

-Chapter 01-

-The Kingdom of Li-

The end was near. And it was that thought that ushered Jai Li adamantly down the castle's limestone, crescent corridors. Her beautiful, silver embroidered dress's red train couldn't keep up with her brisk pace as it whipped around in her wake. And right on her heels, stumbling at times, were her two older sisters. They were each beautiful, the three of them, but in different ways, neither one prettier than the other.

Jai Li and her sisters were royalty, Jai Li being the youngest Princess of the Li Kingdom. A kingdom that had been in existence for as long as man walked on two legs... some say even early, perhaps as long as man feared the darkness and looked for a way to protect itself against the evil that traveled in its shroud. But that was a darker time ago and since then the Li Kingdom had become a better place, flourishing through isolation and xenophobia.

The corridor's chilly temperature was less than ideal, having been cut into the side of a mountain - as much of the castle had been. Jai Li reached the circular wooden door at the end of the corridor. It was already open.

Her older sisters were yelling for her to stop.

"Jai Li, do not do this!" said one sister.

"You're only going to make it worse!" insisted the other. But Jai Li was the stubborn one, so they knew better than to think they could stop her with words. She simply waved her sisters off as she stepped through the door and into the royal courtyard. Her sisters carefully followed, gently stepping over the lip in the doorway as if it were to bite them if they touched it. By the time they had both crossed the threshold, Jai Li was already half-way across the Courtyard.

The Royal Courtyard was large and circular, ranging about fifty feet in diameter with the center open to the sky above. The setting sun projected a beautiful hue of red onto the statues of Jai Li's ancestors carved into the support pillars, and brightened up the murals and friezes that line the walls. She had grown up here, as had her father, and his father, and his father, and so on - each watched over and protected by the spirits of the represented ancestors.

On the other end of the courtyard stood two Royal Guards; Shen Da and Shen Ping - Two short brothers dressed in full, traditional, gold-plated Li armor. One of the brothers wielded a spear, the other a sword, and their backs were adorned with red capes that stopped just inches from the floor.

As Jai Li reached them they crossed their weapons, preventing her from moving past.

"Your highness, I am sorry, but—" Shen Da knew he was not going to finish his sentence before incurring the Princess's infamous wrath.

"Do you know what is happening out there?" she yelled at him.

"Out where?" Shen Ping replies for his brother?

"You idiots!" Jai Li screamed like a child. She shoved their weapons aside and continued forward toward another circular wooden door.

The door to the Throne Room slowly rolled to the side, reveal Jai Li having opened it. Her sisters finally caught up but stayed back.

Jai Li was exhausted from the effort. The smell of the room washed over her. It was a smell of human filth - rotting. She steeled herself, steadying her turning stomach, and stepped into the Throne Room, stopping after a few steps and looking up at Lord Li sitting on his jade throne. His head was between his hands, almost as if he was sobbing. His beard was long and matted and his clothing looked unkempt, as if he hadn't changed or bathed in months. Hunched over, he looked like an empty man, the fire hearst to his right casting a shadow that was far more formidable than the man before her.

"Daddy." Her voice was like that of a child. She was embarrassed by it. She cleared her throat and tried again.

"Father!"

"You are wasting your time, little sister."

Jai Li turned to see her brother, Xiang Li, standing beside her. He was not that imposing of a figure, not like their father once was. At best he was a shadow of their father, but at that moment he was trying to hold his own.

"How long have you been up here," she asked Xiang Li.

"Hours."

"Why?" she asked, a clear hint of accusation included.

"Because, dear sister, our father lacks the wherewithal to adequately rule. But I am."

"How imperious of you," she rolled her eyes as she pushed past him, continuing to her father.

"Jai Li!" Xiang Li yelled.

She ignored him, her stride staying true with purpose.

"Father, your men are out of control!" she shouted ahead to Lord Li. But he did not react. *What is happening to this kingdom*, she thought as she stopped before her father, a look of surprise and sadness hovering across her face.

She lowered herself to see her father's eyes. His brow shifted up to her, then his eyes. He looked old.. worn.. even for his age. His skin was dry and cracked, thirsting for moisture.

"My daughter, is that you?" he whispered through dry lips.

"Yes, father." She grabbed his hand, staying in a kneel.

"And which of my beauties are you?"

"The obstreperous one," she shamelessly replied.

A slight smile crossed his face, causing his dry lips to crack. "Jai Li."

"Yes, father."

Lord Li's focus shifted past her, toward nothing. His eyelids grew heavy again as he lowered his head back into his palms.