

BESTSELLING AND AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF  
*DAUGHTER OF THE MOON GODDESS*

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IMMORTAL



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# Dedication

*To anyone who ever felt like they were not enough.*

# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Dedication*

*Map*

Part One

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

Part Two

16

17

18

19

20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30

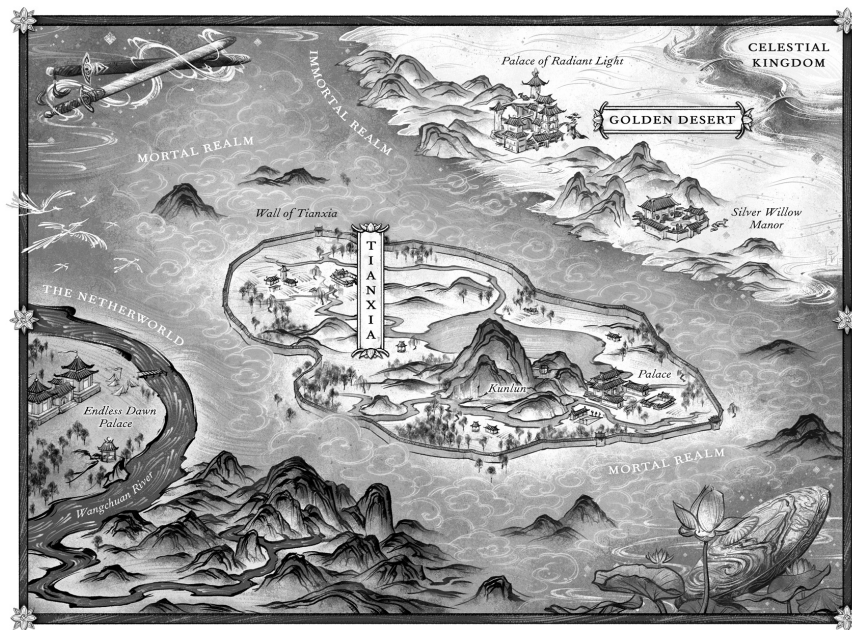
Part Three

31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47

*Acknowledgments*  
*About the Author*  
*Also by Sue Lynn Tan*  
*Copyright*

## *About the Publisher*

# Map





# Part One

# 1

The God of War was famed for three things:  
His unrivaled might. His devotion to the immortal queen.  
And his heart of ice, devoid of all mercy.

\* \* \*

Fire raged through my home, devouring the mahogany pillars and moss-green roof, the scroll paintings and silk carpets. In the gardens, magnolia trees, bamboo, and jasmine went up in flames, smoke lashing the air.

The God of War's heart might be formed of ice, but fire was his weapon of choice. The immortals had turned against us, and I did not know why.

My grandfather was the Lord of Tianxia, and until now a trusted and loyal subject of the Queen of the Golden Desert in the skies. Long ago, our kingdom was pledged to serve the immortals who protected us from a fearsome enemy, and they'd built a wall around Tianxia with their magic. Beyond these borders, the rest of our world was said to live in ignorance of the immortals—while we were the custodians of their secrets. Some might imagine we were favored to serve them. But though we lived in the shade of the gods, we felt no closer to them.

Tonight was meant to be one of triumph. After all these years, Grandfather had finally secured the precious treasure the immortal queen sought. And though many were eager for a glimpse of it, he had refused, keeping it safely locked away.

"Such a treasure is more trouble than it's worth. Greed turns too many honest men into thieves," he'd confided in me, adding darkly, "The immortals are not known for their mercy."

These last words echoed through me as cries of terror rang out from behind, accompanied by clattering footsteps and the frantic neighing of horses. As the thick scent of smoke clouded the air, I coughed loudly. My sweat-slicked hand was tucked in my grandfather's grip as he pulled me through the hallways of our palace. We ran, my chest squeezing tighter until I thought it would burst, but I dared not falter.

I was not strong—possessed of a weak constitution, or so the physicians had claimed. When they thought I couldn't hear, they speculated at my condition in puzzled tones, unable to pinpoint it to any known illness. Grandfather hired private tutors so I could study at my own pace, though my best friend Chengyin often accompanied me. I wasn't ill, yet I never felt well either—constantly tired, a step behind the others. Nothing seemed to dispel the chill in my flesh, how it always felt like winter. After my parents had died, many urged my grandfather to marry again, or to adopt another heir—one stronger—but he'd refused.

"My granddaughter is not replaceable," he'd told them.

The court whispered behind my back, those crueler placing bets on the number of years left to me, while some wiser but no less malicious bided their time in silence, eager for a rare chance at the throne. And maybe . . . one of them had tried to hasten my departure.

I remembered when the poison sank its claws into my body, just weeks ago. It struck like lightning, sapping what little strength I had, my joy, my will to live. I became a shadow of myself, slipping in and out of consciousness. A lock of my hair turned white overnight—not the purity of snow, but the glitter of starlight. It didn't matter what tonics I drank, the medicines the physicians fed me, increasingly

bitter and foul. Nothing helped, a relentless fatigue bearing down on my body until it felt like I was wrapped in a shroud. On the worst days, pain burrowed through my flesh like a vicious fever.

It was a soothsayer, an old crone, who claimed my condition was caused by drinking the waters of the Wangchuan River in the Netherworld. She'd pointed to my hair, nodding sagely as she said, "The waters of death are not meant for the living. There is no known cure."

Most scoffed at her; impossible that such a thing could be found in our kingdom, if it existed at all. Grandfather was the only one who believed her . . . perhaps because no one else had an answer. Despite the grim prognosis, he kept searching for an antidote, offering a vast reward, though nothing had worked.

As we hurried along, I shivered, unable to recall the last time I'd felt warm. Grandfather's eyes darted around frantically, so different from his usual calm self. I wanted to ask what had sparked the immortals' anger but was afraid of distressing him further. His heart was weak; the physicians had warned him against straining it. As my anxiety spiked, I struggled to rein it in. Fear was a contagion that if left unchecked, would taint every spirit.

"Liyen, are you all right? Can you keep up?" Grandfather's voice was hoarse with urgency.

I nodded, though we both knew it was a lie. My breathing was ragged, pain puncturing my chest as I pushed myself onward. When we rounded a corner, I stumbled into an unknown courtyard. A wall ringed the garden, blades of grass grazing my knees, the branches of withered trees splayed wide. Neglect clung to the place like a fog. Grandfather fumbled along the wall, tearing away a curtain of vines to reveal a small door, latched with a rusted iron bar. A key gleamed in his hand that he slid into the lock. As it sprang apart, he tossed away the bar, pulling the door open to reveal the forest beyond.

"We need to run," he said.

"Yes, Grandfather." My voice was steady though my legs shook, light speckling my vision. "I . . . I just need a moment." I willed myself to move, even as I sagged against the wall.

Grandfather seemed to wilt as he reached into his sleeve and drew out a small flower. A shining lotus, its iridescent petals glittering like sunlit ice. "I was going to wait, Liyen—but I must give this to you now. Take it."

Something in his tone made me hesitate when I should have obeyed unflinchingly. "What is this?"

Grandfather clasped my shoulder, looking into my face. He did this whenever he had something important to say, when he wanted to be sure I was listening. "Liyen, you are dying. The waters of the Wangchuan are fatal to us mortals."

I recoiled from his words, shaking my head instinctively. While I'd heard this warning from the healers before, for Grandfather to say it extinguished any last flicker of doubt . . . and of hope. Death stalked us from birth, stealing even the strongest through its reaping—and though this was our fate, few went willingly.

As he blinked, his eyes suspiciously bright, my own grief spilled over. "I did as the physicians asked. I tried everything. I don't want to die, Grandfather. I don't want to leave you."

"This was not your fault, Liyen. Life is not fair. We cannot help how the dice fall, but it's our choice whether to keep playing." Grandfather looked old and gray in this moment, worn out. "The lotus is the antidote to what you suffer—the only one of its kind. Only this can counter the waters of the Wangchuan, as long as you want to live."

"Who wouldn't?" An ache swelled in my chest until it hurt, of *wanting* something so much yet fearing it was out of reach. Hope was an indulgence I rarely allowed myself. When your days are dark, you forget the existence of dawn.

Grandfather stroked the top of my head. "Accept the lotus. We'll flee then, returning here once it's safe." He spoke with the rhythmic cadence of recounting a tale.

A crash erupted in the distance, the roof of a nearby hall caving in. Grandfather didn't waver, pushing the lotus toward me. I hesitated, yet there was no one I trusted more. What did I have to lose? I was dying anyway.

I took the flower from him, cradling it in my hands. Warm to the touch, soothing the bitter chill in my body. The petals quivered, disintegrating into shining flecks that trailed toward me, vanishing into my chest. Warmth flashed, morphing into a feverish heat that surged through my veins. I buckled over, feeling as though the seams of my body were coming undone. A cry hovered but I bit my tongue, afraid to alert those we were fleeing from. One breath, then another. All the while, the blistering fire raged inside, followed by an icy numbness that left me unable to move or speak.

“Liyen!”

Someone called my name, Aunt Shou rushing into the courtyard. Part of her gray hair had unraveled from its coils, a jade hairpin dangling askew. Aunt Shou was one of my grandfather’s trusted confidantes, my mother’s closest friend—and another guardian to me after my parents’ death from illness. Though I’d been too young then to fully comprehend my loss, the memories of my father and mother still hazy like a half-formed dream, it always felt like something was missing from my life.

As Aunt Shou pressed a cool palm to my forehead, her son, Chengyin, joined us. He crouched down beside me, his brown eyes clouding with concern. Aunt Shou had adopted him as an infant, abandoned, possibly due to the birthmark across his temple. “Unlucky,” the soothsayers had proclaimed him, but Aunt Shou had ignored them all. Chengyin was my best friend now, despite our contentious childhood when he’d pulled my hair and laughed at me without an ounce of respect for my position. Only later did I realize what a gift this was, that he’d always seen me for myself.

“What’s wrong with Liyen?” Aunt Shou demanded. “Why can’t she move or speak?”

“I gave the Divine Pearl Lotus to her,” Grandfather said heavily.

The fine lines around Aunt Shou’s eyes creased deeper. “I thought you were keeping it for Queen Caihong,” she whispered. “Her Majesty is here for the lotus. She’s furious that you ignored her summons and is waiting for you in the main hall with the God of War. The immortals won’t cease their attacks until the lotus is surrendered.”

I stared in mute horror at my grandfather, remorse clawing me. While I'd suspected the lotus wasn't of my world, maybe of magic forbidden to us . . . still, I'd taken it. I wanted to live. But I never expected it to have been stolen from the immortal queen.

Grandfather pressed a hand to his forehead. "Shou-yen, you've lost a daughter; you know the pain. Back then, if there was a chance of saving Damei—would you have hesitated?"

Aunt Shou closed her eyes. "I would have done anything I could."

"As I did," Grandfather said steadily. "I only learned about the antidote too late; the queen was already on her way. If I didn't take the Divine Pearl Lotus, the immortals would—and Liyen would die. She is the last of my line; I couldn't lose her too."

"Why didn't you ask Queen Caihong?"

"When have the immortals ever weighed our desires more than theirs? Queen Caihong's command was clear; the lotus is precious to her. Moreover, her temper is volatile of late. If I'd asked, she would have refused, even been angered—and the chance to take it would be gone."

Aunt Shou clasped her hands, her body drooping. "The immortals will show us no mercy. Their God of War will burn Tianxia to the ground."

Grandfather lifted his head, silvered by moonlight. "I will confess and ask that the punishment fall on me alone. I was going to do so, after bringing Liyen to safety."

*No!* Mine was a cry with no voice; I was a ghost in this moment, a shell. It was like my mind was awake but my body pinned down, leaving me helpless.

Aunt Shou gripped Grandfather's sleeve. "You must be careful. What if they hurt you?"

"Then that is the price I'll pay for my theft." He patted her arm, then drew away. "I brought this calamity upon us. I will bear the penalty, even if it's my life."

"I spoke in haste. The gods will forget. They might forgive—"

"They will do neither." Grandfather's smile was so bright and resolute, it hurt. "You spoke the truth, my friend. You have always

spoken the truth to me, even when no one else dared to—which is why your words bear weight.”

“What of Liyen?” Aunt Shou was pale. “You have to think of her, too.”

“I think of her *always*. It’s why I did this—to give her a chance,” he replied.

I flinched where I lay sprawled on the ground.

“What will happen if the immortals find her?” Aunt Shou asked. “What will they do to her if they discover the lotus?”

“You must hide Liyen until the Divine Pearl Lotus has merged with her body. Only then will its presence be concealed, and she can safely return here. Once the lotus has bonded with another, it cannot be seized—only gifted through a willing heart.” My grandfather touched Aunt Shou’s shoulder. “Can I count on you to look after her?”

I wanted to tell him to stay with us, that I’d gladly let the immortals pry their prize from my flesh if they’d let him go—but I had no voice to claim my thoughts, weeping tears that would not form.

“Yes.” Aunt Shou’s voice broke with emotion. “I will treat her as my own.”

Grandfather nodded. “Take her with you. Now. A safehouse has been prepared, south of the wall. I will delay the immortals to give you time to flee.”

As he folded me into his arms, a gray anguish clouded my heart. If I closed my eyes to this nightmare, I could almost imagine I was back in bed and he was bidding me good night—if not for the salt of fear that clung to his skin and the tears wetting the cheek pressed to mine.

Hate engulfed me at the gods who demanded our obedience yet did not answer our prayers, who threatened our lives for the slightest offense, lashing our world with misfortune when they were displeased. I cared not whether the rules were on their side this time, that their actions were deemed justified—

If they hurt my family . . . they would pay.



Grandfather bent to unfasten an ornament that hung by his waist, then tied it to mine. The imperial seal, the yellow jade carved with a round shield, said to be a sacred relic of our kingdom. My grandfather had never been without it, and for him to yield this now broke my heart.

"Live a good life, Liyen. Don't waste yourself in grief or vengeance. I want no regrets for you." Grandfather's words rang clear. "Watch over Tianxia: seek peace and happiness for our people, rule with compassion and strength. Serve the immortal queen loyally and maybe you can secure what I failed to—our people's freedom. We can't live behind these walls forever. The world beyond is part of ours too."

He hugged me tight, and when he released me and strode away—such pain pierced me, worse than any poison. How I willed myself to break free to stop him, my pleas buried in the silence of my mind.

Aunt Shou took my hand in her papery one. "Liyen, you must be strong. Your grandfather knew the risks of stealing from the gods. If you offend the Queen of the Golden Desert, you will condemn not just yourself but your people too." She closed her eyes briefly. "I hate this, but the price must be paid. Your grandfather accepted it, so must we. Whatever happens, I will honor my promise to your grandfather to keep you safe."

As Chengyin clasped my hand, my gaze beseeched him for aid. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "It's too dangerous here. We must get you to safety."

Aunt Shou nodded to Chengyin, and he hoisted me upon his back with ease. I had lost weight over the past weeks, my body frail.

"The Eastern Gate is closer," he suggested with a glance at me.

Hope flared, mingled with gratitude. We had to pass the main hall to get to the Eastern Gate. Chengyin was trying to help, bringing me to where my grandfather would be. As we hurried through the courtyard, I recoiled inwardly from the screams throttling the air, the drift of ash, the flames devouring the wooden beams—and most of all, from the gleam of the immortals' armor as they stalked through my home.

Closer to the main hall, Chengyin's steps slowed as he lagged behind Aunt Shou. He shifted so I might see within, to catch a glimpse of my grandfather. A tall immortal stood in the center of the hall, his black armor edged in gold, a cloak falling from his shoulders. The hilt of a large sword protruded from his back, carved of white jade and gold. Danger emanated from the tautness of his form, the weapons he bore—not just the sword, but the bow slung over his back, the daggers tucked into his waistband. The God of War, the one who'd set my home afire. And seated behind him, upon my grandfather's throne, must be Queen Caihong, the ruler of the Golden Desert. Her shining headdress reflected glimmers of the flames outside, her dark-red lips pulled into a hard slash.

Grandfather knelt before them, his forehead pressed to the ground. Gray hair poked from his topknot, his robe wrinkled and stained. As he rose, he said something I couldn't hear. The God of War raised his hand, alight with a crimson glow—my heart quailing—but his magic streaked through the doorway, settling over the flames beyond, that extinguished as suddenly as they'd flared to life.

As the cries outside subsided, my grandfather's voice carried from where he knelt on the floor. "Thank you, Honored Immortal."

"You have surrendered. The people have done no wrong," the god replied, his voice resonant and clear.

Anger flashed. This was no mercy but to gild the image they wanted to portray, to parade the immensity of their power that we were helpless against. For the gods desired to be seen as great and wise, thriving on worship and admiration. And they cannot bear insult or defiance, to be thought of as weak, infallible . . . or mortal.

"Zhao Likang." The queen enunciated each syllable of my grandfather's name. "Where is the Divine Pearl Lotus? When it bloomed on Kunlun Mountain, I ordered you to bring it to me. As the ruler of Tianxia, you are the only mortal who can enter there to harvest the flower, so it was you who'd plucked it. Yet now we can no longer sense its presence."

*Kunlun Mountain?* I'd wanted to go with Grandfather before, and now I knew why he'd refused. It was our kingdom's most important duty to watch over this place, as Kunlun was once the sole pathway

to the heavens and to the Netherworld—though the immortals had sealed the way there.

“Your Majesty, I harvested the Divine Pearl Lotus as commanded and brought it here. It was closely guarded . . . but was stolen.” Grandfather bowed his head. “I have failed you, and will endure any punishment you impose.”

Grandfather lied so flawlessly, more in what he concealed than shared. While he disliked deception, it was a vital skill when dealing with the court. Once, he’d told me: “There are lies of necessity and those of malice. Those you choose to tell will define your character.”

And now he’d done this to save us all, to ensure none suffered the immortals’ wrath but him.

“Stolen? How did that happen?” Queen Caihong’s voice sharpened. “Rise, and come closer so I can read the truth in your face.”

Grandfather pushed himself slowly to his feet. He was afraid, of course he was. The immortal queen’s displeasure had borne bitter fruit in the past, not just of fire but harsh storms, torrential rain, relentless floods. But his pallor sent a rush of unease through me, his movements uneven and halting as he walked toward her. A gasp tore from his throat as he collapsed—his hand pressed to his chest like it hurt.

His heart!

Terror choked me. I tried to cry out for a physician, struggling to move, to go to him. The God of War stalked forward and laid his hand on my grandfather’s chest. As his fingers glowed like the burning tips of incense, I wanted to shove him away.

“Can you help him?” Queen Caihong asked.

“This injury can’t be healed by us. It is bred by time, formed of the mortal body,” the God of War said coldly, like it meant nothing to him.

“Find one of the mortal physicians,” the queen ordered.

Aunt Shou was hurrying toward Chengyin and me. Her eyes rounded at the sight of my grandfather in the hall, a hand pressed to her lips. As she started forward, Chengyin caught her arm. “Mother,

if they find us—they'll find Liyen. We must send a physician, then go."

Before Aunt Shou could reply, a frail cry slid from within the hall. Grandfather's head had fallen back, his body jerking, then going terrifyingly still. The God of War bent to pick up his hand. After a moment he shook his head, his palm brushing down my grandfather's eyelids.

"He is dead."

Grief wrung me, twisting my heart apart. I was screaming inside, though no one could hear.

The God of War rose as he raised his voice to his warriors outside. "Seal the gates. None are allowed out until we find the Divine Pearl Lotus."

"Chengyin, hurry!" Aunt Shou tugged at him, tears running down her face. "We must go *now*."

Chengyin carried me away, following her. I didn't want to go, but there was nothing I could do now—whether to weep, rage, or even mourn.

As we slipped out the gate, a gong was struck, the bleak sound reverberating through the night. Four times it clanged, plunging through the stillness left in its wake. The end of a reign. A blink, a breath—a lifetime gone.

I would never see my grandfather again. All that remained were his words to me, unfinished lessons, unfulfilled dreams . . . those the immortals had crushed. Something hardened in my chest. I would not go the way Grandfather had, kneeling before the immortals, dedicating my life to their loyal service, fearing their merciless justice. He deserved better, as did our people. And I would forge a new path for us, to set us free of these ruthless gods.