

# Chapter 1

We have a saying in my family: “There’s no gold in California.”

Those were my great-great-grandfather’s<sup>1</sup> last words. He died in 1882, but my family insists on talking about him like he’s returning from a trip to the supermarket.

My favorite memories are the evenings when my father would have my uncles over. Like my father, my uncles chewed sunflower seeds after meals as a digestive, smoked filtered cigarettes, and drank like beasts. They’d tell stories from their childhood, from the famine to the revolution, but eventually, the conversation would drift towards tales of when great-great-grandfather was a young man, living through the gold rush.

Hearing these tales transported me into an exciting and dangerous world, with fantastical characters living on the boundaries of society. My father would tell the best stories, usually with a joke in between, and after the punchline, everyone would compete against each other to laugh the hardest. Then, once everybody settled down, he’d repeat the punchline and the competition was back on. I would sit at the end of the table and laugh at all the jokes, especially the ones I didn’t understand.

When my great-great-grandfather was a young man, he left his plantation in Northern China and immigrated to a shantytown outside of San Francisco. He joined a pack of prospective gold miners with nothing to lose but their miserable lives and nothing of value but a jade bracelet he stole from an imperial concubine. He’d spend his days panning for gold and nights avoiding people like Theo Rask and his brutal gang of scalp-hunters.

Theo Rask stories were among my favorites because they were most mysterious and contradictory. Some evenings, he was a Finnish immigrant who lost his job to Chinese strikebreakers; Another, an Irish mercenary under instructions from the local government; Once, my father described him as an otherworldly figure, ascended from Hell; who doesn’t age, excels at every task, and wears a hat to hide his protruding horns.

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<sup>1</sup>高祖父, or Gao Zufu

Uncle Ding appreciated the recounts of Theo's savagery, but he never mentioned him during his own stories. His tales were about Gao Zufu wandering the cold plains of a foreign country, singing songs of forgotten poets and drinking away his meager wages. His travels would take him to new places and new friends, and he'd take pieces of them with him as memories, ghosts, and recipes. I remember those stories the best.

The evening of my eleventh birthday began like most: I was sitting in my usual corner, listening to the latest retelling of one of Theo Rask's schemes, when Uncle Ding started talking about Gao Zufu's life back in China. I could tell he'd started drinking before he arrived, as his story didn't make much sense. He said that Gao Zufu's jade bracelet was a family heirloom he stole from his pregnant wife and that he promised to send money but never did. I laughed, thinking it was a joke that I didn't understand.

Nobody said anything for a while until my father rapped the table and asked if anybody wanted another bottle. Without waiting for a response, he slid out of his chair and started towards the kitchen, but not fast enough for me to miss the tears forming in his eyes.

That night, I tried to think of a punchline or purpose to Uncle Ding's story but couldn't. It seemed dark and contradictory, something more appropriate for the villainous Theo Rask.

I tried not to think about the family Gao Zufu's left behind, only acknowledged by a sad confession made in our bright, carpeted living room. I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping my own bed would induce a sleep so heavy that I could forget the whole thing. And yet for several moments that was all I could think about. My stomach tightened as I worried whether his wife and children were lost to the famine and revolution he was trying to escape. I looked around my room for a distraction, at the ivory white bedcover, piles of dusty books and magazines, neglected stuffed animals, and at my birthday present - an astronomy kit. But the more I tried to distract myself, the more I began to convince myself that Gao Zufu's family was in all likelihood dead.