

Stormcaller

By Fadzlishah Johanabas

CHAPTER 1

The last of midnight rain dripped off the rotting zinc slates, collecting in puddles in an alley too small to warrant a name. The smell of curry leaves and henna lingered in the air, but the man in a navy-blue jumper too thick for this warm climate scrunched his nose in distaste. He could make out the sting of urine and the decay of dead rodent, overpowering other smells, as he stepped deeper into the shadows. He pulled the cotton hood closer over his head. He kept looking back; he knew he was being followed.

A high-pitched shriek sent his head whipping toward the right. When he realized it was only the LRT making a stop at the Masjid Jamek station, he relaxed his clenched fists. With news of his friends missing one by one, he had reason to be jumpy. He took a few steps forward, quickening his pace.

“Was it yours?”

He almost slipped when he whirled toward the source of the voice. Blocking his nearest exit stood a man easily a foot taller than he was, with shoulders almost blocking the streetlight behind him. He was wearing a close-fitting grey T-shirt. Even his calves strained against the fabric of his blue jeans. He was smiling, his teeth white and even. The hooded man stumbled backward.

“Wha...what was?”

The big man sauntered toward him with an easy grace. “The storm. Was it yours?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know who you are, Stormcaller.”

The smaller man pushed back his hood, revealing a face barely out of his teens. As he narrowed his slanted eyes, his damp black hair started standing up as if charged with static electricity. He rubbed his fingers together, sending blue sparks flying where his skin met. “I am Jin-Wei, Stormcaller Stratum Three. In the Name of the Creator, I request safe passage.”

Still smiling, the man cocked his head to the left. “Hear that?” he said after a few moments. “The Creator isn’t listening.”

“Who are you?” Jin-Wei took another step backward, but a grilled door blocked his path. Chain and padlock rattled much too loud.

“You shouldn’t have taken this way, you know.”

Jin-Wei felt cold sweat dripping from his forehead. In his mind he envisioned a cat toying with a cornered mouse. If only he was the cat. He took a deep breath and then clapped his hands together. With a mighty peal, lightning surged forward, aimed at the man's chest. The alley lit up like midday, followed by absolute silence. Jin-Wei lowered his head to pray for the life he had to take.

Barking laughter echoed throughout the alley. "Is that it? No wonder you're Stratum Three."

Jin-Wei blinked in confusion. The man stood where he was, untouched. It took a few seconds before realization hit him like one of his own lightning bolts. "But you're a – why are you after me?"

The big man rapped his knuckles. The distance between them grew closer. "To kill you, of course."

Where the sky had cleared up almost half-an-hour back, rain started pouring again. Cumulous clouds gathered, black against the black sky. Lightning shot down where the clouds touched each other, charged with electricity. Rumbling thunder followed almost instantly.

"This is more like it. More, Stormcaller. More."

With a gulp that did nothing to help his parched throat, Jin-Wei stole a glance upward without moving his head. He had never attempted it; the power it took was beyond him. But he was desperate to escape. He had to try. He stood half-crouched, ready to run, but he did not intend to use his legs. He felt his body vibrating from within, every cell humming in soundless music. He felt the energy building up, screaming to escape. Searing pain threatened to rip him apart, but he remained static. Sweat turned to steam, sizzling off his skin.

The man got nearer. Soon he would be able to grab hold of Jin-Wei.

In a fluid motion, the Stormcaller crouched before thrusting himself into the air. He saw the sky opening up to welcome him in her bosom. Just as the man's meaty hands tugged at his jumper, Jin-Wei felt himself turning into a blade of lightning.

He died impaled on the wall before thunder could escape his lips.

The big man swore under his breath before turning his head backward. "I had him, Sanya."

A woman almost as tall as the man sighed and walked toward the still glowing body, her heels barely making a sound. She reached up and yanked a white metal spear from the Stormcaller's chest. Any trace of water on her hand disappeared in an angry hiss. She watched the shaft in rapt fascination as it turned orange, then red, and finally back to its original chrome color, with runes etched along its length. She wiped the spear clean using the dead Stormcaller's jumper and secured it within her black

leather trench coat. She tied her glossy black hair back in a ponytail before turning back to where they came from.

“Pick him up, Kajai.”

“I had the kid alive.” He clenched and unclenched his fist. It made no difference to him if the Stormcaller lived or died; he wanted to claim this catch.

“Kajai. Pick him up.”

He squatted and lifted the body with a grunt. The next one, he promised himself, would be his to claim.

CHAPTER 2

The sound of crashing startled Ezra awake. Without hesitation he reached for the blade he kept under his pillow and jumped into a crouching position on his bed. The spring mattress creaked in protest. His eyes swept the room, looking for anything that was amiss. Then he saw his guitar lying flat on the black Italian marble floor. The curtain was billowing like a white sail in a tempest. He could hear the distant rumbling of thunder. He had left the sliding door to the balcony open. Again. Ezra rubbed his face and swept his hair back. He looked at the alarm clock beside his bed. 03:08 am. He was getting jumpy of late.

“You have not slackened off, I see.”

Ezra’s blade landed with a loud twang on the wall centimeters away from the intruder’s face. Her wavy auburn hair wisped where the air current rippled along the blade’s path, before floating back into place, framing her unimpressed face. Even though the room was dark, illuminated only by moonlight peeking in from the sliding door, Ezra could make out her features. She had a gentle beauty that her severe expression could not dissipate. And the easy grace in which she leaned against the wall, her plain white robe not quite obscuring her curves, told him she was not cowed.

“Najuwa. Couldn’t you knock, like anyone else? Sometime during the day, maybe?” Ezra did not relax his stance.

“Isra’.” The tip of her tongue vibrated on her palate at the ‘r’ in his name. “It has been far too long.”

“I don’t go by that name anymore. It’s Ezra.”

“A matter of pronunciation.” Without taking her eyes off Ezra, Najuwa reached back and yanked out the blade. A deep impression marked the place where the tip had been embedded. She flicked it forward using only her wrist. Ezra grabbed the hilt with the tip a breath away from his left eye. She turned on the lights. “You are as opulent as ever.”

Ezra followed her hand as she waved from his silk-covered mahogany bed, to the black-based abstract oil painting that spanned three quarters the height of his wall, to the multifaceted crystal wall lamps, to the collection of bonsais lining his chest-high clothes drawer that matched the bed.

“My money. My life. How did you find me?”

“It was not easy, I have to admit. You are getting good at this, hiding in plain sight.”

“Not good enough, apparently. What do you want?”

“Jin-Wei is dead.”

Ezra swore. He clenched the blade until his knuckles turned white.

“And uncouth as ever.” Najuwa took a step toward Ezra. “He was not the only one. Stormcallers are being hunted one after the other.”

“Stormcallers never really die. They come back in a new body. You know that.”

“Not this time, Isra’.”

Ezra swore again. “Who’d want to kill the children of lightning and thunder? Why?”

“We do not know as yet.” Najuwa paused with her lips half parted. “Isra’, the Throne Bearers sent a legion of us to find you. I am here to deliver you a Message.”

Ezra barked a laughter that sounded hollow throughout his spacious room. “I’m out of the picture, remember?”

“We all have our parts to play. Even you.”

“What do they want?”

“You will cross paths with a Stratum Seven Stormcaller. You are to protect him at all cost.”

Another laughter, this time louder. “Stratum Seven doesn’t exist. Not since the Flood.”

“Isra’, everything the Throne Bearers say will come to pass. It is your destiny to protect this Stormcaller.”

Ezra hurled his blade, which buried itself at the center of the wall-length mirror. A million cracks spread out as if the mirror was a thin sheet of ice on a frozen lake. Within seconds the cracks formed an uneven seven-spoke wheel surrounding the still-vibrating blade.

“Destiny? I am trapped here, never to see home again, and you’re talking about destiny?”

Najuwa closed the gap between them and rested her right hand on his bare chest. Her skin felt cool, but a calming warmth spread from where their skins met throughout his body. He felt his anger dissipating into a whimper deep within the recesses of his heart.

“I do not claim to know the workings of the Higher Ones, much less the Wisdom of the Creator. I have played my part. Now you have to play yours.”

Najuwa’s fingers traced his muscular chest upward and encircled a nondescript cylindrical pendant hanging from a leather thong. Ezra clenched his jaw but remained silent.

“Is this how you remained hidden?”

The grinding of teeth.

“Interesting.” Najuja tightened her grip around the pendant. A soft white glow escaped the gaps between her long, delicate fingers.

Ezra fought a wince when the thong bit into his skin as he pulled away from her.

“What did you just do?”

“Merely strengthening the protection. From now on, I shall be the only one able to locate you should the need arise.”

“Can’t you include yourself?”

“I would not be able to locate you should I do that.”

Ezra snorted at the wasted sarcasm. He watched as Najuja sauntered toward the cracked mirror. The blade was half embedded into the wall, but she pulled it out with barely a twitch of her wrist. Using her free hand, Najuja touched the mirror. Her million distorted reflections became one again. She placed the blade in front of a bonsai vase and headed for the sliding door. She turned to look at Ezra, and in the time it took for a hummingbird to flap its wings, Ezra thought he saw compassion gracing Najuja’s face.

“Perhaps the redemption you have been seeking will be earned at last,” she said, her face expressionless one again.

The curtain billowed inward again with a sudden breeze, and by the time it settled, Ezra was standing alone in his room. Countless minutes flew by before he finally treaded toward the sliding door, Najuja’s final words bogging his feet down with their weight. Outside, the Petronas Twin Towers dominated his view, and from his vantage point, had he looked down, Ezra could even make out individual forms of couples still loitering about the KLCC Park. The green-tinted glass-panel walls reflected the city lights, giving the towers an ethereal glow. But for the first time since he moved to this penthouse, the majestic view could not calm his fluttering heart.

Redemption. He never thought it was possible for him. Not after what he had done.

CHAPTER 3

Ezra couldn't get back to sleep after Najuwa left. He ended up hitting the gym to stop thinking of idle hopes, and by the time the rest of Kuala Lumpur had woken up, he had already showered and headed for the lobby.

"Good morning, Mr. Ezra," said the doorman in well ironed black uniform. "Not driving your car today?"

"Not with this morning traffic. Could you call a taxi for me?"

"Of course." He smiled and nodded.

Ezra turned to take a seat, but turned back after a moment's hesitation. "How are the boys?"

The elder man beamed, taking off years from his wrinkled face. "The eldest is going to university this June. The first one in the family."

Ezra smiled a fraction, but he could not share the doorman's elation. He remembered the doorman talking about his family once, how he was a retiree but had to keep on working to feed his family. The cost of university education would cause a strain, and the doorman's days were numbered.

"Call me when the taxi arrives."

"Will do, Mr. Ezra."

Ezra sat idle for less than five minutes before the doorman came. Living in an overpriced high-end condominium had its perks. He took a seat behind the driver, a large Punjabi man with a curly beard that had more white than black, and a tidy maroon turban.

"Where to go, Mister?" he said, straining his thick neck trying to make eye contact with Ezra.

"Chinatown. Petaling Street."

The driver turned back and dragged a sigh before punching the start button on his meter.

The trip that would usually take ten minutes at most had cost him sixteen ringgit and thirty cents that morning, mainly because of the traffic. The taxi had heated up midway, and the driver turned off the air conditioning, rolled down the window. Ezra left his shut even though he started sweating after a few minutes. It was much more preferable compared to having his clothes soaking up the stench of exhaust fumes. He

stepped out of the taxi after handing the driver two crisp ten ringgit notes. His shirt clung to his back, but he was already used to it, having lived in this humid city for years.

Petaling Street was not what it used to be. Much had changed. Years ago the old buildings lining the street was uniformly white, with crusted paint peeling off, revealing fungus-infested decaying walls. The whole place had a perpetual reek of urine, and seedy stalls packed the pothole-filled street, ready to be packed up and whisked away with the shouted warning of an incoming police raid. Now bulbous plastic Chinese lanterns were hung crisscrossing from one colorful wall to another, swaying in bright silence when tickled by the wind. A green-tinted fiberglass roof bridged the gap between opposite buildings, sheltering the whole street from rain and the glare of the sun. Scents of fresh roses and lavender wafted from flower shops and smaller stalls, their owners advertizing low prices to compete for customers. Most of the stalls sold cheap imitation wares, from watches to pens, from bags to leather shoes. Hawker stalls already had people sitting on plastic stools, eating and talking at the same time. Most of the visitors shouldering one another on the packed street were Caucasians.

Ezra wasn't fooled by this makeover. He could still make out the lingering smell of urine, and saw the cracks on the wall, with yellowing white paint and black fungus underneath the fresh coat of blue, or orange, or green. At least the road was paved well.

"Eh, Mister. Nice watch." A young man whose skin looked more ochre than yellow smiled at Ezra. Behind him was a collection of watches in chrome, silver, gold and black. Ezra could make out expensive names on the face of the watches. "Not original, is it? Come, buy one from me. Fifteen ringgit only. With three months guarantee."

Ezra could not help but smiled back. Three months warranty for a cheap imitation was a wonder in itself.

"No. Thank you. If my watch gets broken, I'll come to you."

The stall keeper came closer and looked up at Ezra, who was easily a head taller. "If you want DVD also have, at back. New movies, don't have to go to cinema."

Ezra shook his head and gave a single wave goodbye. He made his way to a shop with wooden anterior extension, almost hidden between the watch shop and an imitation leatherwear stall. Small, pastel-colored lanterns hung from the pillars and the ceiling, punctuated by occasional larger, elaborate red lanterns. One was even shaped like a pagoda. The scent of burning incense filled the cluttered space, but it was a pleasant change from the stench of decaying life outside.

A small lady with wrinkled skin clinging to her bones shuffled from the depths of the shop. "You want lanterns? Got big lantern, got small lantern, got square lantern."

Round lantern like outside also have.” She pointed at the general direction of the ones hanging on the street. Her fingers, deformed with arthritis, shook with fine tremors.

“No lanterns, Aunty. I’m looking for Madam Tai.”

“Madam Tai not here. You buy lantern?”

“I know she is here, behind this shop, under the trapdoor.”

The old woman stopped smiling and folded her hands back close to her chest. “You no buy lantern, you go somewhere else. Madam Tai not here.”

“Aunty. I need to speak with the Stormcaller. It’s about Jin-Wei.”

She gave a keening wail when she heard the name. As if suddenly boneless, she collapsed. Ezra held her tight until she stopped sobbing. He guided her to a wooden stool behind the counter.

“Aunty, please. It’s important.”

Still hiccupping, the old lady nodded. She muttered a string of short Cantonese words and the empty wooden wall at the back of the shop shimmered and disappeared, revealing an unlit path.

“Thank you.” Ezra took a few steps before turning to face the shopkeeper. “Aunty, close your shop early today. And tell the boy next door to hide his DVDs. There’s going to be a raid this evening.”

She raised her hands with the fingers of her right one cupping her left balled fist and bowed. Ezra nodded and walked down the short corridor. He found the trapdoor hidden beneath a frayed red carpet. The hinges groaned when he lifted the door, and taking a deep breath, he stepped into the darkness.

CHAPTER 4

The first time Ezra walked down the trapdoor, he had thought himself descended into madness. He had no sense of up or down, front or back as he moved in the heavy darkness that blinded all his senses and not only his sight. Now, knowing what to expect, he took one step at a time, calm and steady. He did not even hold his hands out like a blindfolded man would. Eventually he felt the gradual lifting of the darkness rather than seeing it. When he could make out the shape of a fountain with the sculpture of a serpentine dragon, like a lonesome forgotten god, he walked toward it without hesitation.

The dragon looked more imposing the closer he got. Its long body undulated as it orbited a flawless round structure that looked like a pearl, but he knew it was impossible for a pearl to grow that huge, standing a few hand spans taller than him. Each scale along the dragon's length was intricately etched, half an oval within half an oval within half an oval. Its face was captured in mid-roar, and crystalline water flowed from between its fangs, collecting in an oval pool made of the same grey granite as the dragon was. Gigantic white water lilies bloomed with not a single petal out of place or wilted. Their stalks and broad leaves were the deepest emerald, and as perfect as the flowers. The fountain cast not shadow, as if lit up from all places. But Ezra spotted the dark band a few inches wide above the water, all along the inner wall of the pool.

"The fountain is drying up," he commented to himself.

"Astute as well as good looking," said an ethereal female voice from within the darkness. Ezra could not pinpoint its source. Ezra noticed the sharp inflection of each syllable, the crisp music in the ebb and flow of the tone. "A rare commodity it is, these days. You have entered the House of Pearl. We tolerate no weapon. We tolerate no evil intention."

Ezra lifted both arms, palm up. "I have entered the House of Pearl. I bring no weapon. I harbor no evil intention."

"You know the form, yet I know not your name."

"Ezra. I come to seek the wisdom of Madam Tai, Stormcaller Stratum Five."

"*Guang*," said the voice, and the darkness dissipated like a thick fog blown by a strong gale. The fountain was the centerpiece of a high-ceilinged hall. The square area above the fountain opened up to the sky, where thin bands of stratus clouds cut a diagonal line across the sapphire expanse. Cylindrical pillars thicker than Ezra's arm span, adorned with murals of dragons in flight, supported the hall at regular intervals. The floor was white marble with gold veins, polished to mirror-like quality. At the distant end of the hall was a platform of black lacquered wood, with a high-backed chair of

the same material, lined with pearls. The reflection the countless beads cast made them seemingly glowing.

From his peripheral vision Ezra saw the scattered groups of assorted people, from children to the wizened, from those garbed in traditional Chinese clothes to Goth imitations. But what caught his eyes was the full-grown white tiger sitting reclined by the throne, studying him with intelligent green eyes. Its coat shone with a glossy sheen, as if each individual fur caught the light and danced with it. A jade-studded black leather collar circled its neck, half hidden within the thick fur. And sitting on the throne was a woman with flawless cream skin, dressed in black cheongsam, a traditional one-piece dress with short sleeves that hugged her lean arms, a fitting cut that enhanced her curves, and ended mid-thigh, revealing smooth, muscular calves. Her lips were blood-red in stark contrast against her almost translucent skin, and her features were sharp but delicate. Her glossy black hair was tied in a severe bun, with a fine golden rod with a dragon head at the top end keeping her hair in place.

“You used a Mandarin command just now. Usually Madam Tai uses Cantonese.” said Ezra as he paced toward the throne, his footsteps reverberating throughout the hall. “You’re sitting at her place. Is she unwell?”

A ripple of murmurs spread across the hall, and hostility burned within the eyes of the people in the hall. The woman lifted her right hand and Ezra could hear the trickle of the fountain once again. He noticed how fine her fingers were, with long but manicured nails, and he noticed the fluidity of her movement. He made a mental note to be careful with this one.

“You speak our language?”

“No. But I’ve been around your people long enough to notice the different dialects.”

The woman nodded. “Madam Tai is...indisposed at the moment. What business have you with her?”

“I want to know why Jin-Wei is dead.”

The murmurs were louder this time, with an undertone of anxiety and...fear. The woman and the tiger were the only ones unaffected by what Ezra said.

“How did you know of him? Young was his incarnation, barely reaching maturity.”

“We were old friends.”

“When he was in Mother China?”

“Taiwan. He was never assigned China.”

If that was a test, Ezra guessed he just passed. The severity of her expression lifted off almost immediately.

“It is true. He is dead. And information, we have not.”

“How is it possible? Stormcallers die in a burst of lightning, and gets reborn somewhere else. They never truly die.”

“Ezra, for a human, well versed you seem with our world. Possible it is for us to die, in unnatural circumstances. If we are killed.”

“Jin-Wei wasn’t the only one, was he?”

“Four were killed before him, in this city alone. Throughout this continent? Broken is my heart, thinking about them.”

Ezra swore. “Who would want to kill Stormcallers?”

“I said this before. Information we have not. But believe me, once it is known, retribution is swift.”

Ezra took a step closer to the throne. The tiger sat more alert and growled. Ezra stayed his step. “You said ‘us’. Who are you, Stormcaller?”

“Xio Nei is my name. Stratum Six I am.”

Ezra gave a low whistle. “The highest ranking Stormcaller this country has ever seen is Madam Tai.”

“Shepherds of Nature we Stormcallers are. If left unbridled, Nature runs wild and the world crumbles in rain and fire. Madam Tai was forced to take on the responsibilities of the ones departed. I have come to lessen her burden.” She left her lips parted and studied Ezra in silence. “You came seeking her wisdom. Wisdom I offer you, should you need it.”

“An...acquaintance told me a Stratum Seven will head this way. Do you know anything about that?”

The ripple grew the loudest this time. Ezra could not hear his own thoughts in this din. The tiger stood up and gave a mighty roar. Its long fangs were an impressive sight. The chatter became subdued but lingered.

“There is no Stratum Seven, Ezra.”

“Yes there were. Seven of them, and they appeared twice throughout history. Once to cleanse the world for the coming of humans, and once more before the Flood.”

“Myths.”

“Perhaps, but based on truth.”

“Who are you, Ezra? Mere human you may not be, to be well versed in our history.”

“A simple guy, who happens to have friends in high places.”

Xio Nei leaned forward and studied Ezra with fascination. She stayed still, unblinking, for over two minutes.

“If what you say is true, only one thing it means.”

“The end of civilization,” said Ezra, his somber expression mirroring the Stormcaller’s.