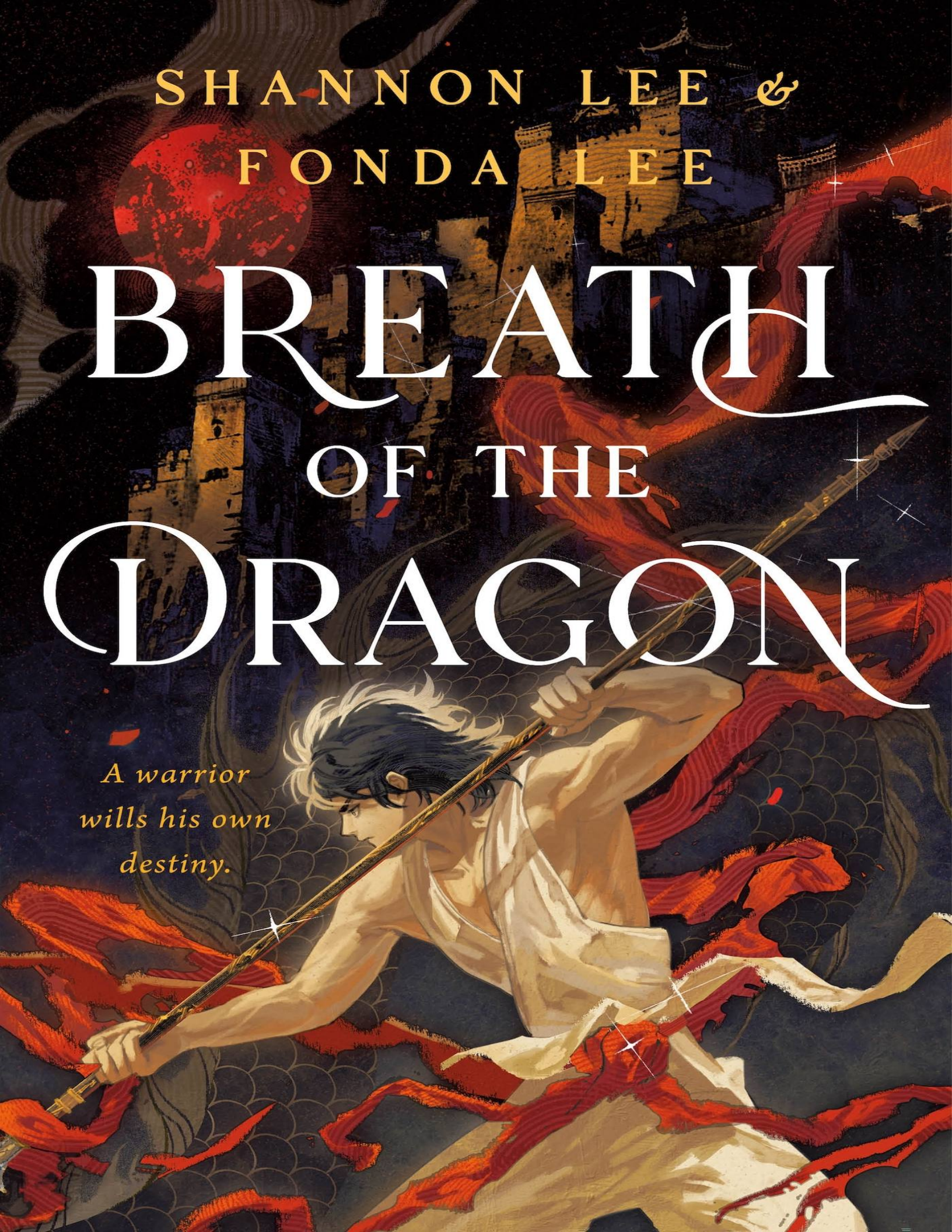
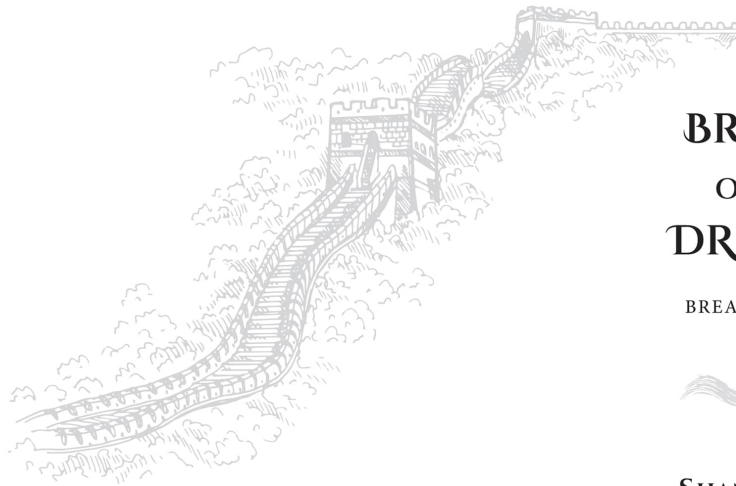


SHANNON LEE &  
FONDA LEE

# BREATH OF THE DRAGON

*A warrior  
wills his own  
destiny.*





**BREATH  
OF THE  
DRAGON**

BREATHMARKED

*Book One*



**SHANNON LEE  
AND FONDA LEE**

**W** WEDNESDAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK

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For all those who keep Bruce Lee's legacy alive with self-expression, growth,  
and unity—and the many more to follow



Map by Tim Paul

## PROLOGUE

TEN YEARS AGO

Two strangers arrived on a midautumn morning, as if swept in by the cold wind rustling the drooping branches of the elm trees. Peering through a crack in the folding screen, Jun couldn't see his mother's face as she opened the door, but he noticed how her back and shoulders stiffened. She stepped aside and bowed low, speaking in a soft and respectful voice.

"Venerable Aspects, I ... wasn't expecting your visit today. I'm afraid I haven't prepared any meal to welcome you..."

"No need to trouble yourself." The man who entered first was tall and stern of face, with a high forehead accentuated by his tidy topknot. The woman who followed after him was younger, with her long black hair in a single plait down her back. Both of them wore the black tunic with yellow sleeve cuffs that unmistakably identified them as Aspects. Even six-year-old Jun knew that the Aspects of Virtue were the most elite of government servants, but what were they doing in his house and why was his mother acting so nervous? Why had she told Jun and Sai to stay in the family's sleeping room?

The visitors took off their shoes but remained standing near the entryway. "You may call me Compass," said the man. "This is my sister Aspect, Water." Jun's mother bowed again and hurried to bring over clay

cups and a teapot, still warm from the hearth after breakfast, but Compass waved aside the hospitality. "Where is your husband, Mrs. Li?"

"He's ... out getting firewood," Jun's mother said with a casualness Jun could tell was forced. "He should be back soon."

Jun pressed his eye to the crack in the screen, trying to get a better look. Sai motioned urgently for him to move aside so he could see, too, but Jun wouldn't give up his spot. Aspects were trained to be the best fighters in the world, that was what Jun had heard. Compass and Water didn't look frightening, but they were carrying swords at their waists. *Real swords!*

Compass looked past Jun's mother, straight toward the folding screen behind which Jun and his brother were concealed. "Have your children come out, Mrs. Li. There's nothing to fear. We should all strive to make this process joyful and easy, not sorrowful."

Jun saw his mother's face sag with a resignation she tried unsuccessfully to conceal. "Jun. Sai," she called to them. "Come greet our respected guests."

Jun scampered out from behind the screen; he was already bursting with a thousand questions and wondered if the strangers might let him touch or hold their weapons. Sai hesitated for a moment, then followed right behind Jun as he always did. Their mother brought them to stand in front of the Aspects. She gripped each of their shoulders with a trembling hand.

"Identical twins." Surprise lifted Water's melodious voice. She smiled down at the children. "Which one of you is older?"

Sai straightened importantly, his confidence restored by the question that people always seemed to ask them. "I'm older by eight whole minutes!"

Jun scowled down at his feet. He didn't see why that was anything for his brother to be proud of. Sai had been the first one born, but Jun had been first to crawl, to walk, to talk. That seemed like a much bigger deal, in his opinion.

He opened his mouth to tell this to the strangers but didn't get the chance; Compass turned to Jun's mother and remarked with sharp disapproval, "It is law that a breathmarked child must be presented to the Council by the time they reach six years of age."



Jun's mother lowered her eyes and muttered, "Venerable Aspect, forgive me. My sons only turned six last month. I was sick at the time, so we put off the journey to Yujing. I ... I thought we might have a little more time. More time for the boys to be together." Her hand tightened on Jun's shoulder, and he squirmed, trying to shrug her off.

"The delay was a dereliction of your duty as a citizen and a mother."

Water touched her colleague on the arm. "Fortunately, Brother Aspect, we're here now and the child is still well within the age to begin proper training." She gestured to the boys. "Which one is it?"

Compass brought his attention back to Jun and his brother. "Strange," he said slowly. "It was easy enough for me to sense the child's location, but with the two of them standing together, I can't tell which one we came for. Could it be that both of them are breathmarked?"

"No," Jun's mother said quickly. "Only one of them has the mark. Sai, show the venerable Aspect." She helped the twin on her left shrug out of his plain linen shirt. The boy stood bare-chested, shivering a little under the gaze of all the adults in the room.

Jun frowned and fidgeted. He crossed his arms and huffed. He and Sai were the same height; they had the same face, the same voice. They were indistinguishable in every way except one. In the center of Sai's chest rested a spearhead-shaped patch of green scales, each one smaller than a pinkie fingernail, bright and iridescent. Jun, on the other hand, had smooth, ordinary skin all over his body.

Jun had asked his parents many times why he and his twin possessed this one glaring difference. "No one knows why Dragon's blood shows up in some and not in others," they answered him. When he pouted at the nonanswer, his mother always looked inexplicably sad. "Don't envy your brother," she told him. "His path is laid out, while yours is open. Just because you don't have a breathmark doesn't mean you're not gifted in your own way."

The reassurance had always felt hollow to Jun, now more so than ever, as Compass gazed down at Sai with intense interest in his steady gaze. "Sai, was

it?” When Sai nodded shyly, the Aspect said, “Do you know what it means to be breathmarked?”

Sai said quietly, “It means that Dragon gave me a special ability that I’m meant to use.”

“That’s right.” Compass’s smile did not entirely reach his eyes, but it did soften his features, and he spoke to the boy in a soothing manner that suggested he was practiced at meeting and explaining things to children. “I was born with a breathmark as well.” He pulled back the sleeve of his tunic to reveal a line of silver scales running along the underside of his right arm. “I have the ability to find other breathmarked people. My gift from Dragon has led me to many children like you. Those of us with Dragon’s blood have a responsibility to use our gifts for the greater good. We must train to become Aspects, to serve and protect East Longhan.”

Sai wrapped his thin arms anxiously around his mother’s waist. “Will I have to leave Mama, and Baba, and Jun?”

Water crouched down to the boy’s eye level and spoke kindly. “As an Aspect initiate, you’ll live and train in the Sun Pagoda in Yujing. It’s a very special place where the Scroll of Earth is kept. If you work very hard, one day you might even become a Keeper, one of the esteemed warriors who guard the pagoda’s floors. Your instructors will help you identify and hone your natural ability. You’ll receive the best scholastic and martial education the nation can provide. And although you’ll have to give up living with your family in order to devote yourself to the country, you’ll gain many new brother and sister Aspects.”

Sai kept his eyes fixed on the floor. “But I don’t want other brothers and sisters. I have Jun.”

Jun’s mother swiped at her eyes with the back of her hands. She enfolded Sai in a tight embrace before holding him out at arm’s length. “Do you remember the times I talked to you about how this day would come? And how you would make our family very proud?” Her voice was quavering, and she was smiling through her tears.

Sai's lips trembled and he looked at Compass and Water. "Will my family still get to visit me?"

"Yes. On special occasions," Compass promised. "The families of Aspects are honored. They're given a place of residence in the inner quarter of Yujing, where government officials and the families of the Virtuous live."

"What about me?" Jun broke in, bewildered that none of the adults were including him in the conversation, or paying attention to him at all for that matter. Surely, if Sai was going to go to a special place to be trained as an Aspect, Jun would go as well. No one ever singled one of the twins out from the other. He and Sai were always together. They'd never spent a day apart.

"Do you know what your breathmark ability is?" Water was still speaking to Sai in a friendly and gentle voice. "Don't worry if it hasn't manifested yet, but at your age, some children already know."

Sai hesitated and shuffled his feet. He glanced guiltily at Jun. "Sometimes, after I see someone do something, I can do it, too. I don't have to practice or have someone tell me how to do it. I just know how."

Compass and Water exchanged an impressed glance. Water said, "A gift of perfect mimicry is a rare and powerful breathmark ability."

Jun couldn't take it anymore. "It's not that special, all he does is copy me!" he blurted, stamping his foot. "You can't take him and not me! We're twins! If Sai gets to live in a pagoda and train in martial arts, then I should, too. I'm just as good as he is. Actually, I'm better! Look at what I can do!"

"Jun, stop it," his mother ordered, anger and panic flying into her voice. "Go back into the other room *right now* and—"

With a shout, Jun dropped into his lowest horse stance and unleashed a flurry of punches, snapping them out straight and strong, showing off his very best form. From a standstill, he leapt straight up into a double front jump kick, then followed it with a spinning double smash kick. Grabbing his mother's broom from the corner, he spun it around his head and body like a staff, then lunged and punched the end of it through the folding paper screen like a spear, demolishing the piece of furniture with all his boyish strength.

Turning back around with the broom held high, he flashed the watching adults a look of triumph. His mother's hands were clapped to her mouth in horror. The two Aspects were glaring at Jun with very different expressions than they'd been using with Sai mere seconds ago. The grin slid off Jun's face.

Compass strode over and snatched the broom from Jun's hand, tossing it aside and towering over him. "Who taught you to do that, boy?" he demanded.

Jun's mother went very pale. "Please," she whispered, "I can explain—"

The door opened. Jun's father came in with a bundle on his back, accompanied by a blast of chilly air that buffeted the room before he shut it out. "Dragon's piss, it's getting cold out—" Abruptly noticing the two Aspects standing in the house, his wife's frightened expression, and Jun posed defiantly in front of the damaged paper screen, the rest of the words died on his tongue. The knob of his throat bobbed in an apprehensive swallow. "What ... is happening here?"

At last, someone who would listen to him! Jun rushed to his father and pointed at the two strangers. "Baba, these people say they're taking Sai away to be trained as an Aspect. It's not fair! Either he should stay with us, or I should get to go with him."

Jun's father placed a hand on Jun's head but didn't answer. His eyes were on Compass as the man approached with slow steps.

"Li Hon, one of your sons is breathmarked by Dragon and destined to serve East Longhan. Ordinarily, your family would deserve a place of honor." The Aspect's voice and expression turned very grave. "But it appears you've been practicing and teaching forbidden knowledge. You've been instructing your sons in the ways of violence."

Compass moved his hand to the hilt of his sword. Jun's mother let out a muffled, fearful gasp and pulled Sai close. Water remained slightly behind her partner but didn't reach for her own weapon, though her shoulders were tense and her expression watchful.

Jun looked up at his father in alarm. Too late, he remembered that his parents had always told him never to show off what he learned, not to anyone. Some people would not understand, they said. He'd liked the idea that martial arts were his family's secret but had never imagined it would get them in serious trouble.

Jun's mother would often chide him, "Jun, you can't just do whatever pops into your head! You need to think first." But then she would sigh, or laugh, or send him outside with his brother. Now, in desperation, he looked to his mother for reassurance, hoping to see that familiar expression of indulgent annoyance, but she didn't look annoyed with him at all.

She looked scared.

"Drop the bundle you're carrying," Compass ordered.

Jun's father took a single step backward, pushing Jun aside protectively as he shifted his weight. For a heartbeat, it seemed as if he would fight the Aspects. A single man against two of the Council's elite enforcers. Jun's heart leapt into his throat, but he raised his small fists, ready with all his childish bravado to fight by his father's side.

The moment of tension broke. Jun's father glanced at his wife and sons, then let his posture sag in unresisting surrender. Moving slowly and unthreateningly, he set the bundle on the floor in front of the Aspects.

Water bent and unwrapped the cloth, revealing a long staff, short staff, spear, broadsword, and straight sword—all the weapons Jun had seen his father practice with before. Compass sucked in an appalled breath. "This is strictly forbidden!"

"But *you* carry weapons!" Jun exclaimed indignantly, pointing at the sword on the man's hip.

"We are the sworn agents of Dragon," Compass snapped at him. "Aspects of Virtue are trained to protect the country and preserve the peace so ordinary people can live in harmony. We fight so you do not have to!" The Aspect turned back to Jun's father with officious menace, his brows pinched together so tightly that a deep, angry groove ran across his forehead. "Teaching children to think about and practice violence promotes aggression

and disharmony in society. Skills designed to harm or kill are not meant to be taught and used carelessly by just anyone. That's what separates us from the vulgar, barbaric West. We must protect ourselves diligently against such base influence."

Jun's father pressed his lips into a straight line. He met Compass's stare for a moment, then dropped his gaze to the floor. "My grandfather was a master martial arts practitioner for decades before the civil war divided Longhan into two countries. I learned from him as a boy and only ever wanted to honor my ancestors by preserving his knowledge. He taught me to use martial arts to improve myself and others in a peaceful way." He glanced down at Jun with pain in his eyes. "I take responsibility for teaching these skills to my sons. Jun showed talent and interest at such a young age and constantly asked to learn. It seemed wrong to dissuade him."

The Aspect was unmoved. "Your violations against law and society carry a penalty of three to five years of mandatory repentance through work."

Jun's mother let out a stifled sob. It was well-known that people died in the harsh conditions of the labor camps.

Li Hon's face turned gray. Lowering himself to his knees before the Council's enforcers, he said quietly but firmly, "I will accept whatever consequence the venerable Aspects decide I deserve. Please don't punish the rest of my family. They're blameless and only went along with my foolishness."

But Jun knew that wasn't true. Some of his earliest memories were of watching his father train. As soon as he could imitate some of the movements, he'd begged incessantly to learn. So really, it was *him*, Jun, who was to blame, first for asking his father to teach him, and now for carelessly revealing their secret.

His vision blurred with anger and confusion. *Baba, get up!* He wanted to shout the words at his father, but they stuck in his throat. Where was Li Hon, the great fighter whose moves Jun admired so much and tried so hard to emulate? The man kneeling timidly on the floor asking for mercy showed none of the pride and strength that Jun had always observed from him as he

practiced his forms and weapons. What was the point in all the hours of diligent training if he couldn't stand up to the Aspects, if he wouldn't fight when he most ought to?

Jun squeezed his eyes shut. *Lady of Many Hands*, he prayed to Dragon's consort, the compassionate goddess, in the way his mother had taught him to on temple days. *I made a mistake, but I didn't mean to. I take it back! If you make these people go away and put everything back the way it was before, I'll never disobey my parents again. Please!*

Sai tore free of their mother and ran to stand in front of their father, glaring up at Compass and Water with tearful betrayal. "You said Aspects use their abilities for good. You promised my family would live in a nice house near the Sun Pagoda." Sai's face trembled. "I-I won't go with you! I don't want to become an Aspect if you send Baba away."

"Sai, stand aside. Don't speak disrespectfully to your elders," their father ordered, his voice strained beyond recognition.

Compass looked down at the child that he'd searched out and been so ready to welcome into the fold of the Aspecthood. His mouth twisted with indecisiveness, clearly unsure of how to handle such an unexpected and conflicting turn of events. He gave a frustrated grumble in the back of his throat. "Do as your father says," he warned Sai, his hand still on the hilt of his sword.

Water stepped up soundlessly beside her colleague and placed a hand on his arm. "Brother Aspect, perhaps an unusual situation requires an unusual solution," she said with calm circumspection. Compass glanced at her with a wary question in his expression as she went on, "We came to find a breathmarked child and bring him back to Yujing. How can we expect him to devote himself willingly and studiously to the required training of an Aspect if we send his father to the work camps, from which it's possible he might not return, leaving his mother and brother alone and uncared for?"

"Li Hon's wife and sons enabled him," Compass pointed out, gesturing at the frightened family. "They overlooked, no, *encouraged* his unacceptable behavior."

“Yet Li Hon has committed no acts of violence against his neighbors, no treason against the Council, and even now he is not using his forbidden skills to resist us. Surely, we ought to set an early example for young Sai that Aspects are merciful as well as just.” Her words were soft, but they carried a persuasive weight, an authority that belied her years.

Apparently, they had an effect on the other Aspect. “What do you have in mind?”

“Let the breathmarked child and his mother come to live in Yujing as planned,” Water suggested. “For illegally training in and espousing violence, Li Hon and his other son should be exiled from East Longhan for a period of five years, the amount of time he would normally be required to spend repenting through work. After five years, if they have renounced the practice of violence, they may return to the East to rejoin their family.”

Compass considered Water’s words for a minute that felt like an eternity. At last, he nodded and let his hand drop from the hilt of his sword. “As usual, you speak wisely and are able to see a way through any problem, Sister Aspect,” he agreed grudgingly.

Water crouched down in front of Jun and Sai. “You are both very brave,” she said, wiping the tears from their faces. “As well as young and foolish. You were born with different destinies. But if you each devote yourself to what Dragon intends, you will see each other again.”

It was all happening too fast. None of it made sense to Jun. He wanted to run away and hide, to throw himself into a corner and cry, to scream and fight, but it was as if the muscles of his small, trembling body were paralyzed by the one awful thing he did understand—he was losing everything.

Mornings spent training with his father, his mother’s hugs before bedtime, the four of them passing the rice bowl around the table during meals, the tree behind their home that was good for climbing, the three speckled chickens in their yard, the sunny riverbank where he and Sai would splash and throw rocks. Most terrible of all, he was losing himself, because Jun was half of a whole, and that whole was being sundered.

Sai put his hand into Jun’s and squeezed as if he would never let go.



“Stand up, Li Hon,” Compass ordered brusquely. “Sister Water will take Sai and his mother to Yujing. They will not need anything from here. All will be provided. I will escort you and your other son to the Snake Wall, where you will cross the border into the West tonight. You have two hours to pack your belongings and say your farewells.”

## ONE

Jun watched from the shadows as his father faced down the masked man, both of them with broadswords drawn, poised for battle. “This is where it ends.” Li Hon shifted forward, his face set in ferocious determination. “Tonight, I restore my honor by ending your life.”

“Scoundrel, you have no honor to restore.” The man in the white mask rushed forward with a shout and a vicious diagonal slash of his blade. Jun’s father met the attack head-on, and their weapons came together with a ringing metallic clang. The two men grunted with furious effort as they each tried to gain the advantage. Their blades separated and met again in a blur of silver. Swift strikes were deflected by skillful parries, thrusts and cuts dodged and countered. Watching in silence, the heavy breathing of the combatants was the only sound Jun could hear.

*He’s still got the moves,* Jun noted, watching his father’s confident attacks and swift defense. Li Hon’s masked opponent was at least fifteen years younger than him, but Jun held no doubt that his father’s martial skills were superior.

Li Hon feinted an obvious, simple attack. When his enemy raised his weapon in defense, he snapped a kick into the man’s abdomen, doubling him over, then kneed him hard in the chest, dropping him to his hands and

knees. With a shout of triumphant rage, Jun's father brought his sword swinging down toward the masked man's neck.

Jun stifled a yawn of boredom.

He knew what would happen next: Before the fatal blow could descend, the masked man spun on the ground, his legs lashing out with a whirling double spin kick that crashed into Jun's father behind the knees, upending him and sending him sprawling to the ground. He lost his grip on the sword, and it flew up into the air. With perfectly timed reflexes, the masked man sprang to his feet and seized the broadsword. He leveled the blade against Jun's father's throat.

Li Hon raised his hands in surrender. "You win, Ghostface," he wheezed in bitter defeat.

The victor tore off his white mask with a dramatic flourish. "Ghostface was merely a name to strike fear in the hearts of criminals. It was I, Shang, the mayor of the town, all along!"

Applause erupted as the woman on the other side of the stage rushed tearfully into the hero's arms. "We shall never be apart again," she declared. The audience cheered as the two of them kissed passionately, and the silk curtains came down on the scene.

Standing by the doors at the back of the opera house, Jun let out a long sigh. His father could handily beat the other actor if this were a real fight, but his father never fought for real anymore. Instead, Li Hon choreographed all the fight scenes for the Cheon Opera Company, which was known throughout West Longhan for its elaborate costumes and sets and dramatic, action-filled stage productions. When Li Hon did perform onstage, he only ever played supporting roles and villains. Sometimes he would don the main actor's costume to perform the more difficult or dangerous stunts if the lead was unable to, but Jun's father was never the hero. He never won a fight onstage. And the stage was the only place he fought anymore.

As an usher and security guard at the opera house, Jun watched his father lose every day. And he hated it. He scanned the crowd, hoping he

might have to eject a drunken audience member to distract himself from embarrassment. No such luck.

When the curtains rose again, the previous set had been replaced with a plain black backdrop. A blindfolded man sat on a stool on one side of the stage. Across from him stood a young woman in a flowing blue-green silk dress with long sleeves that trailed to the floor. A hush fell over the excited crowd. The blind flutist Chang and his daughter traveled all around West Longhan and only came into the city of Cheon a few times each year, but their infrequent performances were always talked about. This wasn't part of the regular show, and everyone knew they were in for a special treat.

Chang lifted the flute to his lips and began to play. An audible sigh of appreciation escaped the spectators as the first evocative notes filled the air and Ren, the flutist's daughter, began to dance. The wordless story that unfolded onstage was one that everyone was familiar with yet was timeless in its significance. As Ren spun and leapt with flawless precision, her feet soundless on the wooden stage, the backdrop changed, switched out by clever stagehands and illuminated by expert lighting. The blue of ocean waters rose behind the performers; vibrant green evoked grass and trees erupting in growth; shadows resolved into the silhouettes of animals and people. This was Longhan's oldest legend: Dragon breathing the world into being.

Chang's music soared in a poignant crescendo as Ren sent her long, weighted sleeves twirling through the air in time with her movements, each balanced pose and athletic leap drawing impressed gasps from the audience. From within the maelstrom of bright spinning silk, the flutist's daughter drew out two wide ribbons of pale yellow gossamer that rose up into the air, twisting in white light, pulled from overhead by thin threads invisible to the audience. She danced the part of Dragon's consort, the Lady of Many Hands, ethereally graceful, her face perfectly composed in a mysterious, benevolent smile as she brought the Scrolls of Heaven and Earth down to guide humankind.