

CHAPTER EIGHT



Meike had once seen an old map in the book-seller's shop in Chengdu. At the time, she was more interested in the way the map-maker had drawn small pictures of mountains and forests, cities and lakes and canals, and China's many rivers on the faded silk. The course of the mighty Yangtze was simply a long, sometimes squiggly line that started in the high western mountains, crossed the entire domain of the Great Han, and ended at the Great Eastern Sea. She now wished she'd paid more attention to the details. She had only the vaguest idea of where they were or where they were going.

The river was a silvery brown. Its currents and eddies were marked by swirls, as if some giant had dipped a feathery brush in a pot of thin white paste and wrote looping characters on the river's skin. Meike noticed that Mr. Ding steered carefully along the edges of these whorls, his eyes sweeping from side to side, on the watch for debris and in search of the swiftest yet steadiest currents. It struck her that the Yangtze wasn't just a single river but a moving swarm of many rivers all surging eastward together toward the sea.

As they rounded a bend, the river opened up to a wide smooth plain framed by hills that, at least from her perch on the bow, looked like a flooded brown field ready for planting. As the current slowed, stillness reigned. Even the boat, which had creaked and groaned with every turn and rocked like a slow cradle as it crossed cross-currents, seemed to grow silent. The wind died when the sun reached its zenith. The sail, with its many stitches and stains, hung limp.

Between the silence and the relentless heat of the midday sun, Meike felt her eyelids getting heavy. As much as she wanted to see and remember everything, weariness settled into her arms and legs. It had been a long and in many ways a frightening morning, yet the events of the morning already seemed far away and long ago. Something about being on the river made the past, even the recent past, seem distant. The wardens who'd been looking for her already seemed like characters in someone else's story. Whatever threat they posed no longer mattered. She rested her shoulder against the gunwale, squirmed into a slightly more comfortable position and decided to give her eyes a brief rest.

A loud snap of the sail woke her. She found herself lying in the shade of the midship tarp. For a moment, she didn't know where she was. Meike must have slept for hours and had no memory at all of leaving her spot at the bow. She didn't remember bunching her pack under her head as a rough pillow. She slowly climbed to her feet.

"Hello, sleepy-bones!" Mr. Ding smiled at her from his spot at the tiller. On the other side of the mid-deck, Ahmei and Mrs. Ding were weaving thin strips of bamboo into baskets. They glanced her way and smiled. The boy, squatting next to his mother, just stared at her, chewing the end of a foot-long chunk of sugar cane. When Meike wandered over to join them she felt her cheeks burning. The skin on her right arm felt tight. It was also bright red.

"You fell asleep in the sun. By the time we realized it, you'd already burnt yourself. Mr. Ding picked you up and set you over there in the shade. You slept right through it all." Ahmei seemed amused by all this, as if reminding Meike that she was still just a foolish child and Ahmei was still the adult.

Mrs. Ding motioned her to come closer. Meike did, stooping down. Lihua swished her fingers in a bowl of something goopy and light brown, then, pulling Meike closer, smeared the glop onto her cheeks. At first, Meike pulled away. "Good for sunburn," she explained as she dipped her fingers back into the bowl and applied another smear of muddy paste to her forehead. The mud felt cool against her skin. Lihua stopped her from touching her cheek, then very gently spread the goop

evenly over her entire face, half of her neck, and then up and down her fiery right arm. She did this all so sweetly, it was almost as if Meike was her own daughter. She told Meike to let the paste dry, promising that it would make her feel better and take away the sting.

When Meike, her entire face masked in the quickly drying paste, turned to the boy, Xiaodi started to laugh. Soon, they were all laughing. Even Captain Ding pointed at her and laughed. Meike didn't find any of this funny. The paste on her right arm was already turning a milky white. She could only imagine how her face looked – probably like a wandering ghost.

Mrs. Ding patted a spot between her and Ahmei, inviting her to sit. When Meike did, Lihua showed her how to work the strands of bamboo in and out of the spaces between the upright strips then tamp down the layers to tighten the weave. Mrs. Ding's basket was smooth and tight and almost perfectly round. Ahmei's was barely a third as high and hopelessly misshapen. After demonstrating a few more rows, Lihua handed Meike a circular base of corkwood to which dozens of upright strips had been tied through tiny holes that ran along the outer rim of the base. She handed Meike a thick handful of bamboo strands and told her to get started.

They spent the better part of the afternoon weaving baskets. After a while, Meike's technique improved so much that Ahmei was getting annoyed that Meike's basket looked so much rounder and tighter than her own. As they worked, Lihua hummed songs with melodies that Meike had never heard before. Now and then Lihua would sing the words. From these scraps of songs, Meike realized that they were all songs about life on the river, many of them about some terrible loss. But strangely, while the songs were sad they weren't mournful. It was as if those who lived on the river understood that loss and disappointment were inevitable but that complaining about these hardships was pointless. There was strength in these songs. They were songs of survival.

Dinner was simple – fish broth with rice noodles and bits of spring onion, chili peppers, and ginger root. The skin on Meike's plastered face felt crinkly every time she tried to move her mouth. A few droplets

of soup slid down her chin, dissolving the paste and splattered like bird droppings on her thigh. Lihua dipped a cloth in a pail of warm water and wiped Meike's face. Each touch, even though gentle, hurt her skin. Lihua let Meike finish wiping away the crusted plaster. Meike was just dipping the cloth in the pail when the entire boat jolted. Soup sloshed over the rims of their bowls. Meike, off balance as she twisted to the side to reach the pail, fell onto her shoulder. Captain Ding dashed back to the tiller. Lihua leaped to her feet and raced to the bow, grabbing a long pole.

The keel ground along the sandbar then jarred to a halt. As the current pushed the stern, the boat began to shift sideways. As it turned and the current pressed more strongly at the hull, the deck began to tilt. The soup pot and pail skidded across the deck and splashed against the gunwale. Xiaodi rushed to help his father as Captain Ding put his full weight on the tiller, trying to turn the boat downstream. Lihua pushed as hard as she could on the pole, most of which was still above her hands, the other end buried in the hardened silt of the sandbar. Ahmei ran to help her. Meike felt useless, not knowing where to go or whom to help or what to do.

Captain Ding shouted to Meike to grab the rail on the high side. As she pressed against the rail, she looked down at the brown water boiling against the hull. In the gathering gloom, Meike could almost make out the tiny mussels and tails of slimy seaweed that splotched the now exposed lower half of the hull. Behind her, any cargo that wasn't tied down, slid dangerously across the deck, adding yet more weight to the lowered side of the boat.

At Captain Ding's instructions, Meike jumped up and down, keeping one hand firmly clutching the rail.

The Captain lashed the tiller in place then raced as best he could along the crazily tilted deck. He too grabbed a pole and, picking a spot closer to the bow, began pushing down on the pole with every ounce of his strength, grunting and shouting with the effort. He lifted the pole and stabbed it down as hard as he could into the sandbar. Meike kept jumping up and down, once almost losing her grip on the rail when her

feet slipped out from under her.

Suddenly, the keel raked a huge bloom of yellow silt off the sandbar as the boat righted on the far side of the bar. The back-rolling of the boat was so sudden, Meike was almost thrown over the side. Free of the sandbar, the sharply angled tiller, still lashed tight, sent the boat in a slow spin as the current swept it along. The Captain raced back, undid the ropes and swung the tiller to the other extreme. The boat turned in a slow arc until its bow was finally pointed downstream toward a distant gap between the now purpling hills.

Meike and Ahmei clapped and laughed at their shared triumph over the crisis, but the Dings, to Meike's surprise, seemed to have little reaction to the catastrophe they'd just escaped. The Captain gave his son instructions on how to handle the tiller, then joined his wife in cleaning up the deck and repositioning the shifted cargo. The boy's chicken, which for the last fifteen minutes had squalled and squawked as if being plucked alive, squawked one more time when Captain Ding righted the cage and banged it into place. He then shoved a mop into Meike's hands, curtly reminding her that she and Ahmei had agreed to work for their passage.

Lihua dropped the pail over the side and pulled it back up with the rope tied to its handles. Meike dipped the mop in the river water and began to swab away the spilled soup, wringing out the mop after every few sweeps.

It was almost dark by the time they finished. Lihua was lighting the lanterns when Meike was giving the rag mop its final twists, squeezing out as much dirty water as she could. The dribble from the twisted rags tinkling down into the river looked almost silver in the faint light of the rising moon. But just as she was about to step away from the rail, she saw something flash in the water. It was so sudden and gone so quickly she almost missed it. She stared down into the dark water. A moment later there was another flash, then another. The second one made a loud hissing sound just before once more disappearing below the surface. Ahmei joined her at the rail. "What are you looking at?"

"I saw something. Three somethings."

Ahmei just gave her a strange look. Then, just as Ahmei was about to pull Meike away from the rail, two sleek backs about half the size of humans, broke the surface, exhaling with loud hisses. "Look!" Meike shouted to Lihua.

Captain Ding told them to go up to the bow if they wanted to see more.

Meike raced to the bow just as the three dolphins leaped out of the river right next to the knifing prow and splashing smoothly back under the water. Two were large, the other was roughly half their size. Meike had never seen anything move so gracefully and quick. When the dolphins did their water dance again, Meike squealed in delight. Ahmei stood transfixed, staring at the river.

Xiaodi joined them. "River dolphins," he explained. "They're blind."

"Then how do they know where the boat is?"

"They just do."

The three of them crouched in the bow watching the dolphins leap and cut across the prow just inches from the boat's leading edge. Xiaodi told them that because the river is so thick with silt, it's impossible to see anything underwater anyway, which is why they don't need to see. He told them to listen closely.

Meike closed her eyes and listened. What she heard, almost masked by the splash of the wake and the creaks of the boat, was something that sounded like a series of clicks and squeaks. "They're talking to each other," the boy said.

"They're a good omen," Lihua said as she joined them, carrying the lantern and hanging it from the hook at the point of the bow and tying it securely in place. "They don't usually come this far upriver. Water's high. Which means it'll be safer when we pass the shallows."

"But faster in the Gorges," added her son.

They watched the dolphins sport along the sides of the prow for what seemed like a long time but was probably only a few minutes more, then, just as suddenly as they'd appeared, the dolphins were gone.

Lihua led Xiaodi back to the midships leaving Meike and Ahmei alone to watch the river. A few minutes later, Ahmei pointed downstream, "Look! There they are!"

Fifty yards or so ahead, the three dolphins curled briefly over the surface before smoothly disappearing. In her mind, Meike had already decided that it was a family of a papa dolphin, a mama dolphin, and their girl dolphin. A river family, she thought, just like the Dings. Then, just as suddenly as the dolphins had come and gone, Meike felt a sudden sadness grip her. Only a few days ago, she too was part of a family of three. She couldn't stop thinking about what would happen to the baby dolphin if her parents were suddenly caught or killed or lost.

Meike and Ahmei spent much of the early evening sitting in the bow staring at the river. Meike was so absorbed in her own sorrows she had almost forgotten about Ahmei until Ahmei sighed. "I already miss him."

"Who?"

Ahmei just shook her head and looked away. Meike knew that she was talking about Tiger, her handsome riverboat man. She wondered if Ahmei missed Meike's parents as much. She wondered if, for Ahmei, leaving Chengdu and leaving the Hu family compound promised a new and maybe even better life than that of a household servant. Meike had never thought of Ahmei as an actual person; she always saw her as an extension of the household – part of it but not really part of the family. Ahmei never talked about her own family. All Meike knew was that she had come from somewhere in the countryside when Meike was still a baby and Ahmei was no more than ten. No one from Ahmei's family had even come to visit and Ahmei had never asked to go to visit them, even on ancestors' day. Meike couldn't imagine a life without parents. Until now.

By now, her parents were on the road, bumping along in an overloaded ox cart, hour by hour moving further and further from their home. And hour by hour Meike was moving in the opposite direction, further and further away.

For the first time she was struck by the terrible thought that she might never see them again. She tried to push that thought from her brain, but the harder she tried, the more the idea seemed to set it hooks. To drive it out, she smacked herself in the head again and again, and

would have continued banging her skull if Ahmei hadn't grabbed her wrists.

"What is wrong with you?! What are you doing?"

Meike couldn't answer – well, she could, but she didn't want to. She didn't want Ahmei to know just how scared and lonely she was. How could she explain that the emptiness of the river was a constant reminder of just how alone she felt, even with Ahmei at her side.

To reassure Meike, Ahmei said that within a week they'd be in Kuaiji and that they'd be safe and have plenty to eat once they found Tiyang and Tiyang's family took them in.

"What if we can't find her? What if she's gone? Or dead?"

"Of course we'll find her," Ahmei reassured her.

"But what if we don't?"

"Then ..."

But Ahmei said nothing more. They sat in silence, watching the river. Up ahead, a few small boats with lanterns dangling from poles looked like fallen stars in the darkness.

When she was leaving Chengdu, Meike had made a vow to herself that she would personally petition the Emperor to pardon her father and restore the family's honor, and that once pardoned, her parents could return from their exile and they'd all be together again. But now, sitting in the dark, inching eastward on the current, surrounded by all this emptiness, Meike felt powerless, no more significant than the tree branch that floated alongside the boat. How could she, a mere girl, ever find a way to gain an audience with the Great Han Emperor? How would she even get to the capital at Luoyang? She didn't even know where Luoyang was. And she was penniless, their last coppers spent on getting to Kuaiji to find a woman she didn't know, who might not even take them in, assuming they could find her and assuming that she was still alive. People died of illnesses all the time. Yet Meike also knew that if she didn't do this, if she didn't find a way to petition the Emperor, she would never see her family again.



