


Sorceress
of the
Himalayas



Sorceress of the Himalayas

K E T A K I S H R I R A M



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DEDICATION

To my family, without whose endless support and encouragement this would not have been possible.

To Ms. Head, for whose selfless contributions to *Sorceress of the Himalayas* I am grateful.

To Tom Parker, for helping me answer questions and bringing clarification to my novel.

And finally, to Holly, Katie, Sarah, and Brian—the four who willingly journeyed with Tien, and never grew tired of it.

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Foreword

Against a backdrop of the majestic Himalayas, Ketaki Shriram's first novel moves from its fairy tale beginning to quickly envelop us in a world of believable magic. It is both a realistic world where parents debate children's needs, where racial prejudice corrupts loving relationships, where loved ones die, and a magical world where a ratty brown leather book with "several rips that had been hastily mended with thin white thread" holds the key to human and magical lives. It is also a world where a young woman chooses to follow her father's sorcerer path, defying the traditions that say she must marry as her father wishes. Her forbidden love starts a saga covering generations and examining the real meaning and power of love, as her mixed-race daughter seeks the family she has never known and the book of magical spells.

Tien is accompanied on her quest by a band of magical creatures, each with its own reasons for seeking the book, and each hiding secrets that will ultimately save the world or leave it in the clutches of the dark Force forever.

Ketaki Shriram here joins the ranks of writers in the finest tradition of fantasy fiction, creating a story appealing on the personal level to anyone who has felt like an outcast, and enthralling in its sweeping creation of a world threatened by best intentions gone awry.

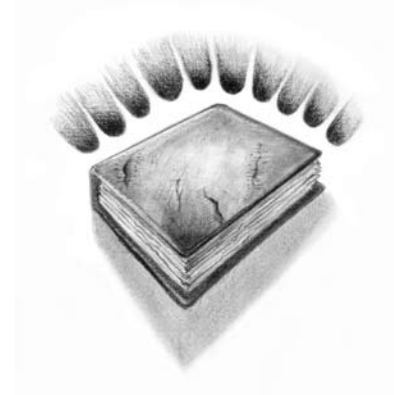
Ironically, Ketaki is a student for whom little goes wrong. *Sorceress of the Himalayas* was written when she was just thirteen; she decided soon thereafter that she would have her work published and sought me out for help in achieving those ends. Alas, I knew next to nothing about publication, but I was able to direct her to my colleague, Kerry Mohnike, who introduced Ketaki to the complex and often defeating world of finding a publisher. Ketaki has taken it from there on her own, much as Tien accepted the quest she was given and persisted despite the obstacles in her way. Confident and cheerfully determined, Ketaki makes sure she finds a path leading to her goals.

Now a junior in high school, Ketaki is revising her second novel, one very different from the world and the concerns of the Himalayan Tien, but nonetheless familiar in theme: the strength of women and the wrongs of racial discrimination. As we work together hammering out plot and motives, I find myself consistently impressed by both Ketaki's clear vision of her world and characters and her willingness to adjust that vision as she grows as a writer and refines her skills. I have no doubt that Ketaki Shriram, should she continue to pursue this path, soon will be a presence on bookshelves across the country.

—Catherine S. Head | FEBRUARY 2008

Sorceress of the Himalayas

Prologue



The Pariah

The old wooden door creaked and shuddered as the man banged against it with his large pitchfork. He waited for several moments after the loud knock, but the house behind the door remained dark and silent, bathed only by the silvery light of the stars.

“Kamsa, you old fool! We know you are hiding.” The man stepped back once more, and motioned with his free hand. Another man standing behind him, this one brandishing a sword, handed the first man an oil lantern. Holding the bright light up, the leader of the group banged on the door a second time.

It creaked open. Peering inside, the leader was able to

see the stooped and weary figure of a man in the gloom of the tiny hut.

“What is it you want?” Kamsa did not move into the light of the lantern as he spoke; instead, he seemed to cringe at the sight of the bright flame.

“To speak with you.” The leader’s tone was brusque and filled with contempt. Kamsa made to close the door, but the leader stabbed his pitchfork into the rotting wood, the forked steel spikes glimmering under the light from the lantern.

Kamsa appeared unconcerned by this violent action. Calmly stepping forward into the light, he steadily gripped the pitchfork and pulled it out of the door. Three holes remained. Kamsa frowned when he saw these, and turned his dark eyes toward the men. They shuffled backwards hurriedly, as though afraid of the man before them.

“What is it you wish to speak about?” His voice was quiet, but tight with irritation.

“Do not be impatient with us,” snarled the burly leader of the men, who was quickly regaining his confidence. “We have come to speak with you of the incident that occurred at your home last night.”

“What incident?” Kamsa’s eyes bore into the burly man’s lighter ones. He faltered for a moment, then blustered, “The-I-you know what we mean!”

The other men shouted their agreement, their calls and cries echoing throughout the silent village.

“You will wake your wives and children,” said Kamsa to the men.

“We know what happened here last night!” Another man, of considerably less size but more intelligence, stepped forward.

“It was dark magic,” said the leader. A long silence fell. Kamsa looked from man to man, the corners of his mouth twitching. When none of his fellow villagers smiled, Kamsa asked incredulously, “You truly believe I am dabbling in dark magic?”

“What else could explain why you stay in your home all the time? You have no other jobs to speak of, and your physique has changed so much!” The smaller man piped up once more, eyeing Kamsa’s lined, weary face thoughtfully.

Touching his face with his hand, Kamsa said softly, “This is not the result of dark magic...it is...”

But what it truly was, he could not be brought to say. The men waited for several moments before the leader spoke once more.

“You must leave. This has gone too far. We will no longer stand for your strange magical dabbling, dark or otherwise, in this village!”

For the first time, Kamsa’s face showed the first sign of emotion. His brows contracted, and he said in a louder tone, “I cannot leave here until my daughter has completed her education.”

“You cannot stay!” squeaked the smaller man, appearing to have lost all control. He lunged at Kamsa, who leapt out of the way with surprising agility. Holding his hands up to fend off the attacker, Kamsa said, “I will not disturb

you any more. I will have no more dialogues with you, and I will only work during the day. My only request to you is that you allow my daughter to attend school here.”

“We have nothing against your daughter,” consented the burly man. “She is welcome to attend school here, and meet our own children...but you, Kamsa...you must stay away.”

Kamsa bowed his head in agreement, and turned. Shuffling slowly back to the door of his hut, he started to close it behind him.

“Wait!” The small man had recovered himself, and called out after Kamsa.

“Yes?” Kamsa turned to face the short-tempered aggressor, his visage once more covered in shadow.

“What is it you are always working on?”

A smile crept across Kamsa’s face, and he shut the battered door carefully behind him, leaving the villagers standing on his doorstep as the sun rose majestically behind them.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, as Kamsa sat in his workshop, he failed to notice a small girl slip into the room, and sit on a stool behind him. Although outside the window she leaned upon were others of her own age playing, she remained more interested in the man hunched over his workbench across the room.

After a few moments of silence, she asked him, “Father, what are you doing?”

“What?” Kamsa stopped his work, and turned. His

eyes widened at the sight of his daughter, and his lined face broke into a smile. Pulling a cloth out from under his workbench, he quickly covered up his work, and strode to the window. Dusting his hands off, he asked Rani, “You never play with the children. Why is that?”

Rani shrugged her shoulders, her wavy black hair moving up and down. “They don’t do anything very interesting. They aren’t *different* like you.” She smiled eagerly up at her father as she said this. He laughed, and replied, “Different? What do you mean by that?”

Rani responded, “You can do things that the others can’t. Even the other men in the village don’t do the work you do. They do boring things, like chopping wood.”

Kamsa chuckled, and ruffled Rani’s hair. She turned to him, and, gathering up her courage, asked timidly, “What exactly do you do, Father? I wish you would show me.”

Kamsa looked down at his daughter and smiled.

“I can...communicate with those who have passed on.” His face glazed over as he said these words, and Kamsa removed his hand from Rani’s head. She sat up straighter, hoping he would speak more, but Kamsa seemed oblivious to her sudden attentiveness. He gazed out the window at the other children, but his mind was once more upon his spellbook.

“But how, Father? How do you speak with them?” Rani’s impatient voice seemed to bring Kamsa out of his reverie. He pointed out of the window, to the distant snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas.

“Do you see those mountains?”

Rani nodded vigorously, her eyes wide with excitement.

“At the top of the tallest peak in those mountains is a bamboo grove. I ventured there to meditate. After some time, my powers were granted.”

Rani gave a sigh, and looked out at the mountains, wishing that she could see the grove. Then her small brows contracted, and she pulled at her father’s shirt. He smiled down at her.

“What is it, my daughter?”

Rani’s voice was no longer eager; it had been lowered to a frightened whisper, and Kamsa had to kneel down to listen.

“Mother isn’t happy...she was saying she wants to leave. Doesn’t she like me?”

Kamsa paused for a moment, while his daughter waited anxiously for his reply. He ran a hand through his unruly black hair as he spoke.

“Your mother isn’t displeased with you. She is... Disappointed in me.” As he said this, Kamsa threw a fleeting glance to his worktable, now covered in the large cloth.

“But why?” Rani looked shocked that anyone could be unhappy with her father. Kamsa looked amused for a moment, but then his face grew lined with worry once more as he thought of his wife.

“She has many reasons, my child. Many reasons...displeasing family is a terrible crime, one I suppose I have committed. I hope you will not do so.”

“No, never!” The little girl’s heart seemed to beat quickly if she even thought of disobeying her father. He

smiled fondly at her, and stroked her dark hair.

“That is good.” Kamsa’s words were spoken without emotion, for his face had once more become a mask behind which his desire to complete the spellbook grew stronger with every moment. Rani looked at her father’s strange expression, wishing more than ever that she would someday possess the talents Kamsa held, which would induct her into the strange world he lived in.

AS THE YEARS PASSED and Rani grew older, Kamsa’s affection for his precious book deepened. He spent increasingly long hours in his tiny, cramped workshop, and though he scarcely dared to admit it, he understood that the book was consuming him. The things he had put within it to allure men, common men who he believed to be inferior to him, were now beginning to grasp at his heart and tug at it.

As obsessed as he was with his brilliant creation, Kamsa was not blind to that which occurred around him. His wife, dissatisfied by both his neglect of his family and his refusal to find more than occasional odd jobs, planned to return to her own village. She insisted upon taking Rani with her, but failed.

“I won’t go, Mother, I won’t!” Rani sat stubbornly on the floor of the hut, her thin brown arms crossed defiantly. Her mother shouted sharply from outside the open door, “Come! Now! Your father will not take care of you.”

“He will, he will, he loves me!” Rani shouted back angrily. Kamsa, sitting on his bench in the workshop,

listened in silence.

“You are a foolish girl,” spoke Rani’s mother harshly. “You think that lazy man sitting hidden in his workshop can provide you with what you need? A husband, a house? No! He will do none of that, and you will end up a pauper as he is!” The door slammed with a bang, leaving Rani alone in the house, illuminated by a single window.

Kamsa sat in silence in his workshop for many moments, but did not go to comfort his daughter. Was his wife correct? Would he be unable to provide Rani with the things necessary in order to lead a good life? As he returned to work on the spellbook, Kamsa promised himself that no matter what happened, he would do anything to help his daughter.

AS HIS DAUGHTER GREW into a young woman, Kamsa began to fear the worst. He had no job, and therefore would be forced to sell his spellbook in order to give Rani a dowry for her marriage. Although he did not admit it to himself, Kamsa cared more for his spellbook than for his own daughter, despite the fact that she revered, even worshipped him. In order to convince his daughter to marry, Kamsa showed Rani the spellbook.

“I am going to show you what I have been working on for all these years.” Kamsa sat at his workbench, facing Rani. His face was lined, and gray streaks ran through his hair. The young woman across from him sat listening intently, her dark eyes narrowed in concentration as he turned and lifted the spellbook into the air.

Suddenly the dim workshop was flooded with light. Rani, who had raised her hands to shield her eyes from the sudden brightness, slowly lowered them to gaze in awe at the book. It was thick, with rough, yellowing pages that had been unevenly cut. Dark brown leather with age spots and several rips that had been hastily mended with thin white thread covered the book. It was from behind this that a brilliant golden light seemed to pulsate, filling Rani with amazement and wonder.

“What is it, father?”

“The spellbook that I told you about so many years ago.” Kamsa’s voice was quiet and controlled, but he could not stop the triumph he felt from affecting his speech.

Rani watched the spellbook carefully. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she wondered whom else her father had shown the book to.

“Have you shown this to anyone else, father?”

Kamsa shook his head slowly. “No, I have not. It is a secret that I will trust no one but family with. Why do you ask this?”

Rani hesitated before replying timidly, “Haven’t you ever worried that someone might steal it?”

This newly authoritative tone irked Kamsa, who returned the spellbook to the wooden workbench, and then covered it with a cloth. The moment the book left his hands, its glow faded, plunging the room into near darkness once more. Kamsa turned to Rani, his wrinkled hands folded in his lap.

“I have put the things that allure men within it. Power,

eternal life, and wealth—it is all possible for the one who possesses the spellbook.”

Kamsa sighed, as though troubled by the words that he had just spoken. Rani frowned, trying to imagine why men would be lured by power and wealth. She was drawn from her reverie by her father’s deep voice.

“There is something I need to speak with you about.”

“Yes?” Rani’s eyes widened slightly, as though fearing what her father would say next.

Kamsa took a deep breath to steady his body, which shook with the fear of parting with the beloved book. In a constricted voice, Kamsa said, “The time has come for you to be married. As I have no job to provide you with a proper dowry, you must accompany me to the next village, where we will proceed to sell the spellbook, and secure you a dowry.”

“Why not this village?” Rani’s voice sounded even smaller than when she had questioned her father earlier.

Kamsa replied, “The men here will not buy the spellbook. They see me as a crazy fool.” Rani quickly lowered her eyes at this comment, but did not contest it.

He continued, “Once we find a buyer for the spellbook, I will find an appropriate suitor for you. With the dowry the book will bring us, we will not have trouble finding you one.”

This small speech seemed to have taken what little energy Kamsa possessed. He sank back against the workbench, and closed his eyes. Creating the spellbook had made him a man far older than his years, Kamsa thought

to himself. Soon, he would be free to rest and enjoy his life, free of all responsibility and burdens. To his surprise, Kamsa did not feel the guilt he had expected for not caring for his daughter as he had when she was young. Those memories seemed as though they had belonged to a different man; Kamsa regarded them as mere dreams or figments of his imagination, nothing more.

“Father?”

“Yes?” His voice was rasping, and he found that his eyes were barely able to make out the silhouette of Rani, even in the faint moonlight pouring through the window.

“I don’t want to be married.”

Kamsa could not believe his ears. He listened intently, but no more words were spoken; the only noise was the chirping of crickets in the still night. He asked quietly, “What do you mean?”

“I wish to go meditate in the bamboo grove, as you have done. If I can achieve what you have done, I will be content with my life. You should not have to sell the spellbook; it means too much to you.”

Shock flooded Kamsa’s body, rendering him speechless for several moments. What was his daughter saying? The words of his irate wife echoed in his ears: “*You think that lazy man sitting hidden in his workshop can provide you with what you need? A husband, a house? No! He will do none of that, and you will end up a pauper as he is!*”

Kamsa doubted himself for a moment. Had he not provided his daughter with that? Had he not offered to

throw away his life's work in order to help her? He felt anger rising within him, first a faint coil of smoke, then a blazing fire.

"You must get married to a man chosen by your family; if you do not, our society will shun you forever. There is no question." He fought to control his tongue, to stop himself from lashing out at his daughter.

"I will not marry a man you choose for me. I wish to achieve something in my life!" Her words goaded Kamsa to his feet.

"Your job in life is not to achieve things! I have proposed selling my life's work to secure you an appropriate future, and in return you reject my offer!" Kamsa's voice rose angrily.

Rani did not cower before his anger, but stood up and said in a tearful voice, "All I want is to be like you! Please, Father, give me the opportunity!"

Kamsa raised his arm as though to strike Rani; she crumpled to the ground, her hands held above her head in a weak defense. He grabbed her by the arm and shouted, "I will lock you in your room until the day you are married if necessary!" Gripping Rani's arm tightly, Kamsa dragged her across the dimly lit workshop, ignoring her stifled sobs.

Crossing the dingy hallway of their home, Kamsa pulled Rani up roughly. She cried, "Father, no!" She struggled for several moments before freeing herself from Kamsa's grip. Staggering, Rani said with wide eyes that were rapidly filling with tears, "I have told you already I will not marry.



You cannot force me to do so!" Her voice reached a hysterical pitch as she spoke the last words, enraging Kamsa further. Seizing her more firmly by the upper arm, he ignored her squeak of pain and pulled her along.

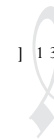
Throwing open a wooden door that led into another room with a tiny window, he pushed Rani into it. Looking around the bare room in fury, Kamsa clenched his hand tightly around the rotting wood of the old door. Ignoring the hinges' creaks and groans of protest, Kamsa slammed the door shut in his anger. Blood pounded through his head.

"You will get married, if it is the last thing I do! I did not suffer this life so that you could turn on me and defy me!" Kamsa roared angrily through the door, his voice echoing up and down the darkened hallway.

Pounding at the door, Rani shouted, "Father, please, let me out! Father!" Her cries seemed to be swallowed by the silence that filled the house. Sinking to the floor, Rani leaned against the old wooden door, the hiccupping sobs filling her body with grief.

Seconds, minutes and hours ticked by, and still Rani sat silently by the door, her dark eyes red-rimmed from crying. There were no signs of life in the house; she feared her father would not return to free her. In these moments of fear, Rani would shake the door furiously and pound it with her hands, reducing herself to tears once more. She would then sink down slowly, and curl up into as small a ball as her body would allow, as though she wished she could disappear from this world entirely.

As the sun rose after her long night of imprisonment,



Rani stood, and walked over to the window. From it, she could see the Himalayas, their snowcapped peaks shining majestically in the early morning light. Her sorrows and worries forgotten for the moment, Rani closed her eyes, and imagined the grove that she had yearned to see since she was a little girl. The bamboo seemed to rustle in her ears and the peaceful sense of pride and achievement she had always imagined engulfed her.

The sound of a woman's voice calling to her children forced Rani to open her eyes. She looked away from the mountains and down at her hands, which lay clasped upon the muddy windowsill. A thought came to Rani's mind, one so daring that she quickly forced it out. But it soon found its way back in and slowly began to entwine itself in her mind.

Rani's heart thudded fiercely inside her chest when she thought of running away from home. No one in her village had ever dreamed of doing such a thing, she told herself. It was the first time she had thought of committing such an act, but as Rani looked at her bleak surroundings, she knew that she could not allow her father to follow society's laws to arrange a marriage for her. The very idea repulsed Rani.

Feeling the pace of her heart quicken again, Rani wondered if she was strong enough to flee from her father in order to achieve what she truly wanted. As she hesitated, she thought of how her father had controlled her during her childhood, and how she had blindly obeyed him without question...but how could she have known



that the man she revered was bound by the shackles of society, and would therefore never let her out of the cage she had been so cruelly locked in?

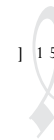
Rani felt a new emotion surge through her legs, propelling her onto the windowsill itself: anger at her father for deceiving her with his lies of his superiority to other men.

She had only respected him because she had believed that her father's magic made him impervious to the worries that other villagers seemed to struggle with. Rani wondered if her father's magic had ever truly freed him from the dark life he was now living. Rani felt her spine prickle as she thought once more of attaining her father's abilities, but the prickle was one of fear, not excitement. Rani ignored this sudden fear of magic—she knew that she would not succumb to it the way her father had.

From her perch on the windowsill, the Himalayas seemed even closer. Rani looked back one more time at the room, biting her lip, but then her father's words rang through her brain: "*I did not suffer this life so that you could turn on me and defy me!*"

Kamsa's words cut through Rani's heart like a knife. She felt angrier than ever that her father, a man consumed by his own magic, had dared tell her that she could not do all that he had done and more. The desire to escape grew so strong that Rani could no longer resist it.

Without looking back, Rani climbed out of her prison, and began to run towards the distant mountain peaks, her heart beating like a drum within her chest.



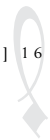
AS THE DAY WORE ON, however, Rani felt as though her journey would never end. She had not thought to bring food or water with her, and was dreadfully thirsty. Her feet lagged, and as the sun slowly set behind her, Rani felt for the first time that she was only an unimportant speck in the world around her, unnoticed and unneeded.

Sitting down to rest, Rani felt she could no longer go on. She thought of what her father would do if she returned from her excursion. The thought of being locked in the windowless room again seemed horrible. This terrifying image brought her weary body to a standing position once more, and she continued walking.

AS THE SUN SLOWLY bade goodbye to the golden cornfields and began to sink behind the horizon in the distance, Rani finally reached the foothills of one of the many mountain peaks that stretched farther than her eye could see. Between Rani and the steep slope of the mountain lay only a cornfield, the golden stalks waving gently in the wind.

Emboldened by the sight of her goal, Rani strode faster through the weeds. In her haste she failed to notice a leopard crouching hidden among the stalks, its golden coat blending almost perfectly. The leopard waited for its prey to draw nearer, and then pounced on the unsuspecting Rani from behind. Her loud scream echoed ominously across the lands she had traversed alone.

The leopard ripped her thick ribbon out of her hair with its menacing claw, and her long braid came loose.

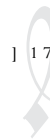


With immense effort, Rani pushed the leopard away from her, rolled away from its vicious claws, and ran across the field, her hair flying out behind her. With a ferocious roar, the leopard leapt upon Rani, knocking her to the ground. The leopard raised its massive paw, preparing to strike. She trembled beneath the beast, and raised her hand to shield her face.

In the distance, Li Shen, a Chinese general, sat astride his white horse, whose coat glowed by the light of the moon. His eyes widened at the sight of the woman and the leopard, and he murmured to the horse, which then began to canter through the cornfields, its tail streaming behind it, as fine as silk. The man drew a long sword as the horse started to gallop. He cried out, urging it on with nearly unintelligible words.

As the horse galloped past the leopard, Li Shen shouted. The beast turned its head, and was struck by the sword, across the face. It drew back with a howl, blood spattering the golden stalks. Rani rolled away from the leopard, and sat, frozen, amid the corn.

The horse had slowed now, and turned to face the leopard, the man holding his sword majestically. The leopard eyed him malevolently, blood darkening its spotted golden coat. Li Shen clicked his tongue, and his horse moved a few steps forward reluctantly. He brandished his sword. At the sight of the instrument that had drawn its blood, the leopard shrank further and further into the cornfield, until it could no longer be seen. The man waited for several moments until he was sure it was gone.



Then, dismounting from his horse, Li Shen offered his hand to Rani. She took it without hesitation, although she was frightened. Her father had always forbidden her to speak with foreign men whenever they had come to the village. Rani hoped to escape the man as soon as possible, and continue her journey alone.

Helping her up, Li Shen asked, "Why are you here? Young women seldom travel to the mountains alone."

Rani hesitated, but then replied, "I am searching for a bamboo grove."

Li Shen nodded gravely, and asked, "The sacred bamboo grove? I thought it was only a myth."

"No, it is not. My father meditated there, and I wish to do the same."

Li Shen looked around, as though expecting to see an old man. "Where is your father?"

"I have run away from home," said Rani defiantly.

After her statement a long silence followed, during which Rani stood staring at the strange man in front of her as though daring him to send her back to her prison. She felt her heart thudding against her chest as she watched him contemplate her for a moment, one of his hands rubbing his chin thoughtfully, while the other held his horse's bridle.

Li Shen was surprised by the defiance of the young woman. She had shown bravery that he had not seen from many people—including some of his own peers. Her dark eyes gazed intensely into his own, while he thought of how he could help her to achieve her goal.



"Let me escort you through the mountains. It would be a pity if you were caught in the claws of a leopard once more."

"I don't need help." Her haughty tone caused Li Shen to raise his eyebrows. She turned away from him, and began to walk briskly through the cornfield, pushing aside the tall stalks as she went. Li Shen jogged after her, his horse in tow.

"Everyone needs help at one point in their life."

Rani did not stop walking, but simply replied, "Then I plan to only have help when I am to be buried after my death."

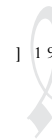
"Why are you so reluctant to accept my offer?" Li Shen asked, puzzled by her rebuffs.

The woman finally paused, and turned to look at him. Li Shen saw a flicker of fear in her eyes, and his brows furrowed in confusion. Surely this lady, with the spirit of a warrior, could not be afraid of something?

"What is it that frightens you?" He spoke gently. She looked away from him, as though unable to see him while she spoke of her weaknesses.

"My father has forbidden me to take the company of men who are not of my race."

Li Shen nodded in an understanding manner. Rani quickly looked up at him, then away again. A silence fell between them once more as they stood still among the corn. Li Shen quietly asked, "Will you continue to obey your father now that you have left your home and your life behind?"



It was Rani's turn to frown now; her lips pressed into a thin line before she spoke, forcing the words out as though she could not believe they were true.

"No. I will not have to obey him."

Li Shen smiled, and bowed low to her, his right knee pressing against the rough soil of the field. Offering his hand to her for the second time that night, Li Shen asked, "Then will you allow me to escort you through the mountains, so that no further danger or catastrophe shall befall you?"

Rani agreed. Li Shen helped her onto his horse, and led it through the cornfield towards the mountains.

AS THEY TRAVELED through the mountains, Rani and Li Shen became accustomed to one another. Rani liked Li Shen for his gentle, kind nature, and he enjoyed learning what Rani knew about the Himalayas and magic, knowledge which her father had occasionally imparted to her when she was younger.

In the year that they wove through the mountains toward the bamboo grove, Rani and Li Shen slowly began to fall in love. Although Rani was blissfully happy with Li Shen, she felt a stab deep within her heart when she thought of her father, and what he would say if he saw her with a man who was not Indian. As time passed, however, Rani's feelings of foreboding began to fade, until they had almost vanished.

Rani and Li Shen feared the discovery of their romance, and were unsure of whether to return to their



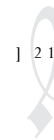
respective homes or continue their lives together. They soon realized, however, that they could not live without each other. Rani and Li Shen chose to live in the mountains forever, because they knew that their families would not approve of their love—their families would not be happy that their races had mixed.

After one year in hiding in the bamboo grove, Rani bore Li Shen's child. The couple named their beautiful daughter Tien Ming, so that she might have the power of the sacred Tien Shan Mountains, and the elegance of the great Ming dynasty. They knew that her birth in the bamboo grove would grant her the powers attributed to her name.

Despite the fact that she had a new family, Rani often thought of her father, the family she had left behind. Pangs of guilt and fear began to creep over her again, for she knew that her father might find her and punish her for what she had done. Rani, because of her child, was now an outcast in her own village.

IN THE MEANTIME, as Rani had predicted, Kamsa had been searching for her far and wide. After Rani's disappearance, Kamsa had felt as though the sun had gone from the world. He was never happy, even when working on spellbook. Kamsa often found himself turning to speak to the little girl on the stool in his workshop, only to find the seat empty, and his house unoccupied by his family.

Unable to bear life without his daughter, Kamsa meditated to Lord Ganesha to remove all obstacles from his path. Lord Ganesha obliged, and Kamsa found that his fears and



worries of what had become of his daughter melted away, leaving him only to dwell on finding his beloved child. His mind cleared, Kamsa was granted a vision by the gods.

He saw a beautiful clearing. It stood atop the mountains. Bamboo trees towered over a meditation rock at the grove's center, shielding it from outside view. He recognized it as the sacred grove where he had been granted his magical powers through meditation. Under the cover of the trees was a primitive hut, made out of bamboo. Within the hut, Kamsa saw his daughter, glowing with happiness and pride. Next to her stood a man of Chinese origin, his dark eyes fixated upon Rani adoringly. She held a small bundle of blankets in her arms tenderly, from among which Kamsa could see a small tuft of black hair, and a tiny hand waving in the air.

In an instant, it was clear to Kamsa—his daughter had conceived a child with a man who was not of their race, instantly making her an outcast among her own people, a fate Kamsa had never wanted for Rani. With worry and anger clouding both his mind and judgment, Kamsa vowed to separate his daughter and the infidel who had fathered the baby girl in the hope that Rani would forget the mistake she had made, and repent. Kamsa took the long, familiar path to the grove where he had meditated many years ago.

THROWING OPEN THE door to the hut, Kamsa grabbed Rani by the hair. Dragging her outside to the central clearing, he threw her to the ground.



“What have you done?” Kamsa’s voice was harsh with anger.

“Father, please, try and understand. I—” Rani’s voice was filled with fear and sadness; the prick of guilt that had once filled her heart had now returned.

“You have betrayed your people, your race by having a child with this man!” From within his pocket, Kamsa drew a blade, and held it against Rani’s neck. She screamed, tears running down her face. To her surprise, Rani found that however much her father berated her, she did not regret the birth of her child.

“Father, no! Please, give me another chance to redeem myself!”

Kamsa raised his blade without hesitation, preparing to kill his daughter. As he brought it down, Li Shen rushed forward, and pushed the angry man’s blade away.

Kamsa’s eyes flashed.

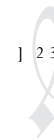
“You fool! Keep out of these family matters, or I will kill you as well!”

“Please, do not kill your daughter, sir. I beg of you, do anything but that.” Li Shen clasped his hands together in a sign of respect to Kamsa as he spoke. The three remained silent for many moments, until the baby began to wail from the hut.

Kamsa’s lips tightened.

“Show me the girl.”

Rani hurried to the hut, and soon returned with the baby. Kamsa looked down at the child. It would be very beautiful; there was no doubt about it. The brown skin



and almond-shaped eyes resembled Rani's own.

"She looks like us, Father."

"Looks cannot hide her mixed blood." Kamsa's words were filled with venom. Rani's eyes filled with tears of anguish, and she looked away from her father, still cradling the baby.

"Take the baby away," said Kamsa to Li Shen. "We do not want her mixed blood to blacken our name. If you ever return here, or come near my daughter, I will kill you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Li Shen took the baby girl from Rani, but the two did not dare hug in front of Kamsa. Li Shen opened his mouth as though he wished to speak, but the murderous look upon Kamsa's face silenced his tongue. Without looking back, Li Shen climbed over the protective rock wall around the grove, and vanished.

"Whether she has mixed blood or not, that child is your granddaughter," Rani said quietly.

Kamsa replied coldly, "She is no relation of mine."

Rani felt a cold sinking within her stomach as her father's words pierced her heart. Kamsa spoke again, in the same cold voice.

"You can no longer return to the village. You have dishonored me, Rani. I can no longer call you my daughter."

"If I am no longer your daughter, then why did you take me from my family?" Rani's words echoed around the empty clearing; Kamsa had exited, leaving her alone.

In the weeks that followed, Rani rid herself of all



things that connected her to her past life, such as the jewelry her father had given her. She instead turned her focus to meditating in order to achieve the magical powers she had so longed for. Unfortunately, it was not to be so. Rani's dreams had now changed, and all she could think of was her missing child and Li Shen. Her mind would not allow her to go to the realms beyond the world of men to reach the spirits, because she was tethered to the world of humans by her love for Li Shen and her child, Tien.

Rani was never seen again. In fact, it seemed as though after the loss of her family, she had simply vanished. Similarly, Kamsa never returned to his village after condemning Rani to the life of a hermit.

ON HIS WAY DOWN from the mountains, Li Shen was caught in a snowstorm. The wind whipped wildly around his face, and even as he raised his arms to protect himself and his daughter from the strange, biting wind, Li Shen knew a dangerous magical force had caught him. Instead of trying to fight, Li Shen fell to his knees, unable to see in front of him because of the snow that flew through the air. Cold flakes hit his face, and ran down his reddened cheeks like icy tears. Scooting along the ground, Li Shen ran his hands along the land in front of him, searching for something. Finally, his nearly numb fingers felt rough, wind-beaten leaves and several sturdy branches. Leaning close to the branches, he carefully moved the bundle of blankets that contained his daughter carefully between the branches. When he was sure she was secure,



Li Shen stood up, and raised his arms in defeat. The snowstorm howled, and swept Li Shen away. As quickly as it had begun, the storm and the wind vanished, leaving flurries of snow flying through the air.

Many hours later, an old woman shuffled through the snow. She frowned, the wrinkles upon her face thrown into sharp relief by the fading rays of the sun. The tracks left by the strange wind that had taken Li Shen away puzzled the woman. She bent down, and ran her finger through the snow, as if trying to feel the presence of what had been there before her.

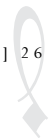
A tiny sneeze from the nearest bush startled the old woman. She straightened up, her long gray braid swinging as she did so. Her intense, deep brown eyes scanned the white landscape around her.

“Hello? Who is there?”

A wail answered her voice. The woman fell to her knees at once, and began to dig away the snow that had since weighed down the branches of the bush that Li Shen had placed his daughter in. When at last the baby’s face came into view, the Chinese woman pulled the child out of the snow. Lifting the young girl into the air, the old woman smiled.

“How did you survive that storm? Who are your parents?”

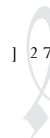
The baby gurgled joyfully in response. The woman laughed and said, “Look at me, child, and show me what you have seen in your short lifetime.” Her eyes gazed thoughtfully into the baby’s smaller ones. The woman’s eyes widened.



“So you are Li Shen’s daughter, Tien Ming..You are not from here. Those eyes, that skin...” The woman’s voice trailed off, and she looked at the child, tears filling her eyes. Drawing the child close to her, she said, “My name is Wise Woman. I will help you, Tien, because you have been wronged already in your life...and because a difficult and dangerous path lies ahead of you.”

The baby pointed to a small group of huts at the base of the mountains, to which a winding path led the way.

“Yes, that is my home...and yours too now, I suppose.” Wise Woman chuckled as she began to walk back down the mountain path, the dying rays of the sun behind her.



Chapter One



An Untimely Passing

My heart beat quickly as I peered through the gaps in the tree's large branches. There was no one on the dusty road as far as I could see. I shifted my position ever so slightly, and shielded my eyes from the bright sun that filtered through the leaves. Pushing aside the rough brown branches tentatively, I looked down onto the road once more. It remained empty.

Sinking back against the large branch that had been my most recent hideaway, I sighed. *Maybe they won't find me today*, I thought to myself.

Suddenly, a cry sounded from down the road. I jolted, and scrambled higher into the tree, my skinny brown legs

trembling with fear.

“There she is!” A boy skidded to a stop under the tree, dust rising around his dirty, ragged clothes.

Other children were surrounding the first boy now; my heart was thudding in my chest.

“Climb the tree! That’ll scare her down!” The children were encouraging the boy now. He grinned wickedly, and called up to me, “How’s the view, Darkie? We almost missed you in the shadows!”

The other children laughed cruelly, and I frantically brushed away the tears that came all too easily. I clung helplessly to the branch of the tree, watching as the boy began to climb the trunk. The others laughed and jeered from the ground.

“Come on Darkie!” The boy was mere inches away now. “We won’t hurt you...much.”

“Get away from me!” I yelled, backing away on the tree branch. The boy followed me until we were both out on the branch. It swayed dangerously under the weight of his larger, heavier body. My tormentor’s pale skin and slanted eyes glowed in the bright sunlight, contrasting with my own darker skin and rounder eyes.

“Come on, Darkie!” He reached into his pocket and brought out a round, flat stone. I eyed it apprehensively. The boy chuckled.

“What’s the matter?”

“Call me Tien. I don’t like the name Darkie.” I spoke authoritatively, my voice firm when I addressed the bully.

“Your name doesn’t fit you!” the boy said loudly. The crowd of my peers below shouted and laughed in agreement. I backed away even further on the branch, which began to crack under the weight of two people.

“I’m no different from you!” I cried the words desperately and without conviction.

The boy clutched the stone tighter in his hand, and advanced towards me on the tree branch.

“You don’t even look like us,” he said with a short laugh. “How can you be the same?”

The simple words cut through my heart like a knife. Staggering backwards, I finally heard the tree branch snap, but the shouts of the boy and others below me were only secondary to the mind-numbing pain of isolation that once again plagued me.

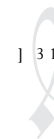
As we hit the ground, I scrambled to my feet, miraculously unhurt from the long fall. One look to my left however, and I saw that the boy had not fared as well. He lay facedown and did not stir.

The children rushed towards him, but their lack of concern for me was a relief; I quickly backed away, hoping to escape.

The boy sat up groggily as his companions revived him, looking around. His eyes lit upon me, and I turned to run, but it was too late.

“Get her!” he shouted, his words slurred from pain. The other children turned, pulling rocks from within their rags.

The first one hit my arm, followed by a stinging, red



welt. I sprinted away from the tree and down the dusty road, my bare feet kicking up dirt behind me. I could hear the heavy breathing of the children as they followed me down the path, which only caused me to run faster.

We entered the center of the village, which was marked by the cluster of open-air stalls selling a variety of foods. Buyers haggled with the old, toothless men who owned the shops, creating a lively atmosphere. The early morning sun beat down upon me as I wove my way through the crowd of shoppers, hoping to hide from my cruel peers.

It was not to be so. As I finally emerged back onto the narrow, tree-lined path, a glance over my shoulder told me that the others were still in pursuit. My lungs were beginning to burn, but I forced myself to continue at a slow jog.

The second rock hit me squarely in the back. I doubled over with shooting pains up and down my spine. Through narrowed eyelids, I saw the children circle me, their hands devoid of rocks, balled into fists.

“What happened with the branch, Darkie? Why weren’t you hurt?” The jeering tone shook me.

“I didn’t do anything! I just fell from the branch.”

“But you weren’t hurt!” the children exclaimed. They murmured among themselves. I turned slowly on the spot, scrutinizing the angry young faces that were so dissimilar to my own. The shade from the trees created only the faintest patches upon their otherwise pale, flawless skin, while my own skin appeared nearly black.



But why hadn’t I been hurt? The thought had barely formed in my mind when the boy nearest me ran forward, his fists up, and delivered a direct punch to my stomach. I doubled over, and swung out with my own arm, but missed. The other children were drawing closer to me now, and I knew inwardly that I would not be able to win the battle— this, however, did not stop me from raising my own hands in defense.

“You won’t be able to fight us,” said one of the children to me. “There are so many of us, but only one of you!”

In response, I raised my fists higher.

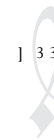
“Get out of my way!” I barreled through the circle of children, but they threw me back forcefully. I landed hard against the ground, feeling blood run down my cheek. Sitting up, I wiped the blood away, feeling it sting with the dirt from my fingers. The children closed in once more, laughing as I struggled to stand.

“What is going on here?” The elderly voice lifted my heart. I raised my head, a smile upon my face.

A Chinese woman stood a few feet down the path, an orange in one hand and a cane in her other. Although she was old, and her skin wrinkled, the woman’s hair still contained traces of its youthful black, visible in the pieces that fell from her bun. She leaned against her sturdy cane as she questioned the children a second time.

“What has happened here? Why do you all gather so?”

The children seemed afraid to respond. They shifted uncomfortably back and forth, their hands now behind their backs and the once sinister faces docile. I dared not



stand up for fear that they would later punish me for revealing the source of my injury to Wise Woman.

“Nothing has happened, Wise Woman,” said one girl. “We were only playing.”

The intense, dark eyes of Wise Woman surveyed the children. She did not appear convinced by their innocence, and did not pretend to be so. Without hesitation, she hobbled forward with her cane, and shooed the children aside. They scattered unwillingly to reveal me, cowering with my dirty hand against my face to hide the injury.

Wise Woman held out a hand to me, leaning on her cane, and I took it. She helped me up, and said quietly, “Remove your hand from your face.”

I shook my head violently, and my hand trembled in fear within her own. She squeezed my hand gently and said, “Tien, do not be afraid. Remove your hand.”

I took a deep breath, and looked into Wise Woman’s eyes. She nodded encouragingly at me, and I removed my hand from my bloody cheek. Wise Woman looked at the scrape, which had since stopped bleeding. Lifting my left arm, she examined the welt upon it. I watched her face while she did this, noting that the patches of shade on her skin were not as dark as mine. Despite Wise Woman’s acts of kindness, I felt isolated once more by my unique appearance.

Taking my hand in her own, Wise Woman murmured, “We should go home now.”

To the children at large, she said calmly, “You should not be so far on the outskirts of town. Return to the



marketplace.”

“Yes, Wise Woman,” all the children murmured. I watched them scuttle away down the dusty path until they turned the corner, vanishing from sight. Wise Woman patted me on the back gently, and said, “We should go home. I will be able to clean your cheek off then.”

I nodded, and we walked in silence for several moments before Wise Woman asked, “So where did you hide today?”

“The big tree,” I muttered. “On the other edge of the village.”

She nodded. “But they still found you...Maybe you should stay in the house tomorrow.”

“They would just come in after you left. It happened last time.”

Wise Woman nodded again, her head moving slowly. We were nearing the end of the dusty path now, and I could see the familiar thatched hut, standing solitary with the picturesque mountains behind it.

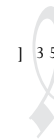
“I cannot stop them, Tien. The villagers refuse to believe that their children give you these injuries.”

“Then where do they think these bruises come from?” I asked indignantly, holding up my arm. Wise Woman studied the dark bruises of varying size and color before responding.

“They think that you are...different. That you might be the cause of your own bruises.”

My heart sank.

“Am I?” I asked Wise Woman.



“Are you what?” She appeared confused by my question.

“Am I different?”

“Only in the way that you are kinder than the others of your age, and more compassionate than many of the adults in the village,” replied Wise Woman. I nodded, but remained unconvinced.

We had reached the hut. I opened the door for my guardian, and she smiled in thanks. Handing me her orange, Wise Woman asked, “Do you want something to eat? I can make something.”

I shook my head, and shut the door of the hut behind me. Proceeding to the small wooden table in the center of the hut, I sat down. Wise Woman busied herself at the clay oven at the other end of the room, heating water.

“Watch the water, Tien,” she said to me. “I have to get a rag for your cheek.”

Hobbling into a small adjacent room, Wise Woman left me alone to stare out the window of the hut at the beautiful mountains. After a few moments, I heard the steady thud of her cane once more as she slowly made her way towards the table.

“You like the mountains, don’t you?” She chuckled as I nodded emphatically.

“I wish I could live in the mountains,” I told Wise Woman. She smiled at me.

“And maybe you will someday. Now, would you like to hear a story?”

She sat down next to me at the table, holding a wet rag

in one hand and a bucket of warm water in the other. Dabbing at my cheek, Wise Woman began.

“There once was a young man. He lived in a small village, and although he was bright, this man was looked down upon because he was poor. One day, the man decided to travel high into the Himalayas, because he had heard that a magical grove existed there.”

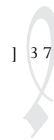
As Wise Woman cleaned my cheek, her free hand moved in complicated motions, conjuring up beams of light from her fingers that reflected on the wall. The rough outline of mountain peaks appeared on the brown bamboo reeds, vanishing as the shape of a human replaced it. I listened intently, curious as to what would happen next.

“The man found the grove, after many months of searching. It was upon the highest peak of the tallest mountain, and was protected by a bamboo forest that grew within it and a rock wall that surrounded it. The man lived in the bamboo grove, and meditated to the gods in the hope that he would be blessed with magical powers.”

“Why did he want to have magical powers?”

“He wished to make a spellbook that would contain the secret to immortality. Once he conveyed this wish to the gods, the man was granted his powers—his dream however, would take time to achieve. He returned to his village at the base of the Himalaya Mountains, and married a woman. She gave birth to a beautiful baby girl.”

The shapes twisted, and I could see two figures cradling a small child, their shapes strangely stretched and manipulated by the bamboo wall.



“What happened next?” I asked eagerly.

“Alas, the man and his family soon became very poor, because he would not work—the spellbook became his only passion. They soon lost all their money, and the wife grew discontent with her husband. The pair often fought, but even her threats to leave the household would not stop the man from creating spell after spell to put within the magical book. Eternal wealth and beauty, spells to obtain skills normally unavailable to man, such as flight and control of the seas—he desperately tried to explain the value of these to his wife, but she would not listen. Finally, one day, the wife left the village, and was never seen again.”

One of the figures vanished from the wall, and another sunk down, and shook with what I knew to be sobs. I gasped.

“What happened? Was the man sad?”

Wise Woman turned to look at me, her brown eyes full of sorrow.

“The man was upset that his wife had left, but he could not stop work on his spellbook. Within the book, he continued to put enchantments and spells that would surely be coveted by the kings and queens of every land. But the spell that the man was most proud of was one that he had created himself: the secret to immortality.”

My eyes widened.

“You mean the holder of the spellbook could live forever?”

Wise Woman nodded. “Yes. The man sealed the spellbook, placing a spell that would not allow it to be opened

until the one who possessed the password would be able to reopen the spellbook, and use the magic within it.”

She dropped her hands. The images vanished, and the beams returned to her fingers, leaving the walls bare and dark.

“What happened to the spellbook?” I asked.

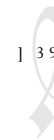
Wise Woman shrugged.

“It is difficult to say...no one knows where it is, or even what the password is. Now go outside and play!” Wise Woman chased me out of the hut playfully, but it was difficult for me to stop thinking about what I had just heard.

This soon became my favorite story, out of all the ones Wise Woman would tell me about. Dragons, tigers, and princesses from faraway lands did not interest me as they did others; instead, I enjoyed listening to the strange tale of the man and his beloved spellbook. I felt a strange connection to the story, and could almost feel the emotions of the people within it as though they were my own. If Wise Woman saw anything strange about my obsession with the tale, she said nothing.

Unfortunately, stories did not ease the pain of the teasing and jeering I received from other children in the village. Because of my lonely existence, I often resorted to eavesdropping on the elders of the village for entertainment. These discussions were normally of little interest to me, until I once heard my own name spoken of.

It was a warm, breezy day. I had been playing alone, outside my hut, when Wise Woman came out, her gray



robes wrapped around her even in the bright sunlight.

“Where are you going?”

“I must meet with the elders, little one. Stay here. I will be back soon.”

I stood and watched sadly as Wise Woman walked down the path, and turned left, towards the elder’s meeting place, a hut on the other end of the village. I waited a few moments until I was sure Wise Woman had gone. Then, with excitement rushing through my veins, I hurried after her.

Skirting the children in the center of the village and slipping between the women arguing in the market, I saw Wise Woman entering the elder’s hut. Crouching down, I crawled towards the window in the hut, under which there were tall bamboo plants, in a group large enough to hide me. I leapt into the bamboo stalks, and was able to hear clearly every word that was spoken by the elders.

“Wise Woman, time is up. You must tell her.” I did not recognize the voice, but my interest was piqued. Who did Wise Woman have to tell what?

“Tien is too young to know of the spellbook.” Wise Woman’s voice was defiant. I felt my heart leap in a mixture of excitement and fear.

“But you yourself told us only a few weeks ago that you have already told it to her in the form a folktale. She must take responsibility as a part of the family that created the spellbook. It is her duty to find it, and now she must do so. If the Force catches her, it will take the password from Tien, and open the book.”



So the folktale had been about my family! I found myself suddenly unable to breathe, as though invisible hands had constricted my windpipe. The longer I considered this impossible possibility, the more it seemed to make sense to me. Why else would I have felt a special connection to the story, and the emotions of the people within it?

Suddenly, Wise Woman’s voice rang out loudly from within the hut, jolting me out of my thoughts.

“She cannot know yet! Placing a burden so large on one so young is a terrible thing to do. I will not tell Tien anything until the Force comes searching for her.”

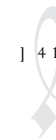
I frowned to myself. What was this Force that would take the spellbook from me? I felt a shiver run down my spine as I thought of the Force. Pushing it to the back of my mind, I continued to listen intently.

There was a dull clunk as a staff banged against the floor.

“That time will be all too soon, Wise Woman! Please, consider someone other than Tien or yourself for a moment. Then entire village will be destroyed if the Force comes here.”

“You are the one who refuses to think of Tien. She would be devastated if she knew her parents were still alive, and that the Force had taken them. I do not wish to harm a child who is already singled out and wounded by her own peers.”

“But if she knew that she alone held the password to the spellbook, and that in finding the book she would find her parents...that would mean a life with people of her



own race!” The voices sounded eager, and I couldn’t help but feel as though they were right. I longed more than anything to find people of my own kind, and to be accepted. At that moment, I made up my mind that I would bring my parents back to life, no matter what it took. I envisioned myself trekking through the mountains, Wise Woman by my side. We soon found my parents, and were able to live together in another village, far away from the mean-spirited children of my current home.

Wise Woman’s angry voice cut through my daydreaming for a second time.

“If you hope that Tien will return here with the spellbook to give you all the secret of immortality, you are wrong. The secrets within the spellbook will not be revealed to anyone.” Wise Woman spoke stiffly.

I felt my heart perform another leap, and I clutched my chest, fearful that my heart would jump right out of me. How could I control the spellbook? If I did manage to open the spellbook, or even to find it, would I grant the elders the secrets of eternal wealth, beauty and immortality?

More to avoid answering the difficult questions in my head than anything else, I quelled the inner voices, and listened as another Elder said disgustedly, “You misjudge us, Wise Woman.”

“And you misjudge children. I—” Wise Woman stopped mid-sentence, only a moment after I shifted slightly within the bamboo. I froze with fear, and heard the scraping of a chair as she stood up. The door to my left



was flung open, and through the green bamboo leaves, I saw the bottom of Wise Woman’s gray robe.

Before I knew what was happening, she had dragged me out of the bamboo by my ear, and flung me to the ground. Dust from the ground rose around me, and I coughed.

“What did you hear?” Her voice was angry and demanding; I opened my mouth, and gaped wordlessly, unable to form words of any kind. From the corner of my eye I saw the other elders watching me, a mixture of fear and surprise upon their faces.

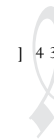
“N-nothing, I swear!”

“Never listen again, do you understand me? Forget what you have heard here.”

Wise Woman’s voice had lost all anger, and was replaced by fear. I did not understand what I had done wrong, but ran away from the hut, looking back to see the strange look upon my guardian’s face.

This, of course, only increased my curiosity about the spellbook. The thought that the key to my past and perhaps a happier future lay within my reach drove me mad; I would find myself hoping for it to be true, but at the same time telling myself that it was impossible to wish for a life other than the one I already led.

This silent battle raged within my head for the next few years. I was too frightened to ever bring up the subject with Wise Woman again, and she followed my example, acting as though that terrible day had never existed.



ONE DARK NIGHT, I awoke to a cry from Wise Woman. Upon entering her room, I found her doubled over in pain by the window, her eyes wide with fear. When she saw me, she made frantic motions with her hands. I came forward, worried.

“Are you all right? Let me fetch the doctor.” I attempted to keep panic out of my voice; Wise Woman looked very ill, and I feared that she would not survive the night. Shaking her head, Wise Woman whispered, “No doctor can help me now.” After those words, speech seemed to fail her. She hobbled to her bed, and from under her pillow removed a package and a folded piece of paper. Placing them inside a dark brown woolen sack, she handed it to me. My hands grasped hers, and I felt a chill creep down my spine; her hands felt like ice.

Shudders ran through Wise Woman’s body, and she lay upon the bed, her eyes still wide, as though she feared she would fall asleep. I placed my hand in hers, and sat by her bedside for many long moments. She gripped my hand tightly as the spasms continued to shake her body. I held onto her firmly, and unfolded the letter with my free hand.

Dear Tien,

There were not many times in your childhood when I was truly angry with you. The only time I felt anger lick my insides like an angry flame was when you were very young, and you heard the elders speak of an ancient spellbook, one that held the secret to immortality.

I will not go into more detail here; it is clear to both of us that you have not forgotten the events of that day, but have possibly only wondered why I did not tell you.

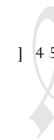
The truth is, the fact that I hid such an important part of your past and future from you displeased many of the elders; they hoped that you would find the spellbook and give them immortality, beauty, wealth, and power beyond their dreams. I fought the terrible human emotion of greed throughout your childhood years, but I realized that I would not be able to stop the elders forever; it was like a rushing river that threatened to drown me.

Those times are now past; you must forget the elders and their sinister qualities, as your true quest is far more challenging.

Within the mountains lives a dangerous Force. It can only be described as a deceiving magical being that commands perhaps more power than even I myself do as a healing shaman. It is looking for you, Tien. You are said to possess the password to this spellbook. The Force will stop at nothing to coerce you to gain the password.

The Force wishes for the spellbook, because very soon the sun and the moon will appear in the sky together, for the first time in many centuries. This signifies the dawn of a new age. The one who possesses the spellbook at the time when both the sun and moon have risen their highest will begin the new age. If the Force has the spellbook at that time, it will have all the power it needs in order to cover our corner of the world in a deep, black darkness. This darkness will soon cause every man, woman and child to either perish at the hands of the Force, or succumb to its dark powers.

You, Tien, are the only one who may stop the Force, for you are said to possess the password to this spellbook. Once it has the book in its hands, the Force will not hesitate to torture you in



order to gain the password and open the spellbook.

Now that I am gone, the village is no longer safe for you. Leave immediately, and follow the path into the Tien Shan Mountains to begin your search for the spellbook. I cannot say more now, but this will eventually lead you to your parents, if only you make the correct choices.

And finally, take heed of my words, Tien: you are in great danger, and you are alone. Accept help from those you believe you can trust; your judgment will not fail you. Remember that I love you, and although I cannot be with you at this time, I will always protect you.

Your Loving Godmother

As I read Wise Woman's note, I felt different emotions pass through my chest, leaving me quite weak by the end. Closing my eyes for a moment, I tried to imagine what my family would look like. I could see all of them, standing with me and smiling. They looked like me: the same skin, same eyes and same thick hair.

Before I could think more about a possible reunion with my family, a cold wind blew through the window, ruffling my hair. I opened my eyes, and saw Wise Woman's still body.

She looked calm, as though she had simply laid down for a quick rest and not gotten up yet. For the first time, I realized that I would never see Wise Woman again. Tears came to my eyes, washing away the happiness that had flooded me only minutes ago.

Forcing myself to turn away from Wise Woman, I

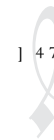
walked to the other end of her room and packed a small hand-woven bag with clothes, some food and an extra pair of sandals. I also packed a blanket. Slinging it over my shoulder, I was about to leave, when I heard voices.

Unfamiliar shadows loomed outside the hut, drawing closer at every moment. I watched from the window of the hut as they silently crossed the mud patch, where I had so often played as a child. I glanced at the door, and then back at Wise Woman, who lay still on the bed. I felt my heart begin to beat quickly as I leapt behind the large clay stove, from where I could see the room. I inhaled the smell of cooked rice and vegetables as the bamboo door creaked open.

A group of strange men entered the hut, murmuring among themselves. The black torches they held seemed to cloak the room in a fearsome, impenetrable darkness. These must be the men Wise Woman had mentioned. Fear flooded my veins, and I took a deep breath, attempting to steady my thumping heart as my body trembled against the rough reed wall.

The men looked at Wise Woman's still body. The leader of the group held his shining black torch in the air, and snapped his fingers. Flames sprang forth from the torch as though fueled by some mystical power. The other men followed suit. Then, laughing cruelly, they set their torches to her body. Flames licked her clothes, turning them black. Within moments, I had lost all sight of Wise Woman's body, the last memory I would ever have of her.

I cried out, forgetting my efforts to be hidden only

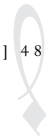


moments before. Leaping from my hiding spot onto the back of the leader, I beat my fists upon his head, screaming for help. To my surprise, a youthful voice sounded out as I beat down. I hesitated, wondering if the master of forces so powerful could be a young man only a few years older than me.

Sensing my surprise, the other men tried to grab me. I was too fast for them, and darted out of the hut, with the smell of smoke still in my throat. My eyes watering from the heat, I rushed down the path, hoping to get help from one of the villagers. The shouts of the mysterious leader followed me, ringing in my ears.

“Catch her! Run, fools!”

To my horror, other men burned down the village, one hut at a time. I stood in the center of the village, transfixed, watching my home vanish within the leaping flames. The faint cries of my fellow villagers as they tried in vain to escape the inferno that had enveloped their homes filled my ears. Then, with tears in my eyes, I ran from the men, and towards the snowcapped mountains.



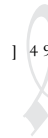
Chapter Two



A New Friend—And a Guide

I tore down the familiar dirt road that led out of the village, my lungs burning as I turned to see the men following me, shouting out angrily. I stopped running at the fork in the road. The path to my right led to the next village, one I knew well from my trips with Wise Woman, on which she would heal those who suffered in other villages with her strange magic. To my left, the road became narrower, and wove endlessly into the black night. I looked up, and saw the Tien Shan Mountains mere miles away.

I stood still for a moment, my mind racing. Should I take the path to the next village and seek help? My hands



clutching the sack that held my belongings, I took an uncertain step to the right. To my surprise, as I did so, I felt my heart urge me in the other direction. Fear engulfed me once more as I saw the band of men sprinting down the path.

My heart in my throat, I leapt into thorny bushes, feeling the brown branches scratch my arms. Trying to suppress my frightened breathing and shaking hands, I clutched my sack and the package Wise Woman had given me. The men ran past me, their torches still burning. My heart beat sounded loudly in my chest as my mind raced, overwhelmed by the loss of Wise Woman.

I was unsure of what to do next. I waited until it was completely dark before I set out to scale the mountain, following the path Wise Woman had outlined for me. It was slippery, covered with snow, and I almost fell twice, but kept trudging upwards. The third time I slipped, I fell, and slid into a bush on the side of the mountain. By then it was daybreak. I struggled to get up, but the branches held me prisoner. The dark night had begun to recede, taking some of my fear with it.

I could now see the village huts far below me, blackened stubs in the distance. Snow weighed down the bare branches of various bushes on the seldom used path. With my eyes distracted by the new sights around me, I failed to see a rock obstructing my path. With a loud cry, I toppled face first into the nearest bush. Sputtering, I wiped the cold snow from my face, and flailed about in an unsuccessful attempt to free myself from the prickly branches.



With a sigh, I lay limp for a few moments, until a young man's voice said, "Here, let me help."

My eyes shot open. I looked around, but no one was there. I was worried, but bravely addressed the voice, "Show yourself!"

"All right, all right, I will."

A huge black owl nearly half my size landed next to the bush, fluttering its wings as it spoke. My mouth was wide open. I blinked once, then twice, to clear my vision. The bird was still there, looking at me. It had stripes under its eyes, making it look slightly sinister. The owl leaned in, squinting to get a closer look at me.

"Have you been crying?"

The curious, piping tone so like my own urged me to speak. Shocked, I said, "You're an owl."

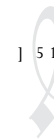
"Yes." It raised an eyebrow, causing me to smile.

"A black owl...I've never seen one of those before!" I could not take my eyes off the strange animal for fear it would vanish.

The owl ruffled its feathers, and said, "I have many different forms. An owl is simply my preferred one."

"And...you can talk!"

Suddenly, the owl fluttered its feather tips. As it did so, a strange ripple passed through the air, as though a giant hand was ripping fabric apart. The ripple enveloped the owl, covering its wings, then feet, and finally the soot-colored body and head. I watched as the creature sank into the ripple, and vanished. Blinking several times, I convinced myself that I had been hallucinating. Rolling



sideways, I fell out of the bush onto the hard, icy ground.

With a twitter, the owl appeared in front of me, flapping its wings angrily.

“Well, there’s gratitude for you. I go through all this trouble to show you one of my talents, and then you walk away!”

I shook my head, and looked at the owl, assuring myself that it was indeed real. Then, gathering my thoughts, I spoke in what I thought would be an adult manner.

“You didn’t even change form...that’s impossible to do. Besides, I have to be going.”

The owl perched on my head, all signs of annoyance gone, and former curiosity returned.

“Wait...what did you say your name was?”

I looked up at the owl on my head, which caused my eyes to cross. Blinking, I looked down at my feet instead.

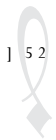
“I didn’t say.”

“Oh. Well, my name is Zharabi. Pleased to meet you.”

The owl fluttered down to my shoulder, and held out a talon. I shook it, and then said hesitantly, “I’m Tien Ming. It’s nice to meet you, Zharabi. But...just one question... how can you talk?”

Zharabi fluffed himself up importantly.

“Well, I used to live with a magician. He was an alchemist. I have three times the brain, powers, and lifespan of an ordinary owl. My caretaker died many years ago. For some time, I had no home, and aimlessly wandered among the mountains. A short while ago, however, I learned that



my master was alive, so I came here looking for him.”

“What made you think he was dead in the first place?” As soon as I had spoken, I regretted my question. Zharabi’s eyes narrowed as he tried in vain to remember something. He waited a few moments before responding quietly, “I don’t...nothing. It was a strange event...” He trailed off, clearly not wanting to speak of his master any longer. I couldn’t think of anything to say, but luckily, Zharabi broke the awkward silence by changing the topic.

“And you? What brings you to wander the Tien Shan Mountains? They seem to be your namesake.”

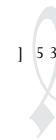
I sighed. Zharabi looked at me carefully, as though trying to read my mind.

“I’m...searching for something.” I was unsure of how much to tell this stranger.

He looked at me for a moment, and then spoke softly.

“I can sense from looking at you that you have recently suffered a great shock, and horrible images are etched in your memory. A burning woman...crying out...a note... men...a burning village...running away...slipping.” His voice was calm, and almost familiar.

As Zharabi spoke, I could feel the memories from the previous night washing over me. The pain was white hot. I cried out, and fell to the ground. I was shaking again, and writhing, as the memory of the men setting fire to Wise Woman came back, sharper than ever. I rolled over, and retched the remains of my last meal on the nearest bush. I felt my vision grow hazy, and my



heart beat faster and faster.

As the images burned the insides of my eyes, I put my hands over my face, and said angrily, “No! Make it stop!”

The images vanished, and the insides of my eyes became black. I slowly opened them, and saw Zharabi gazing at me curiously through his large, dark eyes. I scooted away from him suspiciously, and asked, “Why can’t you take human form?”

He shifted uneasily on his perch.

“I could...but it would be dangerous.”

“Why?” I asked.

The owl only chuckled, and asked, “So what is this quest that you have been sent on?”

I was disappointed that Zharabi had not answered my question, but felt that I could trust him. I said, “I’m searching for a spellbook. I think it belonged to my family.”

“Oh?” Zharabi’s question was spoken lightly, but I sensed that he was surprised and intrigued.

As I opened my mouth to explain further, Zharabi spotted the lumpy package I was clutching. He eyed the package curiously.

“What’s in there?”

I was taken aback for a moment when I saw the package, and a fresh wave of tears threatened to overcome me. With some difficulty, I pushed back my sadness and spoke.

“I-I don’t know. Wise Woman gave the package to me. She said it would help me survive...” I trailed off. Zharabi nodded slowly.



“Well, it seems to me that you already have some sort of power that helps you do that. You have been given the grace of the mountains, Tien, which is no small honor. Now, open the package.”

I slid to my knees, and put the package on the ground in front of me. It was lumpy and soft, and as I ripped away the brown paper, I gasped at the sight that met my eyes.

It was a green *salwaar kameez*, a traditional Indian outfit, and one that I had seen trader’s daughters wear sometimes, when their fathers came from India to trade valuable materials.

The material was fluid and soft, and the top had beautiful embroidery on it, of a willowy tree with waving branches and glittering leaves. Small green stones on the outfit winked and glittered in the morning sun.

A striking green hemmed strip of cloth and long, loose pants lay on top of the outfit. I knew from watching the tradesmen’s daughters that the hemmed cloth was to be worn around my neck, or slung loosely around my shoulders. I picked up the outfit carefully. Zharabi didn’t waste any time in ushering me toward the nearest covering of bushes.

“Change into it, and let’s see how you look.”

I hurried behind a large gathering of leafy bushes, and slipped into the tunic and pants. As I wore it, I felt a sudden change within me. I looked down, and saw, to my immense surprise, that the embroidery was glowing brighter than ever in the sun. The day no longer felt crisp or cold, but pleasantly warm. My fears were gone, replaced by a



new confidence and pride. I was jolted out of my admiration of the clothing by Zharabi's voice.

"Tien, look at this!"

I hurried out from behind the bush, and found Zharabi picking at the brown paper with his beak. A secret pocket was revealed in the seemingly flimsy packing, and within it was jewelry. Pure gold bangles, earrings, and an anklet lay glimmering among the folds of brown paper. I bent down, and scooped up the jewelry in my hands. It had clearly been carefully crafted and seemed almost new. I put on the jewelry without thinking. Zharabi watched me, a strange look on his face, as though he were trying to place something.

"Tien, the necklace is missing..." He frowned, and his face contorted while he tried to remember something.

"Why would the necklace be missing?" I sighed. Was this a part of my past...or just a mere coincidence?

Zharabi broke the silence.

"We might find it later...but for now, we should leave. Whoever you're running from could be here anytime soon."

I nodded. I spun around, and the outfit followed my body. My feet were clad in the simple bamboo sandals that Wise Woman had made for me long ago. Zharabi twittered as I spun; something I took to be a laugh. Then, spotting my old ragged clothes, he spoke once more.

"We need to hide your clothes."

"All right."

I bent down, and gathered up the clothes. Depositing

them and the brown packaging in a ditch by the bush, I covered it up with soil, and patted the earth down. No one would be able to tell that something was hidden there. When I was done, Zharabi fluttered to my shoulder, and roosted there.

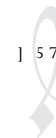
"It's nice to sit on a human shoulder again." Zharabi sighed. I smiled. He smiled back at me and said quietly, "I'd like to come with you, and help you solve your riddle. It would be an honor."

I nodded and replied, "I could make do with a guide, Zharabi."

"Not just a guide, Tien, but a friend too."

As we continued to walk down the mountain path, I looked back at my former home, and saw a single spire of smoke rise from the village. I could have sworn I saw men clad in black moving among the dying flames, but I simply turned my back on my old life, and took steps toward my new one.

NOT LONG AFTER Tien and Zharabi had disappeared around a distant curve in the winding mountain path, men stomped up the path, trailing ashes, their leader seething. In the daylight, their torches seemed much less menacing. Suddenly, the leader held up his hand. The men stopped, and were silent as their commander strode to the bush where Tien had changed. He stood quite still for a moment, then bent down, and recovered her clothes from the pile of earth, a distasteful expression upon his face.



“Sir, is something wrong?”

“They were here. Take these.” The leader shoved the clothes into one of the men’s hands.

“Get rid of those. We will not follow the girl—she will come to us. I want half of you to go smother any remains of the fire and to hide any traces that someone started it. Be quick, and return by nightfall.” The voice from within the mask was youthful, but the eyes that peered out were dark with a strange mystical power.

Half the men bowed respectfully, and hurried down the mountain path, the torches hanging limply at their sides. The other half waited for orders, their backs rigid as they stood in the morning sun. The leader snapped his slim fingers, and the wind began to blow fiercely.

There was movement in the air, marking the arrival of an invisible but powerful being. Without a word, the leader stepped forward, and vanished into the air. The men followed him. When all of the men had disappeared, the wind began to blow once more. When it stopped, all signs of the strange distortion were gone.

Only footprints in the snow remained.