The Three Hares



THE TERRACOTTA HORSE

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SEVEN SEAS
COLLECTION

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CONTENTS

Part 1 p1

Part 2 p43

Part 3 p105

Part 4 p117

Part 5 p159

Part 6 p231

Part 7 p237

List of Characters in Order of Appearance p247

PART 1



LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM

THE PRESENT DAY

Chapter 1

Salma Mansour climbed the stairs to the first floor, placed her hand on the door of the dojang, and pushed hard. The door, creaking like a giant frog, slowly swung open, revealing the same bare neon lights, blue mats, and leaky, iron-framed windows. Nothing was new—except the dead silence and the startled eyes of fourteen people locked on her.

"Just me!" she beamed.

As though a spell had been broken, everyone unfroze and returned to what they had been doing before she entered.

She wasn't the one they were all waiting for.

Still grinning at how tense everyone had looked—like mice watching a cat—she swung her bag off her shoulder. Her instructor, 4th Dan Lee Arnott, standing in front of the mirrored wall, raised his head and caught her eye in the reflection. Straightening her face and quickly tightening the yellow hair tie around her short ponytail, she gave a solemn bow, which Lee returned. Stepping up to the mat, she slipped off her birthday present—straw zori sandals her mother had bought last month. Her mother had acknowledged that they were Japanese, not Korean, but no matter: Salma loved them. They were pale golden, with light-blue straps illustrated with a dragon motif in dark blue. With care, she placed them together, making sure the edges of each met heel and toe. She wanted to take her time and enjoy every minute. Because tonight was a big deal: tonight was the night she got her red-black belt.

Bare feet on the cold, hard mats, she bowed again, as was the custom. When she raised her head, Lee Arnott was standing next to her.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Absolutely," she said. And she was.

Lee Arnott, who had been Salma's taekwondo instructor since she had walked into the dojang five years ago, smiled. "Well…good. There's no reason not to be, but…"

Salma nodded as Lee talked, but her eyes had found the clock over Lee's shoulder whose second hand was creeping closer and closer to eight o'clock.

"Salma?"

Her eyes snapped back to Lee.

"Stay focused," he said. "Remember: this isn't just a test of your physical skills." He held her gaze.

Duh! thought Salma. Of course, the exam was not just about physical strength.

"You should start your warm-up."

Salma nodded. As Lee made his way to the front of the class through the other candidates, arranged at neat intervals on the mat, she began her warm-up, grinning when Alison, in the second row in front of her, turned and gave her a thumbs up, which she returned. There were eleven others taking their grading exams, not including Alison and her. Some, like Alison, were trying to get their blue belts, some their brown, and just two, their black. She was the only one who was trying for the red-black. To get it, she would have to perform a series of regulated moves, spar with a partner, and do various kicks, such as a spinning heel kick. Breaking boards—otherwise known as the destruction—was the last part of the exam. The destruction didn't worry her. In fact, it was probably the part of the exam she was looking forward to the most. She loved the sense of power, of achievement that smashing through the boards gave.

Grabbing both ends of her current red belt, she pulled hard. She wanted the next belt, red and black, so much. The red signified that the belt-holders were aware of their skills and recognised the need for self-control. She had that! As for the black, it represented indifference to darkness and fear. Well, she wasn't afraid of anything, least of all this exam.

She breathed out slowly, forcing the air through her slightly parted lips, and thought about her uncle and her father. They would be proud. Her Uncle Sameer, her father's brother, had been a taekwondo champion in Aleppo. She'd never been to Syria, but she'd heard plenty about it from her father: about his home city, one of the most ancient in the world, and his brother and the rest of his family there. The news that a shell had destroyed Uncle Sameer's apartment, killing him, her cousins, and her aunt, as well as her grandparents, came when she was at primary school. She could still hear the cry of grief her father had given when he got the news. The doctors at Hammersmith hospital said he died of a heart attack. It wasn't true. He died of a broken heart.

Two rows in front of her, the new boy, Kofi, was frowning, listening intently to Lee Arnott, who, she guessed was giving him advice about his first grading exam. One of the things she loved about taekwondo was that nationality, origins, religion—all of those things were secondary. What counted was how well you could deal with an opponent who was trying to knock your head off!

She began bouncing forwards and backwards on her toes. Any moment now, the promotion exam would begin. *Think of your chi*, she told herself as Lee went to the back of the room where the concrete blocks were kept. *Think of the energy that flows through all things*. In the mirror, Lee's image picked up a dozen or so boards and began carrying them to the front of the dojang. She changed exercise and swung her arms in big circles. She had a lot of schoolwork to do, which meant she didn't get to the dojang more than once a week. So, not really often enough to progress through the ranks quickly. But still, it had annoyed her that she had been made to wait so long to take the red-black exam. She'd asked Lee twice before if she could take it. The third time, he'd agreed. Great. But why not the first time?

A sudden gust of wind rattling the dojang's tall windows interrupted her thoughts. The dark grey light pressing against the glass made it seem like winter, yet it was July and only 8 pm!

Brr! British summertime! She could almost feel the rain sweeping across the streets. She looked at her reflection, the light-brown hair pulled tightly over her scalp, the almond eyes, the slim shoulders. Her mother was always saying she was too skinny. Perhaps she was right. An image of the last time she had visited her aunt's house in Chelsea and its dining room table groaning with food came to mind: yabrak, hummus, fattoush, kibbeh, mahshi, muhammarah, kebab halabi. She loved visiting her aunt's place. Besides her aunt being a great cook, there were always loads of people there talking, laughing, offering plates, filling cups, discussing…

As she smiled at the memory of the last visit to her aunt's house, the top of a bus, about six metres away with an advertisement covering the space between the upper and lower deck, filled the dojang's windows. The advert, she noticed, was for a company called Bai Lu, which she'd never heard of. The upper deck was empty apart from an old man halfway along it, whose head was leaning against the bus's window.

A strange coldness crept over her as she gazed at him. Suddenly, the man twitched violently as though someone had jabbed him, his whole body jerking with the spasm. Straightening his hunched shoulders, he sat bolt upright and slowly twisted his head towards her. As he turned, he began to change: his hair becoming darker and longer, his jowls disappearing, his skin tightening…A boy with intense eyes and dark, scraggly hair was staring at her, a mocking grin spreading across his face. Salma staggered backwards as she gazed in horror, unable to look away as the boy's face began to change. Like watery slime, his skin and muscles were melting, sliding away until all that was left was the white, shiny bone below. The skull's two deep, dark, empty sockets stared at her. Salma had the sensation she was underwater; she was drowning, her lungs pressed and squeezed, unable to breathe. Revolted, rooted to the spot, she watched as the thing raised a bony, white finger and pointed at her. A scream rose in her throat, but just as it was about to escape, the bus's engine roared, the bus

lurched forward, and the old man was back again, snoozing like nothing had happened…

"Salma?"

She swivelled around. Lee was staring at her, a quizzical look on his face.

"Are you with us?" he asked.

All she could manage was a weird grunt. Her heart was pounding, her palms sweaty.

Lee's eyes held her for a moment longer; then, addressing the whole class, he clapped his hands and said, "Good luck, everyone." A moment later, the door to the dojang creaked open. Salma turned as a small, stocky man with snow-white, close-cropped hair entered, bowed low, and stepped onto the mats.

Grandmaster Cho had arrived.