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JADE CITY

THE GREEN BONE SAGA:
BOOK ONE

FONDA
LEE

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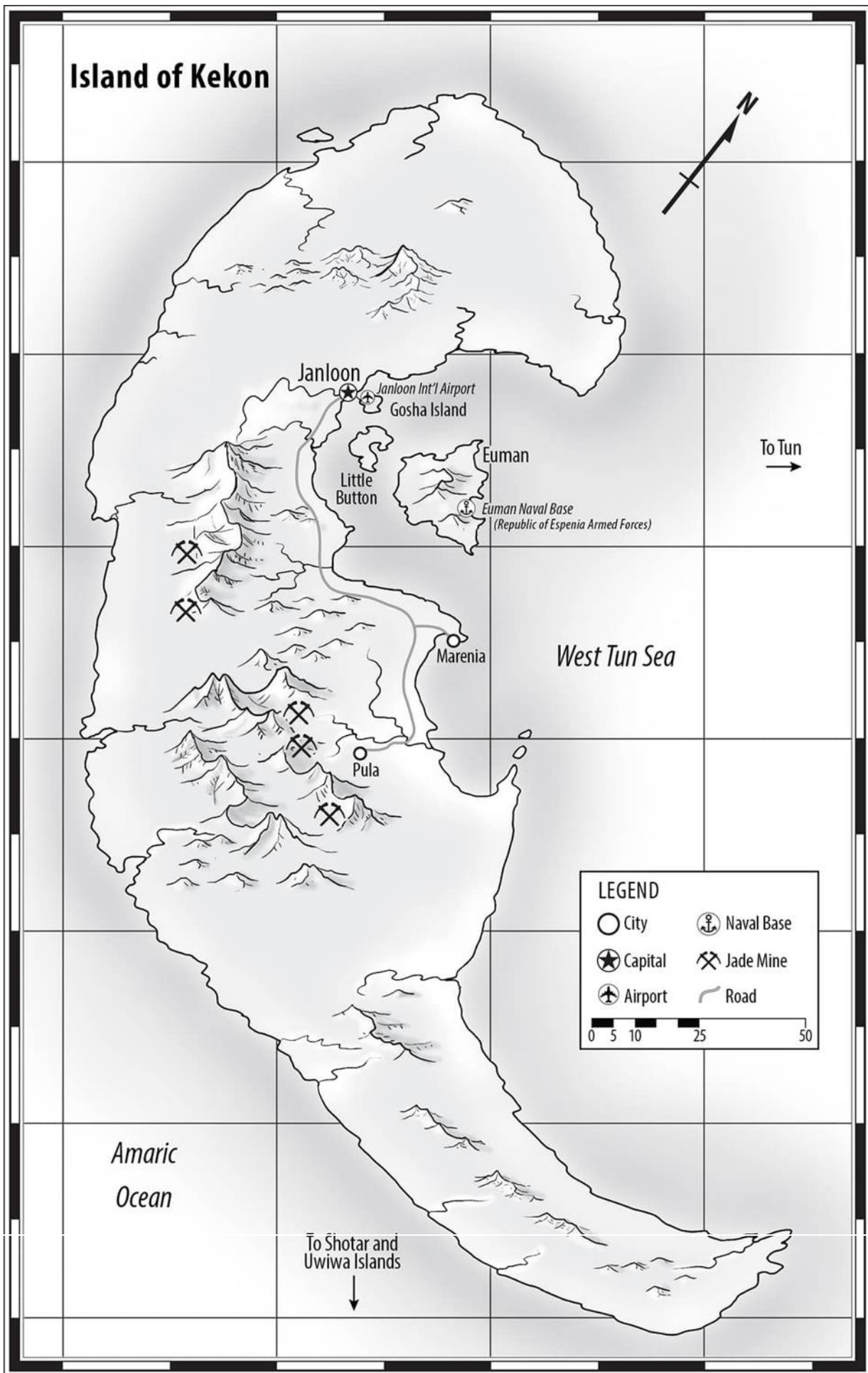
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For my brother.



CHAPTER

1



The Twice Lucky

The two would-be jade thieves sweated in the kitchen of the Twice Lucky restaurant. The windows were open in the dining room, and the onset of evening brought a breeze off the waterfront to cool the diners, but in the kitchen, there were only the two ceiling fans that had been spinning all day to little effect. Summer had barely begun and already the city of Janloon was like a spent lover—sticky and fragrant.

Bero and Sampa were sixteen years old, and after three weeks of planning, they had decided that tonight would change their lives. Bero wore a waiter's dark pants and a white shirt that clung uncomfortably to his back. His sallow face and chapped lips were stiff from holding in his thoughts. He carried a tray of dirty drink glasses over to the kitchen sink and set it down, then wiped his hands on a dish towel and leaned toward his coconspirator, who was rinsing dishes with the spray hose before stacking them in the drying racks.

"He's alone now." Bero kept his voice low.

Sampa glanced up. He was an Abukei teenager—copper-skinned with thick, wiry hair and slightly pudgy cheeks that gave him a faintly cherubic appearance. He blinked rapidly, then turned back to the sink. "I get off my

shift in five minutes.”

“We gotta do it now, keke,” said Bero. “Hand it over.”

Sampa dried a hand on the front of his shirt and pulled a small paper envelope from his pocket. He slipped it quickly into Bero’s palm. Bero tucked his hand under his apron, picked up his empty tray, and walked out of the kitchen.

At the bar, he asked the bartender for rum with chili and lime on the rocks—Shon Judonrhu’s preferred drink. Bero carried the drink away, then put down his tray and bent over an empty table by the wall, his back to the dining room floor. As he pretended to wipe down the table with his towel, he emptied the contents of the paper packet into the glass. They fizzed quickly and dissolved in the amber liquid.

He straightened and made his way over to the bar table in the corner. Shon Ju was still sitting by himself, his bulk squeezed onto a small chair. Earlier in the evening, Maik Kehn had been at the table as well, but to Bero’s great relief, he’d left to rejoin his brother in a booth on the other side of the room. Bero set the glass down in front of Shon. “On the house, Shon-jen.”

Shon took the drink, nodding sleepily without looking up. He was a regular at the Twice Lucky and drank heavily. The bald spot in the center of his head was pink under the dining room lights. Bero’s eyes were drawn, irresistibly, farther down, to the three green studs in the man’s left ear.

He walked away before he could be caught staring. It was ridiculous that such a corpulent, aging drunk was a Green Bone. True, Shon had only a little jade on him, but unimpressive as he was, sooner or later someone would take it, along with his life perhaps. *And why not me?* Bero thought. Why not, indeed. He might only be a dockworker’s bastard who would never have a martial education at Wie Lon Temple School or Kaul Dushuron Academy, but at least he was Kekonese all the way through. He had guts and nerve; he had what it took to be somebody. Jade made you somebody.

He passed the Maik brothers sitting together in a booth with a third young man. Bero slowed a little, just to get a closer look at them. Maik Kehn and Maik Tar—now *they* were real Green Bones. Sinewy men, their fingers

heavy with jade rings, fighting talon knives with jade-inlaid hilts strapped to their waists. They were dressed well: dark, collared shirts and tailored tan jackets, shiny black shoes, billed hats. The Maiks were well-known members of the No Peak clan, which controlled most of the neighborhoods on this side of the city. One of them glanced in Bero's direction.

Bero turned away quickly, busying himself with clearing dishes. The last thing he wanted was for the Maik brothers to pay any attention to him tonight. He resisted the urge to reach down to check the small-caliber pistol tucked in the pocket of his pants and concealed by his apron. Patience. After tonight, he wouldn't be in this waiter's uniform anymore. He wouldn't have to serve anyone anymore.

Back in the kitchen, Sampa had finished his shift for the evening and was signing out. He looked questioningly at Bero, who nodded that the deed was done. Sampa's small, white upper teeth popped into view and crushed down on his lower lip. "You really think we can do this?" he whispered.

Bero brought his face near the other boy's. "Stay cut, keke," he hissed. "We're already doing it. No turning back. You've got to do your part!"

"I know, keke, I know. I will." Sampa gave him a hurt and sour look.

"Think of the money," Bero suggested, and gave him a shove. "Now get going."

Sampa cast a final nervous glance backward, then pushed out the kitchen door. Bero glared after him, wishing for the hundredth time that he didn't need such a doughy and insipid partner. But there was no getting around it—only a full-blooded Abukei native, immune to jade, could palm a gem and walk out of a crowded restaurant without giving himself away.

It had taken some convincing to bring Sampa on board. Like many in his tribe, the boy gambled on the river, spending his weekends diving for jade runoff that escaped the mines far upstream. It was dangerous—when glutted with rainfall, the torrent carried away more than a few unfortunate divers, and even if you were lucky and found jade (Sampa had bragged that he'd once found a piece the size of a fist), you might get caught. Spend time in jail if you were lucky, time in the hospital if you weren't.

It was a loser's game, Bero had insisted to him. Why fish for raw jade just to sell it to the black market middlemen who carved it up and smuggled it off island, paying you only a fraction of what they sold it for later? A couple of clever, daring fellows like them—they could do better. If you were going to gamble for jade, Bero said, then gamble big. Aftermarket gems, cut and set—that was worth real money.

Bero returned to the dining room and busied himself clearing and setting tables, glancing at the clock every few minutes. He could ditch Sampa later, after he'd gotten what he needed.

“Shon Ju says there's been trouble in the Armpit,” said Maik Kehn, leaning in to speak discreetly under the blanket of background noise. “A bunch of kids shaking down businesses.”

His younger brother, Maik Tar, reached across the table with his chopsticks to pluck at the plate of crispy squid balls. “What kind of kids are we talking about?”

“Low-level Fingers. Young toughs with no more than a piece or two of jade.”

The third man at the table wore an uncharacteristically pensive frown. “Even the littlest Fingers are clan soldiers. They take orders from their Fists, and Fists from their Horn.” The Armpit district had always been disputed territory, but directly threatening establishments affiliated with the No Peak clan was too bold to be the work of careless hoodlums. “It smells like someone's pissing on us.”

The Maiks glanced at him, then at each other. “What's going on, Hilo-jen?” asked Kehn. “You seem out of sorts tonight.”

“Do I?” Kaul Hiloshudon leaned against the wall in the booth and turned his glass of rapidly warming beer, idly wiping off the condensation. “Maybe it's the heat.”

Kehn motioned to one of the waiters to refill their drinks. The pallid teenager kept his eyes down as he served them. He glanced up at Hilo for a second but didn't seem to recognize him; few people who hadn't met Kaul Hiloshudon in person expected him to look as young as he did. The Horn of the No Peak clan, second only in authority to his elder brother, often went initially unnoticed in public. Sometimes this galled Hilo; sometimes he found it useful.

"Another strange thing," said Kehn when the waiter had left. "No one's seen or heard from Three-Fingered Gee."

"How's it possible to lose track of Three-Fingered Gee?" Tar wondered. The black market jade carver was as recognizable for his girth as he was for his deformity.

"Maybe he got out of the business."

Tar snickered. "Only one way anyone gets out of the jade business."

A voice spoke up near Hilo's ear. "Kaul-jen, how are you this evening? Is everything to your satisfaction tonight?" Mr. Une had appeared beside their table and was smiling the anxious, solicitous smile he always reserved for them.

"It's all excellent, as usual," Hilo said, arranging his face into the relaxed, lopsided smile that was his more typical expression.

The owner of the Twice Lucky clasped his kitchen-scarred hands together, nodding and smiling his humble thanks. Mr. Une was a man in his sixties, bald and well-padded, and a third-generation restaurateur. His grandfather had founded the venerable old establishment, and his father had kept it running all through the wartime years, and afterward. Like his predecessors, Mr. Une was a loyal Lantern Man in the No Peak clan. Every time Hilo was in, he came around personally to pay his respects. "Please let me know if there is anything else I can have brought out to you," he insisted.

When the reassured Mr. Une had departed, Hilo grew serious again. "Ask around some more. Find out what happened to Gee."

"Why do we care about Gee?" Kehn asked, not in an impertinent way, just curious. "Good riddance to him. One less carver sneaking our jade out to

weaklings and foreigners.”

“It bothers me, is all.” Hilo sat forward, helping himself to the last crispy squid ball. “Nothing good’s coming, when the dogs start disappearing from the streets.”

Bero’s nerves were beginning to fray. Shon Ju had nearly drained his tainted drink. The drug was supposedly tasteless and odorless, but what if Shon, with the enhanced senses of a Green Bone, could detect it somehow? Or what if it didn’t work as it should, and the man walked out, taking his jade out of Bero’s grasp? What if Sampa lost his nerve after all? The spoon in Bero’s hands trembled as he set it down on the table. *Stay cut, now. Be a man.*

A phonograph in the corner wheezed out a slow, romantic opera tune, barely audible through the unceasing chatter of people. Cigarette smoke and spicy food aromas hung languid over red tablecloths.

Shon Ju swayed hastily to his feet. He staggered toward the back of the restaurant and pushed through the door to the men’s room.

Bero counted ten slow seconds in his head, then put the tray down and followed casually. As he slipped into the restroom, he slid his hand into his pocket and closed it around the grip of the tiny pistol. He shut and locked the door behind him and pressed against the far wall.

The sound of sustained retching issued from one of the stalls, and Bero nearly gagged on the nauseating odor of booze-soaked vomit. The toilet flushed, and the heaving noises ceased. There was a muffled thud, like the sound of something heavy hitting the tile floor, then a sickly silence. Bero took several steps forward. His heartbeat thundered in his ears. He raised the small gun to chest level.

The stall door was open. Shon Ju’s large bulk was slumped inside, limbs sprawled. His chest rose and fell in soft, snuffling snores. A thin line of drool