

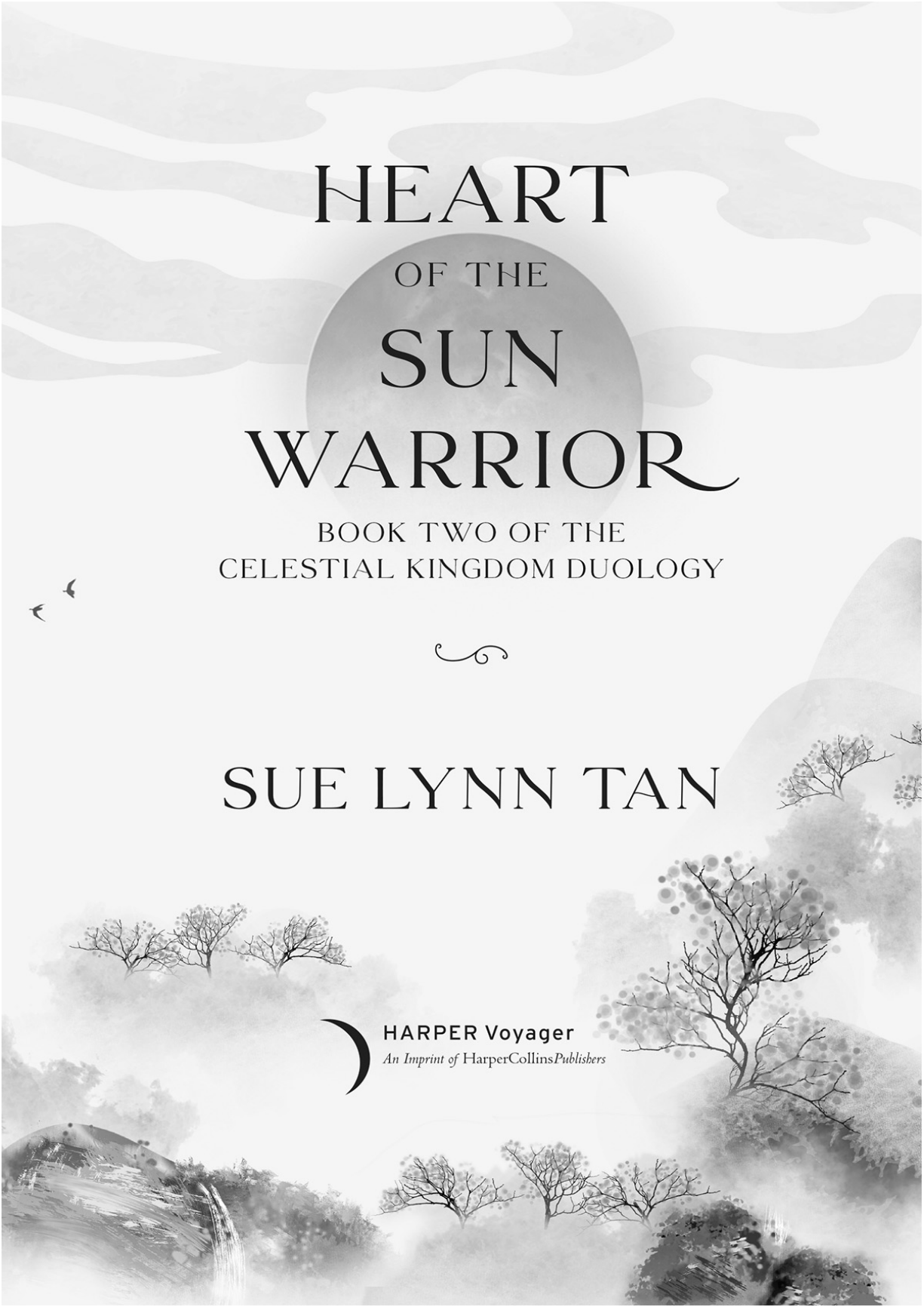
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Book Two of the Celestial Kingdom Duology

HEART OF THE SUN WARRIOR

SUE LYNN TAN

Bestselling author of *Daughter of the Moon Goddess*



HEART OF THE SUN WARRIOR

BOOK TWO OF THE
CELESTIAL KINGDOM DUOLOGY



SUE LYNN TAN



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Dedication

To those who hold unspoken dreams in their hearts

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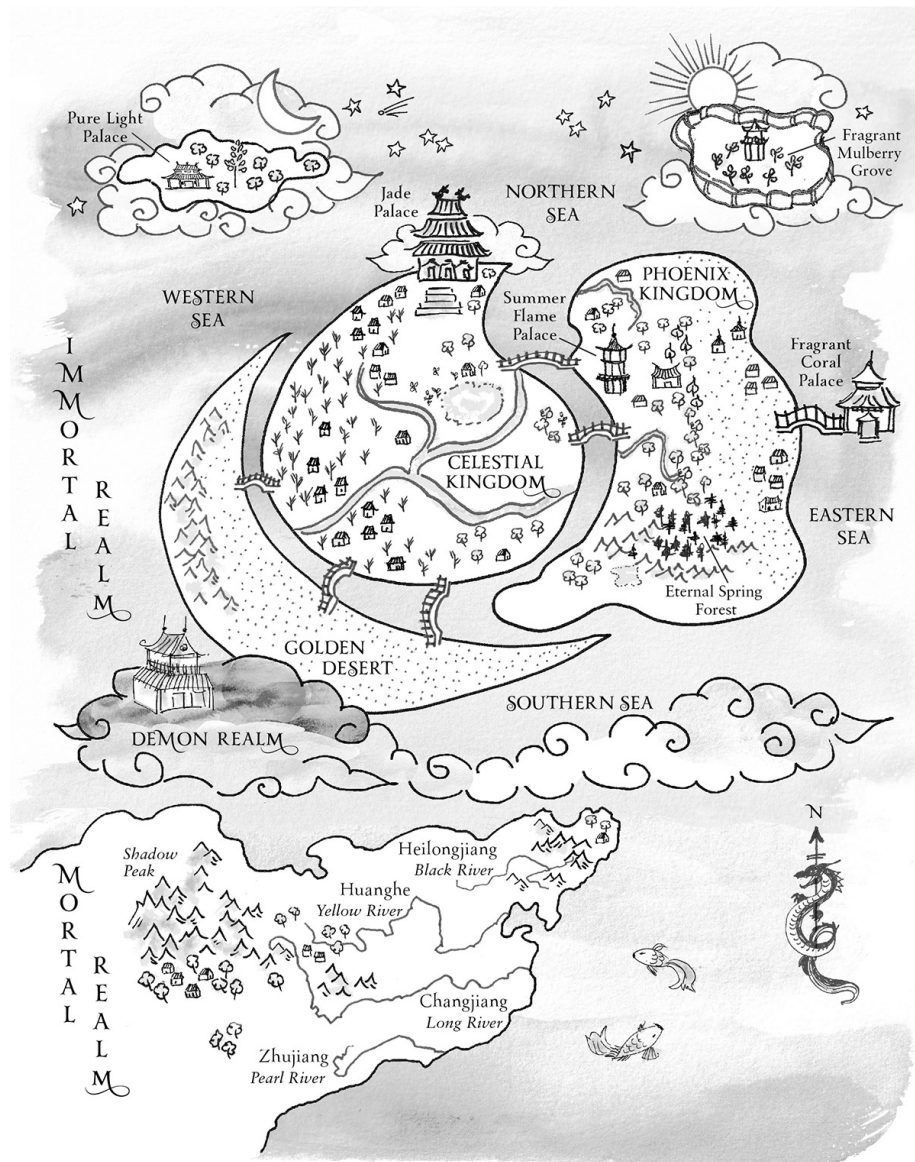
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Map



Part I

Night cloaked the sky in darkness, draping shadows across the earth. While this was the time of rest for the mortals, on the moon, our toils were just beginning. Winter white flames curled from the splint of wood in my hand. Crouching down, I brushed away a stray leaf from the lantern, wrought of translucent stone and twisted strands of silver. As I lowered the splint to the wick, it caught fire with a hiss. I rose, shaking the soil from my robe. Rows of unlit orbs stretched before me as pale as the osmanthus which flowered above—moon lanterns, one thousand in all, that would cast their glow upon the realm below. Through wind and rain, their light would not falter, until they were extinguished at the first breath of dawn.

Each time I lit the lanterns, my mother urged me to be diligent, to perform the task by hand. But I had not her patience. I had grown unused to such quiet work, to peace and calm. Reaching inward, I grasped my energy, the shining magic that flowed from my lifeforce. Flames rippled from my palm, streaking across the lanterns, leaving half ablaze in their wake. My Talent lay in Air, but Fire was useful at times as these. The ground now glittered like stardust, and in the world below, the mortals would be lifting their heads to the curved wedge of light in the sky, its face partially hidden.

Few wrote poems about the half-moon or immortalized it in paintings—devoid of the elegant arch of a crescent or the perfect wholeness of the orb. Clinging to both light and dark, and lost somewhere in between. It resonated with me, a child of mortal and immortal heritage, in the shade of my luminous parents.

Sometimes I would find myself slipping into the past, threaded with a sliver of regret—wondering what if I had remained in the Celestial Kingdom, reaping glory across the years, each accomplishment strung to my name until it shone like a strand of pearls. A legend in my own right, revered as the

heroes like my father, Houyi, or beloved and worshipped like my mother, the Moon Goddess.

The mortals honored her during the annual Mid-Autumn Festival, a celebration of reunion, though this was the day my mother had ascended to the skies. Some prayed to her for good fortune, others for love. Little did they know my mother's powers were limited, perhaps untrained or a remnant of her humanity—shed when she had consumed the Elixir of Immortality, the one gifted to my father for slaying the sunbirds. When she had flown to the heavens, my parents were parted as irrevocably as though death's blade had severed them, and indeed it had, for my father's body now lay entombed in a grave. A sharpness pierced my chest. I had never known my father, cherishing him as an abstract figure in my mind while my mother had mourned him every day of her immortal existence. Perhaps this was why the tedium of her task did not trouble her; relief to a mind splintered with regret, easing a heart clenched with grief.

No, I did not need renown and reverence, just as my parents had not asked for them. Fame was often accompanied by suffering, the thrill of glory came entwined with terror, and blood was not so easily washed from one's conscience. I had not joined the Celestial Army to chase dreams as fleeting as the dazzle of fireworks, leaving a darkness twice as deep in their wake. I would temper this restlessness, untangle such desires. To be home again with my mother and Ping'er, to have love in my life . . . these were the things that made me whole. It was what I had dreamed of, what I had fought for, what I had earned.

To many, this place might be humble compared to the opulence of the Jade Palace. Yet there was no place more wondrous to me—the ground shimmering as starlit waves, the osmanthus blossoms hanging from branches like clumps of white snow. Sometimes I woke in my bed of cinnamon wood, taut with uncertainty whether this was just a dream. But the sweetness curling in the air and the soft light of the lanterns were gentle yet unassailable assurances that I was *here*, in my home, and no one would tear me from it again.

As a breeze wound through the air, something clinked above. The laurel, its clusters of seeds aglitter as ice. In my childhood, I had longed to string them into a bracelet for my mother but could never pull the seeds free. From habit, I wrapped my fingers around one, translucent and cool. I tugged hard, but while the branch dipped and swayed, it held fast as before.

The air shifted with the presence of another immortal, though the wards remained undisturbed. I reached instinctively for the bow slung across my back. After this peaceful year at home, my lifeforce had recovered much

quicker than anticipated. I no longer strained to draw the Jade Dragon Bow; I no longer feared an intruder's trespass. But almost at once, I lowered the weapon. This aura was one I knew as well as my own—shining, summer bright.

"A warm greeting, Xingyin." Liwei's voice rang out, tinged with laughter. "Or are you keen for another challenge with the bow?"

I turned to find him leaning against a tree, arms folded across his chest. My pulse quickened though I kept my tone steady. "You might recall, I won our last challenge. And since then, I've had a lot more practice compared to Your Highness, spending all your time at court."

An intended gibe for he had not visited in weeks. Yet I had no right to expect more. While we had grown closer of late, no promises had been exchanged—we were at once more than friends and less than what we had been. The seeds of doubt once sprouted were much harder to uproot.

The corners of his lips curved into a smile. "Our tally remains even. I might win."

"You are welcome to try," I said, lifting my chin.

He laughed, shaking his head. "I prefer to keep my pride intact."

He strode toward me, stopping when the hem of his lapis-blue robe brushed mine in a soft rustle. A gray length of silk encircled his waist, from which hung an oblong jade tablet and a crystal sphere, agleam with the silver of my energy. The Sky Drop Tassel, its twin swinging from my sash.

I fought the urge to step back, as much as I did the pull forward. "I did not sense your arrival. Did you adjust the wards?" A simple matter for Liwei to circumvent the enchantments that guarded my home, for he had helped me to craft them. While they were not as powerful as those of the Celestial Kingdom, a warning thrummed through me whenever the boundaries were crossed. I was not concerned about those familiar to us; it was the strangers I was wary of.

He nodded. "If they are disturbed, I will sense it, too. An inadvertent outcome is they now recognize my presence."

"Does it matter when you are so rarely here?" The words fell out before I could stop them.

His smile widened. "Did you miss me?"

"No." Yes, but I would not give him the satisfaction. And I would never admit it—not even if someone pressed a knife to my neck—that since his absence, a hollow ache had gaped within me, that only now began to subside.

"Should I leave?" he offered.

How tempting to turn my back on him, but it would be like kicking myself in the shin. "Why did you not come sooner?" I asked instead, which was

what I truly wanted to know.

His expression turned grave. "An urgent matter arose at court; the appointment of a new general to share command over the army with General Jianyun. My father's relationship with him has grown tense of late."

Guilt burrowed in my chest. Did Their Celestial Majesties bear a grudge against General Jianyun for defending me a year ago, the day I won my mother's freedom? They rewarded those who served them well, but insults were repaid in full.

"Who is this new general?" I asked.

"Minister Wu," he said grimly.

A shudder coursed through me at the recollection of the courtier who had argued so vehemently against mercy for us. If he had his way, the emperor would have clapped my mother into chains and sentenced me to death that day. Had I offended the minister without knowing it? Or did he really believe us a threat to the emperor, to whom he was undoubtedly loyal? Whatever it was, my stomach churned at the thought of him wielding such influence over the Celestial Army.

"I did not realize the minister harbored these aspirations," I remarked. "Is he qualified for the position?"

"Few would refuse so illustrious an appointment whether they are capable or not," Liwei said. "I stayed to lend General Jianyun my support in hopes of changing my father's mind, but he is adamant. While Minister Wu is a loyal subject of my father's, I have always felt uneasy around him, even before he spoke against you."

"Unclouded by emotion, instinct can be a powerful guide." As I spoke, my insides knotted at the memory of Wenzhi's betrayal. Who was I to preach such things when I had stifled my own instincts, seeing only what I wanted to believe?

Something pulsed through my mind like a soundless drumbeat; someone had come through the wards. I probed the stillness, sensing the unfamiliar flickers of energy. Immortal auras, several of them, yet none familiar to me. As I stiffened, Liwei's eyes narrowed. He had sensed it, too, these strangers who had come to my home.

Since the moon was no longer a place of exile, many immortals visited us. An unfortunate outcome of the emperor's pardon was having to suffer their curious stares and callous remarks like I was some object to be paraded for their amusement.

How did it feel to be struck by Sky-fire? a Celestial courtier had asked breathlessly.

A miracle that you survived. A face alight with anticipation.

While another had wondered in a too-loud voice, *What of the scars? Do they still hurt? I hear those will never heal.*

Feigned concern. Gloating commiseration. False sympathy. As hollow as those puppets wielded by street performers in the mortal world. If I had detected a fragment of genuine care, I would not have resented them so. But all that spurred their interest was greed, for a scrap of gossip to share. How my fingers had itched to draw my bow, summoning a bolt of lightning to send them fleeing from our hall. I would not have released it but the mere threat would have sufficed. Only my mother's glare and the manners she had instilled in me since I was young kept me fixed to my chair.

Yet better by far their idle curiosity than those with malice in their hearts.

A crash rang out, something shattering against stone. Lifting my skirt, I sprinted toward the Pure Light Palace. Each time my feet hit the ground, kicking up clumps of powdery earth, the Jade Dragon Bow thumped against my back. Liwei's footsteps were never far behind as he ran after me.

Shining walls rose ahead, then the mother-of-pearl columns. I stumbled to a halt by the entrance, examining the porcelain fragments strewn on the floor, drenched in a pool of pale-gold liquid. A sweet and mellow fragrance wafted in the air, soothing and languorous. Wine, though we kept no stores of it here.

Liwei and I stalked through the doors, along the corridor that led to the Silver Harmony Hall where visitors were received. Jade lamps cast their soft glow upon the strangers, seated in wooden chairs around my mother. As I entered, their heads swung my way as they rose to their feet.

The jade tassels on my mother's vermilion sash clinked as she came toward us. "Liwei, we have not seen you for a while," she said warmly, dropping his title as he had long urged her to.

"Forgive me for my lengthy absence." He bent his head in courtesy.

As I greeted our guests, I studied them in turn. Their auras were not strong, which meant any trouble could be easily subdued, nor were there any ominous flashes of metal or subtle thrums of magic held at the ready—only discernible if one was searching for them. A frail immortal stood beside my mother. His eyes were the shade of a sparrow's coat and his hair and beard gleamed silver. A bamboo flute with a green tassel hung from his waist. Beside him were two women in lilac robes with turquoise pins in their hair. The hands they lifted in greeting were smooth and unblemished, that had never wielded a weapon or done a day's work. I breathed easier until I caught sight of the last guest. The hard planes of his features seemed like they were chiseled from wood, while his neck was corded with muscle.

Beneath his fine brocade robe, his shoulders were thrown wide, yet his fingers twitched restlessly.

A prickle of warning slid over my skin as I smiled to conceal my concern. “Mother, who are our guests?”

“Meina and Meining are sisters from the Golden Desert. They wish to stay for a few weeks to observe the stars.” She gestured to the elderly immortal beside her. “Master Gang, a skilled musician, has come to seek inspiration for his latest composition. And this is . . .” She paused, her forehead creasing as she stared at the younger man. “I am afraid we were interrupted before I could learn your name.”

He bowed to us, holding out his clasped hands. “I’m honored to be in your company. My name is Haoran, and I’m a winemaker from the Phoenix Kingdom. My patron, Queen Fengjin, requested a new wine for which I require the finest osmanthus. It is said the most beautiful ones bloom in your forest, and I humbly ask your permission to harvest some of the flowers. I would be eternally grateful for your boundless generosity, that is famed throughout the realm.”

I recoiled inwardly from the obsequious flattery in his words, the way his eyes darted around the room. Something about him set me on edge like a tune played in the wrong rhythm—and it was not just that he was from the Phoenix Kingdom, the closest ally of the Celestial Kingdom and the home of Liwei’s former betrothed. A refusal hovered on the tip of my tongue, an urge rising to send him away. Not just Haoran; all of them. We were safe here, our peace hard-won.

As though sensing my unease, Haoran turned to my mother. “It would be no more than a few days. I brought a humble gift, several jars of my finest wine, one of which was unfortunately dropped outside,” he said with artful cunning.

“Master Haoran, you are most courteous but there is no need for any gift,” my mother replied graciously. “We welcome all of you. I hope you will excuse us for the simple way we live; we do not entertain in a grand manner.”

Master Haoran inclined his head again. “I am grateful.”

The others bowed in acknowledgment before they followed my mother from the room, leaving just Liwei and me in the hall. As I sank onto a chair, pressing a fist to my lips, Liwei took the seat beside me.

“What do you think of Master Haoran?” I asked.

“I would like to try his wines.”

I was in no mood to jest. “Perhaps I’m searching for trouble where there is none. Perhaps I’m used to it.”

Liwei leaned toward me, his face grave. "Trust your instincts; I do. Keep watch over them. If anything happens, send word to me at once."

As his eyes dropped to the Sky Drop Tassel by my waist, his expression tightened. Memories crowded me—of a dark cave, a taunting laugh, the tip of Liwei's sword pressed to my flesh . . . and how close we had come to losing each other.

I stared through the doorway until the footsteps receded to silence. For the first time ever, strangers would reside beneath the roof of my home. I forced from my mind the recollection of the last time I had felt this way here—a child hiding from the Celestial Empress, pressed against the stone wall, half frozen with fear.

2

My fingers stilled above my qin as I stared out the window. Master Haoran was heading toward the forest as he had done every evening for the past week, a bamboo basket strapped onto his back. His whistling pierced the air, its pitch scraping my nerves. Silver scissors glinted in the evening light as he twirled them deftly. Would his fingers be equally nimble when wielding a weapon?

“This song you are playing is one even *I* can attempt.” My mother’s voice from behind interrupted my thoughts.

I smiled faintly, pushing the qin aside. My mother had neither skill nor interest in music, which was why it had been Ping’er who instructed me.

She sat down, clasping her hands on the table. “You don’t seem fond of our guests.”

“Just one in particular.” I tilted my head toward the window.

“Why don’t you like Master Haoran? He is well-mannered and considerate.”

I had no real cause to dislike him. It was just a feeling, like the shift in the air from an immortal’s aura, the prickling sensation of being watched. And, as Liwei had said, I should trust my instincts . . . or at least not silence them in favor of what I wished were true.

I did not want to be right; I did not want any danger to come to our home.

“He is guarded. Tense, as though he is hiding something,” I explained haltingly. “Whenever I ask him a question, he deflects it, moving the discussion from himself.” Evasion was something I was attuned to, having spent years concealing my identity.

“Maybe he is unused to company. Some people feel uncomfortable talking about themselves; some prefer to listen.” My mother added, “Master Haoran is afraid of you. Do you realize how you look at him? Eyes pinched, lips

curled.” She touched my hand gently. “Xingyin, I know you’ve been hurt. If you suspect everyone, you might eventually be proven right—but you will end up disappointed nonetheless. Sometimes, by treating others with mistrust, you invite it upon yourself. By refusing to see the good in them, you might lose something precious that you never allowed yourself to find.”

Her words rang true. These days I caught myself finding a sneer in a smile, menace in a frown. Searching for enemies in every shadow.

She rose, smoothing out the folds of her robe. As her palms grazed the cloth, the tips of the embroidered silver lotuses glinted brighter. Was it a trick of the light? I did not think it was her power; it had never manifested in any other way.

“I came to tell you Shuxiao is here.”

My spirits lifted. Apart from Liwei, she was my most frequent visitor, and always welcome. “Where is she?”

“In the dining hall, plaguing Ping’er for food.”

I headed there at once. The floor was paved with gray stone tiles, covered with a silk carpet in shades of violet. A round table with curved legs rested in the center of the room, surrounded by barrel-shaped stools. The rosewood was inlaid with iridescent mother-of-pearl, forming scenes of flowers and birds. Eight could fit comfortably around the table, and in my childhood I never imagined the day would come when it would be too small.

A warm, savory aroma wafted from the food already laid out: a thick soup brimming with chunks of meat and sliced lotus root, whole eggs stewed in herbs, tender pea shoots, fish fried to a golden crisp, and bowls of steamed rice. Simpler fare than in the Celestial Kingdom, yet rich with flavor. Master Gang took the stool beside my mother, while the sisters from the Golden Desert sat on her other side. Master Haoran was absent, as he had been for the past week—though his jars of wine were on the table, our cups already filled. It was an excellent brew tinged with the sweetness of plum. Though I still doubted his tale, his skill as a winemaker had not been exaggerated. The last few nights I had emptied my cup without hesitation, falling into a deep and untroubled sleep, although I awoke in the mornings with an ache that pounded at my skull.

I filled two bowls with lotus-root soup, then made my way to Shuxiao. Though she smiled, it did not reach her eyes. “What is troubling you?” I wasted no time in pleasantries, sliding one of the bowls toward her.

“Things have been tense in the Jade Palace,” she admitted. “The new general keeps a tight rein on us.”

“General Wu?” The minister’s recently acquired title was stiff on my tongue.

She nodded. "With General Jianyun sidelined, General Wu is now the real power behind the army. He is rigid and harsh. Rules are enforced to the strictest letter, with punishments meted out for the slightest offense. It's considered a lapse of our duties to converse with another, even during mealtimes. Now we just sit there in silence, not daring to look at each other, like we're children again with the fiercest tutor in the realm."

An army divided is easier to control. An unwelcome thought. Was the Celestial Emperor wary of the soldiers uniting against his will again? The soldiers had not realized their support of me could be seen as a challenge to the emperor—they were ignorant of what I had done to earn his wrath. My true defiance of the emperor that day, my calculated misinterpretation of his command to bring him the pearls, was something only the two of us knew. And likely, the newly elevated general, his most trusted advisor.

"Is that the worst of it? Quiet mealtimes?" I spoke lightly, trying to brighten her mood despite my own reservations.

She wrinkled her nose. "It's hard to keep track of the rules when new ones are added each day. Soon, it will be an infraction to leave the palace without permission. I won't be able to visit then."

The thought unsettled me. How things had changed since I left the Celestial Kingdom. How I would have chafed beneath these restrictions. The worst punishment I could recall was a stern rebuke from General Jianyun or Wen—I recoiled, casting aside the unwelcome memory. "What happens if you ignore the rules?" I asked.

"Kneeling. Confinement. Lashings." Her voice cracked over the last word.

My fingers clenched around the bowl. "You must be careful."

"Oh, I am. I've never been so circumspect before," she said with feeling. "But they seem to be keeping a close eye on me, particularly after General Wu's elevation."

"Why?" When she did not reply, I probed, "Is it because of our friendship?"

She looked down, stirring the soup with her spoon. "It is others, seeing threat where there is none. It changes nothing; I will not pander to them."

Remorse gripped me. This was what I had dreaded all this time, that she might come to harm for simply being my friend. "If things are that bad, if they're looking to punish you, why stay?"

"I can't leave yet. While I serve the emperor, my family is safe. We have no powerful friends who would speak for us should trouble arise again. My younger brother hopes to join the army when he comes of age, and if I resign, he will lose the chance." Her gaze turned distant. "Sometimes, steering clear of trouble doesn't keep you safe. Pebbles by the side of a path

still get trodden by careless feet, and idle words carry too much weight when whispered into the wrong ears."

"There is room for you and your family here," I offered at once. "The eyes of the Celestial Kingdom are far away."

But they are still fixed here, a voice inside me cautioned.

"I wish I could," she said wistfully. "But my family will be reluctant to move. These roots we have set down are not so easily wrenched free."

A familiar longing swept over me. During my years away from home, I had often felt adrift—a weed, sprouted in strange and hostile soil. I glanced around the hall, taking in the familiar furniture, the worn carpet, the stool I had sat on as a child. Countless memories thronged this place, each precious and irreplaceable. Yet what mattered most were the people within these walls. Family, whether through blood or bond, who gave a place its heart. And that was more important than any tile or brick, whether of gold, silver, or jade.

The lilting strains of a flute drifted into the air. Master Gang was playing, the tassel on his instrument swinging with each breath he took. The chatter in the room quietened as the others turned toward him. He played exceptionally well, his notes soaring pure and true.

When the last note faded, my mother said, "Thank you, Master Gang. Your music is a gift."

"You are too kind, Goddess of the Moon."

"Do you play often for your family?" she asked.

"My wife. She was fond of music." He smiled as he turned to me. "I hear your daughter is a skilled musician. When might we have the pleasure of listening to a song? I would be glad to share some of my compositions with you."

"Thank you, Master Gang, but I would be hard pressed to follow your performance." I did not decline out of modesty, but because I preferred to play for the audience of my choosing.

As an awkward silence descended, Shuxiao asked, "Master Gang, have you found much inspiration for your music here?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Ah, Lieutenant, this place is wondrous indeed: the wind rustling the leaves, the rain beating on the roof, even the soft fold of soil beneath my feet. I am inclined to stay a while longer, if my hostess permits."

"Stay as long as you wish," my mother replied with faultless courtesy, though I caught the hitch in her tone. Perhaps she, too, missed the solitude of our home.

After the meal, I accompanied Shuxiao outside. The veil of night had cloaked the sky, though the lanterns had yet to be lit.

As she stepped upon her cloud, I touched her arm. "Be on your guard. Don't do anything you should not."

"As you so often did?" Her laugh rang hollow as she shook her head. "I've reformed my ways. I'm now a paragon of obedience."

I passed her a silk-wrapped parcel. "Osmanthus flowers for Minyi." When I had studied with Liwei, she prepared our meals and had become a friend.

Shuxiao tucked it under her arm. "Your trees will be bare soon with every winemaker and cook knocking on your doors. How do they even know of the flowers?"

I did not reply, raising my hand in farewell as her cloud sped away. She would be safe, I assured myself, as I strode to my room. Shuxiao was astute, she had many friends in the palace, and Liwei would watch out for her. Though as I lay in bed, her question lingered in my mind, my last thought before I drifted off to sleep: How *had* Master Haoran heard of our osmanthus? Most of our guests did not trouble themselves to walk through the forest, and I had not offered to show it to them.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

A silvery rustle followed like the tinkling of a wind chime. Rhythmic but muffled, as though it came from far away.

My eyes flew open, blinking in the dark. From the deep quiet it was either late at night or far too early in the morning. Had I imagined those sounds? Perhaps I should have drunk some of Master Haoran's wine, my slumber might have been as restful as the nights before.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

I jerked upright in bed, straining my ears to listen. This was *real*, like something solid being struck. And what was that rustling that trailed after like a persistent echo? Tossing aside the covers, I strode to the open window, inhaling the cool air laced with a delicate sweetness. The sky was dark, the ground infused with moonlight. In the distance, the laurel towered, its branches swaying as though assaulted by the wind—yet the osmanthus trees remained still.

Fear slithered through me, cold and hard. My fingers shook as I pulled a robe over my inner garments, knotting it around my waist. I slipped on my shoes, grabbed my bow, and climbed out through the window. My gaze was pinned on the quivering laurel, my feet flying over the ground—stumbling, almost falling over. Once, twice, thrice, those strange knocks sounded again,