tidy bun. The older woman's black tunic was different from the others, with a thin band of stark white fabric next to the yellow on the cuffs of her wide sleeves.

Sai shifted nervously and squeezed his mother's hand more tightly. She squeezed back, then crouched down to face him. There were dark circles under her eyes and her chilled fingers trembled as she placed her hands against Sai's cheeks. She'd cried almost the entire way to Yujing, but discreetly, trying not to let him see her weeping into her scarf.

"Be brave, Sai." Her voice wavered, but she forced a reassuring smile. "You have Dragon's mark for a reason. Study hard and listen

to your teachers, so you can learn to make the most of your gift. Once you've done that, the Lady of Many Hands is sure to answer our prayers. She'll bring Baba and Jun back so we can all be together again."

Sai wanted to pull free and run away from all these adults and their empty promises. He wanted to shout in his mother's face that the Lady of Many Hands hadn't helped them at all so far. She hadn't answered any of Sai's pleas that he and Jun be allowed to stay together. She probably wasn't even *real*—and if she was, then she clearly wasn't someone he could count on. Sai longed to blurt out all these thoughts the way Jun would've, but ever the obedient son, he merely nodded.

When Water reached them, she put a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder. "I know this isn't the joyful arrival in Yujing that you deserve as an Aspect initiate," she said quietly, "but you're not alone, Sai. All of us, your new brother and sister Aspects, want you to feel at home here. We're going to help you make the most of the ability Dragon gifted to you."

Sai looked down at his feet, fighting back tears. "What if I don't want the gift?"

It seemed a terrible question. Water's partner, Compass, would've scowled and told him not to be so ungrateful and blasphemous, but Water merely gave his small shoulder a sympathetic pat. "Life rarely affords us the choices we want, but perhaps it gives us the experiences we need. You can't trade away your breathmark to get your father and brother back," she said, as if reading his thoughts. "All you can do is follow your own path, and have faith that it will carry you back to those you love."

Her words made Sai's chest burn. This disaster was all Jun's fault! Every day since they'd been separated, Sai had cursed his twin angrily—but furious as he was, he couldn't make the feeling last. He knew Jun couldn't help his impetuous nature. He always wanted to be in the spotlight, even though he was a whole eight minutes younger than Sai and not even breathmarked. Sai had figured out early on in their lives that his brother was easily emboldened by any challenge—*How far can*

you throw this rock? Get in the water first. Bet you can't climb up that tree! They had done everything together, but it was Jun who led the way, and Sai who pushed him out front.

Their parents had explained that because of the spearhead-shaped patch of green scales on his chest, Sai would have to go to Yujing to be trained as an Aspect of Virtue. It was the edict of the Council that governed the land that every breathmarked child be identified by the time they reached the age of six and their abilities tested, honed, and guided to serve the East. When the twins lay awake at night, side by side on the cot they shared, Jun would pout and complain about their one and only glaring difference. Sai had reassured him; surely, he reasoned, they would be chosen to go to Yujing together. After all, the two of them were equally good at martial arts. Why *wouldn't* the Council want them both?

He realized now, with awful certainty, that *he'd* been the one to plant the idea in his brother's mind that they were inseparable. That was what had gotten them into trouble. It was *his* fault that the family had been split up. After all, it was his breathmark that had brought the Aspects to their home in the first place.

The older woman stopped in front of them and regarded Sai and his mother dispassionately before turning to Water. "I'm told that you discovered a lawbreaker but chose to pardon him. Why such leniency?"

"The man and his other son have been banished to the other side of the Snake Wall." As usual, Water spoke mildly, but her voice held a stiff undercurrent that Sai hadn't heard until now. "I would hardly say he was pardoned."

The older woman sighed through her nostrils. "Seemingly minor exceptions, stacked on top of one another over time—that's how the rule of law is slowly eroded. By a thousand little cuts. Our duty to society demands we always bear that reality in mind and not let emotions sway us. You need to understand that if you're to rise to the Council."

Water folded her hands in front of her and said tersely, "The Council depends on the strength and loyalty of the Aspecthood.

Would you have made this child hate us before even arriving here? The solution I came up with was the best one for all concerned."

The other woman made a humming noise that suggested she accepted the explanation but still didn't agree. She turned her attention to Sai and his mother. When Sai raised his eyes, he saw a round, concerned face with deep lines etched across a broad brow and around a straight-lipped mouth. Tiny white scales encircled the base of her throat like a prim necklace of freshwater pearls. "You may call me Sister Tether," said the elder Aspect. "I'm one of the Virtuous members of the Council."

Sai's mother bowed low. "Venerable Aspect," she whispered, "please . . . take good care of my son. He's never been apart from me or his father or brother. He's still so young . . ." Her voice trailed off helplessly.

"He's the age of all our new initiates, perhaps even slightly older," Tether replied, brisk and businesslike. "No need to worry; he will be well cared for and taught all that he must know. Your role as a parent will not go unrecognized. You'll be provided with food and lodgings, and your son will be able to visit you when he is not training."

Sai wrapped his arms around his mother's waist, sensing it might be the last comfort he got from her for a while. Choking down tears, she hugged him back tightly. Tether cocked a plucked eyebrow down at him. "Dear child, there's no need to be afraid," she said, not unkindly, but with the tone of a no-nonsense schoolteacher. "Starting today, you'll be where you belong, doing what Dragon intends for you."

Reluctantly, Sai let go of his mother and stepped forward. Some adults mistook his reticence for caution, especially when they saw him following behind his boisterous brother. Unlike Jun, Sai took his time before speaking or acting—but he never failed at something he put his mind to. In that moment, he made a decision: If he was destined to become an Aspect, as everyone said he was, if his breathmark was important enough to take him away from his home and family, then he was going to become the best Aspect there ever was.

Sai lifted his chin to look up at Tether. "I'm not afraid, Venerable

Aspect,” he added, remembering his mother’s reminders about manners. “Breathmarked people are brave, because we’re the only ones who can fight in Dragon’s name.”

Tether smiled for the first time, wrinkles forming around her sharp eyes. “Very true,” she said approvingly. “We fight so that those who are not breathmarked can live in harmony. It’s our sacred duty to preserve peace and freedom for all citizens of the East to enjoy.” Tether motioned across the courtyard to a teenage Aspect initiate in a yellow tunic, who hurried to join them. “Brother Rhythm here is good with the little ones,” Tether said. “He’ll take you to the children’s quarters.”

With a final backward glance at his mother’s teary but encouraging face, Sai followed the older boy, who led him away toward a low-slung wooden dormitory building, away from the cluster of adults who remained in conversation, and away from everything he had once known. An aching heaviness descended over Sai, turning his steps slow and sluggish. Tears blurred his vision, making it hard for him to see the white pavers in front of him.

“What do they call you?” Rhythm asked, giving Sai a broad, reassuring smile.

“Li Sai.” He sniffed.

“Soon, you’ll claim an Aspect name,” the young man announced cheerfully. He spoke in a curiously melodic, punctuated way, and he walked with quick, springy steps, as if he might break into dance at any moment. Despite the cold, he was wearing sandals, and pale sunlight flashed off the coppery dragonskin on the tops of his feet. “Think it through, ’cause it’s just for you. A name to honor Dragon’s gift, you get my drift?”

A new name, too? Yet another thing to think about. It was all so overwhelming. Sai changed the topic. “Why are you wearing yellow instead of black like the others?”

“I’m just a trainee till I turn sixteen. But I’ve got big dreams. Council member sleeves are yellow and white, but a stripe of red is a Keeper’s right.” Rhythm looked wistfully over his shoulder at the Sun Pagoda, silhouetted against the sky and casting its long shadow over

the plaza. "They live up on the floors, the warriors who're the best. Protecting the Scroll of Earth from enemies in the West."

The West. Sai swallowed hard. Jun and Baba had been banished to that terrible place. Would he ever see them again?

Rhythm grinned down at Sai, misunderstanding the trepidation on his face. "Don't worry, little one! We train hard, but we have fun. We've all got Dragon's mark on our skin; no doubt you're going to fit right in."

Rhythm's effortless rhyming speech and light-footed stride made Sai smile and pick up his own steps. A stir of reluctant hope eased the heaviness in his chest.

"What's your gift, is it known? Has it already shown?" Rhythm asked, eyes dancing with curiosity.

"Yes." Sai's earliest memories were of watching his brother. Watching Jun splashing about trying to swim for the first time, watching Jun painstakingly write his name with an ink brush, watching Jun awkwardly swinging a wooden practice sword. While watching, an ember of understanding would start to glow in Sai's mind. A task that seemed difficult or daunting would suddenly make perfect sense, as if it had simply been a puzzle that needed to be rotated and viewed from a particular angle for the pieces to fall seamlessly into place. Sai could immediately see Jun's errors, what he needed to do differently to swim, or write, or strike flawlessly. It was so *obvious*. An itchy warmth would spread through Sai's limbs, an irresistible desire to get up and snatch the brush or the sword from Jun's hand and show him how it was done. What took his twin weeks or months of practice, Sai could do in an instant.

You can't watch me anymore, said Jun's voice in his head. *Now you'll have to go first.*

But Sai knew his ability depended on the effort of others. Others opened the doorways of knowledge that he walked through. Dragon, in all his wisdom, had given Sai a twin for a reason—so he could discover and understand his gift from a young age. Jun had always been annoyed by how quickly Sai could pick things up, calling him a copycat and a follower. But when Sai saw others struggle to achieve

what, for him, was as effortless as an echo, he sensed how powerful he could be. “Is it too soon for me to pick my Aspect name?” he asked.

“Until the naming ceremony, keep it a surprise,” said Rhythm, “but go ahead, little man, try it on for size.”

“My Aspect name,” Sai declared, “is Mirror.”

ONE



The East was a place of falling leaves and memories.

The bite of autumn was in the air, the first threat of frost stirring the wind that tugged the red and orange leaves from their branches. It reminded Jun of a similar fall morning when he was six years old, when he'd been abruptly thrust into exile, his life torn asunder.

And here he was again.

"We'll stop and rest here," Water suggested, leading them away from the road into a nearby clearing. It was only midafternoon and they hadn't gone more than a couple dozen li, but no one put up an argument. The grueling pace and injuries Jun and Yin Yue had sustained during their flight to reach the Snake Wall had taken a toll, and they needed time to recover. A week ago, Water and Lure had led them through a secret crossing in the Snake Wall under the cover of a cloudy, moonless night, passing shadowy patrolmen bribed to look the other way and keep their mouths shut. Since then, they'd been traveling slowly, taking the much-needed time to regain their strength and prepare themselves for whatever lay ahead.

Jun dropped onto a nearby fallen log and carefully eased off the sling that had been holding his injured left shoulder immobile. Gingerly, he rolled it out, feeling the joint protest with stiffness but no longer with pain. The puncture wound from Old Man Zhang's spike-tipped cane

had sealed up, leaving an unsightly scar but no lingering damage. Lure came over and had Jun lift his arm over his head and move it around as she examined it. “You’re a quick fix,” she observed, impressed.

“Thanks to you,” Jun said, stretching his shoulder across his body, trying to gently bring mobility back into his disused muscles. He was lucky to have made it through the Guardian’s tournament and the encounter against the Moon Righteous Sabers with his life, and without suffering far worse damage. With proper care, he’d always been able to heal quickly and bounce back from injury. Back in his Iron Core school training days, he’d noticed that some of his classmates would be aching for a week after heavy sparring and conditioning.

“Ah, to have the metabolism of a young man,” Water said with a smile, coming up next to her apprentice. “And you’re more fortunate than most, to have such an abundance of Dragon’s Breath. Chang said it was the most he’d ever seen in anyone who isn’t breathmarked.”

Sifu Chang. Worry twisted Jun’s stomach into knots. He could only hope the blind flutist and his daughter, Ren, were safe. They had escaped Cobu’s soldiers and fled into the East; Jun knew that much from Lure’s uncanny ability to lead them steadily and unerringly toward the owner of the silk scarf tied around her belt. Wherever Ren went, Lure could find her. But Jun had no way of knowing if Chang and Ren were sick or injured, if they’d found sanctuary somewhere, or if they were in as much danger on this side of the Snake Wall as they had been on the other.

If only Ren had shared her plans with him earlier, given him more than a cryptic clue to go on. He’d spent so much time with her yet had never really been brought into her confidence. To Chang and Ren and the rest of the Silent Flute Society, he’d been a convenient wrench in General Cobu’s otherwise uncontested plans to subvert the Guardian’s Tournament and seize complete power in the West. And even on that front, he’d failed. He’d been Guardian for less than a day, and now Cobu was on the march. War hung in the air as surely as the coming winter.

Not for the first time, Jun wished he’d never left Cheon. He

wouldn't have any more power to stop Cobu than he did now, but at least he'd be at home, training by day and working at the opera house by night, sitting down with his father for a late supper after the performances were over. The two of them would talk about the fighters in the Guardian's Tournament without Jun ever having to set foot in the arena himself. And his father would be alive. Sad and resigned, perhaps, but still alive, instead of in the ground, buried by strangers, without even his disobedient son to pour libations on his grave. How deeply Jun wished he'd been more grateful for an uneventful day.

Jun got to his feet. Fighting for his life had at least kept him from thinking too much. Now that he wasn't in immediate danger, he had far too much time on his hands to sink into worry and regret. Crossing the clearing, he went over to where Yin Yue was sitting on the ground, leaning his back against a tree, struggling to adjust the canvas straps around the stump where his right hand used to be.

"Need a hand?" Jun jested, hoping to make the older student smile.

Instead, Yin Yue made a noise of frustration and dropped his false appendage to the ground. The pitchfork that Yin had lashed to his maimed limb in order to fight the Sabers was hardly practical for daily tasks, so one night Lure had whittled a piece of firewood into a fake hand for him. It only had two big fingers and a curved thumb, so it looked more like a crab claw than a hand, but at least it was semi-functional and not as heavy. The problem was keeping it stabilized on Yin's arm without it coming loose while keeping the straps, which Lure had fashioned by tearing a grain sack into strips, from chafing against Yin's still-healing limb.

"This is pointless," Yin Yue exclaimed, and dropped his forehead onto his bent knees.

"I don't know about you," Jun said, "but I'm starting to get antsy. Feeling up for some light sparring?"

Training was where Jun could feel in control and centered. He could silence the doubts in his mind with physical exertion, find some measure of peace in the practice of violence. Recovery was all well and needed, but just because they were in the East didn't mean

they were out of danger. Far from it. He wouldn't put it past General Cobu to send more bounty hunters like Old Man Zhang after him.

Besides, from the sunken look on Yin Yue's face, he figured his schoolmate could use the distraction as much as Jun could.

Yin Yue raised his head to look up at Jun, but his expression was dull and incredulous. "What good is it going to do you to practice against a cripple?"

"Old Man Zhang had his leg ruined from the Guardian's Tournament and has had to wear a brace around his knee ever since. Based on my recent near-death experience, I'd say he's still a pretty damn good fighter." Jun prodded his old classmate's foot with his own. "Come on, Yin. I'm not in great shape, either, so we might as well stink together. Remember when Master Song would make us spar even after running ten li and doing so many upside-down curl-ups we couldn't feel our abdominal muscles anymore?"

At the mention of their old master, Yin seemed to reconsider. Even now, after losing the tournament, being declared a treasonous conspirator, and having fled the country, he clearly still thought of himself as having a solemn responsibility to uphold the reputation of their teacher and the Iron Core school. He was Prodigy Yin, after all. Slowly, his shoulders came down. "All right."

Jun bent down and, with a nod from Yin, helped to lash the wooden hand more securely to his friend's arm before pulling him to his feet. With less confidence than usual, Yin saluted his opponent and took a fighting stance, classic Iron Core style: weight evenly distributed, knees slightly bent, arms held up and forward and close to his center line.

Jun returned the salute and raised his own fists. Despite the sorry condition they were in, wry smiles crawled across both their faces. Jun never wanted to set foot in another tournament arena for as long as he lived. He'd seen more death and maimings over the past two weeks than he'd ever wanted to. He'd be happy to never have to fight for his life again.

But *this*—standing across from Yin Yue as an equal, knowing they were there to make each other better, facing someone who was as

skilled in martial arts and loved it as much as he did—this he never wanted to lose.

Jun attacked first, as usual, moving at less than half his usual speed with barely any power. He feinted a jab, went in with a low kick. Yin shifted effortlessly, brought a leg up to deflect the kick and push Jun's leading foot off-balance. Turning the rotation of his landing foot into a hard pivot, Jun spun into a back kick aimed at Yin's midsection.

Yin dropped into typical Iron Core defense, rotating his torso sharply and using his forearm to deflect Jun's attack off its path and away from his center. With a swift automatic lunge, he attacked with his leading side, his right side—once his stronger fist, now a roughly hewn piece of wood.

Jun blocked instinctively, not hard, but the impact near his stump made Yin flinch. His fake hand slipped sideways in its bindings, dragging his arm downward at an awkward angle and causing him to drop his guard. Without thinking, Jun shot a strike through the opening and tapped his sparring partner in the jaw with an open hand.

There was no force—they were just playing, trying to get back into the feel of their recovering bodies—but Yin's eyes flew wide as if he'd been clocked with a knockout blow. With an angry curse, he grabbed his wooden hand, yanked it free from its straps, and shook it. "Everything feels wrong!" he exclaimed. "I can't do anything without noticing that one of my arms feels heavier than the other. It's throwing off every move I make."

"You could try going without it," Jun suggested.

"Then the weight is still off, but in the other direction. And how am I supposed to defend or attack with *this*?" He held up his useless stump. "Ten inches less range on my dominant side? I'm completely screwed. All the principles of Iron Core fighting are founded on strength and balance. I don't have either of those anymore."

Yin stalked away, speaking to Jun over his bitterly hunched shoulder. "Spar with one of them," he said, jerking his chin toward Water and Lure, who'd been watching the exchange.

Water's expression was sympathetic as she called out to him. "Yin

Yue, do you know of anyone with a missing limb who's mastered the Iron Core style?"

"Of course not," Yin muttered.

"Then it's safe to assume that the Iron Core style was not developed for someone with your disability in mind. If your past training no longer suits your current situation, it's time to seek out another way that serves you better."

Yin spun on her. "There are zero fighting styles out there for people without hands. Missing Hand style is not a thing."

"But there's a long history of martial arts styles that were developed to address physical disadvantages. Southern Bird Sect is famously suitable for women and smaller fighters. Red Coast Boxing was designed for fighting on ships and on narrow planks over swampy ground. The remote Peyu Islanders have no metal ore for making weapons, but they're such experts with ropes, snares, and blow darts that they've become famed as assassins." Water shrugged. "Adapting, and seeing around limitations to find opportunity—that's something I know a thing or two about. It's what has forged martial artists since the dawn of time. If there isn't a style out there that works for you, then perhaps it's time to leave the idea of schools and styles behind."

"I'm grateful to you for saving our lives," Yin said to Water, "and I appreciate your help," he added to Lure, holding up his dismembered fake hand apologetically to suggest it wasn't her wood-carving ability he was angry with. "But with all due respect, you don't know me. I've been faithful to the Iron Core school all my life. My father was a founding adept and Master Song has been like a second father to me. Maybe it's easier for some people to move on,"—he glanced at Jun with a touch of resentment—"but I can't discard all that I came from just because I've failed to live up to it."

Jun swallowed and looked down at the leaves between his feet. If Yin thought that Jun was somehow better able to move on from his past, he was deeply mistaken.

I know you're close, Sai.

Sai's voice in his head answered only with smug, anticipatory silence.

“Setting something aside doesn’t mean you’ve stopped honoring it,” Water assured Yin. “You may have to change the way you fight, but you’ll always be your father’s son, and you’ll always be an Iron Core warrior. After all, to change with change is the changeless state.” She responded to Yin’s skeptical expression by motioning him and Jun into facing each other again. “For example, instead of taking a classic stance with your right hand forward, you could—”

“Shh!” Lure exclaimed suddenly, holding up a hand for silence. The young Aspect’s other hand went to her bow and her wide eyes darted around the surrounding foliage. “Do you hear that?”

They all looked over at her in alarm. “What?” Jun asked, his voice lowered as he scanned the trees. The birds had fallen silent, and the hairs were starting to rise on the back of Jun’s neck. He reached for the sawn-off nunchaku he carried tucked into the back of his waistband. Could General Cobu’s men have found them already? Or had they been tracked by more bounty hunters? “Who could’ve—”

His question was cut off as the bushes around them exploded on all sides and a dozen shouting men with weapons burst into the clearing.

TWO



Ahhhhhh!!!” screamed the man who ran straight at Jun, swinging a rake, eyes bulging.

Jun was so startled that he barely ducked the metal tines as they whistled over his head. Yanking the nunchaku from his waistband, he snapped them upward, nailing his attacker across the inside of the arm with the business end. The man let out a yelp of pain and dropped the rake just as another assailant rushed Jun from behind and clubbed him across the back with a wooden broomstick.

Jun staggered forward and spun around, lashing out with the nunchaku in a vicious arc that caused both his attackers to jump backward. In the periphery of his vision, he glimpsed Yin Yue’s spinning roundhouse connecting with another man’s jaw, dropping him like a sack of rocks. A lost hand certainly hadn’t diminished the power and precision of his kicks. Water and Lure immediately moved back-to-back, protecting each other as men surrounded them, brandishing pitchforks and spades, clubs and knives.

“Who the hell are you people?” Jun bellowed, knocking aside the broomstick as its owner tried once more to swing it at his head. “Why are you attacking us?”

“Dragon is on our side!” yelled the rake-wielding man as he re-

claimed his weapon and hefted it into the air, valiantly rallying his comrades. "For the East!"

Jun backed away from the enraged group until he and Yin Yue were standing side by side. Yin was grimacing angrily, clutching the only weapon he had—his wooden crab claw—in his left hand. As an opponent in a straw hat lunged at him with a cleaver, he sidestepped and struck him across the temple with the blunt end of his unorthodox weapon, causing the man to stumble away, dazed.

Jun scanned the group—none of them looked like trained fighters. They were all dressed in simple clothes, and they didn't have armor or proper weapons, just farming tools and household objects. But there were twenty of them and their faces were set with fearful, determined menace.

"Stop! We are not your enemies!" Water's voice rang out with authority. "I am an Aspect of Virtue and you attack us at your peril."

"She's a Western spy, don't believe her!" someone else shouted from the crowd. "There are no Aspects out here."

"Everyone, all at once now," declared the man with the rake, who seemed to be their leader. He pointed at Jun. "Take that one out first, and then we can deal with the one-armed man and the women."

His round-faced, broomstick-wielding comrade let out a sudden gasp. "Wait!" Staring straight at Jun's face, he dropped his stick and grabbed the leader's arm. "That's the High Keeper!"

"What are you talking about?" the rake-holder exclaimed, looking down at his friend as if he'd lost his mind.

"High Keeper Mirror! It has to be. I waited for three hours by the side of the road to see him as he passed by on his tour last month. I'd know that face anywhere."

Trembling, the man dropped to his knees in the grass and pressed his forehead to the dirt.

"Dragon's mercy, I think he's right," said another man behind them, pushing forward for a closer look. "He looks just like the way he's drawn on all the posters." He, too, dropped to his knees and knocked his head to the ground so hard that Jun winced. "High Keeper, forgive us!"

A wave of astonished and incredulous murmuring ran through the attack party as everyone's attention went to Jun. Weapons came down and the men glanced at one another in fearful uncertainty. Several more of them began to drop to their knees.

"I'm not—" Jun began. Yin's elbow nudged him sharply in the side. Jun glanced over at his schoolmate, who gave him a meaningful glare and a tiny shake of his head. *What are you doing? Go along with it.*

"I'm not . . . angry with you," Jun said. Clearing his throat uncomfortably, he raised his voice and repeated himself. "I'm not angry with you for not recognizing me right away, but now would be a good time to put down your weapons and repent for your mistake."

His words dispelled the last of the doubt. Farming tools and kitchen knives thudded into the grass as the rest of the men sank to the ground, prostrating themselves. The rake-wielding leader knelt last. His voice quavered as he spoke into the dirt. "High Keeper, we beg mercy for offending you. I know there's no excuse for what we've done, but please believe that this isn't what it looks like."

"We're all law-abiding citizens," his friend added in a desperate rush. "We've never practiced or taught any forbidden violence. But we thought you were a scouting party from the Western army. Everyone says General Cobu is going to cross the border and invade any day now. May Dragon curse the West! We were only trying to defend our families in Anju and do our patriotic duty. Forgive us!"

"Even if we must be sent away to atone, please don't punish the rest of the town," finished the leader beseechingly.

Jun was at a loss for words. The last time he'd been mistaken for his twin, they'd been six years old. Strangers used to get the two of them mixed up all the time, but back then, it had been innocent and funny. This felt as strange and uncomfortable as ants crawling all over Jun's skin.

Water had told him that his brother was now called Mirror, and that he was an accomplished Aspect who resided in the Sun Pagoda as one of its Keepers. Apparently, that had been an understatement. Sai wasn't just a Keeper, he was the *High Keeper*. The best and most celebrated warrior in the East.

A confusing wave of pride and hot jealousy wiped Jun's mind blank. Looking out across the bowed backs of the people kneeling before him as if he were royalty made him feel like a complete fraud. It was Sai they revered, not him. What was he supposed to say?

Fortunately, Water stepped up next to him and spoke to the cowed group. "It's understandable that you acted as you did, given the unusual times and extraordinary circumstances," she said, taking control of the situation with calm assurance. "High Keeper, I don't believe it necessary that we report these foolish but well-meaning citizens to the Council for disharmony. That is, if you're willing to be merciful."

The crowd trembled, holding its breath. Jun said quickly, "I agree. They made a simple mistake and no harm's been done." When still no one moved, he said, awkwardly, "Stand up, everyone."

Nervously, the peasants got to their feet, eyes still downcast but profound relief palpable in their sagging postures. "May Dragon and his Blessed Consort bless you eternally for your mercy, High Keeper," muttered the man with the rake, wiping a sheen of sweat off his forehead with his shirt sleeve. He wore the pale expression of a man who'd barely escaped disaster. "Please, will you allow us to make up for offending you by hosting you and your entourage for the night at Anju? Our village isn't large but we have a proper inn."

"That would be appreciated," Water said magnanimously. "The High Keeper has been traveling in secret to avoid the attention of Western spies and assassins in this fraught region, but I believe we're far enough from the border now that we can spend a night in proper lodgings."

"That would be great," Jun agreed, feeling like an actor reciting his lines.

"We would be honored to host the High Keeper," said the group's leader, finally breaking into a gap-toothed grin of relief. "My name's Chu, and this is Tran," he said, indicating the round-faced young man next to him.

"I am Water, and this is my apprentice, Lure," Water said. "We are aides to the High Keeper."

“We thought all the Aspects had left the area,” Chu said. “We heard you were all recalled to Yujing and that we would be on our own if the West attacked.” Despite his newfound deference, there was an unmistakably resentful note to Chu’s words.

“Don’t believe everything you hear,” Water said. “The appearance of retreat obscures the Council’s secret plans to defeat the West. This man here, Yin, is a valuable defector from the other side of the wall. He opposed General Cobu and thus was publicly maimed in their barbaric tournament. The High Keeper has granted this brave man asylum in the East. We are bringing him to the Council in Yujing where he will be safe and help us defeat our enemies.”

Yin looked discomfited by Water’s heavily modified account of the truth, but he had the wisdom to keep his mouth shut and merely nod in agreement, clutching his stump to his chest to make his gruesome injury more visible.

The villagers stared, suitably horrified and impressed. “Please, follow us,” Chu said, leading the way. Some of the would-be attack party ran ahead, presumably to alert the town to the arrival of its important guests; others hurried to surround Jun and escort him.

“High Keeper Mirror, I can’t believe I’m getting a chance to talk to you in person.” Tran jostled his way nearest to Jun. Having gotten over his initial shock, he began to ramble excitedly. “I’m not kidding when I said I waited three hours to see your carriage pass on tour. You know, I’m the same age as you. Of course, I’m not breathmarked and could never be an Aspect, but I was also born under Dragon’s star so I’ve always felt connected to you. I was so excited when the Council announced that you’d been named the youngest High Keeper in history. In fact, I opened my pastry shop that very same week. I want to be as good at making food as you are at fighting. I just know that with you protecting the Scroll of Earth, there’s no way the West stands a chance. Whoever the West has as their Guardian, he’s definitely not as favored by Dragon as you are. Do they even have one anymore? By the way, is it true that you can learn any fighting technique after seeing it only once? That’s so amazing! What’s it like, living on the top floor of the Sun Pagoda?”

"It's . . . a lot to get used to," Jun said, "but it's a great honor, of course." He was grateful that Tran was babbling so unceasingly that it didn't seem necessary to provide many answers. "I can't say much else, for . . . national security reasons."

"Of course, naturally," Tran said, nodding vigorously.

Jun noticed Yin Yue eyeing him strangely. Only then did Jun realize he'd slipped into the Eastern accent of his birthplace, Lushin Province. It had happened so quickly and without thought, even though he'd spent the last ten years of his life getting rid of any sign of it.

"Tran! Leave the venerable High Keeper alone and stop blabbing his ear off," Chu admonished, sending the chagrined younger man away.

So this was what it was like to be Sai. Admired and recognized wherever he went. Lauded as a superb talent, afforded a luxurious special residence, acknowledged as Dragon's chosen and the defender of the realm.

A sour taste rose and coated the inside of Jun's throat.

Jun could've had all this on his own side of the wall as the Guardian of the Scroll of Heaven, if it hadn't all been taken away by Cobu and his warmongering bid for power. And unlike Sai, who'd been gifted from birth, Jun had *earned* his place by training his ass off for years and winning every match in the Guardian's Tournament. He didn't know how the High Keeper was chosen in the East, but he'd bet any amount of money it didn't involve putting one's life on the line in the arena. Sure, Sai had a useful ability, but he'd been Jun's copycat. Jun had been the more daring twin, the first one to do everything . . . Yet fate had made him into a hunted exile, while Sai sat atop the world as a national hero.

Don't blame fate, Sai's voice cut in. *You're the one who left, remember? You got yourself exiled before, and now you've done it again. Blame yourself.*

Even though the voice in Jun's head was a fictional version of his twin, Jun winced at the truth of the words. He had no right to resent his brother's success. Besides, he reminded himself with a hard shake of his head, what did the fame and status of Guardian or High Keeper

matter anymore, when the fate of both Scrolls and both countries was at risk?

Last week, on the bank of the Dengu River, he'd dug a grave and marked a headstone with his own name, burying the willfully blind and egotistical person he'd been before he'd journeyed to the Guardian's Tournament and lost everything. Maybe, he mused unhappily, he hadn't done quite as good a job burying that old version of himself as he'd thought. Apparently, he hadn't dug deep enough.

The village of Anju consisted of a simple town square surrounded by a few dozen wood-framed buildings with thatched roofs. Those who'd run ahead of the arriving party had alerted the entire town that the High Keeper and his companions were on their way, so every man, woman, and child had come out of their homes and businesses, and they were lined up several rows deep to greet him. A sun-browned middle-aged woman who bore an unmistakable family resemblance to Chu stood in front of the others wearing a formal blue robe, faded and wrinkled from disuse. She must be the town mayor.

"High Keeper," she said, stepping forward, "you are welcome to everything we have. We are merely humble, ordinary folk, and it is our honor and duty to provide anything we can give in service to the Council of Virtue and Dragon's chosen protectors of the East."

The mayor knelt and bent forward into a deep bow, the crowd of assembled villagers following suit. But Jun wondered if he imagined the edge of resentment in her voice as she spoke the expected lines or the glimpse of stiff displeasure on her lowered face.

"What do these people have to give to the Council?" Lure whispered in an undertone. "They already have so little, and they live on the borderland in fear of an invasion from the West destroying their homes. What more can they be expected to give?"

"They give their breathmarked children," Water whispered back. "As much as the common people admire the prowess of the Keepers, it's a large sacrifice that we ask of them. Aspects are supposed to protect the country, but with most of them in Yujing, the citizens in the countryside don't feel protected right now. And we haven't

provided them the means to defend themselves.” Water leaned over to speak to Jun. “Say something to reassure them. They’re waiting to hear from you.”

Reluctantly, Jun stepped forward, his throat suddenly dry. All the people gathered expectantly before him reminded him of the day he’d won the Guardian’s Tournament. He’d been brought to his new residence in the Thirty-Seventh Ward, and all his household staff had been there lining the walkway, bowing and welcoming him to his new station.

Now all those people were either dead or imprisoned, deemed accomplices to his crimes for no reason other than their brief association with him.

These villagers also thought he was someone he was not. Someone important and worthy of their admiration and obedience, someone who would protect them. Jun felt as if he was lying with every particle of his being. He didn’t even look the part. He was dirty, disheveled, bruised, and sunbaked after ten days of fleeing through the countryside. His clothes as Guardian had been new and fine but were now torn and caked stiff—at least he’d managed to wash most of the bloodstains out. And if anyone were to see him bare-chested, they would notice right away that he didn’t have Sai’s patch of dragonskin and wasn’t an Aspect at all.

“Please,” Jun said, “don’t prepare any special welcome or upend your evening for me. I’m traveling in secret and don’t expect anything other than a room for the night.”

The villagers remained kneeling, but they glanced at one another in confusion. Yin Yue hissed behind his back, “You’re not acting important enough. Great Dragon, being a cocky, bigheaded show-off ought to be effortless for you.”

Jun shot Yin a dirty look, but he straightened and tried to channel the confidence that had carried him through the arena and earned him the title of Little Dragon. What would Sai actually say?

“I realize my appearance here is a surprise, but as High Keeper, I promise you: The Council has a plan to defeat the West and deliver

us to victory. I'm trusting you all as loyal citizens to keep my visit a secret. I would be pleased to stay for longer and accept Anju's hospitality again very soon in the future, after the threat of Western tyranny is destroyed."

The mayor rose to her feet, visibly relieved that her village wouldn't be expected to burden itself for the Council's sake. In a warmer, friendlier voice, she said, "Of course, High Keeper, we trust in the Council and will do whatever is required of us. If all you wish for is a good meal, supplies, and a night of rest, then you shall have it."

Chu took it upon himself to escort them to the faded two-story inn at one end of the town square. As they passed the adjoining stables, Yin Yue said quietly, "That's a lot of farming tools." One of the empty horse stalls was being used entirely for storage and was filled with boxes, barrels, and stacks upon stacks of farming tools—hoes, shovels, rakes, flails, wood axes, and spades. A cursory glance suggested nothing out of the ordinary, but seeing as how Jun had nearly had his face gouged off by a rake earlier that afternoon, he eyed the packed stall skeptically.

"They're storing food and weapons," Lure said from behind them. "No doubt the inn will be the gathering place they'll use to defend the town, if they have to."

Yin shook his head in disbelief. "Your Council doesn't let these poor people have proper weapons so they have to fight with farming tools, and they aren't even allowed to train in martial arts without being charged with a crime. They're practically helpless. What do you think is going to happen to them if Cobu's soldiers come sweeping through here?"

Lure frowned and said, "The edict against practicing violence is meant to preserve social harmony."

"More like preserve the Council's power against a popular uprising," Yin muttered, and Lure didn't disagree.

The inn consisted of three rooms above a common dining area. The innkeepers, an elderly couple named Mr. and Mrs. Lou, bowed

low as Jun and his friends entered. “High Keeper,” the woman murmured, “we have no other guests tonight, so all the rooms are free for your use.”

Water placed a string of bronze yuon—not to be confused with the copper yun in the West—in the innkeeper’s hands. “I know the Council expects you to provide Aspects with free services, but allow us to pay like ordinary guests.”

The old woman’s eyes watered and she blinked them rapidly in gratitude, bowing again and again. “Thank you, venerable Aspects. Business has been very bad for us. With war coming, no one wishes to travel in these parts.”

“Has anyone else come through town recently? A blind man and his daughter, perhaps?” Yin Yue couldn’t keep the hopeful note out of his question. They’d been following Lure’s sense of direction toward Ren for over a week but had seen no sign of her or any evidence that they were getting closer. Although none of them doubted the Aspect’s ability, Jun understood and shared Yin’s growing concern and impatience.

“No, no one like that,” said the husband, causing Yin’s shoulders to sag with disappointment. “We had a scholar stay in one of the rooms for a couple of nights last week, but he was the only guest we’ve had all month.”

“A scholar?” Water asked curiously. “What type of scholar?”

Mr. Lou scratched his balding head. “I don’t really know. A physician, I believe. He had a heavy satchel full of scrolls and papers, and just by looking at me, he knew right away that I’ve been having stomach trouble. Probably an ulcer, he told me.”

Jun and Yin exchanged a meaningful glance with the Aspects. “What did this man look like?” Jun asked the innkeepers. “Where was he going?”

“I was surprised he was a scholar,” said Mrs. Lou. “He was quite young and fit to be so learned. He was quiet and didn’t smile much. Mostly kept to himself, but he was very polite. When we asked, he told us he was planning to travel to Yujing to continue his studies.”

Jun's fists closed at his sides. Traveling to Yujing to "continue his studies." He supposed that would be one way to describe stealing the Scroll of Heaven, taking it into the East with the intention of reuniting it with the Scroll of Earth, and leaving Jun to take the fall.

Yama. Yama was near.