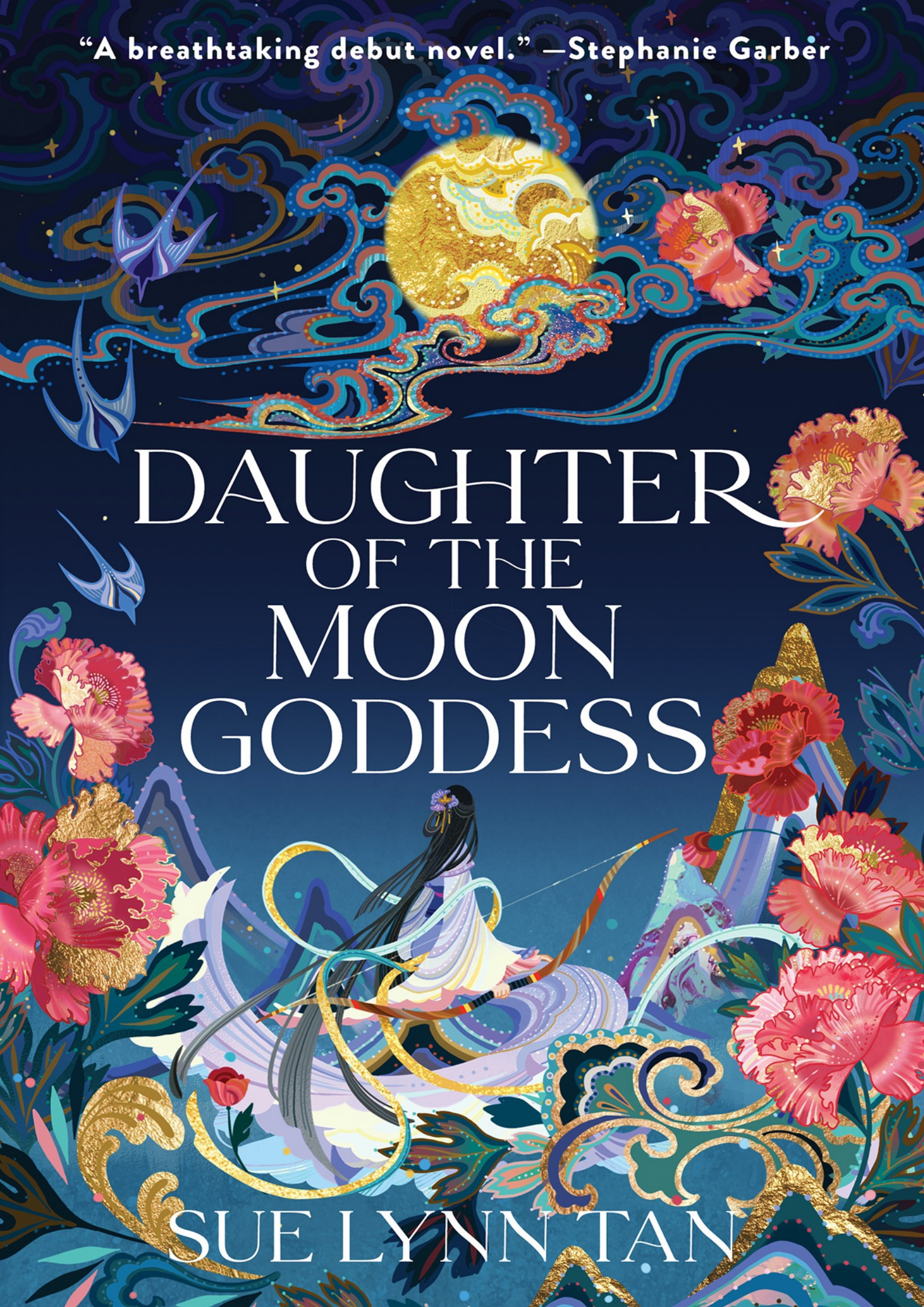
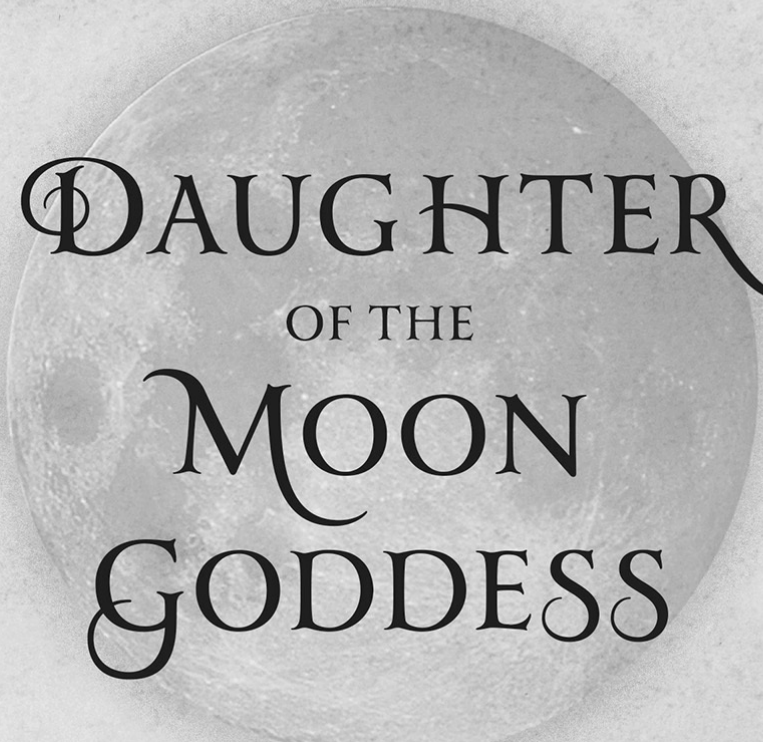



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DAUGHTER  
OF THE  
MOON  
GODDESS

SUE LYNN TAN



DAUGHTER  
OF THE  
MOON  
GODDESS

A NOVEL



SUE LYNN TAN



HARPER Voyager

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# Dedication

*To my husband, Toby—my first reader and partner in life. This would not have been possible without you.*

*And to my children, Lukas and Philip, for letting me work some of the time.*

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# Map



# Part I

# 1

**T**here are many legends about my mother. Some say she betrayed her husband, a great mortal warrior, stealing his Elixir of Immortality to become a goddess. Others depict her as an innocent victim who swallowed the elixir while trying to save it from thieves. Whichever story you believe, my mother, Chang'e, became immortal. As did I.

I remember the stillness of my home. It was just myself, a loyal attendant named Ping'er, and my mother residing on the moon. We lived in a palace built from shining white stone, with columns of mother-of-pearl and a sweeping roof of pure silver. Its vast rooms were filled with cinnamon-wood furniture, their spicy fragrance wafting through the air. A forest of white osmanthus trees surrounded us with a single laurel in its midst, bearing luminous seeds with an ethereal shimmer. No wind nor bird, not even my hands could pluck them, they cleaved to the branches as steadfastly as the stars to the sky.

My mother was gentle and loving, but a little distant, as though she bore some great pain which had numbed her heart. Each night, after lighting the lanterns to illuminate the moon, she stood on our balcony to stare at the mortal world below. Sometimes I woke just before the dawn and found her still standing there, her eyes shrouded in memory. Unable to bear the sadness in her face, I wrapped my arms around her, my head just coming up to her waist. She flinched at my touch as though roused from a dream, before stroking my hair and bringing me back to my room. Her silence pricked me; I worried that I had upset her, even though she rarely lost her temper. It was Ping'er who finally explained that my mother did not like to be disturbed during those times.

"Why?" I asked.

"Your mother suffered a great loss." She raised a hand to stall my next question. "It's not my place to say more."



The thought of her sorrow pierced me. “It’s been years. Will Mother ever recover?”

Ping’er was silent for a moment. “Some scars are carved into our bones—a part of who we are, shaping what we become.” Seeing my crestfallen expression, she cradled me in her soft arms. “But she is stronger than you think, Little Star. Just as you are.”

Despite these fleeting shadows, I was happy here, if not for the gnawing ache that something was missing from our lives. Was I lonely? Perhaps, although I had little time to fret over my solitude. Every morning my mother gave me lessons on writing and reading. I would grind the ink against the stone until a glossy black paste formed, as she taught me to form each character with fluid strokes of her brush.

While I cherished these times with my mother, it was the classes with Ping’er that I enjoyed the most. My painting was passable, and my embroidery dismal, but it did not matter when it was music I fell in love with. Something about the way the melodies formed, stirred emotions in me which I did not yet comprehend—whether from the strings plucked by my fingers, or the notes shaped by my lips. Without companions to vie for my time, I soon mastered the flute and qin—the seven-stringed zither—surpassing Ping’er’s skills in just a few years. On my fifteenth birthday, my mother gifted me a small, white jade flute that I carried everywhere in a silk pouch that hung from my waist. It was my favorite instrument, its tone so pure even the birds would fly up to the moon to listen—though part of me believed they came to gaze at my mother, too.

Sometimes, I caught myself staring at her, entranced by the perfection of her features. Her face was shaped like a melon seed and her skin glowed with the luster of a pearl. Delicate brows arched over slender jet-black eyes which curved into crescents when she smiled. Gold pins gleamed from the dark coils of her hair and a red peony was tucked in one side. Her inner garment was the blue of the noon sky, paired with a white and silver robe that flowed to her ankles. Wrapped around her waist was a vermilion sash, ornamented with tassels of silk and jade. Some nights, as I lay in bed, I would listen out for their gentle clink, and sleep came easy when I knew she was near.

Ping’er assured me that I resembled my mother, but it was like comparing a plum blossom to the lotus. My skin was darker, my eyes rounder, and my jaw more angular with a cleft in the center. Perhaps I resembled my father? I did not know; I had never met him.

It was years before I realized that my mother, who dried my tears when I fell and straightened my brush when I wrote, was the Moon Goddess.

The mortals worshipped her, making offerings to her each Mid-Autumn Festival—on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month—when the moon was at its brightest. On this day they would burn incense sticks for prayer and prepare mooncakes, their tender crusts wrapped around a rich filling of sweet lotus seed paste and salted duck eggs. Children would carry glowing lanterns shaped as rabbits, birds, or fish, symbolizing the light of the moon. On this one day a year I would stand upon the balcony, staring at the world below, inhaling the fragrant incense which wafted up to the sky in honor of my mother.

The mortals intrigued me, because my mother gazed at their world with such yearning. Their stories fascinated me with their struggles for love, power, survival—although I had little comprehension of such intrigues in my sheltered confines. I read everything I could lay my hands on, but my favorites were the tales of valiant warriors battling fearsome enemies to protect their loved ones.

One day, while I was rummaging through a pile of scrolls in our library, something bright caught my eye. I pulled it out, my pulse leaping to find a book I had not read before. From its rough stitched bindings, it appeared to be a mortal text. Its cover was so faded, I could barely make out the painting of an archer aiming a silver bow at ten suns in the sky. I traced the faint details of a feather within the orbs. No, not suns but birds, curled into balls of flame. I brought the book to my room, my fingers tingling as they clutched the brittle paper to my chest. Sinking down on a chair, I eagerly turned the pages, devouring the words.

It began as many tales of heroism did, with the mortal world engulfed by a terrible misfortune. Ten sunbirds rose in the sky, scorching the earth and causing great suffering. No crops could grow on the charred soil and there was no water to drink from the parched rivers. It was rumored that the gods of heaven favored the sunbirds, and no one dared to challenge such mighty creatures. Just when all hope seemed lost, a fearless warrior named Houyi took up his enchanted bow of ice. He shot his arrows into the sky, slaying nine of the sunbirds and leaving one to light the earth—

The book was snatched from me. My mother stood there, flushed, her breaths coming short and fast. As she gripped my arm, her nails dug into my flesh.

“Did you read this?” she cried.

My mother rarely raised her voice. I stared blankly at her, finally managing a nod.

She released me, dropping onto a chair as she pressed her fingers to her temple. I reached out to touch her, afraid she would pull away in anger, but

she clasped her hands around mine, her skin as cold as ice.

“Did I do something wrong? Why can’t I read this?” I asked haltingly. There appeared nothing out of the ordinary in the story.

She was quiet for so long, I thought she had not heard my question. When she turned to me at last, her eyes were luminous, brighter than the stars. “You did nothing wrong. The archer, Houyi . . . he is your father.”

Light flashed through my mind, my ears ringing with her words. When I was younger, I had often asked her about my father. Yet each time she had fallen silent, her face clouding over, until finally my questions ceased. My mother bore many secrets in her heart which she did not share with me. Until now.

“My father?” My chest tightened as I spoke the words.

She closed the book, her gaze lingering on its cover. Afraid that she might leave, I lifted the porcelain teapot and poured her a cup. It was cold, but she sipped it without complaint.

“In the Mortal Realm, we loved each other,” she began, her voice low and soft. “He loved you, too—even before you were born. And now . . .” Her words trailed off as she blinked furiously.

I held her hand to comfort her, and as a gentle reminder that I was still here.

“And now, we are parted for eternity.”

I could barely think through the thoughts cramming my head, the emotions surging within me. For as long as I could remember, my father had been no more than a shadowy presence in my mind. How often had I dreamed of him sitting across from me as we ate our meals, strolling beside me beneath the flowering trees. Each time I awoke, the warmth in my chest dissolved to a hollow ache. Today, I finally knew my father’s name, and that he had loved me.

It was little wonder that my mother appeared haunted all this time, trapped in her memories. What had happened to my father? Was he still in the Mortal Realm? How did we end up here? Yet I gulped back my questions, as my mother wiped her tears away. Oh, how I wanted to know, but I would not hurt her to ease my selfish curiosity.

**T**ime to an immortal was as rain to the boundless ocean. Ours was a peaceful life, a pleasant one, and the years passed by as though they were weeks. Who knows how many decades would have swept by in this manner if my life had not been tossed into turmoil, as a leaf torn from its branch by the wind?

It was a clear day, the sunlight streaming through my window. I set

aside my lacquered qin, closing my eyes to rest. As had happened before, silver flecks of light drifted into my mind, tugging and teasing at me—just as how the scent of osmanthus drew me to the forest each morning. I wanted to reach out to them but recalled my mother's stern warning.

"Don't go near them, Xingyin," she had pleaded, her skin ashen. "It's too dangerous. Trust me, they will fade."

I had stammered my promise to her then. And over the years, I had kept my word diligently, too. Whenever a glint of silver beckoned to me, I thought furiously of other things—a song or my latest book—until my mind cleared and they faded away. Yet it was harder each time, the lights blazing brighter, their call more tantalizing. The urge to reach out, almost overwhelming.

How brightly they glittered today, as though sensing my wavering resolve, the restless churning in my blood. I had felt this more often of late, a part of me yearning for . . . something which had no name. A change, perhaps. But nothing ever happened here. Nothing ever changed.

The lights did not seem dangerous. Was my mother mistaken? She had cautioned me against countless things, as harmless as climbing a tree or running through the halls, maybe recalling such perils from her mortal childhood. I drew closer to the radiance in my mind. Closer than I had ever been before. Something clutched at me, dragging me away—was it fear or guilt? But reckless now, I tore through it as though it were cobwebs. I was at the brink, teetering on the edge. A current raced through my veins, whispers coiling between my ears. Leaning forward, I reached out—only to see the shimmering silver scatter as the starlight at dawn.

My eyes flew open, my senses tingling. I had no idea how long I sat there, lost in a daze. Beyond my window, the evening sun infused the sky with threads of rose and gold. The thrill gone; remorse sat like a stone in my chest. I had broken my promise to my mother. And worse yet, I wanted to do it again. Those lights were not dangerous, they were a part of me—I knew that now with startling certainty. Why had she warned me from them? *I will ask her*, I decided, rising to my feet. *I am old enough to know.*

Just as I reached the entrance, a strange energy thrummed through the air, raising the hair on the back of my neck. Immortal auras—unfamiliar to me—shifting and mingling as the clouds in the sky. I could not tell how many, although one seemed to blaze brighter than the rest, far stronger than my mother's or Ping'er's.

Who had come here?

As I flung the doors open, my mother flew into my room. I stumbled back, knocking into a chair. Did she discover what I had done? Was she

here to scold me?

I hung my head. “I’m sorry, Mother. The lights—”

She grasped my shoulders. “Never mind that, Xingyin. A visitor has arrived. She mustn’t know that you’re here. That you’re my daughter.”

My pulse raced at the thought of meeting someone new. Then, her meaning sank in—as did her tone—and my excitement crumpled like a sheet of paper. “You don’t want me to meet your friend?”

Her hands fell away from me, the planes of her face hardening until they seemed carved from marble. “Not a friend. She is the empress of the Celestial Kingdom. She doesn’t know about you, nobody does. And we can’t let them find you!”

Her words—tumbling out in a rush—startled me, despite the excitement which sparked within. I had read the Celestial Kingdom was the mightiest of the eight immortal lands, nestled like a precious teardrop at the heart of the realm. Its emperor and empress lived in a palace that floated upon a bank of clouds, from where they governed over the Celestials and mortals, and watched over the sun, moon, and stars. In all our time here, they had never deigned to visit our remote home, so why now?

And why did I have to hide?

A strange flutter in the pit of my stomach spread icy tendrils through my core. “Is something wrong?” I asked, hoping she would deny it.

She touched my cheek gently. “I’ll explain everything later. For now, stay in your room and don’t make a sound.”

I nodded and she left, shutting the doors behind her. Only then did I realize that my mother had not answered my question. I opened a book, dropping it down again after reading the same line thrice. My fingers plucked a qin string, but then pinched it to muffle the note. As I stared at the closed doors, a burning curiosity engulfed me, consuming my fear. Slowly, I walked toward it, sliding it open a crack. Just one look at the Celestial Empress and I would return to my room. When would I get another chance to see her, one of the most powerful immortals in the realm? And she might even be wearing her Phoenix Crown, said to be crafted from feathers of pure gold and embellished with a hundred luminous pearls.

As silent as a shadow, I tiptoed down the long corridor that led from my room to the Silver Harmony Hall—the grandest room in our Pure Light Palace—with its marble floor, jade lamps, and silk hangings. Wooden pillars set into ornate silver bases added a touch of warmth to its pristine elegance. This was where I had always imagined we would entertain our guests, although we never had one until now.

Just around the corner, a soft voice drifted through. I strained my ears to listen.

“Chang’e, have you been well?” The Celestial Empress’s cordial address surprised me. She did not sound so very fearsome.

“Yes, Your Celestial Majesty. Thank you for your concern.” My mother’s voice was unnaturally bright.

A brief silence followed this exchange of courtesies. Crouching down by the wall, I craned my neck to peek into the room. My mother knelt on the floor, her head bowed low—while across from her, seated in my mother’s own chair, had to be the Celestial Empress.

She was not wearing a crown, but an elaborate headdress crafted with jeweled leaves and flowers which clinked as she moved. As I stared at it—enthralled—a bud unfurled, blossoming into an amethyst orchid. Over her fingertips glinted pointed gold sheaths, curved as the claws of a hawk. The silver embroidery on her violet robe caught the fading light streaming through the windows. Unlike my mother’s delicate and calm aura, hers was strong, pulsing with heat. She was dazzling, but her glossy lips against her white skin made me think of freshly spilled blood on snow.

As befitting her exalted position, the empress had not come alone. Six attendants stood behind her—along with a tall immortal man, his complexion darker than the rest. Flat pieces of amber adorned his black hat, his inky robes were fastened with a bronze sash, and white gloves covered his hands. I knew nothing of the Celestial Court, but the way he carried himself seemed to indicate he was of a higher rank than the others. Yet there was something about him I did not like, and as his pale brown eyes sliced across the room, I recoiled, pressing my back against the wall.

After a brief pause the empress spoke again, her voice now cooler than a piece of unworn jade. “Chang’e, a peculiar shift was detected in the energy here. Are you cultivating a secret power or harboring a forbidden guest, violating the terms of your imprisonment?”

I stiffened, my shoulder blades clenching at the way she spoke. An eagerness seemed to coat each word as though she reveled in the idea of my mother’s wrongdoing. Empress or not, how dare she speak this way? My mother was the Moon Goddess, worshipped and loved by countless mortals! How could she be a prisoner? This place was more than our home; it was her domain. Who lit the lanterns each night? Who did the trees sway and sigh for as she walked past? How could she do anything here that wasn’t her right?

“Your Celestial Majesty, there must be some misunderstanding. My powers are weak, as you are aware. And no one else is here. Who would

dare come?" my mother replied steadily.

"Minister Wu. Share your discovery," the empress commanded.

Footsteps shuffled forward. "Earlier today a significant shift in the aura of the moon was detected. Unprecedented, in all my years of study. This can be no coincidence."

In his smooth voice, I sensed an undercurrent of excitement. Did he relish my mother's troubles, as the empress seemed to? Anger seared me at the thought, despite my prickling unease. That rush in my veins earlier when I had touched the lights, the whispering in the air . . . had that somehow drawn them here?

"I hope our leniency has not made you bold," the empress hissed. "You were fortunate before, to have been imprisoned here in comfort for stealing your husband's Elixir of Immortality. You escaped the lightning whip and the flaming rod then. But that will change if we discover you're engaging in further deceit. Confess now and we *might* be merciful," she lashed out, shattering the tranquility of our home.

My fist flew to my mouth, smothering my gasp. I had never asked my mother how she ascended to immortality, sensing it caused her pain. Yet ever since I read the tale of the sunbirds, one question kept winding through my mind: Where was my father? To hear he had been bestowed the elixir, and my mother was accused of stealing it . . . something twisted in my gut. *The empress was wrong*, I told myself fiercely, burying a treacherous kernel of doubt.

My mother neither flinched nor denied these vile accusations. Was she accustomed to such treatment from the empress? As I peeked into the room again, she folded over to press her forehead and palms to the floor. "Your Celestial Majesty. Minister Wu. Perhaps this phenomenon was caused by the recent alignment of the stars. The Azure Dragon's constellation has entered the path of the moon, which may have distorted our auras. When it passes, things should return to normal." She spoke like a scholar who studied the skies, though I knew she had no interest in such matters.

A long silence followed, punctured by a rhythmic tapping—the empress's pointed gold sheaths digging into the soft wood of the armrest. Finally, she rose, her attendants gathering behind her.

"That may be so, but we will come again. You have been left alone for far too long."

I was glad for them to leave, despite the threat that lurked beneath the empress's tone like a silk cord yanked tight. Unable to bear listening to more, I crept back to my room and lay on the bed, gazing out through the

window. The sky had darkened into the elusive violet-gray of dusk, when the last of day gives way to night. My mind was numb, though I still sensed when those unfamiliar auras faded away. Moments later, my mother pulled the doors apart, her face whiter than the stone walls.

My doubts vanished. I did not believe the Celestial Empress. My mother would never have betrayed my father. Not even for immortality.

I scrambled up from the bed, coming to her side. I was almost as tall as her now. “Mother, I heard what the empress said to you.”

She threw her arms around me, clutching me tight. Against her shoulder, I sagged with relief that she was not angry, though her body was tense with strain.

“We don’t have much time. The empress could return at any moment with her soldiers,” she whispered.

“What can they do? We did nothing wrong.” My stomach roiled, an unpleasant sensation. “Are we prisoners? What did the empress mean about the elixir?”

She leaned back to look into my face. “Xingyin, *you’re* not a prisoner here. But I am. The Celestial Emperor bestowed the Elixir of Immortality upon your father, for killing the sunbirds and saving the world. Houyi did not take it, though. There was just enough for one and he did not want to ascend to the skies without me. I was with child, our happiness seemed complete. And so, he hid the elixir, only I knew where.”

Her voice broke then. “But my body was too weak to bear you. The physicians told us that you . . . that we would not survive the birth. Houyi did not want to believe them, he did not want to give up—bringing me to one after the other, searching for a different prognosis. Yet deep down, I knew they spoke the truth.” She paused, a tautness around her eyes like she was reaching into her memories, those which hurt. “When he was called to battle, I was left alone. The pains began then, far too early, in the deep of night. Such agony tore through my body, I could barely cry out. I was so afraid of dying, of losing you.”

As she fell silent, the question burst from me, “What happened?”

“I took the elixir from its hiding place, uncorked its stopper, and drank it.”

In the stillness of the room, all I could hear was the beating of my own heart. My hands were no longer warming my mother’s but were as cold as hers.

“Do you hate me, Xingyin?” she asked in a shaking voice. “For betraying your father?”

The empress’s words were true. For a moment I could not move, my



insides curling at the revelation. If my mother had not taken the elixir, perhaps we might have survived. My family, unbroken. Yet I knew how much she loved my father, how greatly she mourned his loss. And no matter what, I was grateful to be alive.

I swallowed the last of my hesitation. “No, Mother. You saved us.”

Her gaze was distant, veiled in memory. “Leaving your father . . . oh, how it hurt. Though I must admit I did not want to die. Nor could I let *you* die. Only later did I learn that gifts from the Celestial Emperor came with unseen strings. That such decisions were not for mortals to make. The emperor was enraged that it was *I* who became immortal instead of your illustrious father. The empress accused me of using trickery to obtain immortality which I had not earned.”

“Did you explain?” I asked. “Surely if they knew it was to save us—”

“I dared not. The empress seemed hostile, as though she bore some grudge against your father. She even accused him of ingratitude for spurning the emperor’s gift. I knew then, she had sought to punish rather than reward him for killing the sunbirds. She would not hesitate to harm you. How could I tell them of your existence? To shield you from their wrath, I kept your birth a secret. I confessed my theft. As punishment, I was exiled to the moon—an enchantment cast upon me which binds me here for eternity. I cannot leave this place, no matter how much I want to.” In a low voice, she added, “A palace you cannot escape is a prison nonetheless.”

I struggled to breathe, my chest heaving like a fish flipped out of the water. I had thought our lives so peaceful, so safe from all the dangers in my books. To learn we had incurred the wrath of the most powerful immortals in the realm shook me to my core.

“But why did the empress come today, after all this time?”

“Our auras emanate from our lifeforce, the core of our magic—those lights you see in your mind. Since you were born, we did our best to conceal your power. Despite our efforts, the empress sensed you today.”

My throat closed tight. “I didn’t know. This is all my fault.” How stupid and reckless I had been! Because I was bored I had ignored my mother’s warning, broken my promise, and hurled us into the gravest of danger.

“I am to blame, too. I told you *not* to reach for your magic, but I should have explained why—that it might alert the Celestial Kingdom to your presence.” She sighed. “It would have happened eventually; with every year you grow stronger. If they find you, our punishment will be severe—I have no doubt. I fear less for myself, but what they would do to *you*, an immortal child who was never meant to be.”

“What can we do?”

“The only thing we can. You must leave this place.”

Fear glazed my skin like ice forming over a lake. To never see my mother again . . . I was suddenly afraid to let go of her. “Can’t I stay with you? I’ll hide. Train me, so I can help.”

“We can’t. You heard the empress’s words. They will be watching us even more closely now. It’s too late.”

“Maybe you convinced them, maybe they won’t come back.” A desperate plea, a childish hope.

“I may have bought us a little time. But the empress would not have come on a whim. They will return. And soon.” Her voice thickened, clogged by emotion. “We can’t protect you. We’re not strong enough.”

“But where will I go? When will I see you again?” Each word was a blow, giving shape to the forming nightmare.

“Ping’er will bring you to her family in the Southern Sea.” She spoke brightly now, as though trying to convince us both. “I hear the ocean is beautiful. You will have a good life there, free from the cloud that hangs over us.”

Ping’er had shared with me all she knew of the lands beyond, stirring my imagination, which hungered for adventure. The great sea was divided into four domains stretching from the eastern shore to the southern ocean, from the cliffs in the west to the waters in the north. I had been transfixed by her tales of the creatures who lived in the glittering cities underwater or upon the golden shores. How I had dreamed of exploring them.

Yet *never* had I imagined fleeing my home to do so. What use were adventures when there was no one to share them with?

My mother’s hand closed around mine, dragging me back to the present. “You must never tell anyone who you are. The Celestial Emperor has informants everywhere. He would take your very existence as an unforgivable insult.” She spoke urgently, her eyes boring into mine until I choked out my promise to her.

Leaning toward me then, she fastened something around my neck. A gold necklace with a small jade disc. It was the color of spring leaves, with a carving of a dragon on its surface. My fingers rubbed the cool stone, feeling a thin crack in the rim.

“This belonged to your father.” Her eyes were as dark as a moonless night. “Don’t tell anyone who you are. But never forget either.”

She held me close, stroking my hair. I kept my head down—cowardly—not wanting to see her leave, wishing this moment could last forever. Her knuckles brushed my cheek once, and then there was nothing except an

aching emptiness.

Sinking onto the floor, I wrapped my arms around my knees. Oh, how I wanted to scream and howl, and beat my fists against the ground. My hand flew to my mouth, muffling my hoarse sobs, but my silent tears . . . I let them stream down my face. In the single night it took the moonflower to bloom and wither, my life had been upended. My path, which had seemed a straight road, had taken a turn into the wilderness—and I was lost.

The room was dark, night had fallen. The moon was still cloaked in shadows as the lanterns had yet to be lit. Moonrise would be late in coming tonight.

Urgency jolted me into action. I did not wish to be discovered if Mother and Ping'er would be punished. While death was rarely inflicted upon immortals, the empress's threats of lightning and fire made my body clench in terror.

Ping'er helped me wrap my belongings into a wide piece of cloth. "Not too many, and nothing too fine to avoid arousing suspicion." Her eyes were rimmed red, but seeing my stricken expression, she added, "You'll be safe in the Southern Sea, as well-hidden as one star in the heavens. My family will look after you and teach you all you need to know."

She knotted the ends of the cloth together, forming a bag that she slung over my shoulder. "Shall we go?"

I did not want to. Yet numb to everything, I nodded. What else could I do? I could not even blame the vagaries of fate when it was *I* who had brought this upon us.

As Ping'er and I hurried through the entrance, heading east into the osmanthus forest, I glanced back, one last time. Never had my home seemed more beautiful than in this moment when I was pressing each curve, each stone into my mind. The thousand lanterns illuminated the soil, the silver roof tiles reflected the stars. And on the balcony where I had stared at the world below, there stood a slender figure in white.

My mother's gaze was not fixed on the Mortal Realm, but on me, her fingers lifted in farewell. Ignoring Ping'er's urgent tug on my sleeve, I sank to my knees, folding myself over to press my forehead to the soft earth. My lips moved in a silent vow: that I would return, that I would set my mother free. I did not know how, but I would try with everything that was in me. This would *not* be our end. As I followed Ping'er toward the cloud which would carry us away, pain struck my heart so sharp and clear—it fractured—only kept whole by a slender thread of hope.

## 2

I inhaled the bracing air, so fresh yet hollow without a trace of spice. As the cloud darted through the sky, I stumbled, grabbing Ping'er's arm. How eerie the night was without the lanterns' glow. Only this morning, fear had been a foreign emotion to me, and now I was choked with it. Fortunately, the cloud's dewy folds did not give way beneath my feet, but was as firm as the ground—if not for the surging wind all around.

It would be a long journey to the Southern Sea—beyond the Celestial Kingdom, past the lush forests of the Phoenix Kingdom. Farther than the Golden Desert even, the vast crescent of barren sand that bordered the feared Demon Realm. How would I ever find my way home? It struck me then, perhaps they did not think I ever would.

A sea of lights glimmered in the distance, drawing me from my bleak thoughts.

“The Celestial Kingdom,” Ping'er whispered.

As a sudden gust sprang up, she glanced over her shoulder, the color draining from her face. I whirled, my gaze probing the night. A large cloud soared toward us, the shadowy forms of six immortals upon it. Their armor gleamed white and gold, although their features were obscured by the dark.

“Soldiers!” Ping'er gasped.

My heart hammered. “Are they searching for us?”

She pulled me behind her. “They wear Celestial armor. They must be here at the empress's command. Stay down! Hide! I'll try to outrun them.”

I pressed myself down as flat as I could, burying myself in the cool tendrils of the cloud. Part of me was glad to not see the soldiers, and yet my skin crawled with dread of the unknown. Ping'er's eyes were closed as a thin stream of light shot from her palm. Until tonight, I had never seen her use magic—perhaps, there had been no need for it before. Our cloud