

CHAPTER 1

Somewhere in the waters of the South China Sea, two stowaways on a freighter ship were brought before the captain at gunpoint. The entire crew was composed of members of the Chinese Triads and they kept their submachine guns trained on the two intruders as they escorted them to the captain on the ship's deck. The captives' hands were bound behind their backs with cable ties and they were forced on their knees before the captain.

"So, what do we have here?" he asked, pacing before the two young women. "An American and a Japanese sneaking aboard my ship. And such beautiful specimens. If you wanted to work for us, you should have simply volunteered." He punctuated his statement with a sickening grin. "Beauties such as yourselves will fetch high prices."

One of the crew approached the captain and told him something in Cantonese before handing him a pair of daggers. The captain accepted the weapons and scoffed as he looked at them. "Why invade my ship?"

"You're in possession of an object you shouldn't have." The American had tanned skin, possibly of mixed ethnicity. She had long, dark hair brushed behind her shoulders and piercing, crystal eyes, dressed in khaki pants and black

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top beneath a brown leather jacket.

The crew laughed and the captain joined in their revelry before kneeling down before his prisoner. “You’ll have to be a bit more specific.”

“This was a *great* idea,” the Japanese woman mumbled to her American companion. She wore a black, pinstripe suit with a fedora and had unique, copper-colored eyes. “Hey, why don’t you meet me in Malaysia? I’ve got a lead on a Hand of Glory. Should be a quick gig, low stress.’ Last time I listen to you.”

The captain’s smile faded. “I see. So you planned to steal the Hand with these as the only weapons between the two of you?” He held up the daggers with their curved blades—Nepalese weapons called kukri. “Tell me, before I put the two of you to work once we reach Hong Kong, who are you?”

The American grinned. “Asami, why don’t you show the good captain just who you are?”

The captain cast a confused glance at the Japanese woman. Asami smiled as well and her copper eyes flashed. Orange fur emerged from her pores and her nails elongated into claws. She pulled hard on the cable ties, snapping them easily.

“What the f—”

The captain’s curse was silenced when the American sprung from her knees, ramming her shoulder into his abdomen. Asami’s appearance was something of a hybrid between a human and a fox and the few Triad who weren’t still in shock turned their focus—and their guns—on her. She hopped around the deck, moving like an orange blur

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to take out her attackers.

With the kukri free from the captain's grasp, the American rolled towards one of them, gripping the handle and working the blade on her ties. Within seconds, she was free, just as the captain rose to his feet and took a pistol from his jacket. She performed a leg-sweep to bring him to the ground and she hopped to her feet, stomping on his chest for good measure.

"That's Asami, in case you didn't know. And as for me, the name's Elisa Hill." She pinned her knee on the captain's chest and held one of the kukri against his throat. "Now tell me where I can find the Hand of Glory."

"My cabin...just below this deck."

Elisa flashed him a smile. "Very helpful, thanks." She punched him in the forehead with her hand still grasping the kukri's hilt, knocking him out cold.

"Get down, Hill!"

Elisa glanced over her shoulder to see one of the Triads readying his weapon. Asami hurled the man she'd been grappling with at Elisa's would-be assassin, his gun going off as he was struck and firing wildly off its mark, taking out a few of his fellow brothers with friendly fire. Elisa darted across the deck to find some cover behind a crate to avoid the bullets. Asami came up to her side, startling the myth hunter enough that she almost stabbed her friend with one of her daggers.

"Whoa!"

Elisa stopped herself and let out a breath of relief. She peered around the crate and could see the entrance to the lower decks. "You think you can stay alive for five min-

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utes?”

“Sure, no problem.” Asami did a double-take and shook her head. “Ohhh no, you are *not* leaving me alone!”

Elisa sheathed her daggers and held up five fingers. “Honestly, five minutes, that’s all I need to get the Hand.”

Asami huffed. “Remind me *why* I stick around with you?”

“Saved your life and now you’re eternally bonded to me.”

“Oh, right. Damn mystic blood debt...” Asami sighed. “Okay, fine. What do you need me to do?”

“Draw their fire long enough for me to get to that door.”

Asami gave a nod and leapt onto the crate. “Hey, over here!” As expected, the Triads on-deck threw their attention—and their bullets—directly at the changeling. Asami jumped from the crate and darted across the surface of the ship—fast enough to avoid injury but just slow enough that they could still see her.

With the diversion in play, Elisa had a clear path to the door. She double-checked the coast and then darted across the distance. Elisa opened the door and stepped inside, shutting it behind her.

As she moved slowly down the metal steps, she could hear footsteps coming down the corridor adjacent to the stairwell. Elisa drew her kukri and kept her back to the railing, taking each step slowly. The stairs ended in a small clearing where there was an opening leading to the corridor. She listened as the footsteps grew louder and she sprung out at the right moment, delivering a high-kick to

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the Triad's head. She jammed one kukri into the arm holding his gun. He screamed in pain and let out a string of expletives in Cantonese, the gun falling from his fingers. Elisa took her other kukri and stabbed him between the eyes. She took both weapons from his corpse and shook off the blood, staying low as she moved carefully down the remainder of the corridor.

The hall curved to the right. Elisa pressed up against the wall, moving to the corner and holding a kukri in a reverse grip with the edge in. She crossed her arm over her chest, listening for footsteps rushing closer. Elisa swung her arm out, stabbing the approaching Triad in the throat. She pulled the dagger, cutting across his neck until the blade came free from the flesh.

She sprinted towards the door at the corridor's dead end. Elisa sheathed one of the knives and took hold of the handle, glad to find the door unlocked. One of the few things that had gone right on this job. The captain's quarters were not very large, just enough room for a bed against one wall, a table against the other, and a small bathroom. The table was scattered with papers, but Elisa ignored those. Her eyes were instantly drawn to the wooden box ornately adorned with gold hinges. Elisa unhooked the latch and raised the lid, looking down at the prize.

Inside was a severed, shriveled hand with a brownish-green color, a result of the pickling and drying process. The legend said that the hand, cut from a murderer as he still hung from the gallows, could render any lock useless. Whether or not this crew meant to use it themselves or simply procured it for another party didn't really matter to

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the myth hunter, she was only interested in keeping that power out of their grasp.

Elisa closed the lid and took the box.

Asami shifted completely into her fox-form to better contend with her attackers. She moved swiftly across the deck, avoiding the bullets to the best of her ability. Although she looked to be in her twenties, in reality she was over a century old. Asami was a kitsune, supernatural beings known as yokai by the Japanese. In addition to her ability to shift between human and fox forms, Asami also possessed some degree of magical ability, which would grow more powerful as she aged.

She found herself cornered by five Triads and Asami's copper eyes burned like hot coals. The pearl bracelet she wore hummed with a soft glow and she opened her mouth wide. A small spark appeared above her tongue and moved from her mouth, growing into a larger fireball. All of the Triads ran when they saw this display of power, but one remained frozen in place and the fireball quickly engulfed him in flames.

"*Huxian!*" shouted one of them, uttering the Chinese name for the kitsune.

By the time the smoke had cleared, there was no sign of Asami. The captain strode amongst them, holding his pistol up. He walked up to the man who said huxian and slapped him on the back of his head. "It's a trick, you moron! Fan out, find her!" He repeated the command once more in Cantonese. The remaining Triads searched around

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the deck, the captain turning his attention to the door that led to the lower decks. He'd seen Elisa gone down there and wouldn't let her get away with his cargo. Their client planned to pay handsomely for it and he'd be damned if he let some interlopers ruin such a profitable opportunity.

One of the Triads stalked along the side of the ship, his eyes focused forward. A clawed, furry hand reached out from over the rail and grabbed the sleeve of his jacket, pulling him overboard. Asami hung from the edge and shimmed further along just as she heard the splash. She pulled herself up and threw her legs out, locking them around the neck of another Triad and yanked him over the edge as well. Asami flipped up and landed on the deck gracefully, but found herself staring down the barrels of several guns.

“Well, shit.”

Once Elisa emerged from the door onto the upper deck, she felt the barrel of a gun pressed against her head. She groaned in annoyance and held up her arms, one hand holding the box. A glance out of the corner of her eye confirmed it was the captain standing beside her, his finger ready to squeeze the trigger on his pistol. He held out his free hand.

“The box. Give it to me.”

Elisa sighed and passed the box to him. The captain smiled and backed away, still keeping the weapon trained on her. His men escorted Asami over, bringing her beside Elisa.

“Any fireworks?” Elisa asked her partner.

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“Already used that trick, gonna take some time before I can do it again,” said Asami.

“I was a little surprised when my client asked me to procure this item for him,” said the captain. “I thought, why would anyone want some mummified hand? And now you come aboard my ship to steal it from me? Perhaps it’s worth more than he told me.”

“We’re doing you a favor,” said Elisa. “That thing is cursed and the best thing you could do is throw it over the edge.”

The captain laughed. “I think not. And now here we are again, where we were before your attempted escape. But this time, my men are prepared for your tricks. There is no way out of this—”

The sound of a helicopter was heard above. A spotlight shone on the deck of the ship. Everyone gathered looked up to see the helicopter hovering above and moving closer to the deck. The wind it generated threw hats off heads and made it hard to hear the Cantonese shouts of surprise. A few warning shots from above came next, striking the deck.

“We have weapons trained on you,” came a voice over a megaphone from the helicopter. “Release the women and you get out of this alive.”

Someone in the helicopter threw down a rope ladder. The crew looked to the captain, who nodded. Elisa and Asami exchanged confused glances but they weren’t about to throw away their one chance. They quickly scrambled up the ladder and as they climbed, the helicopter started to rise.

“Let them go!” said the captain, shouting over the

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sound of the blades. "At least we still have the hand." He lifted the lid to find the box was completely empty. The captain cursed and shouted back at the helicopter, but it had already departed.