

# **Pig, Crane, Fox**

by Beth Bernobich

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## Pig, Crane, Fox

DON'T GET ME WRONG, but yeah, I know everything I need to and a little bit more. You want to know who built Lóng City? I can tell you that. Plus why it's got the Hundred Sewers. I even know all about the first kings, the Interregnum, and why the Guild Council let Prince Xiang back on the throne. Oh, and I can show you sixty-five dagger strikes and...

Okay, I flunked astrology, and my trigonometry sucks the Celestial Wind, according to my Mā mī, who runs a tutoring shop for conjuration and mathematics. *Ai-ya*, does she remind me—at least six times a day.

Today was no different.

"Where is your homework, Kai-my-son?" my mother asked.

I stopped in mid-step, my hand on the door latch. *Crap*.

Running now would only make things worse later. So I took a deep breath and put on my best and most innocent smile before I turned around. My mother stood in the hallway between the kitchen and the classroom. Her arms were folded tight across her chest. Her eyebrows slanted down over her nose. And in case you hadn't guessed, she wasn't smiling back. Behind her, a dozen students in the afternoon remedial class chanted multiplication tables. The soft buzz of their voices filled the air, like bees in the springtime. How had she heard me?

*Chen?*

My companion spirit remained invisible, but I felt his presence inside my skull. *Not me. It was Nuó.*

Nuó was my mother's cat spirit. Now I really wanted to run.

But I kept my face smooth and polite. "Which homework, Mā mī?"

Mā mī's eyes narrowed to slits. My mother was tiny like a mouse, but when she studied me that way, she reminded me of the vast and hungry watch demons that patrolled Lóng City's streets at night. Somewhere behind me, inside me, Chen snorled and grunted, safe in the spirit plane. Smart pig, I thought, wishing I could disappear too.

"If you leave without completing your homework first, you will sleep outside tonight," Mā mī said mildly. "Let us see if you are more obedient after a few days

running from the watch demons."

My throat went dusty dry. Mā mī never bluffed. "I ... I wrote out three problems. I can finish the rest after dinner. I promise."

"So you promised with yesterday's homework. And last week's."

"I know. I'm sorry. But Mā mī, this is different. I need to find Yún and Danzu and \_\_\_"

"Those miserable street rats you call friends cannot help you with arithmetic, much less calculus or divination."

That last was not entirely true. Yún could twiddle formulas as well as Mā mī's best students, but now was not the time to argue. I tried again. "Mā mī, I really must go. It's important. It's about the king."

That got her attention. "What do you mean? No, don't tell me. I can guess. You \_\_\_"

I didn't wait for her to launch into another lecture. I gasped and pointed. "*Wā!* Mā mī, what is that behind you?"

Big mistake. Mā mī's eyebrows tied themselves into knots. "Enough with the pranks," she said. "Go to your room *now*."

She strode toward me and reached for my arm. A loud *crack* in the hallway stopped her. Before she could turn around, a stinky yellow cloud exploded in the kitchen. Chen and his magic tricks. Right on time, as always.

I wanted to laugh, but I was choking from the stink, which was worse than gargoyle dung and rotten eggs. Mā mī launched into a complicated spell to get rid of the cloud. I didn't wait for her to finish. I yanked the door open and darted outside. Chickens flew up, scattering black and white feathers, as I pelted through the tiny courtyard and into the nearest alleyway. Old Man Kang shouted curses after me, but I kept running, round and down the stairs, through the tunnel and into the main boulevard, dodging carts and bicycles and those new auto-wagons that ran on magic and electricity.

It was only when I reached the lane behind Golden Market that I dared to slow down. I ducked into the closest noodle shop, where I drew a deep breath of curry and tea and the sharp tang of burning magic. The room itself was a dingy old hole—dust covered its red-tiled floor and the bamboo paintings on the wall looked cracked and faded. In the

kitchen, a tinny radio coughed out old-fashioned flute music. Two old men huddled over steaming bowls of tea, but the shop was otherwise empty.

A greasy old waiter hurried toward me. "Five minutes, on-time," I told him. "And a ginger soda."

He grunted something that sounded like "yassur." A minute later and six yuan poorer, I shut the cubicle's wooden door and plugged my talk-phone's cable into the wall socket. Blue sparks burst from the socket, giving off a strong metallic smell. Bad connection, but typical for a shop like this one. Never mind. I only needed a few minutes of on-time. I tapped in Yún's number and gulped down a swig of my ginger soda. My heart was still pounding from the run. Oh ya. Sessions with Mā mī were often like that. We argued, I ran, she always took me back. So far, at least.

Three chimes. Five. Yún never took this long to answer. Just when I started to worry, the flux buzzed up a couple notches and the talk-phone clicked over to connect.

"Kai."

Yún sounded out of breath, as if she'd been running too.

"Waterfront docks," I told her. "Everyone."

"Everyone?" There was just a hint of surprise in her voice, which made me wonder. Yún usually knew everything before I did. That's what made her a good second-in-command for the gang.

"Yeah, everyone."

"Same-old, same-old, then."

"No."

I clicked off before the meter ran out. Yún would know what I meant. We always talked in code, just in case the king's wizards had spiked the lines. I wished, for the thousandth time, I had one of those sweet new talk-phones with no-wires and video screens, but they cost five hundred yuan.

*Maybe I can after all—if things go right.*

With a sputter and a pop, Chen materialized inside my cubicle. He was dark brown, with shiny black eyes, four neatly split hooves, and a row of pointy blades down his spine. He'd shrunk himself to miniature form so he could fit next to me. At this size, his tusks looked silly, but I knew better. Chen was one fierce pig.

*The wizards spike the no-wire talk-phones too, you know,* he said.

*I know. But I could use it just for fun times, not business.*

Chen tilted his bristly head and studied me with bright eyes that reminded me uncomfortably of Mā mī. He had first burst into my head and my life when I was six—two years past the usual age when companion spirits appear—but that was the first and only time he was ever late.

*Have you figured out how to get past the king's guards?* he asked.

*Not yet. I will.*

Chen snorted and vanished. I finished off my ginger soda and went to find my gang.

\* \* \*

*Waterfront* meant uptown. *Docks* meant the warehouses behind the Pots-and-Kettles bazaar. *Everyone* meant ... well, everyone.

I set off at a fast run, but Lóng City covers half a mountainside. By the time I zigzagged my way to the wind-and-magic-powered lifts, then jogged around the terrace to the warehouse district, the clock towers were clanging the next hour. I slipped between two tall buildings and down a muddy alleyway to a rusty iron door. Once there, I gave our signal—a squeaky, up-down whistle.

The door creaked open and Danzu poked his bony face out. "Huh, it took you long enough."

"So what? I'm here now."

I shoved past him into the dark cavern of the warehouse. Once upon a time, rich merchants had stored bundles of silks and trinkets they imported from the distant Phoenix Empire here. But a few years of bad luck and high taxes meant they had to sell the building. The new owners had worse luck when a pack of ghost dragons invaded the premises. It was Yún who discovered the hideout and bargained with the ghost dragons to let us use the basement-below-the-basement for gang meetings.

Danzu had left the trap door open. Far below, light leaked through the floorboards covering our hideout. I sniffed smoke from a lamp, the sweaty damp from earth and stones, and something like the fresh, green scent of mountain pines—human and earth

scents. Others I couldn't identify. I swung down onto the rope and wooden ladder, ignoring strange scrabbling noises in the darkness around me. It was Lóng City, after all. Rats, demons, ghost dragons, and other strange creatures had their own kingdoms alongside ours. As long as you didn't bother them, you were okay.

With a thud, I landed on the dirt floor. The others were already there, waiting for me. Jing-mei and Gan sat on the floor, playing cards for small change. Yún leaned against a wooden post and tossed her belt knife in a complicated pattern. Light from the oil lamp glanced off the blade as she caught the knife and sent it spinning in new directions.

A skinny foot-long ghost dragon coalesced from the air and curled around me. I twitched. He was tiny, as ghost dragons go, but little didn't mean harmless. Legend said that ghost dragons could smother you with their breath, and their bite was more poisonous than a drink of pure magic flux. I didn't want to find out if those legends were right.

Yún snickered. "Hēi, Bixi, none of that."

She extracted a sugarcane stick from her jacket pocket. Right away, the ghost dragon's whiskers poked forward and its translucent eyes glowed. Yún waggled the sugarcane at the dragon. With a flick of its tail, it shot past Yún. The cane vanished, and so did the dragon.

Still snickering, Yún tucked her knife in her belt. "So what's up, Kai?"

"Yeah, what's up that we all had to run here?" Danzu landed behind me and gave me a push in payback for the one I gave him upstairs. "Me, I was busy. Lady wanted my opinion about some diamonds."

"You mean you wanted to nick her jewels," said Gan. He swept up the playing cards from the floor and slid them into a pocket.

"We don't nick jewels, remember?" Jing-mei said. "Too risky." She shook a couple extra cards from her sleeves and gave them back to Gan, who shot her an exasperated look.

"That's right," Yún said. "But we do trade news and favors. Like now. Kai has some news he'd like to share with us."

"Not exactly news," I said. "Talk. Big talk."

The others frowned, puzzled. Yún's eyes were bright with suppressed laughter. "Oh, big talk is it? You must mean the king's proclamation."

*Ai-ya*, I wanted to spit. Of course she knew about the proclamation. Everyone did, what with the radio broadcasts and the posters in every square. Fifty thousand yuan, plus the hand of his daughter, Princess Lian, to the man who satisfied three impossible wishes. Still, I hadn't expected Yún to figure me out so quickly.

*It's not so hard*, Chen said. *Qi says Yún guessed last week.*

*Guessed what?*

*That you'd try something stupid.*

Qi was Yún's companion spirit. I hadn't noticed her around, but crane spirits are hard to spot unless they want you to see them.

*I'm not stupid*, I said fiercely to Chen.

*Not always*, Chen agreed. With a *pêng*, he vanished from my mind.

Miserable pig-spirit, I thought.

"You're right," I told Yún. "This proclamation is what my Mā mī calls an opportunity."

"You want to marry the princess?" Jing-mei asked. She sounded surprised.

"No, no," I said. "I just want the money. We can split the prize, but only if you all help me."

Danzu smirked. "Good luck. Only princes are allowed to enter."

"Yeah, well, I have a plan."

And I did. Sort of. One I'd thought of on the way here.

"What about those impossible tasks?" Gan asked.

I waved a hand. "Oh, you know me. I'll think of something."

Danzu looked unconvinced. "Why talk to us, then?"

"Because, we're a gang and—"

"You mean, because your plan is rotten and you want us to think up a better one," Danzu said.

"Hah. As if you could think at all."

Danzu launched himself at me with a curse, but Gan grabbed him before either of us landed more than a punch. Yún took me by the shoulders and shoved me against the

wall. "Shut up," she hissed. "The ghost dragons hate it when we fight. So do I."

Lamplight reflected from her eyes like tiny golden sparks. If Mā mī was a watch demon, Yún was a dragon. She jabbed a finger at me, then Danzu. "You are both idiots. Now, Kai says he has a plan. Let him talk. If his plan stinks, we make it better."

"Why?" Danzu said sulkily.

"Because we all want the money. Right?"

Reluctantly he nodded. So did Jing-mei, but with more enthusiasm. Gan shrugged, but I knew he would listen before he said yes or no.

"I do have a plan," I told them. "I already know how to get past the guards—"

"How?" Jing-mei demanded. "You aren't a prince."

"But I am. Wait." I held up my hand to stop the flood of arguments. "Let me explain. I am a prince—a prince of the streets."

Everyone blinked in surprise—everyone except Yún, who was studying me with an odd expression caught between amusement and something else I couldn't quite pin down.

"You're kidding," Gan said finally.

"No. All I need is a certificate."

"A certificate?" Jing-mei's voice scaled up in disbelief.

"Yeah, a piece of paper with my name and fancy seals and such. And my title—Prince of the Streets. It just has to look good enough for those stupid guards outside the gate."

Danzu sneered. "That's not anywhere close to *good enough*. The king's mages have those magical calculator-gadgets. Your fancy certificate has to have the right seals and stamps. And more. It needs special codes and wires and that invisible ink—"

"No invisible ink," Yún said. "But Danzu is right about the rest. You can't just wave a piece of paper at the guards, Kai. You need a real certificate. And I know where I can get you one."

We all stared at her.

"You can?" My voice squeaked with surprise. "How?"

"Why should you care? That's why you came to us, Kai. So we could help." She glanced at each of us in turn, her gaze cool and remote, as though she were fifty and a

princess and not a fifteen-year-old street rat dressed in patched hand-me-downs. "Kai has a plan," she said. "And I know how to make it work. So let's stop fighting and start talking."

"Yes, but—"

She swiveled around to face me. "But what?"

"Nothing," I muttered.

"Good," she said. "Now, here is what else you must do ..."

\* \* \*

Mā mī kept her word. When I got back to our house, I found the doors locked, the windows barred, and the ladder steps to our upper floors hauled out of reach. Through the slats in one shutter, I could just make out the faint blue glow from the calculator machine on her desk. No sign of Mā mī herself, however.

*Āi-āi.* I blew out a breath, scared.

*If I could just talk to her ...*

Chen's presence tickled my brain. *Later. The sun is going down.*

No sooner did he say that than the sun slid downward another notch, and a twilight breeze ruffled my hair. I shivered. Chen was right. I needed a safe place, and soon. Well, maybe Mā mī would take me back once I collected my prize. With a last glance at the blank walls and windows of our house, I jogged off to find shelter.

The next two days I spent dodging around Lóng City, checking in with my gang, scouting the palace's outer perimeter, scrounging meals, and badgering Yún for that cursed certificate.

"You smell like horse turds," she told me late on the second day.

"Gan found me a room in his uncle's stables." It was a tiny closet filled with horse tack and musty blankets, but I wasn't going to mention that part.

"Lovely. You will need to bathe before you present yourself to the king."

"I know that. What about your friend? Has he even started making the certificate?"

Yún favored me with a smile. "All in good time."

Two days later, Gan tracked me down and gave me some extra cash and a note

from Yún. (A paper note, he explained, to keep her message safe from the wizards.) My heart did a drum dance as I read the two short lines: *We have our certificate. Meet me at the palace gates tomorrow morning, at ten o'clock. Remember to take a hot bath and wear clean clothes.*

Stupid bossy girl. I wanted to throw the paper on the ground and stomp on it, but Gan was standing there watching. Probably Yún told him to wait for an answer. Better him than Danzu, I thought. Keeping my face blank and my voice happy, I said, "Excellent news. Tell Yún I understand. Tell her, yes, of course. Her suggestion is an excellent one."

And she *was* right, curse her. So early the next morning, after a cheap breakfast and lots of hot tea, I visited the nearest bathhouse, where I spent three yuan on extra soap and hot water and scrubbed myself until my skin turned ruddy brown. Two more yuan got me a haircut and my fingernails trimmed. My clothes were hopeless—dusty and stained—but I brushed them hard to remove the worst of the dirt. Besides, I didn't want to look too prosperous, not if I were a genuine Prince of the Streets. Once I'd plaited my hair tight and smoothed out my tunic, I scanned the results in the bathhouse mirror.

Chen popped into view, a huge hairy image in the mirror. *Not bad. Not so good either. You are late, though.*

*Stupid pig, I'm not—*

Just then, the clock towers starting striking the hour. I yelped and ran out the door. Luckily, I knew six shortcuts between the bathhouse and the palace—a couple twists and turns, a scramble over a fence and through a private courtyard, and I had reached Lóng City's grandest public square even before the last loud gong faded away. Yún waited for me in the shadow of a very ugly statue, next to a useless-looking water fountain.

"You're late," she said.

"Not exactly," I snapped back.

"Hah. You're nervous. Good. Here's your certificate."

She handed me a leather scroll case. It was heavier than I expected, capped at both ends with gold-plated discs embossed with impressive designs and the latest connector interfaces. I hefted the case in one hand. The dark red leather felt cool and slick against my palm. There were patterns tooled into the leather too, and I recognized some

of the official guild patterns. "How much did this cost?"

"I bargained my friend down."

"That's no answer."

She shrugged. "Of course not. Now go, before the palace guards arrest us for loitering."

I blew out a breath. Right. Time to make my bid—our bid—for the prize.

Yún disappeared into the crowds. With a *pêng* and *p'ong*, Chen also vanished. I crossed the last distance across the plaza alone.

Six hundred years ago, when they decided to build a royal palace over the old fortress, the kings of Lóng City had hired the finest architects from the Phoenix Empire. It took thirty years, nine different kings, and half the treasury before the architects finished what Mā mī called the Golden Egg Crate. Dozens of fat towers, all of them connected by walkways and low buildings, rose up from behind a thick wall that looped around for six miles, interrupted every so often by watch towers and guard posts. I felt like a small, annoyed flea as I approached the gates, which were twice as tall as any man, and decorated with beaten gold that blazed in the sun.

Twelve guards flanked those gates. They were all dressed in gray uniforms trimmed with scarlet embroidery, with the royal insignia of a screaming dragon over their hearts. These weren't just dress guards either, because they carried scimitars and stun pistols in their belts, and fancy wireless talk-phones strapped to their wrists.

I stopped in front of the guard in the middle. He looked older, grayer than the others, and he wore a row of tiny jewels above his insignia. To him, I held out my scroll.

He glanced down. "What is that?"

"My credentials," I said.

"For what? Sweeping the stables?"

"No," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "For the king's challenge."

Old Guard lifted an eyebrow. "You know the rules."

His left eye was fake. Gold wires made a hatch pattern beneath the translucent lens, and when he blinked, red and silver particles whirled past, making my stomach go flip-flop. I swallowed and managed a shaky smile. "Sure. I can prove I'm a prince. It's right here."

Still with that disbelieving expression, he took my scroll case and ran his fingers over the leather. Squinted at the patterns and seals with his weird left eye and finally nodded. He drew a shiny metal disc from beneath his tunic and laid it against the connector plate. The connector cap snicked open. With a flick of his thumb, the guard opened the case and tilted it. My heart gave a bad thump. All of a sudden, I wished I'd checked its contents. But no, Yún and her friend had not played any tricks. A thick, tightly coiled scroll slid into Old Guard's waiting hand. He unwound it—all three feet of heavy parchment—and I could see that everything was perfect, right down to the embedded copper-wire pattern in the lower right-hand corner.

"Prince of the Streets," said Old Guard. "Your credentials appear valid, Your Highness, but my orders require me to perform a few more checks. Please follow me."

He unlocked a small door next to the gates and ushered me into the guardhouse.

I stepped into a long narrow room. A dented wooden desk occupied one entire side, its surface lost beneath stacks of logbooks and several strange devices that reeked of magic flux. Silk screens suspended from the ceiling flickered between views of the palace gates and the crowded square outside. The air felt close, and my skin itched from nerves and imminent magic.

Old Guard cleared a spot on the desk and laid out my expensive fake certificate underneath an ugly gray lamp that coiled over the desk like a cobra. He pressed a thumb over a button.

A bright blue flash lit up the room. I squawked and fell over. "What's that?"

Ignoring me, Old Guard flipped open his talk-phone and listened a minute. "Yes, my lord. Very well, my lord." To me, "We may proceed, Your Highness. This way."

He indicated another door. I started to pick up my certificate, but Old Guard stopped me. "Please do not encumber yourself during your audience, Your Highness."

"But I—"

I shut up. Old Guard's expression made me think arguing was a bad idea. That, and the stun pistol at his belt. Besides, he'd said the magic word: audience. Maybe they didn't believe I was a prince, but they were letting me see the king.

On the other side of the guardhouse, we crossed an immense courtyard stuffed with runners and pages and lackeys and more. Off to one side, a dozen handlers were

coaxing a strange, tusked animal to kneel. An elephant? Here in the mountains? I'd heard of such a thing, but never seen one. The beast carried a tower contraption on its back, and its small ears flicked back and forth in annoyance. Old Guard would not let me stare, however. He hurried me through the crowds to a pair of doors flanked by more guards. When he gave a funny hand signal, like a twist of a doorknob, the two guards made stiff bows. A third man dressed in a fancy blue tunic and robe appeared out of nowhere and swept the doors open.

*I am a prince, I told myself as I marched through, Old Guard close behind. I'm used to servants and guards and palaces that go on forever.*

But it was hard not to goggle. Beyond the doors, an enormous entry hall extended in all directions. Statues of the first kings looked down on us from their niches. More statues, of ghost dragons and elder gods, flanked a stairway sweeping up and around and out of sight. One brief glimpse, then we were off again, through more corridors and gates and locked doors, up three flights of stairs and along a balcony that overlooked a garden with bright scarlet flowerbeds. Sweet perfume drifted through the air. Someone was singing, accompanied by lutes and drums. It was as though I'd fallen into another world where money flowed like the spring floods. I wasn't sure I liked it. I wasn't sure I didn't.

Finally, just when I thought my feet would drop off, we arrived at a small enameled door set deep into the wall. A single guard stood outside. Unlike the others, he carried no weapons. Instead a small ghost dragon lay coiled at his feet, its scaly body and tail overlapping his boots. Its presence surprised me. Ghost dragons were not pets or slaves, I knew. It raised its head and studied me with silvery eyes.

"You are to wait here, Your Highness," said Old Guard. "The king's steward will fetch you for your interview."

He executed a crisp about-face. The other guard opened the doors and bowed. With a last glance at Old Guard's retreating back, I stepped inside.

This had to be the only medium-sized room in the whole palace, I thought. Extra fancy, like everywhere else, but comfortable too. Silk rugs made the marble floors warmer and softer. Tapestries covered the equally marble walls. In one corner there was a vid-screen showing broadcasts of popular dance troupes. In the opposite corner, three carved chairs circled a miniature waterfall. My skin prickled from all the magic.

Protection spells—lots of them. I'd sensed the magic flux throughout the palace, but here it flowed thick and strong.

And I wasn't alone. A young man slouched in the biggest chair. He was bone thin and wore his hair shaved close like blue-black velvet. When he tilted his head in my direction, tiny points of light glittered from his skull. His gaze flicked toward me and away, as though he'd seen a bug.

*Tilt-nosed snob.* Well, what else did I expect?

I settled into the chair next to Skinny. As soon as I did, one of the marble tiles slid open, and a miniature teakwood table with a teapot, cups, and cloth napkins rose up beside me. Steam trickled from the teapot's spout, filling the air with a summer-sweet scent. I poured myself a cup and pulled out a packet of apricots to chew. Skinny wrinkled up his nose but didn't say anything.

"Want some?" I offered him the packet.

Skinny coughed delicately.

I tried again. "What's your name?"

No answer, except that his mouth thinned.

"Come on. Tell me, or I'll have to call you Stick Man."

Skinny glared at me and his mouth got even thinner. "My name," he said in a tight voice, "is Prince Fei-hsien of Crescent Moon."

Oho. Crescent Moon was a city-kingdom two or three mountains over. Small and rich, but not as rich as Lóng City. So Fei-hsien came to hunt a fortune. I grinned. So had I.

"Mine is Kai," I said to him. "I'm a Prince of the Streets."

"I hardly think that you—"

The air inside the room shimmered. Without warning, an arched passageway appeared on the wall opposite the entrance. A man stalked through in a whirlwind of silks and jewels. I caught a glimpse of a dark red face set in a ferocious scowl before he disappeared through the next archway. The doors slammed shut. Magic buzzed in the air, and for a moment, the video screen went blank.

"Who was that?" I whispered.

"Prince Tso-lin," Fei-hsien whispered back. When I showed I didn't understand,

he added, "Prince of a minor house in the Phoenix Empire. A clever man. I heard...." He paused to glance around. "I heard he finished two impossible tasks in less than a day."

But not the third, obviously.

"How about you?" I said casually. "Done anything impossible yet?"

That got me a suspicious glance. "Not yet. I—"

Once more the archway shuddered into view. A soberly dressed man entered the room. Everything about him was faded to gray. Eyes. Hair. Clothes. Even the screaming dragon insignia looked more subdued on this man. "My lord and prince," he said with a deferential bow to Fei-hsien. "A thousand apologies for the delay. The king invites you into his presence now."

Fei-hsien gulped and jumped to his feet. With a swipe of his hand, he smoothed his glittering hair before following the steward through the passageway.

That took away my appetite. I crumpled up my remaining apricots in their wax paper. A tiny emerald lizard appeared from nowhere to pluck the paper from my hands. It vanished back into the walls, and the back of my neck prickled. Somewhere, a guard, maybe even Old Guard, might be watching me from a video screen. Nervous, I poured myself another cup of tea, trying to act as though I didn't care. How long before the king summoned me? What kind of tasks would he choose? And why? That was the real question. Only now did I remember what Mā mī always said, "Kings have their reasons, and queens do too. If you can't see why at first, it's because they don't want you to. One thing you can be sure of, humans or demons, it's all politics in Lóng City."

*Bang!*

Fei-hsien burst through the suddenly apparent archway. His face was flushed, his eyes had narrowed to angry slits, and he had one hand clenched in a fist as though he wanted to punch someone. Uh oh.

"What happened?" I asked.

Fei-hsien paused to glare at me. "Nothing," he hissed.

"What do you mean, nothing?"

"I mean nothing, Beggar Prince. He wanted *nothing*."

He flung the outer doors open and stalked through, his robes swirling behind him.

I blew out a breath. Nothing? The king wanted nothing? That didn't make sense.

What kind of impossible task—

"Your Highness."

The gray man had reappeared. The king's personal steward I guessed.

"My turn?"

He gave me the briefest of bows in answer.

My mouth went paper-dry. The king wanted nothing. I had nothing to give—

Then I understood the real trick behind those tasks. It was true. I had absolutely nothing to give.

I stood up with a grin. "I'm ready. Show me the way."

Whatever his thoughts, the king's steward betrayed no surprise. He took me through a series of ever-larger rooms to a grander archway flanked by six guards and three whisper-lean ghost dragons. Beyond lay a huge chamber with a dais that filled the entire opposite wall. On that dais stood a throne built of jewels and rare polished metals, so elaborate it looked ugly and beautiful at the same time. I nearly missed the bent old man who occupied it, but not the young woman beside him, whose slim blue robes gleamed like a summer sky.

His Royal Highness, Wencheng Li. His daughter, the Princess Lian Song Li.

Before I could lose my nerve, I marched across the room to the edge of the dais and knelt with my hands cupped together. "Your Majesties, I have brought you the item you requested."

Princess and king both stared. He looked old and weary and out of temper. She... Her eyes were like rare black pearls, her skin like honey-colored silk, and her mouth as red and soft as a fresh-plucked peach. She looked smart and dangerous and ready to order my execution if I said one wrong word.

The king's steward hurried to my side and seized my arm. "You must follow protocol," he whispered.

"I did. I am," I whispered back.

"Let him speak," said the princess. "I wish to know how this young man fulfilled a task no one gave him."

Her voice was cool as a snow-fed stream. Her eyes reminded me of eagles. I kept my gaze lowered away from them. "Your Majesty," I said. "I have presumed. But let me

say only that I spent the past several days and nights considering what impossible tasks a king might demand for his daughter's hand. What could possibly equate to your rank? Your loveliness—"

She cut me off with a gesture. "Stop the pretty words and answer my question."

Right. Okay. I tried again. "Your Highness, what I said before is both pretty and true. Mostly." (Here, the princess's lips quirked.) "Your father cannot demand anything that compares with you. And because nothing could, I bring ... nothing."

Standing, I uncupped my empty hands, as though presenting a gift.

A heavy silence followed, during which the magic flux eddied around me, and I considered all the sins of my too-short life.

The princess laughed with obvious delight. "He is right, Father."

"He is not," the king said harshly. "You know he is not."

"I *do not* know that," she retorted. "You asked for three impossible tasks. In my eyes, this boy has accomplished two of them already—"

"Nonsense—"

"The only nonsense is yours," she said. "Consider it. He acquired that certificate—surely an impossible task. He convinced the guards and their captains to admit him on its strength. That is the second. And here, he demonstrates as much cleverness as Prince Tso-lin. You might even call that three. However, let us compromise and say two."

The king studied me with a cold assessing gaze. "You would marry this beggar," he said to his daughter, though he did not look away from me.

"Let us discuss that matter once he completes his third task."

"And if I disagree? If I send him away?"

"Then that leaves us with our problem unsolved."

Mā mī was right about kings, and princesses too, I thought, wishing myself far away from this battle that did not concern me. Before I could stir, however, the king signaled to the steward, who relaxed his hold on my arm. Princess Lian gave me a tiny smile. "Prince Kai, I declare that you have completed the first two tasks to our satisfaction. Do you wish to continue?"

"Won't you chop off my head if I say no?"

"No." Laughter rippled beneath her voice. "To fail is punishment enough."

I swallowed, remembering Yún and her debts. This Lian might be arrogant, but she was right. I had to win this challenge, and not just for my own sake. "Go on. Tell me what comes next."

Princess Lian and her father exchanged a glance. The king shook his head as though to say it was her decision. "Very well," said the princess. "I give you the same task I gave to Prince Tso-lin. Bring me my heart's desire."

"You have three days," the king added. "Now go."

\* \* \*

"Her what?" Gan said.

"Her heart's desire," I repeated.

I'd called everyone to our backup hideout as soon as I had left the palace.

*Uptown, downtown, notown* were the code words. *And hurry*. Half an hour later, we gathered behind the city dumps. Gargoyles—brown leathery creatures with scaly wings—roamed the grounds, chewing up garbage into arable soil, and the air stank from their droppings. The smell made me queasy, but at least we didn't have to worry about spies.

Danzu snorted. "That's stupid."

"No," Yún said slowly. "Just impossible."

"Like I said—stupid."

I sighed and rubbed my aching head. Yún and Danzu were both right. The princess had asked for something stupidly impossible. No wonder Prince Tso-lin and Prince Fei-hsien had stalked out of the interview chamber like that.

"So now what?" Jing-mei said. She had borrowed Gan's pack and was playing solitaire, snapping out cards one by one as I recounted what happened at the palace. She didn't look as enthusiastic as she had before. Come to think of it, neither did anyone else. I couldn't blame them. For once, I didn't have any idea what to do. But a gang leader can't admit that.

"We think," I said. "As hard as we can."

"Some plan," Danzu muttered.

"It's the only one we have," Yún said wearily.

"Right," I said. "So let's talk. What would a rich princess like this Lian want?"

"Wrong question," Gan said. "What would she *desire*? That makes a difference."

Danzu made a disgusted face. "She's a princess. She can buy anything she wants."

Jing-mei snapped out another card. Frowned. "Maybe she wants a present."

Gan and Danzu snickered, but Yún was nodding. "A gift. Yes. Something she cannot buy or demand. Kai, tell us again exactly what happened. Maybe we can discover some clues."

Though I didn't see the point, I repeated my story, this time including everything that happened from the moment Yún handed me the scroll to when Old Guard returned my certificate and escorted me out the palace. Yún listened with her eyes half closed. Every once in a while, she stopped me with questions or asked me to repeat a part of my story. When I told them about Skinny, her mouth gave a funny twitch. When I described the princess, Yún's face smoothed out and she went still. When I got to the part where the king and princess argued, her eyes flicked open, but she didn't say anything.

After I finished, everyone stared at me blankly.

"She sounds unhappy," Jing-mei said at last.

"She's cheating," Danzu muttered.

"Why would she cheat?" Gan said.

"Why not cheat?" Jing-mei said. "She's a princess."

"Just because you would doesn't mean everyone else does."

"I do not cheat!"

Jing-mei flung her cards at Gan. Before I knew it, she and Gan and Danzu were shouting insults at each other. I sighed and dropped my head into my hands, wishing I had one of Mā mī's headache potions.

"Let them shout a while," Yún said. "They'll get tired of it soon enough. Then we can talk."

"About what? Danzu's right—I have no plan, and we only have three days."

"Three whole days. Less time than when we convinced all the farmers in the Moon-and-Stars Market that we were the king's Secret Harvest Inspectors." She laughed, her teeth flashing against her brown skin. "*Ai-ya*, we haven't eaten that well since."

"And my mother never beat me so hard," I said, laughing with her. But thinking of Mā mī and her last words to me stole the laughter from my chest. I sighed again and

wished a couple of impossible things myself.

Yún touched my arm gently. "Have you talked to her yet?"

I shrugged. "Not yet. She told me she didn't want to see me again."

"Are you sure? That doesn't sound like your Mā mī."

"I'm sure. Sure enough." I plucked a broken straw from the ground and poked at the dirt, thinking that it hurt too much to remember exactly what Mā mī had said. "What about you and your friend? The one you owe lots of money to for that fancy certificate."

"I don't—" She blew out a breath. "I have a choice, Kai. Money or work."

"What kind of work?" I pressed her. "And how long do you have to work for this person?"

She regarded me steadily, her expression hard to read. "Call it an apprenticeship, if you like. I'll work hard, but I'll learn things, too. As for how long it lasts, that is my business, not yours." She glanced around at the others. "Ah, it looks as though they're ready to call truce. Come, time for real talk."

\* \* \*

We spun around a hundred different ideas, trying to figure out what Princess Lian meant by *heart's desire*. Nobody liked anyone else's suggestions. Either they were too obvious or too silly. Finally, with the sun setting, I told everyone we'd meet again the next day.

"Here again," I said. "Eight o'clock."

Everyone grumbled, but no one refused. We were all too tired. Yún disappeared first to meet up with her new friend, she said. The rest scattered for home. I bought a bowl of curry from a street vendor and trudged back to the stables, where I settled down for a lonely dinner—my last good one. I'd get nothing except table scraps tomorrow unless we won our prize. Or Mā mī took me back.

*If she takes me back*, I thought, stabbing at my curry with the chopsticks.

*Don't think about that. Think about Princess Lian and the difference between want and desire.*

The answer had to be a simple one. Take me, for example. I wanted money, lots of it. Nice clothes and maybe a haircut like that Prince Fei-hsien's. Oh, and a fancy new

talk-phone with video. What else?

*Friends. Good times. A home ...*

Feh. No good to think about that anymore. I finished off my curry and lay back on my lumpy pile of blankets. A couple nags in the stall next to me whuffed and shifted around. Above, I could see the night sky through the stable's uneven roof slats. Stars winked at me, and a cool whiff of air said that autumn was approaching fast—another reminder that I no longer had a home.

Danzu was right. The princess was playing tricks on us. Why, I didn't know. Maybe Jing-mei was right, and the princess was just unhappy. I would be, stuck in that wretched palace with guards stuffed in every corner and video screens snooping in on whatever I did. In fact, if I were the princess—

Abruptly I sat up. *Chen! Chen, where are you?*

Chen popped into my brain with a grunt. *Stop shouting. I'm here. What do you want?*

*I have to talk with Yún. Right now. Help me get past the watch demons and to her house.*

*Right now? She lives halfway across the city, you stupid boy.*

*Fine. I'll go by myself.*

I was out the stables and running before I finished that thought. Yún's house was half a city away, but I could do it. I could outrun the demons—

Chen materialized in my path, full-sized and bristling. He swung his head and knocked me off my feet. *You are mad*, he growled and thrust his bristly chin at me. *Go back. Wait until tomorrow.*

"Maybe I am mad," I said out loud. "But I need to talk to Yún. I have an idea, and it can't wait until tomorrow. We don't have much time, Chen. You know that."

Chen grunted softly. *Yes, I know. Wait a moment.*

His eyes squinted to black dimples. He snorflled and grunted, paused, grunted again, as though talking to himself—or someone else I couldn't see. All around me, the night shadows swirled. Even this close to the stables, I was jumpy, thinking I saw watch demons lurking in the dark.

*They are awake*, he said at last. *Do not move ...*

*What are you—*

The world vanished into inky blackness. A warm breeze washed over my skin, smelling of burnt ashes, hot metal, and the tang of lemons. There were voices murmuring inside my skull. I recognized Chen's, then another fluting birdlike voice. I sensed another presence inside me, next to me. A sharp inhalation that felt as though I were breathing it, except I wasn't.

*You are mad, Kai.*

Yún. My breath whooshed out in relief. But I still couldn't see anything. *Where are you?*

*Home, but—*

*Ask and be done, said Chen. We cannot hold the bond very long.*

I stopped the thousand questions clogging my throat. Chen and Qi had linked us somehow with their magic. Even now I could almost imagine myself standing in the two rooms Yún shared with her mother and an ancient aunt. The air smelled of wool and soap. Nearby someone—probably the aunt—snored softly.

*It's about the princess, I told Yún. Jing-mei was right—Lian hates the palace. She wants to escape. That's her heart's desire. That's the only thing that makes sense. We need to come up with a plan to get her out.*

Our bond rippled. I sensed a flood of sharp emotion, which was abruptly cut off.

*I thought you didn't care about her, she said.*

*I don't! But we need to get her out to win the prize.*

A pause. *What about her father, the king?*

*What about him? If we fulfill all three impossible tasks, he has no choice but to give us the money.*

*Oh, I think he might have a choice about that, she murmured. But maybe ...*

I waited. My throat squeezed shut. Or was that Yún?

Her warm breath tickled my cheek, making my pulse dance up and down. *Let me think about it, she said. We'll talk tomorrow. All of us.*

Before I could say anything, the world blinked back into sight. Chen had vanished. I stood inside the stables, safe and alone.

\* \* \*

At sunset the next day, Yún and I stood by that same useless-looking water fountain outside the palace gates. Gouts of water splashed noisily in the basin, sending a rainbow of mist over our heads. Most of the vendors had left the square. The rest were packing up their carts for the night. Off to one side, a crowd of raggedy men sang drinking songs.

Yún handed me a small ebony box. "You have your certificate, right?"

I nodded. Old Guard had returned it to me before I left the palace the day before.

"The bracelets, too? And do you remember the spells?"

"Yes, yes. Who do you think you are, my mother?"

"If I were your mother, I would feed you to the watch demons myself," Yún said. "Now, repeat the spells, leaving off the final consonant."

I did so, feeling more like a minion than a gang leader. But Yún was right, as usual. I was the one who flunked elementary spell-casting and all the other conjuration lessons Mā mī had tried to pound into my thick, miserable skull.

When I finished, Yún nodded. "Good." Her cheeks dimpled briefly in a genuine smile. "And good luck, Kai-my-friend."

Then she was gone, running swiftly to join up with Jing-mei. They would both head immediately for the lower second kitchens, where they would beg for shelter and a meal. Gan and Danzu waited at opposite corners of the nearest lane, ready to create a distraction if necessary. And on the spirit plane, Chen, Qi, and the rest were running messages, keeping watch, and helping out.

Me, I just had to get an audience with Lian and persuade her to run away with me.

I swallowed and approached the gates.

"Halt," said the captain. It wasn't Old Guard, but he looked like he might be a second cousin.

I halted and, with the most respectful expression I could muster, held out my scroll. "I'm Kai, Prince of the Streets. I'd like an audience with Her Royal Highness, the Princess Lian. A personal one. Tell her it's about the contest."

The captain regarded me suspiciously, but maybe he had my name from Old Guard, because he flipped his talk-phone open and tapped out a number. He murmured something inaudible, then listened. And listened. Meanwhile my hands sweated and my

pulse danced faster. What if I was wrong? What if the princess called her guards to arrest me? What if—

*You are making my head ache,* Chen said rather shortly.

*What are you doing here?* I snapped back. *You and Qi—*

*We are. We will. Qi says Yún says to stop worrying or you'll forget the spells.*

I was about to snap back an insult when the guard flipped his talk-phone shut.

"This way, Your Highness."

He ushered me through the gates and handed me off to a runner. Our route took us up a wide stairway that curled up and around the inside of a tower, past more guards who demanded more passwords and special signals. Whatever doubts I had before vanished. If I were Lian, I would have run away years ago.

At last, I passed through a final set of doors and into a small, round sitting room. Like the rest of the palace, this room had its share of pretty tapestries and decoration. But it also had bookshelves, crammed with more kinds books than I had ever imagined—books about history and science and economics and politics. Books about mathematics and poetry. Books about magic that Mā mī would mortgage her shop and soul for.

"Did you come to stare or to talk?"

Princess Lian appeared through another of those magical doorways with a book in her hand. Her pale gray trousers and tunic glinted with magic as she replaced the book on its shelf. She turned and regarded me with cool dark eyes. Eagle eyes. "So," she said.

"Why did you request to see me alone?"

Faint shadows circled her eyes, as though she had slept badly. That made it a little easier to meet her gaze and say my piece. "I came because I have a gift that is for you alone. Your heart's desire, not your father's."

I offered the box. She reached toward it, plucked her hand away. Wary.

"Open it, please," she said.

Just as Yún predicted. Muttering the key-spell under my breath, I tilted the box forward and pressed the latch on its side. Immediately a pale white cloud poured out, enveloping us both. Whoever watched this room would see just a blurry blank spot on their video screens. We had less than a moment to escape. I shoved the box into my tunic and grabbed the two bracelets from my pocket. I snapped one onto my wrist and grabbed

for Lian's.

*Woof.*

A body slammed into me, knocking me to the floor. Sharp teeth pressed into my neck, and an invisible weight made it hard for me to breathe. *Do I kill him now?* said a ghostly voice. *Or do we wait for the guards?*

Oh damn. Her companion spirit. I caught a whiff of pines and rain water and the faintest trace of fox. Oh double damn.

"Wait a moment," Lian said. "I want to ask some questions."

Her face, cold and furious, loomed over me. "What," she said crisply, "did you think you were doing?"

"Um, rescuing you?" Claws pricked my shoulders. My throat squeezed shut in terror. The fox spirit had not materialized completely, but that would not stop it from tearing out my throat.

Lian made an exasperated noise. "You idiot. What makes you think—"

She broke off. Her gaze went diffuse—listening to her companion spirit—then she smiled in a way that made me shiver. "Ah, Jun has made a most interesting suggestion."

Still smiling, Lian took the bracelet from my limp hands. It was made from braided copper wire and looked like any bracelet you'd find in Lóng City's cheapest bazaars. According to Yún, her friend had imbedded magic in the wires, but cleverly so that no one could detect it until I spoke the key-spell.

"Tell me how it works," Lian said.

I explained about the key-spell. "It turns the wearer invisible. The bracelets and spells are linked so we can still see each other. But no one else can. That way we can escape without anyone seeing us. Anyone else, I mean. If you had wanted to, that is. Escape. But I guess you don't. That is ..."

I clamped my lips together and swallowed the rest of my nervous babbling. Lian ignored me, turning the bracelet over in her hands. Her gaze flicked toward me. Then she snapped the bracelet over her wrist. "Say the spell. We better hurry."

The weight vanished from my chest, and Lian dragged me to my feet. I managed to sputter out the spell without making a mistake. My ears popped with the sudden

outpouring of magic flux, but to my eyes, nothing had changed. Just like Yún promised.

Lian's eyes widened, however, as though she could tell what had happened. "Where did you get— Never mind. We don't have any time. This way."

She grabbed my arm and hauled me through yet another magic doorway. The walls flickered closed, plunging us into darkness. Then the air buzzed with magic, and a series of lamps blinked on, showing a plain stone passageway. A servants' corridor, I guessed. "Where are your friends?" she said.

"Second kitchen," I said, not daring to ask how she knew about Yún and the rest.

Lian nodded. "I know a route we can take. A secret one."

She led me to a small wooden door that opened onto a steep stairway. We hurried down to the next landing, along a walkway from one tower to the next, then down another three steep flights to a wide arched corridor. From far ahead came the clamor of many voices, shouting in all the dialects of Lóng City. The second kitchen.

Lian and I waited for a brief lull, then darted through the kitchen doors. Yún and Jing-mei sat off in one corner. We skirted the room to their sides. "We are here," I whispered.

Yún blinked at my voice, then touched Jing-mei's arm. Without a word, they both laid aside their bowls and headed toward the outer doors. Lian and I trailed close behind, using their presence to mask ours as we passed through the doors to the outer courtyard.

Outside the sun had set, the skies had darkened to the purple of late twilight. Gan gave the all-clear signal to Yún as we passed his post and rounded the corner. Just in time, because shouts echoed from inside. We took off down the lane, me trying to recite the unlocking spell as I ran. My stomach gave a lurch as the magic flux vanished. Lian stumbled. Yún caught her before she fell.

Another left and right brought us to the entrance of a roofed passageway. Jing-mei stopped and shook out her hair. In less than a minute, she had rubbed rouge on her lips and cheeks, and changed into a different jacket she'd stashed behind a trash bin. She headed back toward the palace, ready to provide misdirection and delay. Yún, Lian, and I raced down the passageway, which I knew led to the nearest staircase. Down a couple levels, we could disappear into a maze of old tenements, where we were sure to find an unlocked basement to hide—

A keening echoed through the empty passageway. I scrambled to a halt. Yún fell over me, tripping Lian. We untangled ourselves, and I was helping Lian to her feet when Yún gave a muffled cry. "Kai," she whispered in a choked voice. "Look!"

I looked. My brain squeaked and went numb.

An enormous...thing loomed ahead. It had no eyes, no mouth, just a huge blankness that wavered before our eyes, like a shadow flickering against the falling night. A watch demon. I found myself scrambling backward, holding tight to Yún and Lian. The watch demon keened again and surged closer.

With a ferocious roar, Chen burst into the streets between us and the demon, larger than I had even seen him before. His spines and tusks gleamed silver in the moonlight. He shook his head and stamped the ground. The next moment, Qi appeared—tall and sharp and quick—then Jun the fox spirit, Jing-mei's monkey spirit, Gan's ox, and even Danzu's scrawny goat with its horns lowered.

*Run, Chen said. We cannot fight this one for long.*

He charged and swung his tusks at the watch demon. It howled so loud the air shook. We didn't wait to see more. We doubled back to the nearest intersection and rounded into a side passageway to the next plaza. Too late. The ring of many boots over paving stones echoed from the avenue opposite. Guards had circled around and we were caught between them and the watch demon. There was only one place I knew that was safe from both.

I bent over the nearest metal plate and hooked my fingers into one slot. "Help me," I said to Yún. She stared at me, uncomprehending, then realization flashed over her face. She grabbed the other opening, and together, we levered the sewer plate up and over to one side.

"Are you mad?" Lian said. "Do you know what's down there?"

"I know watch demons hate the sewers."

"Do you know why?"

"Who cares why? I know we don't have much—"

A roar sent us all clambering down the metal ladder and into Lóng City's Hundred Sewers.

At the bottom of the ladder, the sewers' murky darkness enveloped us. Yún and I

touched hands, then located the princess. Nearby came the rill of running water. A thick horrible stink filled the air. My eyes watered, and I had to pinch my nose shut.

"Now what?" Yún said.

The moment she spoke, the air buzzed with magic flux. Lamps winked into life, casting a circle of dim light around us.

Tunnels branched off in all directions. Some, I knew, snaked around the mountains. Some dropped in steps to the next terrace, and some shot down toward the lower districts, or even, according to rumors, into the valley below. The old kings had built the sewers centuries ago for when the city-kingdoms went to war and the rulers needed to escape to the mountainside beyond. Other creatures haunted these sewers, so I went underground only when I had to, but I knew a route that would take us to our warehouse hideout. Once there, we could make more plans.

We took out our knives and set off, single file, with me in the lead, and Yún guarding the rear. The air smelled dank, and we had to watch our footing in the ankle-deep muck. Princess Lian had not turned squeamish, I noticed with relief. If we didn't tire, we could reach the warehouse in an hour or two. Not quite the rescue I had imagined, but for the first time, I believed we could succeed.

One thing bothered me, however, so I slowed down to walk by Lian's side. "What changed your mind?" I asked.

She gave me a curious look. "About what?"

"About leaving the palace. You weren't going to at first."

Another swift, assessing glance, as though she were weighing how much to tell me. "True. But then Jun convinced me that you could give me my heart's desire after all."

I grinned. "So you did hate the palace."

She gave a quick laugh, just as quickly smothered. "Oh no, I love the palace and everything about it. But I wanted to travel, to study abroad. To learn about statecraft and law and justice and magic." Lamplight caught a new expression on her face. No longer angry or closed, or even arrogant. She looked ... beautiful and passionate. Like a queen, I thought. One who cares.

"And your father refused to let you go," Yún said, who had come up beside me.

"Yes. He told me I should hire teachers at home. Then he insisted on that

ridiculous contest." Lian hesitated a moment. "You must not think I will abandon you to my father's anger. Once I reach the Phoenix Empire, I will write my father and explain that you are not to blame."

"Many thanks," Yún said dryly. "By then, it might be too late—" She stopped. Her eyes went wide and she put a hand on my arm. "What was that?"

It was a whispery sound, like water seething in a kettle. Uncertain, I shifted my knife in my hand. The hiss grew louder, echoing from the ceiling and walls. I couldn't tell which direction it came from. Ahead? Behind? When I glanced over my shoulder, I glimpsed a rippling in the darkness. Then came a grating noise, of scales sliding over stone. I jerked my attention the other way. A strong burning smell filled the air, as though someone had released a flood of magic flux....

An enormous ghostly head materialized in front of us. A ghost dragon—the largest I had ever seen—stared directly at me. Its eyes were large and luminous, its whiskers thicker than my arms. Eddies of magic flux swirled around its translucent body, which coiled over and around and through the walls to trap us completely.

The dragon's lips pulled back to show a triple row of teeth like swords. *Who are you?*

Its voice thrummed inside my skull. My legs turned to water; my brain chattered in terror. Dimly, I realized that Yún was gripping my shoulder, and Lian had fallen to her knees.

I managed to unlock my jaw. "We are ... We are—"

*Thieves, it declared. Trespassers.*

"No."

Lian drew a deep breath and lurched to her feet. "We are not thieves, Your Majesty."

The ghost dragon paused. Its whiskers pricked forward, nearly brushing Lian, who flinched. "We are not trespassers," she said. "No more than do your children trespass in the human kingdom above. Remember, Your Majesty, these tunnels were built by my ancestors and yours together. We both have right of passage. Or have you forgotten?"

The ghost dragon's eyes flickered. *Who are you that speaks of rights and promises? Are you the king of Lóng City?*

Lian met his gaze directly, though I could see the pulse at her throat beating fast. "No king," she said. "But I am the king's daughter."

*The princesssss.* It sniffed, like a dog taking a scent, and I held my breath. *Yes, I remember you now. But—* Its great head swung around toward me and Yún, stirring the clouds of magic flux. *Those two were taking you away from the city and your father. I heard you speak of it.*

"If you listened, you know why, Your Majesty."

*Why should I remember why? What are you to me, once you abandon your duty?*

"I am not—" Lian broke off and drew a deep breath. "I am not leaving forever, Your Majesty. But for my duty, I must learn all that I can before duty calls me to the throne. Even you must admit that, if my father does not."

*I must?* The dragon's eyes brightened with some unimaginable emotion. *Hah. You are a stubborn creature. You would have me admit things I never denied.*

It slowly uncoiled more of its vast length so that its scales glittered in the dim torchlight. Yún and I glanced back nervously. I could think of no reason why this king would not crush us beneath its ghostly weight, or poison us with its breath. But Lian never budged. She continued to meet its gaze directly.

*Sooooo,* it said at last. *You wish to study magic and kingship. Why not learn from your father, princess? Why not learn from me?*

Lian hesitated just a moment before she bowed deeply. "Because I am a stubborn daughter of the throne. I must learn on my own before I dare to learn from such a teacher as you."

The ghost dragon hissed, an awful sound that I realized was its laughter. *Flattery,* it said, still hissing with amusement. *You remind me of your great-grandfather. Go, then, my child. Go in prosperity. We shall talk again.*

He waved a ghostly claw as though to dismiss us, then vanished into the walls.

\* \* \*

The bells were ringing ten o'clock when we finally reached the exit near our hideout. Lian collapsed against the tunnel wall. Yún and I dragged ourselves up the ladder and levered the metal plate to one side. Light from a full, fat moon poured into the

tunnel.

"I'll go first," I said.

I clambered out and onto the plaza. All was quiet and empty. Our hideout lay two streets over, through a mud-dark alleyway.

"All clear," I whispered, and reached a hand down.

Lian came up first. Right away, she breathed in deeply. I reached down again for Yún. She was halfway out of the tunnel, when a horde of guards poured out of nowhere. Inside of a moment, they had me trussed up and tossed to one side. Yún too. Guards swarmed everywhere, their helmets and scimitars flashing in the moonlight, their boots ringing off the stones. Magic sparked and burned in the air as someone lit an electric torch. By its glare, I could see Lian waving a fist at one of the guards, demanding our release. "They are not to blame. Do you hear me? Are you listening to me?"

"They are listening to me, not you, my daughter, my heart."

Like a ribbon unbraiding, the guards parted. His Royal Highness, Wencheng Li, dismounted from his carriage and approached his daughter.

Her chin jerked up. "You."

"Yes, me," he said. "Who else should chase after my runaway daughter?"

Two spots of bright red flared on her cheeks. "I am *not* a runaway. You know why I left."

"I know. Your heart's desire." He said this, wincing, as though it pained him.

"Yes, my desire." Her voice had gone flat, but I heard the passion underneath. "My desire is to study abroad, to learn more than just this mountain, this kingdom. It is not a whim, whatever you believe. But you refused to listen. You decided I needed a consort. Someone you chose—" She broke off, but not before I heard the edge of tears in her voice. "I am no child," she said after a moment. "And if I am, I am not fit to be queen. Not today, not ever. You taught me that."

"So I did." Her father sighed heavily. "And perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps you were too. Have you thought what might have happened with these two, had you left them behind? Or did you think you would bring them with you, without regard to their families or their friends?"

Lian flinched. "You do not understand."

"I understand more than you believe, and not as much as I would like. Come, Lian. You cannot expect me to—"

*Sssssssstop.*

The stones beneath me shuddered. The sky turned wispy gray, and the air reeked with the burning scent of powerful magic. The guard holding me down scrabbled backward as a thick, luminous fog oozed between the cracks in the street. I froze, knowing that fog, knowing I could not run fast enough to escape it.

The ghost dragon king materialized around and above the crowds of soldiers.

*You are both stubborn creatures,* it said in a voice that made my skin prickle. *You are worse than the worm children who share quarters with these human children, and who told me where to find your daughter. Talk,* it made a spitting sound, and the air crackled with magic. *Talk means nothing if you do not listen. I did not bring you here for that.*

Wencheng Li opened and shut his mouth. Glanced to his daughter and back.

"Very well," he said with obvious reluctance. "What do you say, my daughter, my heart? Shall we talk? And listen?"

"What about my friends?" Lian demanded.

"We take them into safekeeping. For their own sakes. Or would you give them over to the watch demons?"

She swallowed and sent me an anxious glance. "Very well."

Her father nodded to the guards, who hauled me and Yún to our feet. I caught one last glimpse of Lian's father leading her away before they blindfolded us.

\* \* \*

Our gang uses code words to disguise our talk from wizards and spies. So, too, the kings of Lóng City spoke in words and phrases nothing like what they meant.

Safekeeping meant the guards ushered me into a small room with barred windows overlooking a fish pond. No matter how comfortable, it looked like a prison to me. My only consolation was a brief visit from Chen, telling me that the spirit companions were well, and the rest of my gang had escaped home.

I slept badly, dreaming about watch-demons who chased me through an endless

dark maze. Not long after sunrise, a runner shook me awake. Princess Lian had summoned me to an interview.

Servants brought me towels and soap and bowls of hot water. The runner, a young woman, waited while I scrubbed the sleep from my eyes, then led me through yet another maze of corridors to a small sitting room in a different tower. Lian sat on the opposite side of a low table spread with dishes of steamed rice, pickled fish, and delicately spiced noodles. She indicated a seat, which I took, and the dishes, which I had no appetite for.

"Yún went home last hour," she said quietly.

I nodded, not sure how to answer that.

"You fulfilled all three tasks," she went on. "Even the one I thought most impossible of all."

"Does it matter?" My voice sounded frog-like from bad sleep.

"To me," she said hesitantly, "yes, it matters very much."

While I drank down cups of hot tea, she went on to say that she would get her wish to study abroad in the Phoenix Empire. She and her father and the ghost dragon—a king of his own realm, it turned out—had argued for hours. Only toward dawn did her father relent, saying that she might leave next month, so that she could cross the mountains before the winter snows set in.

"And so you did give me my heart's desire," she said at last. "Even my father agrees that you have fulfilled every requirement of our contest."

"Money and a princess," I said, not certain how I felt right now.

Lian smiled pensively. "The money is yours, yes. But I'm not certain you'd want this princess, or this palace. You might run away."

"You mean you'd run away from me. Never mind," I said quickly. "I understand. I'd make a rotten prince, no matter what that certificate said."

We both laughed, a bit painfully. It made saying good-bye easier.

\* \* \*

The sun shone bright over Lóng City as I threaded my way across Golden Market to the noodle shop where I first called Yún for this adventure. Tucked inside my tunic were five credit scrolls, made out to me and the others in my gang. I also had a new no-

wire talk-phone coded with Lian's private number.

"Kai!" Jing-mei called out to me across the square. "Yún said to watch out for you! What happened? Did you get the money? Did you marry the princess?"

Before I could say anything, she dragged me into the noodle shop where everyone else waited around a big table. The same old waiter hurried around, setting out bowls of tea and wiping up the dust. "You," he said. "Ginger soda. Right?"

"Right," I said, feeling really weird.

We ordered a feast of steamed rice and cabbage, boiled dumplings, and spicy dried shrimp imported from the coastal cities. The waiter panted as he hurried to bring more bowls of hot tea, a beer for Danzu, and extra ginger ice cream for Jing-mei. All around me, my gang chattered about how they would spend their fortune. Ten thousand yuan apiece. Enough to buy a shop. Or purchase the best weapons. Or simply live without worry of debt or hunger for years to come. So many dreams, so many shapes to those dreams. Me, I felt strange and all pinched inside, and I wasn't sure why.

Yún slid into the empty space beside me. "What's wrong?"

I shrugged. "Dunno. Tired, I guess. And you?"

"Same-same. Happy we aren't dead. Or stuck in prison."

We drank our ginger sodas. Words bubbled up inside me, but none of them felt right.

Then Yún asked, "Do you miss her already?"

That made me blink. "Who? Lian?"

"No, the ghost dragon's queen. Of course I meant Lian."

"Oh." I tilted my glass and studied the fizzing soda. "No. I mean, we're friends."

These weren't the right words at all, I could tell. Not for me. Not for Yún, who was frowning at the tabletop. "What about your new friend?" I hurried to say. "Won't he kick and yell when he finds out you aren't his slave? Excuse me, I meant *apprentice*."

Yún's mouth tilted into a smile. "He is a she. And maybe she's not so angry. And maybe I want to be her apprentice."

I nearly dropped my glass in surprise. "You do? Why? What about the money?"

"What about it? If I study hard, I can use the money to buy my own shop someday. Same but different." She stood and laid down coins for her share of the feast.

"You should come with me, Kai. My teacher said you weren't as impossible as she thought, and she might give you another chance. But you'd have to finish those homework problems first."

"What homework? You mean—" I stood up fast to block Yún from going. "Stop. Talk to me. You mean my *mother* took you as her apprentice?"

She nodded, her eyes bright with mischief.

I sat back down with a thump. "You," I breathed. "You tricked me. No, you tricked us both—me and Mā mī. No matter what happened, you got what you wanted. If we lost, you'd work for my mother to pay back your debt. And if we won the prize, you got the money for the apprenticeship fee. Both ways you got to learn magic and mathematics." Then another clue clicked into place. "And Mā mī had a chance to help me in secret. Isn't that right?"

Yún laughed. Before I could say anything more, she was dancing around me and out the doorway. I stood and paid my bill, my thoughts in a jumble about Yún, and why she admitted her tricks, and if that meant she trusted me, and even if there were more secrets she had, and why I even cared. Somewhere, in the back of my brain, I could hear Chen snorfling in piggish amusement, but I ignored him and hurried out the door after Yún.

So maybe I don't know everything, I told myself. But maybe I could find out.

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## **About the Author**

Beth Bernobich fell into a fantasy world several years ago and discovered she liked it there just fine. Her short stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Tor.com*, and *Strange Horizons*, among other places. Her first fantasy novel for adults, **Passion Play**, came out from Tor Books in October 2010, and her first YA novel, **Fox and Phoenix**, is forthcoming from Viking in October 2011. For more information about Beth, her stories, and her books, check out her website: <http://www.beth-bernobich.com>

### **The Lóng City Stories**

"Pig, Crane, Fox" (short story)

Fox and Phoenix, Viking Children's Books, October 2011

### **Other Books by Beth Bernobich**

Ars Memoriae, PS Publishing, December 2009

Passion Play, Tor Books, October 2010

Queen's Hunt, Tor Books, Summer 2012