



THE  
TELLER  
OF  
SMALL  
FORTUNES

*a novel*

JULIE LEONG

"The warmest, loveliest book I've read in ages." —SANGU MANDANNA



**Praise for**  
***The Teller of Small Fortunes***

“Warm, welcoming, and endlessly inventive, *The Teller of Small Fortunes* feels like being invited in for tea with a dear friend (and expert storyteller!). An utter and complete delight to read.”

—Grace D. Li, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Portrait of a Thief*

“Lovely and sweet and comforting. But the most beautiful part was how it was not only about found family but about finding your way back to your family...an adventure, yet cozy and funny and sweet and poignant.”

—Quenby Olson, author of the Miss Percy Guide series

“A wonderfully warm, cozy, and immersive fantasy adventure that left me brimming with happiness.”

—Stephanie Burgis, author of *Wooing the Witch Queen*

“A palate cleanser for crappy days.... Leong creates a world resplendent with charm, gentleness, reconciliation, and love. So much love! There were many joyous, cathartic tears shed. I adored every minute of it and now must read everything Leong writes!”

—A.Y. Chao, author of *Shanghai Immortal*

“A warmhearted, often cozy story about telling fortunes—and sometimes stealing them. A delight.”

—John Wiswell, Nebula Award–winning author of *Someone You Can Build a Nest In*

“A warm hug of a book. *The Teller of Small Fortunes* is a curative journey of found friendship and diaspora feels, steeped in so much kindness that even the most cynical of readers will not be able to resist its charms.”

—Eliza Chan, author of *Fathomfolk*

“Very funny and incredibly charming. I found it impossible not to fall in love with this crew. If you loved *Legends & Lattes* but wanted more plot and feels, this book is perfect for you. I adored it!”

—Frances White, author of *Voyage of the Damned*

“*The Teller of Small Fortunes* is a charming delight. It’s the book version of a warm cup of tea, with the perfect mix of adventure, found family, and heart. Also make sure you have some sweets on hand, because this story will give you some serious pastry cravings.”

—Amy Avery, author of *The Longest Autumn*

“As comforting as the scent of freshly baked bread, this is a hug in book form and the perfect comfort read. Set in an endlessly charming world with characters you can’t help but love, this novel is whimsical, cozy perfection, and I loved every second of it.”

—Nadia El-Fassi, author of *Best Hex Ever*

“Tao and her band of charismatic companions (four-legged friends included!) won my heart completely on this deeply endearing and entertaining fantasy road trip. Charming, relatable, and tender, *The Teller of Small Fortunes* will delight readers looking for their next cozy adventure.”

—Maiga Doocy, author of *Sorcery and Small Magics*

“Sweet without ever turning saccharine, and it tackles serious topics without ever losing its sense of humor. An utterly delightful debut.”

—Genoveva Dimova, author of *Foul Days*

“Filled with philosophizing trolls, little magics, and delicious (if lumpy) baked goods, *The Teller of Small Fortunes* is like one of those lift-you-off-the-ground, ribcage-cracking hugs—dizzily delightful, a little painful, and so incredibly therapeutic. Do yourself the great kindness of reading this wrenching, warming, funny, thoughtful, cozy, life-affirming book. I finished it and felt more whole, and I hope you do, too.”

—Jules Arbeaux, author of *Lord of the Empty Isles*

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Julie Leong

ACE  
NEW YORK

ACE

Published by Berkley

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Leong, Julie, author.

Title: The teller of small fortunes / Julie Leong.

Description: First edition. | New York : Ace, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023054041 (print) | LCCN 2023054042 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593815915 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780593815908 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3612.E5788 T45 2024 (print) | LCC PS3612.E5788 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20240126

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023054041>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023054042>

Ebook ISBN 9780593815908

First Edition: November 2024

Cover illustration by Devin Elle Kurtz

Cover design by Katie Anderson

Book design by Nancy Resnick, adapted for ebook by Kelly Brennan

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For my father, who gifted me my love of stories. Thank you  
for still being here.

爸爸, 谢谢你.

# ONE



On the day the Teller of Small Fortunes came to Necker, the village was in an uproar because the candlemaker's would-be apprentice had lost all the goats.

Laohu plodded to a stop in the town square and Tao patted his rump. It had been a long day's travel for them, through forest and field. The mule stamped his hooves and snorted, relieved to be done with it, his breath rising in steamy tendrils through the early-evening chill. It was Tao's first time coming through Necker. She'd made good speed in anticipation of a hot meal and soft bed when they arrived, but the scene around her wagon gave her doubt she'd find much welcome at the moment. She sighed.

Wrapping the reins loosely over a wagon shaft, Tao swung gracefully to the ground, looking around at the activity. They'd come to a stop just in front of a tavern—a handsome one, two full stories and larger than a village like Necker rightly needed.

But where there should have been a crowd of well-fed villagers drinking ale, there was instead a strange assembly line, with rather a lot of yelling and chaotic banging of metal.

“One bucket o' grain and a bell to each! Hurry up now, take a bucket, there's a good lad.”

“And who's to pay for all this grain, I'd like to know!”

“Oh, stuff it, Mallack, we can sort payment later; the headman’ll pay you fair for the grain and you know that’s true.”

“Yes, well, I’d like to be sure of the price afore all the grain is spilled through the woods halfway to the sea and none to account for it! There ought to be a premium for interrupting a man’s supper and raiding his stores without so much as a—”

“You scoundrel! If we don’t find them, Necker’ll be a ruin and your mill with it, for who’ll buy your grain when there’s no goats to feed and no coin to pay with?”

A teenage boy, gangly and flop-haired, sat on a stump some distance away, watching the commotion with a desolate expression. As he seemed to be the only one not rushing about, Tao chose to approach him first.

“Hello,” she said, walking up to him. “Can you tell me what’s happened, please?”

The boy startled out of his misery to goggle at her. “You’re Shinn!”

“I am,” said Tao patiently. “Can you tell me what’s happened here?”

“But you speak Eshteran!” said the boy. He squinted up at Tao with suspicion, as if expecting her foreign features—dark, hooded eyes; tawny skin; and black hair twisted up into a loose bun—to change before his eyes and better suit her speech.

Tao sighed internally and tried a different tack. She flourished her cloak with one hand and bowed.

“Greetings, young sir, from this humble traveler. I am a teller of fortunes from the faraway empire of Shinara, and have come to these lands to seek wisdom and learning.”

“...in Necker?” said the boy, doubtful.

“Wisdom can be found in all places,” said Tao. She pressed her hands together with what she hoped was solemnity. “Wheresoever river inscribes rock with truth, and men fan flames of creation.”

“Ah,” said the boy, suitably impressed. “You’ll want old Derry the blacksmith and his forge, then? He’s holding a pail on the left, there.”

They both looked over again at the assembly line, which had now been more or less equipped with buckets of grain and various noisemaking implements. The boy drooped further, all elbows and knees and teenage despair.

“What are they doing with all that grain?” Tao asked.

“They’re sending out search parties. I lost the goats, you see,” the boy said miserably. “Arty had me watching the herd today, out in the west pasture, and I fell asleep after lunch, and when I woke, the goats were all gone.

“And now the village’ll be ruined, and it’s all my fault, although how was I to know that the goats would rather climb down all those rocks than stay in a nice sunny pasture full of grass? I was to be the candlemaker’s apprentice, not a goatherd, and now who knows if Bern’ll still have me! I’m good with his bees; bees don’t make a fuss—they stay put where you want them, unless you fumble the hives—but Arty’s bad leg was twinging again, and I didn’t mind helping just for the day, and now look what’s happened. Stupid goats!”

The words burst out of him all at once, a hot concoction of youthful indignation and shame.

“Hm,” said Tao. “Perhaps I can be of some assistance.”

She strode to her wagon and leapt back up onto her driving perch, Laohu shuffling impatiently in his traces. But rather than pick up the reins again, Tao ducked beneath the glowing lanterns swinging gently from where they hung on the jutting ridge beam, and into the small wooden traveling wagon that served as home.

A hanging curtain of embroidered canvas hid the interior from both rough weather and curious eyes; behind it was everything Tao owned, tucked away as neatly as could be managed in what might generously be called a storage chest on wheels. Pots and pans of various sizes hung on one wall from a crooked nail. Opposing them was what Tao thought of as her pantry: a small bag of winter apples; jars of grain and tea leaves strapped into place on their makeshift shelf; mint and nettle, hung in bunches to dry. Here, also, was her bedding: a few sacks of hay (which conveniently also served as Laohu’s feed—though it meant that when they went too long between resupplies, her

sleep inevitably suffered for it) swaddled in thick woolen blankets. In all, it made for a cozy—if humble—nest.

But all this Tao took in with only a quick glance. Everything was where it should be. Which meant that what she needed would be in the back, where she kept the things most precious to her.

Moving through the cramped space with the ease of familiarity, Tao sorted through the carefully wrapped bundles in the very rear of the wagon, behind the small stools and folding table. From these bundles, she extracted a disc of hammered bronze, hung on a ribbon, and a small cloth-wrapped mallet.

Grasping the ribbon and mallet in each hand, she ducked back out through the curtain, blinking in the warm glow of the swaying lantern light. Tao stood tall on the perch of her wagon (or as tall as her slight frame allowed), made sure her hooded cloak was billowing impressively so that its blue velvet lining could be seen, lifted her chin, and—with ponderous ceremony—struck the disc.

A low note tolled out, brassy and deep and authoritative, and a hush rolled out over the crowd of villagers as they finally noticed the young Shinn woman perched upon a traveling wagon in the middle of their square. Tao struck the gong once more, and the sound reverberated as all eyes fixed on her.

“Greetings to the people of Necker!” she cried out into the general bafflement. “I am Tao, Teller of Small Fortunes.”

She gestured grandly with the mallet toward the side of her wooden traveling wagon, where, indeed, **TELLER OF SMALL FORTUNES** was painted in neat black letters, along with the addendum, in much smaller lettering beneath: *(NO SPELLS, POTIONS, OR ANCIENT PROPHECIES)*.

“But tonight, I shall give you the gift, free of charge, of a Moderately Sized Fortune! You there, mistress.” Tao pointed at a harried-looking woman in an apron holding several buckets by the tavern door. “Tell me—is there a small stream, flowing through a grove of pines, just to the east?”

“Aye, so there is,” said the woman, narrowing her eyes.

“And you, Master Arty,” Tao pointed now at a rangy older man leaning heavily on his walking stick. “Tell me—are there plentiful berry brambles along that stream?”

“Here now, how did you know my name?” Arty said in confusion, rubbing at his leg.

“Yes, there are,” cut in the aproned woman. “And so?”

Tao spread her arms dramatically wide, closing her eyes and tilting her head back, as if listening to voices only she could hear. “People of Necker...” she intoned. “I have seen your goats! Look to the east where blackberries and cold mountain water meet, for there you shall find your herd!”

The villagers burst into buzzing cacophony.

As a teller of small fortunes, Tao didn’t often have a chance to play the showman, for she’d feel rather silly making such a fuss about announcing whether or not it’d rain next Scholarsday, or when the carpenter’s daughter’s warts would go away. But she had to admit—she rather enjoyed it when she could.

“She’s Shinn, she is,” cried the gangly boy, who had jumped up from his stump at her proclamation. “She sees things in rocks!”

“And what’s a Shinn woman doing all the way out here in Necker, I’d like to know,” said a woman with a pinched mouth and holding a broom.

“How’d she know my name? I’ve never once been to Shinara in my life,” shouted Arty over the din.

“Enough, enough!” shouted the woman in the apron, banging a bucket with a wooden spoon to regain the crowd’s attention. “We’re losing the light if we mean to be finding these goats afore dark. Well now, this fortune teller says to look along the stream to the east, so someone may as well look there—we meant to search in all directions anyways.”

A chorus of ayes met this decisiveness, and the villagers began pairing off and setting out in multiple directions, some glancing back at Tao and her wagon. The gangly boy dashed off to the east, having grabbed his own bucket of grain and yelling over his shoulder, “I’ll check the stream!” His hopes of



redeeming himself had clearly been renewed by faith in Tao's prophetic abilities.

Tao bit back a smile, stowed the gong and mallet back inside her wagon, and climbed down to unhitch Laohu and await the outcome. The stream with the blackberry brambles wasn't far—perhaps half an hour's light run for a motivated youth with long legs. She had crossed it not long before she arrived in Necker, her wagon wheels rattling over the stones and Laohu laying his ears back at the cold water as he daintily lifted his hooves high. Tao remembered leaning down from her wagon to grab a handful of the ripe blackberries, savoring each bright burst of sweetness as she ate them one at a time.

What Tao *also* remembered was the sound of leafy chomping, the distinctive scent of livestock, and the even more distinctive caprine chorus of *maas* coming from behind the brambles as her wagon rolled on by.



Little more than an hour later, with the sun slunk beneath the hills and a purple dusk fallen over the land, grateful villagers wrung Tao's hands and pressed a second mug of foaming ale upon her over her half-hearted protestations.

The woman in the apron, who it turned out was Hattie, the tavernkeep's wife (and the true local authority in Necker, official headman notwithstanding), had warmed quite instantly to Tao once Cam had returned in triumph with a herd of disgruntled, blackberry-stained goats before him.

"No, we won't hear of it, we won't be taking any coin from one such as yourself tonight," tutted Hattie as she set a basket of warm bread and a full plate of cheese ("finest goat cheese in all the hilltowns, of course") on Tao's table near the tavern's hearth. "After what you've done for us! And we hope you'll be staying the night here, for there's many of us hoping to have our

fortunes read by you, if you've the time. A real Shinn fortune teller, imagine that—not even Shellport's had one of those, I reckon!”

This was greeted by many approving *just sos* and self-satisfied nods all around, for Necker often felt the rub of being a smaller, poorer neighbor to nearby Shellport. (Shellport was a middlingly large, marginally important port city that had three whole taverns and even their own resident mage. Admittedly, he was quite old and deaf, and a rather less imposing figure than most other Guild mages; he did mostly fishing-net charms these days, some of which could have rather unexpected effects on one's chowders, but still, a western town having a mage at all was not something to be sniffed at.)

“I would be honored,” replied Tao with a respectful incline of her head, “to rest the night in your fine tavern, and of course, to tell fortunes for all who would wish it tomorrow.”

Hattie beamed at her, and all the villagers raised yet another loud toast—Cam's young voice loudest of them all—to the traveling Teller of Small Fortunes, who looked Shinn but spoke fair Eshteran, and who had saved Necker's goats, and thereby their necks, too.



The next morning, Tao rose from a hearty breakfast (eggs with heavily buttered biscuits, a tad *goatier*-tasting than she'd really like but warm and filling nonetheless), thanked Hattie for the meal, and walked out to her wagon, which was still parked in the square. Laohu had been stabled for the night, and Tao had checked on him earlier to find him contentedly making his way through the large pile of hay that had been supplied. The village roused slowly; even the morning sunlight, as it crept back over the hills and the small thatched houses, seemed soft and lazy. But a handful of the more industrious villagers were already up and about carrying water or tools, and these few nodded or waved to Tao as they walked by, looking her over with unabashed interest.

Humming wordlessly, Tao rolled up her sleeves and began setting up for the day: first, from the depths of her wagon she pulled out a tall stake with a rope knotted on top; with her mallet and a great deal of effort, she hammered the stake securely into the ground a short distance behind the wagon.

Once satisfied that the stake was driven deep enough, Tao grabbed hold of the loose rope end and tied it deftly to a loop on the wagon's bowed truss. With the rope taut, Tao disappeared into the wagon briefly and reemerged holding a large roll of fabric. This, Tao treated with an almost-reverence: she unrolled it gently, with a careful shake to remove any dust.

With practiced hands, she swung it over the rope such that it draped down over either side. The fabric was a rich midnight blue, thicker than linen but not so coarse as wool, and had a lovely, slight shimmer in the sunlight; Tao ran a hand over its softness and thought wistfully, not for the first time, of the lush green mountaintops of Shinara, where all such watersilk was made and which she had not seen since she was very young. *And probably would never see again.* The thought came to her with a pang before she managed to smother it.

The rest of the setting-up went quickly. A few shorter stakes in each corner to broaden the tent; the small wooden folding table and two stools; an odd sort of clay pot, with a handle and a short spout jutting out in parallel, and two matching clay cups set on the table alongside a jar of curled-up tea leaves. A small wooden box that rattled loudly was also brought out, and a single sweet-smelling candle, which Tao lit with a flintsteel and placed carefully by the tea jar.

This done, she stepped back and with a critical eye surveyed her work.

By now Necker had fully awakened and a steady stream of people had emerged into the square, calling out *good-days* to each other, going about their tasks, all the while surreptitiously watching Tao bustling within her wagon, now a wagon-and-tent.

The folk began to sidle in closer, curious but none quite bold enough to be the first, until gangly Cam (who fancied himself something of a

spokesperson, for wasn't he the very first person in Necker to speak with the fortune teller, after all?) walked up to her tent cheerfully and called in, "Hello, miss! Are you open for fortune-telling now?"

Tao took a moment to straighten her clothes. She knew well the importance of appearances to a trade such as hers, and even more so for a foreigner.

A long white frock, plain but clean (a concession to the stricter sensibilities of the hilltowns—though it was less easy than trousers for traveling), belted by a brown leather sash with many small hanging pouches. Tall boots more practical than ladylike, and her black wool cloak with its blue lining, hood back, clasped around her neck with a silver pin shaped like a foxhead. The cloak and pin were perhaps out of place due to their fineness, but much like the blue silk of the tent, they somehow served to elevate rather than be diminished by the plainness of the rest.

Next she loosened and retied her hair up in its bun, tucking stray strands back and running a hand over the bun to smooth it. Tao reached into one of the pouches at her waist and took out a small, tapered rod of finely carved jade with an elaborately curved hook on one end: a *ji*, or Shinn hairpin. She turned it over in her fingers for a moment, noting the way the jade felt both cold and warm at the same time. Did her mother miss wearing it? Did she even feel its absence anymore? But Tao swallowed past the lump in her throat as she carefully inserted the *ji* into her bun, adjusting it this way and that until it was secure. This wasn't the time to dwell on memories. She had fortunes to tell.

Assured she was presentable, Tao turned back to the boy outside her tent.

"Good morning, Cam. Yes, I'm about to open—but I would appreciate your help with something, first." She indicated the clay pot on the table. "I need that full of boiling water—could you run it to Mistress Hattie in the tavern and ask her to kindly fill it for me, please?"

"Aye, I can!" Cam said. He grabbed the clay pot—carefully by its base, as he wasn't quite sure which poky bit was properly the handle—and rushed to the tavern, puffing out his chest with importance as he passed his neighbors.

He returned in short order with the steaming pot, biting his lip with concentration as he set it down on the table.

“Thank you,” said Tao. “Would you like to be my first customer?”

“Yes!” he said eagerly. “But—” Cam rummaged hopefully in his pocket and pulled out three quarterpennies. “Is this enough? How much is a fortune?”

“How much wealth makes a fortune depends on how much one already has, for it will always be more than that,” said Tao. She was rather enjoying getting into character—even if some small part of her shook its head at showing folk what they wanted to see in a mystical Shinn fortune teller, rather than the more mundane truth.

“Eh?” Cam squinted at her.

“Never mind,” said Tao, smiling slightly. “I tell small fortunes only, for small prices. Yes, I can tell you three quarterpennies’ worth. Come sit at my table.”

She ducked her head outside the tent flap briefly, waving to let the others know to wait their turn after Cam, and to kindly form the line at a short distance for privacy.

As they arranged themselves on the two stools, Tao scooped out a small handful of the curly dried leaves from the jar, dropping half into each cup.

“First,” she said, with Cam watching intently, “we make tea.”

Tao lifted the clay pot and carefully poured a long spout of water into each cup, drawing the pot upward away from the table as she poured—not a single drop spilled, and an earthy aroma arose from the steaming cups as the dark leaves unfurled. Cam made to pick up his cup, but Tao stopped him with a quick gesture.

“Not yet—it needs to steep and to cool. Let’s wait a few minutes.”

“Sorry,” he said. A brief silence in which they both regarded their steaming cups, then: “Why do we need tea, miss?”

Tao said, “It’s one of the methods by which I read fortunes. After you drink it, the leaves left in the cup may show me something of your future.”

Impressed, Cam stared at his tea, willing the leaves to do something more magical than float there. “But you didn’t have tea last night when you told us

where the goats were?”

“Well—” Tao cleared her throat hastily. “There are other ways, too. Sometimes, I also read fortunes in my fortune stones.” She gestured at the wooden box on the table. “Or from the palms of your hands, or even in the patterns of smoke from a fire. But I most often prefer to start with tea.”

“Why?” asked Cam, irrepressible as only a teenage boy could be.

Tao shrugged. “Because it’s nice. And I like tea.” And judging it time, she raised her cup to her lips, blowing softly to cool it before taking a long sip. The delicate taste of jasmine flooded her senses, and she rolled the liquid this way and that in her mouth, savoring the way the flavors changed as the tea cooled.

Cam mirrored her cautiously. Finding the tea inoffensive, he took a larger sip, then drained his cup to the dregs.

“There,” he said eagerly. He tilted his head this way and that, looking down at the leaves left in his cup. “It looks...a bit like a shield, I suppose? What do you think?” He pushed it across the table to her doubtfully.

Tao took the cup and looked intently into it. A wet blob looked back. But she took a breath, sucking the grassy, floral scent of the tea in, and held it for a count before exhaling slowly.

She looked again into Cam’s cup and saw more now than just leaves: brief flashes and glimmers, glimpses of scenes yet to come. Most of the images were dark and indeterminate blurs, but a few small and clear images she was able to catch hold of just long enough. These she fixed in her mind; remembering, comprehending.

“Understand,” she said warningly to Cam, “I tell small fortunes only. No war, no politics, no harvests or famines; those are strictly for Seers with the greater vision, and I don’t deal in such things.” Wide-eyed, Cam assured her that he understood.

Tao nodded, setting the cup down. “Good. I see in your future a new tunic. A green one. And you’ll burn your finger next Makersday while rolling wicks, so mind you put some honey on it straightaway.”