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SUE LYNN TAN

NEVER EVER AFTER

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NEVER EVER AFTER

SUE LYNN TAN



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*To my children,
you help me remember the stories I loved,
and make me want to tell them again.*

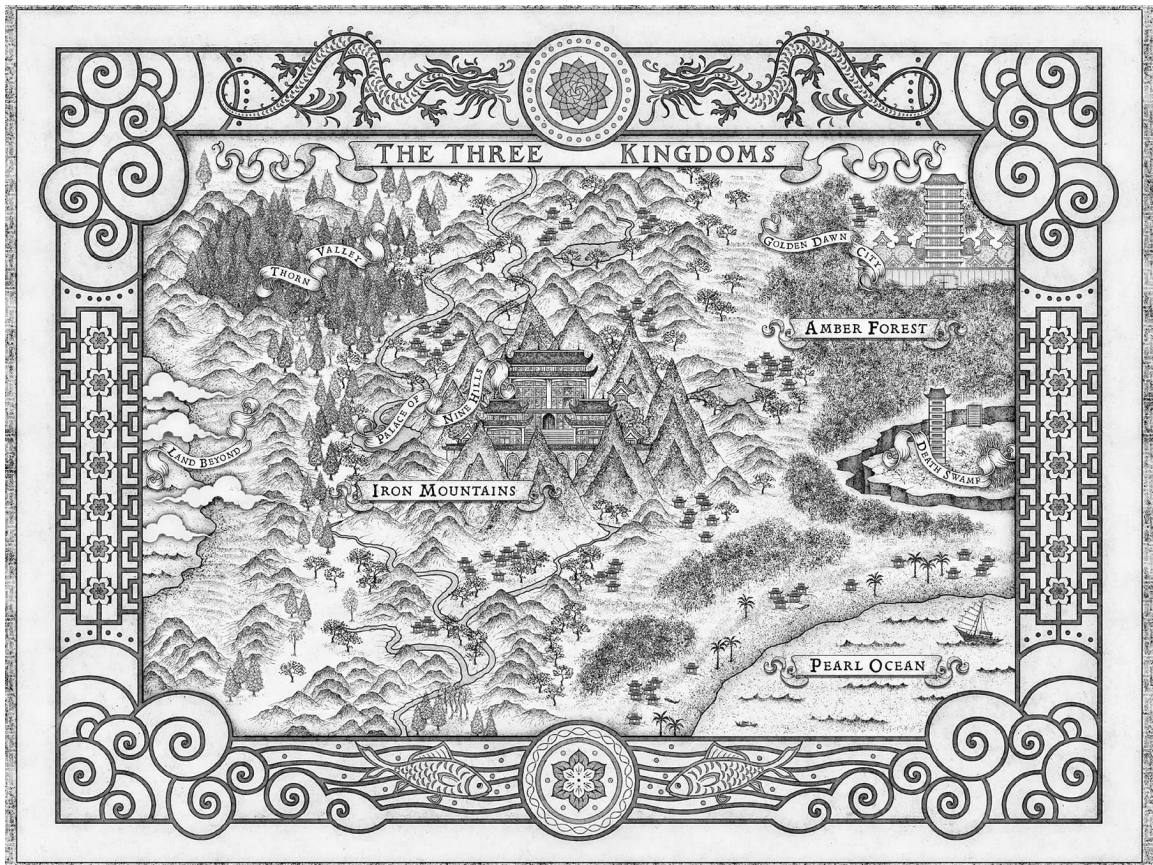


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PROLOGUE



SUNLIGHT STRIKES THE SLOPED ROOF OF THE PALACE, THE TILES SHIMMERING like obsidian. The entrance is flanked by armored guards, the grounds wrapped in a wall of iron. The mines here gleam with it, the namesake of these mountains.

Iron forges weapons and armor. It saves and seizes lives with ruthless indifference, tilting the scales of battle. The one who controls this precious ore is the heart of power in the Three Kingdoms, the true ruler of the realm.

And now, he is dying.

The prince strides toward the king's chamber, his steps quick yet assured. As he passes them, attendants sink into low bows. Soon, he will be crowned King of the Iron Mountains—but that is not the only reason all eyes slide to him, or why they linger.

The prince's dark hair is tucked into a shining headpiece, his black eyes wide and clear, his features as perfect as though carved by a master. He is beautiful in the way the moon lights the night, weaving magic into the ordinary—in the way that makes you think life would change if only he would notice you. By the doorway, he halts, his expression tightening. The chamber is lavishly furnished in yellow brocade and rosewood. Yet it is dim within, the windows shuttered, the opulence glazed in shadow.

The chief attendant, the king's loyal confidant, motions for the prince to enter. "His Majesty has been asking for you."

"I came as soon as I received word. How is His Majesty?"

The chief attendant's lip quivers. While he is avaricious and grasping, his

devotion to the king is unwavering. He has taken many bribes over the years but never to undermine his master. “The physicians say His Majesty is fading fast.”

“Is there pain?” the prince asks in a low voice.

The chief attendant bows. “His Majesty never complains.”

The prince walks toward the bed. Gold brocade falls in swathes from the wooden frame, leaving just a slender gap between the curtains. A hand reaches out, jeweled rings stacked upon withered fingers. As a ridged nail taps the bed, the prince drops to his knees.

“You are my heir, you will rule in my place. Choose a bride to forge alliances and to secure the line of succession,” the king rasps. “I have led us to the pinnacle of power, we are the greatest among the kingdoms. As my heir, you must protect our heritage and uphold our might.” His breath rattles in his throat. “The chief attendant has my final decree as King of the Iron Mountains—”

“And of the Three Kingdoms and also the Land Beyond,” the chief attendant murmurs, never missing an opportunity to flatter.

“Not in my lifetime,” the king corrects him, in an echo of his steely self. “Yet one day the Iron Mountains will rule not just the Three Kingdoms, but also Thorn Valley and the wretched Mist Island. Those evil magic-wielders tried to destroy us and failed. To conquer them, we must be stronger. We must defeat them once and for all.”

“Father, I will not fail you.” The prince speaks steadily, his hands clenched. “I will vanquish our enemies.”

“This is why I have chosen you to rule. Do not waver, else our mountains will be swallowed by the mist, overgrown by thorns.”

As the prince presses his head to the ground in a kowtow, the highest form of respect, the king slides something across the covers: a thick iron seal the width of his palm, carved with a single chrysanthemum. A glittering jewel hangs from it, as bright as white fire. The prince’s eyes shine at the sight of it.

“The royal seal is yours. Carry it with you always; it holds the key to our

future. Use its power to fortify our kingdom, to strengthen our army—and with our iron, we will conquer the realms. Do not fail me again.” The king’s gaze bores into his son’s, but then his eyelids flutter unevenly.

The prince takes the seal, his knuckles white around it. “I swear on my life to protect the Iron Mountains, to uphold its strength, to never allow the shadow of Mist Island to darken the borders of our land.” As the prince fastens the seal to his waist, his expression is grim, the one his enemies see just before he plunges his sword through their chests.

The king’s fingers fumble for the crown laid by the side of his bed, brushing the luminous jewel set between the two carved dragons, its radiance rivaling the stars’, as bright as the stone attached to the seal. “Only once you’ve completed the tasks I’ve set for you—to secure our kingdom’s future—can you claim the crown. Only then will the coronation be held.”

The prince frowns, glancing at the chief attendant, who shakes his head in warning. Such a delay is not customary, but the king has been erratic of late. It’s safer to agree than to risk a confrontation when his health is so frail... when he might still choose another.

“Yes, Father,” the prince says dutifully. “I will rule as you did, as you command.”

Silence falls, punctured by ragged breaths, the occasional cough. At last, the king’s hand falls limp upon the bed. His lined skin is so pale it appears translucent, his veins a dull violet. The room seems emptier, a little dimmer. The prince bows his head as weeping rolls out, the chief attendant falling to his knees. A gong is struck, the mournful sound reverberating.

The King of the Iron Mountains is dead.

A black and white floral border frames the top and bottom of the page. The top border features large, detailed flowers, including a peony on the left and several chrysanthemums on the right. The bottom border also includes peonies and chrysanthemums, with a small flower bud in the center. The background is a solid black rectangle.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE



THE MORNING FOLLOWING THE FULL MOON IS ALWAYS THE BEST FOR business. I hate it—dread coiling in my gut with every night the moon swells wider. Market day in Twin Cypress Village attracts vendors from across the Iron Mountains selling rare delicacies, fragrant tea, silk that shimmers like water...

While I sell lies.

“Hurry, else the best places will be gone,” Mistress Henglan urges as she weaves between the stalls. My uncle married her after my aunt died, and when he passed away, she became my sole guardian.

I quicken my pace to follow my step-aunt, her thin blue coat flapping over her long pants. My clothes are the same except a little more threadbare, my pants three inches too short. As the wind blows, I shiver, glancing at the jagged silver-white mountains encircling us like a cursed crown. Beautiful, yet when I look at them too long, something clenches inside me like I’m trapped in their jaws.

Travelers often complain our autumn feels like winter elsewhere, a stark difference from the warmth of the Amber Forest or the shores of the Pearl Ocean. One day, I’ll find out if what they say is true—though it feels like an impossible dream tucked away in my mind.

I glance at Mistress Henglan, the sunlight glinting off the thin iron hoops in her ears, the small dagger by her waist. Our people covet the iron of our mountains, just as those in other kingdoms desire gold and jade. I possess

neither, just a rusted knife of some ordinary metal, unable to afford better. While I earn our money, Mistress Henglan hoards every coin. I don't complain; it's safer this way, just as it's safer for me to steer clear of the soldiers and the threat of the mines.

The iron of our mountains is the lifeblood of our kingdom. Our elders tell stories of how it is blessed by the gods, believed to ward off evil spirits and the magic-wielders of Mist Island—maybe why the late king built a wall of iron around his palace.

After all, magic is no laughing matter in the Iron Mountains. Not a trace of it exists in our kingdom, any whispered embers swiftly stamped out. Once, I heard an old storyteller speak of the mystical starfire buried deeper in the mines—claiming they were the shards of a celestial jewel that fell from the heavens, casting their unearthly sheen over our mountains. Those listening had scoffed, denouncing him as a liar. Soon after, the guards came, taking the storyteller away.

I ran away then, afraid to even be caught listening. All that matters is keeping free of the mines. While the mountains glitter from the outside, towering until they seem to graze the skies, the mines tunnel into their depths, where the days are blacker than night, the air clogged with dust and ringing with the incessant thud of chisels. My uncle died there.

As Mistress Henglan points at an empty space between a merchant selling fruit and another with jars of wine, I squeeze into the gap and set down the two small stools I've been carrying. A wooden crate from a nearby vendor serves as our table. I drape a piece of cloth over it, setting up a sign that reads FORTUNE TELLER.

I'm not a good fortune teller, not even a trained one, though after a couple of years the lies flow more smoothly. I don't expect my customers to return. Mistress Henglan and I work across the surrounding villages, never returning to the same market within six months. Each time, I change my disguise, my step-aunt careful to keep her face covered beneath her hood. Today, my skin is painted a sallow hue that lends the illusion of lines I don't