

Fantasyland

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“Jia raised her metal fans and a windstorm of flames erupted around Lord Ren, engulfing the once proud northern invader. He screamed as he died, clawing at the flames that blistered his skin. She did not turn away until the dark lord fell to the ground with a thud. The war was over, and the pyromancers of Kai’an were safe at last.”

-Warrior of Fire by Lianna Chen

As a general rule, main characters possess a great deal of luck. Jia was no exception.

Her luck began with her beauty, milk skin that never blemished and hair that never tangled and black eyes that could enchant the heart of any man. On the battlefield, when her enemies sent thousands of flaming arrows in her direction, she would emerge unscathed. Soldiers who dared to oppose Jia always attacked one at a time and were tripped by suddenly appearing holes or blinded by convenient rays of sunlight. In fact, it was common knowledge that any opponent who had the misfortune of encountering Jia on the field ought to run in the opposite direction. The reason was simple: Jia was Lianna’s main character, and even the most skillful of enemies were no match for the power of a writer’s pen.

Over two years had passed since Lianna Chen had finished Jia’s story for good. The northern invaders were defeated, and the remaining soldiers from Lord Ren’s dark armies rotted away in dungeon cells. Jia now tottered on the tallest roof in the District of Pearls. The sunbaked tiles felt warm beneath her cloth slippers. There was a swift snapping sound as she opened two fans, one balanced in either hand. The sleeves of her black hanfu billowed around her, giving her the appearance of an eager crow. From her vantage point, Jia could survey the city for miles.

Lianna Chen was fascinated by ancient cultures, and the world she’d created reflected that. Anjiang, the capital of Kai’an, was built into the sloped shoulder of a yellow mountain, with a peak that scraped the orange sun. Wood-thatched slums retreated towards the tumbling waters of the Xianhe River, while others disappeared among the red pines of the Weida Forest. The Lotus Palace was built into a cliffside at the highest point in the city and cast a creeping shadow over the lesser dwellings. Few knew the true measure of its size and grandeur, though Jia had dined with Emperor Ming himself on many occasions.

“How do you know Lord Yan is coming this way?” asked Shen, who

crouched beside her. His own fans were tucked neatly into his billowing sleeves, and his lined face was fixed into a permanent frown. He wore his gray hair drawn into a too-tight knot, which gave his face an eternally strained appearance. “There are dozens of paths from the hatchery, he might’ve taken any of them.”

“I can sense it,” said Jia.

“How?” Bo snorted. He was the last of Jia’s rooftop comrades. Nineteen and bulky, his own two fans were dwarfed by the size of his massive fists. There was an impish grin on his broad face, the look of a boy who beckoned trouble.

“Trust me,” said Jia. “And if you can’t trust me, trust Lianna. My writer still guides me.” It was true. She felt drawn to this narrow road, though it wasn’t any different than any other in Lower Anjiang. Peasant women peddled carts of apples and persimmons, a trio of elderly men hauled jars of water from the well on the street corner, and barefooted children ran from door to door trying not to get underfoot. The establishment where they were perched was an old bath house whose patrons were prone to carelessness where clothing was concerned.

Minutes passed while the three pyromancers baked beneath the unwavering sun. Shen remained still. Jia placed one fan between her teeth to free her left hand, which she used to wipe wisps of sweaty hair from her forehead. Bo took out his mobile cell phone and began to text.

“Please tell me why you insist on bringing that accursed artifact everywhere?” grumbled Shen.

“Relax,” said Bo. “I’m just letting my friend know I’ll be a bit late for dinner. He’ll get worried if I don’t call.”

“Our ancestors have used Kai’anese carrier pigeons for generations.” The lines on Shen’s forehead tripled as he spoke. “This generation has no respect for old traditions.”

Bo smacked at the device, and Jia saw the screen had gone dark. “The internet service is so awful here. I bet this never happens in other realms.”

“Other realms are not our concern.” Shen’s eyebrows, which resembled rain clouds, had disappeared into his hair. “Lianna built a beautiful ancient world for us. Shouldn’t we fight to preserve what she created rather than trying to change it?”

Bo shrugged. “We only have to preserve our world if Lianna’s writing a sequel, and *Warrior of Fire*’s been finished for over two years now. Which is a shame, really. I always hoped she’d make me the main character of her next book. No offense, Jia, but you have to admit I do provide a certain comedic appeal. Perhaps I ought to cross the Fourth Wall and sell Lianna on the idea myself.”

“No fictional character has left Fantasyland for years,” said Shen. “Besides, you wouldn’t last five minutes in the Realworld.”

“I’d last longer than you—”

“He is here,” interrupted Jia.

Shen and Bo fell silent. On the dirt path far below, four soldiers marched alongside a horse-drawn carriage. They wore only leather breastplates and shoulderpads over their black hanfus. The red feathers sticking from their caps bounced with each step. They were household guards, Jia guessed, hired to protect a lord who was rich enough to afford them but not important enough to justify a royal escort. No match for three seasoned pyromancers.

“This should be quick,” Shen began. “We have the advantage of surprise. I’ll take care of the two in front. Jia, you aim for the—”

A garish tune erupted from Bo’s cellphone, a modern jingle that sounded out of place among the bustling streets of Lower Anjiang. The people below, peasants and guards alike, all looked up.

“Now!” Jia shrieked.

She sprang down from her perch and crashed down onto the nearest soldier. He crumpled beneath her and groped for his fallen spear. Jia knocked him senseless against the side of the lacquered carriage. The soldier ahead of her unsheathed his sword, but before he could advance, Jia swung her fan in an arc. Orange flames burst from the silk tips and flared outwards. The maneuver merely singed the guard’s silk robes. The young guard’s pimpled face stretched wide as he recognized her, and he was on his knees in an instant.

“Spare me, Lady Jia! Begging your pardon a thousand, thousand times.”

More flames flashed from Bo and Shen’s fans; they made quick work of the remaining guards while Jia pulled the carriage door open. A lord quivered within, stinking of sweat and silk. His watery eyes were stretched wide.

“What are *you* doing here?” he squealed.

“Did you think I wouldn’t find the man who stole from my sister?” Jia demanded. “You’ll need to find another way to pay off your bad debts, Lord Yan. Now tell me where it is.”

Lord Yan’s round face turned a brilliant shade of red, and Jia was reminded of the lanterns that decorated the District of Pearls. As he stood, the top of his balding head brushed the padded ceiling. He lifted his seat to reveal a hidden compartment, where a quaking sound came from within. The bird fluttered its gold-tipped feathers and fixed Jia with two pearly ochre eyes. In their depths, Jia

detected a strange wisdom that surpassed lesser animals.

Shen pulled the disgraced lord from the carriage while Jia lifted the goose out of the carriage. Lord Yan's youngest guard was still apologizing profusely.

"Talk about a wild goose chase," said Bo.

"Comedic appeal," Shen scoffed. "As if!"

Lord Yan's beady eyes were trained on the animal in Jia's arms. "How did you know where to find me? Does the House of Everburning Flames have spies in their employment now? What foul modern devices do you possess?"

Just Lianna's luck, Jia thought.

"Regarding foul modern devices." Shen glared at Bo. "Next time you're on an important stealth mission, I suggest you silence your phone."

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Hours later, Jia brooded over one of many balconies that protruded from the stately manors in the District of Pearls.

"So this is what great heroes do when their stories have ended," said Mei. Jia's sister was a thin woman, with glittering black eyes and a face rounder and paler than a full moon. "I never imagined I'd witness the savior of Kai'an staging an ambush for a goose thief."

Jia withdrew from the balcony and into her room. Flames burned in braziers at every corner, as they did all over Jia's manor. The estate was the ancestral home of a treasonous lord, granted to her by the Emperor himself after Lord Ren's defeat. It was a far cry from the filthy orphanage of her childhood. Halls of vermilion timber posts led to spare bedrooms, libraries filled with dusted scrolls, and luxurious lounges. Jia's bed was so massive that a family of seven could've laid side by side. A steamed bath filled with lotus petals seethed in the corner, guarded by two stone lions. Wooden lattice windows lined each wall, tinted red by the lanterns that glowed in the streets beyond.

"The city watch already knew," said Mei. She was heating up an ancient teapot in a microwave. "They were waiting at Lord Yan's house to arrest him. Your interference was unnecessary, as it is often these days. But you already knew that. You just wanted to take the credit. Song Jia, savior of Kai'an, the guardian of geese. The defender of ducks. You must be very proud."

"You should be thanking me." Jia settled on the sprawling bed. "The eggs

of golden geese are more valuable than any other export in Anjiang, and we both know that a dozen members of the City Watch aren't equal to a fully-trained pyromancer."

"Perhaps." Mei removed the teapot from the microwave, dipped her finger in the water, shook her head, and then placed it back inside. She watched the teapot rotating through the window like a giddy toddler.

"Try not to blow this one up, will you? Putting out fires is much harder than starting them."

"It's not as if we can't afford it," said Mei. "We are fortunate that the foreign realms love our golden eggs."

The microwave wasn't the only modern appliance in the house. Jia still did a double take whenever she saw the washers and dryers in her bathroom, and their stainless steel refrigerator never looked quite right in the traditional kitchen no matter where they moved it. Mei was head of the Royal Hatchery which bred golden geese for the Emperor. The foreign realms of Chicago and Cedarbrooke were always happy to trade modern appliances for rare Kai'anese gold.

Mei lifted the jade teapot and poured two cups. "Admit it, you just like showing off."

Jia placed one hand over her chest. "Me? Never."

"Lianna Chen isn't coming back. She isn't writing another book. Your adventures are over, Jia."

"I don't have your talent for calligraphy or silkweaving or tea making." Jia pulled away her silk hair ribbon, and a curtain of dark hair tumbled to her waist. "Protecting people is the only thing I know how to do."

"Which is precisely why you should join the Council of Heroes."

At once, Jia became fixated on unwinding her braids.

"I know their laws," her sister continued. "You're of age now."

"We've been through this," said Jia, as she dragged a bamboo comb through her scalp. The tresses parted without interruption, as always.

"There are ninety-nine realms in Fantasyland. Haven't you always wanted to see the City of Valor and the Fourth Wall?"

Jia shrugged. "Why should I? I like my life here."

"You just like being special." Mei set a cup of tea beside her. "You like being the only one around here who can do any good. What have you actually done since Lord Ren was defeated?"

“You never know when there could be another invasion.” Jia put the comb aside. “People around here like feeling protected, and I like protecting them. It’s a mutually beneficial relationship.”

Mei stood, and her silver hanfu rippled. A butterfly pin, their mother’s, held her hair in its complex updo. “You’re already a hero, Jia. You don’t have to keep proving it to all of us. But beyond the borders of Kai’an there are at least ninety-eight other main characters in Fantasyland with stories of their own, and most of them are training in the City of Valor. Imagine what you could learn from them! But as I said, you like being special. You like being the only main character around. It makes you feel better about the fact that you have no purpose anymore.”

Jia sipped the tea. “You’ve added too much water, Mei. This batch is bland.”

“I know you, Jia. You only insult me when you know I’m right.”

Her sister swept out of the room. Jia tucked the comb back in her drawers, and rummaged around in the sea of hairpins and undergarments to withdraw a small photograph, which depicted three people. The tallest was Professor Henry Monroe, a cheery man with bright cheeks and a glass monocle tucked near one eye. Two young women flanked him; Ellie Monroe, a straight-backed blonde girl who had inherited her father’s pink cheeks and poor vision, and Lianna Chen. Lianna’s black bangs marched across her pale forehead. Her black eyes kissed in the corners, just like Jia’s.

Jia’s mind wandered to a warm winter morning many months before.

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For a single day the snows had relented and the whirling winds stopped. The Xianhe river thawed and buds burst on every tree, even though spring was months away. The long grass tickled Jia’s legs as she walked with Lianna through the weeping Weida Forest, their stomachs filled with Mei’s delicious tea. Snub-nosed monkeys swung from the defrosted trees, where they called out to each other and pointed at Lianna. Herds of reindeer ran across the paths ahead, their black snouts flaring, their curved ivory antlers and slim heads cocked towards the two women.

“They know who you are,” Jia guessed. “They know you created them.”

“It’s amazing.” Lianna beamed. There was a smattering of freckles across her nose, and strands of her bangs peeked beneath the brim of her hat. “They’re

just as I imagined them in my head. Everything is, especially you.”

Jia felt a warmth spread through her, not unlike the unexpected spring.

“I’m almost done with *Warrior of Fire*,” Lianna continued. “The final draft is due next Friday, and Professor Monroe’s pretty strict about due dates. I’m in the final phase of editing.”

“I see.”

“Some main characters have special requests for their writers,” said Lianna. “I wanted to ask if you had any for me?”

“I destroy Lord Ren’s armies?” Jia asked. “I become the savior of Kai’an?”

“You do,” Lianna vowed.

“Then there is nothing else that I want.”

“Nothing?” Lianna frowned. “Don’t you want to be with Bo?”

“I don’t love him.”

Lianna tucked a flyaway hair behind her ear. “I guess I’m not as good at writing romance as I thought.”

“I didn’t mean to insult you.” Jia shifted her boots, which crunched in the half-melted snow. “Bo’s wonderful, he’s the best friend I’ve ever known. But I don’t want to be with him. I don’t want to be with anyone. Not all stories need to be about love, do they?”

“I guess not,” said Lianna. Her gaze was fixed on two twittering partridges, which hopped on a gray branch above their heads.

They walked a bit further. “So you’ve always wanted to be a writer?” said Jia.

Lianna smiled, and a clump of nearby peonies burst into bloom. “Pretty much. When I was applying to college I tried to convince myself that I was going to be an engineer. For the money, you know? But I barely lasted a semester.”

“Do writers not make a lot of money in the Realworld?”

“Nope.” Lianna’s thin shoulders slumped a little. “I mean sometimes, but it’s super rare. I never would’ve switched majors if I hadn’t met Ellie’s dad. He showed me the portalstone and the way into Fantasyland.”

Jia nodded, astonished that a craft so integral to her own existence could be so undervalued.

“It’s hard keeping Fantasyland a secret,” said Lianna. “But I understand why. If other people at Whiteriver State found out what the portalstone can do,

everything would go to shit. The U.S. government would probably take it and try to make bombs with it or something.” She gazed at Anjiang with all the fondness of a mother seeing her firstborn. The orange sun seemed to gleam a shade brighter. “God, I’m so glad I didn’t go to Purdue.”

“Purdue?”

“It’s another college in Indiana,” Lianna added. “Which is the last state you’d expect to find any magic. But I’m glad my family moved from Cali. Meeting you is the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Will you come back and visit?”

“I promise,” said Lianna. She handed Jia a slip of paper. “This is for you. Professor Monroe takes photos for his class wall and he had a few extras. Just so you have something to remember me by?”

“It’s perfect,” said Jia.

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Jia clung to the photograph and traced the outline of Lianna with her fingers. Why hadn’t Lianna returned? There could be any number of reasons. Perhaps Lianna died in a freak accident. Perhaps she’d quarreled with Professor Monroe, and he wouldn’t let her enter the portalstone anymore. Perhaps she’d abandoned Jia and was writing a new story. The thought of this made hot tears fill Jia’s eyes. What had become of the woman who created her?

“What am I supposed to do without you?” Jia muttered, as she clutched the wrinkled paper to her chest.