

fiction

## DRAGON'S FIRE

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No one would notice one less Chinese sailor. They hadn't noticed one extra when I boarded back in Beijing, and they certainly didn't realize I was a woman.

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KATRINA NICHOLSON

Halifax—December 6, 1917

The airship's massive screw churned lazily beside me. I felt the throb-throb-throb of it in my chest. Even station-keeping, the turbulence was strong enough to lift me if I let go of the railing. My heart skittered as I gripped the frigid metal and leaned over.

The city sprawled below in dull predawn browns, greens and greys. It looked like a map of itself. The tiny, square wooden houses puffed coal smoke into the mist. Only a handful of carriages and motorcars crawled the streets at this hour.

The thin strands of the anti-airship net sparkled where they caught the light. Dark lumps of buoys at regular intervals held it up. Somewhere off our bow, two huge artificial islands guarded the entrance—closed now for the night.

The harbour split the city in half, wide at the entrance, narrow through the middle, ending in a basin where steamships and airships bobbed at anchor as they waited for the convoy to assemble. No activity on their decks or ours. A perfect time to escape.

No one would notice one less Chinese sailor. They hadn't noticed one extra when I boarded back in Beijing, and they certainly didn't realize I was a woman. British sailors expected Chinese women to be tottering around on bound feet. Emperor Guangxu's reforms, instituted

just before I was born, had saved me from that. With my big feet, I could climb over the railing and down to the ground to find Casey. If only I had ten thousand feet of rope.

Beijing—October 1917

*Do you have everything you need, Xiang?* Grandmother signed with her good hand.

I took a deep breath to still my doubts and nodded.

Grandmother was the only one who still used my given name, which meant ‘lucky.’ The rest of the family—when they acknowledged my existence—called me *Bu Xiang*, or ‘unlucky.’ They thought I didn’t know. Mandarin is hard to lip-read because tone changes word meanings, but their scorn told me enough. Grandmother understood. Our family was embarrassed by her fingerless left hand and tried to keep her out of the way when visitors came.

We stood on the pier below the *White Mountain*, a small British airship that looked like it should have been scrapped years ago. The whitewash on the hull didn’t quite cover the streaks of rust. I wished I could wait for a safer ship, but with the war on, all the good ships were in battle.

The crew lounged against the gondola railing and smoked while the Captain anxiously supervised the cargo loaders. A long line of them staggered up the ramp in their lead boots, carrying metal barrels of Dragon’s Breath into the hold. I recognized some of them: my father’s men.

In our homespun cotton tunics and trousers, Grandmother and I looked like working men. Black calf-length boots hid Grandmother’s bound feet. No one would have guessed we were the Emperor’s niece and mother-in-law. Grandmother had insisted I travel as a man so Father wouldn’t find me.

I carried a few necessities and changes of clothes on my back. My most important possessions were the formula for Dragon’s Breath, which I had memorized, and the newspaper photo hidden in my shoe that proved Casey was still alive.

Grandmother hefted a pair of lead boots from the cart and dumped them into my arms. I signed: *what do I need these for?*

One of Father’s men tripped on the edge of the ramp and lost his

grip on the barrel. The sailors made a grab for it as it drifted past, but missed. It floated into the sky, trailing the safety rope the loader was supposed to wear around his wrist.

“One never knows,” her lips said.

Halifax—December 1917

Grandmother was wise. I didn’t need rope. I could steal a barrel of Dragon’s Breath, kick off one of my lead boots, and sink gently to the ground. I grabbed my boots from under the hammock I time-shared with another Chinese sailor on the night shift. I didn’t put them on, lest my clomping steps alert the crew.

I kept to the shadows as I crept to the hold, looking back often in my nervousness. Too often. I tripped over the edge of a hatch and dropped the boots. I looked around nervously, but the corridor remained empty. I bent to grab the boots. Too late, I felt the vibrations of footsteps through the deck. I abandoned the boots and tried to scramble away, but a pair of beefy arms wrapped around me, enveloping me in the stench of sweat and onions. The lump of a male member prodded my behind, and I lashed out like a cornered tiger.

Beijing—July 1914

I never understood the appeal of male members. The Emperor’s reforms had made it possible for women to leave the inner world of the home and explore the outer world of men. My sisters and I could sneak out and watch undressed men through strategically placed holes in the bathhouse wall. My sisters giggled and pointed. I wandered off. Even after I flowered, nothing about men or their bodies appealed to me. I thought I would grow out of it. Then I met Casey.

She was fifteen, just one year younger than I. Her skin was white as cream, her lips a cherry blossom pink, her brown hair long and laced with sunlight. She was a Pig, I was a Dog. We were a match. Except for the fact that she was betrothed to my eldest brother, Song.

Casey’s father, J.D. Irving, ran an airship engine company in the British colony of Canada. He brought Casey to China at the behest of my uncle the Emperor. My father’s company produced all of China’s Dragon’s Breath. It was non-flammable, lighter than hydrogen, and

without it, the heavy, steam-powered airships of the British Empire couldn't fly. It should have put them at our mercy, but we needed their complicated gearwheel engines. They kept the secret of their construction as closely as we guarded the formula for Dragon's Breath. In an effort to bring our two nations closer, the Emperor wanted to intermarry the Longs and the Irvings.

"We don't need them, you know," Casey said to me one day. I could hear then, and our schools had taught us enough of each other's languages to communicate. We lay in the shadows of the garden pavilion at midday, hidden from prying eyes and the hot sun by an intricately carved wooden fence.

As the daughter closest to Casey's age, it was my job to entertain her while our fathers negotiated the betrothal. We were supposed to spend our time embroidering in the upstairs room of the main house, but Casey was like me—she wanted to explore. I could tell from Mother's pinched face that she disapproved. She and Father were very old-fashioned and wished (never within the Emperor's earshot, of course) that the old Confucian rules still held. Mother was proud of her bound feet, even though it meant she couldn't get around very well. She had tried to bind my sister's feet too, but Grandmother stopped her, just as she let Casey and I go. I suppose they thought two girls couldn't get into much trouble. They'd change their minds if they saw us with our hands inside each other's clothes.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

I kissed Casey's neck and she shivered. Her hands slid from my breasts to my waist and hesitated. I could tell she wanted to go lower but wasn't sure of me. I shifted my hips to give her what she wanted.

"I mean who needs boys? I can build engines and you can make Dragon's Breath. We could make our own airships and neither China nor Britain can tell us what to do with them. We could do whatever we wanted."

I closed my eyes and arched my back. I was on fire. *She* was what I wanted.

She stopped what she was doing and tapped my nose. "Well? What do you think?"

I sighed and opened my eyes. "I can't make Dragon's Breath."

"Why not?"

"Only Father knows the formula. Well, and the Emperor, since

he invented it. Even the workers don't know the whole thing. Just the parts they work on."

"My father never told me how to build. In fact, he wishes I would sit at home with Mother and make cushions."

"Our fathers have that in common, then."

Casey sat back. "Don't you want to?"

I sat up urgently. "Of course I want to. It makes me sick with rage that Song and Ru and Shan get alchemy tutors while I have to settle for learning whatever Grandmother has picked up over the years. And I'm still better at it than they are."

"So *do* something about it!"

I glared at her. She glared back. We'd had this argument before. Casey didn't understand how lucky she was. While her father might wish she didn't build, he didn't stop her. He'd never laid a hand on her. Even with the new rules, I couldn't dream of going against my father like that.

Our disagreement would end one of two ways: either Casey would stomp off, or we would kiss. This time it was a kiss. Our lips came together bruisingly. I heard a gasp. In my haze of lust, I thought it was Casey. When I lifted my head, I saw my eldest sister Lei standing at the entrance staring at us. Too late, Casey and I scrambled apart.

Lei's upper lip curled. "Father will hear of this."

Halifax—December 1917

The sailor pinned my arms and dragged me to the lift. The platform dropped two decks and deposited us in the glass bubble at the bottom of the gondola. He let go of me and stepped back. I whirled, prepared to savage him, but he held up his hands and I hesitated. His whiskers parted as he said something. Luckily, deafness and not understanding English look the same to the British. He gestured from me to the floor, pointing two fingers at his eyes and then out the window. My heart slowed and rationality returned. He only wanted me to keep watch.

I nodded. Anything to get rid of him. He gave me a gap-toothed grin and swaggered back to the lift. He was shirking his duty, then. Fine by me.

While I waited for the lift to return, the ship shuddered and began to descend. The acrid scent of coal smoke got stronger. Under my

shoes, the huge metal islands came into view as the ship positioned itself above the circular entrance to Halifax airspace. Two small air tugs traveled anti-clockwise from the islands and dragged the net away. The harbour was open for business. We descended toward the north side of the shaft. Curse that sailor! There would be no escape now. I would have to take my chances with the customs inspectors when we docked.

We descended slowly past George's Island II, which was shaped like a bowl. The channel was narrow. According to harbour rules, the north half was ours. Ascending ships kept to the south. My scalp prickled with dread as another airship, larger than ours, swung into our path, rising faster than the recommended speed.

The Captain and harbour pilot, up in the bridge, were effectively blind. They would be relying on their lookout: me! I lunged for the speaking tube and shouted up it.

“Stop! Stop the ship!”

Did I make noise? Would it be recognizable as English?

No change in the course of either ship. I pounded on the wall next to the tube in frustration. I would have to run to the bridge.

I pulled the lever for the lift and bounced impatiently as it made its slow way from the top of the shaft. I looked down. The other ship's gas bag nearly filled the field of view. I could make out the English letters on the fin—*Imo* and a flag I didn't recognize. Red with a blue cross inside a white one. Not German or French. They had no access to Dragon's Breath, so their hydrogen airships were small and made of a flexible, lightweight, oil-based material called *Kunststoff* that would not generate sparks. The *Imo* was metal. It couldn't be American or Japanese either. They only had ocean ships. It must belong to one of the neutral countries. Switzerland, perhaps. Or the Netherlands. I shook myself. Wherever it was from, it was about to hit us!

I yanked open the hatch and sprinted for the 'tween decks ladder. I had climbed maybe halfway to the bridge when a tremendous shudder wracked the ship and nearly knocked me off. I clung to the rail, heart hammering.

We had hit. All I could do now was escape before anyone blamed me. I reversed direction and half-slid toward the hold.

The hold was on the lowest deck, bar the bubble. When I stumbled through the hatch, my foot landed on empty air. My heart skipped a

beat and I threw my weight sideways, landing on my hip next to the huge rent that had split the hold from stem to stern. The shattered topside observation bubble of the *Imo* protruded from the cracked deck. Some of our cargo, mostly Dragon's Breath in barrels, had come loose and bobbed against the ceiling.

With a shudder, the *Imo's* bubble worked itself free of our hull. I grabbed the nearest tie-down strap as cold wind gusted inside. Jagged glass sliced open a barrel as the bubble dropped away. Green flame poured from the rent like New Year's fireworks. An answering fire lit in my veins.

Beijing—July 1914

I stood with my head bowed and stared at my slippers. I could feel my father's angry gaze against the top of my head. My heart pounded. Would he beat me? The reforms hadn't been that far-reaching. It was still my father's right to punish me. I tried not to hyperventilate. Through the wall, I heard Mr. Irving's booming voice as he shouted at Casey and her high, defensive replies. My father would strip the skin off my back if I dared to raise my voice to him.

"Do you think that you are a man? That you will marry a woman, carry on the family business?"

I trembled. "No, Father."

"No? First Daughter did not see you defile your lips on that foreigner?"

My head jerked up. "*That foreigner?* But I thought you wanted Song to marry her!"

My father slapped me across the face.

"If I had my way, all foreigners would be put to the sword."

I gaped at him. I knew he was old-fashioned, but this... he sounded like Prince Duan, the Emperor's cousin, who kept trying to incite nationalist rebellions, even though the Emperor had put the Dowager Empress Cixi to death over it in 1898. If Father supported them, he would know better than to tell anyone about it. Unless he didn't plan to let them live. I started to shake.

"You think you know better than I how to lead this family?"

He snatched up his calligraphy brush and a fragment of parchment and dashed out a set of instructions. He thrust the parchment at me.

“Here. Show me. Show me how you will live in the world of men. Show me how you mean to be a true Long.”

I stared at the parchment. The ink was still wet. It was a recipe in standard Mandarin—men’s writing—which they taught to girls at my school. *1 part acid’s element. 2 parts watery silver...* the formula for Dragon’s Breath! Relief turned my knees to water.

I took the parchment with trembling fingers. “Thank you, Father.”

I ran to find Casey in the garden. Her face was pink and pinched. “Father said I was a disgrace,” she fumed. “Me! My brother Colin can’t even balance an equation, and *I’m* the disgrace!”

“I have it,” I burst out. “This is it! Our big chance!”

“Have what?”

“The formula!”

We commandeered a room at the factory that night after the workers went home. We mixed the ingredients in a still, giggling like my sisters at the bathhouse. Our still was much smaller than the factory still. If it didn’t work the first time, I didn’t want to waste too many ingredients. That’s probably why we survived.

We followed the instructions to the letter. It took all night. By sunrise, we were exhausted but proud and our still was filled with a billowing green mist.

Casey squinted through the glass. “Is it supposed to be green?”

I shook my head and sighed. Dragon’s Breath was orange-red. We must have done something wrong.

She grabbed the spigot, then hissed and shook her hand. “Ouch! It’s hot!”

The spigot whistled as the gas leaked.

“Let me see,” I said.

I raised the lantern to look at her palm. As I did, the burner touched the spilled gas. It burst into green flame, sparking and shooting. The whistle rose in pitch.

My heart seized. “Something’s wrong! Get out!”

We ran for the door.

I threw it open and we tumbled through. At that moment, the still exploded. The shockwave ripped the door off its hinges. It hit me hard in the back of the head. My ears rang. I sprawled onto the grass. The last thing I saw was a jet of green fire as it swallowed Casey. The last thing I thought was: *this was no accident.*



This too was no accident. My father had sent corrupted Dragon's Breath to the British, probably hoping they would blow themselves up. It was an act of war if the British believed the Emperor had done it on purpose. And why wouldn't they? Dragon's Breath could only be traded with the Emperor's approval.

The deck canted sharply. *Get out! Get out!* My instincts screamed. I ignored them and lunged for the flaming barrel, hoping to shove it through the hole in the deck, but it tumbled past me and landed in a mound of other barrels. The impact split a second barrel, which also began to burn. Their green jets ruptured two more barrels. Soon the whole pile was aflame. *RUN!* My instincts howled. This time, I listened.

The 'tween decks ladder was halfway to horizontal. I flew up it like all eighteen levels of hell were at my heels. I burst into the engine room, screaming and waving my arms. British and Chinese sailors hung onto the walls as they frantically worked to right the ship. The heat scorched my skin. The deck, walls, air, and my own body were alive with the vibrations of the enormous gearwheels. The din must have been terrible. Nobody noticed me.

I grabbed the nearest Chinese worker's tunic and dragged him to the ladder. He struggled but went still when I forced his head down. The bottom of the ladder was awash in green fire. He flung himself out of my grip, flapping his lips, waving his arms. The British sailors looked blankly at him but caught on that something was wrong once the panic spread to the other Chinese. A British sailor shouted into the speaking tube. I didn't have to lip-read to know what he was saying. *Abandon ship.*

I raced the sailors as they fled to the hatch and spilled onto the exterior companionway. The frigid air penetrated my sweat-soaked clothes like a slap. The crew scrambled to untie the lifeboats, which were just baskets with balloons attached.

The first lifeboat tipped dangerously as we all piled in at once. The first sailors to board shoved us back out, then cast off before we could jump back in. I ran along the companionway looking for a basket with an empty space. At last, I saw that the bridge crew had a boat to

themselves. Even with the harbour pilot, there was still room. I flung myself into the basket just as they cast off. The Captain frowned, but he didn't shove me out.

The mood was tense as we gently descended. Then all their heads jerked up as one. I followed their gaze and saw that a barrel of corrupted Dragon's Breath had launched itself out of the hold in a shower of green sparks. Another barrel. Another. The third one shot straight up through the gas bag. The ship spiraled toward the water, spewing red gas.

Alarm suffused the sailor's faces. The Captain looked at me. His lips moved. I shook my head. He flapped his arms, shouting. I shook my head. He pointed angrily at the ship, which was now almost completely engulfed in green flame.

I flapped my arms like a dragon, mimed blowing a breath, then shook my head and pretended to retch. *This Dragon's Breath is sick.* He looked worried. He pointed at the ship, at the water, folded his hands in on themselves. *Would it burn out?*

I shook my head. Made an exploding motion with my hands.

The Captain shot a look of alarm at the *White Mountain*, which was now descending almost parallel to us. I pushed him out of the way and let some Dragon's Breath out of the gas bag. Too much. We shot toward the ground at an alarming speed. We had drifted to the eastern bank of the harbour, which was less densely populated than the west. Trees and grass rushed up at us. The pale faces of people gathered on the shore to watch the *White Mountain* burn tilted up as we sailed over their heads. I tensed up and we slammed into the side of a hill near a little white farmhouse. The basket tipped and we spilled into the underbrush. I was dazed and scratched but not seriously hurt. I rolled over and lifted my head.

Across the harbour, the burning *White Mountain* plunged into the water near the docks. People scrambled to turn fire hoses on it. A handful of small airships dumped buckets of water from above. All the water did was make the fire shoot sparks. The people gathered on the other side to watch backed away but did not flee.

"Run!" I screamed at them. When the explosion hit, the pieces of the ship would fly through the air like a thousand needles.

I pushed myself to my hands and knees, then to my feet. I shoved and pulled at the other sailors, trying to get them to run. They didn't

understand. They thought they were far enough away.

A pale woman came out of the house, her coat unbuttoned, holding a baby wrapped in a pink blanket. She walked down the hill toward the shore. I shouted at her to stop. She didn't look in my direction. I felt the sides of my face. They vibrated faintly. I was making noise. Just nothing she understood.

I staggered over to her and snatched the baby. That got her attention. I turned and ran for the top of the hill. When I reached the crest, I looked back. The woman and all of the sailors were chasing me, lips flapping in their angry faces. *Not far enough!* My instincts warned.

I kept going down the other side. I hadn't gotten ten steps when a huge vibration passed under my feet, almost at the same time as a wave of air shoved me in the back and sent me rolling. A green flash filled the air as I folded myself around the baby. *Pleasepleaseplease* I prayed as we tumbled over rocks and dirt. At the bottom of the hill, my back hit a tree. The impact forced my breath out. Pain shot through my chest. *Please...* I loosened my arms and saw a red, squalling face. *Thank you, all the gods of the earth and sky.*

The woman and the sailors had also fallen. They picked themselves up with dazed looks. The sailors' eyes were on the sky. An enormous, angry, green-tinted cloud climbed into the air, high enough to reach the airship net, which had breached in several places and left wires dangling.

I pushed myself shakily to my feet and handed the baby back to the woman. She hugged the baby close, burying her face in the blanket. I knew how she felt. I didn't want to face what had happened either.

Beijing—July 1914

I woke several days after the accident on a pallet in Grandmother's room. My head felt like it was split open and my ears rang. Whenever I opened my eyes, it was always Grandmother's wrinkled face and kind brown eyes I saw. *Casey? Where is Casey?* I needed to know, but I couldn't stay awake long enough to ask.

When I finally woke for good, the ringing was gone, but the silence seemed to press on my ears and fill them up. There must be something in my ears. I reached up to pull the cotton out, but there wasn't any. I

snapped my fingers next to my ears. Nothing. My face crumpled. My hearing was gone.

I fought off tears as Grandmother entered the room with a bowl of noodles in broth.

“Casey?” I asked. Or I think I did.

Grandmother set the bowl down and took my hands. I could see from her face that the news was bad.

“Hurt?”

Her lips moved.

I shook my head. Put my hands over my ears. “Can’t hear.”

With her finger, she traced a character onto my palm. *Death*. There would be no more assignations in the garden. Great sobs wracked my body.

Many days passed before Grandmother judged I was ready to hear the rest. She brought parchment, brush, and ink into the room. I watched dully as she took up the brush in her good right hand, dipped it into the ink and wrote *you are lucky*.

The characters were standard Mandarin. That was interesting. Grandmothers, if they could write at all, generally only knew *nu shu*, the supposedly secret writing women used with each other before the reforms.

I took the brush and jotted *bu*, the negation character, in front of her characters. *Not lucky*.

She calmly took the brush back.

*Dragon’s Fire is highly dangerous. You could have lost your life instead of your hearing.*

*Dragon’s Fire?* I wrote.

*Dragon’s Fire is the unstabilized form of Dragon’s Breath. I discovered it by accident when I was developing the formula. It nearly killed me.*

Grandmother held up her fingerless hand.

I went still. *You discovered Dragon’s Breath?*

*Of course. Why do you think the Emperor married Aunt Liang? And agreed to include rights for women in his reforms? It was part of our deal.*

The Emperor. I had ruined his plans.

*Are Aunt and Uncle angry with me?*

*They are too busy to be angry.*

*Why? What happened?*

*War.*

My stomach cramped with horror. *China fights Britain?*

*Worse! Germany, France, Japan, America, others, fight the British Empire and China.*

Almost the whole world was at war. *For Dragon's Breath*, I guessed. Resentment over our exclusive deal with the British had been brewing for a long time.

*Yes.*

Halifax—December 1917

All I wanted to do was lie down and rest. My ribs hurt when I breathed and sharp stabs of pain radiated from my right ankle. I limped to the top of the hill. With trepidation, I peered over the edge. The bottom dropped out of my stomach. The city was flattened. All the trees were uprooted. Wooden houses had been blasted apart like matchsticks. Brick buildings lay in heaps of rubble. You couldn't tell where one began and the other ended. The streets were an undulating pile of debris. Smoke drifted from hundreds of small fires. Water sloshed alarmingly in the harbour. The ships had been thrown up onto the land. Stinging green rain fell from the sky, along with bits of metal and wood. It smelled like acid and coal. How many people were buried in that mess? Hundreds? Thousands? And one of them was Casey. Suddenly my legs couldn't hold me up. I sank to the ground like a sack of bricks.

A pair of policemen struggled up the hill. Their faces were set, harsh. No doubt people had seen our basket fall from the ship and blamed us for the explosion. The policemen conversed angrily with the sailors. There was a lot of arm-waving. Then the Captain turned and pointed at me.

One of the policemen approached me with his handcuffs. I held out my arms. My father had perpetrated this horror. Someone had to answer for it.

Beijing—October 1917

I was practicing my lip-reading by watching my sisters from the

upstairs window when Grandmother dropped a newspaper in my lap.

The characters were English. It had been a while since I practiced, but I thought it said *The Times*. That wasn't what caught my attention, however. The front-page photograph was of a woman. It was black and white. You couldn't see that her lips were the colour of cherry blossoms and her hair shone with gold. But it was her. I could almost believe it had been taken before the accident, if not for the knotted skin on her neck and arms. Burns. My chest swelled with hope. Casey was alive!

I squinted at the caption. *Casey Irving something something speech something Irving Airship Company something Halifax something Thursday.*

I glared up at Grandmother. *You told me she was dead.* I signed.

*I did not know she lived. They took her body away. We never saw her again,* Grandmother signed back, looking contrite.

I stared at the photo. Casey probably hated me. She hadn't contacted me in three years, and it was my fault she was burned. But I wouldn't know for sure until I saw her. I looked desperately at Grandmother. *I need to go there.*

She nodded. *I overheard my son speak to his factory foreman. A ship leaves tomorrow. You must be on it. I will help you.*

Together, we began to gather the things I would need. After a while, I tapped her on the shoulder.

*You know what Casey and I are.* I signed. *Why do you help?*

Grandmother smiled. *I had a lover before I married.*

I stared at her. How had I never known this?

*Things were different before the British came,* Grandmother explained with her fingers. *Two women or two men, it didn't matter as long as everyone married and produced heirs.*

*Then why don't you support Prince Duan?*

Grandmother grinned. *I like to go outside.*

Halifax—December 1917

The jail was damaged, so they locked me and the sailors from the *White Mountain* in stone cells in an old star-shaped fortress dug into the hilltop on the west side of the harbour. It smelled like old wood and dampness. From my tiny window, I could see the east side of

the hill. The damage there was much less pronounced. Houses held together. Trees still stood. I hoped Casey had been on that side, even though I would probably never see her again.

The Canadians were desperate for an explanation, and the crew of the *White Mountain* knew nothing. Why did the ship explode? Wasn't Dragon's Breath safe? They knew I had the answers, but I couldn't figure out how to tell them.

One after another, stern-looking officials came into my cell to flap their lips at me. I signed back. Their faces turned red. Their arms waved. Sometimes they lost patience and hit things. Sometimes I did. Why couldn't they understand?

I spent the rest of my time peering through the window. It snowed the day after the explosion. Then tents began to crop up on the hill. I hoped the people in them were warm enough. My hands chapped and bled in the cold.

They brought in a Chinese speaker. He was a young Briton with light brown hair and a wispy mustache. He flapped his lips at me, but I could only pick out a few words. *Who? Why?* I tried to answer, but my voice would not cooperate. Understanding flickered across his face. He opened a leather case, removed a piece of paper and a fountain pen, and pushed them across the table to me. I stared at them. I could not write in English. Perhaps the young man could read Mandarin. But where to start? Eventually, I picked up the pen, carefully inked the characters of my name, and passed it over. He frowned at the paper, then left with it.

Days went by. Weeks. Hope faded. The light flickered. Someone had opened the door and come inside. I didn't turn from the window. I kept hoping I might see Casey walk by on the hill.

A hand touched my shoulder and I started. The hand was burned. I turned. A burned face looked back at me. A beloved face. Casey stared at me with the same mixture of hope and disbelief that I felt. In her hand, she held the paper bearing the characters of my name. *Long Xiang*. Lucky Dragon. This time, I believed it. We fell into each others' arms.

A long while later, after much back and forth with the paper and the fountain pen, the story came out.

The Irvings were in their home on the east side of the hill when the explosion hit. Their windows broke, but no one was hurt. J.D. Irving

raced to help dig his employees out of the engine factory. Casey, who had recently launched a shipbuilding branch of the company, led her small fleet all over the province to collect relief supplies. So when the police asked them to send someone to translate for me, Casey's younger brother Colin was the only one available.

Colin had brought home the paper, which meant nothing to him. Eventually, Casey had seen it and shown her father. My father had told the Irvings I was dead. After a long string of telegraph messages from Halifax to Beijing and back, J.D., Casey, the Emperor, and Grandmother put the pieces together and discovered my father's plot. Under interrogation, my father had admitted to conspiring with Prince Duan and they were both executed. By the Emperor's order, Grandmother was the new head of the Long family.

*Do you still want to go into business together?* Casey wrote.

I picked up the pen. *Let them try and stop us.* ■

A resident of Sydney, Nova Scotia, **Katrina Nicholson** works for the Cape Breton Regional Library. Her work has been published in anthologies such as *Tesseract-Fifteen: A Case of Quite Curious Tales*; *Kisses by Clockwork: Stories of Steampunk and Romance*; and *Enter the Apocalypse*.



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