



CHAPTER 1

Far away from here, following the Jade River, there was once a black mountain that cut into the sky like a jagged piece of rough metal. The villagers called it Fruitless Mountain because nothing grew on it and birds and animals did not rest there.

Crowded in the corner of where Fruitless Mountain and the Jade River met was a village that was a shade of faded brown. This was because the land around the village was hard and poor. To coax rice out of the stubborn land, the fields had to be flooded with water. The villagers had to tramp in the mud, bending and stooping and planting day after day. Working in the mud so much made it spread everywhere and the hot sun dried it onto their clothes and hair and homes. Over time, everything in the village had become the dull color of dried mud.

One of the houses in this village was so small that its wood boards, held together by the roof, made one think of a bunch of matches tied with a piece of twine. Inside, there was barely enough room for three people to sit around the table — which was lucky because only three people lived there. One of them was a young girl called Minli.

Minli was not brown and dull like the rest of the village. She had glossy black hair with pink cheeks, shining eyes always eager for adventure, and a fast smile that flashed from her face. When people saw her lively and impulsive spirit, they thought her name, which meant quick thinking, suited her well. "Too well," her mother sighed, as Minli had a habit of quick acting as well.

Ma sighed a great deal, an impatient noise usually accompanied with a frown at their rough clothes, rundown house, or meager food. Minli could not remember a time when Ma did not sigh; it often made Minli wish she had been called a name that meant gold or fortune instead. Because Minli and her parents, like the village and the land around them, were very poor. They were barely able to harvest enough rice to feed themselves, and the only money in the house was two old copper coins that sat in a blue rice bowl with a white rabbit painted on it. The coins and the bowl belonged to Minli; they had been given to her when she was a baby, and she had had them for as long as she could remember.

What kept Minli from becoming dull and brown like the rest of the village were the stories her father told her every night at dinner. She glowed with such wonder and excitement that even Ma would smile, though she would shake her head at the same time. Ba seemed to drop his gray and work weariness — his black eyes sparkled like raindrops in the sun when he began a story.

"Ba, tell me the story about Fruitless Mountain again," Minli would say as her mother spooned their plain rice into bowls. "Tell me again why nothing grows on it."

"Ah," Minli's father said, "you've heard this so many times. You know."

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oung Minli lives in the Valley of Fraitless Mountain, where she and her parents spend their days working hard in the fields. At night, Minli listens to her father's tales about the Old Man of the Moon, who knows the answers to everything. Minli sets out on a quest to find the Old Man of the Moon—he will know how she can bring good fortune to her family. Along the way, she meets many magical friends, including a talking fish, a powerful king, and a dragon who can't fly!

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