The Dreamweavers
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CHAPTER ONE

The Dreamweaver

Many moons ago, there was a small village in the mountains of southern China. During the day, the village was like any other scattered across the country. But sometimes at night, just past bedtime, a remarkable thing would happen there.

It would happen after the firewood cooled beneath kitchen stoves, after oil lamps winked out behind windows, one by one; after conversations in each house dwindled to drowsy whispers and a breath of quiet swept across the sleepy village. It was a time when even the rowdiest children gave up their struggle to stay awake.

In the sky above, soft clouds would nestle the bright moon as its white light smeared the glassy waters of the Pearl River nearby, where schools of colorful fish slept beneath the smooth surface.

None of the villagers would be awake by the time a mysterious figure emerged on one of the drifting clouds.

But if any of them happened to sit up and glance outside, they'd see the hunched figure carried what looked like a fishing rod.

Yet this was no ordinary fisherman.

The man would sit cross-legged on the edge of the cloud, his silhouette illuminated by the bloated moon behind him. He'd dangle the rod in the air and then cast a line, as easily as if he were fishing from a rowboat on the river.

For the next few hours, he'd quietly reel in his invisible catches and place them carefully into a porcelain jar.

Then, as silently as he had appeared, he'd vanish into the shadows.

None of the villagers ever laid eyes on him, or on the mysterious things that he placed in his jar.

But I have, from my quiet home on the moon above.

And I've seen two children with him on those clouds. One boy and one girl.

CHAPTER TWO

二

The Duel

Ming Dynasty, 1500s A.D.

Mei pointed her weapon upward like an umbrella. With her strong pose and steady concentration, the twelve-year-old could almost pass as a warrior from the Imperial City—that is, if the warriors wore tunics, used knobby branches as swords, and were forced to wait an eternity for their dueling partners to present themselves.

"Hurry up, Yun," she sighed.

"Wait," replied Mei's twin brother, who approached slowly, holding a similar wooden branch. He fumbled with the stick, trying to find the best way to grip it between his fingers. "There's a proper way to hold this in combat, in order to maximize the length of the blade. Well, the *imaginary*

blade," Yun corrected himself matter-of-factly. "This, of course, is merely a substitute for a real sword—"

"Come *on!* I've *been* waiting for five minutes."

"All right, all right."

Yun took his place so that the pair stood opposite each other in the shade of a willow tree beside the Pearl River. They were identical in terms of age and most features—dark eyes, straight black hair, lightly toasted skin—but their personalities were as different as night and day. Mei was the impatient one—adults often said she was as restless as an ant on a frying pan. Yun was the careful, cautious one who adults said moved at an ant's pace.

Above the willow tree, the sky was a pale blue, the morning sun unusually warm. The calendar said late autumn, but the air felt like early summer. The yellowing grass tickled the twins' bare feet. The siblings, however, didn't have time to appreciate the weather. More important things were at stake that morning. They'd made a bet earlier that whoever lost the duel had to give the winner their share of desserts for a week. As the Mid-Autumn Festival was two days away, a loss meant missing out on their grandpa's famous batch of mooncakes.

And that was out of the question.

"All right, on the count of three." Mei readied her stance. "One . . ."

". . . two . . ." counted Yun.

"Three!"

They swung their sticks. Wood bounced off wood. Mei separated easily and jumped forward, her black braids swaying. Her branch sliced the air and hit Yun's knee. With a yelp, Yun tumbled backward.

"Well, that was easy," said Mei.

"That's not fair," protested Yun, rubbing his backside. "You know I'm nearsighted."

Like most of the other villagers, Mei and Yun's family were too poor to afford eyeglasses. Yun had grown accustomed to navigating with blurry vision, and most of the time it wasn't a big deal. But certain endeavors, like dueling, avoiding mud puddles, or counting approaching horses, proved tricky.

Mei rolled her eyes. "We were standing inches apart, not miles!" She also noted it was odd that Yun claimed to be blind as a bat, yet was sharper than an owl whenever the bedsheets at home weren't perfectly symmetrical, or when Mei's dish had two more bean sprouts than Yun's.

"That's different," replied Yun, who prided himself on his precision and neatness. "It's much easier to see what stands out when it shouldn't. Anyway, let's start over. This time, we'll give me a three-second head start."

"Why?"

"The extra three seconds make up for my lack of good eyesight, and subsequent reaction time. It's only fair. No, wait. Actually, four seconds is better."

"*Four*? You'd have me beaten in four!"

After several more minutes of arguing, the twins decided to call a temporary truce until they figured out a new way of determining a winner. Yun lay down in the shade, thinking, while Mei began climbing the willow tree.

Mei was a good climber—the best in their village. She had a lightweight build and was quick on her feet. She could tell which branches were the sturdiest and identify invisible grooves for footholds. By the time Yun looked up, his sister was already high above the ground.

From the tree's canopy, Mei could see past the village. The Pearl River snaked around a bend and continued into the surrounding hills and mountains. The nearest place, the City of Ashes, was a day's journey away by foot.

Nobody in their right mind would go there. It was rumored to be a dreadful area, full of burnt buildings and empty houses. Haunted, too. Strange happenings had been reported by those who had passed the city's outskirts: accounts of footprints appearing where no one had walked, and the sound of crowds sobbing where there wasn't a single soul in sight. Travelers told of a gray fog that weighed down the city, casting the place in an eternal cloud of woe.

When Mei and Yun were toddlers, Grandpa used to tell the children stories about what he knew of the City of Ashes in its olden days. He'd describe in his hushed voice the city's once-magnificent buildings, how the sloped rooftops had been gilded with intricate designs, how the trees there would blossom into brilliant shades of pink in the spring. Grandpa used to tell these stories, back before Mei and Yun came to realize that their parents had disappeared behind the city's walls. After that, it became a sore subject.

Mei climbed back down the tree and plopped next to her brother. They observed a fat beetle in the grass for a few moments; the bug appeared to be sleeping in a wisp of a bright blue cloud.

"Let's go check on Grandpa," suggested Mei, who grew bored quickly. "He probably has the first batch of mooncakes ready. We might as well eat while we think of a new contest."

They went back up to the village, which thrummed with life as the new day got underway. Farmers headed toward the

fields with baskets balanced on their shoulders. Young adults bearing axes headed toward the mountains, from where they'd later return with freshly chopped firewood. Toddlers played with sticks and rag dolls on porches. Mei and Yun raced down the dirt road, greeting each villager by name. Everyone knew one another in the small community.

"Hi Mao-Mao! Hi Po! Good morning, Madam Hu—sorry, we have to go, Grandpa is expecting us!" they added before the nosy woman could trap them in one of her hour-long gossip sessions.

They hurried toward their small wooden house at the end of the lane. A familiar, sweet smell drifted out the open kitchen window. As the twins burst through the door, they saw their grandpa taking out a steaming hot pan from the stove. When he saw the two children, he grinned.

"Impeccable timing," he remarked.

The mooncakes gleamed. Each one had a beautiful, swirling pattern etched on the crusty top. The twins' mouths watered at the sight of the little golden pastries. Beneath the kitchen table, their fat gray cat, Smelly Tail, yowled hopefully. When Mei and Yun were four, their mother had brought Smelly Tail home from the fields, where she'd rescued the cat from a pack of angry dogs. The cat had distrusted the family at first, hissing at anyone who came close, but she hung around for Grandpa's cooking. She'd been living in their kitchen for the last eight years, better fed than any other cat.

It didn't surprise the family that Smelly Tail stayed. Grandpa was the best cook in the village. It was said that anything and everything turned to magic on Grandpa's earthen stove. Fishermen often dropped by with a bucket of freshly

caught carp for the family in exchange for a piping-hot bowl of Grandpa's soup. Same with farmers, who came to the door with extra baskets of vegetables and left with steaming plates of fried rice.

But Grandpa's mooncakes were the best of all. Every month on the full moon, he created a batch of mooncakes for the whole village to share. They were made from his secret recipe that not even Mei and Yun knew. Sometimes the cake filling would taste sweet, like honey. Other times it had the crisp, toasty taste of sesame. Whatever the filling, whenever anyone ate one, their day would visibly brighten. Whether someone was sad about the loss of a pet, or frustrated with a neighbor, or worried about the crops, every little problem seemed to vanish after eating Grandpa's mooncakes. Grandpa claimed it was due to a special ingredient, which he never revealed.

The twins plopped down at the rickety wooden table to the side of the hearth. The kitchen wasn't large. Grandpa's clay bowls and utensils cluttered what little space there was. Connected by a narrow entryway was the rest of the house—one bedroom for Grandpa, one bedroom for Mei and Yun to share, a small washroom, and the room that the twins' parents had once occupied. This last room was now empty save for piles of old scrolls and forgotten belongings.

"You two had breakfast less than an hour ago," said Grandpa, wiping flour from his gray hair. "I'm starting to feed you as much as I feed Smelly Tail here. Yet you both are still as skinny as a pair of willow rods."

"Dueling is hard work," answered Yun.

"Yes, all three seconds of it," chimed in Mei with a slight eye roll.

Grandpa chuckled lightly. "Well, I'm afraid these mooncakes have to sit for two nights before they're fully ready. Right now they're all flaky." His eyes swept over the twins' eager faces. "But I suppose you can have a taste."

He took a pair of chopsticks and carefully cut off a small chunk from one of the crumbly cakes. The inside oozed black sesame paste. Grandpa made a *wait* motion with his finger. He carefully put the piece of mooncake into his mouth and closed his eyes.

"Not bad," he said after a moment. "Of course, I haven't added the secret ingredient yet. Saving that for the final batch. But I trust they will impress the emperor's son."

"The emperor's son?" repeated Mei and Yun.

Grandpa nodded. It was clear he was trying to act nonchalant, but his crinkled smile gave him away. He pulled up the last chair and sat beside the twins. "Yes, it seems word of my mooncakes has reached the Imperial City. Several envoys arrived a month ago to let me know the emperor's favorite son is attending our Mid-Autumn celebration to personally sample them."

Mei and Yun exchanged a startled glance. This was huge news. Their small village was one of those insignificant places that mapmakers could barely trace, and rarely got visits from high government officials.

"And you kept this a secret from us the whole time?" exclaimed Mei.

"I don't remember the envoys," added Yun.

"They came by one morning when you were in the orchards—spending more time eating plums than picking them, I might add," said Grandpa with a grin. "The whole village knows."

"What if the emperor's son likes your mooncakes so much that he asks you to work as the emperor's personal cook?" asked Mei excitedly. "At the palace headquarters?"

"The Imperial City," murmured Yun, chewing his fingernails—a habit he did whenever he was nervous or excited, or both. The twins had heard many fantastical stories about the Imperial City, where all the high officials and the emperor lived. Their father, who had been a scholar before his disappearance, had briefly lived there in his younger days. He was the only person in their village who had done so.

"Baba once told me the palace has tens of *thousands* of valuable scrolls," Yun said dreamily.

"And plenty of people I could *properly* duel, I bet," said Mei. "You'd move there if they asked you, right, Grandpa?" she added.

Grandpa chuckled again. "That's a lofty goal for some, but not for me. I have no intention of moving from my village, my home."

No one really knew how long Grandpa had lived in the village. He claimed to have been there when the village had only three houses and the surrounding trees had been mere saplings. He was certainly old (though not as old as their neighbor Elder Liu, whose skin was so wrinkly it resembled a prune). Whenever Mei or Yun tried to guess Grandpa's real age, he'd smile and say he was "just old enough to keep going."

Grandpa carefully cut two more chunks off the mooncake for Mei and Yun. "Eat up, and once you're done, Madam Hu told me she needs help preparing the festival lanterns," he said. As the twins groaned in unison, he reminded them gently, "It's important we all play a part in the community."

Each year, the Mid-Autumn Festival caused a great stir of excitement among the villagers. Families would cook large meals from the season's harvest, and Farmer Jao would roast his fattest pig for the occasion. It was a time of gratitude. The entire village would celebrate together under the moon and stars, laughing and eating and dancing to music, until they finished off the night with Grandpa's famous mooncakes. The moon that night was always the brightest and roundest of the year.

Mei and Yun went outside. There were even more people milling about than before, preparing for the festival. The village had already started to put up decorations two days in advance. A group of small children were carrying baskets of chrysanthemum petals they'd gathered from the riverbed. Several teenage boys lugged wooden pillars to the entrance to hold the golden banners.

They saw Yun and sneered, as they usually did, "Get lost, runt. This isn't a task for wimpy, fog-brained scholar boys."

Yun felt his face heat up. Before he could say anything, Mei tugged him along. She didn't want her brother to launch another one of his embarrassing, longwinded retorts that never worked to stop the bullies, who would also turn on her soon enough if they didn't get moving. "Ignore them," she whispered, throwing the teenagers a dirty look. "They're just insecure. Come on, let's go find Madam Hu."

Despite the closeness of the small village, the twins were not popular with the other kids. There were several reasons for this, as you'll soon discover. Luckily, it never bothered Mei and Yun *too* much, because for them, having a twin was like having a best friend day and night. (It was also a little like having a shadow, in the times they annoyed each other.)

Madam Hu was on her porch, supervising the paper lantern distribution. Her lips were stained crimson above her sharp chin. Mei and Yun liked to joke that the color came from the blood of those who dared to cross her. Which was nearly everyone in the village, at some point or another.

"There you are," she snapped at the approaching twins. "Hurry, hurry. We haven't got all day. Grab a lantern, both of you, and start filling them. Candles are over there."

Each paper lantern was the size of a winter squash. Madam Hu and the other women in the village had been working on them for two months, crafting them out of a bamboo frame and bright gauze dyed red for good luck. The insides had a hollow center for holding one small candle, which the twins helped fill. On the night of the festival, the lanterns would be released into the sky like floating pieces of sunlight.

While they worked, Madam Hu gossiped as per her usual habit. After a ten-minute tirade about her lazy neighbor, Madam Lee, who left laundry out to dry for days on end, she changed tacks to the subject of Grandpa. Was it true, she demanded of the twins, that the emperor's son was coming all the way from the Imperial City, just for Grandpa's special mooncakes? And wasn't it an absolute disgrace that the officials had not heard of *her* renowned soup dumplings?

"Grandpa's mooncakes will be the talk of the nation," replied Mei proudly.

"*Hmph*," snorted Madam Hu, pinching a lantern with her long fingers. "That old fool thinks too highly of himself. Your whole family did. Teaching you two to read, for instance, and so young. What nonsense."

Even though their small village did not have a school, the

twins' parents had often stressed the importance of knowing how to read and write. After their parents' disappearance, Grandpa taught the twins at home from scrolls and other materials belonging to their father. They also learned arithmetic and how to use an abacus (which, as far as the twins could tell, was only useful for keeping track of points for card games).

"What good are book smarts in a place out here?" Madam Hu continued. "You only need good looks if you're a woman out to get a good husband, and strong muscles if you're a man out to get a good wife. Anything else is ambition. Ambition only leads to downfall. Look at what happened to your—" She suddenly squawked like a surprised hen, and yelled at Yun for creasing one of the paper lanterns. The twins spent the rest of the afternoon being lectured on how to properly handle the gauze.

That night before bed, Mei chided Yun for creasing the lantern on purpose.

Yun didn't say anything. A thought came to him. "If Grandpa does manage to gain favor with the emperor's son," he said, "do you think we could . . .?" But then he fell silent again and began brushing his fingers along the chipped windowsill.

"What?" asked Mei as she adjusted the bamboo pillow on her bed.

"Nothing. I'm just mad about what Madam Hu said earlier." In response to Mei's raised eyebrow, Yun sighed and lowered his voice. "I was thinking, the emperor has a lot of power and resources. Maybe the palace has an investigator who can find out what happened to . . ."

He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to.

"Why would anyone from the palace help us?" replied Mei, suddenly irritated. "We're nobody. Besides, we don't need their help. We know where Mama and Baba are."

"Sure." Now Yun sounded irritated, too. He was too tired to remind her that they only knew where Mama and Baba *went*.

"They're fine," Mei said, as if reading Yun's mind. "We'll find them on our own one day. Grandpa won't be able to stop us forever."

Both siblings lay on their beds without another word. They stared out the window. The moon hung in the evening sky. It was nearly a perfect circle, its surface a lovely blend of gold and white, the light pressing against the shadows. But the sight only made Mei and Yun feel worse.

Because there had been a full moon, just like this one, when their parents had disappeared six years ago.