





SONG *of the* CRIMSON FLOWER

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Thank you,
PHILOMEL BOOKS

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PHILOMEL BOOKS
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Will love break the spell? After cruelly rejecting Bao, the poor fisherman who loves her, Lan, a wealthy nobleman's daughter, regrets her actions. So when she finds Bao's prized flute floating in his boat near her house, she takes it into her care, not knowing that his soul has been trapped inside it by an evil witch, who cursed Bao, telling him that only love will set him free. Though Bao now despises her, Lan vows to make amends and help break the spell.

Together, the two travel across the continent, finding themselves in the presence of greatness in the forms of the Great Forest's Empress Jade and Commander Wei. They journey with Wei, getting tangled in the webs of war, blood magic, and romance along the way. Will Lan and Bao begin to break the spell that's been placed upon them? Or will they be doomed to live out their lives with black magic running through their veins?

In this fantastical tale of darkness and love, some magical bonds are stronger than blood.



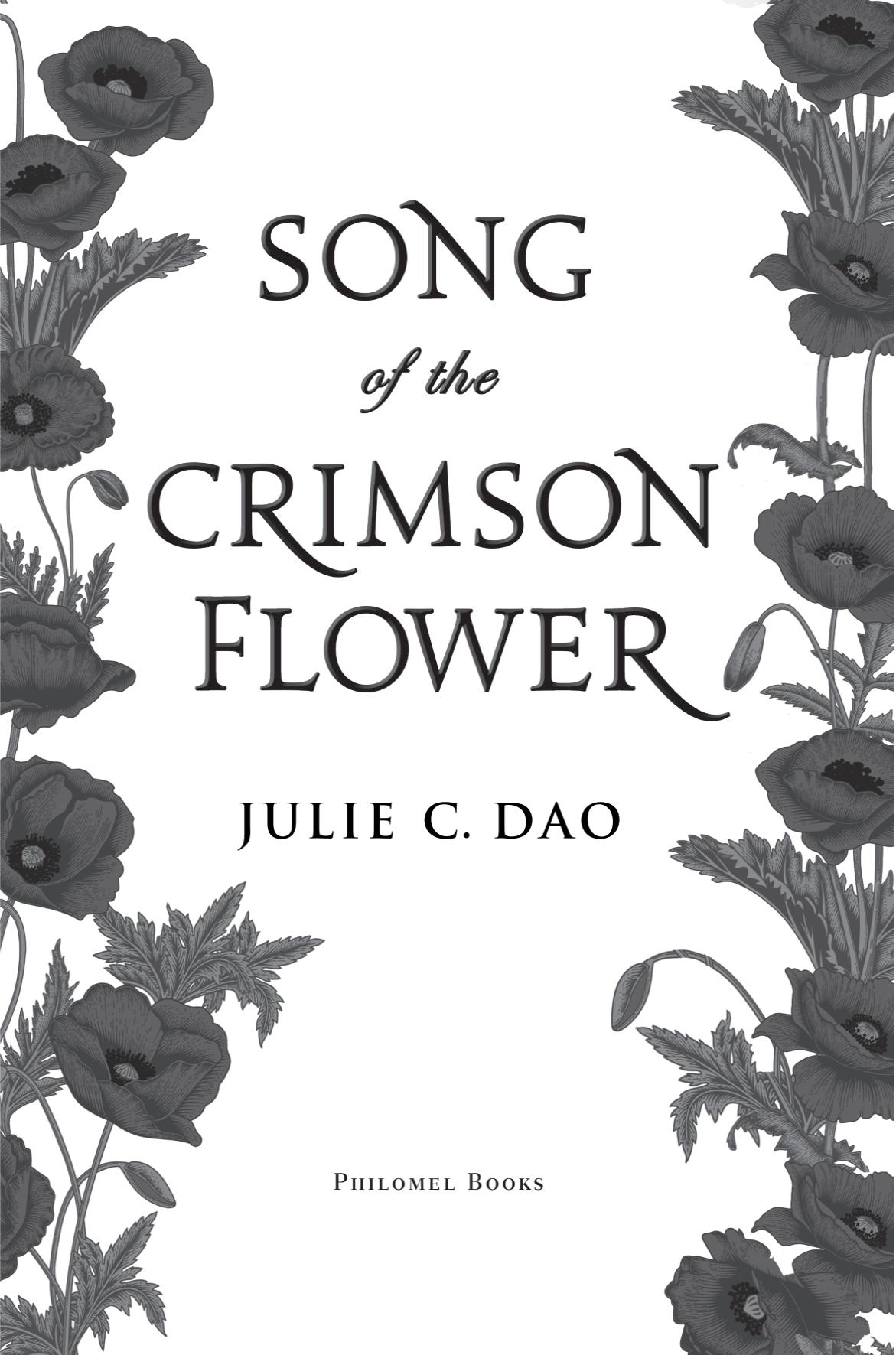
JULIE DAO is a proud Vietnamese American who was born in upstate New York. She studied medicine in college, but came to realize blood and needles were her Kryptonite. By day, she worked in science news and research; by night, she wrote books about heroines unafraid to fight for their dreams, which inspired her to follow her passion of becoming a published author. She is the author of *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* and *Kingdom of the Blazing Phoenix*. Julie lives in New England.

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SONG
of the
CRIMSON
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ALSO BY JULIE C. DAO

Forest of a Thousand Lanterns
Kingdom of the Blazing Phoenix



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To Brian Geffen,
who helped open the door to Feng Lu



❧ CAST OF CHARACTERS ❧

- Lan—*pronounced lahn*
- Chau, her maid—*pronounced chow*
- Minister Vu, her father—*pronounced voo*
- Lady Vu, her mother
- Bà Trang, a seamstress—*pronounced ba jahng*
- Bà Danh, an acquaintance—*pronounced ba den*
- Hieu, Lan's nephew—*pronounced hew*
- Bà nội, (Vietnamese for paternal grandmother), now deceased—
pronounced ba noy
- Phong, Lan's eldest brother—*pronounced fum*
- Chung, the youngest of Lan's older brothers—*pronounced choom*
- Tam—*pronounced tum*
- Master Huynh, his father and a physician—*pronounced win*
- Madam Huynh, his mother
- Bao—*pronounced to rhyme with how*
- Ông Hung, a fisherman in the river market—*pronounced ohm*
hoom
- Chú Minh, a younger fisherman in the river market—
pronounced choo min
- Khoa, who dies of the bloodpox—*pronounced khwa*
- Cô Ha, Khoa's sister—*pronounced co ha*
- Lady Yen, a noblewoman—*pronounced eeeng*
- Lord and Lady Phan, her parents—*pronounced fahng*
- Lord Nguyen, her betrothed—*pronounced weeng*

- Empress Jade
- Lord Koichi—*pronounced ko-ee-chee*
- Wren
- Commander Wei—*pronounced way*
- Huy, a young man who lives in the village—*pronounced hwee*
- Cam, an old woman who lives in the village—*pronounced kahm*
- Tao, Cam's husband—*pronounced to rhyme with how*
- Mistress Vy, leader of the Gray City—*pronounced vee*
- Sinh, Vy's husband—*pronounced sing*
- Huong, the river witch—*pronounced hooing*
- Quang, captain of the Gray City—*pronounced wahng*
- Ly, a worker in the Gray City infirmary—*pronounced lee*
- Master Chu, a patient in the Gray City infirmary—*pronounced*
chew
- Kim, Master Chu's daughter—*pronounced keem*
- Thuy, a patient in the Gray City infirmary—*pronounced twee*
- General Yee, Commander Wei's second-in-command—
pronounced yee
- Lo, the Imperial war surgeon—*pronounced low*

NOTE TO READERS: The above pronunciations are not 100 percent accurate as it can be difficult to translate Vietnamese names, which are often tonal, into phonetic English for the Western tongue. They are merely my closest approximation.





1

The music came in on the breeze.

Lan rushed to the window, the sleeves of her pale yellow robe fluttering like butterfly wings. "He's here! Quick, put out the light!"

Her maid blew out the candles, plunging the bedroom into darkness, and Lan saw outside with a sudden sharp clarity: the great oaks sheltering the Vu family home, bending close together as though sharing a secret; the sunset-pink blossoms in the garden that smelled of summertime; and the grassy hill sloping down to the river two levels beneath her window. The warm breeze ran playful fingers through her long hair as she leaned out.

"Be careful, miss!" Chau begged. "What will I tell your parents if you fall?"

Lan brushed away the maid's hands. "I've never fallen yet, have I? Hush, now."

A boat glided over the water and stopped near the riverbank. In the moonlight, Lan could only see a sliver of the young man's face, turned



up toward her, and the shine of his bamboo flute. *Tam*, she thought, her mind caressing his beloved name. Her heart soared as he began to play, every sweet note ringing out as clearly as though he were in her room with her.

The music seemed a living, breathing thing. It whispered to her and danced in the air before her. The notes clung to her skin and the back of her throat. Lan pressed her hands against her flushed cheeks, thrilling at the beauty of it. Tam had come every night for two weeks and had played this song each time—*her* song, the melody he had written for her. He had tucked the lyrics into the hollow of their favorite tree, and she had learned them by heart:

*Little yellow flower,
You crossed the grass and the wind kissed every blade
Your feet had blessed.
I see springtime in the garden of your eyes.*

The flute sang for her, and her alone. It was his voice, telling her in music what he had always been too shy to say in words: that he loved her, that he couldn't wait to spend his life with her, that both their families' dearest hope was also his own. When he finished, he gazed up and lifted his hand to her, and Lan noticed the soft blue scarf tied around his wrist. She had given it to him along with a ruby dragonfly brooch, the heart-jewel a woman presented to her true love.

Chau, well versed in the routine by now, handed Lan several bundles of *hoa mai*. Lan kissed the sweet-smelling yellow flowers before tossing them to Tam. Most of them scattered on the surface of the water, but it was no matter. She knew he would gather each and every one, for she had watched him do it for fourteen nights. As she watched,

he stooped to pluck a blossom from the river and kissed the petals her lips had touched.

The maid sighed. "How lucky you are to have such a beautiful romance, miss."

"I am," Lan said softly, stretching her hand to the boatman. She felt like a princess in the ancient ballads her father loved, with stars in her unbound hair. But the girls in those tales were always falling in love with men far beneath them. Tam was of a family equal to Lan's, and the prospect of their marriage was as close to their approving parents' hearts as it was to their own. "He's perfect, isn't he?"

If only he would find his courage. If only he would get past the shyness that forced him to express his feelings only in moonlit visits. In the two weeks since he started playing her music on the river, he had not come by once during the day. *He's busy learning how to become a great court minister like his uncle*, she told herself sternly. *It's silly to complain when he is building a good life for us*. Tam was devoted to her, and when the time was right, he would finally allow the fortune-teller to choose an auspicious date for their wedding. In the meantime, she would try to learn patience and understanding, two of her mother's strongest qualities.

As though Lan's thoughts had called her, Lady Vu's footsteps sounded in the corridor. "Why is it so dark in here?" she asked, entering her daughter's room. Two servants flanked her, their lanterns illuminating the crisp turquoise silk of her long, gold-collared *ao dai*. The overdress fluttered against her cream trousers. "What on earth are you looking at?"

Lan jumped back from the window. "Nothing, Mama. Just stargazing." She didn't have to fib; her parents approved of her betrothal to Tam, after all, and there was nothing improper about these visits. But

she was nearly eighteen, and Ba and Mama allowed her so few secrets from them; she wanted these nights of moonlight and music to belong to her and Tam alone. "I was thinking about Tam and how hard he works."

"Of course you were, my love," Lady Vu said, her face softening. "I am certain your wedding will take place soon. You needn't worry."

"I'm not worried," Lan answered, but it sounded forced even to her ears.

Her mother signaled for the servants to relight the candles, and the room in which Lan had grown up came back into view: the bright oak walls, the yellow-and-white embroidered rug, and the cheerful gold silk pillows on the bed. Lady Vu patted a lacquered sandalwood chair. "Sit. I will brush your hair," she said, and the servants left the room to allow mother and daughter their nightly chat. She ran the teeth of the ivory comb tenderly through Lan's hair. "You'll be a happy wife and mother, like me. You have nothing to fear from your Tam."

"I know he cares for me, Mama." Lan fixed her eyes on the night sky, imagining Tam gathering flowers on the river outside and watching the square of light from her room. "I'm just eager for a wedding date to be chosen. If there's a task to be done, better to do it right away."

Lady Vu laughed. "How like your dear father you are in that."

"And like you in my face," Lan returned, lifting an ornate bronze hand mirror. Her face and her mother's looked back at her, both rosy and round with wide noses and wider eyes, dark and shining as the river. Even their dimpled smiles were the same.

Her mother stroked her hair. "Master and Madam Huynh have always spoiled Tam. He's their only son, which is why they indulge him in everything. Ba and I know better than to give your brothers such freedom. *We* are their parents, and we know best." She set the comb

down and met Lan's eyes in the mirror. "Tam may be shy, but his nerves will soon pass."

"Do you think that's why he keeps putting off the fortune-teller?" Lan asked, turning to look at her. "Because he's nervous about marrying me?"

"I don't think it has anything to do with you, my treasure." Lady Vu laid a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Some men are still children at twenty, and Tam may be feeling anxious about the responsibilities he will take on as a husband and head of a household."

"Was Ba anxious?"

The older woman smiled. "No. But he has always been a decisive person."

"He left flowers for you every day after you were betrothed," Lan said, remembering Ba's story. It was both funny and sweet to imagine her proper, formal father as a youth in love.

"Your father and I were well matched from the start. Sharing my life with him has been a joy, and I want that happiness for you," Lady Vu said, squeezing Lan's shoulder. "Ba will speak to the Huynhs and see if they can't push Tam a bit. It's long past time to choose a wedding date."

Three dates had been proposed by the fortune-teller and all refused by Tam. The first had landed in the middle of the rain season, which he insisted was not a propitious time to marry. The next had fallen too close to the Festival of the New Year, which might have symbolized a fresh beginning, but Tam had insisted it would be disrespectful to the gods to celebrate a marriage instead of spending time in reflection and prayer. And the third date—for which both the Huynhs and Vus had pushed—had been in the winter, and Tam did not wish his bride to be cold and uncomfortable in the journey to her new home. No matter that the Huynhs lived only on the other side of the river, no more than

a half hour's journey by palanquin.

Lan had been disappointed each time, but had excused these concerns as proof of Tam's thoughtful, conscientious nature. "He's superstitious, and also cautious," she told her mother now. "Our marriage will be the most important event of his life, and he wants it to be perfect."

"Of course he does. Ba will speak to Tam's parents, and by year's end, you will be a bride." Lady Vu dimpled. "Just think of the finery you'll wear and how beautiful you'll look. The first of your cousins to marry, even though you're the youngest. How jealous they will be."

Lan beamed, picturing herself in her festive red wedding clothes and gold headdress. "Will you lend me your jade necklace, Mama?"

"Better than that. I will give it to you as a gift," her mother said indulgently. "And we will have Bà Trang add *ten* times the gold embroidery to your wedding clothes. They'll be so much prettier than the hideous silks Bà Danh's great-niece wore at her wedding." They giggled at the great-niece's expense and sat up late together, gossiping and planning for the future.

When Lady Vu finally retired for the night, Lan gazed out at the star-dappled river, now empty of her passionate boatman. As a child, she had sat by this window with her grandmother, making up wild stories about all the adventures she would have as a bold, brave young woman. Bà nội had loved tales of daring quests and far-off lands and had transferred her passion to Lan, encouraging her to dream and imagine herself as strong and courageous as anyone in the old legends. But Bà nội had died last summer, leaving an empty place in Lan's heart where her grandmother's love and her thirst for adventure had once been.


It made Lan feel lonesome and a little sad, wondering when she had

changed so much. But she supposed that letting go of her flights of fancy and her desire to see the world came with growing up. *And getting married will be an adventure, too*, she told herself.

The pieces of her life were falling perfectly into place. Soon, she would make Ba and Mama proud, and she would have everything: a lovely, elegant wing of the Huynhs' home, servants to tend to her every wish as a cherished daughter-in-law, and Tam, the handsome young man who wove his love for her into the melody of a flute beneath the moon.



2



Long before sunrise and the first rays of peach and gold touched the sky, the river market came to life. Boats swept over the water, packed with nets of wriggling fish, buckets of jackfruit and spiny durian, and baskets of sweet, fragrant pastries wrapped in banana leaves. Neighbors shouted greetings to one another, having seen the same faces and heard the same voices year after year. Men and women who had once played as children on the riverbank now rowed their goods to shore, setting up stalls of wood and bamboo along the sand as their small sons and daughters tottered after them. They wore loose cotton clothing, cheap but comfortable in the stifling heat, as they hammered, tied rope, lined up wares on tables, and carried crates.

Bao would have given anything to be one of them.

He knew it was a hard life. The people of the river market were always at the mercy of nature—one year might bring a drought, and then the next, the monsoon rains might last for months, flooding boats and damaging goods. But they all *belonged*, from the oldest man to the

newest baby. They all had a place; they all had someone to love and miss them if they were gone.

He couldn't say the same for himself.

"Bao! You're here early," said Ông Hung, a cheerful, red-faced man in his sixties. In the eight years Bao had known him, the man had only ever worn one outfit: a gray hemp tunic over brown trousers. He stood under a lopsided cloth tent, behind a table lined with gleaming catfish. His many daughters sat cross-legged on the ground around him, their hands and legs stained with fish blood as they cleaned the day's catch. The youngest, a girl of fifteen, turned bright red when she saw Bao, causing her sisters to titter.

Bao pretended not to notice, to spare the poor girl further embarrassment. He was too tall to stand up straight beneath Ông Hung's tent, so he stood outside and stooped his head to speak to him. "You look better today, Uncle." He used the term out of respect, but still it gave him a thrill, like addressing a real family member.

"You know why?" called Chú Minh, an adjacent vendor. He was a short, slim man in his forties, with kind, twinkling eyes above a thin mustache. "After he collapsed the other morning, he finally took your advice and rested yesterday."

"Mind your own business," Ông Hung told him good-naturedly. "As the saying goes, an idle man courts the gods' ill will. Lazing about means less money to feed my family."

Bao studied the older man's color. He still looked a bit too peaked for Bao's taste, but at least his eyes were bright and his movements quick. "Your family wouldn't want you to work yourself to death," Bao said. "One day of rest is worth it if it means you can work for years longer."

Chú Minh grinned, and Ông Hung put his hands on his hips, saying, "Listen to the boy! Wah, so you've decided to become the king's court

philosopher instead of a physician now.”

“I’m not a physician yet, just an apprentice,” Bao said, chuckling. “I tie bandages and hold patients’ hands and carry Master Huynh’s medicine bag for him.”

“You’re too modest, son,” Chú Minh scolded him. “That fancy Master Huynh may be a retired court physician, but you’re the one who takes care of us lowly folks. Who else would set our broken bones or treat our coughs? Or tell this old sack of rice to take a day off?” He clapped an affectionate hand on Ông Hung’s shoulder, and the older man grumbled about lack of respect.

“I feel at home here,” Bao said honestly, looking at the bustling market around them. He wouldn’t trade these haphazard tents, these rickety stalls, and the sharp, pungent smell of fish and dust for anything. It was his escape from the servants’ quarters of the Huynh family house, where he slept and studied in a tiny, stuffy room that always smelled of greasy cooking. He had only a thin straw pallet for a bed, a tiny scrap of a table, and a single chair with uneven legs, and still Madam Huynh complained to her husband about the price of keeping a charity orphan like Bao, no matter how gifted he was at medicine. “Everyone in this river market is the closest thing to a family that I have.”

Ông Hung fixed Bao with a piercing gaze. “You’re a good boy, with a good head on your shoulders. What are you, nineteen? If you get tired of treating rich people’s imaginary ailments, come work for me. Learn the business with my sons and marry whichever of my daughters you want.” The girls erupted into giggles, and the youngest hid her face in the flank of a catfish.

Bao cleared his throat. “That is much too generous of you, Uncle.”

“I’m serious. I’d be honored to have you for a son-in-law.” The fisherman’s eyes narrowed. “Unless another man has chosen you for his

daughter?”

Chú Minh’s grin widened. “I think you’ve hit upon the truth. The boy is blushing.”

Bao’s face burned as though the midday sun shone upon it, though dawn had only just crept over the limestone mountains. The girl he loved was still his own, and he would not share her yet—not when he might never summon the courage to speak to her. “Even if I ever wished to make a marriage proposal, I have no parents to speak to the parents of my intended.”

“Do you think that matters to me at all?” Ông Hung exclaimed.

Beneath the older man’s teasing demeanor, Bao saw kindness. Ông Hung was honest and good, and a life with his family would mean hard but decent work and plenty of food. Bao imagined living on the man’s boats as children ran around him and scolding aunties told him to eat more, he was getting too skinny. Ông Hung’s youngest daughter would be there, too, smiling shyly from behind her dark curtain of hair. They would all love Bao and care for him, and for an orphan who had drifted alone for almost ten years, the hunger for that life was physically painful. But Bao’s heart belonged to another. He didn’t know whether *her* father would welcome him so readily, but he wanted no other wife but her.

“Thank you, Uncle,” he said sincerely. “Well, I should be on my way. I’ve got a lot of people to check on before my work with Master Huynh begins. I’m going to see Khoa first.”

Both men sobered at once. “If anyone can do anything to help poor Khoa, it would be you, my boy. You and the gods . . . and maybe the river witch,” Chú Minh said, ignoring Ông Hung’s snort of derision. “People may sneer, but there’s no denying she’s helped many a sick or ailing person. Her methods may be untraditional—”

“Untraditional!” Ông Hung laughed. “The king would throw her into prison for her unnatural practices if she were important enough for him to know.”

“She’s the closest thing we’ve got to a magic-wielder,” Chú Minh argued.

The older man shook his head. “You can keep your mountain magic and enchantresses. I am a citizen of the Kingdom of the Sacred Grasslands, and we are rooted in the earth and good, reliable medicine we can see. I’ll take Bao here over that witch any day.”

They looked at Bao, who hesitated. Growing up, he had often heard Madam Huynh telling her son, Tam, the tale of the river witch to frighten him into good behavior. The story went that the woman had been born in the southern Grasslands, among magic-wielders with benevolent powers like the gift of healing or foresight. But the witch had chosen dark magic, *blood magic*, to manipulate and control others, and her people had thrown her out because of her evil ways. She had gone north to make her home in the darkest part of the river, and anyone wandering her forsaken banks might have the hair cursed right off their head or a second nose magically sprout from their chin, just for her sheer pleasure at hearing them scream.

Unlike Tam, Bao had never been scared by the story. Perhaps it was because he lived with the Huynhs’ servants, who often joked about the witch and talked of how a former cook had successfully sought her out to erase all of her memories about her unfaithful husband. Or perhaps Bao liked hearing about someone who had come from the southern Grasslands, just like him, the only nugget of information he had about his past. Perhaps they had crossed paths once.

Now Bao shrugged, not wanting to take sides. “I always try to do what I can.”

Chú Minh glanced at the small package in his hand. "I don't have a strong opinion either way about your employer, but I'll say this much for him," he remarked. "Even if Master Huynh doesn't deign to serve us peasants, it's decent of him to give you medicine for us."

Bao forced a smile and said nothing.

"Well, go on, then," Ông Hung said. "Let's hope Khoa isn't too far gone to be helped."

"No one is too far gone to be helped," Bao told him, but the men's grave expressions made him wonder whether he should have had Master Huynh accompany him today. He had asked the physician for advice on Khoa's case just the other day.

Khoa was a hale, hearty man who traveled south frequently to harvest milk fruit for his sister to sell in the river market. He rarely stayed more than a day or two at home, but had felt so ill this week that he couldn't make the usual trip. Master Huynh had listened to Bao's description of the symptoms that had developed slowly over the past few months—paleness, lethargy, and chills—and put it down to a case of travel exhaustion. But the physician had not been there to see the transparent quality of Khoa's skin or the dazed look in his eyes.

As Bao bid the men goodbye, he saw a small woman hurrying toward him. It was Khoa's sister, Cô Ha, who was a feminine copy of the man, as though living together for forty years had turned them into each other. But her usually cheerful face was stricken with panic today.

"Bao, please come with me now!" she cried.

"What happened?" Bao asked, alarmed.

Sudden shouts rang out up and down the market. Chickens ran and children shouted as a short, husky man came into view, staggering drunkenly through the market and upending crates of fish and vegetables. It was Khoa, clutching a basket of milk fruit, his ashen face

covered with bright scarlet blood. He crumpled to his knees as people backed away, screaming, the basket crashing to the ground. One of the milk fruits rolled to Bao's feet, drenched in the man's blood.

"He's got the bloodpox!" someone screamed.

"Cover your noses and mouths! He'll get you sick if you breathe in his air!"

Men grabbed their sons and ran. A woman fainted, and several vendors jumped over her body in their haste to flee, while an elderly lady ushered her grandchildren away.

Bao stopped one of them, a tall boy of thirteen or so, and pressed a coin into his palm. "Run for Master Huynh. Tell him to come here right away," he said, and the boy took off at once. Bao pushed gently past the weeping Cô Ha toward Khoa, but Ông Hung grabbed his arm.

"Are you crazy? If it's bloodpox, you'll die soon. This is not worth your life!"

"Someone has to help him," Bao said firmly, but he tore off a good chunk of his tunic and wrapped it securely over his nose and mouth. He rushed over to Khoa, who lay flat on his back. Blood flowed freely from every opening in the man's face, including—to Bao's horror—both of his ears and the tear ducts of his eyes. The man gagged, as though blood was coming up his throat, and Bao quickly turned him onto his side so that it wouldn't choke him. He tore some more cloth from his tunic—one of only two good ones he owned—and tried to stem the bleeding from Khoa's eyes and nose, but it was soon clear that he might as well try to stop the river from flowing. He had never witnessed internal bleeding to such a violent degree.

As he murmured soothing words and wiped the man's face, Bao's mind raced like frantic fingers turning the pages of a book. For years, he had cared for the river market people and had seen many different

illnesses, but whatever Khoa had was worlds away from anything he had ever experienced. *Bloodpox*, he thought, his heart thundering. *A rare disease that began in the south twenty years ago, before I was even born. The patient experiences uncontrolled bleeding from all orifices.* There had been isolated cases here and there, enough for Bao to have learned about it from Master Huynh, but never one so close to home. He prayed that the physician would come soon, for this was far beyond his training.

“Breathe in and out slowly,” Bao said, trying to calm Khoa down, but it was clear that the blood was blocking his airways. “Master Huynh will be here soon.”

Two years ago, a former colleague of Master Huynh’s had come to visit. They had talked about the many fascinating cases they had come across while serving as court physicians to the king of the Sacred Grasslands. Bloodpox had come up in conversation, Bao remembered, for it had been the first time he had ever heard of it. The disease was thought to have come from overseas, since many foreign merchants and sailors docked their ships in the Gulf of Talon, the southernmost coast of Feng Lu. But whether there was actual proof of that, or the belief stemmed from prejudice against outsiders, Bao didn’t know.

What are the chances that it came all the way up here? he thought, gazing down at Khoa.

“He goes south so often,” Cô Ha wept. “He must have caught it from someone while he was bringing the last load of milk fruit home. Oh, what will I do if he dies? I’ll be all alone.”

“Don’t think like that,” Bao urged her, though the futility of trying to stop Khoa’s bleeding was obvious. A powerful smell of rot and damp earth lingered beneath the sharp iron scent of the blood. This man needed medicine beyond anything Master Huynh had in his stores.

Bao rubbed Khoa's back and continued murmuring reassurances, not knowing if they were true, but hearing his voice seemed to calm the poor man. Khoa lay motionlessly, his chest rising and falling with his labored breathing as the blood drained from his eyes, ears, and nose. "Stay back," Bao warned Cô Ha, but the woman seemed to be beyond fear.

She knelt beside her brother, clutching at him helplessly. "He's felt poorly for months, but never so bad as this. I didn't know how sick he was," she sobbed. "Just the other day, he complained about wanting his pipe—he always said it made him feel well—and I mocked him for being dependent on it. We haven't any extra money, or else he would be smoking."

"You couldn't have known," Bao reassured her. "What does he smoke?"

"I don't know. Anything he can get his hands on."

But before Bao could question her further, Khoa went limp like a boneless fish. His chest stopped rising and falling, and his eyes stared sightlessly as Cô Ha threw herself upon him, crying as though her heart would break. Bao backed away, aching at the sight of her devastation.

He heard the sound of running feet and looked up, his eyes wet, to see Master Huynh and the boy who had summoned him. The physician's fleshy face was damp with sweat as he gently extricated Cô Ha from her brother. He set his medicine bag on the ground, utterly useless now, and wrapped a clean cloth around his nose and mouth before bending to examine the dead man.

"I couldn't do anything for him," Bao said softly, and Master Huynh's gaze met his.

"This isn't your fault, son," the physician said, closing the dead man's eyes with a gentle hand. "Not much can be done when bloodpox takes

hold.”

“So it is bloodpox?”

“Nothing else causes bleeding to this degree. The ears are the tell-tale sign,” Master Huynh explained. “There was only one way this could have ended for the poor man.”

“Then there is no cure?” Bao asked.

The physician shook his head grimly. “My colleague tells me there is a treatment they’ve studied in the south, but the poppy plant from which it is derived is illegal now.”

“The same plant they used to make black spice?” Bao asked, and Master Huynh nodded. But before Bao could ask more questions, Cô Ha let out a piercing wail and rocked back and forth on her heels, and Bao put his arms around her. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered, wanting to weep with the poor woman. He knew what it was to be all alone in the world.

Master Huynh was still examining Khoa. “My colleague tells me there is some argument over whether bloodpox is contagious or not,” he said. “Just the same, both you and this woman ought to have a healing tonic to strengthen your body’s defenses. I’ll make it myself.”

In the heat of the moment, Bao hadn’t spared much thought for his own health. He had taken what little precaution he could and covered his nose and mouth. But if the bloodpox was as terrible as people feared, and Bao got sick and died, who would grieve for him? He had no sister like Khoa, no wife and son like Master Huynh. The people with whom he chatted at market would feel sad, and then forget him. The physician would find another apprentice to replace him. Bao made no impact in the world; he had not a single person.

That isn’t entirely true, he reminded himself.

There *was* one person, but she did not know of his love. And if Bao

did fall sick by some unlucky turn of fate, perhaps he ought to tell her how he felt about her at last. He had no hope of winning her. Her heart and her hand had been claimed by someone else, but at least by speaking his truth, he might leave a piece of himself behind on this earth. Perhaps the girl he loved would not forget him, even when she did marry another.

I'll tell her, Bao resolved. It's time.

3

A few days later, Lan went downstairs to find a cool room in which to do her needlework when the sound of raucous cheering distracted her. The Vu family home stood two levels high, with three interconnected buildings around a central gated courtyard. It was in this courtyard that she found her father and uncles sitting in the shade of the mango trees, drinking rice wine and playing a game that involved stone figurines and much shouting. She watched them bend intently over the board, and then one of her uncles threw up his hands in triumph and provoked a general uproar. Lan shook her head, bemused.

“Ah, Lan,” said Minister Vu, looking up at his only daughter. “Are we being too noisy?”

“It sounded like someone was fighting out here.” She opened her mother’s silk sunshade and held it over her head, squinting in the hot sun. “You’re not losing again, are you, Ba?”

The men laughed and Minister Vu pretended to look hurt. “What do you mean, *again*?” He was in his early sixties and still looked every bit as



stately and dignified as he had in his younger days, when he had served as a royal official. Even at home, he insisted on formal clothing similar to what he had worn at court: a navy silk overdress with gold piping at the collar and loose matching trousers. But the laugh lines around his eyes and mouth betrayed his sense of humor. "What are you doing outside when your mother wants you to protect your skin?"

"I won't stay long. Where is Mama?"

"She went to temple with your aunties, to pray for Bà Danh's grandson."

Lan nodded, knowing how sick the child had been. "Is he getting any better?"

"I believe so, but Master Huynh can tell you himself. He should be here any minute."

Second Uncle raised an eyebrow. "Since when is a busy physician able to take time off?"

"He's not here on a social call. He wants to get my opinion on something," Minister Vu said. "And Bao can always fill in for him, if need be. A most capable young man, that apprentice of Huynh's. Only nineteen and as hardworking and honest as you could wish."

Third Uncle sniffed. "He *should* be hardworking; he's a no-name orphan without family or connections. It was good of the physician to take him in when he already has a son."

Lan's heart picked up, as it always did at any mention of Tam. "Will Madam Huynh and Tam accompany Master Huynh, Ba? Should I have the servants prepare tea?"

Minister Vu smiled. "That's a good idea. She won't be coming, but Tam might, and I'm sure Master Huynh would enjoy some refreshment."

"Why are these Huynhs taking so long to choose a wedding date?" Second Uncle asked. "Lan and Tam have been intended for each other

since birth. What are they waiting for?"

"Perhaps they've changed their minds," Third Uncle said darkly. "Did they ever truly mean to make a proposal, brother? Or were they just trying to win your favor?"

"Huynh is just as high in His Majesty's esteem as I am and has no need to win my favor," Minister Vu said. "It's Tam who is being picky about the fortune-teller's chosen dates."

Third Uncle snorted. "What does a boy of twenty care about the right date? Most of them like to hurry things along when they have an intended bride."

Lan averted her eyes, her cheeks hot at their implication. Tam played her music every night, and if that wasn't a sign of devotion, she didn't know what was. But her uncle had a point: if Tam wanted so much to marry her, why put off choosing a date? She loved being treated like a princess, but she wanted something *real*.

She excused herself to order the tea, and as soon as she had done so, she heard her father's voice raised in greeting and Master Huynh's gravelly response. *Today has to be the day*, she thought, straining her ears for Tam's voice. *He has come to tell me when we will be wed*. She longed to go back out, but decided to let him come to her. Setting her sunshade in the corridor, she went into the sitting room, an elegant chamber filled with ornate woodwork and painted scrolls Lady Vu had inherited from her parents. Lan sat on a rosewood chair and listened as Tam's footsteps approached. She smoothed the skirt of her dusty pink silk overdress and tried to slow her breathing. She wished she'd had time to check her appearance first.

A young man appeared in the doorway, so tall that he had to duck his head as he came in. "Good afternoon," he said, bowing, and it was all Lan could do to return the greeting politely, for it was not a passionate,

shining-eyed Tam after all. It was only Bao, Master Huynh's apprentice, dressed in a plain gray tunic and dark pants with his work-roughened hands folded before him.

Lan struggled to hide her disappointment. "What a surprise," she said. She couldn't recall the last time Bao had spoken to her of his own volition. "Won't you sit down? I've ordered tea."

"Thank you." Bao nearly overturned a chair in his haste to take it, and as he sat, his long limbs knocked the table askew. He attempted to pull it back into position, but did so a bit too hard, and Lan's needlework slid off the polished surface, tumbling in an untidy heap. "I'm so sorry," he said, banging his head soundly on the table while retrieving her needlework.

"That's quite all right," Lan said, amused. "I hope you've been well?"

"Yes, thank you." His fingers tapped an embarrassed rhythm on the table as he stared at the wall behind her head. "And . . . and you, Miss Vu?"

"I am well, thank you." The silence dragged on and Lan searched for something to say, but she knew they hadn't anything in common, except for having played together a few times as children. Her mother had always had aches and pains of an uncertain nature, and when Master Huynh came to attend to her, he would often bring Bao and Tam. Tam, who was light on his feet and quick with a smile, would easily join in on the fun with Lan and her brothers. But Bao, she remembered, had always been shy and retiring and had to be encouraged to join in.

Now, as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat, looking like an overgrown colt with his gangly arms and legs, Lan was surprised to find how much he had grown up. She still saw him from time to time, but had never bothered to look closely, not with bright, careless, handsome Tam around. It was a shame Bao was so quiet and uninteresting, she thought,

for he had a face she rather liked and supposed many girls would find attractive, with a long nose, a thoughtful, thin-lipped mouth, and deep-set eyes that always looked a bit sad.

Lan opened her mouth to say something about the weather, out of desperation, when the tea tray came in. Gladly, she poured Bao a cup, hoping he wouldn't break the fragile porcelain. Their fingers touched when he took it, and he jerked backward, wincing as the hot tea splashed onto his leg. She hid a smile, wondering what on earth her father saw in Bao to praise him so.

"It's a hot day. It must have been an uncomfortable carriage ride for the three of you. You, Master Huynh, and Tam," she added, when Bao gave her a puzzled look.

"Unfortunately, Tam couldn't come today," he answered, and Lan felt the now-familiar swoop of disappointment in her belly. "He left this morning to go to his uncle and won't return until tonight. But he asked me to send you his apologies and regards."

His apologies and regards. Lan's fingers clenched on her teacup, her chest tight with anxiety. Perhaps Bao would not be the one to break her mother's porcelain after all. *All of these excuses. All of this putting off the wedding and coming to me only under cover of night.*

"He also sends you this." Bao gave her a folded message, which she tucked away to read later—or throw to the mercy of the river, whichever she felt like doing at the time.

Lan took a deep breath. "Tell me," she said, grasping for something, *anything* to distract her from this sinking feeling, "how has work been for you?"

At once, Bao's whole demeanor changed. He sat up straight, his eyes bright and alert, and began to talk very fast about what he was studying and someone named Khoa who had died the other day. Lan tried her

best to listen and to keep her eyes on his face, but her mind had already drifted back to the mystery of Tam. Bao must have sensed her disinterest, for he fell silent.

"I'm sorry to hear about Khoa," she said quickly. "Did he have any family?"

"Yes. A sister, who is now alone in the world." Bao set his teacup on the table and put his hands gently around it, like cradling a baby bird. "It's just like you to think about that."

"What do you mean?" she asked, startled.

"You're kind. You worry about other people." His eyes met hers at last, so earnest that Lan felt a stab of guilt for not listening more carefully about Khoa. "I remember years ago, when Tam and your brothers tried to leave me out of their games, you would insist that I play, too."

She chuckled. "I was always frustrated with you for hanging back. I'm surprised you still remember that."

"Of course. I always will." He looked down at his cup, the tips of his ears bright pink.

"Do you remember," Lan said suddenly, "how my grandmother goaded us to climb that tree in the courtyard? Tam and my brothers were already in the highest branches, but you and I hesitated. Bà nội asked if we were going to let them tease us like that—"

"Or show them that we were just as brave. She promised not to tell your mother if we did." Bao's smile lit up his whole face like sunshine, but it disappeared as quickly as it had come. Lan found herself wanting to see it again.

"I don't think we've spoken in years, you and I," she said slowly. "You're often here with Master Huynh, tending to my mother, but you've never so much as looked at me. Why did you come in here today? It couldn't have been just to deliver Tam's note."

Bao blinked down at the table, seemingly at a loss for words, but he was spared by the appearance of Minister Vu and Master Huynh. The men joined them at the table without breaking stride in their conversation and Lan poured them tea, thinking proudly how well dressed and distinguished her father looked compared to portly, weak-chinned Master Huynh.

“I do wonder how these explosives will change our military tactics,” the physician was saying. “It doesn’t seem fair to have a weapon that will blow a man up before he’s had a chance to fight back, does it? But perhaps I’m a bit old-fashioned in my views. Everyone else seems to wholeheartedly support Lord Nguyen and his ferocious new weapon.”

“When it comes to war, my friend, survival is more important than fairness,” Minister Vu returned. He accepted his teacup from Lan. “You may leave us if you wish, my dear. I want to catch up on the news with Master Huynh and Bao.”

“I’d like to stay, Ba,” Lan said eagerly. It was rare that she had an opportunity to listen in on her father’s discussions. Her mother hated anything to do with *men’s talk* and had forbidden Lan to soil her gentle mind with war and politics . . . however much Lan longed to do so.

“Do as you like,” her father said indulgently.

“You mentioned Lord Nguyen,” Lan said, recognizing the name of the nobleman who had been one of her father’s closest friends at court. “Isn’t he getting married soon?”

Minister Vu nodded. “The lady’s family is of high rank and close to Empress Jade. They’re hoping that this union between a lady of the Great Forest and a nobleman of the Sacred Grasslands will further strengthen relations between our two kingdoms.”

“Lord Nguyen’s explosives finally work?” Bao asked.

“Yes. After years of developing and testing, he has made yet another

modern military advancement,” Minister Vu said proudly. “My old friend is a credit to the Sacred Grasslands. In fact, he’s held in such high regard that the Gray City has made several overtures of friendship, all of which he has rejected. He’s too faithful to our king.”

Bao listened with rapt attention. “The Gray City wants him as an ally? Because they want his explosives to help fend off the coming war?”

“There’s a war coming?” Lan repeated, alarmed. She blushed when they all looked at her. All she knew of the Gray City was what she’d heard from snippets of her brothers’ conversation: that it was a walled stronghold at the southernmost edge of the Sacred Grasslands, that it was on the coast, and that they had family who didn’t live far from it. “Will our relatives there be safe?”

Minister Vu patted her hand. “Quite safe. Our king and Empress Jade take issue with the Gray City alone, not with ordinary, respectable citizens.”

Lan nodded, wishing she knew more about the conflict. She had fought tooth and nail to sit in on some of her brothers’ history and geography lessons, and her grandmother had supported her desire to learn. But as soon as Bà nội had died last year, Lady Vu had put a stop to it. “Please forgive my ignorance,” she said, embarrassed, “but what has the Gray City done to offend?”

Master Huynh hid a smirk, but Bao leaned forward and spoke, to Lan’s surprise. “The Gray City is in the Unclaimed Lands, the territory between us and Dagovad,” he said. “We share ownership of it, but now the Gray City wants to become its own kingdom.”

“And our king doesn’t like this?” Lan guessed.

“Not one bit,” her father said. “The Gray City has been flouting His Majesty’s authority for years. They’re famous for making a drug called black spice, derived from the poppy flower. Our king and other rulers of

Feng Lu declared it illegal years ago and even burned the poppy fields outside the city, but somehow the Gray City has continued to produce and sell it.”

“They’re not afraid of anything,” Bao said, and Lan glanced at him, wondering if she was imagining the admiration in his voice. He turned to Master Huynh. “Sir, when Khoa died of the bloodpox, you said there was a possible treatment, one that is made from that same poppy plant.”

“Not that exact plant, but a derivative,” the physician said. “Rumor has it that before the poppy fields burned, the Gray City salvaged parts of the plant and cross-bred it with another flower, creating a new plant from which a powerful medicine might be extracted. It would be a fascinating area of study if it didn’t break the laws of four kingdoms of Feng Lu.”

“Illegal or not, could it have saved Khoa’s life?” Bao asked.

Master Huynh shrugged. “I don’t know enough to tell you. I’ve never seen such violent symptoms as the ones he had. Excessive bleeding from the nose, mouth, and ears.”

Lan leaned forward, horrified and intrigued, but Minister Vu gave her a swift glance and said, “This isn’t a fit conversation for young ladies’ ears, Huynh, and I fear what my wife would say if she knew Lan was listening. Perhaps it’s time my daughter went upstairs.”

Lan bit her lip, longing to argue that women saw more blood in their lifetimes than men ever would, but she knew it would be disrespectful to contradict her father. “All right, then,” she said reluctantly. “I’ll go and let you get back to your discussion.”

“My apologies for such an unpleasant topic, my dear,” Master Huynh said mildly. “We’ll let you get back to your sewing. And by the way, Tam hopes to call on you soon.”

“Does he?” she asked, trying not to sound too eager, but she knew

she wasn't fooling anyone from the significant look her father exchanged with Master Huynh.

"He's been busy studying with his uncle and playing the flute and doing whatever it is that fills his hours, but you can expect a visit not long from now," the physician promised.

"Thank you, sir," Lan said gratefully, and got up to go with a much lighter heart.

Bao jumped to his feet as she passed him. The sudden movement startled them both, and she grabbed his shoulder for balance as he mumbled a clumsy apology. Beneath his tunic, his arm was solid and strong. She had never stood so close to him, not since they were little, and she realized now just how tall he was. She barely came up to his shoulder. "It was nice to see you again, Miss Vu," he said, his fingers resuming their nervous tapping.

"Good day to you." Lan let go of him hastily and hurried out of the room. Upstairs, she unfolded the message from Tam with hungry fingers, now feeling much more disposed to read it.


My dear Lan, he wrote, I write to let you and your parents know to expect a visit from my mother tomorrow. I regret that I will not be able to come with her due to business . . .

Lan's stomach lurched despite Master Huynh's reassurances. She skimmed the rest of the note, but there was no mention of when Tam *would* come. She crumpled the message, hurt by its impersonal tone, as though addressing an acquaintance who did not matter much. But she told herself, desperately, that Tam might have written in such a guarded manner because he feared Bao would be nosy and read it before delivering it to her. Yes, that had to be it.

She reminded herself, yet again, that Tam had come every night for weeks to play the song he had written for her. He loved her, and his true

love letter was in his beautiful music.

Still, she couldn't help the tears that spilled down her cheeks. She would have happily traded an entire year's worth of moonlit music to have Tam with her in person, where he belonged, and not in a boat far beneath her window.



In the two days since having tea at Minister Vu's house, Bao had gone over every look and every word from Lan at least a hundred times in his head. He cursed the absurd flutter that took over his brain and body every time they were in a room together. His arms felt too long, his conversation too clumsy, and his manners too unrefined, and every clever, witty thing he meant to say would fly right out of his head. For years, it had been easier to pretend she didn't exist, when he was aware of every breath she took. To avert his eyes, when all he wanted to do was look at her. To speak to everyone else, when she was the one he wanted to talk to.

And she had noticed.

"You've never so much as looked at me," she had told him at tea.

She had seen him, and perhaps she had thought he was ignoring her because he was stuck-up, or he didn't care, or he disliked her. But even if she knew the truth, it wouldn't matter: she was meant for another. *You're a mess, Bao*, he told himself.

“Why are you scowling?” Madam Huynh demanded. “I realize that bringing me to the Vu home is no pleasure of yours, but you needn’t show it.”

Bao jolted back to the present: his hands on the reins of the horse pulling the covered carriage, his eyes on the road, and his body sitting—most unfortunately—next to the physician’s wife. “I’m happy to take you to see Lady Vu. I have to go there myself, for Master Huynh charged me with delivering medicine.” He felt the hatred in her gaze like a splatter of hot oil.

“Impertinent and ungrateful,” she muttered. “The only reason you’re still working for my husband is because of *my* generosity. *I* let you live in my house and eat my food. I could have had him throw you on the streets years ago, but I didn’t.”

He shut out the woman’s nagging voice. It was easy, since he had been doing it for eight years, ever since he had come to live with the Huynhs. All he had to do was call up a pretty melody, perhaps one of the ones Tam played on the flute, and pretend to be alone. Madam Huynh’s words had hurt more when he was little, but at almost twenty, he had learned to spare himself the pain by becoming a wall. *Wall*, after all, was her favorite insult for him, with his long lanky frame and wide shoulders, and he liked the idea of twisting it into a shield against her.

Bao knew he had earned his place through hard work and relentless study. Master Huynh was a kind teacher, but he couldn’t always be around to deflect his wife’s abuse. She wasn’t a noblewoman like Lady Vu, but she had been born to one of the wealthiest families in the Sacred Grasslands, one that had been esteemed by the Emperors of Feng Lu when the continent was still an empire. Marrying her had elevated Master Huynh, a low-born scholar, to court physician, and though he had long since retired from the king’s service, his wife still

ruled his household.

I'm the only decision he ever made without her approval, Bao thought.

That was why she hated him—that, and the fact that rich people like her and her precious son, Tam, believed that a person's birth determined their worth. Tam had always resented the orphan his father had brought home like a stray dog. Better blood flowed in him and his mother; a penniless orphan like Bao was no more important than the dirt beneath their feet.

But Bao reminded himself that not everyone thought that way. Minister Vu was not just rich, but also highborn, and he had always been kind to Bao. And as for his pretty daughter . . . Bao had never seen Lan treat anyone with less than courtesy or civility, from her father's guests to the lowliest servants, and she had spoken to Bao like a human being at tea. Like an equal. The thought of her warmed him in the face of Madam Huynh's coldness.

He pulled the carriage to a stop in front of the wooden gate carved with the Vu emblem: a circle of *hoa mai* around a meadowlark, a symbol of the family's pride in their Grasslands roots. Bao wondered what it was like to belong to a clan like that.

"Well, go on and help me down," Madam Huynh snapped.

Bao obeyed, trying not to grimace as her cloying perfume overpowered his nostrils. As a servant escorted them through the courtyard, Bao checked to make sure he had the packet for Lady Vu. It was only a simple herbal tea, but Bao knew that Master Huynh had to give her something. She was terrified of illness and was constantly convinced she had caught some horrible disease or another. If she had been near Khoa that day in the market, Bao thought wryly, she would be on her "deathbed" right now—not walking around like Bao, after a dose of snake's-blood tonic.

They found Lady Vu in the sitting room, looking fresh and elegant in her pink-and-gold *ao dai* with mother-of-pearl clasps at the double collar. Though many people considered Madam Huynh to be a beauty, Bao liked Lady Vu's face much more—perhaps because she shared her wide, dancing eyes and rounded, dimpled cheeks with her daughter, Lan.

The two women exchanged warm greetings. "Please forgive my daughter's tardiness," Lady Vu said, glancing toward the doorway. "Today marks one year since my husband's mother died, and Lan wished to spend a bit more time in prayer. She was very close to her grandmother."

"That loving girl of yours must take all the time she needs, then," Madam Huynh said in a sweet, breathy voice reserved for people she regarded as equals. "What a treasure she is."

"As is your Tam," Lady Vu said politely, to which the physician's wife smiled, though lines of tightness formed around her eyes. Lady Vu raised her eyebrows at Bao, and he quickly handed over the packet of tea. "Please thank Master Huynh for me. You may leave us now."

The women continued conversing without a second glance at him. Bao left, torn between disappointment at not seeing Lan and relief that she hadn't witnessed her mother dismissing him like a servant. On the day he had come for tea, he had been so ready to tell Lan that he loved her, but his resolve had wavered. After all, he was as strong as a horse, and it was clear that he had not contracted Khoa's bloodpox. *I should still tell her*, he thought. *A healer's health is never certain.*

And there were other things he had to say, too . . . truths she deserved to know.

Bao lingered in the corridor, searching for an inconspicuous place to wait, when he heard her soft voice coming from a nearby room—the

family shrine.

“Hieu is growing fast,” she was saying. “He’s the biggest of all my nephews, and he has your sweet tooth. He loves *chè ba mau* because of the colors of the bean paste. How I wish you were here to see him, Bà nội.” Her voice cracked, and Bao felt a pang at the love and longing in it. He crept past the door, hoping to make it out to the courtyard without her seeing.

“Bao?”

He froze as Lan appeared in the doorway, blinking away tears. He reached into his pocket for a handkerchief, but his fingers shook so much that he ended up dropping it on the floor. He knelt to retrieve it, cursing his awkwardness, and held it up to her. “It’s still clean on this side.”

Lan accepted it and dabbed at her cheeks. Her composure had returned, and so had her expression of polite disappointment whenever she looked at him. Bao bowed his head, knowing she had hoped, as always, that he was someone else. “Madam Huynh is with my mother?”

“Yes, I drove her here. I was bringing your mother medicine.”

“I suppose the two of you came alone,” she said. It wasn’t a question, but Bao nodded anyway, and she sighed. “I presume Tam is still with his uncle? At the rate he’s been studying, he’ll be every bit as good a court minister as my father was.”

Bao looked at her downcast face, scrambling for something to say that would comfort her. “The villagers are worried about bloodpox spreading.” The moment he said it, he felt like kicking himself, knowing that Minister Vu didn’t want Lan hearing about such things. But Lan was looking at him, puzzled, and it was too late to take it back. “Master Huynh says that there is a lot of interest in that new medicine the Gray City is making. It might treat bloodpox. People want support

from important officials like Tam's uncle to persuade His Majesty to legalize the poppies again, or at least allow research to be done." *Stop babbling*, he told himself, flustered.

But Lan looked more interested than annoyed. "Has the new medicine been successful yet?"

"Master Huynh's colleague says it has. But more work needs to be done." Bao noticed her eyes darting to his fingers, which were tapping a relentless, anxious rhythm against his legs, and made an effort to be still. "Tam must be busy learning everything he can." He didn't know why he was making excuses for Tam, but the dejection on Lan's face was too much for him to bear. She deserved better—she deserved to know.

Lan smiled, her eyes sad. "Thank you for trying to make me feel better, but Tam has been like this long before the bloodpox scare. Will you take any refreshment before you go?"

Bao hesitated. He knew she was only being polite, but he couldn't shake the hope that she wanted his company, too. Perhaps if he stayed, he would finally muster enough courage to tell her what she needed to hear. But he dreaded going back to sit with Madam Huynh and Lady Vu.

"I don't want to go in there, either," Lan said, laughing when he stared at her in surprise. She understood him so well. "Would you like to sit in the courtyard? I won't keep you long. I don't want to join my mother yet, but . . . I also don't want to be alone today."

He nodded and followed her outside, his throat dry and heart hammering at the good fortune of having time alone with her. The afternoon sky was gray with the looming threat of rain, and the air hung heavy with moisture and the sweet smell of the fruit trees. They each took a chair and sat down, looking across the expanse of limestone tiles to where a

few maids were doing the day's washing. For a fleeting moment, Bao let himself imagine that this was his house, those were his servants, and Lan was his wife. She would put her small, soft hand in his, and he would tuck a tendril of hair behind her ear and listen to her talk about her day.

But the illusion vanished when he saw the faraway look in her eyes. She was thinking of someone else, someone who would never care for her the way Bao did. This was the moment of truth. He drummed his fingers on his leg, struggling to find the right words. It was now or never.

"I . . . I have something to tell you," he said haltingly. "Something to give you, in fact."

Lan closed her eyes. "Please don't say it's another note from Tam."

"It's not."

"Well, what is it, then?" Her eyes were so deep and soft that he feared looking into them for long. "If it's bad news, tell me at once."

It was too late to go back now. Bao exhaled as he pulled out two objects from his pocket: a crumpled blue silk scarf and a brooch set with dark rubies in the shape of a dragonfly.

Lan stared at them blankly. "I gave those as gifts to Tam. Why do you have them?"

"I've had them for almost a year."

"No, that can't be right. I saw Tam recently with my scarf tied around his wrist."

"While playing the flute to you, on the river."

"Of course. That's what I'm trying to tell you," she said impatiently, and then her eyes slid from the objects to Bao's face. "Please tell me he told you that. *Please* tell me that's how you know." Her voice got smaller with each word until it was a whisper.

"I found your scarf and brooch in a pile of clothing last winter," Bao

told her, miserable. Every word he spoke was a double-edged knife, hurting her, and hurting him, too, because of it. But there was no help for it; this was one wound from which he had to drain the poison for Lan's sake. "Every year, Madam Huynh has the servants discard the family's old possessions. I knew that these were gifts from you to Tam, so I asked him if the maids had discarded them by mistake. He told me he had thrown them out himself."

Lan's lips were pressed so tightly they had turned white. "Go on."

"He wasn't himself that night. He'd had an argument with his parents," Bao said quickly. Again, he was unsure why he was making excuses for someone who didn't deserve them. "They had been pressuring him about your wedding, and his studies, and how much money he was spending, and he . . . exploded. He said he was tired of them telling him what to do. He wanted to live his own life. To study what he liked, choose his own profession, and marry a woman he loved. Madam Huynh fainted, and Master Huynh . . . I've never seen him so angry."

Bao wished he could erase the memory of that night and forget the awful things Tam had shouted at his parents. That evening had been the closest Bao had ever come to hitting him, and the gods knew he'd been tempted many times before. But it had devastated him to hear Tam talk that way to the mother and father he ought to honor—to tell them, to their faces, that he wished they were dead. Bao would have given *anything* to be loved the way the Huynhs loved Tam. And to see Tam throwing that away, so careless, so arrogant . . .

Lan rose shakily to her feet. "He said he wants to marry a woman he loves. Which means he doesn't love me," she said, lips trembling. "You tell me this happened a year ago, but I have received many notes since, all written in his hand. I have been given presents. I have heard music on the river at night. And my scarf and my brooch weren't discarded

after all.”

“No,” Bao said, his heart aching. He got to his feet, too, and gazed down at her, wishing he could take her pain away. She looked so small and sad, and when she covered her eyes with her hands, it was all he could do to keep from wrapping his arms around her. He could imagine it so vividly, the way she would fit softly against him, her head tucked beneath his chin.

Lan’s hands fell away. She looked up at him, tears beading on her lashes like dew. They were standing so close together that he could have bent his head and kissed the drops away. “It was you, wasn’t it?” she whispered. “You wrote the messages to look like they came from him. You left gifts for me. And you . . . you were the boatman.”

“Master Huynh asked me to do it,” Bao said, fumbling for words. “I didn’t want to join in the lie, but I couldn’t refuse him. I needed the money he gave me.”

“So they paid you to keep up the pretense. To avoid offending my father. To save face by hiding the fact that their only son had gone against their wishes.” Lan’s voice was calm in the extreme, and for some reason that made his stomach clench even harder. “I did wonder how Tam had suddenly become so gifted at poetry. You’re quite talented, you know.”

Bao looked down at his hands, still holding her gifts. “They paid me to write messages and stall for time,” he said, wanting desperately for her to undersand. “But everything else, the poems, the gifts, the music . . . everything else came from me. Tam never *saw* you the way I did. He never valued your kindness, your generosity. Your love and respect for your family. I see you. I see *you*, Lan.” Her name slipped carelessly from his mouth, but she didn’t seem to notice.

She was shaking her head, her fists clenched at her sides.

“You deserve to be loved,” he told her, nearly dropping the brooch in his agitation. “I have loved you for half my life, though I’m not worthy of you. The thought of you kept me waking up each day and working hard, rather than giving in. I felt less alone because of you.”

Lan kept her head bowed and did not make a single sound.

Bao put the scarf and brooch on his chair, wanting so much to hold her that it was physically painful. “I wanted you to know what you have meant to me,” he said. “That’s why I did it. That’s why I helped them lie.”

She murmured something.

“What did you say?” he asked anxiously, leaning forward.

At last, Lan stared up at him with wet, red-rimmed eyes. And then she slapped him across the face with all of her strength. “I said, get out of my sight!” she screamed.



I have never heard Bao talk so much before.

That was the nonsensical thought that ran through Lan's mind as Bao told her, his face red with shame, that Tam had never loved her back. She listened, feeling disoriented, as though *this* were the dream and the nights of music had been the reality. But as her eyes returned to the gifts she had given to Tam along with her heart, she began to understand, with a cold sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach, that she had been wrong. So, so wrong.

Tam had not written her the love song.

Tam had not played her such beautiful music.

Tam had not bothered to come and see her.

He would rather defy his parents than marry her, and he had even thrown her brooch away. She remembered, with painful clarity, the day she had bought it for him at market. The woman who had been selling unusual pieces of jewelry had explained to Lan that they were heart-jewels, a custom from her mountain village: a girl would give one

to her true love as a token of endless devotion, and once bestowed, it should never be given back for fear of bad luck. She had beamed when Lan selected the dragonfly, saying, “Be sure you choose the right man.”

And Lan had failed to do that.

She stood in a nauseated daze, only half listening to Bao. Everything had been a lie. The Huynhs had tricked her and she had cultivated their false seed of hope in her mind. She was pining for someone who did not want her. She thought of all the times her relatives had teased her and expressed doubt that her wedding would ever happen. Perhaps everyone else had known . . . everyone except her. Oh, what a fool she had been.

A raging headache pounded in her temples. For the first time in her adult life, Lan wanted to kick and scream and hit something. Why, oh, why was Bao still talking? And those long fingers of his, forever tapping against his legs, seemed to drive his nervous energy right into her skull.

“Get out of my sight,” she whispered.

“What did you say?”

She looked up at him, at his mouth crooked with worry and his deep-set eyes full of pity. She was sure the servants were watching—a scandal like this would fuel their gossip for months. She didn’t care. All she knew was that the young man looking at her was not the one she wanted. He was only a messenger, but his message had shattered her heart.

Lan hauled back and slapped him across the face. “I said, get out of my sight!”

Bao pressed a hand over his reddening cheek. He looked so stunned that she might have regretted it if she hadn’t felt like breaking a chair with her bare hands just then.

“You dare make a proposition to me at a time like this?” she shouted.

“Not a proposition,” he protested, still holding his face. “I wanted to tell you the truth, because you deserved to hear it. And I wanted you to know why I went along with it.”

“I don’t care why!” Lan yelled, hearing gasps from the maids across the courtyard. She knew that later, when they described this scene to all of their friends, she would be painted as the villain and Bao as the wronged suitor and that made her even angrier. She felt herself unraveling before him like a spool of discarded thread. “You’ve made a fool out of me.”

“Please, I never wanted to . . .”

Spots danced in her vision and she could barely hear him for the roaring sound in her ears. Somewhere beneath her roiling fury, she knew Tam was the true object of her fury. But it was poor, sweet Bao who had the bad luck to be here, towering over her with wide, wounded eyes like a hurt fawn’s. “Do you truly think this is a good time to confess your love?” she raged. “You, an *orphan* of no family! And I, the daughter of a royal minister! How dare you!”

Bao’s hand fell away from his face. “I thought that didn’t matter to you,” he said, his voice low and shocked. “You were always so kind to me.”

“I am kind to everyone,” she spat, in a low, acidic tone she hadn’t known she was capable of, “because my mother taught me well. You mean nothing to me, Bao. You never have. You’re a peasant.” She choked on the rest of her words, but she had said quite enough.

He staggered backward, his eyes full of tears, and it was so unsettling that Lan forgot her anger. She had never seen a man cry before, not even her father when Bà nội had passed away. Feeling faint, she groped for the edges of her fury. It was her only shield, and she knew that when it vanished, there would be nothing left but terrible, burning

guilt at her cruel behavior.

“Lan!” Lady Vu hurried over and threw her arms around her daughter, glaring at Bao. “We heard everything. I think you ought to leave and never show your face here again.”

“In fact,” Madam Huynh told him, her voice guttural with glee as she went to stand beside Lady Vu, “I think you should never show your face again in this town. You won’t work for my husband another minute once I’ve told him of your disgraceful conduct toward Miss Vu.”

Lan collapsed against her mother. “Oh, Mama, help me,” she said as the ground tilted beneath her. She caught sight of Bao, whose eyes had never left her. The cheek she had slapped was red, but the rest of his face was white as a funeral sheet, and the look he wore—so much like what Lan imagined her own expression to be, thinking of Tam—was more than she could bear. She buried her face into her mother’s shoulder and let the tears come, gushing out like rain.

“You fancied yourself one of my husband’s sons, didn’t you?” Madam Huynh taunted Bao. “You thought yourself on an equal footing with Tam, to even dare to desire his betrothed.”

The anger came back, sharp and hot as an iron in the fire. “Tam is not my betrothed,” Lan shrieked at the woman. “And I want *you* to leave as well, Madam Huynh.”

“Lan!” her mother cried, horrified by her uncharacteristic rudeness.

But then Bao turned and ran out of the courtyard, leaving Lan’s scarf and brooch behind, and the world disintegrated into shimmering dots. As her vision went black, Lan gave in to her devastation, her body crumpling in her mother’s arms.

Lan lay in bed in a stupor of humiliation.

Her mother had ordered everyone to leave her in peace, and in the dark and quiet, she pulled the pillows over her head, shutting out the world. But, try as she might, she couldn't shut out her thoughts. They came like pebbles, disturbing the surface of her mind with the truth she had never been able to admit: that she had imagined a Tam who did not exist.

The real Tam, on the rare occasions when he *had* bothered to visit, had never spoken of love or talked about their future. She had fallen for his charm, his wit, and his careless smile, and she had seen his parents' flattery and her parents' hope, and had filled in all the rest herself. She had wasted years fantasizing about a future that would never happen. How her cousins must have laughed to see her swanning around, smugly choosing wedding clothes and hoarding the love notes that the Huynhs had paid Bao to write her.

Bao.

Lan dug the heels of her hands into her eyes. Her shame was a knife in her stomach, and several times she sat up, heaving over her chamber pot but bringing up nothing. She had been so cruel to Bao. It wasn't his fault the Huynhs had used him to hide their son's shameful behavior. He had needed the money, and he had only wanted to make Lan happy. He *had* made her happy.

I see you, he had said. You deserve to be loved.

And she had flung his love and his lack of family in his face, as though he could help any of it. She had always been so self-satisfied, so certain she would never grow up to be as horrible as Madam Huynh . . . and in the span of five minutes, had proven that she was no better.

Years ago, she had heard her father telling her mother that he thought Madam Huynh was beating Bao. She remembered how Ba had slipped coins and sweets into the little boy's pockets at every opportunity, and

how Bà nội, too, had gone out of her way to be kind to the child. Lan had felt superior to Madam Huynh then, because her father and grandmother had taught her that a man's greatness lay not in his birth, but in who he chose to become.

And then she had called Bao a peasant to his face.

She despised herself.

All through the night, she tossed and turned and listened in the silence, though she knew she would not hear the boatman's music again. When the sun rose at last, she swallowed her self-loathing and forced herself to get out of bed. Her grandmother would *never* have let her sulk like this. She would have said, "You have done wrong yesterday, but you have a chance to do right today," and figured out a way for Lan to make amends.

And so Lan made an effort to put herself together and go down to join her family. Meals were a chaotic event in the Vu household, with three generations under one roof. Minister and Lady Vu presided at one end of the table, with their four sons, their sons' wives, and assorted grandchildren filling up the rest. Today, Lan welcomed the commotion, hoping it would shield her from attention. She went through the customary round of respectful greetings to her parents and older brothers, then took a seat beside her mother. Lady Vu touched her hand and Minister Vu gave her a loving smile, and Lan felt she could better weather the day with them beside her.

She dug her chopsticks into a bowl of sticky rice speckled with egg and listened to her brothers talk, hoping it would distract her from thoughts of Tam and Bao. Unfortunately, they appeared to be talking about bloodpox, which explained the elegant grimace on Lady Vu's face.

"The disease doesn't seem to be contagious," Phong, her eldest brother, was saying. "Master Huynh and Khoa's sister were both there

when he died, but neither of them fell ill.”

Nor did Bao. A stab of guilt lanced through Lan’s gut, and she put her chopsticks down.

“But how do you explain this other case, then?” asked Chung, the youngest of Lan’s brothers. “A man died of bloodpox, surrounded by his family and faithful manservant. Only the servant fell ill and died a month later, and everyone else survived.”

“Contagious or not, people are frightened,” Minister Vu said. “A few men from the river market came yesterday, begging me to use my influence with the king. They’re visiting all of the officials in our region, retired or not, to try and have the Gray City’s new medicine legalized. They think it could help stop bloodpox from spreading, if His Majesty approves the research.”

Chung shook his head. “It won’t happen, Ba. There’s a reason the poppy fields were burned and black spice was outlawed eight years ago. It is a dangerous and highly addictive drug, and I doubt anything else the Gray City makes would be safer.”

“But isn’t it worth a try, if people are dying such violent deaths?” Phong argued.

“I don’t trust the Gray City one bit,” Chung said. “Nor do I believe in that woman who is leading them. Do you know why her family has grown so rich and powerful over the years? Because they’re good at courting the favor of whoever happens to be in power at the time.”

Lan looked up, surprised into speaking. “The Gray City’s leader is a woman?”

Lady Vu frowned at her, but Chung answered seriously. “Mistress Vy’s family grew the Gray City from nothing,” he told Lan. “They gifted black spice to the barbarian kings who ruled over them for a century, and then to Empress Xifeng. And look what happened to them all!”

“An epidemic killed off the barbarians, not black spice,” Phong pointed out. “And as for Empress Xifeng, she was defeated in the Great War by her stepdaughter.”

Chung threw up his hands. “My point exactly. Anything having to do with Mistress Vy or the Gray City is bad luck. I think it’s because they still revere the Serpent God,” he said, and Lan leaned forward eagerly, distracted at last. Their parents had never before allowed talk of the fallen deity who had aided and abetted wicked Empress Xifeng during her reign of terror.

But before Chung could say more, Minister Vu cleared his throat. “I think we ought to talk of pleasanter things now,” he said, with a swift glance at his scowling wife.

As her brothers obediently began to discuss the weather, Lan sat poking listlessly at her food. All of this talk of the Gray City, of places and people and happenings far from home, stirred something in her that had lain dormant for a year. Since Bà nội’s death, she had shut away any lingering desire to see the world. She had closed off that side of her, focusing all of her effort on becoming a bride and making her parents proud. But that was all over now.

A deep, sinking grief settled into Lan’s core, where her love for Tam had once been . . . and yet there was a thread of an idea, too: what if this was a chance to go somewhere new at last? To fulfill the childhood hope her grandmother had encouraged? She could leave home, Tam, the Huynhs, and her terrible shame behind her, at least for a little while.

Impatiently, she waited for her brothers and their families to finish eating and leave the table. “Ba, Mama,” she said, when she and her parents were alone at last. “May I go and stay with my aunt in the south for a while? I need some time away.”

Minister and Lady Vu exchanged glances. "It isn't safe for you to travel south just now, my child," her father said gently. "My guess is that our king and Empress Jade are days away from declaring war upon the Gray City. They've rejected every royal order to stop producing black spice, and the roads are teeming with smugglers going north to sell the drug."

"But you said our relatives would be safe," Lan told him, agitated. "My aunt there—"

"She and her family are far enough away from the Gray City that I do not fear for them. But it will be risky for a young woman to travel that road. I'm sorry." Minister Vu gave her a kindly smile, but Lan knew he would not budge on this matter. "I cannot part with my daughter—unless perhaps you manage to persuade the Commander of the Great Forest to escort you."

Lan knew he was trying to make her laugh, so she forced a smile for him. The deflated hope clung to her chest like trapped air—she had wanted so badly to escape for a time.

"And we still don't understand enough about that horrid disease. Even if the roads were safe, I wouldn't want you to risk your health," Lady Vu pointed out. She placed a gentle hand on Lan's shoulder. "Poor little daughter, you've been through a difficult time."

"I blame myself," Minister Vu said. "I should have been harder on the Huynhs. I should have gone to greater lengths to find out the reason behind this delay."

"Please don't be hard on yourself, Ba. You only wanted the best for me." Lan sighed. "In any case, I plan to find Bao and apologize today. I was unkind, and I need to make amends."

Once again, her parents exchanged glances. "I'm afraid that's impossible, my love," Lady Vu said carefully. "Bao is gone for good. He took

his belongings and his boat and left yesterday.”

Lan’s stomach dropped. “Gone for good? Can this be true?” she cried. He had vanished without giving her a chance to make things right . . . but considering how awful she had been to him, she couldn’t blame him. A stitch formed in her chest, cold and tight, at the thought of him out there somewhere, despising her, while she held on to this terrible guilt forever.

“Don’t fret,” Minister Vu reassured her. “I am sure that time will soften your words.”

But Lan knew that her father didn’t understand. He hadn’t been there. He hadn’t heard her speak the most painful words she could find, eager to make Bao hurt as much as she did. He hadn’t heard her use the poisonous sentiments Madam Huynh had flung at Bao his entire life.

And when Lan went back up to her lonely, dark room, all she could think was: *Bao will never know how I regret it, and he will never forgive me.*