

# Gold Mountain

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*In the bittersweet story that follows, he shows us that sometimes you can't escape your roots, even if you plant them deep in the soil of another world...*

Johnston Lien stood at the open door of the tram, one elbow crooked around a guardrail, her blue eyes squinting in the morning glare at the sky-piercing needle of the orbital elevator to the south. The sun was in the Cold Dew position, early in the dog-month, when the temperature began to soar and the sunlight burned brighter in the southern sky. Summer was not long off, and Lien hoped to be far from here before it came. As the tram rumbled across the city of Nine Dragons, she turned her attention back to her notes, checking the address of her last interviewee and reviewing the pertinent bits of data from their brief earlier meeting.

Lien had been in Nine Dragons for well over three months, and was eager to return home to the north. She didn't care for the climate this far south, the constant humidity of the sea air, the heat of the southern sun. Nor did she have much patience for the laconic character of Guangdong, the endless farms stretching out in every direction, the slow and simple country wisdom of the southern farmers. Lien was a daughter of Beijing, the Northern Capital, and was accustomed to the hustle of crowded city streets, of nights at the Royal Opera and afternoons in ornamental gardens, of dashing officers of the Eight Banners Army and witty court scholars in their ruby-tipped hats. Nine Dragons, and the port city of Fragrant Harbor across the bay, was filled with nothing but rustics, fishermen, district bureaucrats, and workmen. The only people of culture who came through were travelers on their way to Gold Mountain, but they passed through the city and to the base of the orbital elevator while scarcely looking left or right, and before they'd had time to draw a breath of southern air into their lungs were onboard a gondola, rising up along the electromagnetic rails of Gold Mountain, up the orbital tether of the Bridge of Heaven to the orbiting city of Diamond Summit, thirty-six thousand kilometers overhead.

Johnston Lien was a researcher with the Historical Bureau of the Ministry of Celestial Excursion, and today she'd make her final site visit and collect the last of the data needed for her project. She was part of a group of scholars and researchers given the task of compiling a complete history of the early days of space exploration, beginning with the inception of the Ministry of Celestial Excursion under the aegis of the Xuanton Emperor in the previous century, and continuing straight through to the launch of the Treasure Fleet to the red planet Fire Star, which began just weeks before. The history was to be presented to the emperor in the Northern Capital when the final ship of the Treasure Fleet, a humble water-tender christened *Night Shining White*, departed on its months' long voyage to the red planet.

The tram approached the eastern quarter of Nine Dragons, where the buildings of Ghost Town huddled together over cramped streets, before the city gave way to docklands, and then to the open sea. Lien

returned her notes and disposable brush to her satchel, and chanced a slight smile. She'd already made initial contact with this, her final interview subject, and once she'd finished with him, her work would be complete. She could return straight away to the Inn of the White Lotus, pack up her things, and board a Cloud Flyer back to the Northern Capital. Once she'd filed her findings with the chief of her bureau, she'd be able to return to her regular duties—and more, she'd be able to return to her own life.

The tram reached the easternmost point of its circuit, the driver ringing a bell to announce the last stop. Lien released her hold on the guardrail and hopped to the cobbled street, a few sad-faced old white men making their careful way down the tram's steps behind her. As the tram reversed course and made its way back toward the west, Lien walked up the narrow street; under an archway crested by a massive carved eagle, through the gates of Ghost Town.

Most of Lien's days, these last months, had been spent within the wall of Ghost Town, among the old Vinlanders, the "white ghosts." This was a bachelor society, with only one woman for every ten men. She'd gotten to know more than a few of them, over the long months, as nearly all of them had been involved in the construction of Gold Mountain, the three thousand kilometer-tall tower which rose to meet the orbital elevator, the Bridge of Heaven. Some of the old men had been more helpful than others. Some of them had reached such an advanced age that they couldn't even remember the year in which they were born, nor their own mothers' names. When asked, they would simply mutter, "It was too long, too long ago," in their guttural English. They were hollow men, these old Vinlanders, leaning against cold walls or sitting on empty fruit crates, patiently waiting for death to claim them. They were used up, discarded, and they made Lien uncomfortable in her own skin.

Lien had worked her whole life to overcome the stereotypes and misconceptions most Chinese had about Vinlanders, even those like her who had never set eyes on the homeland of their forefathers. Lien's grandfathers and one grandmother all arrived in China in the middle of the last century, and her father had been born in China. Ghost Town, full of men and women who fit every preconceived notion of the "white ghost," was a reminder to her of how far her people had come in China, and how far they had yet to go.

Lien had only been sent to Guangdong province because she spoke English, the native dialect of the Vinlanders. Her parents had insisted she learn the language, as her maternal grandparents had never learned Mandarin, nor Cantonese, nor any other Chinese dialect. She resented her grandparents for this, embarrassed by their refusal to acclimate. She seldom spoke to them when she and her sister were children, and even less as an adult. When her grandfather passed away, just the previous summer, she had not talked to him in nearly ten years. Lien didn't even attend the funeral ceremony, claiming that her duties at the Historical Bureau prevented her attendance. Her mother had yet to forgive her for this breach of etiquette.

Her last discussion with McAllister James had been brief, but he seemed more lucid and communicative than most of the old-timers she'd interviewed over the previous months. She anticipated a short discussion with him this morning, and with any luck she'd be back in Beijing by the week's end.

At the northern end of Ghost Town, Lien came to the building where her subject lived. To reach his small room on the top floor, Lien had to climb the rickety stairway, up past the foul smelling Vinlander restaurant on the ground floor, from which the odor of grits, hominy, and meatloaves constantly poured, and a small clinic on the second floor where a medicine man still tended to the injuries and ills of Ghost Town with his strange western remedies. At the top floor landing, she found herself at the end of a long, dimly lit hallway, with doorways crowded on either side. Lien checked her notes one final time, confirming the address, and made her way to the correct door.

The old man who answered the door looked at her with barely disguised suspicion, as though he didn't recognize her.

"Mister McAllister?" Lien said, speaking in English for the old man's benefit. "McAllister James? I am Johnston Lien, if you recall. We spoke last week at the market, and you agreed to speak with me for a brief while?"

The old man narrowed his watery eyes, and nodded slowly. Opening the door wide, he stepped out of the way, and motioned Lien inside. When she was through the door, he shut and locked it behind her, and then returned to a threadbare sofa in the far corner of the room. Lien crossed the dusty floorboards to a dining table and chair, the only other furniture in the room.

"May I be seated?"

The old man nodded, and Lien arranged herself on the chair, spreading her notes on the table in front of her.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with me," Lien said, bowing slightly from the waist. The old man just watched her, his expression wary.

McAllister James, in his early eighties, matched the name of "ghost." He seemed spectral, intangible. The few hairs that remained on his liver-spotted scalp were wispy and white, his ears and nostrils grown enormous with the advancing years. He had only a few yellowed teeth left, stained by years of whisky and tobacco—the white man's vices. The skin of his face, neck, and arms was covered with the scars of the flowering-out disease, smallpox.

"You're going to pay, yes?" the old man said brusquely, the first words he'd spoken since she arrived. "To hear me talk?"

Lien nodded.

"Yes, there is a small honorarium, a few copper coins as fee for your trouble."

"Show me," he said.

With a sigh, Lien reached into her satchel, and withdrew a half dozen coppers, stamped with ideograms indicating good fortune, with a square hole bore through the middle. She arranged them in a neat tower at the corner of the table.

"There," Lien said. "Is that sufficient?"

The old man sat up slightly, peering over the edge of the table at the coins. He caught his lower lip between his gums, thinking it over for a moment.

"Alright," he grunted. "I'll talk."

"Very well, Mister McAllister. When we spoke at the market, last week, you mentioned that you were one of the first Vinlanders to come to China, and that you worked on Gold Mountain straight through to its completion. Is that correct?"

The old man leaned back, and arranged his skeletal hands in his lap.

"Well, I don't know that we were the first, but we must have been pretty damned near."

"We?"

The old man got a faraway look in his eyes. A shadow passed briefly across his face, and then was gone.

"My brother and me," he explained. "We came here together, when we were young. And now there's just me, and I'm long past young."

My father was a sharecropper on a Tennessee cotton plantation, *McAllister said*, in Shelby County, just north and east of Memphis. The year the Chinaman came to town, we'd lost more than half of the crop to boll weevils, and we stood ready to starve. The Chinaman told us about work on the Gold Mountain, across the seas. Steady work and high pay for anyone who had a strong back and was willing. You didn't have to ask us twice. Michael—my brother—and I signed up on the spot, got a few pieces of copper for traveling expenses, and we were on our way.

Now, it wasn't that Michael and I were all hot on the notion of China. We liked things just fine in Tennessee, if there was money or work to be had. But there wasn't. In China, at least, we'd be fed three squares a day, and would make enough coin to send home to feed the rest of the family. Michael and I left our parents and two sisters behind, and went with the Chinaman down to the river, along with a dozen or so other young men from Shelby County. I never heard from my parents again, but a few years back my youngest sister's son wrote to me in Nine Dragons, inviting me to come back to Tennessee to live with them. By that time, though, Vinland was leaning a bit too close to the Aztec Empire for my taste, not under their rule but near enough as made no difference, and I didn't have any interest in living under the bloody shadow of the Mexica. No, I stayed right here in Ghost Town, where the only shadow that falls on me is that goddamned tower—Gold Mountain—and that line going up to heaven. We helped build that tower, my brother and me. It cost Michael his life, and cost me damn near everything else.

I was just eighteen when we rode that paddle steamer down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexica, where a China-bound freighter was waiting for us. Michael wasn't yet sixteen, and celebrated a birthday somewhere on the long sea voyage from the eastern shores of Vinland to the dock in Fragrant Harbor.

A lot of men died on the way over, though it's not something a lot of us like to talk about. We were packed in the holds below deck cheek-to-jowl, and were lucky to get slop and water once a day. More often than not, though, the water had gone bad, or there were bugs in the slop, and what with the waves and the motion of the boat the food would either come back up or else rush too fast out the other end. When we rounded the tip of Fusang, down there in those cold reaches of the southern sea, the boat got to rocking so badly that our hold was near ankle-deep in the spew and offal from the men. One man whose name I never knew shat himself to death, after swallowing amoebas or some such in the tainted water, but the ship's crew left his soiled corpse in the hold with us for nearly a week. When, years later, we finished construction on Gold Mountain, and work was scarce, a lot of men talked about going back to Vinland in one of those ships, taking their savings with them. I couldn't credit it, why anyone who'd been through an ocean voyage like that would willingly make another. I suppose that's one reason I stayed here in China, even after all that happened. I don't think the smell of those weeks has ever left my nostrils, not even these long decades later.

In any event, Michael and I made it to Guangdong more or less intact, where work was already underway on Gold Mountain. It was 1962 by our calendar, the fifty-fourth year of the Xuanton Emperor by the reckoning of the Chinese, and though Vinland had been a satellite state of China for just over a century, there'd been only a handful of Vinlanders who'd emigrated to China in all that time. I know Michael and I weren't the first to come, but we weren't too far behind.

Construction on Gold Mountain had begun the year before, from what I later learned. It hadn't taken long for the foreman and shift bosses to realize there weren't nearly enough willing laborers in China to meet the demands of the Ministry of Celestial Excursion. Hell, if they'd not sent out the call for workers to the ends of the Empire, they might still be building the tower even today. Some of those who came to work on Gold Mountain were from Africa, some from India, even a small number from Europe, but the most

who answered the call were Vinlanders like Michael and me, mostly from the southern states of Texas, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Oklahoma.

Gold Mountain wasn't much taller than a regular building, at that point. Up on the hill called Great Peace —on the western end of the island of Fragrant Harbor, just across the bay from the Nine Dragons Peninsula —it was a boxy framework of graphite epoxy about a kilometer on a side, and just a few hundred meters tall. They'd not even pressurized the bottom segments yet, just laid the foundation. By the time we were through, that tower reached up three thousand kilometers, and all because of us. Chinese minds might have dreamed the thing, but it was the sweat off Vinlander backs that built it. That, and Vinlander blood.

But even then, at the beginning, we knew we weren't really welcome. The Chinese called Vinlanders "white ghosts," and said we were barbarians, and savages, and worse. And even when we moved from Guangdong into the other provinces, after Gold Mountain was built, we'd still be huddled together into Ghost Towns at the fringes of town, welcome only to run restaurants, or do bureaucrats' laundry, or manual labor.

When we got off the freighter at the Fragrant Harbor dock, it was just chaos. Two other ships were letting out workers, and there must have been hundreds, thousands even, all packed into that small space. None of us knew where to go, or what to do, most of us too busy trying to remember how to walk on dry land to be of much use to anyone. There were men in loose fitting white jackets and pants, standing on upturned boxes, calling out in a dozen different languages. One of them was a white man speaking English with a Texas accent. He said, "All Vinlanders who want to work, come with me!" I grabbed Michael by the arm, and we followed the man into the city.

Fragrant Harbor wasn't then like it is today. What Chinese there were in the area all lived across the bay in Nine Dragons, and all of the government offices, and restaurants and shops and such were over there with them. In Fragrant Harbor there wasn't much besides the docks, the warehouses where all the building materials were kept, and the Gold Mountain worksite. All of the workers were housed in a tent city on the east side of Great Peace mountain. Like tended to attract like, so one part of the tent city would be Swedes, another part Ethiops, another part Hindi. When Michael and I arrived, there weren't but a few hundred Vinlanders in the whole place, all huddled together in one corner of the tent city. By the time Gold Mountain was complete, and they shut down the worksite, we numbered in the thousands, and tens of thousands.

The work was hard, and dangerous, even before the tower climbed kilometers into the sky. The lattice of Gold Mountain is made up of pressurized segments filled with pressurized gas. That's what gives the tower its strength, what lets it stand so tall. Without those segments to distribute tension and weight, we couldn't have built a tower much taller than 400 kilometers, much less high enough to hook up with the orbital tether of the Bridge of Heaven. But the same thing that made the tower possible made it damnably tricky to build. God help you if you were up on a scaffolding or on a rig when a bulkhead blew out, or if you were down below when the graphite epoxy debris of an explosive depressurization rained down like shrapnel. And then, once the tower was tall enough, you didn't have to worry just about a bulkhead exploding in your face, or you losing your grip and falling down a thousand meters below, but you had to start worrying about your supply of heated oxygen running out, or your pressure suit catching a leak, or your thermals failing and your fingers and toes freezing before you could get to safety. There weren't many in Ghost Town once Gold Mountain was through that hadn't lost at least a finger or toe to the chill of two thousand kilometers up, and there weren't any that hadn't buried what was left of a friend—or a brother—who'd fallen off the tower to their untimely end. I've buried my share, and then some.

It wasn't all work, though, even when things were at their hardest. There was a good living, in those early

days, to be made off of the appetites of the Vinlander workers. Most of us didn't trust Eastern medicine, and wouldn't put our health in the hands of an herbalist if our lives depended on it, so the foremen of the worksite would hire sawbones, Vinlanders and Europeans with experience in Western medicine to see to our health and well-being. And when we got hungry, we wanted food that reminded us of home, not the fish-heads and strange fruits of the Chinaman. The first restaurateurs were Vinlanders who realized they could make a better living feeding their fellow workers traditional southern fare—grits, hominy, meatloaves, and cornbread—than they could working at construction themselves.

Less savory aspects of the Vinlanders' appetites, too, were met by the brothels. Owned by Chinese businessmen, these would bring young girls from Vinland to "service" the workers. Most were damned near slaves, sold into indentured servitude by their parents back in Vinland for a few coins. Their contracts ran for ten years, at the end of which they would be free. Rare was the woman who made it ten years in the brothels.

Michael—God rest his soul—lost his heart to one of those girls in the Excelsior Saloon and Brothel. She was from Tejas, and her name was Susanne Greene, or Greene Zhu Xan as the Chinawoman madame called her. Michael fell in love with her on sight. For my sins, I suppose I fell in love with her, too. We'd been in China just two years, and the tower now reached several kilometers into the sky. Since our arrival, we'd been sending back home at least one in every ten coins we made. Once Michael met Zhu Xan, though, he had other uses for his money. Not prurient uses, mind, though he was a frequent enough visitor to the Excelsior. No, he was saving up his money to buy Zhu Xan out of her contract at the brothel, so he could take her for his wife.

Well, Michael had just about gotten his nut together when we made that last ascent. We were line-and-basket men, Michael and me, always working high up in the scaffolds, welding together the joints in the latticework and securing the bulkheads. We were at the very top, must have been seven or eight kilometers up, and we had to wear heavy thermal suits and breathing apparatuses just to be up there. Michael was in the basket that day, while I was up on the joist working the rigging.

I can't rightly say what went wrong. One minute I was up there looking out over the pale blue sky as it stretched out over the curve of the horizon, and the next minute I heard a sound like a musket shot, and all hell broke loose. By the time I looked down, as quick as it takes to say it, everything had changed. The line had separated just above the basket, just snapped in two like a string pulled too tight, and there was Michael, hanging onto the side of the scaffold for dear life. The basket was tumbling down to the ground far below. It fell straight for a ways, spinning slightly end over end, but then it bumped against the side of the tower and was sent spiraling out, away from the scaffold. I lost sight of it in a cloud bank. The top of the line, the end still attached to the rigging, snapped back towards me like a whip, and almost caught me across the chest. As it was, I managed to shy away just in time, but it slapped against the joist as loud as a thunderclap, and left a mark in that graphite epoxy, which isn't an easy material to scuff.

Now, the gloves and boots on those thermal suits weren't made for climbing, but Michael did his level best. The walls of the tower were just an empty framework of girders that high up, without bulkhead walls, and so he was able to worm his slow way back up to the top. He wasn't much more than a few dozen meters below the top when the basket-line broke, and he managed to climb a few meters before his strength gave out. Then he was left hanging there, his arms wrapped around a girder, calling through his helmet radio for help.

He was calling for me, calling for his brother, begging me to come down and help him. And I could have, too. I could have attached a safety line to my suit's harness, and rappelled down and taken his hand. It wouldn't have taken more than a few minutes. I could have lowered myself, grabbed hold of Michael, and then raised us both back up to safety. But I didn't.

I want to say that I couldn't, but that's not true. I could have done, if I'd not been a coward. I'd never known that I was a coward before that moment, but seeing my brother dangling over the abyss, and knowing that the only thing standing between him and the Almighty was me, I just froze with fear, unable to move. I just stayed where I was, holding onto the joist for all I was worth, trying to shut out the sounds of Michael's calls for help in my helmet's speakers.

When Michael fell, I heard his screams, all the way down.

When I got back down to Earth, the first thing I did was hie myself over to the Excelsior, to break the news to Zhu Xan. With Michael gone, I figured I'd do the right thing and offer to marry her, myself. As his next of kin, Michael's savings would be mine, and I could think of no fitter use for that sad legacy than to buy the freedom of the woman he'd loved.

By the time I walked through the swinging doors of the Excelsior, though, it was already too late. Michael fell far faster than I could climb down, and gossip flies even faster still, so word of her lover's fall had reached Zhu Xan's ears long before I arrived. There, in the big front parlour of the Excelsior, I saw the broken and lifeless body of Zhu Xan, past all caring. She'd jumped from the balcony of one of the upper rooms, and fallen to her death in the street far below, a tintype of Michael McAllister clutched to her breast. The whores and drunkards of the saloon had brought her body inside, where it lay in state, like she was some departed queen. They were buried in the workers' cemetery that night, Zhu Xan and what little remained of Michael, side by side in a narrow trench.

I never again ascended the heights of Gold Mountain. I begged the foremen to let me work on the ground. My terror and cowardice had already cost my brother his life, and I didn't want to put myself, or anyone else, at risk ever again. I spent the next twelve years on the ground, hauling slag, moving girders and bulkhead walls and gas canisters, while above me the tower of Gold Mountain rose ever higher, its shadow growing longer and longer with every passing day.

I was thirty-seven years old when Gold Mountain was complete, and the Bridge of Heaven tether reached down from the orbital platform to the top of the three thousand-kilometer tower. Heaven and earth were joined together, and man could ride the Bridge of Heaven thirty-six thousand kilometers to orbit.

With work on Gold Mountain complete, the Vinlanders were left without jobs. Some of us returned to Vinland, taking what little they'd been able to save with them—a pittance in China, but a fortune back in Mule Shoe, or Memphis, or Augusta—but most lost even that little in the gambling dens, or over cards or dice on the long sea voyage home. Provided they made it back alive, that is, since many died in the passage, with money still in their pockets, through sickness, or injury, or misadventure.

Some Vinlanders found work in factories, or in mills, or on fishing trawlers, wherever there was hard work to be done that the Chinese didn't want to do. They moved from the coastal region of Guangdong to the other provinces of China, living in small enclaves of "white ghosts," eking out hardscrabble livings.

I stayed in Guangdong, for my part. With the worksite closed, we that remained settled across the bay in Nine Dragons, and took what work we could find. There was a wall in Ghost Town where Vinlanders posted messages and notices, and we'd haunt that corner, looking for word of jobs, of any work. But there weren't just work notices. There'd be desperate notes from fathers searching for their sons, or brothers for brothers. Or else warnings not to take work with a particular farmer or mill owner, those that did not pay promised wages or who provided their workers food unfit for consumption. Old men, towermen from the earliest days of Gold Mountain—most of them short a few fingers and toes, some of them missing arms and legs—would sit on upturned fruit crates in the street, and read the posted notices to those who couldn't read for themselves.

The gangs and mutual protection societies flourished in those days, usually made up of men from the same state or region of Vinland. The Lone Stars of Tejas, the Okies of Oklahoma, the Cardinals of Kentuck. I never had much patience for that sort of thing, myself, but knew enough not to cross any of them. If a Lone Star wanted your seat at the bar, you best give it to him, if you wanted the use of all your limbs by the next day. But they lived by their own sort of code, and if you did right by them, they'd do right by you.

There were gambling dens in Ghost Town, too, as there'd been in the Gold Mountain tent city. Places where men shot dice or played cards, bet on the outcome of dog fights and cock fights, boxing matches and tests of skill. Many lost a month's salary in a single night's indiscretion, though I suppose there must have been a few to see a profit out of it.

Many, too, spent their wages in the whisky dens, where Chinamen and women of position and standing could sometimes be found, lounging on hardwood benches, smoking thick-rolled cigars and sipping Tennessee whisky or Kentuck bourbon. The Chinese came to soak up the local color, and get an amusing story about their night among the savages to tell the folks back home.

I still had a healthy bankroll, what with my own savings, and those left me after Michael's death. I rented a suite of rooms in the nicer quarter of Ghost Town, and got a good paying job as a shift manager at a cigar-rolling factory. All of the factory workers were Southern Vinlanders, and the owner of the factory was a Mandarin who was kind to his workers, when his mood was right. When his mood was dark, he could be as fierce as a demon from hell, but thankfully those times were few and far between.

Things were good, for a few years, but it all changed when I got the smallpox, the "flowering-out disease." I lost my job, and damn near lost my life. Most of us who caught the disease died of it, and those that survived will bear the scars of it for the rest of our days. We didn't trust Chinese herbalists, of course, so we trusted our fates to the hands of Vinlander sawbones, practitioners who had little experience with the disease, and were ill-equipped to treat it. By the time I was past the worst of it, weak and scarred, I'd spent nearly all of my savings on medicines. I'd been shut out of the cigar factory, to keep from spreading the disease to the others, and when my savings ran dry I was evicted from my suite and turned out on the street. I was forty-two years old, and had to start all over, from the bottom.

I found work in a garment shop, stitching the hems on women's robes. My wages were enough that I could rent a small room, and eat regularly, but not much more besides. I'd not sent home any money in years, by this point, and was still plagued with the guilt of it from time to time. I sometimes wondered what had become of my parents. Surely they were dead by now. Had they known somehow what had become of Michael, or died thinking that he still lived, somewhere across the sea?

Things weren't going much better for the rest of the Vinlanders in China, either. In the popular press, we were described as heathens and barbarians. They said we were savage, impure, full of strange lusts and foreign diseases. There were new decrees issued every year—no Chinese could marry a white, no white could own property, no white could take imperial examination—just to keep us in line.

Things reached a head ten years after the completion of Gold Mountain. The Council of Deliberative Officials enacted an Exclusion Decree that said no more Vinlanders could enter China. The wives and families of current resident laborers like me were barred from entry. All Vinlanders needed to be registered, and to carry our papers at all times. Only Vinlanders who were teachers, merchants, students, or diplomats would be permitted entry, and there were scarce few of those.

Then came the Driving Out, as the Vinlanders who had moved to the other regions of China were forced out, at the point of a sword or the barrel of a musket. There had been Ghost Towns in most large Chinese cities in the years after the Bridge of Heaven was completed, but after the Exclusion Decree, the



only one left was in Nine Dragons.

Some Vinlanders formed partnerships of up to ten men, pooling their money to open businesses that would let them claim status as "merchants." They could then receive a certificate of legal residency, instead of being considered itinerant laborers. I tried to pool my money with a pair of brothers named Jefferson and their cousins, to open a dry goods store in Ghost Town, but in the end the ties of family proved stronger than any other obligation. The brothers, with the help of one of their cousins, falsified documents to cut me out of the partnership, swindling me of all my savings, and leaving me worse off than I'd been before. I was nearing fifty, and fit only for manual labor.

It has been more than thirty years since, nearly half of a Chinese cycle of years, and I'm still in virtually the same position as I was then. Since coming to work on Gold Mountain, I made two small fortunes, at least as far as Vinlanders are concerned, and lost them both. I've never since made near that much. Perhaps my heart hasn't been in it. Or two chances were all I had, in this lifetime, and having used them both my only choice is to wait until the next world, or the next life, whichever the case may be. My only regret, I suppose, is that I never married, but with so few Vinlander women in the country, I didn't have much choice. Too bad that Zhu Xan couldn't have waited, just a few minutes more, to take that leap from the Excelsior's balcony. Perhaps we could have been happy together. I think about her still, from time to time. And my brother, of course.

The Exclusion Decree was repealed, fifteen years after it was enacted, but the fact that Vinlanders can now emigrate to China with more ease means little to us old bachelors of Ghost Town. I will die without ever laying eyes on my homeland again. The world has passed us by. We wait. We will welcome Death when he comes.

In the vestibule, commuters bustled, waiting for the bell that would sound the arrival of the next gondola. Just beyond the doors, the electromagnetic rails ran straight up the side of the tower, climbing up past the clouds. To one side of the room stood a young woman of Vinlander extraction, and a very old white ghost.

Johnston Lien and McAllister James were on the island of Fragrant Harbor, standing in the departure lounge at the base station of Gold Mountain. The old man was nervous, his gaze darting about the room furtively, his arms tucked in close to his narrow chest. Lien had not told him why they'd come, only that she had a surprise for him. In the end, she had to promise McAllister another stack of copper coins before he'd leave his rented rooms, and only with them safely in hand would he agree to bestir himself.

Lien had stayed in Guangdong longer than she'd expected. She could have left the week before, after finishing her interview with McAllister, but after hearing his story, she felt there was one more thing she had to do.

She was reminded of her grandfather, to look at McAllister now. Her own grandfather might have been such a man, had he not married her grandmother, and raised a family, and opened a successful Vinlander restaurant in Guangdong during the years of the Exclusion Decree, and later moved north to serve his cuisine in the capital city, and once even served a distant cousin of the emperor himself, and died in bed surrounded by friends and family. Except for an ungrateful granddaughter, of course, who never considered what sacrifices her parents and grandparents might have made so that she could grow up in a China where she could take imperial examinations, and hold administrative office. Women couldn't yet own property, or remarry after the death of their husbands, but Lien was sure that was just a matter of time.

By the same token, had circumstances been other than they were, McAllister might have been her grandfather. He was of the right age, and background, and had it been he that met her grandmother, then

things might have gone quite differently for him.

She had allowed her grandfather to slip from this life without taking the opportunity to say a final farewell, nor to thank him. Perhaps in doing some small favor for McAllister James, she could make amends to her grandfather's spirit. She'd had to pull strings at the Ministry of Celestial Excursion, and there was a regional administrator whom she now owed a significant favor, but Lien was convinced it was worth it. For McAllister's sake, for that of her grandfather, and for Lien herself. She felt calmer and more at peace at this moment than she had in years, anxious to see the look on the old man's face.

"Why we here?" the old man finally asked, in his broken Cantonese.

"You'll see," Lien answered in English, laying a gentle hand on the old man's shoulder.

The departure bell chimed as the gondola approached, and the doors opened with a hissing outrush of air once the gondola was safely docked.

"Come along, Mister McAllister." Lien took his withered hand in hers, and gently led him toward the open doors.

The old man's eyes darted from side to side, as he meekly followed behind.

"Where are we going?" he asked in English.

"You'll see."

The gondola doors slid closed behind them, and Lien guided the old man to an open acceleration couch. There were a few dozen engineers, naval officers, and bureaucrats in the gondola with them, and a number of them cast sidelong glances at the old white man trembling in the corner, some with thinly disguised contempt.

The acceleration couch offered an unobstructed view of the observation ports on the opposite wall of the gondola. The old man looked to the window, confused, and it was not until the ground fell away, and he saw the rooftops of Fragrant Harbor spread out like an embroidered quilt at his feet, that he understood what was happening.

"No," he said, his voice soft and far away. "Too high. Too long ago. No."

Lien took his hand in hers, and tried to soothe him.

"It will be alright, Mister McAllister. The Bridge of Heaven is perfectly safe."

The view out the gondola window was now of the bay, and of the Nine Dragons Peninsula. To the north stretched Guangdong and the Chinese mainland, to the east and south the sapphire blue of the south China sea.

"Oh, no," the old man said, squeezing his eyes shut tight. "Too long."

In moments, the gondola was ascending at speeds of 1,000 kilometers per hour, then 2,000 kph, then faster still. On either side of the passenger gondola, cargo loads traveling up and down the tether at speeds of over 39,000 kph rocketed by, exerting hundreds of thousands of gees on the cargoes they carried, enough to liquefy any passengers. At its leisurely top speed of 3,000 kph, still putting several gees of pressure on its occupants, it would take the passenger gondola just over twelve hours to reach Diamond Summit, the station in geosynchronous Earth orbit above Fragrant Harbor.

"No," the old man said, shaking his head.

Lien was beside herself.

"I'm *so* sorry!" she said, squeezing McAllister's frail hand as hard as she dared. "I'd thought to do something nice for you. I'd no idea you'd be so frightened."

"No," the old man whispered urgently.

"It will be alright," Lien insisted. "Once we get to the top, you'll see what I wanted to show you, and then we can return. Alright? Please forgive me, I didn't mean to cause you distress."

The old man kept silent, his mouth drawn into a line, and turned his head away.

By the third hour, the old man would not speak to Lien, not even in response to direct questions. He just sat, his hands in white-knuckled grips on the straps of the couch, his gaze fixed on the curve of the horizon visible through the viewport.

When the stewards came by to serve the mid-voyage meal, the old man waved them away, accepting only a bulb of water from their trays.

When the gondola slowed, and docked at Diamond Summit, the passengers found themselves weightless. The stewards helped them from their couches, and guided them to the nose of the gondola, to the airlock that led to the Diamond Summit entry way.

Once onboard Diamond Summit, Lien led the old man to the main body of the station, which rotated around the central hub, providing artificial gravity to the environs. At a large reinforced panoramic window the pair stopped.

In front of them, a few thousand kilometers off, they could see the last of the Treasure Fleet departing for the red planet Fire Star. Below them stretched the blue curve of the Earth, and the glow of the sun limning the far horizon with pale fire. They could see even as far as the edge of the western hemisphere, and the northern continent which McAllister had once called home. Nearest them was the Muslim colony of Khalifa on the coast, founded in centuries past by admirals of the Dragon Throne. Beyond that, off towards the blazing sun in the east, rose the lands of the Commonwealth of Vinland.

"There," Lien said, supporting the old man with one arm, pointing towards the distant horizon with the other. "That is what I wanted to show you. First to let you see what your labor those many long years was for, and second to give you a final look at your lost home. There, on the horizon. That is your... that is *our* homeland. Vinland."

The old man was trembling. He looked from the panorama to Lien, his eyes watering and his lip quivering.

"You... you don't understand," he managed to get out, with difficulty. His voice caught in his throat, sounding like an injured bullfrog. "It's not terror that plagues me, but guilt."

Lien looked at the old man, confused.

"But I assumed that you were still afflicted by the fear that gripped you up on Gold Mountain, all those years ago."

The old man jerked his head from side to side, as though trying to shake her words from his ears.

"No!" he shouted, flecks of foam spotting the corners of his mouth. "It wasn't fear, not even then. You

don't..."

He left off for a moment, pulling away from Lien and averting his eyes.

Lien reached out and laid a hand on his thin shoulder. She thought of her grandfather, and all that had gone unsaid between them.

"Please," she said. "Tell me."

"No," he repeated, with less conviction.

"Please," she urged. "What do you mean it wasn't fear?"

The old man turned to her, his face a red grimace, his eyes flashing.

"It was envy!" he said. "It was lust! It was greed! But it was never fear. Anything but fear!"

He rocked back on his heels, eyes on the far ceiling, his body racked with sobs.

"I could have saved Michael," he went on. "I only had to reach out my hand. But as he dangled there, I couldn't help thinking that with him gone, Zhu Xan would be mine. I loved her, just as he did, and with my brother dead the way would be clear for me. But..."

He broke off again, sobs interrupting his words. He slid to the floor, on his knees, his hands in his lap.

"But she was already dead," Lien said.

Mucus ran down his face, and tears streamed across his dry cheeks.

"Yes!" he wailed.

Lien stood, looking down at the frail old man at her feet, rocked by paroxysm of grief and guilt.

"That's why you never went home, isn't it?" she asked, realization dawning. "Why you never returned to Vinland. You couldn't face your family."

The old man nodded, and beat his thin fists against the carpeted floor.

"Yes!" he shouted.

Without another word, she knelt down, and wrapped her arms around the old man's slender frame. She drew him tight to her, and McAllister pressed his face into her shoulder, convulsing with sobs.

"Oh, Michael!" the old man said, his voice cracking. "I'm so, so sorry. It was my job to protect you, and I... Oh, God. Forgive me. Forgive me!"

Lien held him tighter, and stroked the back of his wrinkled skull with her hand.

"I forgive you," she whispered, tears in her eyes.

They held each other, the old white ghost and the woman from the Northern Capital. Diamond Summit turned, and the curve of Vinland slipped out of view, and the mountains and plains of China swelled to fill the window.

"Now, grandfather," Lien said, at the edge of hearing. "Forgive me, too."