

PROLOGUE

The Empress's blood tastes of light.

When she dies in my teeth, when I feel her heartbeat slowing through the arteries tangled around my tongue, I learn the taste of death.

Everyone thinks that I've forgotten that moment.

They never speak of it because it was for the greater good, because I survived, because all people want is a victory. They don't want to know what it cost.

But I've felt tendons snap and recoil between my teeth like zither strings. My tongue has scored the Empress's spine, my teeth have peeled back her white powdered skin. It is not a taste that one easily forgets.

The moment plays again and again in my dreams. Every night, I hold her face still, keep her quiet, keep her mine, drink the gold from her withering veins.

But some nights, she does not die.

Instead, she reaches out and clasps my jaw with her bloody hands, burning red qi on slick pearl. She turns my face toward her, and I obey because she is my Empress, because when you

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see something beautiful, you can't look away.

Then she leans close to my ear and whispers words I know are not a dream. They are a memory.

Whatever power you think you have is an illusion.

Whatever your dreams are, they belong to me.

And wherever you run, I am already there waiting for you.

She sinks her nails into my cheek.

A crack ripples across my face, a single jagged line of darkness that begins beneath my right eye and races across my body. I am a daughter born from clay, I am a glazed porcelain doll on a shelf, and with a quiet sparkle of sound, I fracture apart.

She cradles me in her arms even when I'm nothing but fine white dust and jagged shards, and even then, she won't release me. My thoughts scatter like faraway stars, but all I can think is that her bloodless, blue-tinged skin is a beautiful contrast to the scarlet running down her throat. She is the first bright light of morning that slices across the horizon, peeling it open. She is my Empress.

And then at last, she dies. Not because she is weak, or because I've truly defeated her, but because she made me a promise.

Wherever you run, I am already there waiting for you.

A resurrection alchemist should not fear death. But now I do.

Because I know that on the day that I die and wake up in the river of souls, the first thing I see will be a pair of bright, golden eyes.

CHAPTER ONE

Year 775

Lanzhou, China

My brother and I were very good at pretending we weren't dead.

Out in the desert, the harsh sun pulled redness to our cheeks and drew sweat from our skin. We gasped down breaths like we'd nearly drowned and had only just clawed our way to the surface of this golden sea—a convincing imitation of life, in my opinion. I worried a bit that people might recognize us as the Crown Prince and the last royal alchemist, but I didn't worry that anyone suspected we were reanimated corpses.

The ground whispered with snakes, the *pat pat pat* of tiny rodent footsteps, the sigh of sand dunes shifting slowly in the distance. The sky was the color of parchment, choked with sand.

In the north, they called this desert the Borderless Sea. The dunes around us swayed, the desert alive and flowing as much as any ocean I'd ever seen, though it could have been an illusion from the heat waves, or my slowly melting brain. All I knew was that I'd once stuck my hand inside my uncle's kiln back in

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Guangzhou and felt heat that I was sure would boil my skin right off—this heat was like I'd stepped fully inside of the kiln and locked the door behind me.

Wenshu and I had left the palace in Chang'an a week ago on horseback, but we'd reached a part of the world so parched that it would have been cruel to bring horses any farther—their hooves would sink into the heavy sand like mud. We'd sold them in Lanzhou for an amount of gold that we once would have marveled at, but now it was only added weight in our bags that I briefly considered dumping in the desert.

But even this relentless heat was better than staying at the palace in Chang'an.

In the weeks since the other alchemists had died, I'd hardly slept. Whenever I lay down at night, shadows flickered just past my windows, shivering away when I opened the door. Whispers slipped through the cracks in the wood-paneled walls, entered through the keyhole, contorted themselves to the diamond shape of my lattice windows to slither through and invade my dreams.

And at every turn, my sister, Yufei, was there, wearing the Empress's face.

She asked me about dinner and scolded my brother in the same voice that had once told me, unflinchingly, that she'd burned my siblings alive.

Even though Wenshu was borrowing the Crown Prince's body, I never once forgot that he was Wenshu. But for some reason, the Empress's golden eyes haunted me, even though I knew Yufei was the one behind them.

Maybe it was because I'd killed the Empress, sacrificed my body and my betrothed to make sure she was dead, and yet she was still strolling around the palace asking for roasted chicken at all hours of the night.

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The Empress's death, of course, had become one of the palace's many secrets. As long as her body was walking around, she was alive as far as the public was concerned. In many ways, it was like I had never killed her at all. Maybe that was the problem.

I hadn't truly felt like I could breathe until I'd left the palace with Wenshu and the gates of Chang'an were a tiny golden sparkle on the distant horizon. The city that was once my greatest dream had swiftly become my nightmare.

Wenshu had found us thin white cloaks with wide hoods to protect us from the sun, so the two of us swept across the desert like ghosts, our footprints quickly erased by the constant song of shifting sand around us, as if we'd never really existed.

There was someone out here who could help us, but he didn't like to be found.

"Quit kicking up sandstorms behind you with your giant feet," Wenshu said.

If there was one thing my brother was good at, it was reminding me that no matter whose face he wore, this was absolutely not the sweet and gentle prince Li Hong anymore.

"Then keep up," I said, not even glancing over my shoulder.

"Not all of us have legs the length of the Yellow River."

I groaned, tugging my hood down in a futile attempt to cover my face with more shade. "Please don't talk about water right now."

"Are you dizzy?" Wenshu said, suddenly beside me. It was a habit from when we were kids, when he had to worry about me passing out in the heat. But those days were long gone, the name—my real name—carved into my forearm a reminder of all that had changed.

My mentor, the Moon Alchemist, had preferred death to living as an undead abomination like me. But I had too much to

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do before I could die again. My soul was safely tethered to my body, my dead heart once again beating, draining colors from the world around me, pulling light and life and qi from anyone I loved.

But almost no one I loved was alive anymore. I'd made sure of that.

My brother and sister were just as dead as me, my parents long gone, my betrothed waiting for me at the river of souls, his body loaned out to Wenshu like an extra coat. My aunt and uncle who had raised me were still alive and well in Guangzhou, but we could never see them again. Being near us would kill them, our presence lapping up their qi like a wet rag until there was nothing left.

"I'm not dizzy, I'm *thirsty*," I said. "Aren't you?"

Wenshu winced as a hot breeze blew his hood back, spraying his eyes with sand. "Why are you complaining instead of getting us more water, then?"

"Do you have heatstroke already?" I said. "We've only been out here a few hours. There's no water in sand."

"Not *in* the sand. *Below* it," Wenshu said, rolling his eyes. "There's groundwater somewhere down there. How do you think cacti survive out here?"

"I don't know, rain?"

"Rain," he echoed, giving the searing sky a pointed glance.

I would have kept walking just to deprive him of the satisfaction of being right, but my mouth was papery dry, my heartbeat pounding in my ears, and we still had hours to go before nightfall.

I knelt down in the sand, a warm bath of gold around my legs, and reached into my satchel.

Durian, my alchemy duck, popped his head out of my larger

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bag. My hands were a bit sweaty, but I managed to pull three waterstones out of my satchel and press them into the sand.

Alchemy rushed like lightning into the ground. It cascaded down the path of desert crystals too small for the eye to see, reaching for the image of water, thinner and quieter as it burrowed deeper into the ground. My palms began to sting as if sunburned, the alchemy aching through my veins, loosening my fingernails, cracking my skin with dryness. I guided the current around the long-buried bones of rodents and abandoned snake skin and, finally, the tangled web of cactus roots somewhere far away. I traced them down and down until at last, my hands grew cool.

Water burst up from the sand, a thin stream that caught the light in its transparent brilliance. It arced high, then sloped back down and clocked Wenshu between the eyes, sending him onto his back in the sand.

“Fan Zilan!” he said, moving out of the way as I caught the next arc in my water sack.

“You asked for water,” I said.

“Yes, in my mouth would be ideal next time,” he said. “I’m not a frog who drinks through his pores.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“This isn’t even my real face!” he said. “You’re just insulting your ugly boyfriend.”

I shook my head. “Something about your personality just ruins his face,” I said. “Like adding rotten meat to a stew.”

Wenshu’s hood blew back again, sand pummeling his face. He spit on the ground, scrubbing his eyes with a sleeve that was only marginally less sandy.

I set Durian down on my skirt in a cloud of cottony fluff. His feathers were coming in, golden fuzz replaced with smooth

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white from his chest up to his face, but still a puffy cloud from the chest down. Most of the time, he sat in my bag with his head peeking out, occasionally letting out quiet peeps that annoyed Wenshu to no end. I'd tossed a few activated waterstones in with him to keep him cool, but he seemed wholly unbothered by the desert heat, which was more than I could say for myself.

I drew up some more water from the ground and cupped it in my palms, holding it out to Durian while Wenshu watched sourly.

"You care for that demon duck with more kindness than your own brother," he said.

"Are you actually jealous of a duck?" I said, raising an eyebrow. "Did you want to sit in my bag too? Eat crickets from my hands?"

He rolled his eyes, hitching his bag higher on his shoulder, eyes red from sand.

"I could be in a palace right now pretending to be a prince," he said. "Instead, I'm eating sand and getting sunburned while you insult me."

"Consider it payment for resurrecting you twice," I said, taking a long, glorious drink of water.

As the sun grew cooler and sharp red sunset sliced across the horizon, the sound of our footsteps began to change. Each step forward produced a low echo somewhere below, like the world had become hollow.

Wenshu must have noticed it too, slowing to a stop. He pulled out one of the scrolls from his bag and unfurled it. I spotted a tear in his sleeve near his shoulder and yanked him closer to me so I could fix it.

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“Quit manhandling me,” he said, eyes still fixed on the scroll. I slipped my hand into my bag, gently nudging Durian aside as I pulled out a few pieces of opal—waterstones with healing properties—to repair the tear so Wenshu wouldn’t end up with a sunburn across his arm. I clasped the stones in my hands, then pressed both palms to his sleeve.

My hands grew cold as the opal melted away, the pain in my fingernails crescendoing to a sharp point before one of my nails split. The severed threads of Wenshu’s robe shivered like tiny snakes, twisting and knotting themselves back together. I shook the numbness from my hands and leaned over Wenshu’s shoulder to read the scroll.

We’d brought as many of my father’s notes as we could carry. The Moon Alchemist’s study had been full of them, and we’d spent the first few weeks after her death reading and trying to make sense of his language. My father and the Moon Alchemist had worked together, so her notes in Chinese had helped us translate some of his writing.

Many of his earlier scrolls were about perfecting the art of resurrection—old news to both me and the Moon Alchemist. But it seemed that my father had come to Chang’an for an entirely different project: the search for Penglai Island.

Back when people believed in gods instead of alchemy, they spoke of a mythical island called Penglai, home to eight immortal beings and their elixir of eternal life. They lived high up on a snow-white mountain in a palace made of gold and silver with trees that grew diamonds and rubies instead of fruit. They knew no pain, or hunger, or winter.

What a joke.

I knew, because of the rules of alchemy, that such a perfect

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place couldn't be real. Peace and happiness required suffering in turn.

But legends often sprouted from seeds of truth. At least, that was what my father believed.

In order for this island to exist, the most fundamental rule of alchemy would have to be broken, he wrote.

The creation of good without evil.

Though the legends have been diluted by superstition, if there is even a speck of truth to them, they describe alchemy without limits or consequences. The power to do anything at all.

The next few sections described his theories of how to find Penglai, but one page in the middle had been ripped out, and no matter how I tore apart the Moon Alchemist's study, I couldn't find it. Luckily, the surrounding notes made enough sense for us to at least begin searching.

A place like Penglai shouldn't have been possible. It was the kind of thing that children dreamed about, a naive hope crushed by age as the years wore on. Maybe a wiser alchemist would have dismissed it.

But my father had believed in it, just as he'd believed in resurrection, which many had thought impossible as well. He did not fear alchemy the way others did. He saw the potential for greatness and seized it, no matter the cost.

Maybe he had been wrong, and all of this was nothing but a foolish dream. But I remembered the look on the prince's face as the Empress slit his throat, the wound yawning open, waves of blood rolling down the steps, and I knew that somehow, it had to be possible. If I couldn't fix this, then I didn't deserve the second life I'd been given.

My father's notes mentioned a map that would take us to

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Penglai Island, but even after poring through the Moon Alchemist's study, secret drawers and all, we hadn't been able to find it. He might have taken it with him the last time he left the palace, in which case we'd never find it.

But luckily, he'd mentioned where he got the map in the first place.

I've spoken to a great alchemist who lives in the empty valleys beneath the Borderless Sea. He calls himself the Sandstone Alchemist, for he has built a palace of sandstone underground. He claims he has been to Penglai Island.

Unfortunately, my father hadn't been thoughtful enough to include a map to the Sandstone Alchemist's front door. But his journals mentioned entering the desert from Lanzhou, and from there, he couldn't have gone far. The desert was hardly kind to the people who had lived on its borders for centuries, much less to pale-skinned foreigners who didn't know its secrets.

Part of me liked the idea of following the ghost of my father's footsteps. Once, I'd sworn to master alchemy just to spite him for leaving my mother on her deathbed. But when the Moon Alchemist had shown me the truth—that he'd given the last of his life to resurrect me and had returned to her for a cure—that hate had quickly dissipated.

I imagined him, long and wiry, copper hair and eyes full of sky, striding into this golden sea so many years ago with nothing but a dream. I didn't much believe in ghosts, but in the haze of heat waves, at times I thought I could see him there, looking over his shoulder.

Wenshu stomped his foot, the ground echoing below him, sand shivering away. "Does that sound like an underground palace to you?" he said.

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“It doesn’t sound like a sand dune, that’s for sure,” I said, kneeling down. I grabbed three earthstones from my satchel and pressed them to the ground.

Slowly, sand whispered away from the space beneath my hands, forming pale clouds behind me. As the winds picked up, the ground began to sink beneath our feet, and we dropped deep into the mouth of the desert. We sank down, the sand growing cooler and darker beneath us, until at last my hands touched cool metal, my feet on solid ground.

A trapdoor.

“That’s one way to stay cool in the desert,” Wenshu said. “Burrow underground like a fox.”

I knocked twice on the door, feeling a bit silly waiting to be invited into a hermit alchemist’s secret lair as if we’d stopped by for tea. As expected, no response came.

“Well, we tried,” I said, placing three firestones to the lock, snapping it off easily. *Amateur.*

Wenshu made an indignant sound, gaze following the discarded lock as the sand swallowed it. “Zilan, you can’t just—”

“Out of all the awful things I’ve done,” I said, gripping the handle, “I think I can live with myself for opening a door.”

We dropped down into a cool, silent tunnel. I ignited three firestones in my palm, casting the packed sand walls in pale orange light. A network of thin silver wire braced the curved ceilings of the tunnels, the ground beneath us polished sandstone in ribbons of red and brown. I held the firestones ahead of me, but the light couldn’t pierce very far into the sea of darkness. There was only a tunnel growing narrower as it faded into the dark.

“This has to be the Sandstone Alchemist’s home,” I said. “No

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one could carry this much sandstone this far into the desert without alchemy.”

“Finding him isn’t what I was worried about,” Wenshu said, staring off into the never-ending tunnel. “He doesn’t seem the type to appreciate visitors, if the buried door was any indication.”

“Did you think we’d find merchants selling the secrets to Penglai Island in the town square for twenty gold pieces?” I said, glaring over my shoulder. “This was never going to be easy.” I turned and headed deeper into the tunnel system, forcing Wenshu to follow me, as I carried our only source of light.

The sounds of the desert grew distant the farther we walked, which was how I knew we were heading deeper underground. The sand walls seemed denser, darker from trapped moisture. We drew to a stop where the main tunnel split off into three smaller tunnels.

“Which way?” Wenshu said.

I hissed in pain as my firestones burnt out against my palm, singeing my skin and casting us in sudden darkness. “Do I look like a map to you?” I said, reaching into my bag for more stones.

“You’re the royal alchemist.”

I tensed, grateful that Wenshu couldn’t see my face in the darkness, couldn’t tell how much I hated that title. All throughout Chang’an, and then China, the news of the palace massacre had spread through woodblock print flyers.

THE SCARLET ALCHEMIST, the print said at the top, with an illustration of a girl drenched in red, standing before a crumbled palace oozing with blood, severed hands and heads on the lawn, the sky a vicious red.

Scarlet had once referred to my own blood that I’d spilled for the dream of becoming a royal alchemist, but it had taken on a new meaning since that day. I was the last of the royal alchemists,

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the only one who had emerged from the palace, trailing bloody footprints behind me. No one knew what had truly happened, but most people didn't need the truth. They created their own stories.

The Scarlet Alchemist, who killed all her friends. The Scarlet Alchemist, who was so jealous of all the other women in the palace that she tore them to shreds. The Scarlet Alchemist, who refused to die like a little cockroach, not because she was strong, but because everyone else had died for her. I had given everything for that title, and within a month, it was no longer an honor, but a curse.

"And what sort of alchemy do you propose I do here?" I said, still fishing for more firestones in my bag. "Exactly what kind of stone do you think tells you the location of a reclusive alchemist buried underground?"

My fingers were already growing cold, the temperature of the shadowed tunnels a stark contrast to the burning, golden sun aboveground. My trembling fingers skittered across the smooth stones, unable to discern their type in the dark. Normally, I could tell them apart by touch alone, but with my fingertips numb from cold, I wasn't certain.

Wenshu must have sensed my hesitation, because he sighed and started rummaging through his own bag.

"Royal alchemist can't even make a torch," he said, striking a match, bathing the hallway in light.

A man stood before us.

We both flinched, Wenshu nearly dropping the match as the pale wraith of a man took a step closer, a curved knife in each hand. His skin had the blue hue of corpses and glowed with a thin layer of dew, his long black hair damp around his face. His eyes were the murky white of the sand-torn sky, tinged red from

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sand that gathered in the corners, on his lips, in his beard. Topaz and ruby rings glittered on his knobbed fingers. Could this be the Sandstone Alchemist?

I tried to recall any words in Lanzhou dialect to say to him, but before I could speak, a golden viper curled around his throat, baring its fangs at us.

At once, Wenshu and I stepped back, pulling our robes forward so the loose fabric hung in front of us. Auntie So always said that if a snake wanted a piece of you, you better make sure they got a mouthful of fabric instead of flesh.

But the snake didn't strike, instead hovering by the man's face, its piercing golden eyes brighter than the match in Wenshu's hand. I pulled my sleeve back so it draped across my bag, just in case Durian chose that moment to poke his head out.

The man said something in a language I didn't understand. I had never traveled to the northwest before, had never heard their dialects from a world away on the southeast coast.

Wenshu and I shared a confused look. The man sighed impatiently and tried again, louder, shaking his knives.

"*Who sent you?*" he said, in something that resembled the dialect of Chang'an, knives pointed at both of our throats. The emphasis on each word was unbalanced, so it took me a moment to understand.

"No one," I said, trying to enunciate in case he didn't understand. "We're looking for the Sandstone Alchemist."

The man let out a sharp laugh. "Then you're looking for a corpse."

I sighed, mentally running through how many chicken-blood stones I had left. His words probably would have deterred anyone else, but death was not the endpoint in the journey of a resurrection alchemist.

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“How long ago?” I said.

The man frowned. “What?”

“When did he die?” I said slowly. I turned to Wenshu. “It’s cold enough down here to delay decomposition. If his brain is still mostly intact, I can work with that.”

“*Mostly?*” Wenshu echoed palely. “You want to interrogate a dead man with half a brain?”

“He doesn’t need to recite Confucian texts, just point us to a map,” I said.

“The ethical implications—”

“We can put him back down after.”

“*We?*”

“He has been dead for centuries,” the man said, louder, like he desperately wanted us to shut up.

“No,” I said sharply. “He hasn’t.” I knew because my father’s notes said he’d spoken to the Sandstone Alchemist, and my father was certainly not hundreds of years old. This man was lying because he had something to hide. There was only one person who had ever told me a convincing lie, and I had killed her.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” I said. “You’re going to take us to the Sandstone Alchemist, or I will hack your snake’s head off with a shovel and bury you under ten tons of sand.”

The man only laughed, and a hot flash of rage burned through me.

“You see these wires?” he said, gesturing to the ceiling with one of his knives. “You see how they sparkle?”

I glanced up at the wires for a quick moment, not wanting to take my eyes off the armed man for too long.

“Yes?” I said.

He reached out and pressed a single finger to a loose wire dangling by his side. It came away with a bright bead of red

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blood on his fingertip. “The metal is not reflective,” he said. “It shines because of its sharpness. These wires could chop you up like a peach, if I wanted them to. Your bones will become wall ornaments, because I’ll never get them untangled.”

Then he touched the wire again, and light bloomed in his fingertip.

The web of wires shivered as alchemy raced through them, illuminated against the walls of the tunnel. I grabbed Wenshu and pulled him close to me as one of the wires came free from the ceiling, lashed out like a whip, and sliced off part of his sleeve.

I reached for my satchel, but at once, the man released the wire and the netting fell limp and still. One of the man’s ruby rings turned to black ash, falling to the ground. *Classic destruction alchemy, fueled by firestone*, I thought. This man was an alchemist.

“Who sent you?” the man said again.

“No one,” I said, pulling out three firestones and elbowing Wenshu until he moved behind me. “Be careful with your threats when you’re standing in the same tunnel as us, under the same wires.”

“Go ahead and try,” the man said, his snake sliding down his bicep, curling around his wrist.

I pressed the firestones to the wall and imagined alchemy rushing through the sharp wires just as it had rippled down the roots in the ground seeking water. But at once, my hand cramped up as the alchemy rebounded, scorching my palm. I yanked it away from the wall.

“What did you—”

“You don’t even know what it’s made of,” the man said, smiling darkly. “Some alchemist you are.”

I clenched my jaw, stretching my fingers to bring feeling back into my stiff hand. His words shouldn’t have unnerved me. No

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one had ever thought of me as a great alchemist until I proved them wrong. But for some reason, his words settled deep in my bones.

Because he was right—if I were a great alchemist, I wouldn't be underneath the desert searching for a myth just to undo my mistakes.

"You're the Sandstone Alchemist, aren't you?" I said.

"I don't think you want me to answer that question honestly," he said. "If I say yes, you can never leave."

I clenched my jaw. Why had my father befriended such an evasive, unhelpful alchemist?

"We're not here to cause trouble," Wenshu said. "We're looking for Penglai Island."

The man narrowed his eyes. "Two children have no business on Penglai Island," he said. "There are reasons its secrets are down here instead of in the royal library. It's not public information for anyone who bursts through my door."

"I'm not *anyone*," I said. "I'm the last royal alchemist."

The title meant little to me anymore, but it was who Wenshu expected me to be, the person he trusted to bring us safely across the world and home again. It was a title this man should have feared, conjuring images of blood and corpses.

The man laughed, the dark sound thundering down the tunnels. "You think that you're the best just because the Empress chose you? You think there aren't more of us out there who are too smart to serve her?"

I hesitated. All my life, I'd measured my worth as an alchemist against the imperial exam, the dreams of rich children in the north. Alchemy was a way to make money, not a hobby. Why would anyone become an alchemist if not to serve the Emperor?

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“You can leave now,” the man said, “or you can feed my snake for the next month.”

I took a steadying breath. I hadn’t come all this way to return to Chang’an empty-handed. *Focus, Zilan*, I thought, looking back up at the wires. *Think like a royal alchemist.*

The man had clearly made some sort of metal compound that reacted with firestones. I’d assumed the wires were common steel, but the ache in my hand made it clear I was wrong. Part of being an alchemist—a good one, anyway—was knowing every material by sight, by touch, by scent. The silver strands above us looked like the mudwire that Uncle Fan used to cut clay, made from steel. But the sharp sparkle even in dim light meant they were probably coated in something else, some mysterious metal to cancel out any transformations attempted by foreign alchemists.

Luckily, out in the desert, there weren’t that many stones to choose from. Not in this quantity, at least.

I reached out for the netting once more, pushing past the ghost of an ache in my palm.

“Zilan!” Wenshu whispered.

I ignored him, tugging down a loose stretch of wire and slowly, carefully, bringing it to my lips. I opened my mouth and ran my tongue across the wire.

“Zilan!” Wenshu said indignantly. But the man had already lowered his knives a few degrees, mouth pinched.

“It’s rock salt,” I said, licking the sting from my lips. “Steel and rock salt coating, isn’t it?”

The sour look on the man’s face told me I was right.

“We can try this again, and see who can cut the other up faster, but I have a feeling no one will come out as the winner,” I said.

“Or you can tell me what I need to know about Penglai Island.”

“How do you even know about that?” the man said, running

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a trembling hand across his snake, even as his eyes blazed. “Only a few people—”

“My father,” I said. “His name was Laisrén.”

I had learned his real name in the Moon Alchemist’s notes. He’d taken on a Chinese name when he met my mother, but the Moon Alchemist had only ever called him Laisrén.

A strange look eclipsed the man’s face, slowly taking in my appearance with narrowed eyes. Whatever he saw in me, he didn’t like. He tightened his grip around his knives.

“Laisrén’s daughter is dead,” he said.

“Yes,” I said, dragging down my sleeve, showing him the name carved crudely into my forearm, the soul tag that had dragged me back from death in the Empress’s throne room. “I am.”

His gaze burned my scar for a moment before he sighed, lowering his knives. “Where is Laisrén now?”

“Dead,” I said. *Because of me*, I thought but didn’t say.

The man’s brow creased. The sand around his ankles began to whisper, lighting up like tiny constellations. In the dim light, I realized that the ground swarmed with yellow eyes, thin snakes the color of sandstone drawing closer. Wenshu drew back, but I stood still. The viper on the man’s shoulder hissed again, its gold scales glimmering.

“Show us the map,” Wenshu said, even though he most definitely was not going to be the one stabbing a viper if the need arose.

“You two could never find Penglai Island with only a map,” the man said. “It’s a place for the greatest alchemists that ever lived. You don’t even know what you’re asking for.”

“I’m not asking,” I said, sharpening one of my iron rings into a spike.

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The man's shoulders dropped a fraction, and that was how I knew we'd won.

"You're just like him," he said, before turning and heading back down the tunnel, not waiting for us to follow. "Come on."

The Sandstone Alchemist had carved out an entire world below the ground. The chasms of sandstone looked bone white in the darkness, the heat of the desert a distant memory as we descended into the cold and lightless labyrinth. Every now and then, starbursts of golden light flashed past my feet—tiny snakes glinting in and out of the sand.

Through the many archways, I caught shadowed glimpses of sandstone dining tables and pools of groundwater and stores of meat, though I didn't know what kind of animals one could reliably hunt out in the desert. Over the Sandstone Alchemist's shoulder, the viper watched us unflinchingly as the air grew colder.

You're just like him, the Sandstone Alchemist had said. Surely he was talking about my father. My mind burned with questions I wanted to ask, but I knew none of them would be well received, and there was much more at stake than my own curiosity. *How am I like him?* I wanted to ask. *Demanding? Persistent? Smarter than you initially thought?*

Auntie So had only ever told me that my father looked like an uncooked jellyfish and didn't speak comprehensible Chinese. The Moon Alchemist had met him as well, but we'd had much more pressing things to talk about back then, and now I could no longer ask her anything. The Sandstone Alchemist was one of the only people left who'd known him.

We drew to a stop in a room full of sandstone shelves crammed

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with scrolls, a low table in the center of the room surrounded by scattered, dusty floor cushions.

“I will give this to you, for Laisrén,” the Sandstone Alchemist said, kneeling down to ignite the candle on the table with a handful of firestones. As light filled the room, his shadow swelled behind him, like a great beast rising to its full height. He stood up and moved to the wall, and the shadow shrank back to a human size. “Then,” he said, “you will leave me and never come back or tell anyone where you got it from.”

“I have no intention of returning to the desert if I can help it,” I said. “And I’m not going to send people after you. I have bigger problems.”

The Sandstone Alchemist narrowed his eyes as if appraising me, then nodded and bent down to the lowest shelves, shuffling scrolls around somewhere in the shadows.

Wenshu shot me a deeply skeptical look, his mouth pinched into a grimace. It wasn’t hard to guess what he was thinking: *This was too easy.*

This man looked like he’d been fermenting underground for years, clearly hiding from something—or someone—at the cost of all else. He would not give away his secrets before we’d even shed a drop of his blood. Whatever he was about to give us would not be what we wanted.

The question was, how would we figure out where he actually kept the map?

He had his back turned to us, which meant what we wanted probably wasn’t even in this room, or else he would have watched us closely.

But I had ways to see without using my eyes.

Quietly, I pulled three waterstones from my bag, squatted down, and pressed them to the ground.

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Just like in the middle of the desert, alchemy rushed through my fingertips, channeling deep into the ground, seeking webs of roots. I imagined the alchemy spreading out and feeling beneath the foundations of the sandstone palace, giving me a mental map of the building and any rooms with extra fortification. But I'd forgotten just how deep underground we were.

The alchemy slammed into a hard layer of stone beneath us, the whole world trembling with a heavy *thump* as the power dispersed uselessly. Sand and clay powder rained down from the ceiling as the whole building quaked.

The Sandstone Alchemist snapped his gaze to the left doorway, then back at me and Wenshu. Luckily, I'd already stood up, feigning surprise.

"Earthquake?" I said, raising an eyebrow. "Or do you have even bigger snakes down here?"

"I'd rather an earthquake than another visitor," he said, standing up with a scroll under his arm.

I chanced a glance at Wenshu, who I knew had seen what I'd seen.

When disaster struck, people always looked to what they valued most. It was an old trick that market commandants tried on merchants they suspected were hiding money to evade taxes. Back in Guangzhou, the commandant would break our windows in the dead of night, or punch holes in the thatched roof during a rainstorm, or set fire in the middle of the shop, then stand back and watch. They knew that when disaster struck, you looked for what was most important to you.

And the Sandstone Alchemist had looked to the room on the left.

"Here you are," he said, holding out a nondescript scroll in one hand. *Probably blank*, I thought, *or something equally useless*.

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But the Sandstone Alchemist was already heading for the doorway, getting ready to kick us back out into the desert. There was no way he'd simply let us look around. Not without a good reason.

I reached into my bag and cupped a hand under Durian's belly, whispered an apology into his feathers, and set him down on the ground.

At once, he took off for the doorway, flying low, nearly knocking the Sandstone Alchemist off his feet.

"Durian got out!" I shouted, rushing forward and shoving Wenshu into the hallway. "Catch him before a snake eats him!"

Wenshu knew as well as I did that Durian was more likely to eat a snake whole than be eaten by one—I'd caught Durian disemboweling a carp twice his size from one of the palace ponds—but luckily Wenshu only rolled his eyes and took off running.

"You can't just run around in here!" the Sandstone Alchemist said, chasing after Wenshu. I jogged behind them for a moment before turning back to the room we'd just been in, rushing straight through it to the room on the left.

This room had no shelves or cabinets. It was nothing but four walls of smooth, polished sandstone, no cracks or seams. At least, nothing you could see if you weren't an alchemist.

I pressed my palm flat against the wall, my iron rings flush against it. Alchemy rippled through the stone, searching for something to bend, mold, break.

Alchemy curled around a thin, nearly invisible seam in the wall, pausing to gauge my intentions, await my command. *Is this what you're looking for?* it whispered from somewhere deep inside of me.

I'm not sure, I thought, but let's find out.

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The alchemy flooded the seam in a burst of purple light. The stone crackled as dusty white particles swirled into the air, the seam carved wider. At last, a small door swung open, no larger than my satchel.

I slipped my hand inside, fist closing around a few sheets of paper. But there was no time to read them now—hurried footsteps were drawing closer to the room.

I stuffed the papers in my bag and hurried back into the hallway, where Durian narrowly evaded the Sandstone Alchemist's grasping hands.

I reached into my bag, pulled out a handful of dead crickets, and tossed them on the ground. Durian landed on top of them before I could even put the bag away, gobbling them up. I scooped him up as he quacked in protest, setting him back in my bag.

Wenshu and the Sandstone Alchemist had finally caught up, panting and glaring at me, though likely for different reasons.

"We're done here," the Sandstone Alchemist said at last. "Take your scroll and get out."

"Let me see it first," I said, because accepting it too eagerly would look suspicious.

"Get out of my home, then you can see it. That was the deal."

Wenshu crossed his arms. "But—"

"You're already pushing your luck," the man said, jamming a finger at Wenshu. The viper slithered down his arm, baring yellowed fangs. Wenshu swallowed and backed up, nodding.

The man brushed past us, charging down the hall. Slowly, the ground began to slope upward, the sound growing softer and brighter under our feet. We reached a trapdoor in the ceiling, which the Sandstone Alchemist shouldered open with a grunt, bright light and a gust of hot sand blowing through. He clambered out, then held out a hand.

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“Is all of this really necessary?” Wenshu said as the Sandstone Alchemist pulled him up. “You really hate people so much that you need to be this reclusive?”

The Sandstone Alchemist shook his head, yanking me up. I slipped in the sand, keeping a firm grip on Durian. “I’m not here because I hate people,” he said. “I’m here because people would use me for awful things. That is the cost of being a great alchemist.”

At last, he passed me the scroll. I was ready to leave, but I needed to at least make a show of looking at it until he disappeared back into his dune.

I unfurled the scroll and scrutinized the detailed map of China, the sweeping deserts of the northwest, the mountains in the northeast, the rippling ocean border in the east. But there was no indication of anything resembling Penglai Island, just as I’d expected.

I turned to pose some feigned ignorant question, but froze at the sight of Wenshu on the ground, one hand on the side of his neck, the Sandstone Alchemist no longer beside him.

“Gēgē?” I said.

He pulled back his hand, trying to make some sort of gesture, but his fingers twitched and trembled. A single thin line of blood ran fresh across his throat, the mark echoed on his palm. It wasn’t a deep wound and didn’t seem to have bled that much. But his lips were tinged purple, his face drained of color.

I took a step closer, but before I could reach him, something stung my neck.

I turned to the Sandstone Alchemist, now behind me, a blade in his hand.

“There’s something you have to understand about the desert,” he said. But even as he spoke, I knew that he hadn’t cut me

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with a normal blade. The wound seared as if cauterized, the ache rushing from my throat to my chest, blooming into my arms, cramping my muscles.

“The sand is alive,” he said, his words blurring into heat waves. “It flows just like the ocean. There is no permanence out here. The landscape changes every moment because the desert breathes, and what the sand buries is meant to stay buried. The desert keeps its secrets.”

I reached for my satchel, but my fingers were already cramped into a tight fist, too painful to move. The viper circled the man’s throat.

Venom, I realized. He must have coated his knife with it.

I fell forward onto my knees, drops of blood staining the sand that drank it hungrily.

“Penglai Island is lost for a reason,” the Sandstone Alchemist said, his voice already sounding so far away. “I won’t let you unbury her.”