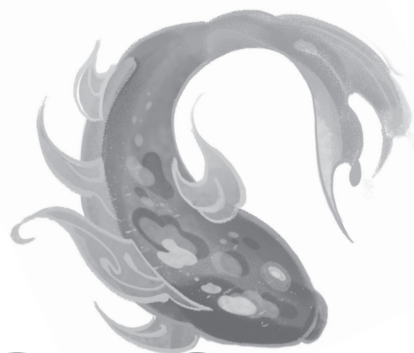


A
MAGIC
STEEPED
IN
POISON



JUDY I. LIN



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
New York

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271 • fiercereads.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lin, Judy I., author.

Title: A magic steeped in poison / Judy I. Lin.

Description: First edition. | New York : Feiwel and Friends, 2022. | Series: The book of tea ; 1 | Audience: Ages 13–18. | Audience: Grades 10–12. | Summary: Ning enters a cutthroat magical competition to find the kingdom's greatest master of the art of brewing tea, but political schemes and secrets make her goal of gaining access to royal physicians to cure her dying sister far more dangerous than she imagined.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021019249 | ISBN 9781250767080 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781250767097 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Tea—Fiction. | Contests—Fiction. | Princesses—Fiction. | Magic—Fiction. | LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.L554 Mag 2022 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021019249>

First edition, 2022

Book design by Michelle Gengaro-Kokmen

Feiwel and Friends logo designed by Filomena Tuosto

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

FOR LYRA.
YOU ARE THE BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING.



CHAPTER ONE

THEY SAY YOU CAN SPOT A TRUE SHÉNNÓNG-SHĪ BY THEIR hands—palms colored by the stain of the earth, fingertips scarred from thorns, a permanent crust of soil and blood darkening the crescents of their nails.

I used to look at my hands with pride.

Now, all I can think is, *These are the hands that buried my mother.*



Our house is dim and quiet as I move through the rooms like a thief. Rifling through boxes and drawers, fumbling with things my father kept hidden, so as not to be reminded of his grief. I weave between chairs and baskets, drying racks and jars, my footsteps careful. I can hear Shu coughing softly through the walls, tossing in her bed. She has gotten worse in these past few days.

Soon the poison will take her, as it did our mother.

Which is why I must leave tonight, before my father tries to stop me and I'm bound here by guilt and fear until it is too late. I touch the scroll hidden in the folds of my tunic, to reassure myself it is still there.

I find what I'm looking for in the back of the storeroom: my mother's shénnóng-shī box, hidden from view in a corner cupboard. Memories slip from beneath the opened lid with a sigh, as if they've been waiting for me there in the tea-scented dark. I run

my fingers over each groove in the wood, touching every compartment, remembering how we repeated the names of the stored items over and over again. This box is a map of her. Her teachings, her stories, her magic.

But the sight brings back other memories.

A broken teacup. A dark stain on our floor.

I shut the lid quickly.

In the back of the same cupboard, I find other jars, labeled in Mother's meticulous writing. My hands tremble slightly when I open the jar of last summer's tea leaves. The final harvest I helped her with, walking along the garden paths, plucking the leaves from willing branches.

As I inhale the scent of the roasted leaves, the fragrance turns to bitterness on the back of my tongue. I'm reminded of how my last attempts at wielding the magic resulted in tears and failure, and I swore I would not touch these tools again. But that was before the scroll appeared on our doorstep. Failure is no longer an option.

People who don't know any better often reduce the shénnóng-shī to the role of the skilled entertainer, able to artfully pour and present the common drink. Trained shénnóng-shī are proficient at the basics, of course—the flavors appropriate for different occasions, the correct shape and make of the cup to match the tea being served. But the true wielders of Shénnóng magic have their unique specialties. Some brew teas for emotions—compassion, hope, love. Others are able to imbue the body with energy or encourage the drinker to remember something long thought lost. They move past the walls of the body and into the soul itself.

Using the flickering light of the brazier to guide me, I pull out the tray and the accompanying pots, one for steeping and one for resting. Over the sound of the bubbling water, I hear a creak in the

next room. I freeze, afraid of a long, dark shadow against the wall, and my father's accompanying wrath.

But it's only the rumbling of Father's snores. I let out a quiet breath and return to my tools. Using the wooden tongs, I pick up the balls of tea leaves and place them in the vessel. With a careful turn of the wrist, the hot water flows over the leaves. They uncurl slowly, releasing their secrets.

The greatest shénnóng-shī can see the future unfolding, wavering in the steam over a well-brewed cup. Once, Mother brewed fū péng zǐ, dried from the leaves of the raspberry bush, for a pregnant woman in the village. The steam burned blue in the morning air, taking the form of four shining needles. From this, she discerned correctly that the child would be stillborn.

I hear her voice as the leaves expand in the water. How she used to tell us the evening fog follows the white wingtips of the Mountain Guardian, the goddess who turns into a bird at dusk. She is the Lady of the South, who dropped a single leaf from her beak into the cup of the First Emperor, and gifted humans the pleasure of tea.

When I was little, Shu and I would trail behind our parents through the gardens and the orchards, baskets at our hips. I often thought I felt the brush of those wingtips against my skin. Sometimes we'd stop to listen as the goddess guided us to the place where a nest of hatchlings chirped, or warned us of heavy rains that could cause rot in the roots if we weren't diligent in turning the land.

I empty the golden liquid from the steeping pot into the one for resting. Mother never allowed us to forget the old, old ways, from before the conquered clans, before the rise and fall of empires. It was in every cup of tea she brewed, a ritual carried out with reverence. It was in the way she knew every single component that entered her tea—the origin of the water, the aroma of the wood that

stoked the fire, the vessel the water was heated in. All the way to the leaves plucked by her fingers, steeped in a cup shaped by her own hands and fired in her own kiln. Distilled into liquid contained in the palms of two hands, offered as a blessing.

Here I am. Drink, and be well.

I lean forward and breathe in the sweet scent of apples. I hear the drowsy drone of bees among the wildflower blooms. A feeling of comfort envelops me, wrapping me in warmth. My eyelids start to droop, but the moment dissipates when something darts across my vision.

My entire body prickles with awareness.

A flutter of black wings to my right. A crow, gliding through the smoky dark before disappearing.

It takes a lifetime of training to learn how to read tea like a master, and I had already resigned myself to becoming a physician's apprentice. A year ago, it was decided. For my sister could not stomach the sight of blood, and my father required another pair of steady hands.

Doubt crawls across my skin as my fingers return to clutch the scroll once more. An invitation meant for someone else—my mother's true apprentice.

But Mother is dead. And only one of us is strong enough to travel now.

I force myself to focus. Deep breath in, let it go. The steam wavers in the path of my exhaled breath. No more visions. A trickle of tea is transferred to the small cup for drinking, just a mouthful. The drink goes down my throat with the honey taste of optimism, the promise that summer will last forever . . .

Courage burns bright and strong in my chest, hot as a sunbaked river rock.

Confidence ripples down my limbs. My shoulders pull back, and I feel poised, like a cat ready to leap. The tightness at the bottom of my stomach uncurls slightly. The magic is still there. The gods have not taken it away as punishment for my neglect.

The sound of violent coughing disrupts my concentration. I knock over one of the pots, tea spilling onto the tray as I run into the next room.

My sister struggles to hold herself up with shaking arms, the coughs racking her slender frame. She fumbles for the basin we keep beside her bed, and I pass it to her. Blood splatters against the wood, too much of it, again and again. After an eternity, the heaving finally relents, and she shivers against me.

“Cold,” she whispers.

I climb into bed beside her and pull the blankets around us. She clutches at my tunic and draws a rattling breath. I hold her as her breathing eases, and the strained lines beside her mouth smooth away.

We have tried our best, my father and I, to treat Shu in the absence of my mother’s knowledge. Me, struggling to recall those childhood lessons, and my father, himself a trained physician, educated at the imperial college. He knows how to set bones and mend cuts, how to treat the external ailments. Although he’s familiar with some of the internal medicines, he always deferred to Mother’s art for the more complex problems. It was what made their partnership work so well.

My father has used every drop of knowledge he possesses, even swallowed his pride to send a letter to the college for aid. All possible antidotes within his reach, he’s tried. But I know the dark truth we circle around.

My sister is dying.

The tonics and tinctures act as a dam to keep the poison at bay, but one day it will spill over. There is nothing we can do to stop it.

And I'm the one who failed her.

In the dark, I wrestle with my thoughts and my worry. I do not want to leave her behind, but there is no other way forward. The scroll is the only answer. Delivered by royal procession to the household of every shénnóng-shī in Dàxī. Shu was the only one at home when we received it. I was in the village with Father, tending to one of his patients. She unfurled it for me to see in the privacy of our bedroom later that evening. The fabric glimmered then, threaded with gold. The dragon rippled from its back, the embroidery so fine it seemed it could come alive and dance around us, leaving flames trailing in its wake.

"This came for us today," she told me with an intensity I've rarely seen from my mild-mannered sister. "An imperial convoy carrying a decree from the princess."

The words I have almost learned by heart: *By Imperial Decree, Princess Li Ying-Zhen welcomes you to a celebration and remembrance of the dowager empress, to be honored through a festival to seek a rising star. All shénnóng-tú are invited to the challenge, and the next shénnóng-shī to serve in the court will be decided. The winner of the competition will be granted a favor from the princess herself.*

The words sing to me, beckoning.

There has not been a shénnóng-shī admitted to court this generation, and to be the one selected would be the highest honor. It would allow a shénnóng-tú to bypass the trials and become a master. Riches would be bestowed on their household, their village celebrated. But it is the hope of the favor that calls out to me the most. I could demand that my sister be attended by the best physicians in the realm, those who have read the pulse of the emperor himself.

My throat clenches as I look down at my sister now, sleeping soundly beside me. If I could take the poison inside of her and ingest it myself, I would do so gladly. I would do anything to ease her suffering.

I brewed that fated cup of tea for Mother and for Shu, from the brick of tea typically distributed to all the emperor's subjects for the Mid-Autumn Festival. For a moment, when the scalding water seeped into the block of leaves, I thought I saw a snake, white and shimmering, writhing in the air. When I waved away the steam, it vanished. I should have known better than to dismiss it.

But not long after, my mother's lips turned black. The snake had been an omen, a warning from the goddess. I didn't listen. Even while she must have been in immense pain, even as the poison ripped through her body, Mother made a tonic that forced my sister to empty her stomach and saved her life.

At least for the time being.

I climb out of bed, careful not to disturb my sister's rest. It doesn't take long to pack the rest of my belongings. The clothes I stuff into a sack, along with the only possession I own of any value: a necklace I was gifted on my tenth birthday. One I will sell to fetch some coin to travel to the capital.

"Ning!" Shu's whisper cuts through the night. I guess she wasn't asleep after all. My heart aches at the sight of her face, pale as milk. She looks like a feral creature from one of Mother's tales—eyes glimmering wild, hair a tangle around her head, a deer wearing human skin.

I kneel at her side while her hands find mine, holding out something small wrapped in cloth. The sharp end of a pin pricks my palm. Unwrapping the handkerchief, I raise the object to the moonlight and see a jeweled hairpin from one of Mother's grateful

patrons, a precious memory of the capital. This treasure she had intended for Shu, like the necklace Mother gave to me.

“Take this with you,” my sister says, “so you can feel beautiful in the palace. As beautiful as she was.”

I open my mouth to speak, but she quiets my protests with a shake of her head.

“You must leave tonight.” Her voice takes on a stern tone, sounding like she is the older sister, and me, the younger. “Don’t stuff yourself with too many chestnut tarts.”

I laugh too loud and swallow it down, gulping back tears in the same breath. What if I come back, and she’s gone?

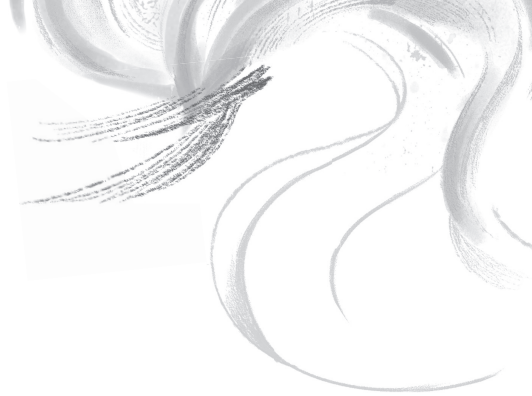
“I believe in you,” she says, echoing last night’s ferocity, when she told me I had to go to the capital and leave her behind. “I’ll tell Father in the morning you are visiting our aunt. That will give you some time before he notices you are gone.”

I squeeze her hand tightly, not sure if I can speak. Not sure what I would even say.

“Don’t let the Banished Prince catch you in the dark,” she whispers.

A childhood tale, a bedtime story we’ve all grown up on. The Banished Prince and his isle of criminals and brigands. What she means is, *Be safe*.

I press my lips to my sister’s forehead and slip out the door.



CHAPTER TWO

WITH THE COURAGE TEA STILL UNFURLING THROUGH MY body, I move quicker than usual through the misty night. The moon is a pale disc that lights my way, leading me toward the main road.

Mother used to say there is a beautiful woman who lives on the moon, stolen away by her celestial husband, who coveted her beauty on earth. He built her a crystal palace and gave her a rabbit as a companion, with the hope that the solitude would make her crave his presence. But she was clever and stole the elixir of immortality he had brewed for himself. The gods offered her a place among them, but she chose to remain in her palace, having grown accustomed to the quiet.

They gave her the title of Moon Goddess and named her Ning, for tranquility. I can still remember Mother's soft voice, telling me stories as she stroked my hair. The feeling of love that enveloped me when she told me the origin of my name.

With her voice guiding me, my feet lead me to a small grove of pomelo trees at the outer edge of our orchards. Here, I touch the waxy leaves. These trees were painstakingly raised by my mother from seed. She picked me and Shu up and spun us around when they finally blossomed and bore fruit, her joy encircling us and making us laugh. She's buried here, among the trees. My breath

catches when I notice a shimmer of white among the green buds. The first blossom of the season, barely opening in bloom.

Her favorite flower. A sign her soul still lingers here, watching over us.

A sudden wind picks up and rustles the trees. The leaves brush against my hair, as if they sense the sadness inside and wish to offer me comfort.

I run my thumb over the necklace I wear at the base of my throat—the bumps and crevices of the symbol signifying eternity, the cosmic balance. Three souls contained within each of us, separated from our bodies when we die. One returning to the earth, one to the air, and the final soul descending into the wheel of life. I press my lips against the hard, smooth bead at the knot's center.

Grief has a taste, bitter and lingering, but so soft it sometimes disguises itself as sweetness.

Mother, it is here I miss you the most.

I whisper a promise to her, to return with a cure for Shu's illness.

With my hands clasped over my heart, I bow, a promise to the dead and the living, and leave my childhood home behind.



I reach the main road, which leads me close to the slumbering village. I turn back only once, to glance at the night softening around our gardens. Even in the darkness, fog curls around the top of the tea trees, muting their color. A sea of swaying green and white.

That's when I hear something—a curious rustling, birdlike. I pause. There's movement across the tiled roof of a nearby building, down the sloped ridges. I recognize the shape of the rafters—it's the

tea warehouse at the edge of town. Holding my breath, I listen. That is no bird. It's the whisper of shoes sliding across the rooftop.

A shadow appears in the dirt before me, cast from above—crouched and furtive. An intruder.

There is no good reason to skulk about the governor's warehouse. Unless you want to be pulled into pieces by four horses, spurred in opposing directions. Or . . . if you have the power to defy him with the strength of three men, the ability to leap up to the rooftop in a single bound, and can cut your way out of a crowd of soldiers with the swiftness of your sword.

The Shadow.

People have spread warnings about the Shadow—the strange figure said to be behind the rash of tea poisonings throughout the land. It is known that bandits lurk near the borders of Dàxī, robbing caravans and hurting anyone who gets in their way. But there is a certain outlaw who does not associate with the list of gangs known to the Ministry of Justice. One outlaw who is able to find hidden treasures and expose secrets, leaving a trail of bodies behind them.

The flash of a crow's wing I saw in the steam above the teacup . . . it was an omen, after all.

Something flies past my head and falls at my feet with a thud. A curse rings above me and the footsteps quicken, scurrying away. It's the curse that piques my interest: If it is the famed Shadow, then they sound terribly human. Curiosity strikes against the suspicion within me, so quick—spark to flame.

I pick up the fallen object and my nail pierces the thin paper covering. Underneath, I feel something familiar—slender strands compacted into a solid block, emitting an earthy smell. A tea brick. I flip over the package, and the red seal leaps up at me in warning.

The governor promised us that all the poisoned bricks have been seized, marked to be destroyed.

I follow the sound of the footsteps on the roof, the dread in my stomach growing tighter with each step, turning from fear to anger. Anger at my mother's death, at Shu's constant pain.

Rolling my shoulders back, a growl rises in my throat as the power of the courage tea moves through my body, encouraging my boldness. I shrug off my belongings and set them against the side of the warehouse. The tea brick, I crush in my hands. The pieces crumble to powder and scatter in a trail behind me as I push myself into a run. The anger feels good. It feels real, a welcome reprieve from my usual helplessness. My mind narrows down to a single point of focus: I cannot let them escape with the poison. Not when it means another girl might have to bury her mother.

I fly around the corner, discarding all pretense at stealth. Only speed matters now.

My eyes catch the dark blur moving through the air, landing in front of me not twenty steps away. Their back is to me and I don't think; I close the distance in the span of two breaths and throw myself at them with all my fury.

We fall to the ground, their balance thrown off by my weight. My hands grab for anything I can find, tightening around fabric, even as the impact of landing sends a wave of pain through my shoulder. They're already moving, twisting under my grasp. I jab the thief under the ribs with my elbow, forcing a breath out in a whoosh. Knowledge gained from assisting my father in holding down grown men as he resets their bones.

Too bad the thief is not one of Father's patients, usually weak from illness or delirious from pain.

They react swiftly, grabbing my right wrist and thrusting it in a

direction it's not meant to go. I howl and loosen my grasp. In one fluid motion, they're up on two feet before I can even brush the hair from my eyes.

I scramble less gracefully to my feet, too, and we assess one another. The moon shines bright above our heads, illuminating us both. Their body is lean, a head taller than me. Darkness obscures their features, a figure from a nightmare—a piece of wood covers the upper half of their face. Horns curve out from slashed, angry brows. They appear as the God of Demons, able to slice off the head of troublesome ghosts with one swipe of a broadsword.

A mask, hiding the face of the terror stalking Dàxī.

They pick up a sack that was dropped in our tussle and secure it over their shoulder with a knot. Their gaze burns from behind the mask, mouth settling into a hard line.

Behind me is freedom, down to the docks where the warehouse workers receive their deliveries. They can steal one of the boats or disappear down the alleyway. The other way leads to the center of the village, with a greater likelihood of being caught by the patrols.

They run at me and try to use brute force to knock me aside. But I duck down and barrel toward their legs, trying to throw them off-balance. They sidestep and push me out of the way, but I grab onto the sack as they pass, causing them to stumble.

They whirl around and kick my knee. My leg crumples and I fall onto my arm, sending a searing pain down my left side. Another kick thrusts me down to the dirt. This thief knows exactly where to strike. I am no match.

They try to leave again, but I flop onto my stomach and claw at their legs, forcing them to drag me behind. I can't let them get away with the poison. I suck in a deep breath to scream, but before any

sound comes out, a swift punch lands at my temple. I fall back, the pain exploding in my head like firecrackers.

I try to stagger after them, but I can't seem to catch my breath. My vision wavers in front of me, the buildings undulating like trees. Catching myself against the wall, I look up just in time to see a dark figure leap off a few stacked barrels and land on the rooftop.

The thief disappears into the night, with no proof anyone was even here at all. Except for the blood seeping through my hair and the ringing, still echoing through my ears.



CHAPTER THREE

I WALK—LIMPING, MY ANKLE AND FACE THROBBING IN pain—until the barest hint of dawn peeks over the horizon, and a farmer passes me in his wagon. He gives me the once-over and offers me a spot in the back. I doze between bags of millet and rice, with a squawking duck for company. The duck remains outraged at the rough ride until we get to the town of Nánjiāng, which sits on the southern bank of the Jade River, several hours from Sù by horse. It would have taken most of the day if I'd had to walk.

I sell my necklace at a pawnshop in order to afford the ferry ride to the capital. Another memory of my mother, gone. But it isn't until I step on the boat that afternoon, jostled by the crowd, that a sudden pang of loneliness strikes me. In my corner of Sù province, I know all the villagers by face and most by name, and they know me. Here, I am no longer Dr. Zhang's willful daughter. It's like I've put on someone else's face.

I retreat to the back of the ferry and sit down, holding my belongings close. Around me, people laugh and mingle with one another. The air is filled with music from wandering musicians, playing for coin. But I remain anxious, afraid that Shu's lies have not worked and I will be discovered before the ferry leaves the dock.

I feel Father's inevitable disapproval like a heaviness around my neck. He never understood me, even though we slept under the

same roof. He would not have permitted me to leave for the competition. He would have found reason to discourage me from this foolish endeavor—I'm too young and untrained to travel alone, Shu is too sick to leave in the care of someone else, he would never leave the village because of his duty to his patients . . .

A girl starts to dance in front of me, a welcome reprieve from my worries. The elegant sweeping gestures of her arms are accompanied by the sweet sound of her voice. Delighted claps begin in the crowd as they recognize "The Song of the Beggar Girl."

It is a story about mourning. An orphaned girl with no name. A city lost to war. She walks through the streets, hungry and alone.

Emotions fill the faces of my fellow travelers as the strands of music weave around them. The dancer's swaying movements, the gentle rocking of the boat, the longing of her words, all intermingle into a bitter taste at the back of my throat.

My sister has always been the warm one, quick to smile from the moment she was born, whereas I am prickly and restless, more at home with plants than with people. I could tell the villagers tolerated my presence, but they loved Shu. She could have easily left me behind, surrounded by their adoration, yet she never forgot about me. She always shared what they gave her, defended me against their harsh words.

It's my turn to protect her now.

I lower my head to my arms.

The girl's voice rises keenly above the crowd: "*I have wandered so far from home . . .*"

"Here." Something is thrust into my hand, and my eyes snap open to see a woman's concerned face. She has a baby tucked contentedly against her, wrapped in thick fabric. The woman's wide, dark eyes are kind.

“If you eat something, your stomach might settle,” she says.

I look down at what she gave me. A piece of dried pork, oily and red. When I bring it to my nose, the smell immediately makes my mouth water. I take a tentative bite, and the meat is both sweet and salty, with a great chew. Gnawing on it bit by bit distracts me from the mournful tune, gives me something to focus on until my head feels a little clearer.

“Thank you,” I mumble, wiping the grease on my tunic. “It was delicious.”

“First time on the ferry?” she asks, patting the baby rhythmically on the back.

Without waiting for my response, she continues, “I remember my first time traveling to Jia. How overwhelming it was. The sheer number of people! I was embarrassed because I was sick over the railing so many times I could barely stand.”

“You seem to be a practiced traveler now,” I tell her. There is something about her that reminds me of my mother. She, too, would have helped a stranger without hesitation.

The woman smiles. “I was a girl newly married then. And unknown to me, what I thought was seasickness was actually due to being pregnant with this one’s brother.” Her gaze turns lovingly toward two people standing a few steps away, one tall, one short—a man and a boy, who looks to be around six years of age.

“Now your children will grow up to be practiced travelers, too,” I say.

She laughs. “Every spring we journey to Jia to sweep the tombs of my husband’s ancestors and visit those who have moved to the capital. But I’m happy my husband was posted to a provincial town, away from the politics of Jia. It is a simpler life. One I dream of for my son and daughter.”

The capital city is where my parents met long ago. My mother returned to our village heavily pregnant, with a stranger at her side who will become her husband. Over the years she would mention the capital in passing. A wistful comment about the sound of the zither, an offhand remark on the perfume of the wisteria flowers that climbed the east wall of the palace.

Shu and I used to ask her: *Why can we not go back, Mama?* We would sit on her lap and beg for more stories about the beauty of the capital. She would tell us there was nothing left for her there, not in comparison to our family. But our family crumbled without her holding us together, and I'm leaving now to save what remains.

The woman kisses the wispy hair on the baby's head with a look of contentment. The baby opens her tiny mouth to yawn, then nestles closer to her mother's chest. This woman lives the life my father wants for me: to be satisfied with food on the table and a comfortable home, a husband who provides. Except my parents have seen the wonders of Jia and lived in its bustling depths, wanted nothing more than what waited for them back home, while I have only known our village and the surrounding countryside.

The time on the ferry passes like a peculiar dream. My companion, Lifan, welcomes me as part of her family. I bounce her baby girl on my knee, pull the boy away from leaning too far over the railing. They refuse to accept any payment for the food and drink they share with me, and my heart is humbled by their kindness.

On our route we pass several towns, picking up and depositing passengers. The journey is a boisterous affair, as the musicians continue to play and vendors sell their goods from baskets they carry on their backs or heads.

At night, I lean against the railing and watch the stars swirl overhead. *Don't be deceived*, my mother once told me. *The stars are not as*

peaceful as they appear. The astronomers are tasked with deciphering their celestial travels, prophecies that predict the rise and ruin of great families and kingdoms. They burn with as much ferocity as our sun.

“I used to dream of being a stargazer,” a voice interrupts my thoughts. Lifan’s husband, Official Yao, sits down heavily beside me on the deck and hands me a clay cup of millet wine. I sip it, and the earthy liquid burns through me, warming my chest. “Didn’t have the aptitude for it. Then I wanted to be a poet. Wrote soulful scribbles about the Banished Prince and his sequestered isle.”

I laugh at this, imagining him younger and more solemn, brush in hand. “And?”

“Life has a way of taking the wind out of our dreams sometimes,” he says, gazing not at me but at the flickering reflection of light on the water.

The heat of the wine emboldens me to announce, “I’m not going to let it.”

He laughs, full and relaxed, like he doesn’t believe me. When Lifan mentioned that her husband works for the government, I was wary of him at first. But even from our brief conversations, I realized quickly he is remarkably different from the governor who is in charge of my village.

I shudder, thinking of Governor Wang. The formidable man whose black cloak always billowed around him like a dark cloud. The governor never asks; he only knows how to take, to demand, to squeeze until every last remnant can be wrung from the people in his jurisdiction. They say he dragged someone’s hound into the road and beat it to death, for all to see. They say he laughed as the creature howled, punishment for its owner’s inability to pay the month’s taxes.

Governor Wang has taken a particular interest in my father

over the years, as if he sees him as his nemesis. Often the villagers rely on my father to appeal to the officials for leniency when times are hard. He has seen for himself how the people have suffered, yet he is still obedient to the governor's whims. Perhaps this is what makes it hard for me to understand my father. It is the most unforgivable kind of loyalty. Especially when, deep down, I know Governor Wang could have done more to stop the poisonings, and even deeper down, I sometimes suspect he is behind them.

I sit there with Official Yao in companionable silence, sharing sips of millet wine, until my hands and cheeks feel warm and tingly.

After the last drop is poured, we clink our cups together and empty them. He lets out a sigh. "The nice thing about getting old is you realize everything circles back on itself," he says, with a dreamy lilt to his voice. "Things change, but they cycle back, too. The stars continue along their course, the cowherd is always reunited with the maiden. It's comforting in a way. Makes it feel less lonely."

He pats my shoulder and stands, leaving me to my own thoughts.

I stare out at the water. I have never thought of it until now, but he's right. I *am* lonely, not just homesick. I've always felt this way, like I don't belong in the village. Sometimes, late at night, when Shu is peacefully resting and sleep refuses to find me, twisted thoughts come for me instead. They take root and refuse to let go. They whisper terrible things—that my father wishes it were me, and not Shu, who had the sickness. That my family would be happier if I were gone.

Father exists in a circle of his own imagining, each of us playing our roles of how a good doctor and his good daughters should behave. He always believed that if I only spoke the right words, acted the proper way, I wouldn't bring trouble on our household again and again.

Even when Mother was alive, even when I was happy in the gardens with my family, I always felt like I was orbiting them, occupying a similar space but charting my own invisible course, with no idea where it would take me.

Maybe I'm about to find out.