

IMMORTAL

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHLOE GONG

LONGINGS

A NOVEL



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IMMORTAL LONGINGS

Flesh & False Gods
Book One

CHLOE GONG

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*For Laura Crockett,
If book publishing were an arena battle, you would be my
most trusted ally.*

*Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies. For vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish.*

—Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*

CHAPTER 1

A living thing, when faced with a break or injury, is compelled to heal itself. A cut will clot with blood, trapping in a person's qi. A bone will smooth over, knitting new threads at every split. And San-Er's buildings, when an inconvenience is identified, will rush to mend the sore, pinpointing every fracture and hurling remedies with vigor. From the top of the palace, all that can be seen are the stacked structures composing the twin cities, interlocked and dependent upon one another, some attached to a neighbor from the ground level and others connected only at the highest floors. Everyone in the kingdom of Talin wants to be in its capital—in these two cities masquerading as one—and so San-Er must grow denser and higher to accommodate, covering up its offenses and stench with utter incoherence.

August Shenzhi tightens his grip on the balcony railing, tearing his gaze away from the horizon of rooftops. His attention should be with the marketplace below, which bustles at high volume inside the coliseum walls. Three generations ago, the Palace of Union was built beside San's massive coliseum—or perhaps it's more apt to say it was built *into* the coliseum, the north side of the elevated palace enmeshed with the coliseum's south wall, its turrets and balconies pulling apart stone and slotting itself right in to close the gap. Every window on the north side has a perfect view of the market, but none better than this balcony. Back when he still made public appearances, King Kasa stood here to make his speeches. The market would be cleared out, and his subjects would come to gather in the only plot of open space inside San-Er, cheering for their monarch.

There's nowhere quite like the coliseum. San-Er itself is only a small protrusion of land at the edge of the kingdom, its border with rural Talin

marked by a towering wall, the rest of its perimeter hemmed in by sea. Yet despite its size, San-Er functions as a world of its own—half a million inhabitants crammed into each square mile, again and again. The needle-thin alleys between every building sag, the earthen ground always muddy because it is sweating with overexertion. Prostitutes and temple priests share the same doorway; drug addicts and schoolteachers nap under the same awning. It makes sense that the only space protected from builders and squatters is the coliseum, under the vigilant eye of royalty and untouched by the desperate expansion pressing in on its walls. They could raze the coliseum and build ten—perhaps twenty—new streets on the land cleared, squeeze in hundreds more apartment complexes, but the palace won't allow it, and what the palace says goes.

“Give me leave to strangle your uncle, August. I'm tired to death of him.”

Galipei Weisanna strolls into the room, his voice echoing out onto the balcony. He speaks as he always does: clipped, terse, honest. Galipei is rarely willing to tell a lie, yet finds it of utmost priority to be running his mouth too, even when silence is a better option. August tips his head back to look at his bodyguard, and the crown in his hair shakes loose, hanging lopsidedly to the left. By the light of the palace, the red gems resemble fragments of blood encircling his bleached blond curls, its position so precarious that one wayward breeze would sweep the band of metal right off.

“Do be careful,” August replies evenly. “High treason in the throne room tends to be frowned upon.”

“So I suppose someone ought to be frowning at you as well.”

Galipei comes to join him upon the balcony, then nudges August's crown back into place with a practiced familiarity. His presence is domineering, shoulders wide and posture tall, in contrast to August's lithe sharpness. Dressed in his usual dark work garb, Galipei looks a part of the night—if the night were decorated with buckles and straps holding various weapons that wouldn't otherwise keep against heavy leather. There's a melodic clanking when his body comes into contact with the gold-plated railing, his arms resting atop it to mimic August, but the sound is easily lost to the clamor of the market below.

“Who would dare?” August asks matter-of-factly. It's not a boast. It's the profoundly confident manner of someone who knows exactly how high his

pedestal is because he hauled himself there.

Galipei makes a vague noise. He turns away from the walls of the coliseum, having searched for threats and finding nothing out of the ordinary. His attention shifts toward August's line of sight instead: a child, kicking a ball beside the closest row of market stalls.

"I heard that you took over preliminary organization for the games." The child draws nearer and nearer to the balcony. "What are you up to, August? Your uncle—"

August clears his throat. Though Galipei rolls his eyes, he takes the correction in stride.

"—your *father*, my apologies, is vexed enough with the whole palace these days. If you go pissing him off, he'll disown you in an instant."

A warm, southerly breeze blows up on the balcony, swallowing August's skeptical huff of breath. He pulls at his collar, fingers sliding against silk, the fabric thin enough to bring a chill to his skin. Let King Kasa push his adoption papers through a shredder. It won't matter soon. Maneuvering the last few years to get the paperwork to exist was only the first part of the plan. It is nowhere near the most important.

"Why are you here?" August asks in return, diverting the topic. "I thought Leida summoned your help for the night."

"She sent me back. San's border is fine."

August doesn't voice his immediate doubt, but he does frown. Other than the coliseum, the far edge of San right beside the wall is the only place within San-Er where civilians might have the space to gather and make a fuss, crowding around the mounds of trash and discarded tech. It never lasts long. The guards spread out and break them up, and then civilians can either spend an indeterminate amount of time in the palace cells or scatter back into the dense labyrinthine streets.

"Fascinating," August says. "I don't remember the last time there weren't riots the day before the games."

A few more steps, and the child will be directly underneath them. She pays no attention to her surroundings, weaving her ball in and out among the shoppers and sellers, her thin shoes clomping down on the uneven ground.

“This year’s games should be quick work. There were hardly any applicants who volunteered for the draw.”

By *hardly*, Galipei means that there were hundreds as opposed to thousands. The games used to be a far larger event, back when there were two kings funneling their coffers into the grand prize. Kasa’s father had started them in his previous reign, and what began as a yearly one-on-one battle to the death eventually grew to a multicontestant affair, expanding past the coliseum and using all of San-Er as the playing field. Once, watching skilled fighters tear each other apart in the arena was mere entertainment, something that was distant to the ordinary civilian. Now, the games are a thrill that anyone can participate in, a solution to a kingdom simmering with complaints. *Don’t worry if your babies drop dead because they have hollowed into starved husks*, King Kasa declares. *Don’t worry that your elderly must sleep in cages because there is no more apartment space, nor that the neon light from the strip club across the alleyway keeps you awake night after night. Put your name in the lottery, slaughter only eighty-seven of your fellow citizens, and be awarded with riches beyond your wildest dreams.*

“He drew his list, then?” August says. “All eighty-eight of our lucky participants?”

Eighty-eight, the number of luck and prosperity! the advertisement posters for the games declare. *You must register before the deadline for your chance to be among our esteemed competitors!*

“His Majesty is very proud of himself. He got through the names in record time.”

August scoffs. It is not efficiency that had Kasa going so fast. Since August suggested an entrance fee two years ago, the random draw has shrunk significantly. One would think that the worsening conditions these days mean more are throwing in their lots for a chance to win, but the people of San-Er are only increasingly terrified that the games are a sham, that the victor will be cheated out of the grand prize just as the twin cities persistently cheat them out of rewards. They’re not wrong. After all, August *did* fiddle with the draw this year to get one name in.

With a wince, he takes a step back from the balcony rail, releasing the tension in his neck. For only two distinct days of the year, the coliseum before him is cleared out and used as the arena it was originally built for. Today, it remains yet a marketplace. A compact, concentrated world of food hawkers splashed with oil and metalworkers clanging on blades and technicians fixing up unwieldy computers to resell. San-Er spends each moment functioning off the fumes of its last. There is no other way to survive.

“August.” A touch on his elbow. August spares a glance to his side, meeting Galipei’s steel-silver eyes. There’s a warning in the way he flings his prince’s name around, title and rank discarded. August does not take caution; he only smiles. That small quirk at his mouth, barely a change in his expression at all, and Galipei falters, taken aback by the rare expression.

August knows exactly what he’s doing. Offer that brief distraction, and when Galipei’s attention is turned elsewhere, he decides on his next move.

“Take my body inside.”

Galipei’s lips part in protest. He recovers quickly from his brief enthrallment. “Would you quit jumping like—”

But August has already left, fixing his sight onto the child and slamming right in, opening his new eyes with a quick snap. He has to adjust to the height change, off-balance for a second as the people nearby jolt in surprise. They know what has happened: the flash of light between jumps is unmistakable, marking the arc from old body to new. Though the palace has long made jumping illegal, it is still as common as a beggar swiping a rice cake from an unwatched stall. Civilians have learned to look away, especially when the light is flashing so closely to the palace.

They just don’t expect their crown prince to be the one jumping.

August looks up at the palace. His body has dropped like a stone, collapsed in Galipei’s arms to enter stasis. Without a person’s qi, the body is only a vessel. But a vessel that belongs to the heir of the throne is an incredibly valuable possession, and when Galipei’s gaze meets August’s pitch-black eyes in the girl’s body, he mouths what appears to be a threat to strangle him too.

August, however, is already walking in the other direction, giving Galipei no choice but to guard his birth body ferociously, lest someone come within ten

feet and attempt to invade it. In any case, it wouldn't be hard for him to boot an intruder out. August's qi is strong—if his body were doubled, he could wrestle back control from the other person easily, either forcing them to find another host or subject them to being lost. When it comes to doubling other bodies, there is no vessel in the twin cities that he cannot invade as long they have come of age: twelve, maybe thirteen, when the gene for jumping manifests.

The problem isn't so much the matter of someone using his body for pleasure or power. It's troublemakers who might invade with the purpose of destroying his body out of protest, making one quick throw off the edge of a building before their prince can jump back.

August nearly collides with someone and flinches, ducking to find a less crowded path through the market. The sudden assault on his senses always takes some getting used to: the louder noises, the brighter colors. Perhaps he has dulled the senses of his birth body too much, and this is true normalcy. When a shoe-shiner barks at him from behind a stall and holds out a few coins, August simply reaches his small hands out and receives them, uncertain why. The child must be some sort of errand runner. All the better. Very few civilians are powerful enough to jump into children, which makes them the most trusted, darting between buildings and into every corner of San-Er without notice.

August makes quick time exiting the coliseum, emerging onto the one main street that acts as a thoroughfare from north to south of San. He is well-acquainted with the lefts and the rights of his byzantine city too, so he steps off the main street for the less populated routes, hurrying under drooping electric wires and barely wincing when the damp pipes overhead drip water down his neck. But the cold moisture irritates his skin after a while, and with a sigh, August enters a building, deciding to travel by staircase and wayward building passages instead. There isn't enough on this body to draw any conclusions about its identity, though that is an answer in and of itself. No markings or tattoos, so no allegiance to the Crescent Societies.

“Hey! Hey, stop there.”

August—ever accommodating—stops. An elderly woman has called out to him, the picture of concern as she hovers in front of her apartment door, a water bucket clutched to her hip.

“Where are your parents?” she asks. “This area is no good. The Crescent Societies have their eye on it. You’ll get yourself invaded.”

“I have it handled.” From the girl’s body, his voice comes out high and soft and sweet. Only August’s tone is too confident. Too regal. The woman can tell, and her expression shifts into suspicion, but August is already walking again. He follows the spray-painted directions on the walls, moving through another corridor to enter a neighboring building. Low moans filter through the thin plaster. Privately run hospitals are aplenty in this area, facilities filled with unhygienic practices and dirty tools, though they still receive a constant stream of patients because they charge far less than the proper places in Er. Half of these private facilities are surely body-trafficking schemes. Still... if a body goes missing here and there, no one cares enough to find out why. Certainly not the palace, no matter what August does.

He turns the corner. The atmosphere shifts immediately, cigarette smoke permeating the low ceilings in such thickness that the dim bulbs can hardly cut through. San is a city of darkness. It is nighttime now, but even when the sun rises, the buildings are so densely packed that the streets remain shrouded in shadow. He counts the doors as he passes: *One, two, three...*

He knocks on the third, his small fist easily fitting between the metal bars of the exterior door. When the second wooden door opens inward, there is a man who towers above him twice over, looking down his nose with a huff of air.

“We don’t have scraps—”

August jumps again. It is instantaneous from the outside, he knows, as fast as that clap of light, but it always *feels* slow, like wading through a brick wall. The closer the jump, the thinner the wall; from the farthest away, at the absolute ten-foot limit, it always feels like forging through a mile of solid stone. Those who have gotten themselves lost between bodies are snagged here, condemned to wander about this incorporeal space forever.

When he opens his eyes, he’s staring at the little girl again, her bright-orange eyes wide and confused. Not everyone in Talin can jump, and even among those with the gene for it, many have such weak abilities that they don’t risk it, in case they attempt to invade a body and lose the fight for control. But at any point,

gene or no gene, a body holding a single person's qi can be invaded, especially by someone like August. The girl figures out quickly what must have happened.

"Move along," August instructs, closing the inner door to the gambling den. The people inside saw the flash of light, aware that their bouncer is now occupied. Thankfully, August is expected.

"Your Highness!"

Though the den-keeper who runs up to him has a different face from the last time August was here, he knows it's the same person. Bodies can be switched, but the man's pale purple eyes remain the same.

"Have you found her?" August asks.

"Right in time, you're right in time," the man gushes, ignoring his question. "Come with me, please, Prince August."

August follows, careful with his steps. This body is large, muscular. He doesn't want to go too fast, or he might tip himself off-kilter and stumble. He closes his fists together and frowns, circling around the card dealings and mahjong tables with barely enough room to maneuver between them. His shoe crunches down on what could be a needle filled with heroin. A woman at one of the tables reaches out to touch his jacket, with no aim except to stroke its fine leather exterior.

"Right through here. The pictures should have finished developing by now."

The man holds open the door, and August walks through, looking around in the red light. Thin drying lines crisscross at his eye level, filled with dangling photographs in various shades. The man reaches up to unclip one. His fingers tremble as he lets the line spring back, cupping the photograph in his palms. Before he can extend the offering to August, however, he hesitates, eyes pinned on the picture.

"Something wrong?"

"No. No, nothing at all." The man shakes his head, erasing any appearance of doubt. "We scoured the records to their very roots. Not one database was left unturned. This is her, Your Highness. I promise. Your trust and sponsorship are appreciated."

August lifts an eyebrow. It is hard to do in this body. He gestures for the photograph instead, and the man hurries to pass it over. The entire darkroom

seems to hold its breath. The vents stutter to a halt.

“Well,” August says, “good job.”

Though the light overhead runs only in one shade, coloring the photograph the wrong hue and washing out the subject’s eyes, there is no doubt. The woman in the photograph is stepping off the stoop of a building—her nose and mouth covered with a mask, her hands gloved in leather, her body angled away in movement—but August would recognize her anywhere. She is not the sort to abandon her body, even under such circumstances. She would instead flaunt what she managed to keep, living in this city for five long years right under his nose.

“Oh, cousin,” August says to the photograph. “You can hide no longer.”
Princess Calla Tuoleimi, found at last.