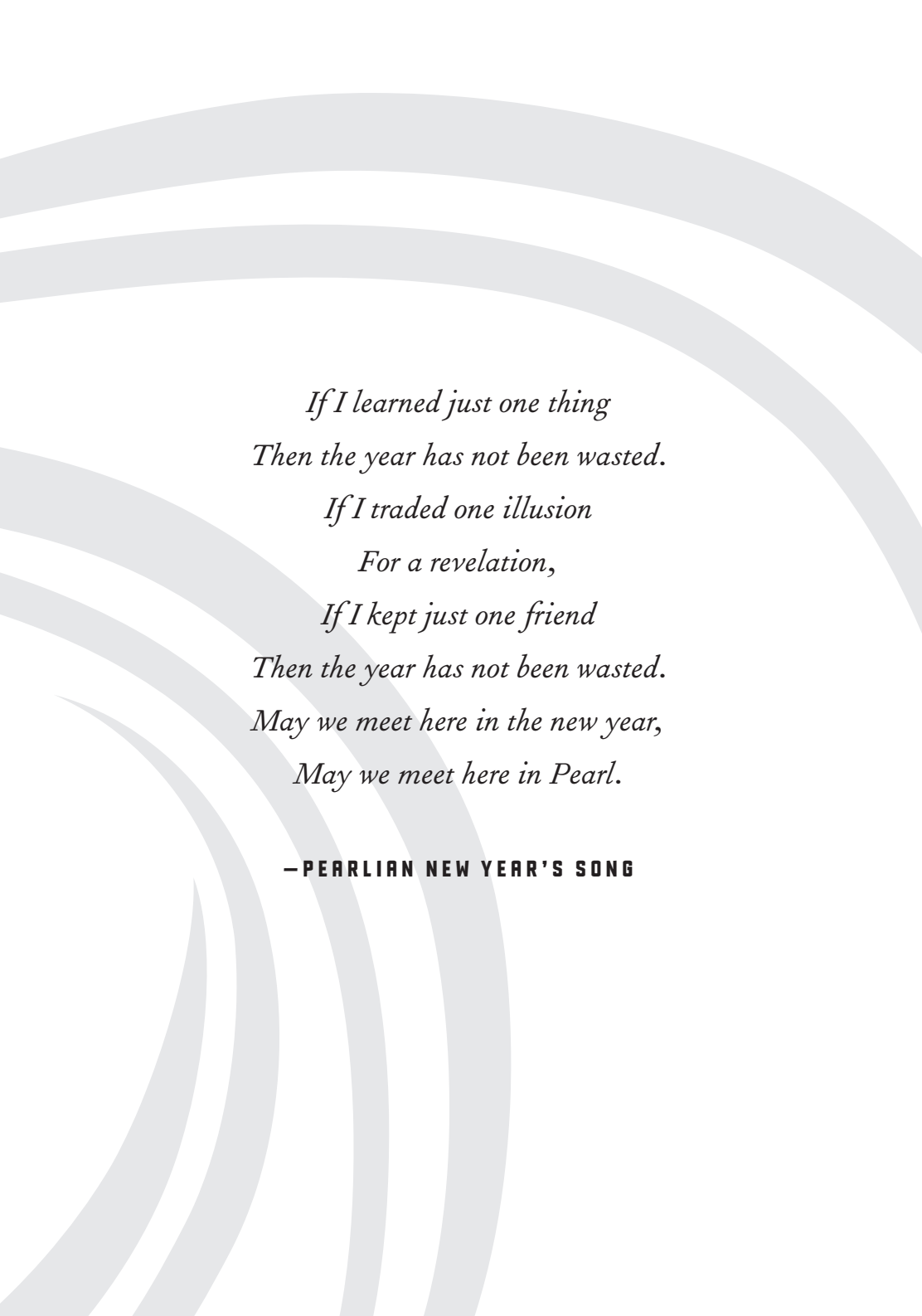


PEASPROUT CHEN

FUTURE LEGEND OF SKATE AND SWORD

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*If I learned just one thing
Then the year has not been wasted.
If I traded one illusion
For a revelation,
If I kept just one friend
Then the year has not been wasted.
May we meet here in the new year,
May we meet here in Pearl.*

-PEARLIAN NEW YEAR'S SONG



CHAPTER ONE

I commit this venture to the imperium of Shin!

I commit this venture to the radiant Empress Dowager!

I commit this venture to . . . well, perhaps I can come back later to complete the eighty-eight honorific hailings. At this moment, it's hard to think of anything except that today, I, Chen Peasprout, sail into the city of Pearl.

The city that looks as if it were made of milky porcelain.

The city that looks as if it were poured, not built.

The city that is always busy with racing, jumping skaters, from the smooth white boulevards to the sweeping white roofs.

I, Chen Peasprout, a girl from the village of Serenity Cliff in Shui Shan Province, of the shining empire of Shin, sail today into this city of legend. As the ship heaves toward Aroma Bay, the city of Pearl appears to rise before us out of the sea like the stage of an opera, all creamy sweeps of roofline and slender pagodas.

Today, I begin my studies at Pearl Famous Academy of Skate and Sword, where I, a girl of just fourteen years, shall become a legend of wu liu, the beautiful and deadly art of martial skating! I shall finish this year with first ranking and win the lead in the Drift Season Pageant! The Empress Dowager would be disgraced if I achieved anything less, for I am the first student from Shin to attend the finest academy under heaven devoted to the only form of kung fu that is performed on bladed skates! A form that was invented by a Shinian, the legendary Little Pi Bao Gu! A form that I—

“Peasprout, what are you doing?” My little brother, Cricket, tugs at the sleeve of my academy robe.

I unclench my fist and uncross my arm from my chest.

“Nothing,” I say. “What is it?”

“I’m going to get last ranking at the academy. I know it.” Cricket twists in his skates like he always does when he’s nervous.

“Let go; you’re creasing my sleeve,” I say.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” He pets the cuff of my silk academy robe as if it were a wounded animal.

In the fables we grew up hearing, princes who flew on dragons to their palaces on the moon wore silk. This is what every student at the academy wears. To Cricket, the academy must be as unreal as a palace on the moon. My little Cricket, with his chin buried in his breast, his hands wringing each other, and his big elbows sticking out, is nothing like me. But he will be. I’ll see to that.

“Cricket, it doesn’t matter how much older or bigger anyone is than you. The Empress Dowager of Shin, the greatest empire

under heaven, selected us as her emissaries in the goodwill exchange of wu liu skaters! No one else at the academy can say that.”

“The Empress Dowager only included me because Pearl also sent two siblings to Shin,” Cricket says. “Do you think the Pearl-ians will take us hostage?”

Ten thousand years of stomach gas. You stamp on one of Cricket’s fears and two more spring up. He tries to take a deep breath but chokes on his saliva.

“Cricket. You have no need to be afraid of this place. None of those little brats at the academy has journeyed three thousand li. None of them has sacrificed what you sacrificed to study wu liu.”

I can’t let him hear my voice shake. If I cry, he cries. I must collect my emotions. Ever since our parents disappeared, Cricket has been my responsibility. I might be an orphan now, but I’m not going to let him be one, too. “All those spoiled Pearl-ian students will reincarnate as fleas and you’ll reincarnate as a hero. Their names will be forgotten. Your name will be long-lived.”

Cricket’s eyes widen and he nods like he’s reminded of some great destiny. “I will reincarnate as a hero. My name will be long-lived.”

As we sail deeper into Aroma Bay, the dazzle of the sun’s reflection off the creamy architecture becomes painful. Cricket and I put on our smoked spectacles bought specially for our arrival. Two weeks’ worth of rice is a lot for a pair of lenses, but it’s hard to see anything in the city without protection for the eyes.

The ship docks at a jetty made of white filigree. Cricket and I shoulder our pouches and I make sure the reed basket of soaps that

we brought as gifts for our teachers is secure. We skate down the disembarking rail with the other passengers.

Everything here is made out of this substance that they call “the pearl.” Even though the whole city is ribboned with waterfalls and fed with canals, the pearl itself is dry and never melts. As I skate, my blades bite into it, but the pearl smooths itself behind me. The sensation is delicious. We have nothing like this back home. In Shin, we have to skate on rinks made of ice preserved in caves until it’s ridged and yellowed like bad toenails, and even then it’s gone by the fourth month of the year at the latest. The inventor of wu liu might have come from Shin, but our country hasn’t advanced conditions for wu liu training in two hundred years.

The wu liu skaters here in Pearl can train all year long. That means that the other first-year students at the academy could have had a total of several years more training than I have had.

So what? I was a Peony-Level Brightstar. Before that, I was wu liu champion for all of Shui Shan Province five times before the age of ten. And the Empress Dowager chose me for this goodwill exchange because Pearl sent the mayor’s sons, Zan Kenji and Zan Aki, the lead skaters of the New Deitsu Opera Company. Who cares if the other students train year-round? They probably spent the extra time on purely ornamental moves, like bowing and hand flourishes. I can do hand flourishes just fine. My hand flourishes are legendary.

“It’s like pools of poured tofu!” says Cricket. He crouches to touch the pearl. He pops his finger into his mouth.

“Cricket!”

He pulls his finger out of his mouth and says, “It’s salty. Maybe the pearl comes from the sea.”

“We’re not here to study architecture or work for the pearl-works company, so it doesn’t matter. Come on, we have to find our way to the rail-gondola towers.” The academy scroll says that the gondolas are the easiest way over the sea to the string of islets on which the academy sits but we have to board them before they stop running at sunset. The sun looks like it’s only an hour from setting.

We have to arrive on time. We can’t disgrace the Empress Dowager.

Cricket and I are blocking the main path of the boardwalk, so we skate off to the side and huddle next to a series of pungent vats that must belong to some sort of stinky vinegar tofu factory.

I notice two boys in official-looking uniforms watching us. Cricket digs his nails into the back of my sleeve and says, “Don’t talk to them.”

“Cricket, how do you think we’re ever going to succeed if we’re afraid even to talk to the people here?”

The boys skate over to us. They’re not much older than I am but they wear uniforms that remind me of the ones that government officials wore back in Shui Shan Province. The logograms on the boys’ sashes are too small to read while they’re moving around. I bow and say, “Hail, brothers.”

“Brothers?” they say together, then laugh.

What is there to laugh at?

“Shinian, neh?” says one, a compact, square-shaped boy. How does he know we’re from Shin? I speak perfect Pearlian. It must be Cricket’s accent. I’ve told him ten thousand times that no one curls their tongue when speaking Pearlian. Make me drink sand to death!

“You’ve come to study wu liu?” the square-shaped boy asks. “Which school?”

“Pearl Famous Academy of Skate and Sword.”

The boys look at us as if for the first time. I know this look in their faces. It’s envy. Well, they should be envious. The square-shaped boy reaches inside his coat and brings out a small clay tablet and a stylus.

“Name,” he says to me.

“I am called familial name Chen, personal name Peasprout,” I answer. “My little brother is called familial name Chen, personal name Cricket.”

“Peasprout, neh,” he says. “*Kawai*.” Is he mocking me, or does he really think that my name is cute? And why is he using an Edaian word like *kawai*? The empire of Shin is no longer at war with the empire of Eda. But that doesn’t mean we’re going to just forget the war.

“Please,” I say. “We have to get to the rail-gondola towers before the sun sets.”

“You’re not going anywhere until we approve your papers.”

I hand him our scrolls confirming acceptance into the academy. “No good,” he says, handing them back to me. “No seal.”

“What seal? Nobody told us we needed to get a seal.”

“No seal, no admittance farther into the city.”

“Where do we get a seal?”

“If you’re Shinian, you have to get the seal from the office of the Minister of Culture for your province.”

“Where might that be?” I ask, trying to keep my voice even. We’re going to miss the last gondola. The academy will turn us away and say that Shinians are too ignorant to tell time.

The boy squints at the setting sun. “If you start swimming now, you might get back in time to see the rest of your class graduate.”

This can’t be. The Empress Dowager would’ve provided us any necessary documents. I knew that Pearlians would be unfair to us. Two hundred years later and they still blame us for the damage caused to their city by the Great Leap of Shin.

“Peasprout, look at their sashes!” Cricket whispers.

The writing on their sashes is so small, but Cricket always did have eyes like an owl. I pick out the words: *Number One Best Quality Auspicious Golden Dragon Discount Wu Liu Academy and Noodle House.*

My heart fills with a thousand throbbing fists.

These boys are only students as well, not officials. They’ve been making us stand here like fools while the sun sets over the gondolas. I want to teach them a lesson, but I know we should just skate away.

“How many Shinian feng shui masters are needed to take care of a tree blocking the front door of a house?” says the square-shaped boy to the slighter boy in a loud voice meant for us. “Eighty-one. One to yell at the tree and eighty to push the house.”

I whip into a combat stance. “Show some respect! I am the emissary of the Empress Dowager!”

“Meaning you’re her spy? What’s in the basket—bombs?”

The boy grabs for the basket. I push Cricket far aside of the combat radius. We didn’t bring these gifts across three thousand li just to have some harbor scamp steal them. I enter into the single-toe butterfly spinning leap, ending with a diagonal toe kick that connects with the boy’s forearm. The force of my kick sends his hand slapping against his own shoulder.

The pearl here is so smooth, so responsive. I stand with my skates biting deep into the surface, my palms crossed in blade position, ready for more combat. I toss the basket of soaps to Cricket. He plucks it from the air and skates far away to keep it safe.

The boys circle out to either side of me and then charge. I launch into a defensive move, the iron parasol spin. I dive onto my fingertips and split my legs above me, my skates rotating in a deadly circle that spins faster and faster. The boys scrape backward from my flashing blades, but they’ve built up too much momentum and now they’re sliding toward me. When they’re about to meet the steel, I pull in my skates, channel the gathered Chi energy of my spin, and use my knees to knock them back.

The boys land on the edge of the vat of stinky tofu. They spiral their arms and peddle their feet wildly to keep from falling into the stew. I leap up, balance my skates on the edge of the vat between them, and grab the fronts of their robes in my fists.

On the horizon, the bottom edge of the sun is nearly touching the water.

“Where are the rail-gondolas to the academy?”

The boys answer only with sneers.

“I’m going to ask each of you where the rail-gondolas are. And you’d better say the same thing, or you’re both going into that vat. Now, whisper it in my ear.”

I bend my ear to the slimmer boy. “You first.”

He says, “It’s to the east, just past the dolphin embassy’s water court.”

I bend my ear to the square-shaped boy. He spits out, “Your ancestors leaked out of rancid turtle eggs, Shinian pig!”

I release the boys, straighten my robe, and perform a double-jump double-knee tornado kick. I send them both flying into the vat of stinky tofu.



CHAPTER TWO

The sun is now half covered by the sea. If those two nasty boys are any indication of how Pearlans treat Shinians, the teachers will probably ship us back home if we arrive late.

I search for the rail-gondola towers from atop the vats. In the far distance, something that could be a water court glimmers in the light. I look for the thin rails stretching across the open sea, but my view is blocked by the plumes of water that spray up from all the canals and pools throughout Pearl. It's the Season of Spouts, after all. I calculate the distance using finger geometry. The towers are thirty li away! It will take us an hour to skate there!

"Peasprout, let's leave the street level so we won't lose sight of the towers."

We skate our way atop a high bridge rail and leap upward. The pearl surface bounces with us as we jump, launching us into the sky up to roof level. The new skates that the Empress Dowager

sent us have filigree blades in the shape of a dragon. The tail curls up and spirals under the heel to serve as a wonderful spring.

The roofs are designed to be skated on. They form another complex of streets above the streets below, like a second city floating above the first one. I'm proud of the fact that a Shinian invented the art of wu liu, but Pearlians have built a whole city made for it.

The sun is now three-quarters covered by the water! However, we can keep the towers in view from up here. The ornamental curves at the edges of the roofs send us lifting into the air. We cross the city, striding left and right, skipping off the structures as if we were leaping from stone to stone in a pond.

At last, we reach the towers. Only a sliver of the sun remains above the water. A group of tourists from the Shin mainland is gathered at the scenic overlook point between the towers.

"Witnessing the sunset in the legendary city of Pearl produces feelings of serenity and quietude!" shouts the touring group's guide through his hollering cone.

There aren't any rail-gondolas at the foot of the towers. A small scroll at the base of one tower informs us that we've missed the last gondola to the academy. I almost panic, until I notice there's still a portion of sun left above the water.

"Customs are different in Pearl. Even their sun sets differently!" shouts the tour guide to his group. "In Pearl, it is sunset when the bottom edge of the sun first touches the edge of the water!"

Ten thousand years of stomach gas. Why didn't I read anything about this in *The Imperial Anthology of the Pearlian Colloquial, Vernacular, and Obscurely Idiomatic?*

The tourists from Shin look at me and whisper to one another. Two girls from the group skate toward me. Their movements are terrible, exactly as you would think Shinians on skates for the first time would look. I don't want to be seen with them. Luckily, there are no Pearlans nearby.

"Everyone, look!" squeaks one of the girls. "It's the Peony-Level Brightstar Chen Peasprout!"

The others in the touring group make their way over, all of them appalling skaters. Some even use snow poles to balance.

The tour guide bows deeply and says, "We're all so proud of you. All hail the Peony-Level Brightstar Chen Peasprout, emissary of the Empress Dowager!"

An old man and woman at the back of the group tuck their heads in and bow shyly when I catch their gaze. They look at each other and unfold two identical fans with my face painted on them. They look like my maternal grandparents.

I can't be ungracious to these people. My people. And we're already late anyway.

I lose a tenth of an hour returning their bows, thanking them as they praise me, and brushing my autograph on their merchandise. I'm just glad that none of them has one of those mortifying paper dolls of me, especially the one with me dressed like a silly assassin or the one with me toppling an entire pagoda with a flying side kick of my skates. When I become a legend of wu liu here, I'm going to use my money to buy every last one of those and burn them.

At last, Cricket and I climb up the steps of the towers and hop on the thin rails atop them leading over the water.

I warn Cricket to skate cautiously, due to the winds and the waterspouts. We work our way across, leading with one skate and pushing with the other. It's an unnerving sensation to be skating over open sea balanced on a slim rail.

At last, the islets of the academy come into view. In the fading light, the campus is profoundly beautiful. There is one central island composed of terraces, great sweeps of plazas, and roofs. It's ringed with smaller islets, all of them connected by rails. Everywhere there are banners fluttering and snapping. Canals atop the structures send water flowing down their sides. The roofs shimmer in the twilight, their edges and spines weaving across the campus in exuberant curls like dragons nested with each other. We reach the landing and leap off the rails.

We pass under a vast arch in the form of milky sea horses meeting snout to snout, garlanded with flowers and carved with the words *The Great Gate of Complete Centrality and Perfect Uprightness*.

"That's the first new structure that Cloud-Tamer Zwei built after the Great Leap of Shin!" cries Cricket.

"Cricket, what did I say? Don't talk about the Great Leap!"

We skate through the gate and up to the entrance of a crystal-line hall with a roof wider than I thought was possible in this world. A prefect stands at the door, clutching a scroll of what I assume are the names of new students. She lifts her arm and flaps her hand at us. "Come, come, come! The Feast of Welcoming is almost done!"

Cricket and I hand her our academy scrolls for inspection. We bow, apologize for our lateness, and beg her not to turn us away. The girl smiles with an Enlightened One's face of kindness and

says, “No troubles. You missed Supreme Sensei Master Jio’s speech. That’s a good thing. Now, in you go before all the hot food and all the cold food swap temperatures! And happy Year of the Dolphin!”

It seems that not all Pearlians are like those boys from the discount academy. I wish we could go to our dormitories first to put away our belongings, but we’re already very late, so we skate in.

The hall is a wide, open structure lined with rows of milky tables and benches, filled with laughing students. Strange, gelatinous lanterns hang everywhere. One wall is covered by a great curtain of silky white.

This is our first chance to meet some of our fellow academy students. We have to make a good impression as the first students from Shin ever to attend the academy.

Heads turn toward us. Girls whisper to one another. Are they laughing at us?

Cricket and I take a little of every dish offered at the central serving table onto our trays. I don’t recognize a single food. No pickled chicken feet or sheep intestines or any of the other comforting home-style foods we have in Shin. And there’s no one to stop us from taking too much. Is food so plentiful here that they don’t have to control portions?

We look for a place to sit, but everyone is packed together, deep in their conversations and private jokes. I feel like I’m skating straight into a cold sea.

No one sits alone except for one girl, at the end of the hall. Her hair is a long black waterfall. On a technical level, I admit she’s

slightly more beautiful than I am. However, she stares at the table in front of her in a very unattractive way as she eats.

The girl lifts her face and meets my gaze. I turn away quickly.

When I glance back, she's still looking at me! Pearlians have no manners. In Shin, we never look people in the eyes, unless they are speaking to you and they are at the same social level.

"Peasprout," says Cricket, tugging on my robe in the way that I hate. "Everyone's almost finished, so let's not bother them. Let's eat at that empty table."

Ten thousand years of stomach gas. As if it were not hard enough to make new friends here without Cricket isolating us at every opportunity. I scan the rows and see two boys sitting at a table by themselves.

I can do this.

I was wu liu champion for all of Shui Shan Province five times before the age of ten.

I was the Peony-Level Brightstar.

I am the emissary of the Empress Dowager.

I skate toward them. I look back to Cricket and urge him to follow, but he only shakes his head.

When I reach the two students, I see they're very handsome. I flash my famous smile, which everyone loves, even if they haven't seen it on the posters and paper dolls. I cast each of them a flirtatious look. Then I notice that the two boys are holding hands across the table. They unclasp hands, bow their heads to me, and politely ask me to join them, as my neck and face flood with embarrassment.

I catch their names as Ong Hong-Gee and Song Matsu. Beyond that, I can barely hear the polite questions they're asking me, between the sound of the blood beating in my ears, the heat on my face, and my attempts to eat more quickly than I've ever eaten in my life. All the strange foods are bland, as if they didn't use any salt, and I can't tell if some of them are sauces or dishes.

The boys, kind souls that they are, ask me please not to rush, as they were just about to get second servings themselves. I protest that I'll be finished shortly, too, but they won't allow it. By the time they come back to me with full plates, I *am* finished. Then it's my turn to sit and watch while they eat food that they don't want to eat.

Thankfully, the torture is interrupted by Supreme Sensei Master Jio, the head of Pearl Famous Academy of Skate and Sword. He skates to a great dais, rubbing his belly like the Enlightened One, and laughing as if hearing the best jokes in his life one after another although no one else is saying anything. "Ahihahaha, sweet little embryos! Now the second- and third-year students shall welcome you to Pearl Famous with a demonstration of Pearlian opera. For as you shall learn when you attain sagehood, the shadow they cast is the you that you shadow."

A student skates out and unfurls a scroll that reads, **FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS: DO NOT ATTEMPT THIS YOURSELVES WITHOUT THE SUPERVISION OF A SENSEI! ALWAYS SKATE RESPONSIBLY!**

The great curtain of white silk covering one side of the hall is drawn aside. We gasp as we see that there is a vast white

stage set behind it built in the image of the whole city of Pearl in miniature.

The older students enter into the cityscape. They sing as they skate, while strumming or pounding or drawing bows across instruments. I know the song. It is “The Pearlian New Year’s Song” sung throughout the month of the New Year’s festivities.

“If I learned just one thing, then the year has not been wasted!” they cry.

They skate faster and faster, and then begin to leap, up and down from the rooftops to street level, flipping from bridge to balcony. The miniature cityscape is alive with a dazzle of figures dressed in ravishing pearlsilk brocades that swirl and flip like petal-fall in a wild wind.

“If I traded one illusion for a revelation,” they sing.

The stage riots with color and motion and the flash of blades. Skaters in scarlet and skaters in black robes spin and fly at each other in one-on-one duels like dark, metallic parasols.

The voices crescendo and I feel a ball of emotion grow inside me as they sing, “If I kept just one friend, then the year has not been wasted!”

The hall quakes with Eidaian *taiko* drumming, over the sound of skates whisking on the pearl like bladed blossoms.

“May we meet here in the New Year!”

Skaters bear down hard toward the curling rooftops to the left and right edges of the stage. They whip into the curves and go hurtling back toward each other with their arms spread like eagle

wings. They fly through the air until their skates clash and shower sparks onto the crowd. With each strike of metal on metal, we roar with joy.

“May we meet here in Pearl!”

With the last note of the song and the last strike of the drums, the skaters stamp their skates, toss their chests out, and punch their fists in the air, like statues of heroes from legend. The hall explodes in applause.

This is all I have ever wanted.

At last, at long last, I am finally where I belong.

And I do belong here. Because Little Pi Bao Gu was Shinian, and she invented this beautiful art form. So no one is going to make me feel that I belong here any less than anyone else.

After the performance, the two boys invite me to come and tour the campus with them sometime. I learn that they’re second-year students. They tell me that you can distinguish by the trim on the front seam of a student’s robes: silver for first-years, gold for second-years, various colors for third-years depending on their conservatory. I burn with embarrassment, because second-year students don’t spend their time with first-years. There are kind people here in Pearl as well.

I look for Cricket, but I can’t see him. He must have skated off to hide in his dormitory chamber with no evenmeal. His hands tremble very badly when he doesn’t eat. Why did I leave him?

As I head toward the boys' dormitory, I see two people sitting inside one of the rail-gondolas stationed at the towers at the academy entrance: Cricket and boy I don't recognize.

The gondola hangs from the rails, bluntly snouted like the lip of a walnut shell and swaying gently. I climb the tower steps to them.

They're eating noodle soup with mushrooms and bright vegetables. The boy who is sitting with Cricket is handsome but smiles too much. Boys who have dimples overuse them.

He smiles. "Ah, Disciple Cricket, we have a guest!" He smiles again. "You must be Disciple Peasprout." Another smile.

I press my hands in a bow and sit on the gondola bench beside Cricket.

"Joyful fortune to make your acquaintance. I am called familial name Niu, personal name Hisashi."

What kind of name is Hisashi? Not Pearlian. Certainly not Shinian. Another Edaian name? Why are the Pearlians so obsessed with Eda?

"Thank you for feeding Cricket," I say.

"You didn't actually eat that stuff they serve in Eastern Heaven Dining Hall, did you?" he asks. He laughs. He has a nice laugh, as if he's remembering something amusing while trying to clear bean jam from the roof of his mouth.

"Why didn't you eat in the dining hall?" I ask.

"I don't like crowds. And everything they serve has meat or other things taken from animals in it. The architecture is magnificent, though."

“Disciple Hisashi said that he thinks I have the hands of an architect!” says Cricket.

What does that matter to him? Cricket has as much focus as a puppy.

“You’re too kind,” I say. “But Cricket is here to study wu liu. We are the skaters sent in the goodwill exchange with Chairman Niu Kazuhiro of New Deitsu Pearlworks Company.”

He tenses when I mention the Chairman of New Deitsu. Why is he acting like— Wait, the familial name. Niu. He must be the Chairman’s son. This boy is the son of the man who controls the company that manufactures and sells most of the pearl in existence. So why is this rich boy from a powerful family out here alone with Cricket?

“Tell me, friends”—Hisashi smiles, breaking the silence—“what has your impression of Pearl been so far?”

This boy’s big eyes have a way of turning into merry little crescent moons when he smiles.

I take time to think. When someone asks a question like that, it’s stupid to answer with something that anyone could say, like “It’s very nice here.” I want to make a startling observation about the culture here, and the experience of a five-time wu liu champion skating on a city made of the pearl. I want to say something he’ll never forget.

“It’s very nice here,” answers Cricket. “Everyone is very friendly.”

Ten thousand years of stomach gas. “Cricket—” I struggle to control my irritation. “That’s not what he’s asking. And not everyone has been so well-mannered in Pearl as Disciple Hisashi.”

“Just Hisashi. Did you meet any trouble?” His concern sounds sincere.

“No trouble I couldn’t handle. But not everyone’s been as polite as you. There was a girl eating alone in the dining hall. With hair like a waterfall. She stared straight at me without turning away.”

Hisashi stiffens.

“Have I said something?” I ask.

“That girl is my twin sister. Doi.”

“My apologies, Hisashi. I didn’t know.”

Heavenly August Personage of Jade. I’ve just met this boy and he was kind to Cricket and me, and I’ve already made him uncomfortable twice by talking about his family.

I steal a glance at him in the awkward silence. I can’t see any resemblance between him and his sister. Before I can stop myself, the words are out of my mouth. “If she’s your sister, why was she eating alone?”

Sometimes I think I should just bite off my own tongue and swallow it.

“She and I . . . avoid each other.”

I’ve upset him. That’s three times now. There’s clearly some secret sadness in their family. I want to let him know that Cricket and I know all about sad family histories. I want to tell him about why our parents disappeared, but I don’t trust my mouth.

After Cricket finishes his noodle soup, we descend from the rail-gondola. Hisashi says, “I hope to see you again soon, and you can tell me all about life in Shin.” He bows and says, “May we meet here in the New Year.”

“May we meet here in Pearl,” I reply, bowing back.

He begins to skate away, but he stops and turns back. He smiles again but this time the smile is deep and sad and wise and happy, all at once. This time, he looks a thousand years older and a thousand times gentler than any boy I have met.

“Yes, my sister, Doi, was sitting alone,” he says. “But most people who do great things in this life know what it is to be alone.”

He turns and skates softly away.



CHAPTER THREE

I don't want to cry during the first day of class, but the ache in my chest is so great that I might. I watch Cricket being led away from me, over to the boys' side at the assembly at Divinity's Lap, the central square on the Principal Island of the academy, before our first day of class. Cricket, with his small build and his bewildered face, thrust among these noisy, confident boys, disappears in the sweeping expanse of this square, under a towering sculpture of the Enlightened One, into a sea of black robes, all jostling sharp shoulders, narrow torsos, long sleeves, scholars' collars, and trim pants. They look as hard as an army of crows. Cricket turns back to look at me as he departs, every stroke of his blades cutting sore little slices on my heart. Fifty first-year boys. Fifty second-year boys. Twenty-five third-year boys. And Cricket is the youngest and smallest one among them.

How is Cricket going to hold up against these huge, rough boys?

He only learned girls' wu liu styles with me. No one taught boys' styles in Shin. I had to teach him what I could read about in books. I can't help but feel like I've failed him. He's so unprepared.

I straighten my robe and pretend to rub at something in my eye under my smoked spectacles. I'm glad that our uniforms are black so that no one can see where I dry my fingers in the pleats of my skirt.

During the assembly, the first-years watch the older students to see when to stand up or kneel down. A couple of evil second-year boys keep pretending to stand up at the wrong point to trick us into standing when we should be kneeling. One student is left standing by himself twice as the whole school giggles. It's Cricket. I'm going to remember those evil older boys' faces in case I ever have an excuse to fight them.

The second- and third-year students separate to go to their classes. We're told that the first-year girls will be taught wu liu by Sensei Madame Liao and the boys by Sensei Master Bao. I'll have to get used to calling my teachers by the Edaian title "sensei" instead of "shifu" like we did in Shin.

In the gathering of first-year girls, I see the girl with the waterfall hair. Hisashi's sister, Doi. I skate over to introduce myself properly and make a fresh start, but before I can speak, another girl cuts me off.

This second girl is not without beauty. But her hair is bobbed short and tucked behind the ear on one side, swinging loose on the other. This must be the fashion here, since she's followed by an entourage of other girls with identical haircuts. Why doesn't

anyone besides me wear braids? This bobbed-hair girl says to Doi, “Nice hair. It looks like pearlsilk.”

Her followers giggle behind their hands. One of them says, “Ask her how much she paid for it, Suki!”

“Don’t think that we owe each other anything,” Suki continues. “What happened at Pearl Rehabilitative Colony for Ungrateful Daughters meant nothing.”

Pearl Rehabilitative what?

The girls go silent as Sensei Madame Liao skates to the front of our gathering. She has the sharp cheekbones that indicate a hunger for power. I can tell she’s a cold woman. “Worthless, ungrateful daughters of Pearl—” She notices me and quickly adds, “And worthless, ungrateful daughter of Shin.

“The wu liu regimen here at Pearl Famous incorporates rigorous daily training; grueling Motivations; deprivation of food, shelter, and sleep; and whatever else it takes to achieve excellence. The effectiveness of our institution’s curriculum is directly proportional to the misery of the student. That is why Pearl Famous is *number one* in helping each student attain the greatest joy possible in life, which is to bring honor to her esteemed parents.”

She’s just trying to frighten us. She doesn’t know me. I don’t know what sort of training these rich students in Pearl got, but I’m not afraid of hard work. I’m not afraid of disappointing my parents. I don’t even know where they are. The only thing I’m afraid of is not winning. Let’s get on with this.

“We will test just how completely without qualities you are. You will be examined in wu liu this year through six Motivations.

Today will be the first, Veneration of the Three Aunties. Three beacons have been lit on three different islets. It's not easy to see the beacons. It's even less easy to get to them. Touch the beacon on the Conservatory of Wu Liu, then the Conservatory of Literature, then the Conservatory of Music. You must not, for any reason, attempt to enter the Conservatory of Architecture.

"You will encounter water on this route, so you will need to step in the pit of tuber root starch powder to keep your socks from slipping.

"The girl who reaches all three beacons in the correct order and comes back first will receive top ranking.

"Any girl who fails to touch all three beacons or who falls off the rail will fail the Motivation."

So here it begins. All the years of training. They were all leading to this.

The chance to prove that I'm the best, that the Empress Dowager was right to choose me, that wu liu belongs to Shin.

I will place first.

I will make Pearl Famous Academy of Skate and Sword history.

I will be a legend.

Sensei Madame Liao turns from us, sits on a small stool, pulls a little scroll from her sleeve, and begins to read.

I assume that the race has started.

None of us is quite sure how to begin. Then one girl, with a friendly round face and a mole on one side of her chin, grins and begins taking off her skates to powder her socks.

The other girls see this and everyone else starts to take off their

skates to step into the pit. These socks they gave us are terrible for skating, as loose and droopy as elephants' ankles. Why are girls made to wear inane, impractical, performance-hindering, accident-inviting things? For the sake of cuteness? Why don't boys have to wear them? At least we get to wear skirts, which we don't have to worry about tearing when doing splits, like boys' pants.

Doi looks at the pit, then looks at Suki and her entourage. None of them is taking off her skates to step into the pit of powder.

Instinct tells me that these are powerful girls, and if the powerful girls don't want to step into the pit, it's because they know something. I keep my skates on.

Suki hops on one of the rails connecting the Principal Island to the smaller islets, with her followers close behind. Doi watches them skate away. She leaps onto the rail after them. All the other girls put on their skates and follow.

We glide on the rail toward the islet where the Conservatory of Wu Liu sits. I look for a beacon as we speed along the rail over the open sea, but there are so many structures covered with pearlplate roofs that their rows seem like meandering, elbowed moon dragons. I'm grateful for my smoked spectacles for the whole of the white academy blooms with glare.

Behind us, I see several girls stopped on the route. What is happening? Some of them are taking off their skates and banging them.

We skate on the rail curling around the Conservatory of Wu Liu. Fields of older students train below. Some are doing exercises in lines. Some are practicing weapons combat with staffs and dual katanas.

I flip off the rail onto the spine of one dragonlike structure and ride its undulations. I think I see a brightness that could be a beacon in the coils of its tail but it's only a tower studded with little lounges and sitting rooms. What does the beacon look like?

A glimmer on the edge of the islet catches my attention. It's difficult to see in the full daylight but the wind sweeps a spray of seawater in front of it, refracting it into a flash of wild colors.

The light issues from a pagoda topped by a mirrored bowl that has a blaze of torches in it. The beacon! How do I get up there? The structure is three stories tall. Sprays of seawater keep blowing at me.

I see how to reach the beacon! The hall next to the pagoda has a roof that sweeps up like a pumpkin vine. I can skate off that roof and leap up toward the tower next to the pagoda. I can kick against its side with a single-footed grasshopper move so that I spring back at a sharp angle, followed immediately by a hammer throw spin in midair. I'll come slinging toward the pagoda and land directly on the platform with the beacon. I have to be careful not to overshoot or I'll go sliding off into the sea.

As I prepare to execute these moves, two figures skate past me and do exactly what I planned. Suki and Doi. Ten thousand years of stomach gas!

I execute the moves. They work just as I thought. It feels wonderful to finally be doing these moves on actual buildings, after doing them for so many years on just a training court. This is how it felt in my dreams.

I tag the beacon with my hand. The pearl forming the mirrored

bowl is surprisingly cool. I look around for the next destination, the Conservatory of Literature.

The beacon there is easier to find because the conservatory is made of enormous sheets of the pearl formed into scrolls, unfurling out of the sea. Below the rails, students sit at desks in neat rows, working on the scripts of operas in open air. They look up and begin to applaud as the first-years pass over them. It's a joyful thing to be applauded by students of so legendary a school.

Ahead, Suki and Doi skate hard toward a curling sheet of the pearl. It sends them flying back toward the beacon. They execute a string of three backflips in the air, scissoring and snapping their legs closed at the end of each flip to sling themselves farther. I'll have to try that.

The backflips send them whipping up toward the pedestal on which the beacon sits. They each reach out a hand and tag the beacon. They grab the pedestal below the beacon with one hand and use the remaining momentum to whip around the pole twice. They sling toward the rail leading past the Conservatory of Architecture. I'm not far behind them. I tag the beacon and follow them onto the rail.

Ahead of me, Doi skates just an arm's length behind Suki. Suki turns around and takes an illegal swipe at her with one skate. What a vicious little snake.

Doi easily ducks Suki's skate. She even adds the insult of flicking her finger against Suki's blade as she dodges under it, as if she were testing the quality of a porcelain cup in a half-reputable shop. This has become personal.

I skate behind Doi and Suki on the rail that passes by the Conservatory of Architecture, where students design the strange and wild opera sets that the wu liu performers skate across. There's only one straight, ominous rail that leads to this conservatory. It passes through a little door in a high wall of the pearl rising out of the water, encircling the whole islet and blocking the operations within entirely from view.

As our path swings past it, I see that the wall is covered in adornments. There are fins, horns, paws, claws, tails, levers, prows, and masts erupting from the surface. Flowers and vines are carved everywhere. What do they do behind that wall?

Ahead on the rail, it's all-out war between the two leaders. Now Doi is in the lead, elbowing Suki aside. Now Suki does the seven-fingered somersault egret move and lands ahead of Doi. These girls are not without skill. Of course. They train here year-round. But I've trained harder.

As we skate down the rail to the islet of the Conservatory of Music, I hear humming and ringing. The halls of the conservatory are grafted with wind flutes. Trumpets that end in spread-mouthed blossoms streak up the sides of towers.

A troupe of drummers skates in single file along the perimeter of the islet, racing up and down the gentle hills that form the breakwaters, each drummer beating at the drum slung on the back of the person in front of her.

Singing breaks out. We look into the glassy pearl trees sprouting from the sides of the breakwaters. They're filled with boy

choristers. They turn to watch us midsong, smile and wave, and make their song into a serenade for us.

We speed over the principal orchestra platform where spoon-fiddle virtuosos turn up their faces at the combat that's playing out above. Their conductress barks at them not to drop the tempo. The fiddlers saw harder at their instruments, and the frenzied melodies seem to give our skates wings.

I have to say, this is fun.

Doi and Suki each strike the last beacon with flawless round-house kicks. They jump onto parallel rails leading back to the finish line at the Principal Island, skating side by side. Each knows the other's moves well enough to perfectly dodge or block them. It's clear from the emotion in their wu liu that they've not only fought each other before, they're continuing unfinished business.

I slap the beacon and bear down hard toward them. If I keep this up, I'll finish third. I didn't come here to finish third.

As we ride the rails from the Conservatory of Music down to the Principal Island of the academy, we cross a great expanse of open sea. Here, the Season of Spouts makes itself most felt. All around us, we're misted with warm, gentle rain, but it's not rain, since it's falling upward.

The rails ahead of us end. The Principal Island lies before me, across a stretch of open sea too wide to jump across. How are we supposed to cross that? I slow so that I don't go shooting off into the sea before I solve the puzzle.

Doi and Suki are still too busy with combat to notice. When

they finally see the gap, they hop and skid sideways to make a sharp stop, right in front of me. The only thing I can do to keep from crashing into them is to plant a two-heeled sesame-seed pestle jump so that my skates pound down together on the rail below me and the dragon tails curled under my heels bounce me up and send me flipping over the girls' heads.

The next moments seem to pass so slowly, as if it takes days. I hang suspended in the air, skates above me, my braids swinging an arc under my head, the surprised faces of the girls watching me. I land and look behind me to see them clutching each other's collars, mouths melting open at the realization that they're not the only two in this race. In the distance, I see the banners that mark the finish line on the Principal Island. There's only a short stretch of rail ahead of me, and I know I won't be able to stop in time.

Three waterspouts grind slowly in the water in front of me, spewing water and fish toward the sky. Dolphins leap into the columns of wind and water, rise up, and go shooting out of the tops through the air.

I understand the solution to Sensei Madame Liao's puzzle. I end my slide with a single-footed forward flip, flinging myself off the edge and into a waterspout. The spout spins me higher and higher. I focus my mind and loosen all my muscles except my back muscles to center my Chi and make my body as sleek as a dolphin's. Like the dolphins, I go shooting out of the top of the spout.

I land in a crouch on the Principal Island so heavily that it bruises the pearl in a disk around me. I make sure to finish right in front of Sensei Madame Liao, in a one-footed landing, head thrown

back, both arms fanning out behind me like a swan spreading its wings. Never let them say that Shinians have no style.

Suki and Doi land behind me. I don't know which one came in second and which in third. I don't care. Because I've finished first at our first Motivation at Pearl Famous Academy of Skate and Sword. I, Chen Peasprout from Serenity Cliff. I've only just arrived here and I've already started my rise to become a legend of wu liu.

Bring on the rest of the days. It's going to be a lucky year!