

Paper Dragons:
Fight for the Hidden Realm

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麥舒雲



HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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For Blathnaid.

Who patiently sat through, and improved,
every version of Zhi Ging's story.

PROLOGUE

The figure paused and glanced again at the instructions scrawled across his palm, marvelling at how small it looked now that his talons were gone. Apart from a pair of moths fluttering around the threadbare lantern, the street was deserted. He shifted the basket to his elbow and his pale skin rippled, stretching to wrap his body in a heavy black cloak. A low hood dropped over his face before he slid the screen door open.

The village healer stood from her position by the hearth, a wizened hand pressed against the wall for support.

‘Well, come in then. Or were you waiting for the moonlight to take the first step?’ She chuckled, gesturing towards the table.

The man placed the basket on its scuffed surface while the healer ambled over with two cups, then pushed one towards him. He lifted the amber liquid to his nose, breathing in its heady jasmine scent, then lowered the cup back down, untouched.

She raised an eyebrow before sipping her own tea.

‘That’s fine, no need to drink it. But do I at least get a name?’

I assume you already know mine's Aapau, and it only seems fair to trade.'

The figure shifted uncomfortably then shook his head, tapping the basket.

'Suit yourself.'

Aapau turned away, her hands focused on untangling a thin copper wire from the braid wrapped around her head. She twirled it between her fingers then slid the wire into a thin crack in the side of the table. A wooden panel sprang open and the healer lifted out a rectangular bundle wrapped in faded strips of silk. She unravelled the cloth to reveal a book made entirely of glass.

Aapau caught the man's eyes, her own sparkling as firelight glinted against the pages.

'Fei Chui is a village of Glassmiths. It took generations for us to learn how to harness dragons' lightning and turn sand into glass.' She snapped a blank page out from the end of the book and leant forward, her expression suddenly serious. 'Before we start, I need to know you understand what you're risking. Once it's in the book, that's it. There's no way to break the contract. Are you sure you want to go ahead?'

He paused, glanced across at the basket and breathed a silent *yes*. Before the word even had a chance to form, Aapau launched herself forward, snatching the air in front of him and then slamming it hard against the thin sheet of glass.

The man's eyes shot down, but instead of having broken into shards, the glass now had a smooth indent, roughly the size of

a coin. Aapau snorted at his shocked expression before patting him reassuringly on the arm.

‘Sorry about that. I didn’t want to risk the agreement escaping and diffusing across the room. We couldn’t have continued without it.’

He gaped at her, wondering if she really was as old and frail as she seemed. Aapau peered at him out of the corner of her eye, as if reading his thoughts.

‘Oh, I’m definitely as decrepit as I look. Age has just made me exceptionally good at what I do.’

She held up the page and inspected it closely.

‘Good to see you meant that “yes” too – a lie would have shattered the glass. I’ve wasted far too many pages on half-truths. Glass doesn’t forget,’ she continued. ‘It keeps a record of what’s owed. If a year passes without payment, your page will start to flush red. At the same time, your hand will begin to prickle. That heat will keep rising until the payment is settled. Now, would you prefer to pay annually or . . .’ Aapau trailed off as the figure dropped a heavy pouch on to the table. In the flickering light, it looked like it was filled with hundreds of gleaming, metallic fireflies. Aapau plucked out one of the coins, the soft gold warming between her fingers.

‘Wah, impressive! This is more than enough to cover a lifetime.’

She bent down and lowered the page into the hearth’s smouldering embers. Golden flames roared up, encasing her hand and the glass in a crackling sphere. A warm yellow glow

bloomed from the centre of the glass. Just before it reached her fingertips, Aapau pulled the page out and the fire vanished back into the coals. She snatched up the copper ribbon and scrawled on the molten glass, words gliding across the shimmering surface. Aapau looked up, and her eyes darted around the room.

'Why are you suddenly skulking in the corner? You're needed for this part!'

The man inched forward, never taking his eyes off the embers. Aapau grabbed his left hand and pressed his thumb firmly into the glass indent. There was a faint hiss as his skin touched the surface. Once Aapau let go, he slipped his hand back into his cloak pocket. She peered at him and tutted.

'Aiyah, you're as white as a sheet – not that you had much colour to start with. Make sure to drink that tea before you leave, it always helps. And don't worry about your thumb, it'll heal soon enough,' Aapau continued cheerfully. She pressed the page into the book, expertly fusing it against the glass spine. Once the copper wire had been twisted back into her braid, she lifted the basket's blankets.

The baby was smaller than Aapau had expected, large brown eyes filling her face. Like everyone else in Fei Chui, she had thick black hair and warm sandy skin. Peering closer, Aapau realised the girl's eyes weren't just a deep shade of brown. They were the iridescent black of a starling's feather. The baby gurgled, chewing on a crumpled scrap of paper. Aapau eased it out of her hand but the message had already run, purple ink seeping across the note's surface.

'What was on this? Does she already have a name?' Aapau demanded, waving the sodden note under the man's hood. He blinked sheepishly, then shrugged, unsure.

Aapau shook her head in exasperation then lifted the baby up, dabbing at the stains around her mouth.

'You'll be a Yeung, of course. All babies brought to us from beneath the cloud sea are given that surname. Hmm, how about Zhi Ging? You don't hear that name much any more, but I've always liked it.' Aapau smiled down at her. 'I can already tell you'll bring it back.'

Zhi Ging wriggled cheerfully in Aapau's arms while the healer turned back towards the hooded figure.

'Is there anything you can tell me? They always ask questions when they're older. At least tell me which of the six provinces she's from.'

He shook his head and backed awkwardly towards the door.

'Go on then. There's no more need for you now anyway.'

The figure nodded and slipped out the door without even a goodbye wave to Zhi Ging.

'What a strange man,' Aapau murmured. 'Silly thing didn't even drink his tea in the end.'

Her hand stopped just before it closed around his untouched cup. The tea leaves swirled wildly, soaring and colliding beneath the surface. Aapau spun around and hurried out on to the street, but he had already vanished.

It was only when he reached the cliff bordering Fei Chui

that the man eased his hand out of his pocket. The thumb Aapau had pressed into the glass had disappeared, long since crumbling to ash. He watched the smouldering line creep across his hand, transforming everything it touched to delicate wisps that floated away in the breeze.

The hypnotic glow flickered over the purple instructions on his palm and he smiled. He'd carried out his purpose; there really was no need for him now.

Within seconds, the dawn sky began to glimmer through his cloak. The air filled with the crackle of burning paper and what was left of the man fragmented into a thousand pieces. Through the flurry, there was a glimpse of scales and the paper dragon's shadow stretched thin across the clouds as he swept back towards the horizon.

CHAPTER 1

Zhi Ging scowled up at the glass dragon blocking her way. *Since when does the Lead Glassmith lock his office door? Why is he making it so difficult to break in?*

The glass door had been designed to look like a coiling dragon and its body curled from ceiling to floor in a protective circle, its head snarling out at her from the centre.

Zhi Ging flicked its snout in frustration, and a hollow chime echoed across the Glassmiths' workshop. The dragon's long whiskers jangled together, and she flung her arms around them to muffle the sound. Curled glass pressed uncomfortably against her sleeves, but Zhi Ging couldn't risk moving until the noise stopped. The last thing she needed was a curious Glassmith catching her before she had a chance to find the letter.

The pre-dawn haze was doing little to help, filtering down the corridor like a spotlight on her break-in attempt. She groaned and ran a hand along the dragon's overlapping scales. Any one of them could be the switch needed to unlock the door.

Fei Chui, the village Zhi Ging had grown up in, was set to announce its new Silhouette at noon, but she couldn't wait until then. Not when she knew Iridill would be watching, ready to pounce if her name wasn't called. Visions of the Lead Glassmith's sneering daughter flashed across Zhi Ging's mind and she shuddered. No, she wouldn't give Iridill the satisfaction. If she found out now that she hadn't been chosen, she could at least hide her disappointment later.

Zhi Ging frowned and shut her eyes, head pressed against the glass in concentration. The dragon's carved face was ice cold beneath her forehead, and she grimaced. Training as a Silhouette was her only chance to escape Fei Chui. If someone else was picked, the Lead Glassmith would force her to spend the rest of her life trapped inside glass much colder than this. Now that Aapau was gone no one would stop him from sending her into the post pipe, her chances of drowning creeping up with each minute she spent squeezed inside that narrow, water-filled space.

Zhi Ging straightened up and winced when she opened her eyes. A large smudge had appeared on the dragon's polished glass, marking the exact spot where her forehead had rested on its surface. *So much for a stealth break in!* The Lead Glassmith might not care about her, but he would definitely notice if there was anything different about his precious door. She tugged her sleeve over her palm, ready to wipe the smudge away, and froze. *If pressing my forehead against the glass left a mark, maybe . . .*

Zhi Ging took a deep, steadying breath and exhaled gently

over the dragon's glass face. Her eyes darted between the soft pale clouds that bloomed across its surface.

There!

Faint fingerprints had appeared on one of the dragon's spiralling whiskers, revealing how the Lead Glassmith entered his office each morning.

'And you thought you could keep me out.' She beamed, pulling the whisker down. The dragon jolted to life and scales chimed against one another as it uncoiled around the door frame. The faint clicks of whirling glass cogs rippled along the length of the dragon and its long body stretched tight against the corridor wall.

Zhi Ging slipped inside. There was a faint rumble behind her and the dragon curled back into its protective circle, plunging the office into an eerie gloom.

Centuries earlier, another Lead Glassmith had stumbled across a shed dragon skin and draped it around the ceiling beams. Over time, the scales had dried and faded to a milky opal until you could almost mistake them for fused shards of glass. But no glass would make a Glassmith's hair blaze with crackling white light. Only dragon scales could do that.

For Zhi Ging though, there wasn't even a hint of static along her braid. She puffed out her cheeks and tried to squash down the all-too-familiar pang of frustration. Why was she the only person in Fei Chui whose hair didn't glow near dragons or dragon scales?

The muffled sound of footsteps bustling past the door jolted her back to her mission. Zhi Ging hurried across the sand-covered

floor, wincing in pain when her foot hit the Lead Glassmith's desk. Letters fluttered to the ground and she scrambled after them, peering closely at each one before tossing it aside. Every faint sound on the other side of the door added to the nerves already bubbling in her stomach.

She yelped in excitement when she finally spotted an ornate envelope flecked with gold. Heart pounding, Zhi Ging pulled a glass hairpin out from the top of her braid. Her shoulders hunched in concentration while she eased the slim edge under the seal, tensed for the sound of wax snapping in half. Time slowed as the glass pushed forward and there was a faint pop when the seal came loose in a single piece. Zhi Ging hugged the hairpin tight between her hands before sliding it back into her braid. It might not have been what Aapau intended when she'd gifted it, but Zhi Ging couldn't help feeling her old guardian would have been proud.

Despite the darkness, the letter seemed to glow, a narrow triangle of white shimmering up from the opened envelope. She wiped her hand against her loose green trousers, suddenly worried her fingers would mark the spotless paper. Whoever was picked as Silhouette would spend the next year training in Hok Woh, the Cyo B'Ahon's hidden realm, learning the skills needed to become immortal. If she passed her Silhouette year, not even the Lead Glassmith could force her back to Fei Chui and into the post pipe. Zhi Ging's eyes skimmed across the handwriting, both dreading and desperate to reach the chosen name.

The letter fell from her hands.

Behind her, the glass door chimed again and the room filled with a soft pearly light. The Lead Glassmith stepped inside, followed closely by a second man, but Zhi Ging barely noticed them. Her eyes were glued to the letter that now lay on the ground.

In the newly lit room, the name on the paper was impossible to miss. Nothing existed apart from that name. The person chosen as Silhouette, promised a chance at immortality, blazed up from the white page:

Iridill

CHAPTER 2

‘Miss Yeung! What do you think you’re doing?’ The Lead Glassmith snatched the letter from the floor, brushing specks of dust from its surface.

Zhi Ging glanced past him in a daze and spotted Reishi, the Silhouette Scout, looking at her with concern. He was in the same official yellow robes he’d worn a week earlier on the day of her exam and the long-necked crane embroidered across his chest seemed to stare accusingly at her. Zhi Ging looked away, still unused to seeing him look so formal. She had to force herself to remember that he was the same Reishi who had, on multiple visits, knocked entire bowls of congee over himself in his enthusiasm to tell Aapau about his latest discovery. *He looks much less intimidating when his knees are poking out through Aapau’s spare robe.*

‘Well, explain yourself. You better have a very good reason to be standing in my office,’ the Lead Glassmith snapped. ‘The upper levels of the jade mountain are sacred and reserved for

Glassmiths. Aapau may have raised you but that doesn't mean you have the same privileges as the village healer.'

'I know, I only wanted to find out if I'd—' Zhi Ging's eyes flickered towards the letter and she bit her tongue.

The Lead Glassmith followed her gaze and snorted.

'I should have guessed.' He lowered his voice to a snide whisper. 'Honestly, just because Aapau was old friends with Reishi, did you really think *you* would be chosen as Fei Chui's Silhouette?'

Angry tears threatened to blur Zhi Ging's vision, but she held his gaze.

'Why not? I studied as hard as Iridell, she—'

'Is everything all right?' Reishi strode forward, frowning as he stepped between Zhi Ging and the Lead Glassmith. The two silk pouches that hung from his belt swished from side to side as he moved, the rustling sound reminding Zhi Ging of a bird's wings in flight.

The Lead Glassmith sprang back and ran a distracted hand through his wispy beard, sending sparks flying between his fingers. Not for the first time, Zhi Ging couldn't help but imagine a glowing dandelion attacking the lower half of his face.

'Absolutely fine. I do apologise for this *unexpected* interruption to our search. I assure you your jade stone will—'

'Please,' Zhi Ging blurted out. She looked desperately at Reishi. 'I want – I *need* to be picked as Silhouette so much more than Iridill. More than anyone in Fei Chui. Now that the Lead Glassmith's sent Aapau away for her Final Year, they're going to

get rid of me too. He said I can't stay in her house by myself, but none of the Glassmiths will take me on as an apprentice, not when my hair doesn't glow. Aapau made him promise I'd be all right after she left, but he lied! They're going to send me in to the post pipe, even though the last two post pipe scrubbers drowned in their first month.'

'Utter nonsense! The child is simply upset she hasn't been chosen,' the Lead Glassmith said, the glass beads that covered his robes jangling loudly as he waved away her claims. Reishi held up a hand and bent down until he was eye to eye with Zhi Ging.

'I'm sorry, Zhi Ging. Truly. I know from Aapau just how hard you studied, but there's nothing I can do once the final name has been chosen. Scouts have strict, thousand-year-old rules on Silhouette selection, and we can only invite one candidate from each town or village.' He paused, trying to find a way to soften the blow. 'Perhaps you could take the entrance exam again next year? I probably shouldn't say this, but if you hadn't run out of time for that final question, my Silhouette choice would have been much more difficult.'

Zhi Ging sniffed and smiled weakly while the Lead Glassmith glared at her over Reishi's shoulder. *Will I even make it to next year once I'm in the post pipe?*

Reishi straightened up and turned to face the Lead Glassmith, who quickly hid his scowl behind an unctuous smile.

'I hope you don't plan on punishing Zhi Ging for her enthusiasm. In fact, I'm pleased to see the chance to be trained by Cyo B'Ahon like myself still holds this much excitement in Fei

Chui. It's refreshing. Now,' he continued, a commanding tone sliding into his voice, 'it's about time we met with the Glassmiths searching for my missing jade. It would be *such* a disappointment if I had to return to Hok Woh in the morning without it.'

The Lead Glassmith paled.

'They're gathered by the lower terraces now,' he croaked. 'We'll find it ahead of your farewell feast. I guarantee tonight's celebrations won't begin until we do.' The Lead Glassmith hurried towards the door and pressed against a glass scale, tapping his foot impatiently while the dragon unfurled. Reishi followed after him but paused at the entrance. He turned back to face Zhi Ging, the embroidered bird shimmering on his robe.

'I'll be back next year. I promise.'

Zhi Ging was trudging back along the corridor when she spotted the figure smirking at her from the courtyard.

Iridill.

The girl's smile widened at Zhi Ging's swollen, red eyes and she strode forward, the colourful glass beads stitched across her clothes glinting in the light. Not for the first time, Zhi Ging felt a sharp twinge of jealousy. Her own robe had only a single clouded bead, gifted to her by Aapau on the healer's final day in Fei Chui.

'Well, NoGlow, aren't you going to congratulate me?' Iridill held a paper lantern in her hands, its surface covered in scrawling calligraphy. The unmistakable outline of her silhouette had been cut into one side and she spun the lantern around to admire it.

‘Once Reishi lights this for me at noon, I’m leaving for Hok Woh. Maybe I’ll visit you once I’ve graduated from Silhouette to full immortal Cyo B’Ahon.’ Iridill’s eyebrows knitted together in mock concern. ‘Although, you probably won’t have much space to wave back from inside the post pipe. Those glass pipes get incredibly narrow, don’t they?’

Zhi Ging’s hands clenched into fists. Her nails pressed down, leaving angry half-moons across her palm while she forced back the insults raring to hurl themselves at Iridill. *It isn’t worth it.*

Iridill glanced down at Zhi Ging’s hands and smirked.

‘Are you actually surprised you weren’t picked? No one even wants you here in Fei Chui, NoGlow. So why would anyone want you in Hok Woh?’

Zhi Ging stepped forward, despite barely coming up to Iridill’s shoulders.

‘Just because your hair glows and mine doesn’t, how does that make me any different to anyone living beneath the cloud sea. Even your brother—’

Iridill’s mouth twisted into a furious snarl. ‘Don’t you *dare* compare yourself to him,’ she hissed, cutting Zhi Ging off. ‘If you don’t drown in the post pipe, I hope the Fui Gwai gets you.’ She leant forward, pleased to see the sudden fear in Zhi Ging’s eyes. ‘I heard the spirit has started preying on villages right beneath the cloud sea, turning even more people into mindless thralls. Once you’re trapped in the post pipe, you’ll be its easiest possession ever.’

‘What’s going on here?’

The two girls spun around to see a senior Glassmith marching towards them.

‘Murrine!’ Iridill trilled, her bottom lip suddenly shaking in fake terror. ‘NoGl— Zhi Ging was threatening to summon the Fui Gwai to curse all Glassmiths. She’s so jealous I was picked as Silhouette that she wants to punish the entire village!’

Zhi Ging drew in a sharp breath, stunned by the viciousness of Iridill’s latest lie. Although Aapau had tried to shield her from the stories, whispers had spread between the Glassmiths of a prowling spirit, known only as the Fui Gwai, attacking villagers right across the glass province. While the spirit’s existence was officially no more than a rumour, this was worse than if Iridill had accused her of plotting to burn down Fei Chui.

Zhi Ging opened her mouth to argue as Iridill sidled past the Glassmith, but one look at Murrine’s pinched expression forced her to grit her teeth together in silence. She knew from bitter experience that no one in Fei Chui would ever believe her over the Lead Glassmith’s daughter.

‘Young lady, the Fui Gwai is no joke,’ Murrine barked. ‘Spirit summoning of any kind is forbidden in our province. Even *threats* of summoning must be reported to the Lead Glassmith. Come with me.’

A flustered Glassmith came racing across the courtyard, his shoes sending sand flying around him.

‘Murrine, didn’t you get my message? All senior Glassmiths

have been summoned to scour the glass terraces for Reishi's missing jade.'

'How are we meant to find the right stone when our entire mountain's made from jade?' Murrine grumbled, Zhi Ging instantly forgotten as he hurried after the other Glassmith.

'Just look for his Cyo B'Ahon seal on its surface,' the flustered Glassmith urged, thrusting a crumpled scroll towards Murrine. The illustration's still-damp ink glinted in the light and Zhi Ging caught a glimpse of Reishi's seal – two golden cranes circling one another in flight.

She stared after them, her mind whirring while the two men raced out towards the glass terraces. Maybe she had one last chance to make it as a Silhouette after all. If the stone really was that important to Reishi as the Silhouette Scout, maybe she could trade it for a place in Hok Woh.

All Zhi Ging had to do was find it before anyone else.

CHAPTER 3

Zhi Ging shivered and inched further along the concealed mountain path. An icy fog had settled at sundown and the cold was seeping through the soles of her cloth shoes. She had spent the entire day searching the terraces and was beginning to worry. What if one of the Glassmiths had already found the jade stone? Had she missed her chance?

She turned and tried to spot the bright lights of the workshop below her, sighing with relief when all she could see was an unending soft dappled grey. Since Reishi had arrived a fortnight ago, there had been nightly feasts in the Lead Glassmith's private wing. Packed with Glassmiths hoping to speak with the Cyo B'Ahon, the entire place would glow, its iridescent glass walls twinkling like a jewel fused to the mountainside. No lights meant the Glassmiths were still searching.

Zhi Ging clambered further up, careful not to step off the path and on to an empty terrace. The glass terraces were flat platforms cut into the upper half of the jade mountain, some several metres

deep. Glassmiths would create complex designs by pouring different coloured sands into the hollow terraces before luring dragons towards them, channelling their lightning through copper rods to transform the sand into shimmering panels of glass. When dawn caught against the newly fused glass, it would drape the mountain in a patchwork quilt of blazing light, fragments of sky captured in the jade.

There was a muffled grunt up ahead and Zhi Ging froze, her heart pounding. What if it was a spirit? What if the Fui Gwai had finally reached Fei Chui? A solitary figure loomed out of the fog and she clamped her hands over her eyes, knowing from ghost stories that eyes were always the Fui Gwai's first target.

'Zhi Ging? What are you doing up here?'

She peeked through a small gap between her fingers and spotted a bemused-looking Reishi walking towards her. She lowered her hands sheepishly, embarrassed by how quickly she'd panicked. Stupid really. After all, the only real danger this high up were dragons, and they never hunted in fog. Their eyesight wasn't strong enough for anything other than clear, cloudless nights.

'Uh, I'm . . . trying to find your jade stone,' she admitted and, taking a deep breath, added, 'and, I'd like to swap it for a place as a Silhouette.'

Reishi's eyebrows shot up in amusement.

'Well, I think it's safe to say I've never met anyone as determined to be a Silhouette as you, Zhi Ging. And this is coming from a Scout who's waded through seven centuries worth

of intense, and often illegible, exam scrolls.’ His smile faded. ‘But I’m sorry, I really can’t invite anyone else from Fei Chui for the next twelve months. Cyo B’Ahon have strict rules on equal invitations for a reason. We can’t be seen to favour any village, town or city across the six provinces.’

‘But I’m not really from Fei Chui,’ Zhi Ging cried. ‘You know I wasn’t born here. What if I’m from somewhere that hasn’t been visited by a Silhouette Scout yet?’

‘Or you could just as easily be from one of the countless places that’s already sent someone to Hok Woh this year.’ Reishi shook his head. ‘Go home before you get into any more trouble, Zhi Ging. There are four Glassmiths still searching these terraces for my stone. I’m sure one of them will find it soon.’

‘But they’ve been searching for hours now. What if I find it before them?’

‘Even if you did, I still couldn’t—’ Reishi began, but Zhi Ging darted back into the fog before she could hear the rest of his answer.

An hour later, Zhi Ging reached the jade mountain’s highest terrace and frowned down through the fog. The sunken space was filled with swirling shades of fine sand, with a few jade pebbles scattered across its surface. If Reishi’s stone wasn’t here, she’d have to restart her search. Zhi Ging sighed, heavy fog closing in above her as she stepped into the terrace and crouched to gather the pebbles. She flipped over one of the larger pieces of jade in her palm and yelped.

She’d found it!

A gold seal with two cranes circling an ornate 'R' shimmered up at her.

'I knew I'd find you,' she whispered, brushing grains of sand from its surface. 'Iridill can say what she wants about my hair, but I can do anything a Glass—' She broke off with a gasp, her left thumb pulsing with a sudden, sharp pain. Zhi Ging jerked back, the stone dropping to the terrace with a dull thud.

It had almost felt like a papercut, but when she squeezed the tip of her thumb, there was no sign she'd been hurt.

Zhi Ging snatched the stone back up before anyone else reached the terrace and lifted it in triumph, sand cascading down her arm. There was a faint *plink* and her glass hairpin slipped out of her braid and rolled into a corner of the terrace. Zhi Ging bent to pick it up, then froze, her shadow stretching out in front of her.

Her *shadow*.

How was there enough light to cast a shadow in this fog? The entire terrace was bathed in a bright glow, even her faint trail of footprints now visible in the sand. In a daze, Zhi Ging raised her free hand towards her head. Her fingers caught in a fizzing white light, static flickering over her hand when she touched her hair.

Her hair was glowing!

The brief burst of excitement curdled almost immediately and was replaced by a troubling thought. There was only ever one reason for someone's hair to glow: being near dragons or dragon scales. But there were no dragon scales in the terrace, which meant—

Zhi Ging spun around and found herself staring up into rows of gleaming teeth.

A dragon loomed over her, each scale on its scarred body larger than her face. Its heavy talons scratched against the terrace, sending sparks skittering across the sand. A piercing ball of white lightning crackled between its jaws and the dragon coiled its wiry tail behind Zhi Ging, cutting off her escape route. Her entire body howled at her to run but she couldn't move. The paralysing fear coursing through her was so powerful she couldn't even open her mouth to scream.

The dragon leant down and its long whiskers sparked against her face. The jolt shocked Zhi Ging out of her frozen panic and she leapt sideways, scrambling as fast as she could for the path. She dove behind a boulder and curled into a tight protective ball around Reishi's stone just as the dragon unleashed its lightning.

The heat was unimaginable. From her hiding spot, she watched in horror as her hairpin blazed white hot then shattered, her last birthday present from Aapau destroyed in an instant. Zhi Ging whimpered and burning air scalded her throat. Sand bubbled around her, forming shimmering pools of glass that threatened to spill over the terrace borders. An ear-splitting *crack* boomed across the mountain and the boulder, which had taken the full brunt of the lightning strike, crumbled. Fragments of molten rock hissed and spat while acrid steam surged over Zhi Ging. Panic ripped through her and, in her desperation to get away from what was left of the boulder, Zhi Ging slipped, plummeting backwards into a lower terrace.

She screamed as she hit a layer of molten sand, the shock of the heat knocking every other thought from her mind. The sand washed over her, and a thin layer of dark glass began to fuse around her sleeve, trapping her left arm in place. She spluttered and fought to keep the rest of her body above the cooling glass. Not even a healer like Aapau could save someone with glass solidifying in their lungs.

The dragon snapped at the air, its tail swishing in frustration as it prowled towards her.

'Get away from me!' Zhi Ging hurled the jade at it in desperation, but the stone simply bounced against one of the dragon's horns to land back in the upper terrace. The air filled with crackling heat and her vision blurred as more lightning swelled at the back of the dragon's throat.

Suddenly, a glowing white ribbon shot out from the darkness and wrapped itself around the dragon, wrenching it away from Zhi Ging. She blinked hard, strands of glass sticking to her still-glowing hair as she twisted to follow it. *Has the lightning already hit me? Is this what all Glassmiths see in the final seconds of a dragon attack?*

The dragon thrashed wildly and strands of light tore between its talons, but it couldn't escape the twisting ribbon. It roared as it was dragged away, mercury eyes locked on Zhi Ging, until the fog swept back across the mountain, obscuring her.

Zhi Ging could hear Reishi calling in the distance but, when she tried to cry out, her scorched voice came out as nothing more than a hoarse whimper. *What if the dragon comes back before he finds me?*

Her trapped hand began to prickle, and a pulsing light flashed beneath the warped glass. Sand spilled down from the upper terrace and the jade stone tumbled towards her. The newly-formed glass shattered beneath it like eggshell and Zhi Ging hurried to pull herself free. Her sleeve tore against a shard of glass as she swung her arm back to the terrace, snatching up the stone and dropping it into her pocket.

‘There you are!’ An ashen-faced Reishi raced towards her, his silk robes swinging wildly as he stumbled along the charred path between the terraces.

‘Are you all right? I saw it creeping towards you, but you couldn’t hear me shout—’

‘There she is! The spirit summoner!’ Two Glassmiths were scrambling up the jade mountain towards them, beaded cloaks jangling as they jumped between the fractured terraces. Both had pulled their hoods low, only the lower halves of their faces visible beneath the dark glass beads.

‘What are you talking about?’ Zhi Ging croaked. ‘I was attacked by a dragon. Reishi, tell them.’

‘Liar!’

She flinched, recognising Murrine’s voice beneath the hood.

‘I should have reported you immediately. You threatened to curse Fei Chui and now the Fui Gwai is here. Our hair did more than just glow in warning like it does near dragons, that spirit’s arrival seared a warning across all our scalps.’

‘We *saw* you release that cursed light, guiding it into our village!’ The other Glassmith added.

‘Cursed light?’ asked Reishi, bewildered.

‘You mean that white ribbon? I have no idea what that was, but it didn’t have anything to do with me, I swear. How would I even do that?’

‘Your hair was glowing. I saw it.’ Murrine spat, a copper rod clenched tight between his fists. ‘You have no Fei Chui ancestors. The only way your hair could do that is through spirit magic.’

Two more Glassmiths appeared through the fog, hands gripped around their beaded hoods as they stalked towards Zhi Ging.

‘Look at her arm! Let’s see her try explaining *that* to the Lead Glassmith’

Zhi Ging glanced down and yelped in surprise. Her left sleeve hung loose, revealing an arm covered in delicate gold lines. The shining strands curled up from her palm, twisting past her elbow before coiling back on themselves.

‘Everyone just needs to take a moment,’ Reishi cautioned, stepping in front of Zhi Ging to block her from the enraged Glassmiths. ‘We have a child here who just survived a dragon attack. Let’s hold off on accusations until a healer has checked her for injuries, shall we?’

‘And give her a chance to escape? What if she summons another spirit? Look at the damage she’s already done to our jade mountain.’

‘I say we take her straight to the Lead Glassmith. Let him show the other provinces just how seriously Fei Chui takes the crime of spirit summoning.’

'She should have been placed in the post pipe the second Aapau left.' The closest Glassmith added, his voice thick with rage. 'No one from outside Fei Chui can ever be trusted.'

The others murmured in agreement, gnarled glass cracking beneath their feet as they closed in.

'Right, good to know there's no point trying to reason with you.' Reishi sighed, before turning back to Zhi Ging. 'New plan,' he whispered, looking pointedly above the Glassmiths towards a faint glowing point that seemed to grow brighter with each second. 'Get ready to jump when I say so.'

'What?' she hissed, her eyes never leaving the circling Glassmiths.

'Now!'

The ribbon burst back through the fog and the Glassmiths scattered across the terraces, their copper rods sticking to the still-warm pools of liquid glass. Reishi leapt up, pulling Zhi Ging with him, and they grabbed on, fingers sinking between glowing threads of light.

Her breath caught in her throat as she was lifted off the ground and Zhi Ging swivelled to stare open mouthed at the mountain shrinking beneath her.

Their legs swung in the air as the ribbon twisted over the shouting Glassmiths and soared down towards the cloud sea on the edge of Fei Chui.