



SPIN THE DAWN

ELIZABETH LIM

SPIN THE DAWN

THE BLOOD OF STARS

Book I

ELIZABETH LIM



Alfred A. Knopf
New York

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2019 by Elizabeth Lim

Cover art copyright © 2019 by Tran Nguyen

Map copyright © 2019 by Virginia Allyn

Excerpt from *Unravel the Dusk* copyright © 2020 by Elizabeth Lim

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

Knopf, Borzoi Books, and the colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us on the Web! GetUnderlined.com

Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools, visit us at RHTeachersLibrarians.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 9780525646990 (trade) — ISBN 9780525647003 (lib. bdg.) — ebook
ISBN 9780525647010

Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment and celebrates the right to read.

v5.4

ep

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Map

Prologue

Part One: The Trial

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Part Two: The Journey

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-one

Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Twenty-three

Chapter Twenty-four

Chapter Twenty-five

Chapter Twenty-six

Chapter Twenty-seven

Chapter Twenty-eight

Chapter Twenty-nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-one

Part Three: The Oath

Chapter Thirty-two

Chapter Thirty-three

Chapter Thirty-four

Chapter Thirty-five

Chapter Thirty-six

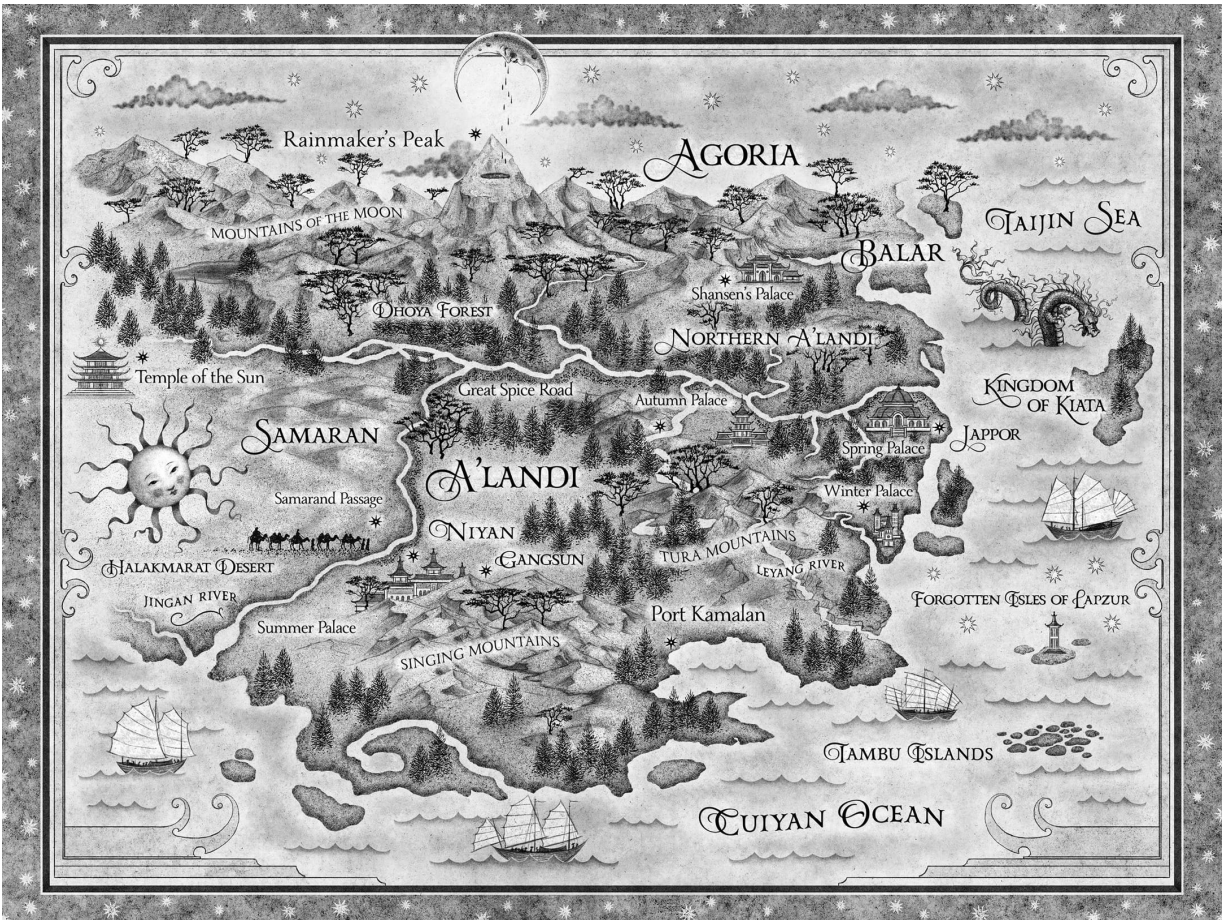
Chapter Thirty-seven

Acknowledgments

Excerpt from Unravel the Dusk

About the Author

*To Adrian, for changing my life in the best of
possible ways*



Ask me to spin the finest yarn or thread, and I can do it faster than any man—even with my eyes closed. Yet ask me to tell a lie, and I will stumble and falter to think of one.

I have never had a talent for spinning tales.

My brother Keton knows this better than anyone. Even though his brows rise once or twice as I tell him everything—of the three impossible tasks I was given, of the demon and ghosts I encountered on my journey, and of the enchantment that surrounded our emperor—my brother believes me.

Baba, my father, does not. He sees through the shadows I hide behind. That beyond the smile I give Keton, my eyes are red and raw. They are swollen from crying for hours, days even. What he cannot see is that in spite of the tears drying on my cheeks, my heart is hard.

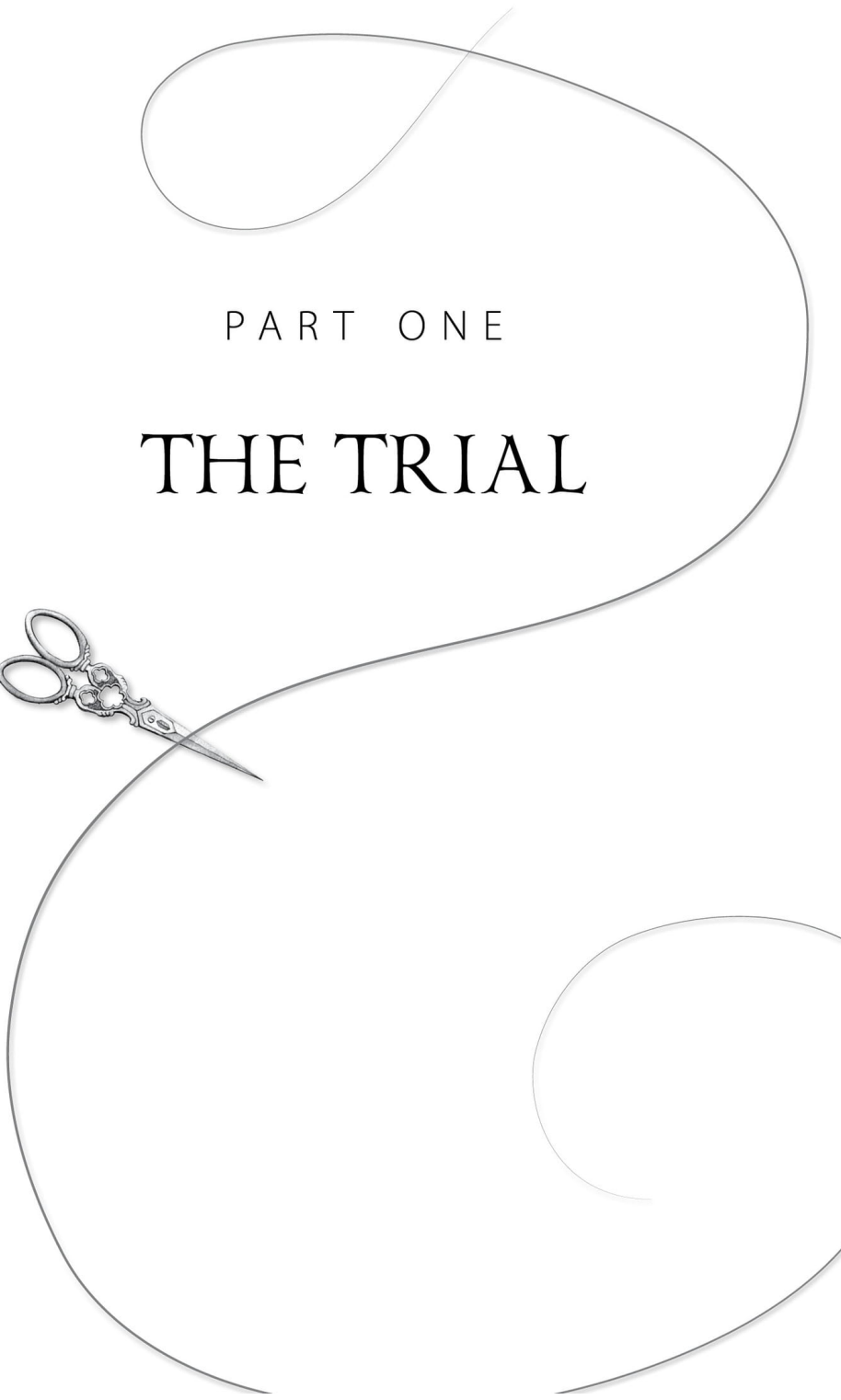
I dread reaching the end of my story, for it is full of knots that I haven't had the courage to cut free. Distant drums pound. They draw closer with every second, a stirring reminder of the little time I have left to make my choice.

If I go back, I leave behind who I am. I will never see my family again, never see my face in the mirror again, never hear my name called again.

But I would give up the sun and moon and stars if it meant saving *him*.

Him—the boy with no name and yet a thousand names. The boy whose hands are stained with the blood of stars.

The boy I love.



PART ONE

THE TRIAL



CHAPTER ONE

I had three brothers once.

Finlei was the oldest—the brave one. Nothing frightened him, not spiders or needles or a flogging from Baba’s cane. He was the quickest of us four children, fast enough to catch a fly with only his thumb and a thimble. But along with his dauntlessness came a craving for adventure. He despised having to work in our shop, having to spend the sun’s precious light sewing dresses and mending shirts. And he was careless with the needle, his fingers constantly bandaged from pricks and his work marred with uneven stitches. Stitches I would unpick and redo to save him from Baba’s lectures.

Finlei didn’t have the patience to become a tailor like Baba.

Sendo had patience, but not for sewing. My second brother was the poet in the family, and the only weaving he loved was of words, especially about the sea. He would tell stories about the beautiful garments Baba could sew, with such exquisite detail all the ladies in town clamored to buy them—only to find they didn’t exist.

As punishment, Baba made him sit on the pier behind our shop, unraveling thread from silkworm cocoons. Often I stole out to sit with him, to listen to his tales of what lay beyond that never-ending horizon of water.

“What color is the ocean?” Sendo would ask me.

“Blue, silly. What else?”

“How will you be the best tailor in A’landi if you don’t know your colors?” Sendo shook his head and pointed at the water. “Look again. Look into the depths of it.”

“Sapphire,” I said, studying the ocean’s gentle crests and troughs. The water sparkled. “Sapphire, like the stones Lady Tainak wears around her neck. But there’s a hint of green...jade green. And the foam curls up like pearls.”

Sendo smiled. “That’s better.” He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and hugged me close. “One day, we’ll sail the seas, you and I. And you’ll see the blue in all the world.”

Because of Sendo, blue was my favorite color. It painted the white of my walls when I opened my window each morning and saw the sea glittering in the sunlight. Sapphire or cerulean. Azure. Indigo. Sendo trained my eyes to see the variations in color, to appreciate the dullest brown to the brightest pink. How light could bend something into a thousand possibilities.

Sendo’s heart was for the sea, not for becoming a tailor like Baba.

Keton was my third brother, and the closest to me in age. His songs and jokes made everyone laugh, no matter what mood we were in. He always got in trouble for dyeing our silks green instead of purple, for carelessly stepping on newly pressed dresses with dirty sandals, for forgetting to water the mulberry trees, and for never spinning yarn fine enough for Baba to knit into a sweater. Money slipped through his fingers like water. But Baba loved him best—even though Keton didn’t have the discipline to become a tailor.

Then there was me—Maia. The obedient daughter. My earliest memories were of sitting contentedly with Mama as she worked the spinning wheel, listening to Finlei, Sendo, and Keton playing outside while Baba taught me to roll Mama’s thread so it wouldn’t tangle.

My heart *was* for becoming a tailor: I learned to thread needles before I could walk, to make a line of perfect stitches before I could talk. I loved my needlework and was happy learning Baba’s trade instead of going out with my brothers. Besides, when Finlei taught me to spar and shoot arrows, I always missed the target. Even though I soaked up Sendo’s fairy tales and ghost stories, I could never tell one of my own. And I always fell for Keton’s pranks, no matter how often my older brothers warned me of them.

Baba proudly told me I was born with a needle in one hand, a pair of scissors in the other. That if I hadn't been born a girl, I might have become the greatest tailor in A'landi, sought after by merchants from one coast of the continent to the other.

"A tailor's worth is not measured by his fame, but by the happiness he brings," Mama said, seeing how disappointed Baba's words made me. "You will hold the seams of our family together, Maia. No other tailor in the world can do that."

I remembered beaming at her. Back then, all I wanted was for my family to be happy and whole like this—always.

But then Mama died, and everything changed.

We had been living in Gangsun, a key city along the Great Spice Road, and our shop occupied an entire half block. Baba was a well-respected tailor, known throughout southern A'landi for his skill at dressmaking. But ill times fell upon us, my mother's death opening the first crack in Baba's strong will.

He began to drink heavily—a way to drown his sorrows, he said. That didn't last long—in his grief, Baba's health deteriorated until he was unable to stomach any sort of spirits. He returned to his work at the shop, but he was never quite the same.

Customers noticed the decline in quality of Baba's sewing and mentioned it to my brothers. Finlei and Sendo never told him; they didn't have the heart. But a few years before the Five Winters' War, when I was ten, Finlei convinced Baba to leave Gangsun and move into a shophouse in Port Kamalan, a small coastal town along the fringes of the Road. The fresh sea air would be good for Baba, he insisted.

Our new home occupied the corner of Yanamer and Tongsa Streets, across from a shop that made hand-pulled noodles so long you could get full on just one, and a bakery that sold the best steamed buns and milk bread in the world—at least it tasted that way to my brothers and me when we were hungry, which we often were. But what I loved most was the beautiful view of the ocean. Sometimes while I watched the waves roll along the piers, I

secretly prayed that the sea would mend Baba's broken heart—the way it was slowly healing mine.

Business was best in the summers and winters, when all the caravans traveling east and west on the Great Spice Road stopped in Port Kamalan to enjoy our temperate weather. My father's little shop depended on a steady supply of indigo, saffron, ocher—colors for our dyes. It was a small town, so we not only tailored garments but also sold fabrics and threads. It had been a long time since Baba had crafted a gown worthy of a great lady, and when the war began, there was little business to be had anyway.

Misfortune followed us to our new home. Port Kamalan was far enough from the capital that I'd thought my brothers would never be drafted into the civil war that ravaged A'landi. But the hostilities between young Emperor Khanujin and the shansen, the country's most powerful warlord, showed no signs of abating, and the emperor needed more men to fight in his army.

Finlei and Sendo were of age, so they were conscripted first. I was young enough then that the idea of going to war was romantic to me. Having two brothers become soldiers felt honorable.

The day before they left, I was outside, painting on a swath of white cotton. The peach blossoms lining Yanamer Street made me sneeze, and I splattered the last of Baba's expensive indigo over my skirt.

Finlei laughed at me and wiped drops of paint from my nose.

"Don't fret," he said as I desperately tried to salvage as much of the paint as I could.

"It's eighty jens an ounce! And who knows when the dye merchants will be back?" I muttered, still scrubbing at my skirt. "It's getting too hot for them to cross the Road."

"Then I'll get you some during my travels," Finlei said. He tipped my chin toward him. "I'm going to see all of A'landi when I'm a soldier. Maybe I'll come back as a general."

“I hope you won’t be away as long as that!” I exclaimed.

Finlei’s face sobered. His eyes pooled black, and he pushed aside a wisp of my wind-tousled hair. “Take care of yourself, sister,” he said, his voice carrying both humor and sadness. “Don’t work so hard you—”

“Become the kite that never flies,” I finished for him. “I know.”

Finlei touched my cheek. “Watch over Keton. Make sure he doesn’t get into trouble.”

“Take care of Baba, too,” Sendo added, coming up behind me. He’d plucked a flower from the trees in front of our shop, and placed it above my ear. “And work on your calligraphy. I’ll be back soon to make sure your handwriting’s improved.” Sendo ruffled my hair. “You’re the lady of the house now.”

I bowed my head dutifully. “Yes, brothers.”

“You make it sound like I’m useless,” Keton cut in. Baba was shouting at him to finish his chores, and he winced.

A smile broke Finlei’s serious face. “Can you prove otherwise?”

Keton put his hands on his hips, and we all laughed.

“We’ll visit faraway places with the army,” Sendo said, his hand on my shoulder. “What can I bring back for you? Dyes from West Gangseng, maybe? Or pearls from the Majestic Harbor?”

“No, no,” I said. “Just come home safely. Both of you.” But then I paused.

Sendo prodded me. “What is it, Maia?”

My cheeks were hot, and I lowered my eyes to stare at my hands. “If you get to see Emperor Khanujin,” I began slowly, “draw his portrait, will you?”

Finlei's shoulders shook with mirth. "So you've heard how handsome he is from the village girls? Every one of them aspires to become one of the emperor's concubines."

I was so embarrassed I couldn't look at him. "I have no interest in becoming a concubine."

"You don't want to live in one of his four palaces?" Keton asked snidely. "I heard he has one for every season."

"Keton, that's enough," Sendo chided.

"I don't care about his palaces," I said, turning away from my youngest brother to Sendo. His eyes shone with gentleness—he'd always been my favorite brother, and I knew he would understand. "I want to know what he looks like so I can become his tailor one day. An imperial tailor."

Keton rolled his eyes at my confession. "That's as likely as you becoming his concubine!"

Finlei and Sendo glared at him.

"All right, then," Sendo promised, touching the freckles on my cheek. We were the only two of the family with freckles—a result of our hours daydreaming under the sun. "A portrait of the emperor for my talented sister, Maia."

I hugged him, knowing my request was very foolish but still hoping all the same.

If I'd known it was the last time we would all be together, I wouldn't have asked for anything.

...

Two years later, Baba received a notice that Finlei had been killed in battle. The imperial emblem stamped on the bottom of the letter was as red as freshly drawn blood, and hurriedly pressed so that the characters of Emperor Khanujin's name were smeared. Even months later, the memory would make me cry.

Then one night, with no warning, Keton ran away to join the army. All he left was a quickly scrawled note on top of my morning laundry—knowing it would be the first thing I saw when I woke.

I've been useless too long. I'm going to find Sendo and bring him home. Take care of Baba.

Tears filled my eyes, and I crumpled the note in my fist.

What did he know about fighting? Like me, he was lean as a reed, barely strong enough to hold up against the wind. He couldn't buy rice at the market without being swindled, and he always tried to talk his way out of a fight. How would he survive a war?

I was angry, too—because I couldn't go with him. If Keton thought *he* was useless, what was I? I couldn't fight in the army. And for all the thousands of hours I spent creating new stitches and drawing designs to sell, I could never become a master tailor. I could never take over Baba's shop. I was a girl. The best *I* could hope for was to marry well.

Baba never spoke of Keton's departure, would not speak of my youngest brother for months. But I saw how his fingers became stiff as stones; they could not even stretch wide enough to hold a pair of shears. He spent his days staring at the ocean as I took over our faltering shop. It was up to me to drum up business, to make sure my brothers had a home to return to.

No one had any need for silks and satins, not when our country was devouring itself from within. So I made hemp shirts for the local fishermen and linen dresses for their wives, and I spun flax into thread and mended soldiers' coats when they passed by. The fishermen gave us fish heads and

sacks of rice in return for my work, and it didn't seem right to charge the soldiers.

Toward the end of every month, I helped the women who were preparing their gifts for the dead—usually paper clothing, which was tricky to sew—to burn before the prayer shrines in honor of their ancestors. I stitched paper into the shoes of passing merchants and strings of coins into their belts to ward off pickpockets. I even repaired amulets for travelers who asked it of me, though I didn't believe in magic. Not then.

On days when there was no business and our supplies of wheat and rice were running dangerously low, I took out my rattan basket and filled it with a few spools of thread, a bolt of muslin, and a needle. I roamed the streets, going from door to door, asking if anyone had mending to be done.

But few ships docked at the port. Dust and shadows wreathed the empty streets.

The lack of work didn't bother me as much as the awkward encounters I'd begun to endure on my way home. I used to love going into the bakery across from our shop, but that changed during the war. For now when I returned to Yanamer Street, Calu the baker's son would be there waiting for me.

I didn't like Calu. It wasn't because he didn't serve in the army—he hadn't passed the imperial health examination, so he couldn't. It was because as soon as I turned sixteen, he got it into his head that I was going to be his wife.

"I hate seeing you beg for work like this," Calu told me one day. He waved me inside his father's bakery. The fragrance from the breads and cakes wafted out the door, and my mouth watered at the smell of yeast, fermented rice flour, and roasted peanuts and sesame seeds.

"It's better than starving."

He wiped red-bean paste off his palm. Sweat from his temples dripped into the bowl of dough on his table. Normally it would have made me