

Prologue

Mei-Mei paused at the gate of the abandoned kiln and called out, "Is anyone there?"

No one answered.

She looked up and down the dirt road again. It was empty. Not many merchants traveled the trade routes since the Tibetans sacked Xian, the capital of the Middle Kingdom. Farmers only came to her city, Bao Fang, on market days. But bandits, soldiers—or worse, foreign soldiers—could appear at any time. Cold shouzhi walked down Mei-Mei's spine in spite of the summer sun beating on her head.

Maybe she should just leave the basket of cakes for her sister and run back home. Mei-Mei had always been accompanied by someone when outside Bao Fang's walls,

either her mother, her siblings or her nurse. This was the first time she'd gone beyond any of the city gates by herself.

But the cakes would spoil in the heat, and she wouldn't see Young Lu. Mei-Mei made herself call again, her voice barely rising above the chorus of cicadas hidden in the grass.

No response.

Was she at the right building? She thought so. It was the first kiln outside Bao Fang. Abandoned kilns made fine houses for those who weren't allowed to live inside the city walls. This one was in much better shape than its neighbors: the yard had been raked; a small altar, dedicated to Kuan Yin, goddess of mercy, stood next to the door; and a geomancer's mirror decorated with red and green ba gua hung over the entrance, protecting those inside from evil spirits. At the same time, the white building had been patched with plain mud, and garbage lay piled as high as the garden wall.

A soft clank came from inside the kiln, the sound of a lid being placed on a teapot. Mei-Mei crossed the yard, then hesitated and peered into the semidarkness.

Young Lu stood on the far side of the room, her back to the door. Mei-Mei would recognize the slender figure

anywhere, her long thin neck, the coltish way she tilted her head.

"Nin hau," Mei-Mei called, using the formal greeting.

Young Lu turned around. She raised her cane above her head, holding it like a soldier's staff. She drew in a deep breath, as if to scream, then let it out with a huff.

"Mei-Mei?" she asked.

"Nin hau," Mei-Mei repeated.

Young Lu dropped her cane and rushed, limping, to where Mei-Mei stood. Wordlessly she hugged her older sister.

Mei-Mei returned the hug just as fiercely. Though her father had disowned his youngest daughter, and Uncle Li now called her evil, Mei-Mei still missed her.

After a moment Young Lu pulled back and scolded Mei-Mei as if Mei-Mei were the younger one. "What are you doing? You know you shouldn't be here." Young Lu clutched Mei-Mei's arms while she spoke. "It isn't safe outside the city walls. Come inside." She pulled Mei-Mei across the threshold. "Does Mother know you're here?" she asked.

Mei-Mei didn't meet Young Lu's eye. "I told her I was visiting my sister."

"But not that you were visiting your youngest sister, eh?" Young Lu shook her head. "What would happen if Father found out?"

Now Mei-Mei looked up. "I'm not his favorite," she said, then covered her mouth as if hiding the source of her thoughtless words.

Bitterness tinged the edge of Young Lu's smile. "True. He'd probably only beat you. But your reputation could be ruined if someone saw you here. Prostitutes live in the kiln next door. Why did you come?"

Mei-Mei stuttered, trying to put unaccustomed emotions into words. "It-it, it was so hot, waiting in Grandma's room, the-the air wasn't good. I felt . . . stifled." She paused again.

Just after lunch, while Mei-Mei had tucked her grandmother in for her nap, her grandmother had told a story of when she'd been a little girl, taking care of a sick aunt. She'd commented on how someday, one of Mei-Mei's descendants would take care of her.

Normally Mei-Mei felt comforted by such stories. The cycle of death, rebirth and life swirled by but her place was as fixed as the stars in the king of Heaven's crown.

Today was different. Maybe it was because she'd accompanied her mother to the White Temple that morning, to

light incense for her cousins who had been killed defending the mountain passes against the Tibetans. She still remembered them leaving for battle, eager and optimistic, their naïve enthusiasm louder than their mother's tears. They'd laughed at the change in their fortune.

While Mei-Mei had listened to her grandmother's tale in the afternoon, she'd realized her life would never change. She'd marry, move into the woman's compound of her husband's house, and rarely leave. She'd have children, grow old, be revered, and die. When she thought hard about her future, the air grew thick, like a winter quilt, and threatened to smother her. So she'd had to leave.

"My xiao-filial duty-is important." Mei-Mei held up her hand so Young Lu would let her finish. "But so is my entire family. Please," she said, extending her basket. "It would be my honor if you would accept this inadequate token of my high esteem and regard for you." Mei-Mei pressed the basket into her sister's hands.

"Thank you so much," Young Lu replied. "You don't know how much this means to me," she said, her voice cracking. She turned away so Mei-Mei couldn't see her tears and indicated with her free hand that Mei-Mei should sit.

"Thank you for being my relation," Mei-Mei said formally, kneeling on the cracked and dusty bamboo mats covering the dirt floor.

"Please, let me get you something to eat," Young Lu said, turning back to Mei-Mei.

"No, I'm not hungry. I couldn't eat anything," Mei-Mei replied.

"It won't be any trouble."

"I just had lunch. I wouldn't touch a bite. Really." Mei-Mei let some iron creep into her voice. Young Lu had always been as slender as spring bamboo. Now she was even skinnier. Her cheeks were hollow, which made her cheekbones stand out, and her lips were drawn and pale. She looked more delicate than one of Master Kung's statues, made of clay so soft it could be carved with flower petals. Mei-Mei wouldn't put any strain on her sister's household by eating even a little of what they had.

Young Lu nodded, her face saved, but still shamed. "Let this unworthy person at least offer you some tea," she insisted.

Mei-Mei accepted. She had to give Young Lu some way to show her hospitality.

Young Lu limped across the floor to the back of the kiln where a small hearth held an iron pot with a cracked

lid. Mei-Mei pretended not to notice her sister's infirmity by looking down at her lap and smoothing her silver robe, running both hands over the embroidered white cranes.

"That's one good thing about living here in the kiln," Young Lu said over her shoulder. "Pieces of coal are scattered all over the ground."

Mei-Mei couldn't help but smile. Only Young Lu could find any good in being cast out of their family, shunned by their father and mother, and forced to live outside the city walls. The kiln was tiny and filthy: it had only two rooms, the back one just large enough to hold a bed; the walls were covered with soot from a fire a former tenant had let burn out of control; and the incense Young Lu burned couldn't hide the smell of the garbage next door. The light from the single eastern-facing window didn't shine all the way through the front room, and didn't bring any fresh air in with it.

On the right side of the hearth Young Lu, or her husband, Old Lu, had installed a small wooden altar. Pasted between the flimsy split-bamboo uprights was a brightly colored picture of Zhao Wang, the kitchen god. Under the picture sat a tiny white-and-blue porcelain bowl

filled with rice. It had three sticks of incense poking out of it.

Mei-Mei shook her head. How could Young Lu afford even a small sacrifice? She looked at her sister. Young Lu swayed in time to her own silent music, like ivy in a breeze. From that angle, Mei-Mei saw the bulge in Young Lu's abdomen.

Young Lu's gaze followed Mei-Mei's. She brushed her fingertips across her stomach, looking more serene than the Buddha meditating under the bodhi tree.

Mei-Mei pressed her lips together in a polite smile, hiding her surprise. She wanted to know, but couldn't ask.

Young Lu told her anyway. "Five and a half moons," she said. She hobbled from the stove—tiny, awkward steps—and knelt next to her sister. "Isn't it exciting? I never expected to be blessed so soon."

Mei-Mei hugged Young Lu. "That's wonderful! Ten thousand blessings," she said, feeling Young Lu's shoulder blades through her robe. She was too thin to be that far along.

Young Lu pulled back and said with a mischievous smile, "Old Lu was so happy when I told him. It made him feel more like a tiger again."

Mei-Mei looked down at her hands, embarrassed at the shared intimacy. Young Lu struggled to get to her feet. Mei-Mei said, "Let me help you."

Young Lu admonished her, "The guest shouldn't serve the tea. It isn't a problem."

Mei-Mei gave her a skeptical look.

Young Lu continued. "I barely feel it anymore. See?" She got to her feet and walked to the stove, limping.

Mei-Mei turned away. When their father had heard Old Lu's marriage proposal, he'd forbidden it. Young Lu had pleaded with Father. She told him Old Lu and she were meant to be with each other. The moon god had tied their ankles together with a red ribbon at birth, even if she was only fourteen and they were second cousins. Father and daughter fought for weeks. Girls weren't supposed to pick their own husbands. It wasn't proper.

Young Lu tried to run away. Father caught her and treated her like a slave, not like a daughter. He put her right ankle in a press and squeezed the two boards together until the bones shattered.

As soon as she could walk, Young Lu ran away again, this time successfully, and the marriage was consummated. Both families renounced Young Lu and Old Lu. All of Bao Fang had gossiped about the scandal for weeks. Old Lu

worked hard to earn a few coins in the market, fetching and carrying from place to place, but it wasn't enough. Many merchants wouldn't serve them.

As Young Lu poured the tea Mei-Mei asked, "Have you heard from Old Lu's friend in the north?"

Young Lu sighed and sipped her tea. "It's so hard. I don't want to leave. Our family's here. All our ancestors are buried here." She paused. "Can you imagine leaving?"

Mei-Mei didn't respond. To go to live with strangers for the rest of her life? To never again tell stories with her aunts all afternoon, read one of her mother's poems, listen to her father construct a faultless argument, or talk with her sisters, her brothers, her cousins? It was the most horrible fate she'd ever contemplated. Yet when she got married . . .

Young Lu continued. "Bao Fang is the only city I've ever known. But Old Lu wants to leave. And I'll follow him. Even to the Hell of Iron and Acid, if necessary."

"You're so brave," Mei-Mei said, marveling.

Young Lu giggled. "I'm not brave," she said, sounding like a carefree girl for the first time that afternoon.

"I'm just stubborn, like an old ox."

Mei-Mei also giggled at her petite sister comparing herself to such a huge beast.

Young Lu took a sip of tea and said, "Tell me about your engagement to Wang Po Kao. Everyone in Bao Fang speaks well of him. They say he'll make a lot of money in trading."

Mei-Mei tried to make herself smile at the thought of her husband-to-be, but failed. She drank her tea instead. The hot liquid failed to warm her belly, and left a bitter, metallic taste on the back of her tongue. She looked at her cup instead of meeting her sister's eye. It had splashes of orange, green and yellow under a thick glaze, not fine, but artistically done. The parts of her life mingled like the colors—her family, her sister, her husband-to-be. Would the last color wash over all the others, until her life was a muddy brown, like the bottom of the river Quang?

"When Old Lu looks at you, he sees a treasure, and thinks himself the luckiest man in the world," she started.

"Stop!" Young Lu interrupted, hiding her smile behind her hand.

"The one time I met Wang Po Kao, at Mother's birthday party, he also looked at me like I was a treasure. But one he'd never share, like . . ."

Mei-Mei bit down on her lip, but her unspoken comment, "like Father," still echoed through the room.

Young Lu didn't say anything.

Mei-Mei continued. "It's a good match, good for the family. The Wangs have a cousin who has a son who is friends with the horsemen up north. If Father has horses he can sell through the winter, our family will thrive. The price for horses has tripled since the war."

"Our family will thrive," Young Lu repeated. "And you'll do what Father wants, won't you?"

Mei-Mei replied without thinking. "Of course. He's my father. I'm his daughter. It's my duty to obey him."

"Of course," Young Lu said.

Mei-Mei's blush spread from her cheeks all the way to her ears. Young Lu had defied Father. She'd changed her life, wrenched it out of the fixed shape laid out for her by all the generations of women who'd come before her. Like their dead cousins, she'd paid a horrible price. Mei-Mei couldn't imagine doing anything like that. She'd end her days at home, surrounded by her family, secure, safe, and stifled.

"Let's be cheerful," Mei-Mei said. "Marrying Wang Po Kao means I'll soon have my own babies. And that is something I look forward to. As well as to the birth of your little one. I'm sure you'll have a fine son."

When the bells tolled the change from the hour of the Sheep to the hour of the Monkey, Young Lu got up and escorted her sister to the door. She made Mei-Mei wait inside the kiln while she went out to the road to check that it was empty. Then she beckoned for Mei-Mei.

Mei-Mei approached with her hands out, saying the traditional words of parting, "Until we meet again, may . . ."

Young Lu held up her hand, indicating Mei-Mei should stop. Without another word Young Lu limped back into the kiln. Mei-Mei blinked hard to keep the tears out of her eyes. She might never see her sister again. Then her chin stiffened. She would see her, at least one more time. Plus, she wouldn't just bring a few cakes from the market. She'd bring the biggest basket of food she could carry.

#

The next afternoon, after Mei-Mei had sung her grandmother to sleep, she decided to go light incense for Young Lu and her unborn child. Though Mei-Mei and her family considered themselves Buddhist, they were also practical, and prayed at a number of different temples, depending on the occasion. Today, Mei-Mei decided to go to the Fire Mountain Temple and pray to Fu Xi and Nü-gua. Though they'd been brother and sister, the other gods had

decreed that they should be together, and so had invented marriage just for them. Mei-Mei loved the representation of the two that hung on the wall above the altar—the top, human-halves of their bodies faced away from each other, while their snake tails intertwined together, inseparable, as white as crane feathers.

The Fire Mountain Temple was just up the street from the southern gate. Before she could approach the altar in the main building, a priest in a tan robe stopped her.

"Can I help you?" he asked. He was a skinny man, tall like a foreigner, and looked down his nose at Mei-Mei.

"No thank you sir," Mei-Mei responded. It was always better to be polite to priests. Her grandmother believed priests talked directly with the gods. Mei-Mei thought priests were more like scholars, whose knowledge came from study, not divine intervention.

"Are you certain? Tell me who you pray for. I can help." The man licked his thin lips, like a cat smelling a treat.

Mei-Mei couldn't tell him that she prayed for Young Lu. He might have heard of the scandal, and forbidden it. Plus, she didn't have any coins to pay him for his services, as he was obviously anticipating.

"Please, sir, just let me—"

"Are you here alone?" the priest interrupted. He peered past her shoulder. "Where's your mother? Or your nurse? Nice girls like you shouldn't be going to temples by themselves," he admonished.

The priest was right. Mei-Mei shouldn't be there alone. It wasn't proper. More than one market tale of illicit romance took place in a temple. Her anger still flared. She remained silent.

"You need to go home now," he said. "You don't want another disgrace to mar your family's name." The priest turned away and walked back into the main temple.

Alternate courses of shame and rage washed through Mei-Mei. The priest had recognized her. But she wasn't doing anything wrong. Someone needed to pray for Young Lu.

The anger won. Mei-Mei turned on her heel and stormed out of the Fire Mountain Temple compound. Instead of turning to her right and going back into the city, she turned to her left, and marched out the southern gate. Then she continued along the path, straight to a small pavilion that sat next to the river Quang. The previous summer, her family had picnicked there. An unattended altar to the river dragon sat in one corner of the pavilion.

Without another thought, Mei-Mei lit her incense, knelt, pressed the incense to her forehead and bowed the

customary three times, praying for a son for Young Lu. Then she bowed three more times, praying for Young Lu herself.

"There," thought Mei-Mei as she reached above her head to place the incense in the brazier. That would show that meddlesome priest. She sat back on her heels and watched with satisfaction as the thin curls of smoke rose above the red lacquered altar table.

How dare that priest question why she prayed alone? Someone needed to burn incense and ask for kindness for Young Lu's unborn child. Just because Mei-Mei wasn't escorted by her mother didn't mean she was willful, like Young Lu. . . .

Mei-Mei looked back the way she'd come. She couldn't see the city walls. On her left, the river Quang ran slick and gray in the morning sunshine, full of melted snow from the northern mountains. Crickets chirped in the low grass, and small fluffy clouds played tag with each other across a perfect blue sky.

It looked so peaceful, but soldiers could be hiding in the stand of oaks on the far side of the river. Mei-Mei jumped to her feet, suddenly regretting her rash behavior. She needed to hurry back before anyone discovered she was gone.

A rattling sound came from behind her, rhythmic and hollow, like metal against a dry reed. She turned toward the noise.

An old fisherman stood on the far side of the pavilion. He held one hand out over the river, shaking a long bamboo pole. Something inside the pole made the clanking noise. His face held only a light map of wrinkles, yet Mei-Mei had the impression he was extremely old. He smiled with childlike joy. His jacket had faded to a muddy beige from too many washings. Muscular calves bulged beneath his rolled-up pant legs. Mysterious bags hung from his wide leather belt.

The old man's rhythm grew faster, sharper. He called out to Mei-Mei, excited and happy, "Come here miss."

Mei-Mei hesitated. He was obviously poor. It wasn't safe here beyond Bao Fang's wall. She should go home.

"Come see!" the old man called out again.

Duty to all elders compelled Mei-Mei to walk toward him.

The old man gestured with his free hand at the river. Mei-Mei caught her breath in surprise. A school of fish had gathered under the clear water. They moved forward and back, turned a quarter turn together, then moved from side to side. The fish danced in time to the old man's rhythm.

Was he a sorcerer? Mei-Mei took two steps backward.

He turned to smile at her. His teeth were faultlessly placed—no gaps or irregularities—white with fine shading, like bright jade. How could such an old man have perfect teeth? The wrinkles around his eyes reflected many summers of looking into the sun. His laughter, though, was carefree. “Oh gentle miss,” he said, still smiling, “might I have the honor of knowing your name?”

Mei-Mei bowed her head low at his quaint request. “My surname is Li, my formal name is Kong-Jing.”

“And what do you call yourself?” the old man asked.

It wasn't proper for him to ask. Only family and close friends used a person's milk name. On the other hand, his smile warmed her heart more than the sun warmed her back. “My friends call me Mei-Mei.”

“Ah, Mei-Mei, you're as fair as the plum blossoms for which you're named. You may call me Old Zhang.” He bowed deeply. Without straightening up, he twisted his head and grinned at her.

Mei-Mei couldn't help herself. He looked so comical, stooped over with his head at such an odd angle. She put her hand in front of her mouth and giggled.

Old Zhang laughed with her as he stood up. “Good,” he said. “You can tell more about a person when they laugh.”

You," he paused, then nodded, "are young, not quite conventional, and as precise as a dagger in the hands of an assassin. I like that."

Mei-Mei didn't like his mention of assassins, but she was too polite to let it show.

"I'm a stranger here. Tell me about this city," he said, leading her back to the pavilion.

They sat on one of the benches next to the altar and talked. Mei-Mei told him which merchants had the best goods, which ones would try to cheat him, and a little about her family. Of course, she never mentioned Young Lu. Then their conversation wandered. They tried to define the exact color of the setting sun, the different sounds water makes, which flowers bloom first in the spring and why. From flowers, they moved to peaches.

"Would you accept a peach from the garden of Xi Mong Yu? If one were offered to you?" Old Zhang asked.

"A peach that would make me immortal?"

The old man frowned for the first time that afternoon. "Peaches from Xi Mong Yu's garden allow you to leave the eternal wheel of death, rebirth and suffering. But you don't become one of the eight immortals that wander the earth. Instead, you live on Peng Lai, the Isle of the Blessed, forever at peace."

The crickets in the grass stopped their calls, and the river hushed, as if holding its breath. The stillness went straight to Mei-Mei's heart. She tried to shake off the feeling with a laugh. "Of course I'd accept," she said. "Wouldn't everyone? It'd be such an honor for my family to have a daughter who was immortal, who'd pray for them and look over them forever. It might make up for . . ." Mei-Mei paused, not wanting to discuss family matters. "Wear your broken arm inside your sleeve," her mother had always told her.

"Even if you had to say good-bye to your family? Once you reach the Isle of the Blessed, you can never return to this sweet Middle Kingdom," the old man said, leaning forward.

Mei-Mei didn't know what to say. To leave her family forever seemed a great price, even for the honor of immortality. Yet, to change the set pattern of her life, to be immortal, revered forever, her name a legend. . . .

In the distance, the evening bells rang in deep, somber tones. It was the hour of the Rooster. She was late for dinner. "I must go home," she said. She'd never had such a fascinating conversation, or talked so easily with someone, not even Young Lu.

"Please meet me again. I wish to talk with you more," Old Zhang said.

"I don't know," Mei-Mei said, hesitating. "I shouldn't be here. What if someone saw?"

"Doesn't your grandmother nap every afternoon? You can slip away then," he said in a reassuring voice.

"But I have someone else I must visit. . . ." Mei-Mei said. She must go see Young Lu at least one more time.

"I predict your mother will send you on errands tomorrow morning so you'll be able to see your friend. Then, your grandmother will sleep so well after lunch you'll be able to come straight here," Old Zhang said.

Mei-Mei pulled back from him a little. Was he a sorcerer? She liked him so much, but if he hurt her family . . .

Her concern must have shown on her face because Old Zhang laughed and said, "Don't worry. I'm lonely, and in your company my soul feels complete."

Mei-Mei smiled and her cheeks burned. Now she knew how Young Lu felt about Old Lu.

"Until tomorrow, then," he said as she turned to go.

Mei-Mei said, "Only if I can. If Father finds out . . ." She couldn't finish. She didn't know what her father would do if he thought he had two wild daughters.

She'd come to the altar of the river dragon that afternoon because she hadn't been thinking. To come back deliberately was something different. She couldn't risk making Father angry. Not even for a soul mate. Or an immortal peach.

She turned and ran back toward the safety of Bao Fang.

#

The next morning, as Mei-Mei approached the kiln, she heard shouting. She paused. Should she go back? What if Young Lu was in trouble? Mei-Mei made herself hurry forward.

A pale white water buffalo stood in front of the kiln. A small wagon piled with goods rested behind the animal. Old Lu and another man argued with each other on the far side of the buffalo. Old Lu wanted the man to tie the bed down tighter, while the man thought it was tight enough. They didn't see Mei-Mei, so she walked around the wagon into the kiln.

The cracked, yellowing bamboo mats still lay on the floor, but everything else had been removed. Young Lu stood in the center of the room waving a piece of paper, as if it were a magic wand that had made everything disappear.

"Young Lu?" Mei-Mei called, holding her basket with both hands in front of her.

Young Lu whipped around, the spell broken. "Mei-Mei! Why did you come here again? I told you it was dangerous," she said, folding her arms over her chest.

Mei-Mei looked down at the heavy basket in her hands, surprised by Young Lu's welcome, unsure of what to say.

"I am glad you came," Young Lu said, relenting. "Old Lu's friend in Khan Hua sent word. He has work. One of the traders here is taking a caravan north, and hired Old Lu as a guard. We're meeting the rest of the caravan within the hour." Young Lu paused and took a deep breath. "I wrote you a farewell note, so you'd know what happened to us." She held the forlorn piece of paper out to her sister.

Mei-Mei made herself smile and handed her basket to Young Lu. "A fair exchange. You need some food for the road," she said. She glanced at the letter, the characters flowing in firm lines, telling of Young Lu's good fortune. "Is there anyone else . . . ?" Mei-Mei asked, pausing.

"No," Young Lu replied. "Father still wants me dead." She hesitated, then continued. "I wish I could talk with him, at least one more time, before I go. I may never see him again." She turned away from Mei-Mei, her voice full of unshed tears. "I know I should hate Father, hate all this," she said, gesturing at the blackened walls of the

kiln. "I should be happy I have a new chance in a new place, that won't have heard of the scandal. But I'm not. I can't be. He's my father. And I'm leaving." Young Lu turned back toward Mei-Mei.

Mei-Mei took a step toward her. She wanted to hug her little sister, to hold her apart from the world and protect her, just for a moment.

Young Lu held up her hand. "Don't," she said. "Or I might squeeze you to death like a snake demon. We have to say good-bye too."

The silence in the room lengthened. The voices outside faded. The two sisters stood at arm's length from each other, trying to say with their eyes all the things they'd never speak aloud.

"It's time to go," Mei-Mei heard from behind her. Young Lu looked away from Mei-Mei, switching her gaze to Old Lu. Though their gaze held fire, Mei-Mei felt cold. She was alone with these two people, on the outside. Young Lu limped to where Old Lu stood.

"Can't I walk with you? At least to the river?" Mei-Mei asked.

"You're a good sister," Old Lu said, taking the basket from Young Lu. He weighed it in his hands. "A very good sister. But I won't have others blacken your name."

"I don't care," Mei-Mei replied.

"I do," Young Lu said. "It was dangerous for you to come see me."

"But I met this fisherman—he reflects my soul—I want to talk with you. . . ."

"You can always talk with me in your heart," Young Lu said, ending the conversation.

Old Lu led Young Lu to the wagon. He gave the basket to the other man and lifted his wife onto the seat as if she were a fragile present from the Emperor. He nodded once to Mei-Mei then walked beside the wagon as it trundled along. Young Lu never looked back.

Mei-Mei had a wild impulse to run after the wagon, to ask Young Lu to take her with them. But no, that was just a dream. Her mother always told her that a person who followed their dreams spent their life asleep. Mei-Mei waited awhile more, then plodded back to Bao Fang, alone.

#

Old Zhang had been right. Mei-Mei had been able to visit Young Lu in the morning while doing the errands her mother had sent her on, and her grandmother had gone right to sleep after lunch.

Mei-Mei hurried toward the pavilion covering the river dragon altar. She didn't have much time. Today was the

twenty-fifth day of the seventh moon. That evening was the family dedication ceremony. Every year just before ghost month her entire family—all her cousins and aunts and uncles—knelt before the family poem and swore to uphold its tenets: be loyal to the Emperor, show obedience to family elders, uphold the family honor and bring prosperity to all.

The pavilion was empty. Mei-Mei circled the eight-sided structure, trying not to step on the profuse bluebells. She didn't see Old Zhang anywhere. Her heart thudded heavily in her ears, louder than the river. Maybe he was a sorcerer, and yesterday had been a dream. Or maybe the soldiers. . .

Notes from a sad, solitary flute floated from the trees beyond the pavilion. Mei-Mei followed the sorrowful melody along a trail, away from the river. Old Zhang sat on a bench enclosed by bushes and trees, playing a black lacquered flute. The river sounded louder here, though she could no longer see it. It was the perfect place for a tryst. A warm glow started in her belly, but she didn't sit down.

Old Zhang finished playing with a pensive trill that placed a question mark between them. "You're wary. Good. But you have nothing to fear from me. I'm just lonely, like a wind whispering bad news. I didn't want to see

anyone except you, so I hid back here. Please join me, won't you?" He smiled at her with his perfect teeth.

Mei-Mei still didn't sit, but she did take a step forward. "I shouldn't be here. What if someone saw us? I'm worried . . ."

Old Zhang laughed. "I'd be disappointed if you weren't. You're a pretty young girl, with eyebrows curved as softly as a butterfly's wing. I'm not asking for solace, just for the company of a dear friend on this sad, fleeting day."

Mei-Mei cautiously sat on the bench. A quick breeze through the curtain of green in front of her entangled the leaves and branches until she couldn't see the trail. Before she could say anything, a brilliant sapphire-colored bird landed near her feet. It sang a song, pecked at the ground, then looked up at her, first with one eye, then the other. Mei-Mei giggled and forgot about being nervous.

Old Zhang told her about the begging birds in the west. Monks trained them to fetch food from the people in the nearby village and bring it back to the monastery. Then their talk wandered all over the world, from the barbarians and dwarves north of the Tian mountains, to the kind hearted people south of the Yellow River, and the terrible

dragons in the eastern sea. Eventually they arrived again at Peng Lai, the Isle of the Blessed.

"Are you certain you'd choose to be an immortal?" Old Zhang asked.

Mei-Mei began the speech she'd prepared the night before. "Of course, if someone favored such an unworthy person as myself with that choice, I'd have to consider it for a long while. But in the end, the honor would be too great to turn down."

"And your family?" he asked.

Mei-Mei bit her lip. She didn't want to hurt her family. They'd lost so many relatives during the war, and now they'd lost Young Lu. Who would take her place in the ceremony that night? But a chance to be free of her marriage to Wang Po Ko, away from Father's wicked temper . . .

"Watching a child pass beyond the Great River is the hardest thing in the world," Old Zhang said, rubbing his hands. "Even if they've lived a long full life."

Mei-Mei examined the fisherman, noting again the discrepancy between his old eyes and his young face. "You're an immortal, aren't you? One of the eight who wander the Middle Kingdom?" she asked.

The breeze rattled the bushes again and the sound of the river died. The silence was muted, expectant. "Yes. I am." Old Zhang hesitated, then continued. "I love wandering the Middle Kingdom, helping people in small ways. Now, though, it isn't enough. The barbarian horseman, Vakhtang, just killed the last of my family. Nothing holds me to the earth anymore. I'm afraid when I sleep at night, if I don't tie myself to the ground, I'll turn into a wind and blow away."

Mei-Mei knew there weren't enough tears in the world to ease his heart. "What about the other seven immortals . . . ?" she began.

"They can't help. Immortality just means being alone, without your family, forever."

Mei-Mei nodded. She knew a little of his sorrow, and of being alone. She suspected she'd learn more.

She took the old man's face in her hands and rubbed his cold nose with hers. She didn't know what made her do it: whether it was his bleak words; because she wanted to touch his magic; or because she wanted to hold, just for a moment, the kind of feelings Young Lu had.

Old Zhang placed his warm hands on hers and pulled her into his arms.

Then the dragon played with the pearl, the hen showed her teeth, and they entered the land of thunder and rain.

#

Mei-Mei's knees ached even though she knelt on a silk cushion her grandmother had embroidered for her. She'd been kneeling with the rest of the family for the entire hour of the Dog while her father and uncles performed the family dedication ceremony. Another trickle of sweat squeezed out from where her thighs met her calves.

The family poem hung above a skinny black-lacquer altar, its characters dark and solid on the yellowing silk. Many narrow, crimson tablets stood on top of the altar, each about the length of an arm from fingertips to elbow. Every lacquered tablet had the name of one of Mei-Mei's ancestors written on it in raised gold characters. Tendrils of sweet smoke rose from the ball-shaped, silver filigree censer that also sat on the altar.

The empty spot next to Mei-Mei nagged at her worse than her younger cousins begging for sweets. This was the first time Young Lu hadn't been there to read her stanza. Who would take her place?

When the men finished, one by one the women rose, prostrated themselves before the altar, and read a stanza from the family poem. Mei-Mei trembled inside. Her mother

stood up, read her part of the poem; then her two older sisters did the same. She would be next. How could she swear to uphold the family honor when she'd stained it that afternoon with Old Zhang?

Her knees unbent slowly, like leather stiff with age. How could she be part of her family anymore? She should accept the immortal peach from Old Zhang, and become another tablet in her family's Hall of Ancestors. She walked toward the altar, unable to feel her feet. Yet she didn't trip or stumble. At least her association with Old Zhang hadn't brought her bad luck.

Mei-Mei knelt back on the ground, then prostrated herself. She stayed flat on the floor for a moment, not wanting to continue. What if her throat suddenly closed and she couldn't speak? She forced herself up to a kneeling position. She had to continue. It was the only path she knew.

She began reading. The words flowed out of her mouth like rain from the heavens, cleansing her conscience, bathing her soul. She could dedicate herself, from this moment on, to her family. She took a deep breath when she finished her part. She wanted the relief she felt to continue, so she read the next stanza as well, the one that Young Lu usually read. She wasn't trying to take Young

Lu's place. She would never be called the youngest daughter.

Mei-Mei bowed and touched her forehead to the ground three times before she got up and joined the rest of her family standing in a line near the door. She trembled again. What if she'd over stepped her bounds? She watched the ground as she walked, not wanting to meet her father's eye. After her two younger brothers finished their parts, the family stood silently for a while, letting the echoes of their reading float up to the Heavenly Court.

The back of Mei-Mei's neck pricked and chicken skin moved across her shoulders, though the room was warm. She felt compelled to look up. Her father stared at her. Mei-Mei shrank inside at the fierceness of his gaze. Then it softened, and he nodded, moving his head just a fraction. Mei-Mei risked a small smile. Her father didn't smile back with his mouth, but his eyes looked tender. He wasn't angry with her. She'd done the right thing. For the second time that night relief flooded through her.

Mei-Mei's smile drained away as the weight of her choice settled into her bones. She couldn't leave. She'd just established the pattern of her life. She was her father's daughter. For better and for worse, she was part of her family, here, in the Middle Kingdom.

#

Old Zhang was fishing in the river when Mei-Mei walked up to him. He looked at her, his eyes sucking at her, pulling her toward him. He didn't say anything, so she tried. "I-ah-I've decided to-ah-to not accept . . ." she stuttered.

"You've decided to stay in this world, and not travel to the next. Very wise of you," Old Zhang said. He pulled his bare hook out of the water and wrapped the line around the long bamboo pole.

Mei-Mei didn't know what to say. She looked down at her hands. Such small hands, so pale. She knew now that strong bones grew underneath that soft skin.

Old Zhang said, "Imagine the great black sky that is the life of an immortal. There are so few bright points. You, my dear, are one of those stars."

Mei-Mei's cheeks burned. How could she live with the memory of their afternoon together?

Old Zhang answered her unspoken question. "If jade isn't polished, it can't become a thing of use. You'll remember what you need to remember, and use it, like a tailor with a silver needle, to sew your happiness together."

Mei-Mei looked up and made herself smile at him. She bit her tongue hard, to hurt to prevent herself from crying.

Old Zhang returned her sad smile. He laid his pole on the ground next to him and took a brilliant piece of white paper from one of the bags hanging from his belt. He scooped up some water from the river and sprinkled a few drops on the paper. Then he blew on it.

The paper unfolded itself rapidly, fold upon fold, like a giant lotus blossom. Mei-Mei stepped back, her heart beating fast, not with fear, but with wonder. A deep tone came from the waist-high paper, like echoes from a bronze bell. Two more times the paper unfolded, then a full-sized donkey stood where the paper had been, motionless as a white statue.

The old man blew on the paper a second time. The white faded to gray. The donkey's mane stirred, and the beast shuddered and shook itself. It looked at Old Zhang, then lowered its head to pull up some grass. The old man laughed, grabbed a handful of the donkey's mane, and swung himself up on its back. He turned back to Mei-Mei and said, "I respect your decision." He paused, then continued. "Maybe one of your descendants will make a different choice."

He clucked once and the donkey started trotting. Old Zhang didn't say another word or turn around again.

As Mei-Mei watched him disappear behind the river bend, she vowed that when one of her descendants showed merit, she'd move heaven and earth to let her have that choice.