

CHAPTER 1

I let the tips of both my swords dig into the sandy arena floor. It was the wrong move, but the dragging pain in my gut was pulling me into a crouch. I watched Swordmaster Ranne's bare feet shuffle forwards, rebalancing his weight for a sweep cut. Training with him always made my innards cramp with fear, but this was different. This was the bleeding pain. Had I miscounted the moon days?

'What are you doing, boy?' he said.

I looked up. Ranne was standing poised, both of his swords ready for the elegant cross cut that could have taken my head. His hands tightened around the hilts. I knew he wanted to follow through and rid the school of the cripple. But he didn't dare.

'Are you spent already?' he demanded. 'That third form was even worse than usual.'

I shook my head, gritting my teeth against another clamping pain.

‘It is nothing, Swordmaster.’ I carefully straightened, keeping my swords down.

Ranne relaxed his stance and stepped back. ‘You’re not ready for the ceremony tomorrow,’ he said. ‘You’ll never be ready. You can’t even finish the approach sequence.’

He turned in a circle, glaring at the other candidates kneeling around the edge of the practice sand. ‘This sequence must be flawless if you are to approach the mirrors. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Swordmaster,’ eleven voices yelled.

‘Please, if you allow, I’ll try again,’ I said. Another cramp twisted through my body but I didn’t move.

‘No, Eon-*jab*. Get back in the circle.’

I saw a ruffle of unease run through the other eleven candidates. Ranne had added *jab*, the old ward-evil, to my name. I bowed and crossed my swords in salute, imagining the feel of driving both blades through his chest. Behind Ranne, the huge opaque form of the Tiger Dragon uncoiled and stared at me. He always seemed to rouse with my anger. I concentrated on the Rabbit Dragon, bringing him into shimmering outline, hoping the Keeper of Peace would help calm my rage.

In the candidate circle, Dillon shifted and looked around the arena. Had he sensed the dragons? He was more aware than the other boys, but even he couldn’t see an energy dragon without meditating for hours. I was the only candidate who could see all of the dragons at will, not counting the Mirror Dragon, of course, who had been lost long ago. It took all my focus to see the spirit beasts and left me weary, but it was the

only thing that had made the last two years of training bearable. It was also the only reason why a cripple like me was allowed to stand as a candidate: full dragon sight was rare although, as Swordmaster Ranne liked to remind me, no guarantee of success.

‘Get back in the circle. Now!’ Ranne yelled.

I tensed and stepped back. Too fast. The sand shifted under my bad leg, wrenching it to the right. I hit the ground, hard. One heartbeat of numbed shock then the pain came. Shoulder, hip, knee. My hip! Had I done more harm to my hip? I reached across my body, digging my fingers through skin and muscle to feel the malformed hipbone. No, there was no pain. It was whole. And the other aches were already fading.

Dillon shuffled forwards on his knees, spraying sand into the air, his eyes wide with concern. Little fool — he would only make things worse.

‘Eon, are you . . . ?’

‘Don’t break formation,’ Ranne snapped. He kicked at me. ‘Get up, Eon-*jab*. You’re an insult to the Dragoneye profession. Get up.’

I struggled on to my hands and knees, ready to roll if he kicked again. There was no blow. I grabbed my swords and pushed myself upright, another cramp catching me as I straightened. It wouldn’t be long now; I had to get back to my master, before the blood showed. Ever since my body had first betrayed us six months ago, my master had kept a supply of soft cloths and sea sponges locked away, in his library. Safe from prying eyes.

The half-hour bell had just rung. If Ranne gave me leave, I could get to the house and back again by the full hour.

‘Swordmaster, may I withdraw from practice until the next bell?’ I asked. My head was respectfully bowed but I kept my eyes on Ranne’s blunt, stubborn features. He was probably born in an Ox year. Or maybe he was a Goat.

Ranne shrugged. ‘Return your swords to armoury, Eon-*jab*, and don’t bother coming back. Another few hours of practice won’t improve your chances tomorrow.’ He turned his back, calling his favourite, Baret, to take my place on the sand. I was dismissed.

Dillon looked over at me, his soft face set into folds of worry. We were the weakest candidates: he was of age — twelve, like all the boys in the circle — but as small as an eight year old, and I was lame. In the past, we wouldn’t even have been considered as Dragoneye candidates. Neither of us was expected to be chosen by the Rat Dragon in the ceremony tomorrow. All the gambling rings had Dillon at a thirty to one chance. I was at a thousand to one. The odds may be against us, but even the Council did not know how a dragon made its choice. We still had a chance. I pretended to yawn at Ranne’s back, waiting for Dillon to smile. His mouth twitched up, but the lines of tension did not ease.

Another cramp dragged at my innards. I held my breath through it, then turned and walked carefully towards the small armoury building, my bad leg kicking up the fine sand. Dillon was right to be worried. Candidates no longer fought each other for the honour of approaching the mirrors, but we still had to prove our strength and stamina in the ceremonial sword sequences. At least Dillon could complete the approach sequence, even if it was poorly done. I had never once managed the intricate moves of the Mirror Dragon Third.

It was said it took a lot of physical and mental toughness to

bargain with the energy dragons and manipulate the earth forces. It was even whispered among the candidates that a Dragoneye slowly gave up his own life force to a dragon in return for the ability to work the energies, and that the pact aged him beyond his years. My master had been the Tiger Dragoneye during the last cycle and, by my reckoning, would be a few years over forty. Yet he had the looks and bearing of an old man. Perhaps it was true — a Dragoneye did give up his own life force — or perhaps my master had aged under the strain of poverty and ill luck. He was risking everything for the chance of my success.

I looked over my shoulder. Ranne was watching Baret go through the first form. With all of the strong able-bodied boys vying to serve him, would the Rat Dragon really choose me? He was the Keeper of Ambition so perhaps he would not be attracted to physical prowess. I turned to the north-northwest and narrowed my mind, staring across the arena floor until I saw the Rat Dragon shimmer on the sand like a heat mirage. As though he was aware of my focus, the dragon arched his neck and shook out his thick mane.

If he did choose me, then I would hold status for twenty-four years: first working as apprentice to the existing Dragoneye and then, when he retired, working the energies myself. I would earn a mountain of riches, even with the twenty per cent tithe to my master. No one would dare spit at me or make the ward-evil sign or turn their face away in disgust.

If he did not choose me, I would be lucky if my master kept me as a servant in his house. I would be like Chart, the slops boy, whose body was permanently twisted into a grim parody of laughter. Fourteen years ago, Chart was born to one of the

unmarried maids, and although my master was sickened by the infant's straining deformity, he allowed it to live and stay within his household. Chart had never been beyond the confines of the servants' quarters, and he lived on a mat near the cooking stoves. If I failed tomorrow, I could only hope my master would show me similar mercy. Before he found me four years ago, I had laboured on a salt farm. I would rather share Chart's mat by the stoves than be returned to such misery.

I stopped walking and reached out further with my mind, pressing my energy-self against the Rat Dragon, trying to touch the mind of the great beast. I felt his power spark through my body. Talk to me, I begged. Talk to me. Choose me tomorrow. Please, choose me tomorrow.

There was no response.

A dull pain in my temple sharpened into white agony. The effort to hold him in my sight was too great. The dragon slid beyond my mind's-eye, dragging my energy with it. Gasping for air, I lurched forwards, digging a sword into the sand to stop myself from falling. Fool! Would I never learn? A dragon only ever communicated with his Dragoneye and apprentice. I sucked in a deep breath and pulled the sword out of the ground. Why, then, could I see all eleven dragons? As far back as I could remember, I had been able to see their huge translucent forms. Why was I given such a gift in such an ill-favoured body?

It was a relief to step off the sand and on to the paving of the armoury courtyard. The sharp cramps in my gut had finally smoothed into a dragging ache. Hian, the old master armsman, was sitting on a box beside the armoury door polishing the furnace-black off a small dagger.

'You been thrown out again?' he asked as I passed him.

I stopped. Hian had never spoken to me before.

‘Yes, Armsmaster,’ I said, tucking my chin into a bow to wait out his scorn.

He held the dagger up in front of him and inspected the blade. ‘It seems to me you were doing all right.’

I looked up and met his eyes, the whites yellowed against his forge-reddened skin.

‘With that leg, you’re never going to get the Mirror Dragon Third sequence right,’ he said. ‘Try a Reverse Horse Dragon Second. There’s a precedent for it. Ranne should have told you.’

I kept my face expressionless but couldn’t help the skip of hope that caught in my throat. Was it true? But why was he telling me this? Maybe it was just a joke on the cripple.

He stood up, holding on to the door jamb to help him straighten. ‘I don’t blame your mistrust, boy. But you ask your master. He’s one of the best history-keepers around. He’ll tell you I’m right.’

‘Yes, Armsmaster. Thank you.’

A loud yell made us both turn towards the candidates on the sand. Baret was on his knees in front of Ranne.

‘Swordmaster Louan was considered one of the best approach-ceremony instructors. It’s a pity he retired,’ Hian said flatly. ‘You got practice swords at home?’

I nodded.

‘Then practise the Reverse Second tonight. Before your cleansing ritual starts.’ He walked stiffly down the two steps then looked back at me. ‘And tell your master that old Hian sends his regards.’

I watched him walk slowly to the gateway that led down to the forge, the distant clang of hammer on anvil drumming his

progress. If he was right and I could replace the Mirror Dragon Third with a Reverse Horse Dragon Second, then I would have no difficulty finishing the approach sequence.

I stepped into the cool, dim armoury and waited for my eyes to adjust. I was not as convinced as the armsmaster that the Council would allow a change to the ceremony, particularly to the Mirror Dragon sequence. The Dragon Dragon was, after all, the symbol of the Emperor, and the legends said that the Imperial family was descended from dragons and still had dragon blood in its veins.

Then again, the Mirror Dragon had been gone for over five hundred years. No one really knew why or how he had disappeared. One story said that a long-ago Emperor offended the dragon, and another told of a terrible battle between the spirit beasts that destroyed the Mirror dragon. My master said that all the stories were just hearthside imaginings, and that the truth, along with all the records, had been lost to time and the fire that took the Mirror Dragon Hall. And he would know: as the armsmaster said, my master was a great history-keeper. If there was an old variation to the approach sequence, then he would find it.

But first I had to tell him, a day before the ceremony, that I could not complete the Mirror Dragon form. I shivered, remembering the welts and bruises of his past displeasure. I knew it was desperation that provoked his hand — in the last ten years my master had trained six candidates and all of them had failed — but I did not look forward to his anger. I gripped the hilts of the swords more tightly. I had to know if the Reverse Horse Dragon Second was allowed. It was my best chance. My master was not a fool, he would not beat me too hard before the ceremony. Too much rode upon it. And if his

history scrolls agreed with Hian, I'd have at least four hours before the cleansing ritual to practise the new form and bridges. It was not long, but it should be enough. I raised the swords in the overhead cut that started the Reverse Second and sliced the left sword down shallowly, conscious of the limited space.

'Oy, don't fling those around in here,' the duty armsman snapped.

I pulled up, dropping the points of the swords.

'My apologies, Armsman,' I said quickly. It was the skinny, sallow one who liked giving lectures. I held out the two hilts to him, angling the blades down. I saw his hand clench briefly into the ward-evil sign before he took the swords.

'Any damage?' he asked, holding one out flat to check the steel.

'No, Armsman.'

'These are expensive tools, you know, not playthings. You have to treat them with respect. Not hack away with them indoors. If everyone...'

'Thank you, Armsman,' I said, backing towards the door before he could go into a full tirade. He was still talking as I cleared the steps.

The easiest way out of the school was back across the arena and through the main gate, but I didn't want to walk over the sand again, or draw the attention of Ranne. Instead, I took the steep path down to the school's southern gate. My left hip ached from the strain of the practice session and the cramping in my gut made me breathless. By the time I reached the south gate and was passed through by the bored guard, I was sweating from the effort of not crying out.

A dozen or so house-shops lined the road behind the

school, forming the outer edge of the food market. The smell of roasting pork fat and crispy-skinned duck oiled the air. I leaned against the wall of the school, letting the stone cool my back, and watched a girl in the blue gown of a kitchen maid weave through the tight knots of gossiping marketers and pause at the hatch of the pork-seller. She was about sixteen — my true age — and her dark hair was scraped back into the looped braid of ‘unmarried girl’. I touched the end of my short queue of black hair; the candidate length. If I was chosen tomorrow, I would begin to grow it to my waist until I could bind it into the double-looped queue of the Dragoneye.

The girl, keeping her eyes down, pointed at a cured haunch on display. The young apprentice wrapped the meat in a cloth and placed it on the bench. The girl waited until he had stepped back before laying the coin beside it and picking up the package. No conversation, no eye contact, no touching; it was all very proper. Yet I sensed something between them.

Although part of me knew it was not honourable, I narrowed my eyes and focused as I did with the dragons. At first, there was nothing. Then I felt a strange shift in my mind’s-eye, as though I was stepping closer, and a surge of orange energy flared between the girl and boy, swirling around their bodies like a small monsoon. Something soured in my gut and spirit. I dropped my gaze to the ground, feeling like a low intruder, and blinked away my mind-sight. When I looked back, the girl was already turning to leave. There was no sign of the energy around them. No sign of the pulsing brightness that had left a searing after-image in my mind. Why could I suddenly see such intimate human energy? Neither my master nor any of my instructors had ever spoken of it: emotion was not the province of the dragon magic. A

rushing heat prickled through my body; it was another difference to keep hidden from the world. I pushed away from the wall, needing to work the backwash of power and shame out of my muscles.

My master's house was three roads away, all uphill. The pain in my hip had changed from the familiar ache of overuse to a sharper warning. I needed to get to a hot bath if I wanted any chance of practising the approach sequence. The alley beside the pork-seller was a good shortcut. If it was empty. Stepping to the left, I shaded my eyes and studied the narrow walkway. It seemed safe; no dock boys sharing a quick pipe or waiting for a limping diversion to chase. I took a step out, but hesitated as a familiar wave of motion moved through the crowd — people scrambling to the edges of the road and dropping to their knees, their chatter suddenly silenced.

'Make way for the Lady Jila. Make way for the Lady Jila.'

The voice was high but masculine. An elaborately carved palanquin was moving down the road carried on the shoulders of eight sweating men, the passenger concealed behind draped purple silks. Twelve guards, dressed in purple tunics and carrying curved swords, formed a protective square around it. The Shadow Men, the soldier eunuchs of the Imperial court. They were always quick to beat down those who did not clear the way or bow fast enough for their liking. I dropped to my good knee, balancing on my hands, and dragged my bad leg beneath me. The Lady Jila? She must be one of the Emperor's favourites if she was allowed out of the inner precinct. I lowered into the 'court noble' bow.

Beside me, a stocky man in the leggings and oiled wrap of the seafarer sat back on his heels, watching the approaching procession. If he did not bow down, he would attract the

attention of the guards. And they were not careful about who they struck.

‘It is a court lady, sir,’ I whispered urgently. ‘You must bow. Like this.’ I held my body at the proper angle.

He glanced at me. ‘Do you think she deserves our bows?’ he asked.

I frowned. ‘What do you mean? She’s a court lady, it doesn’t matter what she deserves. If you don’t bow, you will be beaten.’

The seafarer laughed. ‘A very pragmatic approach to life,’ he said. ‘I’ll take your advice.’ He lowered his shoulders, still smiling.

I held my breath as the palanquin passed, squinting as the dust raised then settled. Beyond us, I heard the crack of a sword laid flat against flesh; a merchant, too slow in his movements, knocked to the ground by the lead guard. The palanquin turned the far corner and a collective easing of muscle and breath rippled through the crowd. A few soft remarks grew in volume as people stood, brushing at their clothes. I dropped my hands to the ground and swung my leg out, preparing to stand. Suddenly, I felt a large hand under each armpit, pulling me upwards.

‘There you go, boy.’

‘Don’t touch me!’ I jumped back, my arms across my chest.

‘It’s all right,’ he said, holding his hands up. ‘I just wanted to return the favour. You saved me from a sword across my back.’

He smelled of fish oil and old sweat and seaweed. I felt a memory move through my body: of holding up a heavy string of black pearl kelp, and my mother, nodding and smiling and coiling it into the basket strapped across her slight body. Then

the image was gone. Too quick to hold, like all the others I had of my family.

‘I’m sorry, sir, you took me by surprise,’ I said, tightening my arms around my chest. ‘Thank you for the assistance.’ Bowing politely, I stepped away from him. The shock of his grip was still on my skin.

The alley opposite was no longer empty; a group of dock boys had congregated near the far end, squatting around a game of dice. I’d have to take the long way round. As if in protest, the pain in my hip sharpened.

The seafarer stopped beside me again. ‘Perhaps you will help me once more,’ he said. ‘Can you tell me the way to the Gate of Officials?’

There was no suspicion or puzzlement on his face, just polite enquiry. I looked at the dock boys again, then back at the seafarer. He was not overly tall, but his chest and shoulders were powerful and his face was tanned into stern lines. I glanced to see if he was armed: a knife slung through his belt. It would do.

‘I’m going that way myself, sir,’ I said, beckoning him across the road towards the alley. It was not strictly in the direction he wanted to go, but it would still be quicker than the main streets. He smiled and followed me.

‘I am Tozay, Master Fisher of Kan Po,’ he said, pausing at the mouth of the alley. He clasped his hands together and nodded — adult to child.

From my ley-line studies, I knew that Kan Po was on the coast. It had one of the most fortunate harbours in the realm, shaped like a money pouch and ringed by seven hills that trapped good luck. It was also the port access to the islands. And beyond.

'I am Eon, Dragoneye candidate.' I bowed again.

He stared down at me. 'Eon? The lame candidate?'

'Yes,' I said, keeping my face impassive.

'Well now, isn't that something.' He dipped into an 'honoured acquaintance' bow.

I nodded stupidly, unprepared for the sudden change in status.

'We've heard all about you from the news-walker,' Master Tozay said. 'He came through our town a few months back. Told us the Council had decided to let you approach the mirrors. Did my son a lot of good to hear that. He's a year younger than you, just turned eleven. By rights, he should be fishing with me, learning his craft, but he lost an arm in a net accident last winter.' Master Tozay's broad face tightened into hollows of grief.

'That must be hard for him,' I said.

I looked down at my twisted leg — at least it was still intact. I didn't remember much about the accident that had crushed my left hip, but I did remember the physician holding a rusted saw over me, deciding where to cut. He was going to take my whole leg off, but my master stopped him and called for the bonesetter. Sometimes I could still smell the old blood and decaying flesh on the jagged teeth of the saw blade.

We started walking again. I sneaked another look at the end of the alley — the dock boys had already shifted into a watchful line. Beside me, Master Tozay stiffened as he noted the lounging gang.

'It is hard on him. On the family too,' he said, brushing his fingers across the hilt of his knife. 'Wait, I have a stone in my shoe,' he said loudly and stopped.

I turned and watched as he bent and dug a finger down the side of his worn boot.

‘You’re a shrewd one, aren’t you,’ he said, his voice low. ‘Well then, if you want a bodyguard, you’d better move to my other side.’ The look in his eyes made the soft words a command, but he didn’t seem angry. I nodded and shifted to his left.

‘I just hope you’re not taking me too far out of my way,’ he said as he straightened, keeping his eyes on the boys.

‘It *is* a shortcut,’ I said.

He glanced at me. ‘More for you than for me, hey?’

‘For both of us. But perhaps a little more for me.’

He grunted in amusement and placed his hand on my shoulder. ‘Keep close.’

We walked towards the group, Master Tozay shortening his stride to match my slower pace. The largest boy, thickset with the darker skin and bull-necked strength of the island people, casually kicked a cobblestone into our path. It skipped and bounced, narrowly missing my foot. His three friends laughed. They were city boys, thin and sharp, with the aimless bravado that was always in need of a leader. The island boy picked up a large stone, rubbing his thumb across its surface.

‘Afternoon, boys,’ Master Tozay said.

The islander spat out a wad of tannin leaf, the fibrous mess landing in front of us. His movement made a pendant swing out on a thin leather cord from his clothing: a pale shell carving in the shape of bamboo branches enclosed in a circle. Master Tozay saw it too and stopped, checking me with a hand on my arm. He pushed me behind him then turned and faced the islander. The other boys nudged each other closer, keen for a show.

‘You’re from the south, aren’t you?’ Master Tozay said. ‘From the far islands?’

The boy’s shoulders stiffened. ‘I’m from Trang Dein,’ he said, lifting his chin.

I leaned to my right to get a better look at him. A year ago, the Emperor had ordered raids on the Trang Dein people as punishment for their bold independence. It was whispered in the city taverns that all the male Trang prisoners had been viciously gelded, like animals, and forced to serve on the Imperial ships. This boy was only about fifteen, but big enough to pass as a man. Was he one of the Trang cattle-men? My eyes dropped, but he wore the loose tunic and trousers of the dock labourer. I couldn’t tell by just looking.

Or could I? A cattle-man’s energy would be different from a whole man’s energy, wouldn’t it? Maybe my new mind-sight would work on him as it had with the kitchen girl and apprentice. The memory of watching their bright monsoon union made my skin prickle with shame, but I still narrowed my mind into the energy world. There was the same strange sensation of stepping forwards, and then light, so bright that tears came to my eyes. I couldn’t separate anyone’s energy: it was a roiling blurred mass of red and yellow and blue. Then, like a flickering cloud shadow, another presence. And pain, deep and low in the belly. Ten times worse than the monthly pain, as though barbs were being dragged through my innards. Only a power born of evil spirits could have such agony ride with it. My mind-sight buckled. I drew in a shuddering breath as the alley twisted back into view. The pain vanished. Never again would I intrude upon such savage energies.

Beside me, I heard Master Tozay say, ‘I fish the Kan Po coast. Hired a few of your people as hands on my boats. That

was before the raid, of course. They were all good workers.'

The island boy nodded warily.

'The islands are quiet now,' Tozay said softly. 'Not so many soldiers in Ryoka. Some of the missing are making their way home.'

The boy let the stone drop to the ground, his hand groping for the shell carving. Holding it like a talisman, he glanced back at his friends, then faced Master Tozay and hunched his shoulders as though to separate himself from his companions.

'Are you hiring now?' he asked, stumbling over the words.

'I may have a place,' Master Tozay said. 'If you're looking for honest work, then meet me at the Grey Marlin dock tomorrow. I'll wait until the noon bell.'

Master Tozay turned, herding me with his body. As we walked out of the alley and into the busy Sweet-sellers Road, I looked back at the island boy. He was staring at us, oblivious to his friends, his hand clenched around the pendant.

'What is that thing he wears around his neck?' I asked Master Tozay as we crossed the road. 'A good luck symbol?' But I knew the pendant had to be more than that.

Master Tozay snorted. 'No, I wouldn't say it was good luck.' He looked closely at me.

'You have a politician's face, Eon. I'd wager you know a lot more than you show the world. So what have you noted about the change in our land?'

More beggars, more raids, more arrests, more hard words against the Imperial court. I had also overheard my master in low conversation with others of his rank: *the Emperor is ill, the heir too callow, the court split in its loyalties.*

'What I have noted is that it is safer to have a politician's face and a mute's tongue,' I said wryly.

Master Tozay laughed. 'Prudently said.' He looked around then pulled me over to the narrow space between two shops. 'That boy's pendant is an islander totem, to bring longevity and courage,' he said, bending close to my ear, his voice low. 'It's also a symbol of resistance.'

'To the Emperor?' I whispered, instinctively knowing the danger of such words.

'No, child. To the real power in the Empire of the Celestial Dragons. High Lord Sethon.'

The Emperor's brother. The son of a concubine. According to the old ways, when the Emperor came to his throne, he should have ordered his brother Sethon killed, along with all the other male children born to his father's concubines. But our Emperor was an enlightened man, an educated man. He let his eight younger brothers live. He made them his generals, and Sethon, the eldest of the eight, he made his commander-in-chief. Our Emperor was also a trusting man.

'But High Lord Sethon commands the armies. What can islanders do against such might?' I asked.

Master Tozay shrugged. 'Not much. But there are others, more powerful, who remain loyal to the Emperor and his son.' He paused as an old woman stopped at the shop-hatch next to us to poke through a display of yeast cakes. 'Come, this is not the talk for such an open place,' he said softly. 'Or indeed for any place.' He straightened. 'I fancy a sweet bun. How about you?'

I longed to ask him who opposed High Lord Sethon, but the subject was clearly at an end. And I had not had a sweet bun in a very long time — there was no money for such excesses in my master's household.

'I should not dawdle . . .' I said.

‘Come, it will not take long. We’ll get them as we walk. Can you recommend a seller?’

I nodded. One bun would not take long. I spotted a break in the slow-moving crowd and led Master Tozay through it, cutting diagonally across the road to the corner of the covered White Cloud Market. It was busier than usual, the afternoon sun driving people under the shade of the broad white silk sails that had been stretched between carved poles. We passed Ari the Foreigner serving some merchants in his coffee stall, the heavy perfume of the strange black drink thick in the air. Ari had once given me a bowl of his coffee, and I had liked the rich bitterness and the slight buzzing it left in my head. I touched Master Tozay’s arm and pointed at the pastry stall to our left, its counter blocked by customers.

‘The red bean ones are said to be good here,’ I said, standing on my toes to see the trays of buns arranged in neat lines.

The nutty smell of bean paste and sweet dough radiated in a wave of heat. A sharp roil of hunger joined the ache in my gut. Master Tozay nodded and, bowing politely, managed to neatly insert himself ahead of a woman hesitating over her choice. As I watched his broad back and sunburnt neck, I felt another flicker of memory: of being carried on a big man’s back and the salty warmth of sun-leathered skin against my cheek. But, once again, I couldn’t make the image stay. Was it a memory of my father? I no longer had any clear idea of what he looked like. A moment later Master Tozay turned, holding a bun in each hand, wrapped in a twist of red paper.

‘Here you go,’ he said, handing me a pastry. ‘Be careful. The seller said they’re just out of the steamer.’

‘Thank you, sir.’ The heat from the bun stung my palm

through the thin wrapping. I slid the paper down, fashioning a handle. It would be best to wait until it had cooled, but the smell was too tantalising; I bit into it, juggling the steaming pastry around with my tongue.

‘Tasty,’ Master Tozay said, fanning his mouth with his hand.

I nodded, unable to speak as the hot dense filling made my jaw seize with its sudden sweetness.

He motioned forwards with his bun. ‘Is this the way to the gate?’

I swallowed and sucked in a breath of cooling air. ‘Yes, you follow the white sails until they end,’ I said, pointing at the silk roof, ‘and then turn right. Just keep walking and you’ll come to the Gate of Officials.’

Master Tozay smiled. ‘Good boy. Now, if ever you make the journey down the coast to Kan Po, you must look for me. You can be sure of a welcome.’ He hesitated then put his hand on my shoulder. ‘If that dragon has any sense tomorrow, he’ll choose you,’ he said, giving me a gentle shake.

I smiled. ‘Thank you, sir. And travel well.’

He nodded and raised his pastry in salute, then joined the flow of people in the centre of the walkway. As his solid form merged into the shapes and colours of the crowd, I felt as though he was taking my mother and father with him. Two half-memories that were already fading, leaving only an imprint of a smile like mine and the smell of sun-warmed skin.