



FOUR
TREASURES
OF
THE SKY

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JENNY TINGHUI ZHANG

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of the
SKY



Jenny Tinghui Zhang



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For my parents

PART I

Zhifu, China

1882

1

When I am kidnapped, it does not happen in an alleyway. It does not happen in the middle of the night. It does not happen when I am alone.

When I am kidnapped, I am thirteen and standing in the middle of the Zhifu fish market on Beach Road, watching a fleshy woman assemble whitefish the shape of spades into a pile. The woman squats, her knees in her armpits, rearranging the fish so the best ones rise to the top. Around us, a dozen fishmongers do the same, their own piles of fish suspended in nets, squirming. Below the nets are pails to catch the water sliding off fish bodies. The ground is glossy with water from the ones that are not yet dead. When they flail in the air, they gleam like silver firecrackers.

The whole place smells wet and raw.

Someone yells about red snapper. Fresh, they say. Straight from the Gulf of Pechili. Another voice tumbles over that one, louder, brighter. Real shark fin! Boost sexual potency, make skin better, increase energy for your little emperor!

This is poetry to the house servants who came to the fish market for their masters. Bodies surge in the direction of the shark fin voice, knocking and grinding for the promise of a promotion, of rank advancement, of favorability. It could all rest on the quality of shark fin.

While the others clamor, I remain staring at the fish woman, who continues to rearrange her pile. Her fish are not in a net like the others, but laid out on a tarp. At her shuffling, loose fish slide down from the top of the heap to the tarp's edge, where they remain vulnerable and unattended.

Hunger presses against the walls of my stomach. It would be so easy to snatch one. In the time it takes for me to approach, grab the fish farthest from her, and sprint away, the woman would barely be able to rise to her

feet. I finger the silver pieces in my pants before letting them fall back into the lining. This money should be saved, not wasted on some limp fish. I would just take one or two, nothing she could not make up the next day. The ocean holds plenty.

But by the time I decide, the fish woman has noticed me. She knows immediately who I am, sees the gnawing in my belly, an insistence that hollows all the things it touches. My body betrays me; it is as thin as a reed. She recognizes what she sees in all the urchins who dare slide into the fish market, and before I can look away, she is in front of me, body heaving.

What do you want?

Her eyes are narrowed. She flaps at me, hands the size of pans.

I duck one, then two blows. Away, away! she yells. Behind her, the whitefish wait in their pile, glistening. There is still time to grab a few and run away.

But the rest of the market has noticed us by now.

I saw that scamp here yesterday, someone shouts. Grab him and we will give him a good whipping!

The fishmongers nearby roar in agreement. They emerge from behind their fish and form a barricade around me and the woman. I have stayed too long, I think, as their shoulders lock against each other. There will be a lot to explain to Master Wang if I ever get home. If I am still allowed to stay at home.

Get him, someone else yells gleefully. The woman lunges forward, hands outstretched. Her gums are the color of rot. Behind her, the fishmongers' faces fatten with anticipation. I close my eyes and brace.

But what I am expecting does not come. Instead, a pressure descends on my shoulder, warm and sure. I open my eyes. The woman is frozen, her arms outstretched. The fishmongers inhale together.

Where have you been, a voice says. It comes from above, the color of honey. I have been looking all over for you.

I raise my head. A slender man with a large forehead and a pointed chin smiles down at me. He is young, but he carries himself with the weight of someone older. I have heard tales of immortals who descend from the sky, of dragons that turn into wardens who turn into human forms. Of those who protect people like me.

The man winks at me.

You know this scoundrel? the fish woman pants. Her arms now hang at her sides, red and splotched.

Scoundrel? The man laughs. This is no scoundrel. This is my nephew.

The fishmongers around us groan and begin to disperse, returning to their unmanned fish. There would be no excitement today. Red snapper, red snapper, the first voice offers again.

But the fish woman does not believe the man. I can tell. She glares at him, then at me, daring me to look away. Something about the man's hand on my shoulder, the calm heat of it, tells me that if I do, we will never leave this place. I continue to stare back at the fish woman, unblinking.

If you have a problem, the man continues, you can speak with my father, Master Eng.

And just like that, as if the man has spoken magic into the air, the fish woman looks away first. I blink one, two, three times, the backs of my eyelids raw.

I am so sorry, Brother Eng, she says, bowing. So dark in here, and the fish are making me light-headed. I will send Master Eng my best fish to make up for this terrible mistake.

We leave the market together, me and this tall winking stranger. He keeps his hand on my shoulder until we are both back on the street. It is midday, and the light from the sun casts everything into greens and gold. A merchant walks past us with a sow in tow, her teats swinging.

We are in the foreign business center of Zhifu's Beach Road. Over the tile roofs and the British consulate, a rush of green fields swells toward faraway hills. The cotton roar of the beach is at our backs, the sea breeze one long exhale around us. The air here is rich with salt. Everything clings to me, and I to everything.

I have come because there is always something to be found here. In places where foreigners roam, I find silver pieces, embroidered handkerchiefs, dropped gloves. The frivolous things with which Westerners garnish their bodies. Today brought two pieces of silver. They jingle in my pocket next to the four pieces I earned from Master Wang. Today, I could call myself wealthy.

In the daylight, I inspect my strange winking man. He feels rich, but he is not dressed like the other rich men I have seen. Instead of a silk chang shan, he wears a white shirt with a shiny fabric dangling from his neck. His

black jacket is heavy and open, instead of buttoned to the neck, and his pants are tight. Most odd of all is his hair—not braided into a queue but shorn and cropped close to his head.

What do you think, little nephew? my savior says, still smiling.

I am a girl, I blurt out. I cannot help myself.

He laughs. The sunlight reflects two yellow teeth. I think of tales where men have yellow teeth, how those teeth grew from pieces of gold. That I knew, he says, but being a boy worked out better for us both, in this case.

He scans me, eyes bright with intent. Are you hungry? Are you here alone? Where is your family?

I tell him, Yes, I am starving. I am eager for him to show me his mercy. There are things I want to ask him, too, like, Who are you? Where did you come from? Who is Master Eng, and why did the fish woman back away so suddenly when you said his name?

Let me tell you all about it, he says, placing his hand back on my shoulder. He suggests noodles—there is a good shop just down the street.

Something tells me that this invitation is not one to be taken lightly. I nod and offer him a shy smile. This is answer enough. He steers me farther away from the fish market and we stroll down the street together, passing the post office, three more foreign consulates, and a church. Passersby stare at us before returning to themselves, momentarily stunned by this odd father-and-son duo, one dressed like a character from the theater, the other wan and skittish. Behind us, the ocean froths.

With every noodle shop we pass I ask my savior, Is it this one? With every noodle shop we pass he says, No, little nephew, not quite yet. We keep walking until I do not know where we are anymore, and by the time we are done walking, I understand that we will never arrive at the noodle shop.

It is the first day of spring.

2

This is a story of a magical stone. It is a story told to me by my grandmother. It is also the story of how I got my name.

★ ★ ★

In the story, the goddess Nuwa is attempting to repair the heavens. She melts rock and molds it into 36,501 building blocks of stone, but only uses 36,500, leaving one stone block behind.

This one stone block can move as it pleases. It can grow into the size of a temple or shrink to a garlic bulb. It has undergone the ministrations of a goddess, after all. But having been left behind, it drifts from one day to the next, thinking itself unworthy and ashamed of its own disuse.

One day, the stone comes across a Daoist priest and a Buddhist monk. They are so impressed with its magical powers that they decide to bring it along on their travels. Thus, the stone enters the world of mortals.

Much later, a boy is born with a piece of magical jade in his mouth. They say this boy is the reincarnation of the stone.

What else? The boy falls in love with his younger cousin, Lin Daiyu, a sickly girl with a dead mother. But the boy's family rebukes their love, insisting that he marry a wealthier, healthier cousin named Xue Baochai. On the boy's wedding day, the family disguises Xue Baochai under layers of heavy veils. They lie to the boy, who believes that she is Lin Daiyu.

When Lin Daiyu learns of this plan, she falls ill in her bed, spitting up blood. She dies. The boy, having no idea, goes through with the marriage, believing himself and his new bride happy and inseparable. When he finds out the truth, he goes mad.

Almost a century later, under a mulberry tree in a small fishing village, a young woman finishes reading this story and puts a hand to her belly, thinking, *Daiyu*.

At least this is the story I have been told.

I have always hated my name. Lin Daiyu was weak. I would be nothing like her, I promised myself. I did not want to be melancholic or jealous or spiteful. And I would never let myself die of a broken heart.

They named me after a tragedy, I would complain to my grandmother.

No, dear Daiyu, they named you after a poet.

My parents were born in Zhifu, near the ocean. This is how I like to imagine that they met—the tides gently pushing them toward each other until the day they stood face-to-face. An imperative, from the water. After they married, they opened a tapestry shop and ran it together, my mother weaving the tapestries while my father sold them to the wives of government officials and other wealthy merchants. My mother saw to it that every design, be it phoenix, crane, or chrysanthemum, leapt off the fabric. The phoenix surged, the crane bent, the chrysanthemums flowered. Under her, the tapestries came to life. It was no surprise that theirs became the most popular tapestry shop in all of Zhifu.

Then, for reasons they did not tell me and I did not think to ask, my parents moved to a small fishing village just outside the city. My mother had not wanted to move, that much I knew. Zhifu was filling with foreigners, transforming from a seaside town to a crowded port, and she wanted the child sleeping in her belly to attend the Western schools that had begun opening up across the city. Pregnant, her hands swollen and no longer able to thread silk in the ke si loom, she waited for me to come into the world. Movers loaded her loom and threads into a buggy, and she turned to look upon her beloved store one last time.

It was late summer when my father, mother, and grandmother arrived in the little fishing village six days outside of Zhifu. Inside my mother's stomach, I had grown from a bean into a small fist. That autumn, I came into the world, a child of the country. When I finally slipped out, my mother told me, she imagined drinking salt water, the liquid sliding all the way down her body and pooling in my own mouth, so that I would always know how to find my way to the sea.

It must have worked. Our village sat next to a river that fed the ocean, and in those early years I walked along the riverbank often, following the black-tailed gulls until I reached the ocean's mouth. I hugged the water's edge, counting the riches that it held: life, memory, even doom. My mother spoke of the sea with romance, my father with reverence, my grandmother with caution. I felt none of those things. Standing beneath the gulls and swifts and terns, I only felt myself, one who held nothing, carried nothing, and offered nothing. I was simply beginning.

We lived in a three-bay house facing the north. We were not rich, but we were not poor, either. My father continued the tapestry business, despite living in a village where no one had enough money to afford my mother's designs. But business, it seemed, was better than ever. Our house became a frequent stop for bureaucrats passing through on their way to and from Zhifu on government affairs, sometimes to rest from their journey, other times to buy a gift for their wives and concubines back home. One look at my mother's pink peonies, silver pheasants, or golden dragons—reserved for only the highest-ranking officials—and they were entranced. I still remember the regulars: a burly man with many chins, the big brother who had one leg shorter than the other, the uncle who always wanted to show me his sword.

There were others, too, men and sometimes women who came by our house and spoke to my parents in hushed voices. These visitors were not dressed in official court clothing but simple black shan ku, looking more like brothers and sisters from the church than officials. Often they left with tapestries, and I wondered if my parents were giving out donations for charity. There was one guest who always brought sweets and candies for me. I looked forward to his visits the most, and was delighted when I found him in our dining room one morning, hunched over porridge and pickled radish.

The journey to my home is far, little one, he told me, seeing the surprise on my face. Your parents are very generous.

There is no need to speak to her, my grandmother snapped from the kitchen.

He apologized, but when my grandmother was not looking, he passed me another candy across the table, a secret between us.

Perhaps it was because of this encounter that my grandmother began taking me into her garden when visitors were present. In Zhifu, there had been no room for all the vegetables and herbs she wanted to grow, but here, the land could be hers. In the empty lot behind our house, she tossed the soil and packed the earth tight with seeds. By the time I was tall enough to see out the window, I had already eaten a lifetime of green peppers and crushed mint, although I did not know what they were called back then.

In that garden, I learned to care for living things. I thought it perplexing that a thing could be called living, yet be so slow to show its capacity for life. I wanted immediacy, for a bud to turn into a ripe fruit in the span of a day. But there were many things my grandmother wanted to teach me about gardening that did not have to do with gardening, and patience was one of them. We grew hairy ginseng, turnips that looked like white slippers, and cucumbers with wrinkled skin. We planted green peppers in the sun and dried string green beans on wooden poles, their long fingerlike bodies reaching limply for the earth. The tomatoes were sensitive and needy, so we tended to them often, caressing their yellow-green skins that strained with a mysterious energy.

The herbs were more interesting to me for their healing uses: We had ma huang shrubs with rigid branches and seeds that looked like small red lanterns, and huang lian, which we used for dye and digestion. We grew chai hu, a peculiar plant with a stem threading through the leaf like the tail of a kite, to ward off liver disease. The most fickle was huang qi, a plant with hairy stems and small yellow flowers. These were the hardest for my grandmother to grow, as the huang qi did not like our wet soil, and the seeds had to be rubbed with a rough stone and soaked overnight. Huang qi was always popular with the merchants and neighbors who bought from my grandmother. They ground the dried root into powder, took it with ginseng to strengthen the body. An infinite herb, they called it.

You are learning to be a real master, my mother would tell me. She was short and slender with skin the color of milk, except for her hands, which were spotted with delicate red marks. When I was much younger, she allowed me to sit on her lap to watch as she threaded the silk through, brushing it down with the shuttle the way you would a horse. When I turned ten, I was finally old enough to help her with more important tasks, like boiling the silk to make it soft.

It was my mother who taught me how to be good with my hands. My mother who showed me how to slice potatoes into ribbons and fold paper into fans. My work in the garden left calluses on my palms, but my mother would sand them down with a stone until they were ready again for delicate work. No matter how rough the hands, she would tell me, it is your good-heartedness that makes you soft.

While my mother taught me to work my hands, my father taught me to work my mind, surprising me in quiet moments with questions that frustrated and occupied me. What is the difference between a child and an adult? he asked on my eleventh birthday. Once, when I did not finish my dinner, he asked without looking at me, How many grains of rice does it take to keep a village full? Another time, when I ran through the grass barefoot and came back crying, a thorn in my left heel, he asked, When does a father feel the most pain? He followed me with curious, knowing eyes, as if he could see a small root within me that was ready to burst out and bloom.

These were my favorite memories of my time at home—being cared for and loved by all of them, every sign of that love passed on through the things they taught me. The village could disappear and our house could blow away, but if I had my mother, my father, and my grandmother, I knew that I would be able to do anything—the four of us, capable and strong and bound by love.

In the quieter moments, my mother would invite me to return to her lap, braiding ribbons into my hair. They began simply, only one or two twists and braids, but as I grew older, she added in golds, beads, tassels, flowers. I came to think of my head as a reflection of my mother's affection. The more elaborate the hair, the vaster her love.

If we were living in Zhifu, she would say, adjusting the ribbon on my crown, your many talents would bring you more suitors than you would know what to do with. She was always speaking like this, dreaming of what our lives would be like if we had stayed. I heard her talk about Zhifu often with fondness, but in my mind, it remained a blurred dream I could not access.

If we were living in Zhifu, I had thought, my feet would be broken and reshaped by now. I knew what they did to a girl's feet in the city. To be a lady of the house was to have your feet forever broken, to marry a man with

money, to have his children, and then to grow old, feet coalescing into lumps of dried, cracking dough. This was not the future I wanted. In our village, the most ambitious families broke their daughters' feet by five, the best age for breaking. At five, the bones have not hardened too much and the girl would be old enough to withstand the pain. She would grow into a woman with tiny feet, a perfect wife or concubine for a rich city man. If a friend had her feet freshly broken, I would not see her for many days, and even if I stopped by, I could not stay, the rot of skin and bone overwhelming. Eventually, this rot turned into a potato that turned into a hoof, so that when we played outside, my friends could not run and jump and fly, but instead sat, their bound feet lifeless in the dirt, waiting for the day their parents sold them off.

My parents did not bind my feet, perhaps because they feared that I could not survive it, perhaps because they did not plan on us ever leaving the fishing village. I was happy with that. I had no desire to be a city man's toy. I dreamed of becoming a fisherman and living out the rest of my days on a boat, feet big and proud, my only way of balancing against the thrust of the waves.



Then, when I turned twelve, my parents disappeared. An empty kitchen, their dark bedroom, a bed untouched, my father's office unlocked and open, papers scattered everywhere. My mother's lonely loom. That morning was like any other morning, except that my parents were gone and did not return that night, nor the next night, nor the night after that.

I waited, sitting on our front steps, then inside my mother's weaving room, then walking in circles in the kitchen until my feet throbbed, then folding and unfolding the blanket in their bedroom. My grandmother followed me, pleading with me to eat something, drink this, lie down to sleep, take a rest, anything. You must tell me where they went, I wailed. All she could do was push a cup of tea into my hands and rub my neck.

I waited with my head down. I did not sleep for three nights.

On the morning of the fourth day, two men arrived at our door with dragons embroidered on their robes. They stomped through our little house, the dragons writhing and twirling as the men overturned pots and slashed

our pillows. They tore apart my mother's loom, even though they could see that there was nothing hidden within it. I could feel the neighbors peeking out their windows, eyes wide and fearful.

We know they live here, one of the men said. Do you know the punishment for hiding criminals?

No one here but us, my grandmother protested again and again. My son and his wife died years ago. Everything lost in the fire!

Then they turned to me, teeth bared. The man who questioned us approached me. I could not stop staring at the dragon on his sleeve, red and gold with a black eye, tongue like a whip in mid-flight.

Listen to me, he said. I know your father. You must tell us where he is.

He did not sound menacing, but calm and steady. I thought then of everyone who had been through our house. They knew my father, too. They could tell us where he was. I remembered the man I found in our dining room who gave me candy. We could begin with him.

I opened my mouth to tell them what I knew. But whether it was by my own design or the will of an immortal, no sound came out. Something that felt like a hand clamped around my neck and squeezed when I tried to take a breath. I shook my head, trying to dislodge the words.

No good, the other man said to his companion. A crazy woman and a mute runt. Are you certain this is the right house?

The first man did not say anything. He stared at me, then beckoned to the other man. They both turned and walked out the front door. As their robes gleamed in the sunlight, I watched the dragons fly away.

★ ★ ★

You must never speak about your parents to anyone, my grandmother told me after they left. From now on, we must behave as if we will never see them again. It is better for everyone this way.

But I did not want to listen. I believed that my parents would return. I made their bed and smoothed out their clothes. I put the most intricate ribbon in my hair, one I knew my mother would find pretty. I even tried to put her loom back together with paste I found in my father's study. I would be here for their return, and they would be glad to see me. And so it was for that day, and every day after that.

When autumn came and my parents had been gone for three months, I thought about the woman with whom I shared my name. In the story, Lin Daiyu's mother dies when she is very young, her father following not long after. I wondered if my parents had disappeared because of my name. If they disappeared because this was always meant to be.

If you let yourself think that way, my grandmother told me, you will likely make it come true.

As if it were not true already, I said. I never hated Lin Daiyu more.

★ ★ ★

A letter came that spring, sender unknown: My parents had been arrested.

Any day, my grandmother said, setting fire to the letter. Any day, the people who captured your parents will come for you, too.

I could not understand, and my grandmother gave me no answers. She dressed me in boys' clothes and gave me a quilted jacket. She shaved my head. I watched my hair fall to the floor in black crescents, trying not to cry, thinking of my mother and how I would no longer have any hair for her to adorn if she ever came back. Go to Zhifu, my grandmother told me, stuffing cotton into black men's shoes and fitting them on my feet. Disappear in the city. You are good with your hands—you will find honest work.

What will Grandmother do? I asked her.

Grandmother will do the same thing she has always done, she said. Grandmother will grow good herbs to make people heal. There is not much they can do with a crazy old lady like me. It is you they have to worry about.

Neighbor Hu brought his wagon in the middle of the night. I climbed into the back with a sack of clothes, man tou, and a few coins from my parents' stores. My grandmother tried to give me more, but I closed my fingers into fists and flattened my pockets. She would need that money when those men in the dragon robes returned.

Do not write me letters, she said, putting a cap over my bald head. I missed my long hair already, missed the warmth it kept around my neck. We were still on the heel of a hard winter, and in the night breeze, I shivered. Letters will be intercepted. Instead, let us speak to each other when it rains.

What if it does not rain where I go? I asked her. We will only be able to speak once in a while.

That is how it should be, she said. My heart would break over and over again, otherwise.

I asked if I would ever see her again. I was crying. I knew older friends who had been sent away when they were young, families desperate to lessen the burden of an extra mouth. I had never imagined I would be sent away, too. But my parents were gone now, and as I lay in the back of neighbor Hu's wagon, wrapped in my quilted jacket, I knew that my life was veering toward something new and much more difficult. Gone were the days of playing in the ditch behind our village. No more would I help my grandmother pour tea to an orange sun. I would never see my friends again. I would never sleep in my bed again. Our house was a shell without its creatures. I would not be here for the first pepper to grow in the garden this year, nor would I be here for its first taste—bittersweet, cool, untrained. Somehow, the thought of the pepper was what turned my sobs into wails.

My grandmother put her hands to my eyes, as if she could brush the entire well of my tears away. Then she adjusted the tarp to cover me.

When it is safe to come back, she said, you will know.

I could not tell, in the dark, if she was crying, too, but her voice was clotted.

I clutched the sack of clothes and man tou, still warm, to my chest as neighbor Hu's wagon took me away, trying to hold the faces of my parents, my grandmother, my home tight in my memory. The pinch of skin at the corner of my father's eyes when he smiled. The warm spot between my mother's hair and the nape of her neck. The reassuring light from my parents' room when I woke from a nightmare. The images rotated in front of me, prayer beads to cling to. I will never forget, I repeated to myself.

Neighbor Hu's wagon stumbled over a rock, and the tarp covering me slid down, revealing the starless night sky. I lifted my head to gaze back at the house one more time. In the dark, my grandmother's figure looked hunched and soft. It occurred to me that I had never seen her from this far away before.

She would need help with the garden. The quilted jacket I wore belonged to her. Did she have enough warm clothes for next winter? I should have made sure that someone could come check on her every day.

Tears soaked my face again. I watched my grandmother shrink until darkness took her, until I could only imagine that it was still her out there in front of our house, waiting, watching, not moving from her post until she was sure we were gone. I prayed that it would rain soon.