

## The Jade Talisman Excerpt

When Walter arrived at the river, the first thing he noticed was the drying racks the villagers had laid out along its banks. The water level was high, and the river churned swiftly across the landscape, slicing through the monotony of the night's blackness like a serpent winding across the dark earth.

Walter sat down on a boulder near the river's edge to admire the grace and power of the waterway. Before long, tears sprang to his eyes as he realized he missed Christopher and the days they had spent training for battle together in Tsei'watu. It was not surprising that those memories were returning to him now, by the river—it was near the edge of a stream that he had bonded with Christopher, first learned to spear a fish with his *balayan*, and discovered that Christopher was Elaine's brother. Christopher felt like a brother to Walter, and in that sense reminded him of Jonathan. Although Walter had recently reunited with Jonathan, Walter felt as though the new Jonathan was a different man, a stranger whose humanity had been cruelly eradicated by the AI Masters. In Walter's mind, the old Jonathan of his childhood was a hero who had symbolized the resilience and indomitability of the human spirit. This, of course, rendered the brainwashing all the more heartbreaking.

Walter unexpectedly found himself weeping near the river's edge, his mind tormented by a slew of worries about the past and the future. Over a year ago, Elaine had been captured by the AI Masters and he had set out in a rowboat to rescue her. Walter had then chanced upon a seer in a tavern who revealed that his brother—whom he had long believed to be dead—was actually alive. His quest had therefore begun with a basic objective, finding his loved ones, and he had gradually acquired new goals and aspirations during the course of his travels. However, he regarded his mission so far as a failure. Walter had set out to find Elaine, but after reuniting with her he had not been able to re-ignite their relationship—and now, he had slept with another man's wife, which would no doubt set back his efforts. Walter had also set out to find his brother, but instead he had encountered a troubled stranger whom he could barely relate to anymore. He had set out to rebel against the AI Masters and to lead the Jade Rebellion to victory, but now he was wasting valuable time on this potentially futile quest. Instead of fighting the AI Masters, Walter was wandering aimlessly through the untamed wilderness in search of animal spirits—that likely did not even exist—and a half-crazed shaman-god. The young man shuddered with grief as he realized that the AI Masters were readying their bulldozers to destroy Elaine's village to make way for the massive diamond mine they wanted to build, and he was helpless to do anything from this small, isolated island in the middle of the Hapakay Sea.

*Even if the animal spirits are real, Walter thought, what chance do they stand against the technological might of the AI Masters?* The AI Masters had been victorious against those spirits in the past, when they had succeeded in quelling the uprising of the southern tribes and their shamans. Since then, the AI Masters had grown exponentially in wealth, power, and influence.

As tears blurred his vision, Walter spotted a curious figure emerge from the shadowy rainforest. At first, he thought that it was simply the moonlight reflecting off of a nearby rock, but when Walter wiped the tears from his eyes the figure came into sharp relief. It was an antlered stag, with a coat that was an ethereal, luminous shade of bluish-white. Walter

squinted in confusion at the apparition, attempting to discern whether or not it was real as his heart thudded in his chest. Although he could not tell for certain, Walter suspected that it was the same stag he had slaughtered several days ago with Ishkode, which had been carved and dried on these riverbanks. Walter chuckled as he realized how absurd that thought was; it departed from every natural and physical law known to mankind. And yet, he instinctively sensed that his suspicions were correct—contrary to logic or reason, the animal that now stood before him was the same one he had slain.

The ghostly stag came closer. Walter watched it in fascination as the phantom crossed the river with ease, wading confidently through the rushing waters. When the spirit was so close to him that Walter could touch it, he saw that it had the exact same markings and antlers as the slain stag, and even had a wound in its neck where Walter had slaughtered the creature with Ishkode's knife.

When Walter reached out to place a hand on the stag's back, he did not touch the warm, firm body of a living animal but a cold, ephemeral substance that made the young man shiver. The stag did not move, and simply continued to gaze at Walter with wide, black orbs of eyes which were so dark in contrast to the surrounding white luminescence that they looked like holes carved into a star. Walter's memory was jogged by the sight, and he realized that the stag's piercing black eyes were uncannily similar to those of the seer he had met in the Jamestown tavern many moons ago. When Walter touched the spirit, a whirlwind of thoughts, emotions, and memories suddenly flooded his mind, and he became overwhelmed with an intense yet indescribable sensation which could not quite be categorized as either pleasure or pain, but was equally poignant. For a fleeting instant, Walter was immersed in the stag's world; he was temporarily capable of experiencing the vibrant richness of each and every memory the creature had acquired during its life on Earth.

## The Jade Talisman – Excerpt #2

In the lobby of the apartment building, Elaine deliberately avoided eye contact with the concierge, who smiled and nodded at her as she passed him by. The hovering spirit of Walter exited the building with her. It was a clear but crisp autumn day; the wind was gusty, and the trees lining the streets were ripe with leaves the color of burnished copper. Elaine drew her coat tightly around her body, shivering as she stepped outside.

The woman now began walking quickly, each of her movements infused with purpose. After a few blocks, Elaine arrived at a train station that was crowded and bustling with people going about their daily business. When the hovering spirit observed the throng of people more carefully, he could see that it was comprised primarily of humans, but also included many mixed-race peoples, who had actuators and elastic nanotubes embedded onto their arms, legs, and faces. It soon became apparent that there were robots everywhere, scattered throughout the masses like clues buried in a puzzle. Most of the guards and officers at the train station were uniformed AI Fighters, and there were a few higher-ranked AI Masters. The Masters could be distinguished from the Fighters by their sleeker, more sophisticated humanoid bodies and red badges emblazoned with white diamonds: the official symbol of Crystal City.

The train station itself was a large public square surrounded by screens projecting lists of dozens of cities and villages in Khalendar and beyond, along with the arrival and departure times of the trains. The hovering spirit noticed that each screen appeared to be devoted to a particular region, and that Elaine was perusing a list related to the region “Barrens Reserve IV.” Elaine appeared to have found the platform for her train and hastily walked toward it, keeping her head lowered but her eyes alert. She glanced around nervously, deliberately avoiding clusters of AI guards and trying to blend in amongst the crowd as much as she could.

When Elaine arrived at the correct platform, she impatiently checked an old-fashioned golden watch she kept in her coat pocket. There were a few other people scattered around her, but the general sparseness of the crowd suggested that she had arrived early. After what seemed like an agonizingly long wait, a silver bullet train finally appeared in the distance, snaking its way rapidly toward the platform. The hovering spirit saw that Elaine was now more than mildly anxious; her brow was sweating profusely, and she was shifting back and forth on her feet in impatience. The crowd had grown substantially by this point, and everyone jostled each other as they lined up along the train tracks. The spirit saw Elaine’s eyes widen as she spotted, through a clearing in the dense multitude, blue-vested AI Fighters arriving at the station: *Crystal Militsiya*. These heavily armed cyborg cops were equipped with state-of-the-art facial recognition software and were hard-wired to detect criminals based on their appearance. When a bystander witnessed a crime, or suspected that one had occurred, they would report a description of the suspect’s appearance to an employee at the central police station, who would input the description into a database and send out a unit of these trackers to hunt down the criminal. The hovering spirit of Walter understood this intuitively, without knowing why.

The cyborg cops stopped momentarily at the entrance to the station to converse with the guards selling train tickets. One of the guards pointed in Elaine’s direction and the police followed his lead, marching briskly toward the platform where Elaine was standing. Fortunately for her, by now the crowd was very thick, and Elaine could conceal herself behind the wall of people standing in front of her. The train then suddenly arrived, blocking her completely from

the *Militsiya's* line of sight. Trembling, Elaine stepped impatiently onto the train, nearly knocking over a young child in front of her. The young girl's mother began to chastise Elaine, calling her a "*kayensta*," the Khalendi word for rude whore. Elaine did not turn around to acknowledge the woman, and upon entering the train, she immediately made her way toward the washroom and locked herself inside.

The hovering spirit followed her, effortlessly floating through the walls of the locked washroom. Elaine glanced in the mirror at her own exhausted face—the dark under-eye circles, the grey hairs, and the wrinkles on her forehead and around her mouth. She heaved a long, unsteady sigh as she opened her briefcase and carefully removed a black bag containing a brunette wig, a fake adhesive nose, and an elastic band. After tying up her long red hair with the band, she covered her head with the wig and meticulously tucked any stray hairs underneath it. She then removed another pouch from the briefcase which contained foundation, lipstick, blush, and eyeliner. Acting quickly, with trembling hands she placed the adhesive nose over her own and began applying the makeup onto her face, covering up the puffy bags under her eyes and bringing warmth and vibrancy to her pale cheeks and lips. When she was finished, she looked like a different person entirely, younger and prettier than the exhausted woman who had entered the bathroom.

When she left the washroom, Elaine tried to appear casual as she walked down the aisle to find an unoccupied seat. After a painful few minutes of searching, she finally spotted one next to a sleeping elderly man who was snoring quietly. As she settled in and tucked her briefcase under the seat in front of her, she could hear a man's voice projecting over the loudspeakers: "Alert, alert: criminal spotted at *Vennyest* train station. Remain calm and seated while the train is searched for the suspect."