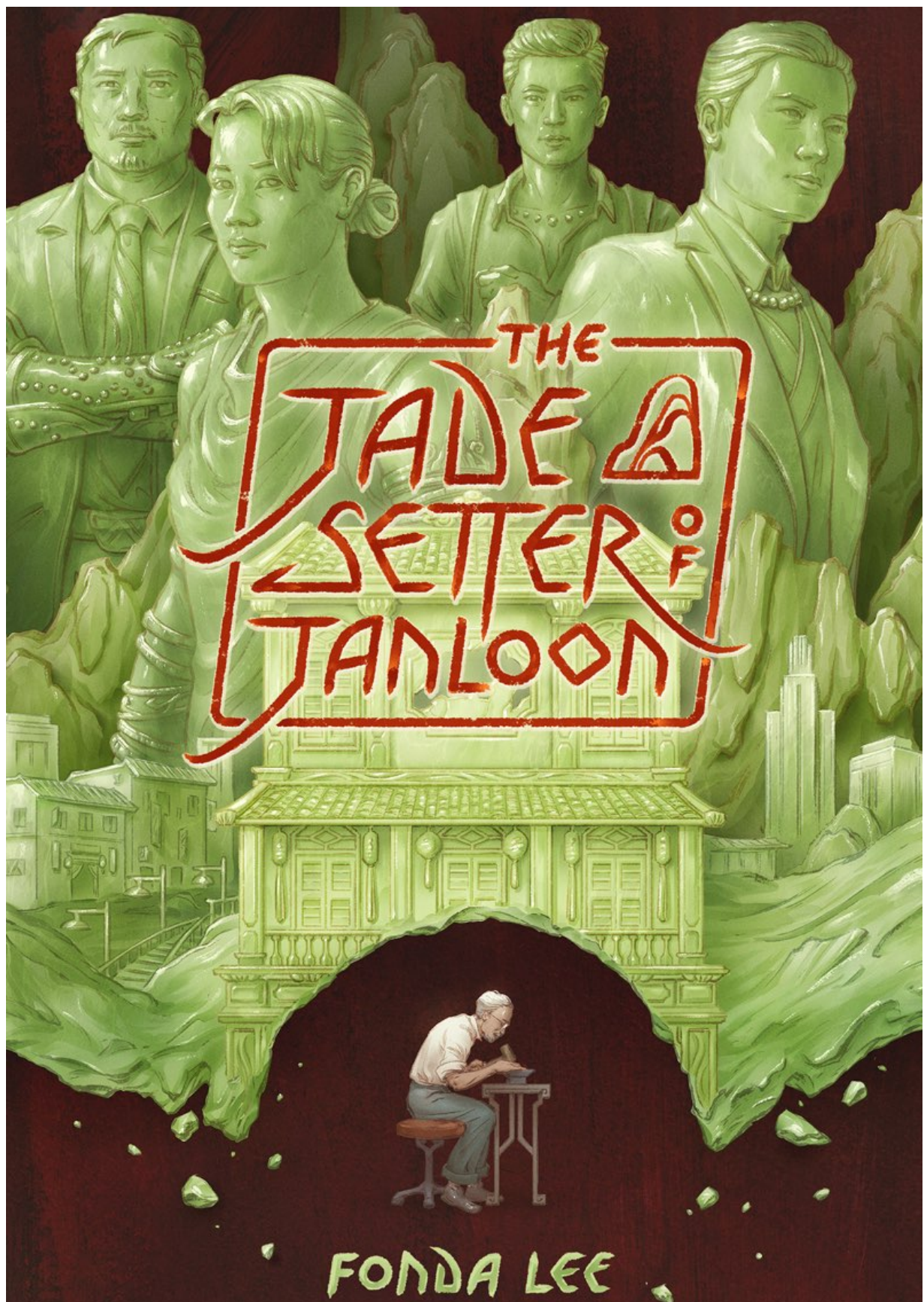


THE
JADE
SETTER
OF
JANLOON

FONDA LEE



The Jade Setter of Janloon

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Print version interior design

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Edited by Navah Wolfe

Electronic Edition

ISBN

978-1-64524-063-1

Subterranean Press

PO Box 190106

Burton, MI 48519

www.subterraneanpress.com

Manufactured in the United States of America

*For Mrs. Carson.
You were right about me.*

CHAPTER ONE

THE APPRENTICE

THE DUEL OCCURRED AT NOON IN THE PARKING LOT OF A JOLLO PLUS Mart and lasted under three minutes. Afterward, an ambulance arrived, but the medics left when they saw there was nothing to be done about the man on the asphalt—a powerful blast of Channeling had stopped his heart. Pulo had never seen a man killed so quickly and decisively.

“My blade is clean.” The victor, a junior Fist of the Mountain clan, ceremoniously wiped the length of his moon blade on the inside of his sleeve before bending to remove the jade from his opponent’s body. Gam Oben had a dark complexion and a sharp chin, and even the simplest of his movements seemed lithe and infused with dangerous energy.

Pulo turned away, self-consciously fingering the two jade studs in his left ear. He and Gam both wore jade, they were of a similar size and build, and a similar age; Pulo was twenty-two years old and Gam perhaps a couple of years older. Unfortunately, that was where the similarities ended. Gam Oben, Pulo thought with a sigh of resignation, was as impressive a jade warrior as Pulo had once imagined himself becoming.

The impromptu crowd that had gathered to watch the contest milled about, discussing the dramatic outcome. It was uncommon for clean-bladed duels between members of the same clan to end fatally. Of course, it was the prerogative of the winner to take his adversary’s life in addition to his jade, but why eliminate a man from your own side and create bad feelings with that person’s family unnecessarily? However, these were not usual circumstances.

Pulo left the scene and hurried back toward the shop. Gam was still accepting congratulations and enjoying his victory, but it wouldn't be long before he made his way over to the jade setter's. Isin-jen would want Pulo to be there, to help behind the counter.

The sidewalks were clogged with streams of people enjoying the city's damp but warm late-spring weather: well-dressed women browsing window displays of the latest foreign fashions; office workers lining up to buy lunch from food stands selling hot noodles and barbecue meat on skewers; petitioners visiting the Temple District's houses of worship to hang prayer cards on the devotional trees. Ordinary people, most of whom didn't wear jade, going about their normal lives. One wouldn't think that mere minutes ago and a few blocks away, a man had died, and with him, whatever hopes and dreams he might've had.

Pulo weaved through the crush of pedestrians, his eyes on the sidewalk, his thoughts turned inward. What would it be like to offer or accept a clean blade, knowing you might be killed in the contest? How had Gam and his rival felt in the seconds before the fight, as they saluted each other and offered up prayers to the gods? Pulo had always wondered: If it weren't for the ironclad neutrality of the Haedo Shield clan, which forbade dueling for jade, would he have the thick blood to risk his life?

Isin's squat shop was sandwiched between two taller, newer buildings—a twenty-four-hour foot spa on one side and a three-story record shop on the other. The modest sign over the door was hand-painted in a dated style. *Carving. Setting. Piercing.* It was fading to illegibility, but that hardly mattered; everyone knew where to find the best jade setter in the city of Janloon, and likely the whole island of Kekon. Skyrocketing real estate prices would've made it profitable for a developer to buy the shop, demolish it, and erect a high-rise building in its place. That wouldn't happen, as no one would dream of forcing Isin out. His services were too renowned and highly valued by jade warriors in all the Green Bone clans.

Pulo pushed through the front door, causing the bell over it to jangle its familiar tinny chime. "Gam won the duel," he announced. "He's probably on his way here right now."

Isin did not look up from the small table where he sat examining a wristwatch with a jade face. He moved the loupe away and sighed regretfully. "The crack is deep; even if we perform the repair, it won't be reliable in a battle." He handed the watch to Malla and said, "Call the customer and see whether he wants it returned, or carved down and reset."

"Gam Oben is the Second Fist of the Mountain," Pulo said, leaning over the counter to get the master jade setter's attention. "If he's pleased with our work, he could put in a good word for us. With clan patronage, we could expand the shop. We'd have twice as much space if we move out of the Temple District and into, say, Sogen or Cherry Grove. Or we could keep this place, but set up a second location. I could manage it for you."

Isin settled his bifocals back onto the ridge of his nose and gazed patiently up at his apprentice. His thick gray eyebrows twitched over eyes that blinked too much as a result of countless hours spent doing fine work under bright lights. Pulo thought his master's short wiry beard and placidly dignified expression made him look like an aged terrier in a wool jacket.

"Your job is to learn the craft of jade setting," Isin reminded him.

Pulo replied with a touch of frustration he couldn't hide. "I've been doing that all this time, but we can't run a successful business on technical skill alone. We need to make savvier business decisions. At least consider renovating the front of the shop."

"The shop's fine as it is," Isin said, adjusting a tray in the display case.

Pulo bit his tongue and glanced at Malla. She gave him a sympathetic look but shrugged, as if to say, *What did you expect?* It wasn't as if they hadn't had this argument before. Pulo knew why Isin refused to adopt his suggestions. A major expansion required capital, and the best way to secure a loan was by asking for patronage from one of the two major clans. Moving the shop would also mean deciding whose territory to locate in. Those decisions would make Isin a tribute-paying Lantern Man. It meant choosing a side. Pulo was willing to leave the minor Haedo Shield clan and its policy of neutrality. Isin wasn't.

Before Pulo could press his argument further, a gleaming ZT Toro pulled up to the curb in front of the shop. Three men stepped out of the car. Pulo

could Perceive their jade auras before they reached the door, as a bright energetic hum in his mind.

Without prompting, Malla turned and went into the workroom behind the counter, her loose, curly hair bobbing against her straight shoulders as she disappeared from view. Malla was Abukei, which was both an advantage and a detriment in the jade-setting profession. On one hand, she was not affected by jade and thus never had to be concerned about overexposure, which might lead to illness or death in other people. But prejudice ran deep. Green Bone warriors might appreciate the traditional jade-carving techniques of the island's indigenous artists, but that didn't mean they wanted to see one in the front of the shop.

The door swung open with a loud jingling of the entry bell. As Pulo had expected, Gam Oben came in, his dark face still flushed and his jade aura crackling with the residual adrenaline of the fight. Behind him came two others—another Fist that Pulo didn't recognize, followed by a huge man who was impossible not to recognize.

Isin clasped his hands together and touched them to his forehead in a respectful salute. Pulo hastily followed suit. "Gont-jen," Isin said mildly. "I'm always honored to have the Horn of the Mountain clan visit my humble business. What can I do for you today?"

There were Green Bones, Pulo thought, and then there were *Green Bones*. Anyone who wore jade, who'd trained in the six traditional disciplines and graduated from one of Kekon's martial academies was a Green Bone who'd earned the suffix *jen*—even someone like him, a jade setter's apprentice with only two jade stones.

Men like Gont Asch were different. Second in authority only to the Pillar, the Horn was the top warrior who commanded all the Fists and the Fingers on the military side of the clan. Gont's massive shoulders were crisscrossed with raised white scars, and he wore his copious amount of jade encrusted on striking leather armguards that Isin had created for him years ago. He seemed to fill the room with his imposing frame as he turned slowly, taking in the small shop and everyone inside. Pulo was sure the Horn could Perceive Malla's hidden presence in the back of the building, and Pulo's own heart thumping.

“One of my Fists has come into possession of some new jade.” Gont’s voice was a low, even baritone, unexpectedly smooth and congenial.

Isin turned toward Gam, who was examining the glass display case of ring settings. “Far do your enemies flee, Gam-jen,” he congratulated the Fist.

“I slept well last night,” Gam said, politely but curtly deflecting the praise. He laid his spoils on the countertop. “I need the rings resized, and I want to have the studs remounted and to get nose piercings for them.”

“Very good, Gam-jen,” Isin said, examining the jade. “We can do all of that right now.” He measured Gam’s ring size, then handed the rings to Pulo, who placed them on a tray and took them into the back of the shop for Malla to work on.

“A half size smaller, simple enough,” Isin’s assistant said, turning the bands under a worklight. “I’ll solder a layer of matching gold onto the inner metal band and he won’t lose any of the jade at all.” She looked up at Pulo, hovering over her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

Pulo shifted back, dropping his eyes. “Nothing,” he muttered, before blurting out, “It’s not right that you hide back here every time customers come in. You ought to be out in the front of the shop with us, getting credit for the work you do.” Pulo’s face flushed with discomfort as he glanced up into her surprised expression. Malla was a talented jeweler and her detailed handiwork was flawless. She was a patient person who would be naturally good at the front counter. When Malla smiled, always slowly and with her mouth closed, her cheeks rounded into plump bronze hills under her large, amber-flecked brown eyes.

Malla was a similar age to Pulo, but she’d been working for Isin for longer than Pulo had been an apprentice. Pulo had never seen the master jade setter order Malla away from public view, but that had seemed to be the unspoken expectation from the beginning. At first, Pulo hadn’t questioned it, but now it increasingly bothered him. Given his matchless reputation as a master craftsman, was the old man really so concerned about superstitious bigots objecting to the idea of a stone-eye working in his shop and handling their jade?

If only Malla wasn’t Abukei.

Pulo set his mouth. “I’m going to talk to Isin about it.”

“Please don’t,” Malla said quickly. “It’s not Isin’s fault, it’s...” She turned away from him, embarrassed, but not before Pulo glimpsed an anxious, almost fearful shadow cross her face. “I’d rather be in the back room, honestly. I’m more comfortable here.”

“But—” Pulo began.

“It’s kind of you to worry about me, but you don’t have to do that.” Malla gave him a small appeasing smile and her tone was polite, but it was clear she didn’t want to talk about the issue anymore. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear as she picked up the first of Gam’s rings. “Shouldn’t you go back out there to help Isin?”

Dissatisfied but unable to argue, Pulo returned to the front of the store. By now, Isin had seated Gam in the side room and was unwrapping a sterile piercing needle. He’d marked the spots where Gam wanted his four new jade studs—a bridge piercing, and two nostril piercings, one on each side. At Pulo’s appearance, the master jade setter said, “Gam-jen, with your permission, I’d like my apprentice to do the work. I vouch for his abilities completely.”

Gam’s eyes slid over to Pulo with mild interest. He shrugged in acquiescence. Pulo washed his hands and put on latex gloves. Isin had given him a simple task that he’d performed many times, but he’d never before handled the jade of a Green Bone as highly ranked as Gam. Was Isin giving him this responsibility, publicly demonstrating his confidence in his apprentice, as conciliation for repeatedly shooting down his other ideas? Was he giving Pulo a chance to be noticed and remembered by Mountain clan leaders?

When Pulo picked up the remounted jade studs, a faint tingle warmed his fingers and spread up his arms. The jade energy sharpened his senses for a moment; the light in the room brightened, every detail seemed crisper and every noise more distinct, like the improvement in a broadcast when a nudged television antenna receives a clearer signal. He wondered how much more the jade would do for Gam once he wore it. Thinking of the duel he’d seen, he imagined the Fist’s leaps of Lightness being faster and higher, his reflexes honed by greater Perception, his Strength and Steel more unassailable, his Deflection more powerful and his Channeling even more

lethal. A familiar envy stirred in Pulo's chest as he gave Gam one nostril piercing, then the other.

"How long have you been a jade setter's apprentice?" Gam asked, not with great interest, but no doubt wondering whether to trust his skills.

"Four years, Gam-jen." Four years of labor for an exacting but unambitious master in a profession he'd fallen into through no desire of his own.

"I didn't know Isin took on apprentices," Gam said. "You must be the first one."

Pulo hesitated. "Isin-jen agreed to train me because I'm also from the Haedo Shield clan. When he retires, he wants the shop to stay open to all Green Bones. I'm good at detailed work and have a naturally high jade tolerance, so he thought I could learn the craft." He didn't mention that he'd had no choice in the matter. His aunt was one of the elders of the clan and had already put forth his name to Isin with the expectation that he accept the position.

When Pulo finished the bridge piercing, he handed Gam a mirror. The Fist turned his face back and forth. He nodded in satisfaction at the way the new jade stood out bright and arresting against his dark skin. "Isin-jen," Gam called out to the master jade setter, "your apprentice did a good job. What do you think? Does this jade look better on me than it did on poor Taso Gumi?"

"The jade is where it belongs, Gam-jen," Isin said equably.

Isin was known to have an astonishing memory; he remembered the jade pieces he'd carved and set for thousands of Green Bones over the course of twenty years, and he often saw his work change hands. The jade setter might spend weeks painstakingly designing an elaborate jade necklace for one warrior, then a year later, he would calmly and without question destroy his creation and remount all the jade stones into a belt for another man who'd fought and killed the original owner. The Temple District was one of the few areas of Janloon that was perpetually neutral territory; Isin saw customers from all the clans. They trusted him, as he would never spread rumors or betray the confidence of anyone. Of course, there were other jade setters in

other parts of Janloon who serviced one clan or another exclusively, but none of them were as talented as Isin Nakokun.

As Gam stood, Pulo asked, "Was it hard to take the jade? To kill a member of your own clan?" Only after the question had impulsively left his mouth did it occur to him that the Fist might not take well to the loaded question. When Gam gave him a narrow-eyed look of surprise, Pulo began to stammer an apology. "I'm sorry if that sounded rude, Gam-jen, it's only that I saw the duel, and I wondered—"

"No," Gam answered, bluntly but seemingly unoffended. "Taso had his chance. The leadership of the clan has been settled. If any Fist slanders his own Pillar, he ought to expect to be challenged by those who are loyal, and to pay with his life if he loses." Before he strode out of the room, he looked back at Pulo with a curious, faintly patronizing glance and tilted his sharp chin. "Life must be simpler in the Haedo Shield clan."

That was true enough, Pulo admitted. The Mountain clan was the largest in Kekon. When its longtime Pillar had passed away last year without naming an heir, a brief but bloody struggle for the leadership had ensued. Afterward, the clan had fallen into line behind the victor, but a few vocal dissenters like Taso Gumi were still being made into dramatic examples.

Haedo Shield had no such public dramas. It did not have a Pillar, nor did it have a Horn to oversee Fists and Fingers, or a Weather Man to manage the clan's business interests. Instead, it was governed by a council of five elders who maintained a low profile and whose names were barely known outside of the clan. It offered no patronage and took no tribute, relying only on public funds for its operations. The clan's Green Bones trained in their own small but rigorous martial school for one purpose: to protect the ceremonial royal family and guard government buildings and functions. In their distinctive flat caps and sashes, the Shieldbearers of Haedo Shield were more civil servants than warriors.

Isin brought Malla's handiwork out to the counter. Gam's rings were now a perfect fit. As the Fist put them on, Pulo tried not to keep glancing over at Gont Asch. The Horn and his other Fist had been standing near the door patiently, Gont's thick arms crossed over his chest. Now, he came up to the counter and placed a long, cloth-wrapped object in front of Isin.

“One more task, Isin-jen,” Gont rumbled. He unfolded the black cloth to reveal a sheathed moon blade. Pulo sucked in an awed breath. The moon blade was the traditional weapon of Green Bone warriors and this one was a superlative specimen: thirty-two inches long, a slightly curved single-edged twenty-one-inch white carbon steel blade in an elaborately carved sheath, set into a hilt inlaid with bands of brilliant jade stones and a carved jade pommel.

“This is the moon blade of the Pillar, Ayt Madashi,” Gont said. “It was given to her by her father. The pommel is loose and needs to be repaired without damage to any of the jade. The Pillar has made it clear that she trusts only the most reliable and skilled jade setter to do the work for her.”

Isin studied the weapon. He fished out the small notepad from his breast pocket, wrote out a repair order, and tore the thin customer copy out, handing it to the Horn. “Come back at the end of the day tomorrow.”

Gont and his two Fists left the shop. As soon as they were gone, Pulo burst out, “The Pillar’s moon blade, I can’t believe it!” He bent over the priceless object, enthralled, unable to resist reaching out to touch it. This must be the weapon Ayt Mada had used to kill her rivals to become Pillar. What would it feel like to wield something so powerful in battle?

He looked up at Isin, torn between admiration and indignation. “Isin-jen, the Pillar of the Mountain knows who you are, and out of all the jade setters in the city, she trusts only *you* with her own weapon? Why *wouldn’t* we ask for clan patronage?”

Malla came out from the back room and bent over the counter next to Pulo to admire the moon blade. She was close enough that Pulo caught a whiff of the dusty sweat on her neck mingled with the citrus scent of her shampoo. “Malla,” he said, trying to recruit her to his side, “don’t you think we ought to move the shop, or at least renovate it? Wouldn’t you rather have a larger and better workroom instead of that stuffy space we have now?”

“That would be nice, I suppose,” Malla said, “but I don’t mind the shop the way it is. It’s the best jade-setting service in the city because of Isin-jen. He’s kept it this way for so long that if we changed anything, he wouldn’t be able to find his way around anymore.” She gave the master jade setter a teasing pat on the hand.

Isin looked at both of them over the top of his glasses. “That’s true,” he said, with a tug on the corners of his mouth that for him constituted a smile. “I’m too old to change.”

That was simply an excuse, Pulo thought sourly. Isin was in his midfifties, not even that old. He seemed aged only because of his quiet, methodical personality, the weathered texture of his face, and the calluses on his hands. Pulo had heard people say that as a young man, Isin Nakokun had been a formidable jade warrior. During the Many Nations War, he’d fought alongside famous Green Bone war heroes like Ayt Yugontin and Kaul Seningtun to overthrow the foreign occupation of Kekon. Watching his master wipe the dust from his bifocals with a square of cloth, Pulo found that difficult to imagine.

The door banged open again and Pulo jumped, thinking for a second that the Mountain Green Bones had returned. Then he exclaimed, “Godsdamnit, Nuo, haven’t we told you not to come in here during business hours?”

Nuo ignored him. “Uncle Isin, I need to borrow five hundred dien. Just to get me through the week with my landlord, and I promise I’ll pay it back by next Fourthday, on my mother’s grave, please, Uncle Isin.”

Isin’s nephew Nuo was a year older than Pulo, but as far as Pulo could tell, he was a parasite who was always asking for money and was never going to support himself with any sort of reputable job. For a while, he’d tried his hand at raising and fighting gamecocks, but he’d lost all his birds in matches and to disease. Then he’d gotten involved in a questionable pyramid scheme and would come into the shop to try to sell them suspicious herbal supplements, several jars of which remained untouched in the workroom’s cabinet. Supposedly, he now had a job at a temp agency, but either his job was fictional, or it didn’t pay.

Nuo’s shifty gaze fell onto the magnificent weapon on the counter and his eyes lit up as brightly as an Autumn Festival lamp. “Whose moon blade is that?” He reached a hand toward it. “Holy shit, is that what I think it is? Only the Ayt family uses that hilt design.”

“Don’t touch it,” Pulo snapped, quickly wrapping the valuable moon blade back up in the black cloth. “How do you know that anyway?”

Nuo's nostrils flared and he gave Pulo a withering look. "I read about it in a magazine, dumbfuck. The famous Green Bones like the Ayts and the Kauls all have one-of-a-kind custom-made Da Tanori blades." Nuo wetted his lips and his eyes darted back to the cloth bundle as Pulo stowed it out of sight under the counter. "I bet you've worked on a lot of those special blades, haven't you, Uncle Isin?"

Isin gave his nephew a look of disappointed forbearance and shuffled over to unlock the cash register. Pulo and Malla watched in tight-lipped silence as the jade setter removed a stack of bills from the register and wearily peeled off several of them for Nuo, who stood with his hand held out expectantly, still shooting glances in the direction the moon blade had vanished.

Pulo ground his teeth in frustration. After all his efforts to convince Isin to invest in the business, instead of seeking patronage or saving up funds, the old man threw money away. No wonder the shop never seemed to grow profits, despite all the demand for Isin's skills. Nuo was the only son of Isin's deceased older sister, but even so, he shouldn't let a relative take advantage of him so easily.

Malla's thoughts were apparently running the same way. "What about the other three hundred dien you borrowed last month?" she asked, crossing her arms.

"I'm going to pay it all back together at the same time," Nuo insisted. He slid Isin's assistant a petulant glare. "Who're you to take an arrogant tone with me, anyway? If Isin hadn't helped *you* out, you'd be barefoot with some filthy kids clinging to your skirt in a muddy village somewhere, wouldn't you?"

Malla's mouth fell open and she shrank back. Pulo took a step toward Nuo, inclined to punch him in the face, but Isin pounded the side of his fist on the counter in uncharacteristic vexation. "Enough! All of you. We depend on each other, either because we're family, or because we share this shop. We shouldn't turn on each other." Isin sighed sadly as he handed over the loan. "Nuo, the gods only give us one life. We should use our time wisely, to commit worthwhile deeds, not selfish ones."

Nuo frowned as he took the cash. Isin wasn't usually the type to judge or lecture, or even to question. An expression of guilt and uncertainty crossed Nuo's face but was gone a second later. "Yeah, sure," he mumbled, as he stuffed the bills into his jacket pocket. "Listen, I'm going through a rough patch right now, but things are going to get better. Sorry for what I said, Malla," he mumbled, scowling at Pulo instead of looking at her.

Nuo's life, according to what Pulo had heard from Malla, had been a series of starts and failures. His father was a member of middling rank in the No Peak clan, so at the age of ten, Nuo had been sent to Kaul Dushuron Academy, one of the best martial schools in the country, but he'd been forced to drop out after two years. He was too sensitive to jade, as overreactive as a foreigner, and would get violently ill at school. Nuo's parents had split up shortly thereafter (partly because his father was convinced Nuo wasn't his child) and he'd been raised by his mother, who'd passed away two years ago. Nevertheless, Nuo had somehow managed to build up enough jade tolerance through private training to earn one small jade stud, which he wore through his right eyebrow, but that was likely all he would ever wear. Isin and others might pity Nuo and forgive his shortcomings of character, but Pulo didn't.

"Eight hundred dien by next Fourthday, don't forget," Isin called after his nephew as Nuo left the shop, the door clanging shut behind him.

"Why do you put up with him?" Pulo demanded of his master. "Do you know what I think Nuo does with the money you give him? I think he spends it on drugs. I'm serious, Isin-jen. Why else would he be broke all the time?"

Isin took the wrapped moon blade out from under the counter. "If that's the case, it's better that Nuo takes my money than someone else's."

Malla's forehead creased with worry. "Do you really think he's gotten involved in something awful?"

"Last week, he asked me to give him a ride to the subway station," Pulo told them. "He seemed unusually nervous, so on a hunch, I parked nearby and watched him. Instead of going into the station, he went into the semibasement of a boarded-up building. What in the name of the gods was he up to? At this rate, he's going to end up dead or in jail."

Isin spoke over his shoulder as he took the wrapped moon blade with him into the back room. "Come with me," he said to Pulo. "I'll need your help

with this repair.”

Isin didn't really need Pulo's help. Working on Ayt Mada's blade was too important a job for anyone else. However, the jade setter motioned for his apprentice to sit next to him and observe and hand him tools, which Pulo did resentfully but dutifully, muttering an affirmative whenever Isin asked if he was paying attention.

Watching Isin work was like witnessing a courtly tea ceremony from some bygone era. Every part of the experience was quiet, precise, and laden with esoteric meaning. First, he would examine the jade, sometimes for so long it seemed he was communicating with it directly, or shaping it a hundred different ways in his mind before committing to action. While Isin worked, he didn't play the radio, engage in conversation, or allow himself to be interrupted, even by customers. Many jade setters, unless they were Abukei or stone-eyes with natural immunity to jade, wore lead-lined gloves when they worked, to reduce their long-term exposure, but Isin did not. He insisted on feeling the jade, connecting with it as if it were his own trophy, won with blood, so he might best carve it into its most suitable final form. It was why Isin wore almost no jade of his own—only a single plain green band around his left thumb—so as to maximize his sensitivity and capacity to handle the jade of others.

After a long period of silent concentration, Isin tested that the pommel was now secure, then held up the moon blade to check its balance. He gave a single nod of satisfaction and began polishing the undamaged hilt with a fresh cloth, making the jade gleam brilliant and translucent green. He began speaking to Pulo as if there had been no break in their earlier conversation. “If only Nuo wasn't so sensitive to jade, he could work in the shop with us,” the jade setter said regretfully. “He doesn't have the temperament to be a jade setter, but he could stand behind the counter or manage records. But even that would be too much jade exposure for him. I'm the only uncle Nuo has, but I can't offer him much.”

“You're not responsible for Nuo's choices in life,” Pulo pointed out.

“I know he doesn't have good judgment, but even if I can't change him, at least I can give him the chance to change himself. And if things end badly, then I'd rather know than not know.”

“It’s not my place to talk critically about your family, Isin-jen,” Pulo said, trying to sound respectful while containing his annoyance, “but I’ve been your apprentice for years, and the reality is that Nuo’s problems could hurt the shop. If you’re going to bring me into the business, we ought to start talking frankly about all the things that affect it. We should be making decisions about the future together—you, me, and Malla.”

The workroom had no windows, but Pulo knew the hour was late because he heard Malla closing up—putting all the display items into cabinets, dead-bolting the entry doors, turning the lights out in the front of the shop. Isin carefully wrapped the repaired moon blade back into the black cloth and placed it into the safe where customers’ valuable items were stored overnight. He shut the steel door and spun the combination lock.

“You’re asking me to bring you into the business, but do you want to be brought in?” The jade setter turned back to Pulo with bushy eyebrows drawn together over his perpetually squinting, blinking eyes. “You have all the skills to follow in my footsteps if you choose. But a jade setter’s life is dedicated to uncelebrated work that might be undone. Every day, we give ourselves to the craft of setting jade that will give power to others. They do with it what they will, and we keep none of it for ourselves. That’s our place. Do you want that?”



WHEN HE RETURNED to his one-bedroom apartment that evening, Pulo sat in front of the television, eating a boxed takeout meal of barbecue chicken, and not really watching the show. During the next commercial break, he muted the TV and took a business card out of his wallet. He spent a long minute turning the card in his hands before he picked up the phone and dialed the number. The call picked up on the second ring.

“I’ve thought about it,” he said. “I’d like to start the process.”

“An excellent decision,” said the patronage counselor. “What changed your mind?”

A pang of guilt made Pulo hesitate. “I guess...I realized there’s no reason to hold myself back. And the best way to get ahead is with the backing of a

big clan.”

He should’ve told Isin that he was considering striking out on his own. But perhaps it didn’t need to be said. Surely, after the arguments they’d had about the direction of the shop, his master wouldn’t be surprised. He would accept Pulo’s decision the way he accepted his work changing hands. For some reason, the thought made Pulo feel worse.

“I’m delighted you’re ready to pursue your future success. Let me get some basic information from you,” said the counselor. Pulo could hear her shuffling papers. “Are you or any of your family members currently of rank in a clan, or do you have any special standing?”

“My aunt is an elder of Haedo Shield,” Pulo said.

“But none of your relatives are tribute-paying Lantern Men?”

“No.” *If they were, I probably wouldn’t need you, would I?* Patronage counselors were for people who didn’t already have an inside track to getting appointments and favorable notice by clan business leaders.

“Are you married? Do you have children?”

Malla appeared in Pulo’s mind, unbidden. He couldn’t pinpoint when he’d begun feeling the urge to stand closer to her, to find excuses to do tasks together, to say things that might make her smile. Sometimes, when she looked at him for a second or two longer than necessary, he imagined that perhaps she felt the same way, and it warmed him from head to toe. He thought of the way Malla bit her lip when she was bent in concentration over her careful work, the reflection of the bright work lamps off her copper skin, how she covered her mouth when she laughed. Malla was quiet in a way that suggested she had secrets to tell. They’d seen each other every day for years, and yet he still knew so little about her.

He knew it was because he hadn’t tried to get close, not really. The idea of bringing an Abukei woman home to his parents was terrifying to contemplate. Racial prejudice notwithstanding, any children they had together would likely be stone-eyes. Although Pulo couldn’t be a true Green Bone warrior, was he willing to shut that valuable door of opportunity on his own descendants, trading it instead for society’s disdain?

“No,” he told the patronage counselor. “No wife or kids.”