



CHAPTER ONE

AT THE GATES

The Siege of Vauzan began during a sunny Tenth Day Prayer. Ling Taishi was gnawing on a thousand-layer flaky bun at the Tall Wall Dim Sum restaurant set up at the parapet of the Dauntless Wall, which ran along the eastern perimeter of Vauzan city, the ducal capital of Shulan Duchy. The wall didn't serve as much of a deterrent. It was wider and squatter than it was tall, and no opposing army had ever been intimidated by a fat wall. The court often rented the grounds of the outer battlement to various businesses and special events. Wedding processions circling the city were especially popular.

Today was Breakfast Club, which happened at every Tenth Day Prayer. Taishi would never admit it, but she savored these meals with the other women of the club. These events were some of her most enjoyable moments in a world increasingly devoid of such small pleasures. The Vauzan Temple of the Tiandi during Tenth Day Prayer was insufferable, so this gave her an excuse to leave the temple grounds and stay as far away from the ghastly, pious rabble yearning to tithe their way into heaven. With the troubles brewing across the Enlightened States, the business of religion was doing well.

She continued to nibble the edges of her bun. Like the wall, her breakfast was also falsely advertised. The so-called thousand-layer flaky bun had many layers, yes, but not close to a thousand. Probably not even twenty. Even worse, it was dry and bland. Every bite sucked the moisture out of her mouth. It was a good thing that Taishi was prepared. She reached for one of the six cups arrayed before her. The one on the left was hot soy milk for dipping. Next to it was the black poison tea—not actually poisonous. Beside that was the plum wine, the ginseng drink, and then the monk fruit drink. The last cup was water, for washing of course.

Taishi drained the hot soy milk in one burning gulp, and then scooped up another bun. It wasn't that the Tall Wall's pastries were that good; it was that there was competition here, and Zofi ate enough for three.

Sitting across from Taishi, smirking, was Narwani Bhasani, Master of the Drowned Fist, who said, "Ling Taishi, grandmaster war artist, legend of the lunar court, the most-wanted fugitive—sometimes second—in the Enlightened States, is a messy eater. We can't take you anywhere respectable, master."

Flakes dribbled onto Taishi's lap as she sucked her fingers. "I might not be alive next time we get a table here. I'll eat how I like."

It was true; reservations at the Tall Wall Dim Sum, a pop-up open only during Tenth Day Prayers, were difficult to land. That was the thing about time. When she first entered the lunar court, reputation was everything, especially for young women starting out in a man's world. Now that these masters were older legends, they were practically invisible, which suited Taishi fine. Once you're close to death, you tend to stop worrying about what other people think of you.

Taishi popped the last bit of bun into her mouth and flagged down one of the servers moving between the tables. "Hey, pretty miss, another round of soy milk, please."

The girl with the bright green apron rolled her pushcart next to the table and swapped out the empty pitcher with a piping hot one. She also brought out three stacks of wicker baskets and placed them on the

table before scribbling markings on a small wooden tablet next to Bhasani.

She bowed to Taishi. “Will that be all, holy dowager?”

“That’s it, pretty miss.” Taishi objected to the title, but not everyone gets the chance to choose their own identity. She did her best to play the part. She now lived in Vauzan under the alias Dowager Nun Nai Roha.

The legendary grandmaster war artist and criminal Ling Taishi was, by all official accounts, deceased, although she still had the second-largest bounty in all the Enlightened States on her head. According to the carefully crafted and then leaked story that she and Templeabbot Lee Mori had concocted, Taishi had been killed two years ago by her disciple, Wen Jian, the Prophesied Hero—or Villain, depending on which clergy you asked—of the Tiandi, the Champion of the Five Under Heaven, and *still* the most wanted man in the Enlightened States. It annoyed Taishi that her bounty never surpassed his, and never would now that she was dead.

The rumors surrounding them were equally fantastic and unbelievable. The facts were decidedly murkier and needed to be kept under wraps for a while longer. Taishi was not yet ready to reveal Jian to the world, and honestly, *he* wasn’t ready.

Ras Sonaya and Wu Zofi joined the two masters at the table a little while later. The drowned fist heir was Jian’s tutor, and Taishi’s assistant and ward rounded out the last two members of the Breakfast Club. As usual, the girls were late. Both were dragging a little, their heads bowed and shoulders slumped as they fell into their seats. It must have been another late night for the young people.

Taishi used her chopsticks to pick up a couple pieces of garlic green beans. “Have a seat. There’s more soy milk coming.”

“You’re late, daughter,” Bhasani scolded. She was always a stickler about her heir’s timeliness even though *she* was the one who was often criminally tardy.

“Apologies, Mother.” Sonaya looked hungover. She double-fisted a cup of water and a cup of tea and took turns sipping from each. The

drowned fist didn't have a strong tolerance, and any drinking the previous night now showed on her usually unblemished face. After Sonaya finished her second cup, she helped herself to the blood orange wine, gulping that until she was out of breath. She set it down and burped, earning a disapproving glare from Bhasani. Sonaya had been spending her free time with Jian, and the two had rubbed off on each other in the worst and best ways.

Bhasani's puckered lips reflected her views on the two young women's late-night escapades, but Taishi didn't mind. They were young, assertive women in one of the grandest cities in the world. Taishi had once been just like them, except with more bar brawls. Bhasani had been too, if the haughty drowned fist master bothered to remember.

Zofi, on the other hand, had an iron stomach and could match the God of Gamblers gourd for gourd. She could probably go for another binge after breakfast if she chose. The former mapmaker's daughter immediately reached for the wooden menu tablet and took inventory of the spread on the table, as she was wont to do, as if she were running her father's map shop. She began to mark up the orders as if she were grading one of Jian's tests, adding two extra plates of garlic spinach and removing one of the small dragon buns.

"You always get too many," she chided Taishi.

After she was satisfied with the business of ordering breakfast, Zofi began to dig into her plate as if this were her last meal. The girl ate like a large Lawkan ring-push wrestler, swallowing a potsticker with one bite. "This could use a little salt and sesame oil." She was a food snob too, with an opinion on everything. She crunched a thousand-layer flaky bun. "Gah, so dry." Zofi slurped her soy milk and made a face. "This could use some sugar."

The drowned fist daughter had drained her cups and was flagging down the server for a refill. "Excuse me, pretty miss. Girl, hey, excuse me . . . hey!"

The server walked past their table. It was a particularly peculiar trait among the Shulan. If an elderly person was around, they ignored the younger people as if they were toddlers. It was their way of showing deference, but as with everything else, they took it to an extreme. Tai-

shi enjoyed sipping her steaming soy milk as Sonaya tried to flag someone down. The young woman was so used to attention that she got easily riled when it was withheld. Jian might love her, even if he didn't realize it yet, but she was a handful.

"Little stinkfish!" Sonaya hissed the fifth time the server walked past her. Her eyes narrowed, boring into the back of the server girl's head. Her lips parted . . . and then closed when Bhasani smacked her across the shoulder.

"Don't abuse your powers, daughter."

"But, Mother . . ." She started to sulk, but a sharp look silenced her.

Taishi wished Jian could be so dutiful. She raised a limp hand, and the server immediately rushed over. "Yes, dowager, how may I serve you?"

Taishi smirked. "Refresh our cups, pretty miss, and we've added to the order."

"Very good, dowager."

Another server arrived a few minutes later with his pushcart carrying an extravagantly glazed green soup bowl shaped like a turtle. He removed the lid with a flourish, revealing bubbling red liquid inside.

"Dragon egg soup." Zofi rounded on Taishi. "Did you order this? We're on a budget!"

Taishi frowned. "This must be a mistake, handsome boy. We didn't order this. You have the wrong table."

The server bowed, his voice cracking. "Pardon, holy dowager. Courtesy of the gentlemen at table three." He pointed to a large eight-top with a rotating center. Four men sat around it, throwing attention their way. It was likely at Sonaya, who had become a striking young woman. Too much so, in fact, which wasn't necessarily a good thing when you're a fugitive.

Zofi sneaked a peek. "Fancy any of them?"

The drowned fist daughter sniffed. "I cannot be bought with soup."

"Pardon, mistress, but the gift is for the dowager nun." The server's cheeks turned a darker shade of red. "The generous gentleman requests the pleasure of your presence."

Taishi shrouded her face. Either someone recognized her or some-

one had a fetish for old, dying women. Both were nonstarters. She looked over, not bothering to be subtle. All four were impeccably dressed, with pale painted faces and perfectly manicured eyebrows. All were staring directly at her. She snorted. They were either court officials or gangsters. Neither would do. “Tell my gracious patrons that I thank them for the fine offer, but if they look my way again, they’ll be reincarnated as toads.”

The server was taken aback. “But you accepted his gift. It’s only courteous you accept—”

Taishi cut him off. “It’s not a gift if I have to pay for it. Take it back if you like.”

Not everyone agreed. Bhasani wrapped her arms around it and hissed. “Dragon eggs are worth their weight in gold. It’s disgusting, but I doubt I’ll get the chance to taste it again.”

The server acted as if he were going to try to take the bowl from her anyway, but then changed his mind. He bowed. “As you wish, mistresses.” He retreated back to the young men.

The four ladies settled back into their seats and helped themselves to their newfound bounty. The men, obviously courtiers, had looked puzzled and then furious when the server had relayed the message, but what were they going to do about it? The Breakfast Club had already slurped the expensive soup. They were not under any obligation to cater to these dumb hatchlings’ whims simply because they were gifted an expensive appetizer. The dragon egg soup was delicious, although Taishi doubted it was liquid-gold good.

The four women forgot about those silly boys and resumed their meal. They had nearly checked off every dish on the menu tablet when several patrons rushed to the wall, looking to the east. A crowd began to gather at the edge of the outer wall. Some put their hands to their mouths. A few cried out and fled, leaving their tables with breakfast half uneaten.

Zofi looked over first. “Is a thunderstorm approaching?”

Sonya followed her gaze and squinted. “It’s too low for clouds. Perhaps an incoming fog?”

Taishi had been busy making out with the sweet potato bread but

finally looked over. It was a strange sight at first, a thin plume of smoke rising up toward the heavens. Then the dark, cloudy pillar expanded, spreading out on both sides until it became a vast wall of smoke rising on the horizon where the land met sky. She had witnessed it before, and terrible things always followed shortly after. There went her pleasant morning. “We better finish our breakfast.” She turned her attention back to making love with the sweet potato bread. This could be the last piece she would ever eat.

Bhasani had recognized it too. She was the first to stand. “Smoke.” “What was that?” asked Sonaya.

“It’s a Smoke Curtain. Caobiu armies use them as a fog of war. It’s their calling card to incite panic.”

“‘The Smoke Curtain parts ways to invite death in,’” recited Taishi. “It’s always been a clunky battle cry.”

A few moments later, several lines of soldiers flooded onto the battlement. Fresh tension began to sour her breakfast. The table next to them abruptly got up and left. They were followed by several more, including the four men who’d tried to lure Taishi away with soup. The flow of traffic fleeing the walls became a rush. Others went histrionic, falling to their knees and praying, ruining the mood. It wasn’t long before the four women were the only ones left at the tables.

Zofi, as always, was the first to become alarmed. “Shouldn’t we get going somewhere as well?”

Taishi continued to chew her food. “After breakfast. Do you know how hard it is to get these reservations?”

“There’s an army approaching!”

Taishi glanced at the growing Smoke Curtain and shrugged. It was still half a day away. By the size of it, the army was big, probably filled with siege towers and massive war wagons and legions upon legions of soldiers. Sunri never warred small.

She reached over for her cup of plum wine and found it empty, as were all her other cups. She raised her arm and looked around. “Pretty miss? Handsome boy?” All the servers had fled. She scowled. “Fine. Let’s go.”

She stood and made her way toward the stairs. The crowds of wor-

ried people parted before her as she led the other three women down the stairs toward the city level. It was one of the perks of being a dowager nun. Zofi hurried up next to her. "What should we do, Taishi? Should we leave the city? We should get out of here, right?"

Taishi didn't love the idea of dying on the run, but it appeared they had no choice. "The sooner the better, child."

A groan came from both of the drowned fists. Bhasani made a disgusted face as if she had just passed gas. "Or . . ." The drowned fist master held up a fingernail-painted, manicured hand. "We could lay low and mind our own business until things blow over. We're set up well within the city. We have shelter, food, and most importantly, anonymity. We go on the run, we risk being exposed or encountering bounty hunters or—"

"Drifting helplessly right into a naval battle," said Sonaya.

"Being taken prisoner by an enemy army and stuffed into a corpse wagon," added Zofi unhelpfully. "That was fun."

"Even if Caobiu takes the city, they would certainly leave the Ti-andi temple alone. Why rile the local populace?" Bhasani raised her cup and sipped. "Besides, you said the other day that Jian wasn't ready to reveal himself to the world yet."

Both Zofi and Sonaya bobbed their heads. No one relished being on the run again, either as fugitives or refugees. Taishi didn't blame them. She did not care to be out in the open either, especially in her condition, partially sickness but also just old age, which weakened her with each passing day.

She stayed firm, however. "I'd rather risk the dangers outside these walls than the ones inside once the Caobiu are here. Sunri is a monster. She'll find Jian eventually and turn him into a puppet, assuming he lives that long."

"Fair," Bhasani conceded. She sounded almost grudgingly admiring of the duchess.

All of them did. Taishi didn't blame them for that either. She must be getting soft with her old age, but the truth was the truth. As terrible as she was, Sunri certainly deserved to be empress. A woman needed to be ruthless to triumph in a world ruled by men. Duchess Sunri was,

at the same time, the best and worst role model for little murderous girls everywhere.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and started into the city proper. The main square near the Gate of Meaning was a panicked mob of citizens trying to flee deeper into the city while soldiers pushed upstream to get to the city's defenses.

Taishi turned to Zofi. "Start gathering necessary supplies. We'll head west, circle south around the Cloud Pillars, and then head south along the Tyk Coast. We'll need garb that can withstand rain. Maybe an amphibious wagon if you can obtain one."

"And then what?" asked the mapmaker's daughter.

Taishi shrugged. "We'll decide once we get there."

"I'll head to the market to pick up travel supplies."

"Good girl." Taishi turned to the others.

Sonaya wrinkled her nose. "I don't like touching food unless it's being served to me. I'll be in the fashion ward. I need a new travel wardrobe."

"And I," added Bhasani, "am not missing my spa appointment. I won't let Sunri have that power over me. If Sunri is going to run me out of Vauzan, I intend to have a memory of a grand spa day to relive for the rest of my life."

Everyone remembered their fond memories, but the drowned fists had the ability to relive them fully with their jing. Taishi was jealous of that power, although she would probably abuse it to relive her most tragic moments in life.

The Breakfast Club broke up, each woman going her separate way, leaving Taishi standing alone at the base of the Gate of Stillness leading outside the city. Something about this moment gave her pause as she watched her friends disappear into the crowded streets. Sadness swept over her, and she wondered if today's Breakfast Club would be the last good morning she would have for the rest of her life.