



KYLIE LEE BAKER

Author of *The Keeper of Night*

*The*  
SCARLET  
ALCHEMIST

"A dark and glittering jewel of a book."

—JUDY I. LIN,

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Magic Steeped in Poison*

*The*  
SCARLET  
ALCHEMIST

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*The Scarlet Alchemist*

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SCARLET  
ALCHEMIST

KYLIE LEE BAKER

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P R E S S



ISBN-13: 978-1-335-45801-8

The Scarlet Alchemist

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Inkyard Press  
22 Adelaide St. West, 41st Floor  
Toronto, Ontario M5H 4E3, Canada  
[www.InkyardPress.com](http://www.InkyardPress.com)

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## CONTENT NOTE

During the Tang dynasty, Chinese alchemists tried to create an elixir of immortality. This story is what might have happened if they'd succeeded. Because this is an alternate history that reimagines China as it might have developed a century after this discovery, many historical details have been consciously changed. As such, please do not use this book as an authoritative source on Chinese history or culture.

In particular, please note that while the alchemy in this book is based loosely on the principles and goals of eighth-century Chinese Taoist alchemy, the depiction is entirely fictional and is not reflective of historical or modern Taoist practices. This book also includes contemporary Mandarin and Cantonese words, which differ greatly from the Middle Chinese that was spoken during the Tang dynasty. The author made this decision for the sake of relatability and ease of reading for modern Chinese speakers (as well as a reluctance to learn a dead language for the sake of a fantasy novel).





## PROLOGUE

I remember the day of darkness, even if no one else does.

When I close my eyes, I'm standing in a city my aunt says I've never visited, with my parents, who no longer exist.

The city of Chang'an is like a lifetime in a single moment, brimming with words in a thousand languages, the ghosts of footsteps softening the rammed dirt roads, silk clothes that shimmer like fish scales as people glint down the wide streets. At the faraway end of the road is a great stone gate with five doors opening into darkness.

I don't know what's behind the gate, but I move closer, away from my parents, past the merchants and their goatskin bags spilling wine, the pilgrims in robes the color of dust, the dancers in jewels that sharpen the sun's rays and cast them back at me like daggers.

There is something beyond the gate. I'm sure of it. The five archways are screaming mouths, calling out for me.

A gong echoes, then the world flips and disappears, a door slammed shut in my face. I reach out for my mother, and my fingers snap in all different directions with a thousand tiny pops, like fireworks. I'm falling through a world that's turned

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to sand, tumbling into the night sky. The universe unfolds my skin and stretches me across its endless dark, a pale tent over all the stars. I am the night that birthed the world. I am the bones of all the planets. I am silence. I am the end.

I hear my father's voice speaking to me in a language that I've long forgotten. The words rise and fall like slow gusts of wind spilling across a valley, shivering through the grass. Somehow I know that they're of great importance, but I am made of silk and the words flow through me. The only word I understand is my name. *Zilan. Zilan. Zilan.*

I wake in a bed in Guangzhou in my mother's arms. My parents tell me it was a dream, but I know better.

I know because the way they look at me has changed. They watch me when they think I'm not paying attention, their gazes crawling up the knobs of my spine. They're waiting for something.

*What did I do?* I think one thousand times over. But no one will tell me.

Then my mother dies and my father vanishes, and there is no one left to ask.

I am the only one who remembers.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Year 775*

*Guangzhou, China*

At high noon on the first day of the summer solstice, old man Gou barged into the shop carrying a rancid hemp bag over his shoulder. Even if I ignored the suspiciously human-shaped bulge inside, or the brown ooze sloughing onto my floor, or the purple fingertips dangling out the untied end, I would know that scent anywhere.

I closed my book and set down my tea that now tasted sour, the smell of hot corpse knifing up my nose and making saliva pool at the base of my throat, like I was going to be sick. I liked to think I was good at breathing through my mouth and swallowing back the nausea like a professional, but I typically only came across corpses when I was expecting to.

“You can’t bring that in here,” I said, taking a quick sip of tea to force down anything besides words that wanted to come up.

Old man Gou kept walking forward like he hadn’t heard me, hitching the bag higher on his shoulder. “I need you to—”

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“I know what you need,” I said. “That’s not how this works. You make an appointment and you go around back after dark.”

He bristled at being interrupted, but I didn’t care. People with leverage didn’t come to me asking for help. His gaze twitched around the shelves packed with ceramic horses and tiny servants on their knees, thousands of glazed clay eyes witnessing his sins.

My family owned a míngqì store at the far west end of Guangzhou. Uncle Fan and Auntie So molded clay into ghost vessels to bury with the dead, and my cousins and I sold them to grieving families. No one could take real people with them to the afterlife, but they could take our painted ceramic steeds and beautiful glazed clay women and faithful servants the size of your palm. They crammed as many as they could into their tombs, hoping that cold clay would turn to warm flesh once their souls crossed over, that they wouldn’t be alone in death.

When I was younger, I asked Uncle Fan if any of that was true. He scoffed and said *It doesn’t matter if it’s true, the dead can’t ask for refunds*, and slammed the kiln door shut. But the dead could do a lot more than he thought.

That was only our business during the daylight hours. Uncle Fan and Auntie So were blissfully unaware of where the other half of our money came from.

“Take me to the back, then,” old man Gou said, as if it were that simple.

I shook my head, praying that no one had seen him dragging a rotting corpse to our shop in broad daylight. Getting hanged for forbidden life alchemy would certainly interfere with my upcoming travel plans. “I’m watching the shop now. That’s why you need an appointment.”

He narrowed his eyes, his irises glinting gold—a side ef-

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fect of eating too many gold nuggets. These days, the diet of the rich was no longer steamed bear and phoenix pears but handcrafted gold pieces with pearls as garnish, still steaming from their alchemical transformation. Some said they ate it with spoons instead of chopsticks because they didn't have the patience to eat the pieces one at a time.

A century ago, the royal alchemists learned the secret recipe for gold that stopped you from aging and made your blood run the color of sunlight. As long as you kept eating it forever, your smiles would never carve scars into your cheeks, your bones would never grow brittle and creak during rainstorms, your skin would never sag or speckle or crease.

But even ageless bodies were still made of soft human flesh, and neither gold nor gems would protect the rich from disease, or accidents, or whatever the hell had happened to the rancid corpse that old man Gou had dragged in. Those who could afford the gold of immortality often stayed locked away in their mansions to protect their investment, but clearly Gou's family hadn't felt the need. No one truly believed in death until it happened to them.

"There was only a small window of time that I could remove his body unnoticed," old man Gou said, lowering his voice, as if anyone unfortunate enough to pass by would actually process his words before falling unconscious from the stench.

"Which I might have been able to accommodate, if you had come here yesterday and *made an appointment*."

Old man Gou huffed. "Is this trinket shop more important than my brother?" he said, his grip tightening on the bag.

*Important to me, or to you?* I wanted to ask but knew better than to say that to a man, even one who was breaking the law and probably wouldn't risk making a scene. There was a dagger under the counter that I had no qualms about draw-

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ing if he grew too upset, but bloodstains were annoying to clean and hard to explain to Auntie So.

One of the problems with the death industry was that everyone came to you with pain so great that they were convinced no one else could have felt it before. They didn't like that I had rules, that I charged for my time, that their tears didn't move me.

*It doesn't matter that death is sad. This is a business,* Uncle Fan always said when customers cried. *If you make a poor man's business a charity, within a week he'll have twice as many beggars and nothing left to give.*

Besides, old man Gou didn't need my charity, and if he wanted someone to cry for his brother, he could buy a couple mourners down the street. His satchel bulged with coins and his purple silk robes twinkled with golden embroidery. His hands had no callouses, no dirt caught under his nails like the farmers or artisans. He hadn't fallen on hard times, clearly.

He must have read the sternness on my face and decided to change tactics, because he finally set the bag on the floor with a heavy sigh. I prayed whatever swampy liquid sloshing around inside wouldn't stain the floor.

"Surely you don't have many customers these days," he said, strolling over to a shelf and lifting a ceramic ox. I opened my mouth to demand he put it down, but he let out a breath and a cloud of dust flew up into the air, the soft powder swirling around the horribly smug look on his face.

"We have enough," I said, gripping the edge of the counter. People who couldn't afford life gold were still planning funerals, of course, but there were no more aristocrats emptying our shelves when their fathers passed. Most customers bought one or two míngqì and cried over the counter while begging for

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a lower price. We gave it to them, not because we were good people but because a few coins were better than none at all.

Old man Gou raised an eyebrow. “You’d be better off making chamber pots.”

I didn’t reply, because I’d actually said the same thing to Auntie So. *People can shit in a hole in the ground, not in my art*, she’d responded.

I shook my head. “Closing at random times is bad for business.”

“Zilan síuzé,” he said, offering me a stiff smile, “please, my brother has two young daughters.”

It took an immense effort not to roll my eyes at how sweetly he said my name. When I was younger, he’d laughed when his son called me gwáimūi—*ghost girl*—and didn’t scold him when he ripped up all the purple orchids that grew at the edge of the city, chewed them up, and spit them at my feet. I couldn’t even be that mad at him, because I also wanted to chew up my name and spit it out in a purple slurry.

Zílán—written with the characters for *purple orchid*—wasn’t the kind of name that you gave a girl who would be someone important someday. It was what you got stuck with when your father was a foreigner and your mother had—for some bizarre reason—let him name you even though he barely spoke Chinese. Maybe it was fine for Scotian girls to be named after flowers, but in Guangzhou, names were our parents’ hopes and dreams for us, not just pretty things they saw in the dirt.

My cousin Wénshū’s name had the character for *book* in it, because even before he’d proven his annoying aptitude for reading, he was destined to be a scholar. My cousin Yǔfēi’s name was a misty shroud of snow and rain, the hidden face of a beautiful goddess. But zílán was a flower so common that it



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couldn't even be sold, so fragile that a few days of rain would tear it apart. It was pretty for a moment, and then it was dead.

The shop was truly starting to smell now, and if I'd hoped for any customers today, they certainly wouldn't come if old man Gou stood there any longer with his brother's leaky corpse. It was best to just deal with him quickly.

I sighed. "Lock the door."

Old man Gou turned and drew the wooden bar across the door behind him. He cleared his throat, stepping farther into the room. "I want—"

"Payment first," I said, tapping the counter.

He froze as if slapped. "You haven't even looked at him yet."

"A consultation costs fifty gold."

His expression curdled, but he obeyed, emptying his satchel onto the counter. Gold coins spun across the polished wood. These were the diluted kind used for currency, not the nuggets eaten for immortality. I could tell that from the tarnish alone.

I picked up one of the coins and held it up to the window, examining its shine, then dropped it in my cup of tea. Real gold always sank to the bottom, but fool's gold—the cheaply transformed kind that would turn back to coal in the next hour—would float.

"My brother had heart pains," old man Gou said as the coin sank to the bottom of my teacup.

I picked up another piece and put it in my mouth, biting down gently. Real gold was soft and malleable. This one came out with the impression of my back molars. Satisfied that they were real, I began to count.

"Cinnabar and mushrooms didn't help," old man Gou went on.

"I am not a healer," I said, because his voice was distract-

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ing me from my counting. “His diagnosis doesn’t matter to me as long as he’s in one piece.”

Old man Gou’s upper lip twitched as I lined up his gold in neat rows. He was probably unaccustomed to being spoken to so casually. Bags of gold could buy him many things, but my respect was not one of them.

“This is forty-seven,” I said at last, holding out my hand for more.

Old man Gou waved his hand at me as if it didn’t matter. “Surely that’s enough for a consultation.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You want a consultation worth forty-seven gold pieces?”

“*Please,*” he said, teeth clenched.

“As you wish,” I said, leaning over the counter. I squinted at the sack’s hemp fabric, stained with gray liquid. I took a deep breath, the scent of death making my eyes water.

“No,” I said, swiping his gold off the counter into my clay bowl. “Thank you for your business.”

“*No?*” old man Gou said, red rushing to his face. “How can you call that a consultation?”

“The smell,” I said, taking a long sip of my tea that now had a metallic tang, like blood. “You waited too long to come to me. I’m not going to reanimate a corpse with maggots for eyes and send him on his way.”

“He has eyes!” old man Gou said, his voice rattling the row of ceramic singers beside him. “You didn’t even look at him!”

I took another sip of tea. “Looking costs ten more gold than what you paid me.”

“*Three more! You said fifty!*”

“That was before you tried to shortchange me,” I said. “Now it’s ten more.”

Old man Gou huffed and reached into another satchel,

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shaking his head as he counted out ten coins and slammed them onto the counter. I added them to my bowl, then ducked under the counter and into the shop room.

I pulled back the hemp cloth, revealing a stiff and bloated body the color of cold porridge, his nails and lips blue. His nose dripped with a tar-black liquid that ran down his cheeks and pooled at the corners of his mouth. I touched his arm and felt the skin shift back and forth as I moved my fingers, like a piece of loose clothing. Old man Gou gagged at the smell.

“He’s already started purging,” I said. “His skin could slip off at any moment. I can’t fix that.”

“But you can bring him back?”

I looked up, frowning. “Did you hear me? You want a brother with no skin?”

“We’ll sew it back on,” he said, waving his hand like it was a minor inconvenience. “Anything’s better than death, isn’t it?”

I narrowed my eyes. “To *you*. He won’t be able to go outside. His appearance will alarm people.”

“Our house is large enough that he won’t be bored,” he said. “Can you do it or not?”

If I could afford to have a conscience, I would have said no.

But soon, my cousins and I would take our civil service exams, and if all went well, we’d be moving to the capital for the second and third testing rounds, leaving half our savings behind for Uncle Fan and Auntie So. I pictured them sitting in the dark, stretching out the last bags of rice into thin soup.

“Six hundred,” I said.

Old man Gou scoffed. “I heard you were charging five hundred last week.”

“Last week, gold was worth more.”

“How dare you—”

“If you don’t like it, find someone else.”

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There was no one else, and he knew it. Alchemists who could repair broken toys or heal skinned knees were easy to find, but experimenting with life alchemy—or soliciting it—was punishable by death.

Old man Gou glared back at me, probably unsure if I would truly walk away from five hundred gold. But I had seen death and decay, things far more fearsome than an angry old man, things that Gou could never imagine in his endless, gilded life.

At last, he nodded.

“You can leave the body in the pigpen,” I said. “Come back after dark with the money.”

His eyes narrowed, the gold flecks knife-sharp. “I’m not leaving my brother in a pigpen.”

“Oh, then let’s prop him up to greet customers,” I said, rolling my eyes and standing up to move behind the counter again. “I’m not the one who dragged a corpse here at midday with nowhere to put it.”

“Can you not help me *now*?”

“My cousins are busy, and I need their help,” I said. “Besides, you haven’t paid me yet.”

“What is it with you Fans and money?” he said. “Have you no compassion?”

“None,” I said, taking another sip of tea. I was used to people berating me for my prices.

“That’s why your family is so unlucky, you know,” he said, hefting the sack onto his shoulder once more. “You all have bad karma.”

I made sure not to change my expression, not to show him that his words affected me. He was probably talking about my parents. Guangzhou had been smaller back then, and everyone had heard about the girl foolish enough to marry a foreigner who left her on her deathbed. Or maybe he meant

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Auntie and Uncle, whose poor health was no secret. But our bad fortune had nothing to do with our prices, and everything to do with gold guzzlers like old man Gou.

“Buddhist morals don’t apply to an alchemist,” I said, draining my teacup and setting it heavily on the counter, “and the devas will abandon you for this. If you want your brother back, then I’m your new god.”

Old man Gou scoffed. “Imagine,” he said, shaking his head, “someone like me on my knees praying to someone like you.”

That could have meant a thousand different things, but in the end, it didn’t matter. China had long split into a great chasm, with Gou’s family on one side and mine on the other.

“I don’t want your prayers,” I said. “I just want your money.”

## CHAPTER TWO

I found Wenshu sitting on the floor of our bedroom among dozens of unfurled scrolls. His eyes tracked up and down the text, not bothering to look when I appeared in the doorway. I could have set the roof on fire and he probably would have kept reading until his skin started to bubble.

He went outside far less than me or Yufei, so his complexion nearly matched the white of his hemp robes. Yufei and I joked that he would make a better bride than either of us because he was wispy as a stalk of silver grass, had soft hands, hair that never tangled, and bathed so often that he perpetually smelled like soap beans.

“Gēgē,” I said. “We have—”

“Wait a minute,” he said. “I’m concentrating.”

His gaze stayed locked on the parchment, reading faster than I could ever dream of. He had an irritatingly good memory, and it was probably the fifth or sixth time he’d read the same scroll, so I didn’t feel too bad about grabbing one of Yufei’s stray socks from the floor, balling it up, and throwing it at his face.

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The sock bounced off his forehead. He finally looked up, his expression flat. "I'm studying."

"It's tax day," I said. "Come with me to the tax office and buy more tattoo ink on the way. We have a job tonight."

"Ah." He looked down at the scroll before him like a lover he couldn't bear to part with, slowly rolling it up. He'd gone to school for a few years, but ever since business declined, he'd had to split his time between the shop and studying on his own. Though he wasn't the most patient teacher, he'd managed to teach Yufei and me some basic characters, and the rest we'd learned for ourselves.

At some point that I couldn't remember, we'd all joked about passing the civil service exams together and moving to the capital, Chang'an, as government workers, where we could send Auntie So and Uncle Fan enough money to buy ten new houses. Then one day, as we studied with only the light of the thinnest slice of crescent moon coming through the paper windows, we realized it was no longer a joke. We'd spoken it aloud and slowly it had taken shape, gone from the soft haze of a dream to something with hard edges and sharp corners that we could hold tight in our hands. Now, in two weeks' time, we'd take our exams and see if our studying had amounted to anything, or if the dream would pour through our fingers like sand.

So, whenever we weren't working, Wenshu and Yufei studied Confucian classics for the bureaucratic exam, while I studied for the alchemy exam to become one of the royal court alchemists.

I'd read every alchemy book in Guangzhou that I could find or borrow or steal. I'd learned how alchemists were masters of the five elements, using all kinds of rocks and minerals as catalysts to reshape the world. At first, the earliest alchemists' only goal had been to create an elixir of immortality.

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They had managed to kill five emperors with their toxic concoctions before they finally succeeded for Empress Wu—over one hundred years old and still fresh as a pond lily.

Now, with their greatest dream accomplished, there was little that modern alchemists wouldn't attempt. They could rend mountains in two, change the course of rivers, boil the oceans, raze cities to ashes—nothing was impossible if you had the right stones and were willing to pay the price.

My first text had been my father's notes on alchemy—the only thing he'd left for me, besides my ridiculous flowery name. My aunt said he'd heard that alchemy was more advanced in China than in the West, so he'd traveled along the Silk Road with the hopes of learning our secrets. He came from the other side of the world, from a small country called Scotia that spoke a strange language called Gaelic, where they still thought of alchemy as pseudoscience and myth just because they'd never mastered it. Auntie So said my father was tall, pale, and pinkish like uncooked jellyfish, with coppery hair and watery blue eyes. I still remembered the soft line of his smile, but after ten years, my memories had grown tattered at the edges.

Because of him, I would be a great alchemist one day. Not to make him proud, but to spite him. Because when my mother got sick, he'd simply left and never come back. I could still feel her stiff, withered hands in mine while she said, *Your father has gone to get help. He'll be back any moment now.* But there was no help beyond our local healers, and as the moon grew thin and dark in the sky, I knew he would never return. My mother, who had never hurt anyone, who braided my hair with orchids and picked the peppers out of my soup for me and sang to me every night until she died, had believed in him until her last breath.

So I had taken his notes as my own, because it was the



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least he could give me after dumping me on Auntie So. His research was the only advantage I could hope to have over the schooled alchemists. He wrote half in Chinese and half in Gaelic, which Wenshu had helped me decipher, saying it had roots in the Slavic languages that were used along Western trade routes.

It was obvious that the Scotians really had no idea what they were doing with alchemy. My father's notes described unstable and overly ambitious transformations mixed with rants about a magical elixir hidden in a mythical Penglai Island. Sometimes, that ambition had led him to questions that would have gotten him jailed if he'd said them in Chinese.

*Why must the dead remain dead?* he'd written in his last notebook. *Alchemists wield life energy for their transformations, so why is death untouchable? Surely, with the right stone, it's possible.*

He'd focused his efforts on chicken-blood stone—a mix of clay and bloodred quartz—as the key material in a transmutation that could revive the dead. He hadn't stayed long enough to find out that he was right.

Putting his notes into practice had taken some trial and error, plus a lot of screaming and praying from Auntie So when the pig she slaughtered for dinner was suddenly alive again in the afternoon. But the first time I'd tried it on humans, I'd realized that this was as close as I would ever get to being a god. For a single moment after every transformation, I was no longer a poor merchant's daughter but an artist of the universe, repainting the constellations, smoothing mountains into valleys and parting seas.

My cousins tried alchemy when we were younger, but neither of them had been able to do much more than create bubbling pools of sludge that smelled so sharp that we nearly fainted from the fumes.

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“There’s probably a genetic component,” Wenshu had said. “Your father did it, that’s why you can.”

But I suspected that Wenshu just preferred reading scrolls to getting his hands dirty.

“You smell like old fish,” Wenshu said, rolling up his last scroll and setting it with reverence on his desk.

“No, I smell like purge fluid.”

“Oh, that’s much better,” he said, putting his brushes in their drawer. I waved my hands near his face and he flinched away. “Wash your hands, you demon.”

I jokingly reached for his pillow and he grabbed a handful of soap beans from the jar on his desk, hurling them at my head.

“If the smell bothers you now, good luck tonight when you actually see the body,” I said. “It’s leaking from every orifice.”

“The body isn’t standing in my bedroom touching my pillow,” he said, turning and pulling out the inkstone from his desk drawer, holding it to the light, and scraping the crusted bits from the near-empty pan. He would have to make more before nightfall.

Yufei appeared in the doorway, holding a bundle of fabric. Our room truly was too small for three people, and Yufei and I were definitely too old to be sharing a room with a boy, but unless one of us slept in the hallway, there was nowhere else to go. Her long skirt had red dirt stains at the hem, and her hair had fallen down from the intricate bun that Auntie So did for her every morning.

“Why is there a body in the pigpen?” Yufei asked.

“That’s for later,” I said, gathering up the soap beans from the floor.

Yufei blinked but didn’t inquire further. She had such a small range of facial expressions that neighbors whispered

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about how she wore a porcelain mask instead of a real face. Wordlessly, she unfolded the fabric in her arms, dumping whitish-brown mush all over the floor.

Wenshu made a strangled sound and backed up. After seeing the body that afternoon, my first thought was that I was looking at several pounds of human fat. But death had a distinct smell, and this one was sharp and sweet.

“Sweet potatoes?” I said.

Yufei nodded. “Can you fix them?”

I nodded, moving over to my bedside drawer. “Yes, but why did you smash them?”

“And why did you dump them all over the clean floor?” Wenshu said, gripping his hair.

Yufei shrugged. “Needed something heavy, and they were already ruined,” she said, sitting down cross-legged.

“You needed something heavy while buying vegetables two blocks away?” Wenshu said, glaring accusingly at the mashed potatoes.

“Men are annoying,” Yufei said, as if that explained it all. At our blank looks, she rolled her eyes and elaborated, “They wouldn’t leave me alone and I had eggs in my other hand.”

“Oh,” I said. “You bludgeoned someone with potatoes?” She nodded.

Quite a few men were desperate for Yufei’s hand in marriage, but she was just as determined to convince them they would be better off with a wild boar than have her for a wife. One unfortunate suitor had slipped her a love note last month, which she’d torn to pieces and eaten in front of him. Another man had come to the shop to give her wildflowers, which she’d tossed into the kiln. Auntie So kept telling people Yufei was fifteen, even though she’d been fifteen for over four years now, because she was getting embarrassingly old

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to be unwed. But no matter how hard she tried, the well of suitors never seemed to dry up.

Wenshu let out a massive sigh, hunched over his desk. “Did you kill anyone?”

Yufei shook her head. “Too many witnesses. But even if I did, Zilan could just fix him.”

Wenshu groaned and flopped facedown onto his bed. “I have demons for sisters.”

“All the more reason to stay on our good side,” I said, digging through my drawer for the right stone and hiding a small smile. Something in me always warmed when Wenshu or Yufei called me their sister. Sure, we’d grown up together, but I was really only their cousin. It was painfully obvious just by looking at the three of us together—I was taller than both of them because that was what happened when you had a towering Scotian father. My hair had a strange coppery tint in the sunlight, my arms and legs were so long that Auntie So called me grasshopper, and the shoemaker told me only men had feet so big.

When we played by the river as kids and I saw our mismatched reflections rippling in the muddy water, the word *sister* felt like a lie. I had not always been their sister, which meant one day they could decide I wasn’t their sister anymore. It was fine now, when we were all living under Auntie and Uncle’s roof. But maybe one day, Yufei would finally meet a man that didn’t disgust her, and Wenshu would marry because it was the logical choice, and I would be alone. Unlike Yufei, I wasn’t pretty enough to persuade a man to pay a dowry for me. The fact that I was a *hùnxiě*—half Hàn Chinese and half foreigner—certainly didn’t help my case. Part of me wished all of us could be like Yufei and just pretend to never age, so we could stay together forever.

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I pulled three small moonstones from the drawer, warming them between my palms. Moonstone was a waterstone, useful for healing and repairs. All the stones in the world had different properties based on their elements—most metalstones could reshape other objects, earthstones were good for transforming the mind, woodstones worked well for manipulating plant and animal life, and firestones were agents of destruction or great change. There were still thousands of stones with untapped uses, and even more hybrid stones that alchemists tried to forge for more powerful reactions, like the chicken-blood stone my father had studied.

I'd bought an old alchemy-stone manual a few years ago for half price because it was so outdated, then taken notes in the margins as I tried out each stone to verify what the book said. I knew by heart how to use any stone I could find in Guangzhou, and carried a satchel of the most common ones with me at all times: moonstone for healing, iron for reshaping, amethyst for breaking.

For small repairs like this, a few moonstones would do the trick. I held three of them in my hand, sunk my fingers into the mashed potatoes, and closed my eyes.

The real reason I could do alchemy and my cousins couldn't was that they couldn't hear the river flowing inside them. I'd asked them about it once and Wenshu had checked my forehead for a fever.

Qi—breath, energy, life—circulated through all our bodies, an endless river inside us keeping our hearts beating, making our lungs expand, warming the food in our stomachs. Alchemy was about drawing the power of the natural world into your qi. When I closed my eyes and let my breath grow shallow, I could hear it rushing over smooth stones and golden sands, pouring into the vast ocean of my heart.

## The SCARLET ALCHEMIST

My palm grew cool as it soaked up the healing properties of the moonstone, the river inside me running cold, thin layers of glassy ice forming across it and shattering in the current. I breathed out a cloud of water vapor, my skin prickling with goosebumps. Then, like an unstopped dam, the moonstone's energy bled out my palms and into the potatoes.

The starchy sludge grew firm beneath my hands, the skin sealing back up, soft spots of overripeness growing firm. Five whole sweet potatoes sat on the floor beneath my hands.

My fingers stung as if frostbitten, one of my nails cracking as I rubbed my hands together to melt away the coldness.

Whenever I called on alchemy, it bit back. That was one of alchemy's central principles—you *cannot create good without also creating evil*. For small things like reconstructing potatoes, the cost was negligible. For bigger transformations...it was always a question of whether it was worth it.

"Thanks," Yufei said, gathering up the potatoes. She paused, raising an eyebrow as if contemplating something of great importance. "We should do this with the food the merchants throw out at the end of the day. Save some money."

"That's not a bad idea," I said.

"It is absolutely a bad idea," Wenshu said. "You want to eat rotten fruit and spoiled meat?"

"Zilan can unspoil it," Yufei said.

"You would lick soup off the floor. Your standards for food safety don't reassure me."

"I wouldn't lick soup off the floor," I said.

"No, you would just resurrect potatoes with hands covered in corpse juice," Wenshu said.

"The moonstone purifies—"

"Eat what you want," Wenshu said. "There's a very short list of things I would die for, and potatoes are not on it."

KYLIE LEE BAKER

I turned to Yufei. “You and I are on that list, but second to his soap beans.”

Another handful of soap beans flew across the room, raining over me and Yufei.

“Did you want me to go with you or not?” Wenshu said.

I nodded, biting back another jab. Taxes for our ward were due at the end of every week, and it wasn’t a good idea for a girl to walk alone to the other end of the city on a day that everyone knew she’d be carrying money. I had cinnabar crystals in my pocket that I could use to explode a thief’s brains if I wanted to, but it was better for our business for me to simply walk with Wenshu and avoid conflicts altogether. He always offered to go by himself, but I knew he didn’t have enough of a spine to stand up to the market commandant.

“I’ll come too,” Yufei said.

“You already went out today,” Wenshu said. “Mama will be mad if you get too tan.”

“I want rice cakes,” Yufei said, as if that would ward off Auntie So’s anger.

Wenshu rolled his eyes and handed me a straw hat from the hook by the door, taking one for himself as well. I didn’t particularly care if I got tan, but I knew it would give Auntie So one less thing to worry about. Both she and Uncle Fan had been too sick to work lately, so if me having the complexion of raw whitefish made them smile, I wouldn’t question it.

I grabbed the bag of gold from behind the counter while Wenshu took out our sales ledger. We left through the side door, locking it tight behind us and stepping out into the sharp sunlight.