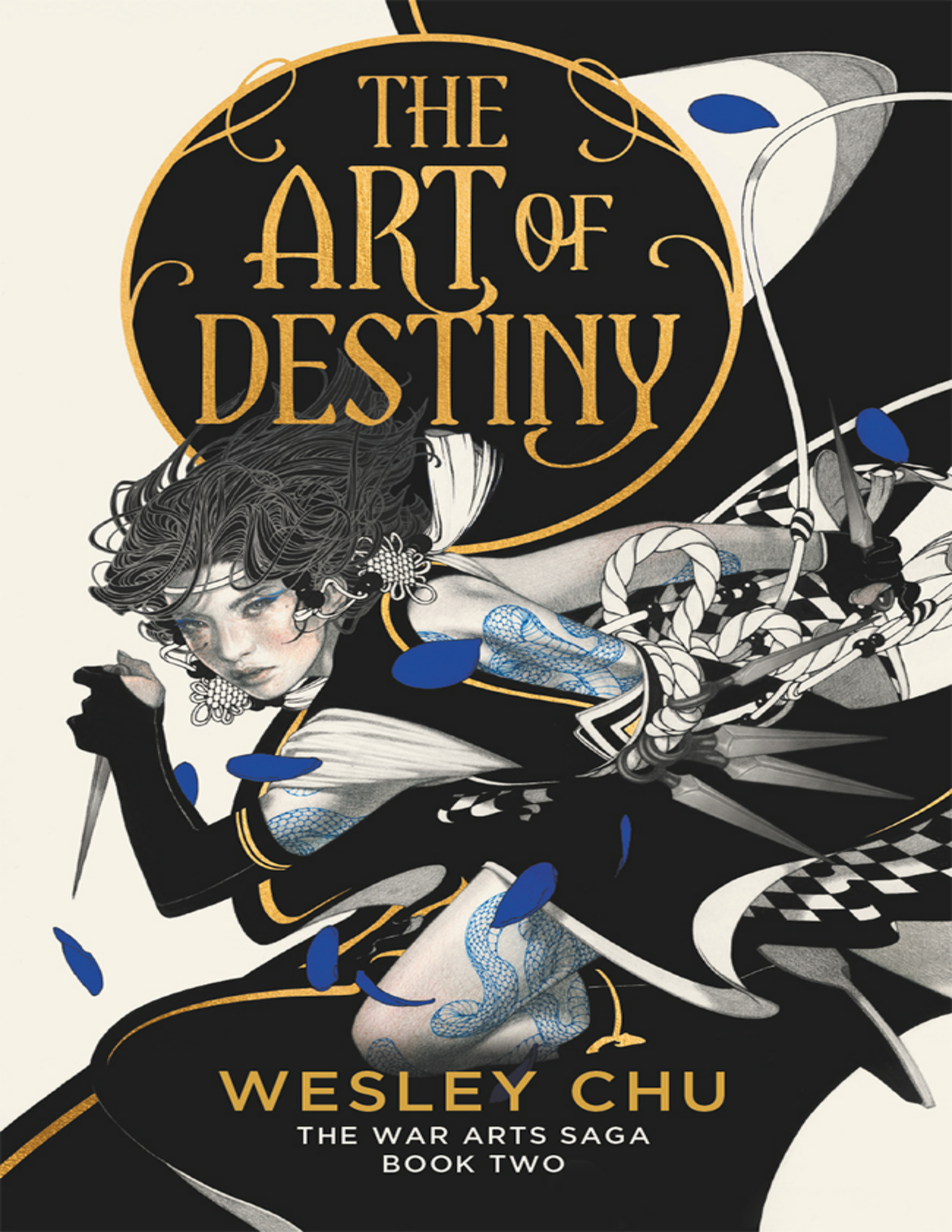
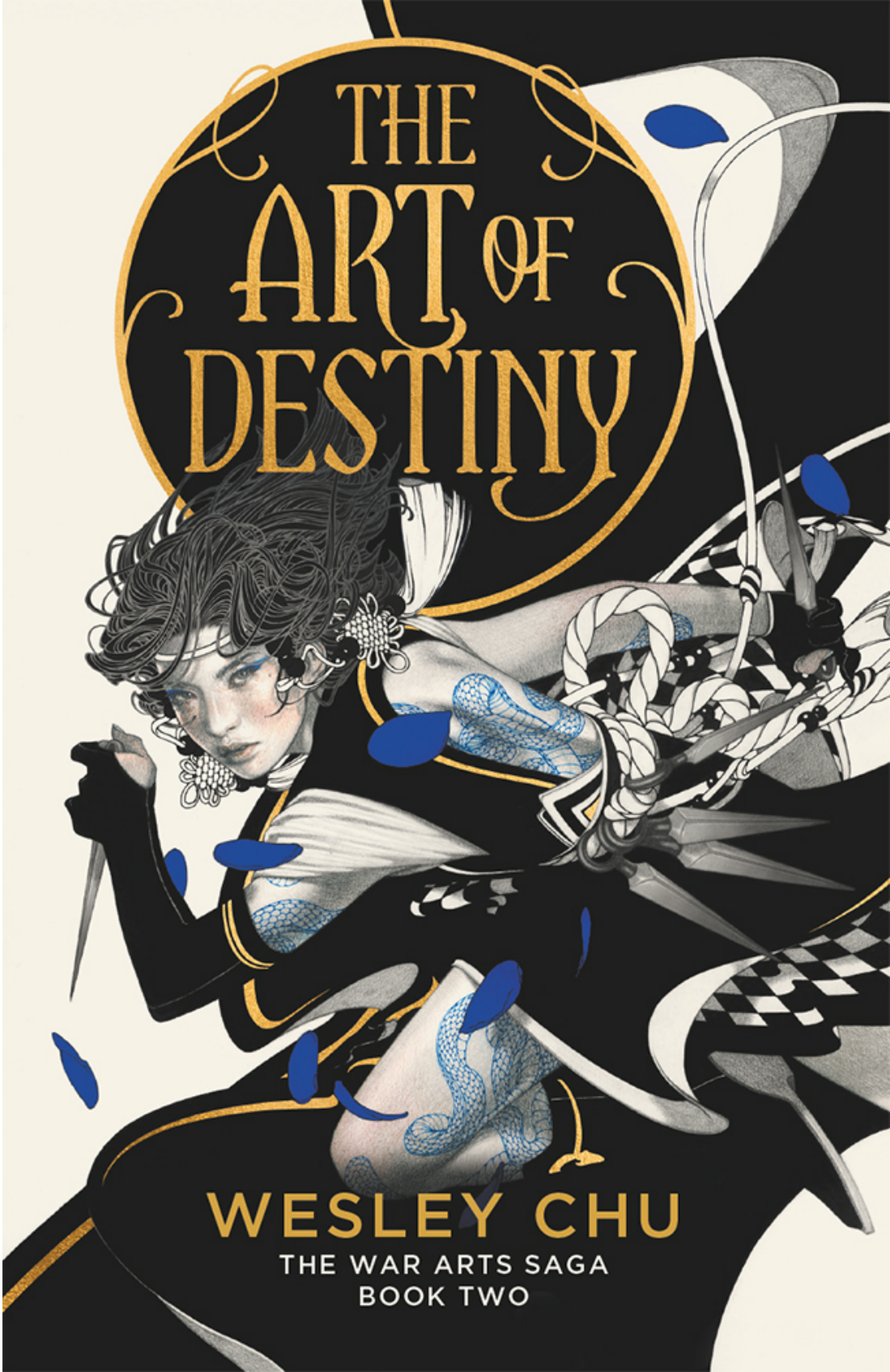




THE ART OF DESTINY

WESLEY CHU

THE WAR ARTS SAGA
BOOK TWO



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Contents

Cover

Title Page

Leave us a Review

Copyright

Dedication

Dramatis Personae

Act I

Chapter One: The Mail

Chapter Two: A Long Day

Chapter Three: The Master

Chapter Four: Bad Reviews

Chapter Five: Houtou

Chapter Six: Desert Lioness

Chapter Seven: The Troop

Chapter Eight: The Prognosis

Chapter Nine: New Job

Chapter Ten: Bahngtown

Chapter Eleven: Game Night

Chapter Twelve: The Motley Crew

Chapter Thirteen: Old Friends, New Enemies

Chapter Fourteen: The Return

Chapter Fifteen: The Challenge
Chapter Sixteen: Unwanted Assistance
Chapter Seventeen: The Choice
Chapter Eighteen: Allanto

Act II

Chapter Nineteen: New Old Find
Chapter Twenty: Monotony The Killer
Chapter Twenty-One: The Summons
Chapter Twenty-Two: Palace Life
Chapter Twenty-Three: The Sun Under Lagoon
Chapter Twenty-Four: Ducal Consequences
Chapter Twenty-Five: Responsibilities
Chapter Twenty-Six: The Lake City
Chapter Twenty-Seven: Foster Teacher
Chapter Twenty-Eight: Meeting In Daleh
Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Rich Man
Chapter Thirty: The Day Job
Chapter Thirty-One: Back to the Bahng
Chapter Thirty-Two: The Primordial Mist
Chapter Thirty-Three: Naming The Livestock
Chapter Thirty-Four: Bad Trouble
Chapter Thirty-Five: Oracle of the Tiandi
Chapter Thirty-Six: Stormchaser
Chapter Thirty-Seven: Nothing Pleasant Happens after Midnight
Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Rescue

Chapter Thirty-Nine: The Retreat
Chapter Forty: Prisoner
Chapter Forty-One: The Harbor
Chapter Forty-Two: Jailbreak
Chapter Forty-Three: The Truth
Chapter Forty-Four: Boat Fight
Chapter Forty-Five: The Alliance
Chapter Forty-Six: Escape
Chapter Forty-Seven: Palace Intrigue
Chapter Forty-Eight: Surrender
Chapter Forty-Nine: The Solution

Act III

Chapter Fifty: Negotiations
Chapter Fifty-One: Staff
Chapter Fifty-Two: Eye of the Storm
Chapter Fifty-Three: Bait
Chapter Fifty-Four: The Cure
Chapter Fifty-Five: Old Friends
Chapter Fifty-Six: Fires of Freedom
Chapter Fifty-Seven: Decoy
Chapter Fifty-Eight: The Duel
Chapter Fifty-Nine: Escape
Chapter Sixty: The Stand
Chapter Sixty-One: Homecoming
Chapter Sixty-Two: The Test

Chapter Sixty-Three: The Results

Acknowledgments

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THE
ART OF
DESTINY

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*To those searching for their way,
and to those guiding them*

To Tricia

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE TIANDI

BHASANI, NARWANI Master of the Drowned Fist.

CHOWN, WU Master mapmaker in Sanba. Father to Zofi. Deceased.

DONGSHI Duke of Lawkan. Former whisperlord of the empire. Leader of the Ten Hounds.

FAARU Palacelord of the Celestial Palace. Father figure to Jian. Deceased.

FAUSAN, NOON also God of Gamblers. Master of the Whipfinger Style Song Family Ho Lineage.

GUANSHI also Guanshi Kanyu. Master of the Longxian Northern Fist School of War in Jiayi. Killed by Sali.

HACHI Heir to the Whipfinger Style Song Family Ho Lineage. Close friend to Jian.

HORASHI Bodyguard to Jian at the Celestial Palace. Spared by Taishi.

JIAN, WEN also Lu Hiro. Champion of the Five Under Heaven. The Prophesied Hero of the Tiandi. Heir to the Windwhispering School of the Zhang Lineage. #1 Most Wanted Fugitive in the Enlightened States.

KAIYU, HWANG Heir of the Houtou style Third Lin Lineage. Close friend to Jian.

KASA, HWANG also the Sky Monkey. Master of the Houtou style Third Lin Lineage. Father to Kaiyu.

KEIRO, ZHU Senior of the Southern Cross in Jiayi. Former rival to Xinde.

KUA NAIFUN also the Black Night of Xing. Tea Master of the Hazy Dreams Tea House in Bahngtown. Adviser to Taishi.

KUI Master acupuncturist. Doctor in Jiayi. Teacher to Meehae.

LI also Auntie Li. Former cook at the Longxian Northern Fist School of War.

LIUMAN Hansoo monk. Twelve rings. Pahm's former master. Killed by Qisami.

MEEHAE Apprentice acupuncturist. Close friend to Jian in Sanba.

MORI, LEE Templeabbot of the Temple of the Tiandi in Vauzan. Former lover to Taishi.

PAHM Hansoo war monk. Four rings. Close friend to Xinde and Jian.

RIGA Bodyguard to Jian at the Celestial Palace. Betrayed Jian. Not spared by Taishi.

SAAN also the Painted Tiger. Duke of Shulan. Former Emperor Xuanshing's second son. Former student to Taishi.

SANU Templeabbot of the Original Temple of the Tiandi. Killed by Qisami.

SOHN, SOA Master of the Eternal Bright Light Fist Pan Family Pan Lineage. Lost heir to the family's schools. Formerly nicknamed Pan's Pillaging Playboy. Wanted Fugitive.

SONAYA, RAS Daughter of the Drowned Fist. Bhasani's heir.

SUNRI also the Desert Lioness. Duchess of Caobiu. Former concubine to Emperor Xuanshing.

TAISHI, LING also Nai Roha. Grandmaster of the Windwhispering School of the Zhang Lineage; Windwhispering School of the Zhang Lineage of the Ling Family Branch. Distant #2 Most Wanted Fugitive in the Enlightened States.

URWAN, PSY Horselord of Gyian. Horse breeder residing in the Cloud Pillars. Friend to Taishi.

WAYLIN Duke of Xing. Cousin to the Emperor Xuanshing.

XINDE Captain of the Caobiu Stone Watchers long eyes unit. Former First Senior of the Longxian War Art Academy. Close friend to Jian from back in Jiayi.

YANSO Duke of Gyian. Former purselord to Emperor Xuanshing.

ZOFI, WU Taishi's close confidant and assistant. Best friend and tutor to Jian.

THE SHADOW

AKIANA, AKI Lady of Aki household. Twin to Akiya. Youngest daughter of Lord Aki Niam. Under the care of Qisami as Child Companion Kiki.

AKIYA, AKI Lady of Aki household. Twin to Akiana. Youngest daughter of Lord Aki Niam. Under the care of Qisami as Child Companion Kiki.

BURANDIN Shadowkill in Qisami's cell. Husband to Koteuni.

CHIAFANA also Firstwife. The Minister of Critical Purpose. Adviser to Duchess Sunri of Caobiu.

CYYK, QUAN also Cyknan. Lord in the Quan family of Caobiu. Son of Highlord General Quan Sah. Former student of the Longxian School. Grunt in Qisami's cell.

EIFAN also the Black Widow. Silkspinner. Weblord of Jiayi. Cousin to Qisami.

HAAREN Shadowkill in Qisami's cell. Opera. Killed by Taishi.

HARI Estatekeeper on Duke Yanso's estate. Boss to Qisami.

HILAO Palacemaids on Duke Yanso's estate in Gyian. Best friend to Qisami on the estate.

KOTEUNI Shadowkill in Qisami's cell. Second in command. Wife to Burandin. Close adviser to Qisami.

NIAM, AKI High Lord of the Aki House of Gyian. Lord of the Fine Blades. Close friend and adviser to Duke Yanso. Father to Akiya and Akiana.

PORLA Scullerymaids on Duke Yanso's estate. Roommate to Qisami.

QISAMI, MAZA also Kiki. Copper tier Shadowkill from the Bo Po Mo Fo training pool. Former diamond tier operative under demotion and garnishment from the Consortium.

RULI Palacemaids to Duke Yanso's estate in Gyian. Roommate to Qisami.

YOSHI, SABANA Senior Account Executive with the Central Orb. Silkspinner.

ZWEI also Zweilang. Shadowkill in Qisami's cell. Opera. A Yiyang.

THE KATUIA

ARIUN Defensechief of Nezra. Former Council member of Nezra. Adviser to Sali. Deceased.

BATU Clan chief of Sheetan.

DAEWON Master tinker (unofficial). Council member of the Nezra clan. Husband to Mali.

HAMPA Viperstrike. Neophyte to Salminde.

JHAMSA Elder Spirit Shaman of Katuia. Council member of Chaqra, the Black City. Former heart-father to Sali.

JIAMIN also The Eternal Khan of Katuia. The Lord of the Grass Sea. Childhood friend of Sali. Deceased.

LEHUANGXI THIRAPUT CUNGLE Captain of the *Hana Iceberg*. Friend to Sali.

MALI also Malinde the Master Tinker (unofficial). Sectchief to Nezra tinker sect. Council member of the Nezra clan. Sister to Sali.

MARHI also Hoisannisi Jayngnaga Marhi. Rumblerlead of Hightop cluster. Friend to Hampa.

QUASA Custodian of the Viperstrike. Former viperstrike.

RAYDAN also Raydan the Stormchaser. The Stormchaser. Former raidbrother to Sali.

SALI also Salminde the Viperstrike. The Viperstrike. Will of the Khan. Council member of the Nezra clan.

SHOBANSA Nezra Supplychief. Trader and wealthiest person in Nezra.

SURIPTIKA also Conchitsha Abu Suriptika. Happan ritualist. Cobbler in Hrusha. Healer to Sali.

YURAKI also Rich Man Yuraki. Elder of Hightop cluster. Important politician in Hrusha.

ACT I

CHAPTER ONE

THE MAIL

The caravan of covered wagons snaked along the craggy face of a mountain range known as the Five Ugly Brothers. They were three quarters of the way up the fourth Ugly Brother, and running late. Jai Janus had hoped they would reach the mail post before nightfall, but he wasn't sure if the oxen had enough pull in them to clear the final stretch. To be honest, he wasn't having an easy time keeping his own eyelids open either. Fortunately, his side-seat driver was excellent at keeping him awake.

Besides being able to navigate routes and flash signal codes, Aimei was incredibly adept at talking for hours on end, pausing only occasionally to breathe. She had been prating on about her latest drama since dawn, when they had set off from the peak of the second Ugly Brother. "He's out every night with his gross, mangy friends, skulking on the streets, and then creeps home in the morning, stinking of sweat and piss. All my bed sheets are ruined!"

Janus bit his lip and swallowed another sigh. "Why don't you just—"

Aimei finished taking a breath. "The worst part is he always brings home a midnight snack and insists on eating it right on the bed. There's gross leftovers scattered all over the sheets every morning. And my mattress is woven from loose straw, so you know I can't just wipe it off. To clean up all the bits of food—can't have crumbs, mind you. It'll attract sludge beetles—I have to comb through the straw and individually pick every piece out." She gesticulated with conviction. "Don't get me started on his breath. It's like death. Like if I just mouth-kissed a ten-day-old corpse."

“You did what?”

Aimei’s eyes brimmed. “He used to be so affectionate, so much fun. Now he ignores me and pretends I don’t exist unless he needs something, like I’m just a servant or cook or some occasional plaything when he’s bored. It’s really unfair. I’m always so nice to him.”

“Just lock the door at night. Teach him a lesson. Don’t let him push—Hold.” Janus scanned the horizon. Night had swept in quicker than expected with both the Queen and Prince hidden behind a thick blanket of dark rolling rain clouds. It might get wet soon. He yanked on the reins to urge the oxen forward. “We’re losing visibility, even with the forward lantern’s spotlights. The road will soon tilt to the right up ahead. Signal a warning to the rest of the team.”

Aimei lived to chatter, but that didn’t take away from her being an otherwise skilled and well-trained side-seat. She grabbed hold of a lantern swaying off the side of the wagon, sliding the cover in and out to flash a long blink, a pause, and then two more. A row of single flashes, one for each wagon behind them, confirmed receipt of Janus’s order.

“Prep the spotlights,” he added.

Aimei slipped off her perch to light the two lanterns hanging off each side of the wagon. Two strong beams of yellow light shone straight into the night haze and the darkened tree lines. Two more on the other side lit up shortly after. She returned to her perch a moment later to yank at a long lever near her feet, releasing two poles out along the sides of the wagon, each with a lantern at its end. The other wagons soon followed suit, extending their own antennae two at a time until the caravan looked like a giant centipede skittering up the side of the dark mountain on glowing feet.

Once all of the antennae had fanned opened, Aimei picked up where she had left off. “How could you say such a thing? I can’t just lock Mop out of the house. He won’t last one night by himself.”

“Maybe you should just get a new cat then,” Janus muttered. Before she could sputter her outrage, he pointed forward. “Check the road up ahead.”

Aimei obeyed, grabbing the handle of a large forward-facing spotlight and directing it just ahead of the team of oxen. She swept it back and forth along the ground, each time aiming just a little bit farther out. It wasn’t long before she found something: a pair of knee-high brown boots. The spotlight continued to climb upward, revealing a colorful, garish, and slightly oversize

merchant's travel cloak and settling on the pale face of a young man below a fountain of black hair.

The man waggled his fingers in a wave. "Ho, honorable friend. It is such a great fortune to see your arrival." There was an insecure smugness to his smirk, unearned bravado.

Janus gnashed his teeth. "I actually thought we were going to finish this leg without incident."

Aimei leaned close. "Maybe we should just run him over."

He shook his head. "Nah, that's rude. It would violate the commerce codes anyway. I'm not paying a fine on his account."

"My horse, my poor horse has fallen lame. I am left stranded." The stranger in the spotlight launched into a well-rehearsed monologue, raising one arm toward the sky and cupping his heart with the other. "Could I beseech you, noble sir, for some assistance?" The young man couldn't have been more than twenty. His skin was too milky for a peasant, and his words too flowery, reflecting an education. He also couldn't act his way out of a burlap sack.

Janus snapped his fingers twice and waved him off. "First of all, that's a terrible delivery. You weren't even looking at me. Why are you talking to the sky? Who are you serenading, the Queen? My face is down here. Look at the person you're talking to, me, the person you're trying to rob. Second of all, your tone is all over the place. I can't tell if you're trying to swindle me or bed me. Pick a motive and stick to the lane, son, because it's late, and my back is quivering from having to hunch forward all day. We have a full wagon of ducal post to sort tomorrow, and my eyes are burning from a long day on the haul." He gestured for the stranger to hurry up. "So skip to the epilogue, yeah?"

The stranger did not seem to mind the interruption. "Very well." He raised his arms dramatically and clapped three times. Several figures emerged from the shadows. He continued orating. "You have the privilege of being robbed by the Righteous Raiders, the crew of a hundred scores."

"Really?" Aimei's eyes widened. She had been taken in by the bandit's presentation. She was usually easily impressed.

"Righteous Raiders, eh? Stupid name." Janus got a better look at the stranger. "You look a little too much of a small dumpling to have earned a hundred scores."

“It’s more of a goal,” the young man admitted.

Aimei’s eyes narrowed, and she folded her arms. “How many robberies have you *actually* pulled off?”

Janus elbowed her in the shoulder lightly.

His side-seat elbowed him back. “What? I want to know.”

“Five, but three were in the past few weeks.”

Janus didn’t bother stifling his laugh. “Five? No wonder your scabbard’s tied on wrong. You bunch of muddied pig feet flee your lord and suddenly think you’re all real bandits now, yeah? That’s a nice blade. Where did you steal it?”

The stranger stayed in character. “Earned in a duel with a master war artist off the Tyk Coast.”

“It’s pronounced Tyk Coast, third accent,” Janus retorted. “Get it right.”

“Are you in charge?” asked the orator.

“I’m the headguard. Are you the leader of this band of dirt-wallowing peasants?” he shot back.

“I am the legendary Tuhan the Woo.”

“Never heard of you.” Janus actually had, but he wasn’t going to give the boy any cred. He rose to his feet and crossed his arms. His back really was aching. He couldn’t wait until he could hand the reins over to Aimei. She just needed a little more seasoning. “Wait, you’re that runaway monk. Brother Big Brother.”

“He doesn’t look that big to me,” scoffed Aimei. “Why do they call you that?”

Tuhan shrugged. “I go by many titles, but that’s a new one.” He turned to those standing nearby. “Boys, anyone ever hear me referred to as that?”

A smattering chorus of “No, Big Brother, never, Big Brother” followed. More bodies emerged from the tree line. The lead wagon was now completely surrounded.

“Let’s get this over with.” Janus nudged Aimei, but the girl was already prepared, one hand resting on the shaft of a holstered short spear. Janus grabbed a mallet the size of his palm and banged the small gong hanging off the side of his perch. The ringing passed from wagon to wagon all the way down the line. Then he jumped off the wagon and drew the mallet’s much larger sibling, which rivaled Janus’s height. The rest of the caravan guards

emerged from their wagons and began making their way to the front. The last few coming up from the far back were still strapping on their armor.

The two sides sized each other up. Janus didn't get an accurate count of how many, but he knew at a glance the numbers were skewed enough that it didn't matter.

Tuhan looked smug. "Twelve guards against forty Righteous."

"Closer to thirty," replied Janus.

"I have more in the woods as backup."

"Sure you do."

The monk flashed a bright smile as if he were giving a sermon on Tenth Day Prayer. "A word of advice, my good senior sir, you should just take the loss. It's better for everyone."

Janus considered the odds for a moment. Then he considered all the other financial implications involved. He shook his head. "Nah, we'll fight it out."

The leader of the Righteous Raiders momentarily broke character. "Are you sure, headguard?"

"Let's see what you have, double brother runaway monk."

The guards and bandits lined up politely. One never knew when the person across from them may end up on the same side one day. After a few last-minute armor adjustments and drawing of weapons, Janus raised an arm and stomped his feet three times. Tuhan mirrored the movements.

The two sides came together in a messy, dull crash. It had been a long day, and everyone was tired. A lazy ax met a half-hearted swung sword. A mace dinged against a shield when it really should have been a louder dong. Even the grunts and yells sounded forced. It was also quickly obvious that these mud-slipping, doe-faced peasants were just that, not experienced soldiers or bandits. You could put these peasants in the finest armor wielding the sharpest swords and riding the fiercest steeds. It didn't matter. Regardless of how you dress them, a peasant will always be a peasant. Arrow fodder was all they were good for.

No one was fighting particularly hard, except for perhaps Aimei, who was obviously working for a fight bonus. She always did. Apparently, feeding that cat was expensive. Janus's side-seat fought in the thick of the battle, clashing with several bandits at once and finding the mark in several, which was good enough to earn the first blood payout.

Janus wished the girl didn't always give her full effort. It was exhausting just to be close to her sometimes, but as the only woman in his crew, she worked twice as hard as everyone on everything, and as his apprentice, she was twice as hard on everyone else as well. He had been meaning to have a talk with her about that. There were many times when a crew should give it their all. Right now wasn't one of them.

In any case, Janus had no intention of letting this play out any more than necessary. After a brief series of hits and blows, his people holding their own but slowly getting overwhelmed by sheer numbers, he decided to call it.

Janus raised his mallet over his head, slightly disappointed he hadn't even gotten to use it. "All right, that's enough. The caravan is yours, Brother Big Brother."

Tuhan, who also hadn't drawn his saber yet, was standing on the opposite side of the small field, and frowned. "Are you sure? The stoppage feels early."

Janus shrugged. "Long enough for my crew to earn fight pay. Not worth it to go for the win bonus." He had to pull Aimei back from still trying to paw at her opponent, and then hauled Enja and Pio off the ground. Pio *may* actually have broken a leg, which looked like the worst of the injuries. "Surrender formation, boys. Back to the wagon and let the good raiders finish their work." Once his people had retreated, Janus turned over a sand clock to start the count and turned back to Tuhan. "As agreed by the commerce code, you're allocated fifteen minutes. Try to keep it neat, will you?"

Tuhan the Woo was too preoccupied to listen, however. He had picked up Aimei's dropped short sword and was busy asking her to tea, which she was clearly enjoying. Janus reluctantly admitted the banditlord came across like a rogue straight out of a Burning Hearts romance. The man was a jackass, but at least a dashing one.

Janus hauled her back to the surrender formation before the two could set a date. "Act professional, will you?"

The Righteous Raiders began to pick through the caravan like ants on a rotting melon. What they lacked in skill and organization, they made up for in numbers. Janus was surprised to count that there really were forty or so of them. With so many mouths to feed, it was no wonder they had to hit so many caravans.

The bandits were midway through ransacking the third wagon when the door to the riding carriage in the rear banged open. A stout, fleshy man with neatly combed hair stumbled out still wearing a sleep sack. He looked aghast at the bandits crawling all over the wagons and stormed up to the front of the caravan.

He shook a fist at Janus. "What's going on? What is the meaning of this? Why aren't you stopping these brigands from absconding with the merchandise? They're robbing me!"

"We tried, Boss Izun. Battle's over. You lost." Janus shook his head. "I *did* tell you twelve was too few for a caravan this size, but you didn't want to bring on my second unit. You wanted to save the liang."

"Battle's already over?" Izun looked the guards over. "There's barely a mark on any of you!"

Everyone looked offended. "Of course not," huffed Enja, who was one of the ones wearing only half of his armor. "We're professionals. We don't chop people up every fight. Who can do business like that?"

Janus hurried to calm Izun's nerves. "Worry not, Boss. Everyone's operating under the lunar court commerce rules. These fine gentlemen won't take more than a quarter, and it'll be merchandise only. No personal belongings or extracurricular killings. On their good word."

"A quarter? On a bandit's good word?" The caravan boss paled. "What am I paying you miserable dogs for?" He turned abruptly and took two steps toward the leader of the Righteous Raiders. "And you, I don't know who you think you—"

"I'm surrounded by amateurs these days," Janus complained. Before his employer made it a third of the way, Janus hooked the shaft of his mallet around his weedy neck in a choke hold and dragged him back to the rest of the guards. "Don't mind him, banditlord. He's new, just like you, and needs to learn the rules."

"Traitor, traitor!" Izun screeched, pawing ineffectually at Janus's face. "You're all in on this vile scam, you backstabbing goats."

Janus jerked the mallet sharply sideways and thunked the boss across the head, just hard enough to shut him up. "Stop squirming or I'll throw you into a trunk until this is over. I just saved your life." He handed the quivering Izun over to Aimei once the man settled down. "Stay on him. No one gets paid if he dies."

The merchant struggled weakly in her grasp. "You . . . traitors . . ."

Janus held up his hands apologetically. "Sorry about that disturbance, banditlord. Fresh fish from Lawkan. Hasn't learned the local commerce rules yet." His voice trailed off. He looked up. "Do you hear that?"

The Righteous Raiders boss frowned. "Hear what?"

Then they all did, a faint wailing over the high-pitched whistle of the stiff breeze.

Tuhan glanced back at his crew and at the rest of the raiders. No, the sound was bouncing across the mountain range, but it was coming from farther away. Janus looked up the road and squinted, noticing for the first time a lone figure running toward them from up the road, wildly flapping arms.

Tuhan by now had noticed as well. He cupped his palms around his eyes. "Who interrupts a robbery?"

"One of yours?" asked Janus.

"Don't think so. We've been lying in wait all day. Maybe someone from the delivery post?"

The yelling became more coherent as the intruder neared. "Wait, don't leave yet."

The two men exchanged glances.

"Who is leaving?" asked Tuhan.

"Certainly not us." Janus checked the sand clock. "Not for another seven minutes."

"Thanks for the reminder." Tuhan raised his voice. "Wrap it up, my righteous brothers!"

The stranger reached the edge of the crowd near the first wagon. He slowed to a labored jog and then hung his head low, his chest heaving as he rested his hands on his knees. "Thanks . . . thanks for waiting. I got to the drop post late, thought I'd missed the wagon. Then I saw your lanterns in the distance and tried to catch up. I have a package to pick up . . ."

The newcomer was young, with long hair pulled back at the nape of his neck. His face was youthful, with a sparse patch of hair on his chin. The rest of his face needed tweezers more than a blade. His skin was tanned, wind-whipped and beaten by the King. His plain, coarse tunic and dirty trousers were of livestock quality, soaked with sweat and caked to his body, revealing a surprisingly lean and muscular figure. He was also completely oblivious to

the situation. Janus recognized him after a few moments. It was one of the local boys who had moved into the region the past few cycles. It took him a bit longer to put a name to that face.

Janus raised a hand. "Hello, Hiro. You should probably go back to the delivery post. We'll be along shortly."

Hiro waved back and then appeared to realize that he was surrounded by armed men with their weapons drawn. "Is this a bad time?"

"Who is this guppy?" asked Tuhan.

"Just a local kid," he told Tuhan. "Don't mind him."

"Are your wagons stuck here? I can help push." Hiro offered a weak smile. "Hey!"

One of the bandits had grabbed him by the collar and was shoving him off to the side.

"Just hang still, Hiro," shouted Janus. "We'll get to you after this business is done."

A commotion at the back of the caravan drew Janus's attention. One of his guards was quarreling with four bandits. "Headguard," called his man, "they're trying to break into the mail wagon."

The merchant Izun's eyes bulged, and he temporarily escaped Aimei's grasp. "That's an official postal wagon, you ball-licking dog. It's ducal insured and off-limits, you mud-faced, stone-brained ass-bottom!"

This time, the flat of Janus's mallet knocked him out cold. That didn't mean the trader was wrong, though. Janus snapped at the banditlord. "What are you little minnows doing? Can't you see the imperial purple seal with the bright gold Zhingzhi? You can't be that fresh of a fish to hit up a ducal-backed wagon."

Tuhan did not appear to worry. "The dukes are too embroiled in their civil war, burning their own lands, to worry about a little disruption in the post. They won't care."

Janus knew for a fact they would, on pure principle if nothing else. The dukes of the Enlightened States never let anything slide. Attacking anything ducal-marked was an attack on their power. Still, if these dumb carcasses wanted to wrap their mouths around this hook, he would let them. He signaled to his man to step aside and let the righteous fools gleefully tear into the ducal wagon. He shook his head in disbelief and disgust as people's

mail packages, crates, and personal belongings were haphazardly tossed onto the muddy road.

“Hey,” Hiro protested, squirming in a bandit’s grasp as one of the raiders pulled out a package neatly wrapped in bright-orange rice paper and sniffed it curiously. “That’s my aunt’s delivery. She really needs it.”

The bandit holding him pressed a blade to his throat. “Your auntie needs that package like you need a hole in your neck, swine.”

“I’m not the one who smells like I bathe in a trough,” Hiro shot back, earning him a punch in the gut. Interestingly, it didn’t fold him over. Either the boy was made of tougher stuff, or the bandit didn’t know how to punch. The boy’s protest, however, caught Tuhan’s attention.

The runaway monk walked over to the discarded crate with the expensive orange wrapping paper. He nudged it lightly with his boot. “What do you have in here that’s so important, son?”

Hiro must have realized his mistake too late. “Nothing.”

“Right.” Tuhan flourished his expensive-looking saber, used it like the ignorant peasant that he was to crack open the crate. The saber was obviously a nobleman’s toy, probably not suited for battle, and definitely not suitable for packages.

A pained cry drew Janus’s attention back to Hiro, who had somehow acquired a knife from one of the bandits. The young man, with an arm around the bandit’s neck, dragged him toward the crate while leveling the knife at any nearby bandits. “I don’t want any trouble. I just want to get my package and go. My aunt’s been expecting it. If I don’t get it to her, there will be trouble. And I’m honestly not in the mood for that tonight, or any night, really, so let me just get my stuff, and you all can keep”—he motioned at everyone—“doing whatever it is you guys are doing.”

Tuhan pointed his blade at him. “Get this dog!”

Janus tried to defuse the situation. A commoner getting gutted during a robbery was bad business for both sides. “Come on, this is embarrassing. Let’s not kill each other over the mail.”

It was too late, however.

The rest of the raiders converged on him. The nearest bandit, a large, brawny man wearing a wok as a breastplate, tried to knock the boy over with a metal-gloved fist. Hiro turned aside sharply and sent the raider flying onto his belly. The boy twisted and turned through the onslaught, impressively

face was so unsettling that Taishi had initially thought someone was holding a blade into his back.

“Taishi,” he panted. “I have the glorious honor of—”

The child oracle shoved Mori aside and stomped toward Taishi, high-kneeing every step of the way. Deep lines etched into her face as her mouth and eyes contorted in sharp and violent ways. Taishi must be dealing with Pei right now, because this little girl was *pissed*. “Taishi! What have you done?”

“Oracle,” Taishi acknowledged with a slight tilt of her head. “Can we keep it down? I’m supposed to be dead.”

“Do the right thing! That’s all you had to do. Do the right thing, and everything had the best chance of turning out right. Do the right thing. That’s all I asked.” She actually raised her rag doll and hurled it at Taishi. The precocious little oracle was melting into a full-on tantrum. Floppy, her little pet red fox, joined in, slinking between the girl’s ankles and hissing at Taishi like an ill-tempered cat. It was all rather adorable. Jian covered his mouth while he chuckled. No need to be rude about it. Her rage was something to behold. There was more to it, though, something else: fear.

Taishi looked unaffected by the outburst. She swirled the spoon in her cup of tea. “Hello, Pei. We believe we did exactly that.”

“No,” the oracle snapped. “You did exactly what *you* wanted to do.”

“Why not both?”

“How convenient!” Pei jabbed a tiny finger in Taishi’s face. “One thing, Taishi, the right thing, that was it, and you couldn’t help but muddle that up! The only constant in your life is that you always make bad choices! Why even bother working to become one of the greatest war artists of your generation if you’re going to ignore your responsibilities and screw with fate like a spoiled goober!”

Now Pei was getting a little personal. Jian raised his hand. “What do you mean, the right thing?”

The oracle turned her little wrath on Jian, and it was indeed furious. “And you! You rock brain. You discount dummy. You were *supposed* to kill her and take her power! That was the whole point of the entire exercise. That was everything. This terrible path is the best one we have left, and you just messed it up. Only on this path with Wen Jian assuming the mantle of the

windwhisper lineage could anyone have become strong enough to kill the last of the Xoangiagu.”

“The what?” he asked.

“We were almost there.” Pei held up her forefinger and thumb. “See this? That was how much further you had to go and we would have stood a chance.

“That’s the worst part,” the oracle hissed. “You gave up all that just for a brief while longer with *her*?” The not-so-nice girl now shot an accusing finger at Taishi. “She’s already dying!”

Jian shrugged, sticking his chin out at her, his eyes fierce and blazing. “You’re never going to make me feel guilty for sparing my master’s life.”

The tiny prophet screamed. “No you hairless peanut! It’s not about you, you monkey scrotum. I’ve seen the how the vision shifts.” Pei’s tone changed too. It became hushed, fearful. “Everyone now will die.”

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You would think, after having written twelve books and twelve acknowledgments, that I would eventually run out of people to thank, but that's the thing with publishing. It really does take a village.

The Art of Destiny was an extra-tough project to crack. Part of it was wrangling this increasingly complex story. Part of it was the dreaded second-book-in-a-trilogy transition. And part of it was because the characters often had a mind of their own. Just like failed prophecies, free will often does not care about your outline.

Oh, and we also welcomed baby River to the world during the throes of the pandemic. Let me tell ya; having two young boys locked in the house with you was a special experience. One thing for sure, I needed the entire village while working on this book, and thankfully everyone showed up.

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