

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.

Chapter One

Bao Fang and on the Trail

Xiao Yen marveled at how the peaceful morning air grew charged with anticipation the moment Wang Tie-Tie woke up.

"Good morning Aunt," Xiao Yen said from where she was kneeling. She bowed from her waist, put her hands on the floor and touched her forehead to the ground to show respect for the eldest member of her family. Wang Tie-Tie's dark eyes stared out at Xiao Yen from a collection of wrinkles. Her forehead held deep lines, and her long hair was all white, with only a few strands of black. The front of her neck was hollow, like an old rooster's, but her gaze was steady, and her hands didn't shake as she pushed herself up into a seated position.

Xiao Yen kept her own eyes averted, observing instead the scarlet, orange and green quilt that covered her aunt. She traced the tiny stitches attaching the seemingly random-colored pieces together. Only when Xiao Yen let herself look beyond the minute could she see that the colors made exotic flowers.

"You leave today," Wang Tie-Tie said, breaking the silence. "Good. You

will be worthy, perform your duty, and do great deeds while you're traveling. You will make Old Zhang proud of you," she said, gesturing toward the altar set up in the corner of her room.

An ink drawing of the immortal hung above a black lacquered table. He stood between his donkey and a river, holding his long bamboo fish drum in his hand. A peach tree grew just behind him. His cheeks and brow were broad and wide, youthful and without flaws. The artist had drawn the immortal's eyes extra large and bulging, with many wrinkles around them. Old Zhang seemed to be staring at Xiao Yen, judging her worth.

"And when I come back?" Xiao Yen asked without thinking. She put her hand in front of her mouth. She'd never questioned her aunt before. Wang Tie-Tie didn't seem to notice her impoliteness.

"When you come back I shall arrange other employment for you."

Employment. Not marriage, though she'd just turned seventeen, and should be married. Gan Ou, her older sister, had been engaged by the time she was fifteen. Xiao Yen wondered again if the reason her aunt never talked about Xiao Yen getting married was because her own husband had been so unpleasant before he'd been killed in the same river accident that had taken Xiao Yen's father and elder brothers. Wang Tie-Tie's husband was honored. Her aunt performed the proper rituals to appease his ghost every month. On the other hand, no one talked about him, or told stories about the funny or clever or even brave things he'd done. Xiao Yen's mother lamented about how improper the household was now that Wang Tie-Tie was the head of the family, how in the old days the servants did all the shopping and the women were strictly confined to the women's quarters. Yet Xiao Yen suspected her mother secretly enjoyed being able to go to the market and to the White Temple without having to beg permission.

"Now go. It is time for my morning tea," Wang Tie-Tie said.

Xiao Yen swallowed hard, sadness dimming the morning sunlight.

Though she knew better than to expect warm words at their parting, she'd still hoped. Xiao Yen didn't want to go, didn't know when she'd be returning, and if she ran into bandits, or worse . . . She unbent her knees slowly, as if they held Wang Tie-Tie's age, bowed again to her aunt, and started for the door.

"Xiao Yen," Wang Tie-Tie called out.

Did her tone hold some softness? Xiao Yen stopped, but didn't turn around.

"I have every faith in you. You will do well, and Old Zhang will come to reward you. He promised me."

Xiao Yen turned around. Had the immortal really visited her aunt when she was Xiao Yen's age? She'd heard the story almost every day since she'd been a little girl. And about his promise.

It had always been easy for Xiao Yen to agree to her aunt's plan: learn paper magic, perform some great deed, and be rewarded with an immortal peach from Zhang Gua Lao. Now the plan had to be put into action. She was about to start her first appointment as a paper mage, protecting horses. How could she prove herself worthy of such important, rare charges, let alone an immortal's attention? Especially with foreigners, going to a foreign place? The impossibility of her task threatened to crush her.

"And when he does reward you . . ." Wang Tie-Tie started.

"I'll bring the immortal peach to you," Xiao Yen finished the litany. Every time Xiao Yen saw Wang Tie-Tie they repeated this phrase. It was their pact, their bond. It was how Xiao Yen would repay Wang Tie-Tie for letting her study with Master Wei. It was her duty. No matter what else happened, Xiao Yen would do her duty.

Wang Tie-Tie smiled, her eyes kind. "You are my hope. My dream." The soft voice hardened. "I don't understand why you have such a sad face. You're lucky. You've always been lucky."

Xiao Yen forced her hands to stay at her sides, to not reach up to grasp the empty place around her neck. The amulet that held her luck was gone. A ragged hole ripped through the morning and darkness poured through, threatening to suffocate Xiao Yen. She kept her face calm, placid, so Wang Tie-Tie wouldn't know anything was wrong.

"You will do well. I'm sure of it." Her aunt paused, then said, "I will see you again when you return."

Xiao Yen bowed at the dismissal, turned, and walked out the door.

She couldn't tell her aunt. She couldn't tell anyone.

Bright spring sunlight peeped over the front wall of the family compound. Pale sky filled the area above the walls—the sky well. Xiao Yen only saw darkness. She held herself rigid, not blinking until she was sure she could move again without screaming her loss aloud. She'd lost her luck. Jing Long, the dragon living at the bottom of the city well, had caused her amulet, the source of her luck, to fall into the well at the center of the city. Now she had to leave her family, go on an impossible journey with foreigners, and protect their horses, each one worth more than her life.

She took a deep breath, trying capture the stillness of the morning air. She failed. She couldn't stop trembling inside. She closed her eyes and tried to find her center, her quiet place, but all she saw were the gray backs of her eyelids.

A moment later she felt a tug on her sleeve, and opened her eyes. Her old nurse, Ama, stood beside her. She held out a dark blue bundle. Xiao Yen recognized her mother's favorite jacket. Without a word Ama folded it again and put it into Xiao Yen's pack. Fu Be Be hadn't understood why Xiao Yen had wanted to take her old jacket. It was worn, the cuffs were covered with plaques to hide their raveling, and the embroidered threads were breaking. But Xiao Yen had wanted something of her mother's with her, to remind her of her family, to comfort her while she traveled. It was

Xiao Yen's favorite jacket too.

Ama bowed deeply to Xiao Yen, almost bending in half. Then she scuttled away, heading toward the servants' quarters at the far end of the compound. They'd already said their good-byes. Xiao Yen knew Ama didn't want to be seen crying again.

Fu Be Be came up before Xiao Yen could take another deep breath. Her skin glowed like a white peony in the sunlight. She'd added only the slightest pink to her cheeks and lips. Her eyebrows arched across her forehead like gull wings, showing her great intelligence. She wore her rich black hair piled loosely on top of her head, held in place with three black-and-red lacquered hairpins. Glittering sunlight reflected off her best silver jacket, and fired the golden pine boughs embroidered on it.

Xiao Yen's throat tightened. Although her mother didn't approve of her employment, Fu Be Be was going to see her daughter off with all due ceremony.

Fu Be Be sniffed with disapproval when Xiao Yen picked up her own bag. To forestall another argument about hiring porters, Xiao Yen turned and walked toward the gate that separated the family courtyard from the front, formal courtyard. Though her mother stood a good head shorter than Xiao Yen, and was thinner than a river willow, Xiao Yen would rather face Hu Xien, the demon-slayer strong enough to jump and touch the moon, than have another fight with her mother.

Old Gardener had sprinkled water mixed with oil over the stones that morning, so the formal courtyard, also known as the Yard of Greeting, sparkled in the sunlight. The Hall of Politeness, the only building in the Yard of Greeting, sat like a shadow in the sunlight. Small brass bells hung under the eaves and rang when the wind touched them. Xiao Yen hurried past with only the slightest nod to show her respect. Fu Be Be hadn't paused, and already stood waiting at the front gate, beyond the bright red spirit wall.

Evil spirits could only travel in straight lines, so families built spirit walls behind their front gates, preventing direct access into the courtyards beyond. A circling gold-and-white dragon was painted on the side of the wall facing the gate of Xiao Yen's family compound. Xiao Yen wanted to stroke the dragon's long, drooping whiskers, to say good-bye, as she had when she'd been younger. But she couldn't. Not in front of her mother.

Old Gardener opened the gate silently, eyes downcast. As Xiao Yen passed through, he reached out and patted the dragon's snout for her. Xiao Yen bit her lip, refusing to cry. Instead, she hurried after her mother.

"*Hú-ah*," cried an old woman sitting on the street corner next to a covered iron pot. "Porridge for sale!" High-pitched tings rang from the coppersmith shop. Heated bargaining spilled out onto the street from the tailor's next door. Steam clouds billowed across the sidewalk. They smelled like almonds and obscured the bun stand.

Xiao Yen slowed as she passed the line of customers. She would like to buy a sweet bun for breakfast, but her mother wouldn't stop. Fu Be Be walked without hesitation, like the ghost Wu Quang Yin on her way to collect more souls. Dutifully Xiao Yen hurried on.

The rain from the night before had left large puddles in the center of the road, squeezing traffic into two tight lines. Xiao Yen paused at the first line to let a man with a wheelbarrow full of baskets pass in front of her. She found a narrow path between two puddles in the center, then paused again to wait for an ox pulling a cart laden with spring grain. Fu Be Be was already on the other side of the street. Xiao Yen hurried to catch up.

Just as Xiao Yen reached her mother, she stepped in a small puddle. Her shoe stuck in the mud at the bottom of the hole and Xiao Yen fell onto her knees and hands. Her head snapped forward and she bit her tongue. "Ow!" she cried.

Fu Be Be rushed to her daughter's side, gripped Xiao Yen's elbow, and pulled her up.

Xiao Yen looked down in dismay. Mud covered her new gray travel pants. The palms of her hands burned and the mud on her knees grew chill in the cool morning air. Xiao Yen grasped her mother's arm to steady herself. The warm silk slid under her hand. Xiao Yen let go, but it was too late. An ugly stain, like a black arrow, circled the silver sleeve.

Xiao Yen stared, horrified. She'd just ruined her new travel clothes and her mother's best jacket. A roaring like wet thunder filled Xiao Yen's ears. How could she have done this? She'd rarely tripped before, and had never fallen like this. Not when she'd had her luck. She rubbed the faint scar on the back of her left hand, remembering when she once thought of herself as the luckiest girl in the world.

Fu Be Be leaned over and brushed at the mud on Xiao Yen's pants, but only dirtied her own hands. She straightened up and looked at Xiao Yen, her dark eyes cutting through Xiao Yen's cloud of silence.

"This is a bad omen. Wang Tie-Tie should never have signed that contract. It's shameful. Sending you away from your family, to work with those dirty foreigners. You must keep yourself apart and pure." Fu Be Be pulled Xiao Yen's arm down, jerking her forward, and hurrying along again.

Xiao Yen stopped. "Mother, I'm sure it'll be fine. It'll be good experience for me." Xiao Yen regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth.

Fu Be Be turned and came back to where Xiao Yen was standing. Xiao Yen flinched under her mother's angry gaze.

"Good experience? The only experience you should be getting is listening to matchmakers and swaddling babies. Who's going to make an offer for you after you spend three months away from your home, traveling with foreigners?"

"Shhh, Mother," Xiao Yen said, conscious of the stares from the people

passing them.

Fu Be Be wouldn't be shushed. "Wang Tie-Tie, your own aunt, has robbed you. I don't care how much money we're getting from this contract. A girl without family is poor."

A water carrier, his empty buckets dangling on a pole carried over his broad shoulders, leaned against the wall next to the sidewalk to watch. Xiao Yen gestured at him and told her mother, "Remember what they say: wear your broken arm *inside* your sleeve."

Fu Be Be glared at the young man, then dismissed him with a wave of her hand. Holding her nose high, she turned and walked down the sidewalk again, as proud as royalty. Xiao Yen suppressed a giggle and followed.

A small crowd had gathered in the courtyard of the merchant inn. The two foreign brothers stood next to their horses, packed and ready to go. A group of people gathered in a circle around them, staring, pointing, and whispering to each other. The brothers towered over everyone by a head at least. Xiao Yen gasped as she and Fu Be Be approached. She'd never been this close to a foreigner before. They really were as ugly as her cousins said. Wang Tie-Tie's partner, Fu Ling, detached himself from the crowd to greet them.

Fu Ling bowed low, hands pressed together across his chest. He wore makeup around his eyes to make them seem small and squinting, as if he spent his nights studying. His broad red nose told the truth—the only thing he studied was a wine pot. He wore a black cap with a high-standing brim and long ear flaps, like an official's cap, but without the sign of Heaven embroidered on it. His russet silk robe had a pattern of golden blossoms embroidered across his skinny chest and long sleeves.

"Greetings Lady Fu," he said in a voice like silk caressing silk. "I welcome you and your"—he paused, glancing at Xiao Yen—"daughter."

Everyone always said how much Xiao Yen looked like her mother, the

same long fine fingers, well-formed nose and oval face. Xiao Yen's training had left her bulkier though. Her sister had teased her once, that with Xiao Yen's shoulders, if she cut her hair, she could pass for a man. The remark still burned.

Fu Ling paused again. Fu Be Be bowed to him, a very short, curt bow, as one would give to an inferior. Xiao Yen did the same. The crowd in the courtyard now stared at her. She wished she could disappear. It was bad enough that her family knew of her position. Now all of Bao Fang would know. Gossip ran faster through the city than the goddess Chang-e could fly from the Tien Mountains in the west to the sea in the east.

Fu Be Be started to walk past Fu Ling, but he touched her sleeve and said, "Oh gracious lady, perhaps you can untie the knot the foreigners have presented me."

"Continue," Fu Be Be commanded.

Xiao Yen caught her breath. If there was some way out of the current contract, her mother would find it. Xiao Yen didn't know whether to feel sadness or joy. On the one hand, she didn't want to go. Who would want to be separated from their family, their home, for weeks, traveling with foreigners? On the other hand, she had to go. She must do her duty. She had to fulfill her obligation to Wang Tie-Tie.

"It seems the foreigners have, ah, met someone. She calls herself Bei Xi. She also travels the merchant trail, and wants to join the brothers and their horses."

"Does this person, this Bei Xi, expect my daughter to protect her as well?" Fu Be Be asked.

"She has her own guard, but, if they're all traveling together, how could Xiao Yen protect one and not the other?" Wang Tie-Tie's partner ended with an elegant shrug.

One of the two foreigners walked up to them. Xiao Yen couldn't take her eyes off his blond hair. It was like someone had taken a piece of the

sun and placed it on his head. Maybe it had happened because he was so tall. Fu Ling introduced him as Udo, then bowed and said something in a foreign language, his voice like oil running off water, though he struggled with the words.

The tall foreigner pointed to Xiao Yen and said a single word, incredulously. Xiao Yen's cheeks burned. She could guess what had happened. Wang Tie-Tie's partner had never told the foreigners, or had lied, about her being so young. Or about her being a girl. No one thought girls could provide good protection.

Udo's eyes, the color of summer thunderstorms, flashed with anger. He drew himself up straight, his face turning more red, about to argue more, when a sweet voice called out. The voice spoke fluently in the foreigner language. The man turned and answered roughly.

The most beautiful woman Xiao Yen had ever seen appeared from behind the foreigner, gliding like silk on the wind. She was petite as the blossoms on a *wu-tong* tree, with skin finer than imperial jade. Though the pink of her cheeks had been only slightly enhanced, her lips were as red as poppies. She wore a lovely off-white silk jacket decorated with cicadas, tied loosely with sleeves that didn't cover her wrists, giving improper glimpses of her under jacket when she moved.

Xiao Yen looked down at her feet, conscious again of her stained pants. *This* was the person who wanted to travel with the foreigners? From the way Bei Xi wore her clothes and the amount of makeup covering her face, she was obviously a courtesan. Equally obvious, from the quality of the jacket she wore, her cultured tones, and the number of jewels adorning her, she was from some lord's court, possibly even a lord who knew the Emperor.

Fu Be Be made a disapproving noise. Xiao Yen knew Fu Be Be didn't approve of second wives, let alone other women in a household. Would her mother let her travel with such a woman? Xiao Yen was certain that

Wang Tie-Tie would approve of Xiao Yen associating with Bei Xi. Her aunt always sought to better their family's social position. Besides, Xiao Yen knew that Wang Tie-Tie thought second wives, courtesans, even prostitutes, could help keep discord from a marriage.

Patiently Bei Xi listened to the story told by the foreigner. She spoke in a reassuring tone, and eventually mollified the tall blond man. He walked away still shaking his head. The woman watched him, her head tilted to one side, as if she listened to the wind. She raised her arms, clapped her hands, then turned to Fu Be Be.

A servant came running into the courtyard, breathless, carrying a large sack.

"Of course, because your talented daughter is now protecting twice as many people, you should receive twice the fee," Bei Xi said, indicating that the servant should hand the money to Fu Be Be.

Xiao Yen felt the anger radiating from her mother. The courtesan had done the right thing, the proper thing. Her mother couldn't back out now. "The contract . . ." she started to say.

"Is still valid," Wang Tie-Tie's partner smoothly inserted as he reached for the bag.

Xiao Yen looked at her feet. Of course it was. She still had to go, to do her duty, to make Wang Tie-Tie proud.

The foreign brothers had traveled the entire length of the Great Merchant road, from the fabled city of Constantinople, over the Mountains of Heaven, through the Bone Desert, and down to Xian, the capital of the Middle Kingdom. Their home was a town called Reric, on the other side of the world, just east of the kingdom of Jutland. They'd hired Xiao Yen to protect their merchandise, their horses, as they made their way through the Middle Kingdom to the seaport Khuangho. They'd make much more money selling the horses on the coast than selling them inland. Xiao Yen didn't know how they'd gotten permission to do it.

Almost all horses were the property of the Emperor, or his men.

The brothers had traveled to Xian with a different mage, one who enchanted cloth. He'd conjured blankets that changed the appearance of the horses. Xiao Yen wished she could have met him, though she'd been warned by her master many times that all other mages would be a threat to her. The brothers dismissed the cloth mage when he tried to steal their horses while at the capital.

The brothers wanted to go back home by sea. A sea route back to the foreign lands of the west had been open for ten years or so. It wasn't a safe journey, but the land route was less safe than it had been. When Emperor Dezong had forged the peace treaty with the Tibetans to the west and the kingdom of Turic—the land of the horsemen—to the north, and the Great Merchant road to the west had reopened, all three kingdoms had dedicated soldiers to keeping merchants safe from robbers. Now, the horsemen ignored the treaty, raiding both merchants and the villages on the border between their lands and the Middle Kingdom. In addition, on the other side of the trade route, the great foreign king, Charlemagne, had died, and his son was old and weak. His lands, too, were under attack.

Everything happened quickly in the courtyard. One of Bei Xi's servants led Xiao Yen to her horse. It had a ragged dark brown coat with matching mane, and the character for "ox" branded on its right shoulder. The characters branded on the left side of its tail indicated that the horse was foreign. The brands on the right showed that it could be used privately. It smelled of hay and dust.

Xiao Yen remembered another brand she'd seen, only once. She shivered, and wished she could ask the horse if it still hurt.

Xiao Yen's head didn't crest the horse's back, while the foreigner's heads stood almost as high as their horses'. Xiao Yen had never been on a horse before. Her fear hollowed out the pit of her stomach as she looked

up at it. What if she injured it? If she took all the money from her contract, maybe she could pay for one horse.

Bei Xi's servant tied Xiao Yen's bags across the back of the horse, showed her how to step on the mounting block, and how to swing one leg up and over the horse. Xiao Yen forced herself to follow his instructions precisely, trying to make the foreign movements seem natural. She couldn't let anyone guess how full of fear she was. She was their defense against mercenaries and bandits on the road. She couldn't be afraid of what she was protecting.

From her high perch, Xiao Yen could see over the heads of everyone in the courtyard. Maybe this wouldn't be too bad. She wasn't afraid of falling off. Her training with Master Wei had given her an excellent sense of balance.

Then the horse took a step.

Xiao Yen stopped looking around and concentrated on her horse. She'd never sat in a cart or ridden in a palanquin. Moving without taking a step was an odd sensation. It reminded her of her dreams of flying.

A sharp whistle cut through the air. Xiao Yen's horse turned around and started walking toward the gate, following the rest of the horses. Xiao Yen clutched at the reins and looked around for her mother. This was it. She was leaving. Leaving Bao Fang. Leaving her family.

Xiao Yen bent her head as she passed through the arch of the merchant's inn, though she didn't need to, unlike the foreigners. Her mother came hurrying up, pushing her way through the crowd. Xiao Yen wasn't sure how to stop her horse. She couldn't dismount. She'd never be able to get back on it again without help.

Fu Be Be handed Xiao Yen a small willow branch, saying, "I look forward to your return."

Xiao Yen squeezed her lips together, biting them. The willow branch was a traditional parting gift. It cried all the tears that the parties saying

good-bye could never shed. Xiao Yen didn't know what to say. She'd never thought her mother would shed any tears, real or metaphorical, at her departure.

"Be well," her mother said, falling away.

"I'll try," Xiao Yen called over her shoulder. She couldn't look backward for more than a moment. Though she had good balance, it was still unsettling.

Besides, she didn't want to see her mother actually cry.

* * *

Xiao Yen held the reins to her horse in one cold hand and clutched the willow branch in the other. Her thighs trembled and her buttocks ached. She'd never ridden a horse before that day. Now she'd been on one all day, and wasn't sure she could dismount. Everyone in camp seemed too busy to help her. The long-haired guard, a barbarian horseman from the north, Gi Tang, was setting up a tent for Bei Xi on the eastern edge of camp. The trail guide looked after the horses, lifting up hooves one at a time, checking for rocks.

The foreign brothers, Udo and Ebran, worked together; Ebran built a fire and Udo unpacked large cast-iron cooking pots. They yelled at each other with big, hearty voices, as if they stood many *li* apart. Their voices dominated the other sounds in the camp: the grunts from the barbarian guard as he raised the center pole of a tent, the chorus of frogs from the river, the horses nickering as the trail guide led them to the edge of camp. Xiao Yen longed to be outside of all the noise, in the woods with only the wind speaking to her. Though the oaks still held their leaves, the other trees were only budding, so the blazing orange sunset shone through the clearing. From her high perch Xiao Yen smelled the damp ground. Her horse was warm against her thighs, but her shoulders were cold. At least her legs had finally dried.

She suppressed a shudder remembering the river crossing that

morning. Only her horse had stumbled, dropping to its knees. Only Xiao Yen had soaked her legs. The foreigners had laughed, saying she was now "baptized," whatever that meant. Xiao Yen knew it was the river dragon trying to drag her under, angry with her because the city dragon was angry with her. She was glad they didn't have to cross the river again, though they would ride beside it for weeks as they traveled north along the merchant trail. It would provide their water the entire trip.

Udo approached her. He was the uglier of the two foreigners, with a large nose and the grin of a carnivore. His best feature was his hair, golden as summer wheat. It rested in waves across the top of his head, and he tied it in a ponytail in the back. He wore the cuffs of his gray pants loose, like a woman, instead of bound tightly around his ankles, like a man. Over his reddish cotton shirt he wore a short black vest, lined with brown fur.

Udo said something to her in his harsh, guttural foreign tongue and held out his hands. She assumed he wanted to help her down so she said, "Yes, down please," in his tongue. He looked surprised and rattled off more words at her.

Xiao Yen didn't know what he'd said. She smiled as if she agreed, hoping that was the right answer. He yelled at his brother—something about a flower? Then he turned back and smiled at her, showing all his teeth like an angry dog. Xiao Yen suppressed a shudder and didn't flinch when he touched her elbow and helped her slide off her horse. His warm fingers held her upper arm, steadying her. When Xiao Yen found she could stand, she pulled away from him.

Udo untied her bags, hanging on either side of her horse. He grunted as he lifted them over the horse, then dropped them to the ground. Xiao Yen let go of her willow branch and picked her bags up. Why hadn't he just handed them to her? He said something more that she didn't understand.

"He's asking how you can carry such heavy bags," came a soft voice over her right shoulder. Xiao Yen spun around, clutching her bags to her chest like a shield. Bei Xi the courtesan stood there, more beautiful than the painting Wang Tie-Tie had of Kuan Yin, the goddess of mercy. A sweet scent flowed from Bei Xi to Xiao Yen. In the dimming light her skin glowed like a new moon. Her teeth looked like little pearls, expertly strung.

Xiao Yen realized that both Bei Xi and Udo stared at her, waiting for an answer. One word popped out from her terror of addressing such a perfect being. "Practice."

Udo roared with laughter when Bei Xi repeated the word to him in his language. The courtesan smiled politely, though her eyes laughed as well. Xiao Yen turned away, taking small steps with her shaky legs. Udo came up beside her before she was halfway across the camp clearing and took her bags from her. He grunted again at their weight.

He led her to a small tent set up next to Bei Xi's. Xiao Yen glanced at Bei Xi's tent, then looked away. Why had they put her tent next to Bei Xi's? The courtesan's tent was made from off-white cloth, like the muslin used for mourning clothes. Xiao Yen had often heard the northern barbarians referred to as "the ones who sleep in death tents."

Xiao Yen's tent, provided for her by her foreign patrons, was made of black oiled leather. It was long enough for Xiao Yen to lie down and be covered. A padded comforter covered the floor of the tent. The apex of the tent was high enough for her to sit upright. After Udo placed her bags inside, Xiao Yen sank down, glad to sit on ground that didn't move.

Udo yelled again at his brother. Why couldn't they address each other in normal tones? Ebran came over to where Udo stood. Xiao Yen decided that in dim light, he might pass for a wealthy merchant from her land, the Middle Kingdom. He wasn't as tall as Udo. Ebran also weighed more. He carried his extra weight around his belly. His beard grew out of his

chin, thin and black. He let his black hair hang loose around his shoulders. His skin was darker than Udo's, and his features were much wider. His nose spread across his face like it had melted. Only his round eyes ruined the illusion.

Ehran spoke rapidly to Udo, gesturing at Xiao Yen. She caught the word "protection." She stifled a groan and wished the earth would open up and swallow her whole. All she wanted to do was to sleep. How could riding a horse all day make her so tired? Her legs ached at the thought of getting up, but she knew she must. She needed to set up the defenses for the camp that night.

She reached up to touch her luck. When her fingers closed upon the empty space around her neck she nearly growled. She had no luck. She rubbed the back of her left hand. The faint scar there held no magic. As she flexed her fingers she remembered the willow branch her mother had given her. Where was it?

She looked under her bags. The branch wasn't there. She remembered holding the branch when she'd been on her horse, letting it cry the tears she couldn't. Then she'd dropped it when Udo had put her bags on the ground. Xiao Yen got out of her tent and stood up. The edges of her vision dimmed. Xiao Yen closed her eyes and took three deep breaths to steady herself.

She opened her eyes in time to see the trail guide throw her willow branch on the cooking fire.

Xiao Yen wanted to turn around and crawl back into her tent, pull her comforter over her head, and never get up again. The green willow wood sizzled and crackled on the fire. Any hope that things would be better after she left Bao Fang also went up in smoke.

Udo said something from behind her. Xiao Yen acquiesced without fully understanding what he asked. It was time for her to do her duty, in front of these strangers, luck or no. Master Wei had said she had skill as

well as luck. She hoped he was right.

She followed Udo around the edges of the camp, memorizing landmarks. Then she went to her tent. Her special bag was there, made of stiff oiled leather, the sides supported with straight pieces of wood, so that the paper she carried wouldn't get wet or be crushed. She sent another quick prayer of thanks to Master Wei for such a thoughtful parting gift. She reverently pulled out a sheet of paper and put her bag over her shoulder. Then she walked to the southern edge of the camp, the one closest to her home.

Xiao Yen sat on the cold ground with the paper in her lap. She breathed deeply, pulling her breath down past her fast-beating heart into her center where she imagined a pebble tumbling over and over. She concentrated on the revolving rock. She filled herself with the sound of the night wind pulling at the winter leaves and the scent of the spring hidden in the thawing ground. The image of a silver river came to Xiao Yen, the place where she felt most comfortable, her still place, the home of her quiet.

Calmer now, Xiao Yen bowed three times to the west, the direction of Xian and the Emperor, touching her forehead on the cold earth each time. Then she lifted her hands and prayed to Zhang Gua Lao, the immortal. When she finished, she raised her arms, glad to see they were as steady and as motionless as the arms of a carved Buddha.

She picked up the piece of paper and made her first two folds, mountain-folds, bringing the lower corners to the back of the paper, close to the middle. Then she valley-folded the top layer only, creasing the paper from the lower edge to just past the center. She made a valley-fold of the small remaining square, pulling the fold between her nails so it was sharp. Then she unfolded the paper and looked at the resulting lines. They were crisp, well defined, like the trimmed edges of a wooden fan. Pleased, she folded more.

When she finished, her creation wasn't much bigger than her outstretched hand, but its legs were solid, its ears large, and its tail supple. Even the two fangs looked sharp. Xiao Yen was happy with her tiger. She was also relieved her first try had worked, that she didn't have to make a second attempt in front of her new employers. She put her beast on the ground where she had previously touched her forehead. Still feeling the folds in her fingers, she closed her eyes and let the tiger grow larger and larger in her mind. She imagined its soft fur rippling as it paced, its whiskers bobbing, its paws as big as her thigh, ready to rend any strangers to pieces.

The collective gasp behind her told her she'd succeeded. She opened her eyes to a golden tiger glow. A surety and wildness filled its eyes. Xiao Yen didn't know she possessed or could have imparted such emotion.

Holding her tiger's gaze, Xiao Yen let the path around their camp, a series of landmark she had memorized earlier, saturate her vision. The first landmark was just north of the tents: a little bush, buds only, no leaves; next was a thin sapling with more white than gray in its trunk; and then a small rock with brown veins on the right and a hollow in a tree on the left. She thought about every spot she'd chosen around the border of their camp in sequence, visualizing the unique aspects of each. When she thought of the last marker, finishing the circle around their camp, the tiger, with a sudden jump, sprang to its duty. It would patrol from one place to the next, protecting their camp with its presence as it prowled the perimeter for the entire night.

Xiao Yen pulled five candles out of her bag. She placed them at the five compass points around the paper figure still on the ground: north, south, east, west and center. Then she stood to fetch a small branch from the fire with which to light the candles.

Udo, Ebran, Bei Xi and her guard stood in a line behind her. Udo asked something in a choked tone. Bei Xi translated.

"How long . . . ?"

"Until the sun comes up," Xiao Yen replied, indicating with her hand, palm raised.

Ehran asked something, his voice a little more normal than his brother's. Ehran didn't look up as he asked the question. His gaze stayed focused on his fingers, fiddling with the knife hilt sticking out from his belt.

Bei Xi translated. "Will it stay outside the camp?"

"Outside, yes. It will follow the path I made."

"Is it dangerous?" Udo asked, his voice now under his control again.

Finally a question that Xiao Yen could answer without translation. "To others, if they see it. It can kill," Xiao Yen lied. Xiao Yen's teacher, Master Wei, could create a deadly tiger, but Xiao Yen didn't have the wisdom or understanding yet.

Bei Xi smiled. "Ay! We're lucky to have you with us."

Lucky? Was she lucky to be here, so far away from her family and everything she'd ever known? She'd lost her luck, maybe forever. With her luck gone, how could she gain enough merit to win Wang Tie-Tie an immortal peach? Xiao Yen was certain she was the unluckiest girl in the world.