

Chapter Sixteen

Phoenix Warrior

The basilisk slithered through the streets of Khitai. Now and then it lunged, always at a child or a pretty girl who froze in place. The monster's orange eyes bore down until its victim shrieked. Then it shook green and yellow scales out of its mane and danced away.

Children gathered the scale-shaped leaf wrappers and ate the sweet bean cakes inside. The eight-legged basilisk moved along to the next throng of children, its painted silk skin rippling at every turn. The bare feet of the men inside the monster slapped the pavement in time with the festival drums.

I was the opposite of the basilisk, a monster hidden beneath the silk cover of a man.

Even without Burning Cloud Devil's magic, it was a good enough disguise. Unless someone got close, I could have been another of the big northern barbarians who'd come south looking for mercenary work. I was glad I'd picked up a black rice hat with a brim so low it had an eye slit in the front. I felt like a kid playing at knights in armor, but at least no one had run screaming when I came into town.

Burning Cloud Devil was still holed up at the inn. I'd wandered off to find a smith to repair my big knife. As an afterthought I asked him to make a new one just like it, only big enough for my devil hands. We negotiated until I got tired of pantomime. I showed him the big smile, and we had a deal.

The rest of the day I figured I'd take in the sights. There was no point telling Burning Cloud Devil where I was going. After our long journey back from the western mountains, and a hundred failed attempts to teach me his Quivering Palm technique, he said he needed to catch up on his sleep.

After the business with the Moon Blade Killer, we'd both had some rough nights. More than once I'd woken from nightmares of the boss writhing inside a dragon's belly. Across the fire, Burning Cloud Devil twitched in his sleep, soaked with night sweat. I figured he dreamed of Spring Snow in the same damned place.

Despite the nightmares, I wasn't buying his "need some sleep" excuse. He'd been wound up tight since I showed him the silver sword. He said he didn't believe I'd seen Spring Snow, but I could tell it was gnawing at him. I'd seen it a thousand times before with the boss.

Burning Cloud Devil wasn't slipping away to rest. He was off to get stinking drunk.

Weeks ago I'd figured out that most of the joints he called "tea houses" were really taverns. Let him drink, I figured. At least it spared me more lessons on clarifying my soul or maintaining the perfect nature of my body or some other airy stuff. When he wasn't full of wine, he was full of bad poetry.

Since I'd seen her face, I had a hard time picturing Spring Snow with this guy. She struck me as a good kid, full of life at one time. She had to have been a lot more

fun than he was. Burning Cloud Devil didn't deserve someone like her.

The way I saw it, he was responsible for the deaths of the family back at the restaurant. Sure, it was me the Moon Blade Killer had come to kill, but Burning Cloud Devil knew it would happen. He'd tricked me into burying the wrestler's head. He might as well have murdered those boys and their father himself.

Anyway, it had to be his fault. Otherwise, it was mine. I couldn't stand to think that.

Among the festival crowd, a woman dressed as a warrior caught my eye. Her golden scale armor glittered in the sun. She held one of those long-bladed glaives, sort of halfway between a spear and a sword. Where its grip met the blade twined a golden phoenix.

Something told me she hadn't dressed up for the festival.

Most people in town hadn't given me a second glance, but this woman stared in a way that made me think she could see through the brim of my hat. In other circumstances, I'd tip her a wink, but she was the one who threw me a fetching smile.

Normally, that's all the encouragement I need. Instead of taking her up on the invitation, I walked away.

Until Burning Cloud Devil released my body, I was in no fit shape for a cuddle. And yeah, I knew that probably wasn't what her smile meant, but it was what it made me think about.

Likely she wanted a whole different kind of trouble. Without Burning Cloud Devil around to slap me up with the fight whammy, there was nothing in it for me.

She called after me in Tien. "Face me, devil."

I kept walking. A few steps later, a wave of nausea rolled through me. She'd thrown a spell on me.

I ran down a narrow lane between a block of townhouses and a spice shop. Waiting for me at the other end was a woman dressed identically to the first, except she held a scepter with a golden phoenix on its head. She looked exactly like the other woman.

Twins, of course.

Under other circumstances, I'd have been tickled. With their thick jaws and thin noses, they were no beauties, but they were all right. Later there'd be time to imagine the scenarios that could have been, assuming I survived this little tryst.

She pointed the scepter at me. Its wings began to move, its feathered breast glowing red.

I didn't wait to see the result. I pulled a little juice from inside the core of my spirit and jumped from the ground to land on the roof of the spice shop.

No matter how many times I did that trick, "flying" never got old. Burning Cloud Devil said it came easily to me because of my abundant ki. Sometimes I wondered whether I'd still be able to do it when I got back to my regular body. It'd be a useful trick, not to mention one hell of a lot of fun.

My first step crunched through the roof tile. I weighed a lot more these days, so I stuck to running along the beam lines. A few more tiles clattered away behind me, but I made it to the other side without falling through. I leaped down onto the next lane, heard a cry, and looked around to see who I'd startled.

There was no one in the street except the armored woman. She lunged, twirled the glaive, and stepped back. I realized she'd already hit me only when the front of my rice hat fell off, revealing my face.

She gave me a smug smile and turned her blade so the reflected sunlight light dazzled me. I shaded my

eyes until she turned the blade again, showing me the opposite side.

On the metal was etched a familiar symbol. I'd seen it in Minkai. It was the mark of Shizuru, goddess of ancestors and honor. This woman wasn't just a warrior.

She was a paladin.

Her smile vanished as she advanced, whirling the long blade. I turned to run, but there she was on the other side, this time with the golden scepter.

"Xifeng." The one with the scepter saluted her sister. "The honor of first attack is yours. Smite the evil beast!"

Xifeng returned the salute. "I thank you, Dongmei. I accept your charge and—"

"Listen, ladies, thanks all the same, but no smiting today. Despite my looks, I'm not actually evil."

Hey, I'm entitled to my opinion.

"It says it is not evil," said Dongmei, translating my devil-speech to Tien. Good for her, I thought. Know your enemy. Speak the language. Maybe we'll have a drink later.

"Impossible," said Xifeng. "I see its aura. It is a fiend from Hell."

"Cheliux, actually," I said. Dongmei's face remained blank, so I did boat-on-the-wave with my hand. "Far across the sea, on the other side of the world."

Dongmei showed me her palm, two fingers up, thumb nestled to the side. She said a few words in the language of angels, which I never learned because it's got no decent curses. A pale golden circle formed around us. Motes of holy light danced in the alley like dust under a bright window.

"Say it again," demanded Dongmei. "Tell us you are not truly evil."

"I'm not— I'm actually a perfectly— The thing is—"

I couldn't say the words. Her magic turned them to dust in my mouth.

"You condemn yourself!" cried Dongmei. "Not even a devil can tell a lie within the Circle of Truth."

Xifeng's slipper scuffed the ground behind me. Even in armor, the woman was quick. She damned near succeeded where the Moon Blade Killer failed. I moved just in time to make sure it was only the rest of my hat that fell onto the street.

I jumped back to the roof. Xifeng vaulted up behind me. I let her chase me across a couple more buildings while I searched for an escape route.

No dice. Dongmei had already cut me off, running up steps of air on the other side. I'd seen that trick before. It meant a god was listening to her prayers.

I was fighting both a paladin and a priest. If there'd ever before been a question of my going to Hell, it was answered now.

I tossed a handful of darts to keep her occupied. She covered her face with her arm, but the little blades glanced off an invisible barrier a few inches from her skin.

A crunch on the roof tiles warned me of Xifeng's attack. To make sure I knew it was coming, she added a battle cry. "Shizuru, guide my hand!"

I leaped away. The roof exploded in yellow light inches away from me. Sharp tile fragments bit into my face and neck.

Xifeng's battle cry was mighty.

I feinted a forward roll and swept her legs with a kick. Xifeng fell for it, and then she fell for it—right off the side of the roof.

It's always funnier when something like that happens to a paladin.

I grinned as I turned to face Dongmei. She had just finished calling down a spell, her arms raised to heaven to receive it.

It landed on me, a pillar of roaring flames. I threw back my head to laugh—fire doesn't bother me when I'm cloaked in Hell—but out of my mouth came a howl of pain.

The holy fire was hot and cold and something else I can't explain. It hurt far more than the burning I feel just before fire turns me big. My hair floated up like I was underwater. My clothes rustled but didn't so much as smoke.

My grin turned into a snarl.

"All right, sister, you got my attention."

Dongmei's eyes widened. She ran and leaped to the next building, once more walking on an invisible stair. I sent a pair of darts after her, putting one just above her shoulder blade. She faltered but didn't fall.

The gap was wider than those I'd jumped before. I pumped my legs, my clawed toes tearing divots in the burning roof. I threw myself across the street and landed hard on the opposite roof, leaving the burning building behind me.

Dongmei's fingers sketched another spell. She babbled holy words.

I charged across the tiles, diving into a tumble to come at her from below. My palm caught her on the breastbone. I let my fingers do the spider-crawl strike Burning Cloud Devil taught me. I sealed them with the final blow.

Dongmei recognized the attack. Her face paled. She slapped at her sternum, gasping as I raised my fist and squeezed it tight.

I felt no invisible strings between my fingers and her heart. I still hadn't got the knack.

Her color returned. She raised her scepter.

I shot her a fast one in the breadbasket. My knuckle spurs pierced her armor.

She pressed her hand against my forehead. I felt her pulse fluttering through her palm. The last few syllables of her spell came out in blood, but she pronounced them well enough for her goddess to hear.

The goddess replied.

Holy fire erupted out of my brain. Hot tears poured down my face, so thick I feared they might be my melted eyeballs. Dongmei showed me a pained smile of triumph as her face blurred from my vision.

My thoughts melted away next. All I had left inside my head was hatred. My hand found the grip of the big knife. I brought it up hard and low, through Dongmei's belly and up into her chest.

She didn't scream. The only sound was the scrape of my blade across her metal armor and the bone beneath. I lifted her up, twisting and jerking the blade to tear her heart to pieces. The cloud over my vision drifted away.

"Sister!" Xifeng screamed from the edge of the roof.

I turned to show the paladin what I'd done with her sister. Dongmei's blood was on my face, running down my lips and across the long, ragged teeth of my big smile.

Across my shoulder, Dongmei stretched a feeble arm toward Xifeng. For an instant, the gesture plucked at something that had slipped down deep inside me. It was something important, something I used to value. I couldn't think of its name.

Whatever it was, I didn't need it anymore.

Xifeng stood at the edge of the roof. She raised her hand toward her sister's.

Dongmei's weight lifted off of me. Her body faded away, but the ghost of it floated toward her sister. As their outstretched hands touched, the image of

Dongmei vanished. Xifeng stood alone, her sword-glaive in one hand, the phoenix scepter in the other.

She tucked her sister's weapon inside her belt and assumed a fighting stance.

"You want some of the same?" I said.

There was no one to translate, but she was done talking. She came on like a storm.

I drifted back and tried another kick, but she set the butt of her weapon into the tile and blocked me. The dark wood was hard as steel. There'd be one hell of a bruise on my instep.

She attacked with both the blade and the spiked butt of the glaive. She was strong as a bull, and fast. It was all I could do to bring up my arms to protect my body. The blade hit hard, but it couldn't cut the sleeves of my enchanted robes. Xifeng noticed and redirected her blows to my hands, face, and feet.

Her limited targets gave me breathing room. With the big knife I gave her a good shot in the shoulder, hard enough to bloody her golden scales. The wound barely slowed her.

I followed up with a knee to the belly, but she faded back and stepped to my right. She'd gulled me!

The blade creased the back of my skull. The bone cracked, and I felt a cool rush of air slip inside. I rolled away, expecting a finishing shot to land where my head had been.

Xifeng anticipated that, too. The butt of her glaive slammed into my mouth. I choked on blood and the shards of my teeth.

Something came apart inside me. It felt as though some enormous hand had grasped my spine and cracked it like a whip. Everything I saw turned the color of blood. I clutched and clawed, kicked and raked, snarling and spitting like an animal.

It didn't matter what I touched. I ripped it in my hands, shredded it in my ruined teeth. Shattered tile, metal, and flesh filled my mouth. At last I felt a hard kick on my ass, and I fell off the roof and face-first onto the pavement.

I came up spitting fragments of paving stones.

Mocking laughter rained down from another roof across the street.

"The gods punish you for starting another fight without me," said Burning Cloud Devil. His voice was equal parts amusement, irritation, and wine.

He sat cross-legged on the edge of a bakery roof. Cradled in his legs were a steam basket and a wine jug. He'd brought refreshments for the show.

The sun exploded behind me. That's how it felt, anyway.

I turned, shielding my eyes from the radiance. On the roof stood the silhouettes of both sisters, each holding her weapon. They stepped forward. Each was bloodied, but Dongmei's wound now appeared little more than a deep cut.

They hesitated at the sight of Burning Cloud Devil. He laughed at their reaction.

"The Phoenix Warrior! I meant to seek her out, but only after you had mastered the Quivering Palm."

"Maybe you can give me a hand," I said. Even in devil-speech, my words came out a mushy mumble through my broken teeth. "Which sister you want?"

"Which sister?" He juggled a hot dumpling one-handed. "There is but one Phoenix Warrior."

I figured he meant Dongmei, then, since she carried the phoenix scepter. I pointed at her. "Almost got that one."

Dongmei scoffed. "Burning Cloud Devil, let us see what fiend you have summoned to plague our town."

She touched the butt of Xifeng's glaive to wet her fingers with blood.

My blood.

She blew it like a kiss onto a strip of white parchment and read the words that formed there. "Radovan Virholt Norge kel Zogreb Dokange the Flaying Tongue Fell Viridio . . . This is not a name!"

In her hands, the blood turned her parchment completely red before trickling down her fingers. She cast it away like a filthy thing.

Burning Cloud Devil choked on his dumpling. "So many!"

Dongmei and Xifeng raised their arms to the sky and bathed in healing radiance. I'd have to start all over.

"Bitches cheat," I said. "Come on, Lefty. You can take the little one."

Burning Cloud Devil lost his smirk and glared at me. All right, I admitted. That was a little mean. But if he hadn't come to fight, he could use all the encouragement I had to offer.

Dongmei ran down her steps of air to stand twenty feet away to my left. Xifeng hit the ground on the right. They raised their weapons and closed in toward me.

"It is a pity you were not a more diligent student," said Burning Cloud Devil.

Before I could ask what he meant by 'were,' Xifeng made a flourish with her glaive. Despite my tough robes, I was shy of that blade, but I was tired of running. I sidestepped, but her attack was only a feint. On the ground between us, Dongmei's shadow swallowed up mine and kept growing.

I leaped aside just in time to avoid her massive fist. It struck the ground like a boulder, and I kept rolling away. She'd grown taller than me, bigger than an ogre.

On the roof, Burning Cloud Devil laughed. His voice echoed through the streets and shook the shutters. He wrote on a sheet of paper on his knee.

"Take your notes later!" I shouted.

Xifeng came for me in earnest. Her glaive smashed a hitching post where my legs had been an instant earlier.

It was time to get away. I ran up the street and skidded to a halt. The city guard had arrived. They formed a barricade of pikes and shields. I turned to run down the street, dodging the giant Dongmei and her smaller but still vicious paladin double. Beyond them, another phalanx of guards appeared.

I looked around, but every path was closed. There were archers on the rooftops, and every door and window had shut.

"A little help!"

Burning Cloud Devil washed down the last of his dumplings with a huge swig of wine. "Very well," he said. "But only if you use the Quivering Palm."

"I can't—" What the hell. I could give it a go. "Fine!"

"Put them close together." Burning Cloud Devil's voice whispered in my ear. I heard it as clearly as if he'd stood behind me, but he remained on the rooftop. He dropped the empty jug and steam basket and assumed a horse stance.

He let the giant kick me around a little while I focused on keeping Xifeng's blade from my neck. At last, the spell that made Dongmei big wore off. I rolled toward a wall, ran three steps up the side, and flipped back to kick her in the face.

It was a heavy blow made worse by the claws on my toes. Four deep grooves cut across her face, and for a second I thought I'd taken out an eye. In an instant, the wound

faded to half its depth. She whipped around to strike me with her glowing scepter. I leaped out of the way.

From the other side, Xifeng screamed as she lunged for me. I twisted aside and felt her blade slide across my shoulder blades. One glimpse of her angry face showed me she'd suffered half the kick I gave Dongmei.

"Now," whispered Burning Cloud Devil. "Strike both at once."

I crouched low and struck both women at once. My palms hit just below the breastbone. The fingers of my left hand traced out the pattern of a cage, or a net. I'd never thought of it that way before, but I knew it could capture a life.

Xifeng gasped.

The fingers of my right hand moved also, but too slow.

Dongmei slapped my hand away.

"Do as I do," hissed Burning Cloud Devil.

For another second I tried to remember the moves he had made through my left hand. Then I gave up and just tried to *feel* them.

I struck again, hitting both women in the same place. My fingers moved, this time faster than Burning Cloud Devil could command them. They formed the same patterns, built the same cages. Xifeng and Dongmei cried out as one. Their bodies trembled and became translucent. They moved together, forming a single person holding Xifeng and Dongmei's weapons in either hand. She fell to her knees.

I rolled back and stood. A cool calm washed over me, but underneath I felt the heat of anger. They—she—had meant to kill me, but now I was the one who held her life in my palm. I felt it trembling there, like a hummingbird.

“Mercy,” moaned the Phoenix Warrior. “Spare me.”

“Crush her,” whispered Burning Cloud Devil. “Prove what you have learned.”

“I didn’t come after you,” I told her. “You came after me.”

“Please.”

I needed another reason. “You broke my teeth.”

She opened her mouth, but before she could plead again, her courage returned to clamp her jaw shut.

“You have this coming,” I told her. I wanted to believe it, too.

I closed my hand. A bird-shaped flame leaped from her chest and flew away. In its wake, the buildings caught fire as the woman’s corpse fell onto the dusty street.