

THE DRAGON SONGS Saga
PREQUEL

PRELUDE TO INSURRECTION



A LEGENDS OF TIVARA SHORT STORY

JC KANG



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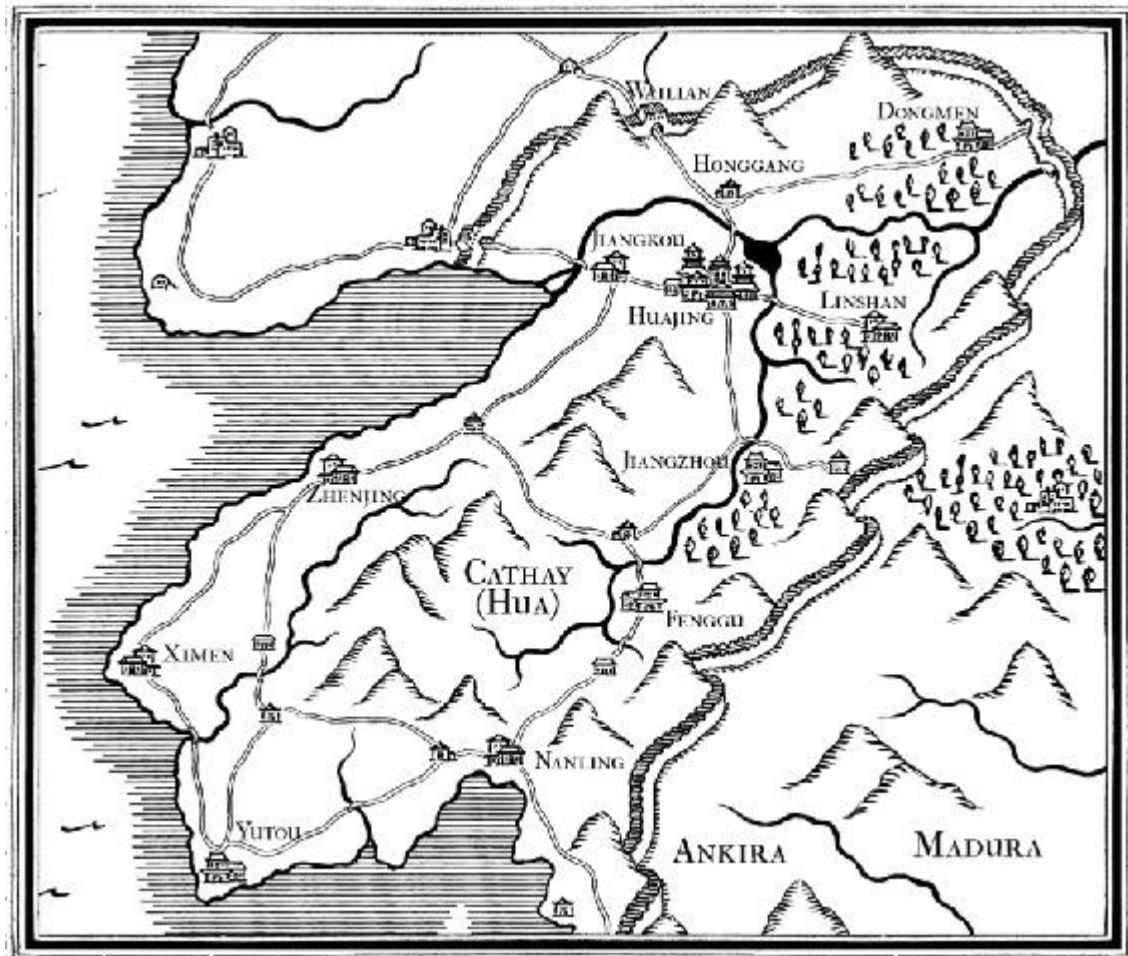
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Map of Cathay





Part 1

Jie's eyes stung, and the duel had nearly claimed her fingers, but she'd finally vanquished the last of the onions. Just in time, too, as Lord Shi's seven-year-old son, Ren, reached for the platter of candies. He tripped over a rock and stumbled toward the roasting pig in the fire pit. With a sweep of her hand, she caught him by his silk sleeve, avoiding an unsavory addition to dinner.

The servants' collective gasp might've sucked all the air from the outdoor kitchen.

Nursemaid Lan covered her mouth in a silent scream. When she finally found her voice, her tone straddled anger and relief. "Sneaking out again? If you don't behave, Young Lord, the Black Fists will kidnap you and turn you into a sneak-thief."

Jie buried a snicker. Frustrated mothers leveled the same empty threat in every home throughout the realm. Never had an unruly child been spirited away in the middle of the night by the boogiemaster.

As the adopted daughter of the Black Lotus clan master, she'd know. After all, most Black Fists were orphans like her; and rather than becoming

thieves, they served as the Emperor's spies, defending the realm from threats the citizenry would never know about.

Threats like Ren's father, Lord Shi.

She straightened the wailing brat's embroidered green robes. The only thing the pudgy kid could defend the realm from was the legions of sweets he ravaged. She knelt down and pressed his next conquest—a sugar pastry—into his palm. With only the rebukes of the Black Lotus masters to draw on, she summoned her most mothering voice. “No bones broken, no tendons torn, you're okay.”

Either her words and gentle tone had soothed him, or maybe the candy could take credit. The lordling grinned with fat cheeks. Bits of tongue pressed through the gaps in the lines of enameled soldiers. His adult teeth might never replenish his ranks for his war of attrition against sweets.

After all, he'd likely die in the imperial army's surprise assault.

“He's a clever one. Always sneaking out.” The nursemaid's gaze raked over Jie's dirty cotton dress, pausing at her pointed ears. “You're new, aren't you?”

“Yes, Miss Lan. I'm Jie.” Jie sucked her lower lip and finger-combed hair over her ears. It'd been so long since she'd mingled with non-clan members, she forgotten how heavy the stares weighed. “I just started yesterday.”

“I'm sorry. I've never seen an elf—half-elf—before.” Lan cast her eyes down, then looked up with a smile too genuine for even a Black Lotus master to fake. She pulled out two hairpins and proffered them. “This will help hide your ears. If that's what you want.”

Jie stared at the pins, made of lacquer with inlaid mother-of-pearl. They were probably the young woman's most prized possessions. Perhaps it was an act of atonement, or maybe she wanted to exchange pins to declare sisterhood like girls often did. Not that Jie could part with the lockpicks and throwing spikes that held up her hair. She closed the woman's hand around them. “They're beautiful, but I couldn't...”

Lan bowed her head. “My thanks for saving the Young Lord. He’s fast and naughty, and wants to talk to the miners and explore the mines. It takes all of us to ensure he doesn’t run off into the camp.” She pointed to the haphazard sprawl of tents and hastily-constructed wood buildings just beyond the cooking area, spiraling out from the central keep like a web spun by a drunken spider.

Jie followed the gesture. Men milled about, pickaxes and shovels in hand. The layers of soot and dirt clinging to their trousers, shirts, and skin made the workers indistinguishable from one another. How sad their circumstances must’ve been for them to agree to work underground from sun up to sun down.

Her eyes tracked one team’s line back to a mine, the one heavily guarded by soldiers armed with muskets. The same group of burly men always worked there, bringing in crates from other mines. Flashes periodically blinked like lightning from inside. The other laborers’ speculations ranged from gas igniting to the snores of the mythical guardian dragon.

Whatever was down there had to be the reason why Lord Shi had occupied foreign territory, outside the protection of the Great Wall, without permission from the Emperor. Unless the clan solved this mystery within two days, the imperial army would sweep in and punish Lord Shi at the point of a spear. Even if they weren’t the intended targets, the poor miners and servants might catch an errant arrow or find themselves trampled under a horse hoof.

The senior-most maid, Fei, lowered the platter of roasted meats and autumn vegetables. She leaned against Jie. “You’re handy with a knife. I’m happy you’re here to help. As long as you remember that *he’s* mine.” With a grin, she pointed her chin at a cook.

The cook’s pot belly suggested he spent a little too much time tasting his work. He turned and puckered his lips in their direction. “Hurry, Fei. The lord is entertaining foreign guests, and my masterpiece is getting cold while you chatter.”

“I’ll take it.” Jie swept the platter from Fei’s hands. With a quick bow to her gawking colleagues, she trotted down the hard-packed path. At last, here was a chance to get close to Lord Shi, and maybe find out just why he risked antagonizing both his foreign hosts and the emperor. She’d been long relegated to mission lookout due to her superior senses; this important task was a first chance to prove elvish features didn’t compromise her infiltration skills.

Red banners with the Great Wall insignia of Chengfu County lined the road, casting long shadows in the setting sun. It took only a minute to reach the open doors of the three-tiered main keep. Though structurally complete, its steeply-pitched tile roofs and plaster walls had yet to be painted. Guards in lamellar armor and steel helms, armed with spears and broadswords, waved her through.

Unshuttered light bauble lamps illuminated the plain wood and plaster walls. Designed to deter spies, the floorboards chirped like a nightingale, even under her light weight. A hallway in the Black Lotus Temple was similarly floored, so the adepts could practice crossing without a sound; still, it took practice to find the right places to step in any given castle, and right now, with so many eyes around, she’d look ridiculous tiptoeing around and letting the snacks get cold.

At another set of double doors stood the middle-aged steward in light red robes, flanked by two guards. One stood out with his fair hair and pale skin. His blue surcoat with its yellow eagle crest marked him as a royal guard from the Kingdom of Rotuvi, Lord Shi’s ostensible host.

The steward glared at her. “What kept you so long, girl? And where’s Fei?”

Girl? Curse the elf blood in her veins, making her appear less than half her twenty-nine years. Jie dipped her head in contrived remorse. The food would’ve arrived earlier had she let the Lord’s son burn off his baby fat.

With a last scathing glance, the steward slid the doors open and hustled her in. “*Jue-ye*, refreshments have arrived.”

A cool autumn breeze drifted in through the unshuttered windows to the left, and blew dust from the exposed beams in the ceiling. Unlike the rest of the keep, this room boasted decorations worthy of a lord. An elaborately carved writing desk, with a stack of rice paper and several brushes, stood against the wall directly across from the entrance. Brush paintings and calligraphy hung in long scrolls between the windows. Magic imbued into the script and images evoked a sense of calm and deference, though clan training in resisting such magic muted the effect on Jie.

The middle-aged foreigner, however, looked to be under their spell. Eyes glazed over, he slouched in a bloodwood chair angled to the side of a small matching table. On the other side, Lord Shi sat perfectly straight, his red robes doing little to hide the rotund belly his son was working hard to match. The gentle arc of the chairs suggested friendly equality, even if magic put the two on uneven footing. Neither looked to have touched their cups of rice wine.

“Come, girl, serve Ambassador Borivoi.” Lord Shi beckoned her, his sausage fingers waving as his eyes focused on the platter. He switched to Arkothi, the language of the North, which she’d pretended not to understand when the steward hired her. “Ambassador, please enjoy some of Cathay’s cuisine.”

Ambassador Borivoi’s eyes shifted from the platter to the lord. “I would certainly enjoy it more if we were eating in Cathay, instead of Rotuvi’s territory.”

Jie treaded across the soft wool rug and knelt by the table. Holding the tray in one hand, she chopsticked choice slices of roasted meat onto a small plate beside the ambassador.

How easy this was! Perhaps the Black Lotus Clan’s legendary Beauty, one of three young masters struck down on an ill-fated mission thirty years before, had started with a mission like this. Jie worked at the deliberate pace of a Tai Chi master.

“Ambassador, your gracious king agreed to let me come.” Lord Shi gestured out the window. “Look how many of your people are now working

the mines instead of fomenting rebellion.”

The ambassador shook his head. “He did not give you permission to build a castle, or to plant crops. Nor to bring armed men.”

“We must keep order, after all, and protect the mines. We also need to feed everyone.” He leaned in. “As your king and I agreed, we will split the gold, fifty-fifty. Our mining and farming expertise will turn these barren hills into your country’s most profitable region.”

Jie set a plate before Lord Shi. So Lord Shi was looking for gold. No amount of it was worth risking the wrath of the emperor.

The ambassador leaned back, creating distance. “We have yet to see any gold, nor have you explained the fortress.”

“My geomancer tells me we are very close to a major vein. Please have patience.” Lord Shi produced a nugget, half the size of a thumb, and pressed it into the ambassador’s palm.

Jie nearly dropped a braised carrot. Geomancers deceived the superstitious by peddling their expertise in *feng shui* for architecture. The only gold they ever located came from other people’s purses.

And indeed, the rock was pyrite. Fool’s gold.

The ambassador’s hand closed around the worthless nugget. “The fort tells me you have found something already. The food supply suggests you plan on staying a while. You have two days. If we do not receive ten thousand *kroons*, our army waiting across the river will come and seize your mines and crops.” The ambassador was apparently better at diplomacy than direction; he was pointing the wrong way.

Jie sucked on her lower lip. Little did either man know that Cathay’s Imperial Army of the North waited on the other side of the Great Wall. They were ready to sweep in and punish Lord Shi within two days as well, if Jie didn’t give them a reason to call off the assault. Still, they wouldn’t suffer a foreign army doing the work for them, so there was no telling who they’d attack. No matter what, the shanty town and its innocent denizens would be caught in between.



Part 2

Jie had swiped the pyrite from the ambassador's pocket as he left, and now turned it over in her hand. Crouched by the door to the main keep's armory, she wondered if Lord Shi knew his find was worthless. To think he was risking a slow death for nothing.

She pocketed the pyrite and pulled the lockpick from her hair. With a few quick twists, the lock yielded. Up to now, she could reasonably say she got lost. Entering the armory, with no escape route, could mean trouble. She took a quick look down the corridor. Nothing. Only floorboards chirping in the distance. Pushing the door open, she slipped in.

Her elf vision only revealed blurry shapes in shades of green. The armory must've been well to the interior of the castle, maybe partially underground. Leaving the tray of food inside the door, she shut it and crept in.

She produced her own light bauble from a pocket sewn in her sleeve, illuminating the room.

Muskets, spears, broadswords, and repeating crossbows hung from hooks on the walls. Several bundles of crossbow bolts, crates of musketballs, and kegs of firepowder stood in orderly rows.

“Hello,” a high-pitched voice called from the entrance.

Jie’s heart leaped into her throat. How had she not heard someone approach on the nightingale floors, or even open the door? She spun around, hand reaching for her bladed hairpin.

At the entrance, the lord’s son crouched by the tray of food. A slice of roast pork disappeared into his mouth.

Logic said to not leave witnesses. Kill the boy, hide the body. They’d think he ran off to the mines. Any number of weapons were well within reach.

No, there had to be a better way. All kids liked games, even at the temple where they played *Pin the Knife in the Donkey* and *Dodge Blades*. She hustled over to the lordling. “I was playing Hide-and-Go-Stalk with Nursemaid Lan. Do you want to join?”

His expression brightened like a Black Fist trainee receiving his first throwing star.

“But first, promise you won’t tell anyone you saw me. I’ll bring you candy.”

If he nodded any faster, he’d give himself a concussion.

She turned back to the room. “Let’s play the counting game. Twenty muskets—”

“*Two hundred* muskets, three thousand musketballs, five hundred swords, three hundred spears, two hundred repeaters. Yay, I win!”

It was all Jie could do not to gawk. Some clan members could count on sight, though only after years of training. She pointed down the hall. “The floors sing. I didn’t hear you come.”

“I’ll show you.” He grinned.

Out in the hall, the boy zigzagged on his tiptoes, in a repeating pattern. Jie followed his lead, never once eliciting a chirp. Maybe he’d been trained as spy, and he’d betray her.

She reached for her bladed hairpin. No. No child his age in the clan could replicate this feat. She withdrew the pyrite and gave it to him. “Young Lord, it’s your turn. See if you can collect some shiny rocks like this before anyone finds you. I’ll give you a head start.”

“Easy!” He dashed down the hall, sending the floorboards into a chorus of chirps.

She trailed a distance behind him, pausing at corners and listening for his tittering footsteps. He wasn’t heading toward the entrance, but rather in the direction of Lord Shi’s quarters. Maybe the foolish lord had a whole chest of fool’s gold.

At the end of the corridor, the boy pushed against a blank space on the wall. Lines of light appeared first, then a secret door swung open. An escape route, in all likelihood. Jie waited a few minutes before following. Light baubles illuminated a long passage, which emerged out on a hillside. The iridescent moon, never moving from its reliable spot in the south, hung just ahead, waxing to half. The boy’s red robes flashed in the twilight as he disappeared down a path. She sprinted after him.

She came to a ridge, which he was just starting to climb down. Maybe it would’ve been better to let him stumble and break his neck, leaving no witnesses to her spying. No. She reached down and grabbed his wrist. “It’s too late now. We can play again tomorrow. Is this where you can find the shiny rocks?”

Head bobbing, he pointed.

At the base of the ridge was an unguarded mine. Beside it stood an enormous dome of bricks, with wisps of smoke just barely visible in the low light. From the stench of it, they were cooking rotten eggs. Just beyond that, mounds of dirt smoldered as well.

“What is it?”

The boy shrugged. “They get the pretty rocks from the cave. They put them in the oven.”

Jie sucked on her lower lip. Perhaps Lord Shi was trying to melt out gold from pyrite, a failing proposition for sure.

“Come on, we’ll play again tomorrow. Remember, it’s our secret.” She took the kid’s hand. It felt plump and smooth compared to the clan children’s calloused palms, but it still felt...nostalgic.



Part 3

Jie peered out from the wooden hovel she shared with several other female servants. The iridescent moon waxed toward its second gibbous, indicating that it was about four hours before midnight. Nothing stirred in the sprawl of tents, save for the occasional scurrying of a rat. She had an hour to deliver a report to the clan courier waiting at the edge of the camp. Yet, having told the steward she couldn't read, she hadn't risked bringing paper or writing instruments.

She tiptoed through the bedrolls, looking at the peaceful faces of sleeping young women. They'd all been kind to her. If the Rotuvi army attacked first, there was no doubt what would happen to these poor girls.

Her pack served as a pillow. From its secret compartment, she withdrew a stealth suit, tool pouch, and three flashpowder packets. With a last look at her sleeping roommates, she slipped out into the night.

Outside, the white and blue moons had yet to rise. In the darkness, Jie's elf vision perceived the world in shades of greys and greens. The guard outside the door, ostensibly there to protect the maidservants from the laborers, snored on the ground. She crept by and headed toward the kitchen.

There, she shrugged out of her dress and hid it under a cauldron. She slipped into her stealth suit and pulled up the masked hood. Borrowing a

knife, she slunk toward the main keep. Periodic flashes of light burst from the guarded mine.

Bauble lamps illuminated the two guards outside the doors. Jie slunk along the light's edge and circled around to the room where Lord Shi had met with Ambassador Borivoi. Finding handholds in the mortar between the foundation stones, she climbed up to the now-shuttered window and listened. Silence.

She eased one of the leaves open and scanned the room. Nobody was there. The paper and brush from the earlier meeting remained on the desk. The room darkened when she slipped in and closed the shutter, so she withdrew her own light bauble and tiptoed to the desk. Taking the brush, she jotted a coded briefing.

Lord made deal with Rotuvi king. Mining for Gold. Found Pyrite. King is angry. Enemy army to attack in two days.

The floorboards chirped, and voices in the hallway approached. Footsteps stopped at the doors. Light shined through the crack between them. She evaluated the room. The chairs, table, and desk would provide no cover.

Holding the message between her lips and stuffing her light bauble into her pocket, Jie tip-toe-sprinted toward the corner, pop-vaulted between the walls, and wedged herself between two of the rafters with her hands.

The doors opened, revealing the steward holding a lamp, and Lord Shi. The silhouettes of a short soldier and a tall, lanky man stood behind them. Jie pressed her back against the ceiling. The beams now blocked her line of sight, but at least they'd have to be right under her and happen to look up to see an eavesdropping half-elf. Her improvisation was worthy of the Surgeon, the second of the deceased Black Lotus masters. She closed her eyes and listened.

The lord stomped across the room to the desk. He opened a drawer and whipped out a sheet of paper. "What do you think, General Lu? Do you have enough men to hold the hills?"

The short soldier's footsteps came to a stop right beneath her. "*Jue-ye*, my scouts say they number ten thousand strong, armed with spears, swords, and crossbows. We have a thousand men and three cannon. If we blow one of the two bridges, it will force them into a bottleneck. We'll rain bolts and musketballs on them. Whoever makes it across must then charge uphill and breach our palisade."

Jie's arms burned from the strain of holding herself in place. Sweat gathered on her brow. It would trickle and splatter on General Lu's nose if he stood there much longer spouting his hare-brained ideas: A thousand men might hold the high ground for now, but Rotuvi could keep sending more troops, while Lord Shi's firepowder and musketball supplies would dwindle. Then there was the imperial army they didn't know about, attacking from the other front.

Lord Shi's question came out as a growl. "How much longer, alchemist?"

The alchemist took several steps in, his long stride and light weight suggesting he was the skinny man at the back. His refined accent was that of a scholar from the capital. "The pyrite extraction process for the latest batch is done. It's been taken to the secret mine."

So Lord Shi knew it wasn't really gold. Now if they'd just hurry up and reveal what they were extracting.

Lord Shi's brush swished across paper. "Prepare samples to send to the lords of the North. The empire has exploited us for too long; once they see we don't need them anymore, they'll join me."

Jie would've gasped if it were safe to do so just then. The two bridges General Lu referred to were those from Cathay, not Rotuvi. Lord Shi wasn't looking to defend this land against foreigners; he was planning on defying the emperor. Not only that, he wanted the mineral-rich North to ally with him. The imperial army would be caught between this fort and the Great Wall.

She needed to infiltrate the secret mine and find out what samples could coax an entire region into rebellion. Now, if only Lord Shi would

hurry up and leave, and take the general with him before his bloodlust got doused with half-elf sweat. It was pooling on her nose now.

A distraction, maybe. Something important. Modulating her voice with a *Mockingbird's Deception* to sound like Lord Shi's son, Jie threw her voice to the doors with a *Ghost Echo*. "Daddy!" She shuddered. The tone pitched too high, like a Night Blossom beckoning lustful men in the Floating World, but at least it sounded like it came from the doors. She adjusted her voice. "Come here."

General Lu turned and took a step, just as her sweat plopped soundlessly into the rug. Lord Shi, too, headed toward the door with the alchemist. The steward folded up the message as he hastily left. The room blinked into darkness. Their chirping footsteps faded.

About time! Leg and arm muscles sore, Jie dropped to the floor. Shaking out her poor limbs, she wrote a new message, blew the ink dry, and folded it in the clan's six-crease pattern. It would tear if opened by anyone untrained in the art.

Jie darted to the window, pushed open the shutter, and slipped out. She looked to the iridescent moon, now waxing halfway to its third gibbous. It was almost too late to deliver the note.

She raced down the path and through the camp, pausing to evade the occasional sentry, or duck behind a tent when the mine entrance flashed. When she arrived at the rendezvous point at the tree line, she let out a sparrow call.

A shape emerged from behind a tree. A shortsword hung at its side. "My Little Sister. Late for once."

Jie snorted. She'd taken Zheng Tian under her wing when he first arrived at the Black Lotus Temple as a shy ten-year-old. He'd called her *Big Sister* back then, but over six years, he'd physically matured into a han—strapping—young man.

Meanwhile, her elf blood had left her prepubescent and dismally flat. She flicked the message at him. "Here."

“What does it say?” He swept it out of the air. He had yet to master the unfolding technique, though knowing his mind for puzzles, he’d probably be able to piece the shreds back together if he *did* try to open it.

“Lord Shi is planning a rebellion and wants to drag the North in with him.”

Tian tapped his chin. “With what? He’s in foreign territory. He’s risking the wrath of foreigners. And the Emperor.”

Her thoughts, exactly. “Something’s in the mine. Come with me.”

Tian cocked his head and held up the message. “I need to get to the waystation. By the fourth gibbous. Otherwise, they’ll assume you blew your cover. The imperial army will advance. And get caught between Lord Shi and his friends.”

Was it worth the risk? The secret mine likely held the answer, and with at least four guards, two Black Fists were better than one.



Part 4

Hiding by the tent closest to the secret mine's entrance, Jie cast a quick glance at the iridescent moon. It waxed just past its third gibbous. Tian had less than an hour to make it to the waystation, a half-hour away at full sprint. Maybe this was a bad idea.

A trail of three light baubles illuminated the open space between her hiding place and the twenty paces to the cave. There were no boulders, trees, or even shrubs to provide cover; just several rocks. Unlike the sentry outside the women's lodgings, the four guards here stood alert. In the time it took to dash across the space, the soldiers could take aim and shoot. An arrow might be possible to catch, but a musketball was another story.

She tapped in clan code on Tian's arm. *You, second light. Me, first and third. You, right two.*

Incredulousness couldn't be conveyed through code, yet somehow Tian's response managed it. *You sure?*

The plan certainly wasn't worthy of the Architect, the last of the three legendary young Black Lotus masters. Nor was Tian as good as the Surgeon, and she certainly didn't qualify as the Beauty. At least not yet. Still, it might get them close without getting riddled with musketball holes.

Now, she tapped. She picked up a rock and flung one at the first bauble. It smashed, its light blacking out. Tian dashed closer and hurled two

stones at the second. Shattering glass and darkness indicated one had hit. Just one remained, shedding light out to five paces from the cave entrance.

The soldiers shouldered their muskets.

Jie surged after him and threw her voice with a *Ghost Echo*, originating to the far right. “Don’t shoot. We’re just looking for a private place.”

“Stop!” A guard leveled his weapon on that spot. The others followed suit.

Jie kicked a rock, sending it spinning and arcing into the last bauble at the cave entrance. In the darkness, her elf vision took over. The four guards tightened their formation at the mine entrance, their guns sweeping back and forth. Without waiting, Tian slid to the right. Having spent a year blindfolded, he deftly avoided obstacles as he closed in rapid silence. Jie flanked to the left.

“The lights!” one guard yelled.

“Sound the alarm.” Another swept his gun left to right and back.

Light flashed from the cave, illuminating her. Jie’s vision blurred at the sudden brightness, and the shapes of the guards turned their guns at her. Two, three shots rang out.

Dog farts! In a few moments, the entire camp would rouse to life. She dove into a forward roll and sprung up where the right-most guard should be. Her wrist contacted his forearm. She swept a leg behind him. With her other hand, she reached for his head and jerked him to the ground. A phoenix-eye fist to the temple knocked him out.

Her vision adjusted. The other guard dropped his musket. He swept his sword from its scabbard and arced it in her direction. She could’ve stood where she was, and the blade would’ve passed over her head if she were even close enough to hit. Nonetheless, she dove shoulder-first into the man’s shin. Hooking a hand behind his ankle, she sent him sprawling to the ground. A twist of her body dislocated his foot. She rolled over and delivered an elbow to his face.

Springing to her feet, she looked around. The third guard lay moaning on the ground, while the fourth slumped in Tian's chokehold. Behind them, confused voices erupted through the shanty-town.

Time was running out. She bent down and liberated a guard of his dagger. "Get to the waystation."

Tian drove his heel into the semi-conscious guard, then turned and ran.

Jie dashed into the mine. Her night vision failed not far from the cave entrance. The stench of rotten eggs and smoke assaulted her nose. She pulled out her light bauble, ready to hide it if she ran into someone.

The smooth passage was oval-shaped, with the ceiling rising not much higher than a grown man. It was wide enough that four men could march abreast. It descended at an easy-to-manage slope. Lights flashed periodically. A swarm of bats zigzagged by, forcing her to duck.

Muffled voices emanated from up ahead, where the tunnel opened up into a brightly-lit grotto. Shadows shifted on the cave walls. At the edge of the roughhewn cavern, she paused and looked.

The walls and ceiling sparkled white, though it'd been scraped away in some places. A soldier rolled a keg down a side tunnel, while another pried open a crate and then followed the first. Three rows of crates formed a U-shape around a long table, where three more men weighed powders on scales. Beside the table sat another keg.

"More charcoal." A tall, lanky man in long robes gestured toward one of his assistants. His voice was that of the alchemist from earlier.

The assistant troweled out a black powder from one of the crates, into a large bowl. He passed it to the alchemist, who mixed the charcoal with yellow and white powders in a large ceramic jar. Taking a pinch, he set it on a platter. He struck a stone with a piece of metal, sending sparks into the mixture.

It flashed.

Jie sucked on her lower lip. It all made sense now: The bats and sparkling white walls meant saltpeter. The rotten-egg smell, sulfur. And charcoal. Lord Shi was making firepowder. The alchemist with the formal accent must've been privy to the secret formula, the one which gave Cathay an advantage over its neighbors. No wonder General Lu thought they could hold out against a siege.

She studied the cavern's texture. Several counties in the North mined saltpeter. They'd mined so much that they had to go deeper and into more dangerous places to find it. The clan had noted the lords of those counties complaining about quotas. With Lord Shi sitting on a new source, in a defensible part of a foreign country, his insurrection might actually succeed.

Voices came from the head of the mine entrance—the only way out, unless one of the side tunnels led back to the surface. And first, she needed to deal with the traitorous alchemist and his assistants, lest they spread a state secret.

Taking a deep breath, she hurled her knife into the alchemist's throat. His three assistants watched wide-eyed as he choked up blood. He slumped to the floor. The jar of firepowder slipped from his hands and rolled half a pace across the ground.

The jar... Tian might be able to calculate the yield and blast pressure, but for Jie, it was guesswork. The cost of being wrong meant having half-elf innards splattered to the cave walls.

As the others crowded around the alchemist, Jie flung two flash packets at the firepowder trail, spun, and sprinted toward the mine entrance. A red flare lit up from behind, followed by fizzling and dancing shadows. Then, pottery shattered. Screams and coughs echoed from the cave.

Jie ground to a halt. Voices and footsteps came from the mine entrance. The tunnel was too narrow for her to get by, and if the two distinct coughs and one scream were any indication, all three of the assistants still lived. She turned back to the cavern.

Inside, the two coughing men covered their eyes with their sleeves and waved away the thinning smoke. Pottery shards left bloody marks in their robes. The third swatted at his blazing robe, spreading the flames.

Jie stayed low as she pattered over to the alchemist's body. She jerked her knife free and crept to the closest assistant, who'd suffered cuts on his upper body. He moved his arm away from his eyes just in time to see her plunge the blade between his ribs and into his lung. His face contorted, and his mouth opened in a silent scream.

Bile rose in her throat. She'd killed from a distance before, but never so close. The flames would claim the second man, but there was still the third to murder, up close and in cold blood. Now, footsteps thumped from a side tunnel—the soldiers who'd been moving the kegs.

Her next victim rubbed his eyes. All his wounds were down around his legs, where the pottery had shredded his robes. Jie leaped over, slunk low, and jammed the knife into his thigh, right at the femoral artery. Blood belched out from the stab. She looked up toward the sound of footsteps.

Two soldiers emerged from the side tunnel.

Jie ducked down behind the row of crates.

“What happened here?”

“An accident?”

“Help!” her last victim rasped.

Jie crawled low and fast around the crates, in the opposite direction of the approaching voices. She rounded the row just as the men reached the table.

“Heavens!” Footsteps quickened to the scene.

Jie hazarded a glance over the crates. The soldiers were kneeling by the man whose thigh she'd stabbed. She slunk toward the side tunnel.

“It was a girl.” the dying assistant's voice came out weaker now.

The men stood and looked around. One met her eyes.

He drew his broadsword and pointed. “There!”

More witnesses. More lives to take. If they didn’t kill her first. Unlike the assistants, these were trained soldiers, nearly twice her size. Their broadswords gave them a reach advantage over her knife and dagger. She raced into the side tunnel, and they lumbered after her.

Light baubles on the ground illuminated the passage. Although it wasn’t much wider than the access tunnel, it had rough walls and support beams. She stomped on each light as she passed, hoping the guards might trip in the darkness and fall on their swords.

No such luck; and several paces ahead, the tunnel opened into another cavern. So much open space would give them an advantage.

Jie stopped at the last light bauble and smashed it. She spun, dagger in one hand and knife in the other. With the light from the second cavern at her back, she’d appear as a silhouette to them.

The first soldier lifted his sword, but it clanged into the ceiling. In that moment, she leaped forward with a thrust, which punched through the man’s unarmored belly. He grunted as the second hip-pushed him aside and started to swing his sword. It caught on the wall in a shower of sparks.

Jie yanked the dagger free of the first man, the backward arc slashing through the second’s palmar tendons. As his sword clattered to the ground, she jammed her knife between his ribs. Three steps back put her into the cavern.

The second man stared at his lifeless fingers while holding his other hand over his flank wound. Sword dangling in a limp grip, the first stumbled into the cavern after her. His mouth hung open, and blood flecked his lips.

Surging forward, Jie set the dagger on his sword arm, and stabbed to the base of his throat with the knife. His attempt to lift his weapon drew his wrist across her blade. Her knife bit deep into his neck. Behind him, the second man crumpled.

She blew out a breath and surveyed the carnage. She'd just defeated two superior warriors by using the terrain to her advantage. Spinning around, she scanned for another exit from the cavern.

The walls had been scraped clean of saltpeter. At least a dozen kegs marked *firepowder* stood in the middle of the room. And there were no exits.

Trapped.

A commotion of voices rumbled from the first grotto. No doubt they would check on the firepowder supplies and find two bodies and a bloodied half-elf girl in a stealth suit.

She stripped down to her undergarments and wedged her suit and knife between some kegs. She yanked the pants off the dead man. Lying down, she lugged and tugged him on top of her. Then, she conjured the saddest thing she could think of: being abandoned by a philandering elf father, adopted by a Black Fist clan just because she had superior senses. Tears welled in her eyes and clogged her nose.

Footsteps approached. A shadow appeared above her. He turned back toward the entrance. "There's a girl here."

More footsteps grew louder as he pulled the body off her. He offered a cape. "Are you all right?"

Lord Shi came up behind him.

Sniffling, Jie took the cape and covered herself. Freeing a hand, she pointed at the body and forced a distraught tone. "He... He tried to..." She hung her head and tightened the cape around her. "He was on top of me, but I grabbed his...dagger...and..."

Lord Shi studied her through narrow eyes. "What were you doing down here?"

She sniffed. "The Young Lord. I heard the shouts and came out. I saw the Young Lord run past the sleeping guards and into the mine. But then, the men grabbed me. They ripped my clothes. They..." She burst into tears.

“Find my son,” Lord Shi said. “Take the girl to my receiving room. Bring clothes and keep a close eye on her.”

Trembling all over in a performance worthy of a stage actor, Jie hung her head and followed the escort of guards. Hopefully, an escape route would present itself before they uncovered her stealth suit.



Part 5

Wearing a simple dress that must've belonged to a water buffalo, Jie knelt on the carpet in Lord Shi's audience room, head bowed before his chair. The clothes hung from her small frame like laundry left out to dry. Guards stood at each window, blocking all escape routes. General Lu watched her through narrow eyes.

The doors behind her opened. A set of heavy footsteps matched with lighter ones. Lord Shi came around and sat in his chair, his son at his side.

"My son says he was in his room sleeping."

Jie raised her head and faced the boy.

His eyes widened.

She turned to the lord. "I swear. Young Lord Shi wanted to see the mines. He thought he'd find *candies*." She shot the kid a meaningful look. Would he take the tacit bribe? Her fists clenched tight.

The boy hung his head and burst into tears. "I'm sorry, Father."

Lord Shi patted his son on the head and faced her. "It looks like I owe you a debt of gratitude. You will be rewarded."

More than he could imagine, once she escaped. Jie bowed her head. "Thank you, My Lord. The best reward would be to allow me to go to bed."

"Yes, of course. You will stay in the keep." Lord Shi peered at her.

A reward, or precaution? Either way, it would be harder to escape compared to the servants' hovel. She shook her head. "I would rather stay with my friends. My things are there, too."

"Nonsense. It will be more comfortable, and you will be protected, close to the officers' quarters. I'll have your things brought to you." He motioned to General Lu. "General, escort the girl to her room."

"As you command." The general bowed and gestured her out.

For now, she was stuck deeper in the dragon's jaws. She followed General Lu through the chirping halls.

When they were alone, he stopped. "One thing I don't understand is, we didn't find your clothes in the mine."

Jie's stomach leapt into her throat. Perhaps he was sharper than he appeared.

Time to use his suspicions against him. She looked left to right, then pulled him into a side room. She yanked his straightsword free and placed the tip at his throat. "I'm a scout for the imperial army, which waits a days' march away. My partner has already revealed your troop numbers and supplies. Even if all three thousand of your musketballs find their mark, they'll still outnumber you a ten-to-one. Then, there's the Rotuvi army to consider."

If his mouth could gape any wider, a fist would fit in. "Why are you telling me this?"

"To give you a chance to resolve this problem with minimal bloodshed. The emperor has an offer: capture Lord Shi and turn over your firepowder, and His Majesty will give you a command of an imperial outpost here." Or at least, she'd suggest it to the clan, in hopes that they'd suggest it to the emperor.

General Lu's forehead bunched up and his lips squeezed tight. Good, he was at least considering the offer. Or perhaps he was constipated. If he

strained any harder, smoke might blow from his ears. “I agree to His Exaltedness’ terms.”



Part 6

Jie zigzagged in silence over the nightingale floors to the Young Lord's room. Sliding the door open, she crept inside.

The child jolted up from his bed. His startled eyes met hers before softening. "Miss Jie, why are you here?"

It was amazing how alert and perceptive he was. Perhaps it helped him find candy better. "You'll be in big trouble if you stay. I'm taking you somewhere safe."

"Will there be candy?"

Jie sucked on her lower lip. After a pampered childhood, he'd face hardships. But better that than being executed as a traitor's son. "No. But you'll play lots of games. Pin the Knife in the Donkey, Dodge Blades, Hide-and-Go-Stalk..."

THE END (for now)



Excerpt from [Songs of Insurrection](#), Book 1 of the Dragon Songs Saga.

Two years after Prelude to Insurrection...

Jie picked her way among the cargo, glancing back at every voice and footstep. Red paint marked contents and destinations. The bulk of the crates were labelled as Ayuri gooseweed and Levanthi spices, imported by Golden Fu Trading Company, bound for Nanling Province's villa in the capital. Tian's suspicions, though rarely wrong, were wrong now. Hardly worth the risk of mingling among boisterous sailors. If they discovered her, found out she was a girl—

The smell of rotten eggs, unmistakable but likely undetectable to a human nose, caught her attention. She sniffed, following the scent to several kegs. The writing marked the contents as turmeric, a ubiquitous ingredient of Ayuri cooking, originating from Pelastya and bound for Wailian County.

Jie examined one of the kegs. Well-sealed, no residue. There was no way of telling the contents without opening it. However, turmeric didn't smell like rotting eggs, and Pelastya did not grow turmeric. It did have volcanoes and sulfur mines.

Sulfur, bound for Wailian County, the world's only major source of saltpeter. As clan master's daughter, she was privy to the closely guarded recipe for firepowder. The only major ingredient left would be charcoal.

Against the laws of interdependence that kept the nation at peace, someone was making firepowder in the rebellious North. If that was the mysterious substance they'd found in the warehouse, it was being sent south to Yutou Province. An alliance of North and South, ready to fall on the capital.

Jie needed to alert the clan. She started back toward the hatch.

“You!” a male voice called.

Trapped like a rat. Avoiding the sailor’s gaze, Jie ducked back down among the kegs of sulfur bound for Wailian County. It might be used to cure scabies and ringworm, but there was enough here to put every herb store and acupuncture clinic in the North out of business. No, against the *Tianzi’s* law, someone in Wailian was undoubtedly making firepowder and shipping it south.

Getting the message to the clan would be difficult now that someone had spotted her. Near the only exit, seven different voices and hurried footsteps of varying lengths and weights echoed in the cargo hold.

“Are you sure it wasn’t just rats?”

“It would have been a huge rat. No, it’s an intruder.”

“Inform the quartermaster.”

Jie sucked her bottom lip. They knew she was here, and there was only one way out.

Winches and gears creaked. The platform to the main deck clunked up, and the door clanked shut.

“Fan out,” a male voice called from near the hatch.

Jie leaned forward from between two kegs and peeked out. Three men congregated near the now-raised platform. Four others searched among the crates and kegs. Shadows danced as they raised and waved their light bauble lamps.

Until the hatch opened, there was no way out. At least the patches of darkness allowed her to work her way in that direction. As one man turned his head away, Jie scooted over one crate. When another swept his lamp in her direction, she used the arcing shadow to move to the next. Child’s play. Though if information won wars, the time wasted down here could mean the difference between quelling a rebellion in its infancy, and taking years rooting out a well-established insurgency.

A large man near the hatch crossed his arms. “We know you are down here. Just save us the trouble and show yourself.”

Oh, she’d give them plenty of trouble. Unless they suddenly figured out a systematic search method, she could keep them circling for hours if need be. Still, precious time slipped away.

“Damn stowaway,” another muttered.

So they thought her a stowaway. Better that than a spy. It would get her above deck sooner, which would make escape all the easier, as long as the boatswain didn't recognize her as one of the recruits. Just better not to let these ruffians know she was a girl. Jie ran her hand through dust and grime and smeared her face.

She then stood and stepped into the light. Lowering her voice, she said, "I'm sorry. I'll give you all my money. A silver *yuan*. Just let me out."

The large man guarding the hatch favored her with a sneer, exposing a long incisor. "Normally we'd take it, brat. Unfortunately, all the gold in Sun-Moon Palace won't buy you out of this situation."

Since when did a sailor not take a bribe? And what did they have in mind? Jie's pulse might have ticked up a beat. Or not. Seven men with more brawn than brains shouldn't be too hard to escape.

A sailor with a scar on his cheek came up and cuffed her on the side of the head, sending flashes through her field of vision. The stubby fingers of another clamped her shoulder.

Jie froze, feigning fear.

"We got 'im." Snaggleteeth rapped on the door above with a belaying pin.

The hatch above opened. Standing on the platform as it lowered were two men, one a sailor from the look of his clothes, and a man in robes.

Fat Nose.

Or at least that's what Tian called him. The short sword, which he'd kept hidden in the warehouse, now flashed in his hand. He pointed it at her. "You, boy, what are you doing here?"

Jie threw her hands up. "I ran away from home." Hopefully he wouldn't ask where home was, since Tian, in his usual laconic manner, hadn't bothered to say where the *Wild Orchid* had sailed from.

"What did you see?"

Jie stared at the floor, pretending to be ashamed. "I ain't see nothin'. Just some curry-lovin' brown folk." Right, she could always tell them she'd travelled with the Ankirans, though it wouldn't exactly explain why she'd stayed behind when they disembarked.

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Fat Nose sheathed the sword and turned back to the platform. "Just a stowaway. Not my problem."

“One with a high-pitched voice,” Snaggletooth said. “You didn’t even bother to check for weapons.” He nodded toward a thick-necked sailor.

No Neck patted her down, pausing where no gentleman would. “A girl.” His leer left a stain on her clothes. He continued down, stopping again when his hand found one of her three knives. “What is this?”

“A knife?” Jie flashed a guilty grin.

Scarface smacked her on the side of the head again. “You’re in no position to make jokes.”

Looking at Fat Nose, Snaggletooth harrumphed. “She’s been in the hold for Heaven knows how long. A runaway, who might have seen too much. Nobody will miss her. Save yourself the risk. We’ll gut her.”

“Afterwards.” Grinning, No Neck slapped Snaggletooth on the back. “Just like that brownie refugee girl whose little body we threw overboard.”

Rapists and murderers! Jie’s muscles clenched, ready to break free of Stubby Fingers’ grip. Nine men to avoid on her way to the ropes leading out of the cargo hold, though perhaps Snaggletooth and No Neck deserved a knife between their ribs first.

“She’s just a girl,” Fat Nose said. “Let her go.”

“Wait.” Scarface held the lamp closer to her face and yanked off her headband.

Jie shot her hands up to cover her ears.

“An elf?” Fat Nose cocked his head.

“Half-elf,” Scarface said. “The one we saw on Ayudra.”

Stubby Fingers nodded. “Yep. That’s her, all right.”

“It wasn’t me!” Jie shook her head. She’d never left Hua before. Though trying to convince them might prove difficult, since elves hardly ever left their secluded valley kingdom, nor mated with humans like a certain dastard of a father.

“Hah! You want us to believe you have an evil twin?” Snaggletooth looked at his companions, who took up his chorus of laughter.

Jie’s fists squeezed tight. They had to be making this up.

“It makes sense now.” Stubby Fingers nodded. “She must’ve stowed away when we docked at Ayudra.”

Snaggletooth turned to Fat Nose. “Mister Jiang, no need to waste your time. We’ll take care of her.”

Jiang held up a finger. “I don’t think—”

With a jerk of his hand, Snaggleteeth pointed the belaying pin at Jiang. “Our ship, our rules. Now, you can watch if you want—”

Jie lowered her chin, loosening his grip. With one hand, she seized his wrist and twisted it; with the other, she whipped her third knife out in an arc, slicing Stubby Finger’s wrist tendons. His fingers went limp on her shoulder. Twirling toward the platform, she continued with a backslash through Snaggleteeth’s wrist.

He stood, staring at his lifeless fingers, his belaying pin forgotten in his other hand. Jie swept under that arm, dislocated the elbow over her shoulder, and caught the weapon as he dropped it. Finishing her spin, she stepped on the platform with the knife pointed at Fat Nose Jiang’s flank.

Thank the Heavens. Without the element of surprise, she wouldn’t have stood a chance. But now, gaffer hooks, belaying pins, and knives swept out from boots and belts. While Stubby Fingers and Snaggleteeth held their wounds moaning, the six remaining sailors encircled the platform.

And exposing her weapon skills would now alert the conspirators that someone might be on to their plans. Time to find out as much as possible. Keeping eyes and ears on the sailors, Jie pressed the tip of the knife into Jiang’s ribs. “Tell me, what are you trying to hide here?”

“Silly girl, nothing.”

“By now, you’ve surmised I’m more than a stowaway. Talk.” Jie pushed the point through his clothes and ran it over bare flesh.

Jiang yelped. “Okay. I am an inventor.” He nodded toward some crates. “I have the prototype for a new repeating crossbow. I didn’t want any of my competitors to know.”

And Jie’s father was a pig. Well, he probably was, but... “Why bother when we have muskets?”

“Muskets have limitations. If it rains. If you need to arc projectiles over your own men.”

It was almost believable. Might as well play along; make them think this was all about industrial sabotage. “Then the rumors are true. Open one up and show me.”

Jiang nodded toward Scarface. “Go show her one.”

Holding his injured wrist, Snaggleteeth jerked his head back and forth. “No, that bitch is going to pay!”

“What’s going on here?” a voice called from above.

Jie dared a glance. A burly longshoreman stood at the hatch’s opening, hands on his hips.

“Nothing,” Jiang said. “We will load up soon.”

“No!” Scarface leaned into the column of light from above. “We have an intruder!”

Apparently, the two men’s agendas had just reached an impasse, and soon her escape route would be compromised. Stowing her knife, she took one step back and leapt toward Jiang. Pop-vaulting off his back, she snared one of the ropes and climbed hand over hand to the tween deck.

The longshoreman’s eyes widened.

Jie flashed a grin and bolted through the other workers toward the steps to the upper deck.

“Stop her!” the longshoreman yelled.

One man spun around, too late, and Jie avoided his grasp. Yet two more now blocked her exit. Four came clapping down the steps, broadswords in hand. No easy way out.

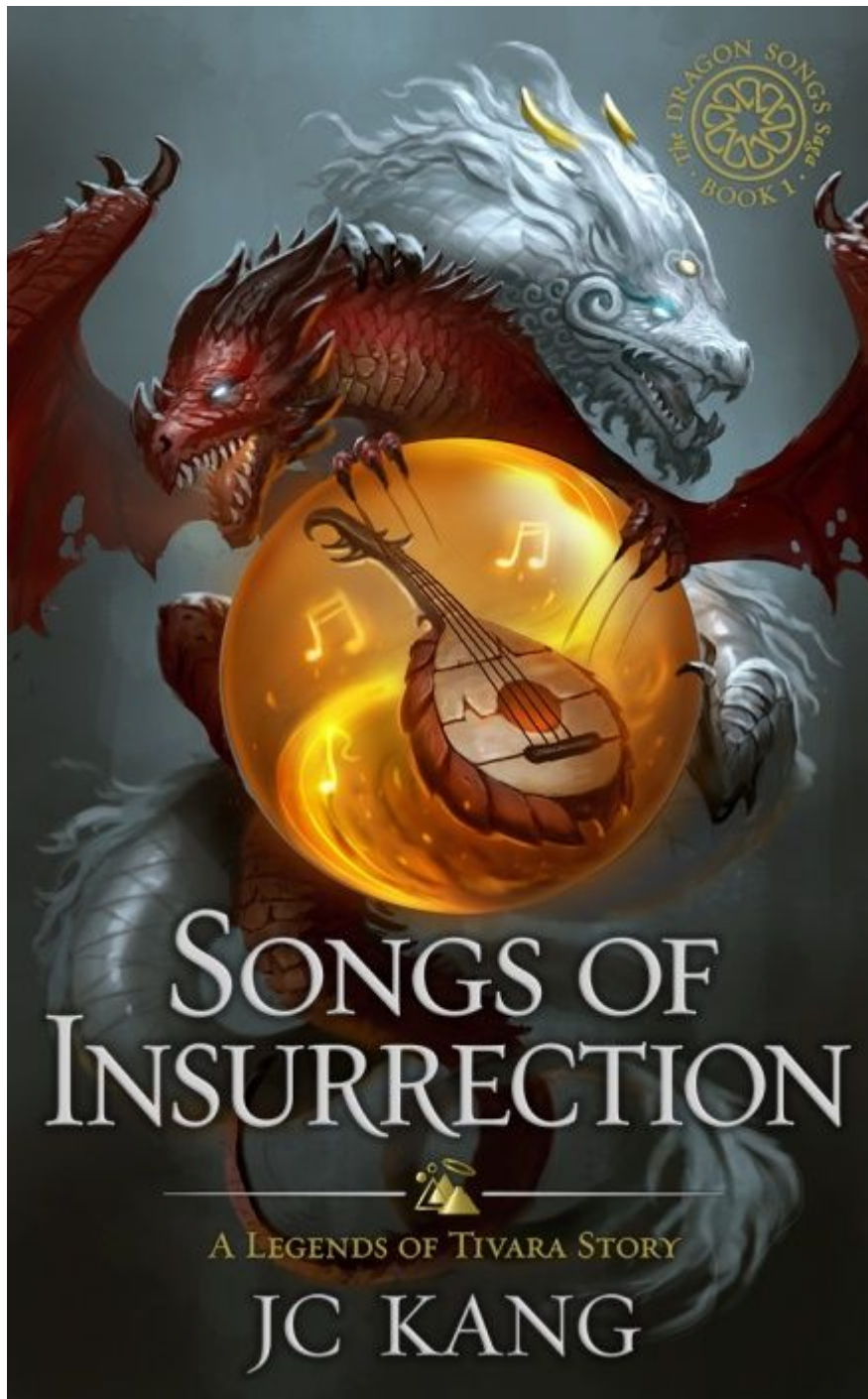
Unless... The oar ports provided several not-so-easy way outs. Even if she could squeeze through, it was a long drop into cold water. The winches groaned behind her, likely meaning Jiang, Snaggletooth, and Stubby Fingers were on their way. Right; freezing sounded more appealing than being gang-raped and murdered. She took a sharp turn toward the closest row of benches and then dove toward the oar port.

For once, her flat boy’s body proved useful, as she swished through—only to have the hem of her pants catch on the oarlock. She dangled upside down, the drawstring of her pants biting into her waist and hips. Perhaps it was for better, given the narrow rocking space between the hull and the stone dock. The wrong timing would mean being crushed like a cherry. As the gap started to widen, she took a deep breath, drew her knife, and slashed the drawstring.

Into the water she went, wearing nothing more than undergarments. The frigid water sent a chill to her core, almost stopping her heart. Still, she dove deeper, kicking off the dockside and swimming over toward the next berth. The ship’s crew would be scouring the waterfront for her, and the longer she remained underwater, the more she could confuse them.

Her lungs burned. At last, she came to stone steps leading from the harbor floor to the top of a dock. She poked her head out and gasped for air, looking back in the direction she'd come. Sure enough, two berths down, the *Wild Orchid* was at full alert, with sailors running along its dock. It was time to lay low, lest the information about Wailian's illegal firepowder die with her.

She looked at the ship docked here, its dark shadow swallowing up the sun's warmth. The Tarkothi blackship. On deck, a fair-haired man with fine features eyed her. Her chattering teeth rattled her brain. The foreigners may or may not turn her in, but staying in the water meant death by hypothermia. Waving both arms, she floundered.



Thank you for reading Prelude to Insurrection. The Dragon Songs Saga continues with [Songs of Insurrection](#). Available now.

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Appendix

Celestial Bodies

White Moon: Known as Renyue in Cathay, and represents the God of the Seas. Its orbital period is thirty days.

Iridescent Moon: Known in Cathay as Caiyue, it is the manifestation of the God of Magic. It appeared at the end of the war between elves and orcs. It never moves from its spot in the sky. Its orbital period is one day, and can be used to keep time.

Blue Moon: Known in Cathay as Guanyin's Eye, it is the manifestation of the Goddess of Fertility. Its phases go from wide open to winking.

Tivar's Star: A red star, a manifestation of the God of Conquest. During the Year of the Second Sun, it approached the world, causing the Blue Moon to go dim.

Time

As measured by the phases of the iridescent moon:

Full = Midnight

1st Waning Gibbons = 1:00 AM

2nd Waning Gibbons = 2:00 AM

Mid-Waning Gibbons = 3:00 AM

4th Waning Gibbons = 4:00 AM

5th Waning Gibbons = 5:00 AM

Waning Half = 6:00 AM

1st Waning Crescent = 7:00 AM

2nd Waning Crescent = 8:00 AM

Mid-Waning Crescent = 9:00 AM

4th Waning Crescent = 10:00 AM

5th Waning Crescent = 11:00 AM

New = Noon

1st Waxing Crescent = 1:00 PM

2nd Waxing Crescent = 2:00 PM

Mid-Waxing Crescent = 3:00 PM

4th Waxing Crescent = 4:00 PM

5th Waxing Crescent = 5:00 PM

Waxing Half = 6:00 PM

1st Waxing Gibbons = 7:00 PM

2nd Waxing Gibbons = 8:00 PM

Mid-Waxing Gibbons = 9:00 PM

4th Waxing Gibbons = 10:00 PM

5th Waxing Gibbons = 11:00 PM

Provinces of Cathay

Province	Ruling Family	Resources
Dongmen	Zheng	grain, stone, guns
Fenggu	Han	timber, rice, grain
Huayuan	Wang	livestock, rice, wheat, lumber, firepowder, guns
Jiangzhou	Liu	timber, wheat, silk
Linshan	Lin	wheat, millet, timber, porcelain
Nanling	Peng	livestock, steel, stone, gems, crossbows
Ximen	Zhao	fishing, rice
Yutou	Liang	fishing, rice, iron, copper, fish paste
Zhenjing	Wu	ships, rice, fish

Human Ethnicities

Aksumi: Dark-skinned with dark eyes and coarse hair. On Earth, they would be considered North Africans. They can use Sorcery.

Ayuri: Bronze-toned skin with dark hair and eyes. On Earth, they would be considered South Asians. They can use Martial Magic.

Arkothi: Olive-skinned with blond to dark hair and light-colored eyes. On Earth, they would be considered Eastern Mediteraneans. They can use weak Mental Magic.

Bovyan: The descendants of the Sun God's begotten son, they are cursed to be all male and live only to thirty-three years of age. They are much taller and larger than the average human. Their other physical characteristics are determined by their mother's race. They have no magical ability.

Cathayi (Hua): Honey-toned skin with dark hair and eyes. High-set cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes. On Earth, they would be considered East Asians. They can use Artistic Magic.

Eldaeri: Olive-skinned with brown hair. With features and small frames, they are shorter in stature than the average human. In a previous age, they fled the orc domination of the continent and mingled with elves. They have no magical ability.

Estomari: Olive-skinned with varying eye and hair color. They are famous for their fine arts. On Earth, they would be considered Western Mediterraneans. They can use Divining Magic.

Kanin: Ruddy-skinned with dark hair. On Earth, they would be considered Native Americans. They can use Shamanic Magic.

Levanthi: Dark-bronze skin and dark hair. On Earth, they would be considered Persians. They can use Divine Magic.

Nothori: fair-skinned and fair-haired. On Earth, they would be considered Northern Europeans. They can use Empathic Magic.

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About the Author

JC Kang's unhealthy obsession with fantasy and sci-fi began at an early age when his brother Romain introduced him to the *Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Hobbit*, *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars*. As an adult, JC combines his geek roots with his professional experiences as a Chinese Medicine doctor, martial arts instructor, and technical writer to pen multicultural epic fantasy stories