A Single Shard by Linda Sue Park—Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1

The story opens in the small coastal village of Ch'ulp'o in 12th-century Korea, a place celebrated throughout the region for its exquisite celadon pottery. The village is home to a community of skilled potters whose craft defines its reputation and economy. Living on the margins of this society — literally beneath one of its bridges — are two unlikely companions: an elderly, disabled man known as Crane-man, and a 12-year-old orphan boy called Tree-ear.

Tree-ear's name comes from a type of mushroom that grows on the trunks of dead or fallen trees, sprouting without any parent seed. As Crane-man notes, it is a fitting name for a boy with no parents. Tree-ear's own parents died when he was still a toddler, and Crane-man is the only family he has ever known. Crane-man earned his nickname because of a physical deformity — his foot and calf are twisted, forcing him to walk with a crutch and balance on one leg, much like the long-legged bird.

Despite their poverty, the two have developed a warm and functional routine. They survive by foraging in the surrounding woods for edible plants and mushrooms, and by scouring the garbage heaps left out by the village's wealthier residents. It is a hard life, but Crane-man has instilled in Tree-ear a strong moral code. He teaches the boy that there is dignity in honest work, however humble, and deep shame in theft or begging. As Crane-man often says, "Work gives a man dignity, stealing takes it away." He also offers Tree-ear a philosophy about knowledge: while scholars read great books, he and Tree-ear must learn to read the world itself — meaning they must be sharp observers of human behavior and nature to survive.

One day, Tree-ear is walking through the village when he spots a farmer ahead of him on the road. The farmer's rice bag has a hole in it, and grains of rice are trickling out with every step. Tree-ear faces a quiet moral crisis. He is hungry — deeply, chronically hungry — and the rice is falling to the ground unclaimed. He could simply wait until the farmer is out of sight and scoop it up. Instead, after a painful internal debate, he calls out and alerts the farmer to the hole. The farmer is grateful and, in thanks, tells Tree-ear to keep whatever rice has already fallen. Tree-ear collects it gladly, but he is later troubled when he reflects on his own hesitation — he did not speak up immediately, and he wonders whether that pause was a form of stealing in itself.

On one of his regular scavenging trips to the trash heaps near the potters' workshops, Tree-ear happens to stop and watch one of the village's master potters at work. The potter is named Min, and unlike every other craftsman in Ch'ulp'o, Min works outdoors, in the open air of his yard, without any concern that passersby might observe his technique. Tree-ear immediately reads something significant into this: Min must be so confident in his skill that he does not fear

imitation. He works as if to say, *go ahead and watch — you still won't be able to do what I do.* Tree-ear is transfixed. He watches Min's hands shape the clay on the wheel and sees a beautiful vase begin to emerge from what was moments ago a formless lump. Then, to Tree-ear's complete bewilderment, Min pauses, studies the vase carefully, and destroys it — pressing it back down into the clay as though it never existed. To Tree-ear's untrained eyes, it had looked perfect. He cannot understand why Min found it unworthy.

From that day forward, Tree-ear returns again and again to watch Min work.

Chapter 2

Tree-ear's fascination with Min deepens into something close to obsession. He makes daily visits to the spot near Min's yard, sometimes watching for long stretches of time. One morning, he arrives to find that Min is not outside. Seized by temptation, Tree-ear slips quietly into the yard to get a closer look at the finished pieces Min has left out. He is enchanted by what he sees — the graceful forms, the smooth surfaces, the subtle artistry in every detail. He picks up a nested box, a set of small interlocking ceramic containers, and turns it over in his hands, marveling at the craftsmanship.

He is so absorbed that he does not hear Min returning. When Min suddenly appears, Tree-ear startles badly and drops the box. It strikes the ground and is damaged. Min is furious. The boy has trespassed, handled work he had no right to touch, and broken something that took Min three full days to create. Tree-ear, deeply ashamed and genuinely remorseful, does not run away. Instead, he offers to work for Min without any pay to make up for the damage. Min considers this and agrees, setting the terms: since the box took three days to make, Tree-ear will give him nine days of labor in return. Min makes clear that he considers even this arrangement a bargain in his own favor, given that his skilled labor is worth far more than a boy's unskilled work, but he accepts it as a starting point.

That night, Tree-ear can barely sleep. He imagines himself sitting at Min's wheel, a beautiful pot rising from the clay under his hands. For the first time, a real dream has taken shape inside him — not just the vague wish of a hungry orphan, but a specific, burning ambition.

Chapter 3

Tree-ear arrives at Min's workshop before dawn on the first morning, full of hope and nervous excitement. He imagines that his work might begin with something related to pottery — watching Min throw pots, perhaps, or helping to prepare materials. Instead, Min sends him into the forest with a cart and an axe. His job is to chop wood and haul it to the communal kiln where all the village potters fire their work. The task is backbreaking. Tree-ear works all day chopping logs, loading the heavy cart, and pulling it to the kiln site. By the end of the day, his hands are raw and bleeding. A deep, painful blister forms and becomes infected.

That evening, Crane-man examines the wound carefully and makes a poultice from materials he finds nearby, applying it gently to Tree-ear's hand. He does not belittle the injury or the difficulty of the work. He simply tends to it.

The next morning, Min barely glances at Tree-ear's bandaged hand. He does, however, criticize the boy for failing to stack the wood neatly at the end of the previous day. Tree-ear feels a flash of indignation — Min had only said to fill the cart, not to stack the wood — but he swallows his frustration. His desire to stay, to keep working, to somehow get closer to the pottery and to Min's knowledge, is stronger than his pride.

The nine days of labor come and go. Tree-ear has chopped wood, hauled clay, and worked until his body ached — and he has not been allowed anywhere near a potter's wheel. At the end of the ninth day, he does something that surprises even himself: he begs Min to let him keep working, even without pay. Min agrees, but the conditions remain the same. Tree-ear's new task is to cut heavy chunks of clay from the clay pits along the riverbank and carry them back to the workshop. It is equally exhausting.

However, there is an unexpected benefit. By law, a master craftsman is required to provide a midday meal for anyone working in his service, even an unpaid assistant. Min's wife appears at midday with a generous bowl of rice and vegetables — far more food than Tree-ear usually sees in an entire day. He eats hungrily, and then guilt overtakes him. Crane-man is back under the bridge with nothing. The next day, Tree-ear brings his own bowl, eats only half his meal at the workshop, and carefully hides the rest to carry home to his friend that evening.

Chapter 4

Two months pass. Tree-ear continues his work for Min, and a small, quiet act of kindness becomes part of his daily routine: after he finishes his meal each day, he finds that his bowl has been silently refilled. Min's wife — without a word, without drawing any attention to herself — has been replenishing his food. She has apparently understood what the boy is doing with the second portion, and she wants to help. Tree-ear says nothing. She says nothing. But he is deeply moved.

His tasks at the workshop have progressed. He is now mixing the chunks of raw clay with water to form a thick mud, which is then spread out to drain and settle. This must be repeated multiple times — sometimes four or five — before Min is satisfied with the fineness of the clay's consistency. Min is a perfectionist in every sense. He examines the clay between his fingers, tests its texture, and often sends Tree-ear back to repeat the entire process. Nothing is ever quite good enough on the first attempt.

While carrying out these tasks, Tree-ear overhears conversations among the other potters of the village. They speak respectfully of Min's skill — his pottery is universally acknowledged as the finest in Ch'ulp'o, commanding higher prices than anyone else's — but they also grumble about how slowly he works. Customers grow tired of waiting. Still, Tree-ear senses something deeper about Min's relationship to his craft. He understands intuitively that a royal commission — an official order from the palace of the king — is not merely a professional goal for Min. It is, as the narrative puts it, "his life's desire." Everything Min does, every day he spends at the wheel, every piece he destroys in dissatisfaction, is somehow oriented toward that dream.

As summer fully arrives, life is as good as it has ever been for Tree-ear and Crane-man. Crane-man ventures out to gather ripe plums. Tree-ear has work, food, and purpose. He is still troubled by one thing — he cannot find an adequate way to thank Min's wife for her generosity. But even that worry sits lightly in what he later recalls as a golden time: warm nights, full bellies, and the pleasure of honest work.

Chapter 5

Autumn approaches. One early morning, Tree-ear spots another of the village's potters — a man named Kang — moving toward the communal kiln with a cart of covered objects, guarded and secretive. The potters of Ch'ulp'o are intensely protective of their techniques, always alert to the possibility that a rival might steal a method or a glaze formula. This is why Min's habit of working openly is so unusual and confident a statement.

Curious, Tree-ear lingers near Kang's workshop and manages to peer inside. He sees Kang working with two dishes of colored slip — one red, one white. This is puzzling. Potters in this tradition work with the familiar gray-brown clay that, when fired, produces the remarkable translucent celadon green that is Ch'ulp'o's pride. Red and white slip serve no obvious purpose in that process. Tree-ear files the observation away without yet understanding its significance.

Meanwhile, his inner life continues to be dominated by his dream of becoming a potter. He has begun to envision a specific creation: a prunus vase, tall and elegantly proportioned, designed to hold a single branch of flowering plum. He imagines the branch suspended inside the vase — the work of a human hand joined with the work of nature — and the thought fills him with a sense of peace that is almost spiritual.

As the weather cools, Crane-man presents Tree-ear with a new pair of sandals he has made. They are already too small, because Tree-ear has been growing rapidly, but the gesture is touching. The two begin preparing for winter, moving from the bridge to their usual cold-weather shelter: a root cellar in the corner of an abandoned house at the edge of the village.

Then Min's wife does something that surprises Tree-ear deeply. She brings him a warm jacket and trousers, explaining quietly that they belonged to her son, who died years before. Tree-ear had not known that Min ever had a child. He accepts the clothes gratefully, and that night he gives the jacket to Crane-man, keeping the trousers for himself. When the two of them stand together — Crane-man in the jacket, Tree-ear in the trousers — Crane-man laughs: "Apart, we look strange enough, but together we are as properly dressed as any man!"

Late one evening, Tree-ear cannot resist the pull of curiosity about Kang, and he circles back to peer through the potter's window. What he sees stops him cold. Kang is inscribing an unfired clay pot with a chrysanthemum design, carefully carving out the petals and then filling the recessed lines with the colored slip. No one has ever done this before. It is a genuine innovation — a way of embedding decoration directly into the clay itself before firing, so that the design becomes part of the vessel rather than something painted on the surface.

Chapter 6

Shortly after his discovery, Tree-ear learns that the royal court is sending an emissary — a man named Kim — to inspect the pottery workshops of Ch'ulp'o and the neighboring village of Kangjin. The purpose of the visit is to award a palace commission: an official, ongoing order to supply pottery to the royal household. For any potter in the region, this would be the achievement of a lifetime.

Tree-ear is immediately struck by a painful dilemma. He has seen Kang's new technique. He knows, with the instinctive understanding he has developed from months of observation, that Min could execute the same method with far greater skill and artistry than Kang. But to tell Min what he saw would be to steal Kang's idea — to take something that Kang has invented and hand it to a rival. That night, unable to sleep, Tree-ear brings the problem to Crane-man. The old man thinks carefully and gives his answer: as long as Kang is keeping the technique to himself, it belongs to him alone. No one else should speak of it. But once he reveals it to the world, it is no longer his secret — it belongs to everyone.

Tree-ear resolves to say nothing.

All the potters in the village begin preparing their finest work for Emissary Kim's inspection. They set up displays along the waterfront. When Tree-ear goes to look at Kang's display, he sees the incised chrysanthemum pieces for the first time in their finished, fired state — and they are remarkable. The red slip has turned black in the kiln, creating a striking contrast of black and white against the jade green of the celadon glaze. It is undeniably new, different, and beautiful.

When Kim arrives and tours the displays, he is impressed by Kang's innovation but notes a significant flaw: the work is careless. Kang has a good idea but imprecise execution. Kim then speaks privately with Min, recalling earlier pieces of Min's that he has admired, and hints strongly that he would very much like to see new work from Min's workshop when he returns from Kangjin to make his final decision.

Chapter 7

With Kang's incised designs now publicly displayed and known throughout the village, Tree-ear feels free to tell Min what he observed. He goes to the master potter and describes the technique — the carving, the colored slip, the way the design becomes part of the vessel. Min listens without a word of thanks and immediately sets to work.

What follows is a period of ferocious, almost frightening effort. Min works with the intensity of a man possessed. He eats little, sleeps less, and drives himself from before dawn until long after dark, by lamplight. Tree-ear describes him as being like a man with a demon inside him. The boy assists where he can, and something significant happens during this period: mixing and testing the clay one day, Tree-ear suddenly *knows* — without being told, without measuring, without checking — that the clay has reached exactly the right consistency. It is a moment of genuine intuition, born from months of repetitive, attentive work. He has developed a feel for the material that cannot be learned from instruction alone.

Min creates five pieces that he considers good enough to fire in the kiln at night, after all the other potters have gone. Tree-ear stays to watch. The glaze on incised work, he understands, will settle into the carved crevices, creating subtle shadows and variations in depth that will make the design almost seem to breathe in certain lights.

That evening, waiting for the kiln to do its work, Tree-ear asks Crane-man something that has long puzzled him: why did Crane-man never go to live in a monastery, as many poor men do? Crane-man's answer is surprising. He had been on his way to a monastery once, long ago. But a fox crossed his path, and everyone knows that foxes are evil omens — creatures of malevolent magic in Korean folklore, capable of bewitching a man and luring him to his death. Crane-man had fled in terror, sheltered under a bridge for the night, and eventually made the bridge his home. He tells the story with a laugh, after all these years, but Tree-ear is unsettled by it.

The next morning, Tree-ear rushes to the kiln to see the results — and finds that Min has shattered every single one of the five pieces. Brown blotches, caused by some unpredictable chemistry in the kiln, have ruined the glaze on every pot. This is the cruelest kind of failure, because it is entirely beyond the potter's control. No amount of skill or care can prevent the kiln from occasionally doing this. Tree-ear collects some of the shards and hurls them into the river.

Chapter 8

Emissary Kim returns from Kangjin and holds his final review. Min has nothing new to show him. Kang receives a temporary commission. But Kim is not finished with Min. He comes to the potter's house and makes a personal appeal: he has admired Min's work for years, he believes in Min's talent, and he is genuinely reluctant to give the permanent commission to someone whose work he considers inferior. He urges Min to create new samples and bring them to the royal palace at Songdo, the capital city, for further consideration.

Min's pride is a serious obstacle. He is too old, he says, to make the journey himself. And he cannot bear to show the emissary the ruined shards — pieces that failed through no fault of his artistry, but failures nonetheless. He refuses to display them.

After Kim leaves, Tree-ear approaches Min's wife and makes an offer: he will carry the new samples to Songdo himself. She is moved, but cautious. She agrees only if Tree-ear promises to return quickly and safely. Then she does something that touches the boy profoundly — she tells him that she wants him to call her *Ajima*, meaning "auntie," a term of warm familial affection in Korean culture, reserved for elderly female relatives. For a boy who has never had a mother or any female family connection, the invitation is overwhelming.

Min agrees to have new work ready by midsummer. That night, Tree-ear tells Crane-man about the journey ahead, and his courage immediately begins to crumble under the weight of what he has committed to. The road to Songdo crosses unfamiliar mountain terrain. There may not even be clear paths in some stretches. And who knows what dangers might be lurking — robbers, wild animals, rockslides? Crane-man offers him the most practical wisdom he knows: do not think about the whole journey at once. Think only of one hill, one valley, one day at a time. Your body cannot walk to Songdo, but it can walk one more step.

The following day, Tree-ear gathers his courage and asks Min directly if he might someday learn the craft of pottery. Min's response is harsh and immediate. The trade passes from father to son. Tree-ear is not his son. The boy is stung deeply by the rejection — not just the refusal, but the blunt reminder of his orphaned state.

Chapter 9

Tree-ear broods over Min's words. The anger and grief rise up in him: it is not his fault that he is an orphan, and it is not his fault that Min lost his son. Why should the accident of birth determine who may or may not learn to make beautiful things? Crane-man explains the history patiently. In earlier times, there had been a law requiring potters' sons to follow their fathers into the craft, because so many young men were leaving the trade for easier work. The law is no longer in force, but the tradition it created has calcified into custom. It is simply the way things are done.

Tree-ear falls into a period of genuine depression. The vision of the prunus vase he has always dreamed of making begins to feel like a taunt rather than an inspiration. But gradually, he finds a way forward: he cannot work the wheel, but he can shape clay by hand. He begins carrying a small ball of clay in his waist pouch and spending his idle moments — resting, waiting, thinking — fashioning small figurines. His fingers learn the feel of the material, and slowly a particular shape begins to emerge, almost as if the clay itself is suggesting what it wants to become.

Meanwhile, Min completes his new samples: two perfect inlaid vases, the finest work he has ever produced. He gives Tree-ear a special wooden backpack frame called a *jiggeh* to carry them, but worries that the vases are not adequately cushioned. Tree-ear mentions that Crane-man is an expert at weaving straw. Ajima goes to Crane-man, who constructs a carrying vessel so sturdy and well-padded that even heavy blows do not disturb what is inside.

Ajima also makes an arrangement with Crane-man: while Tree-ear is away, Crane-man will help her with household tasks in exchange for food and shelter. At first, Crane-man's pride makes him reluctant — he does not want charity. Tree-ear finds the right words: Ajima genuinely needs help, and Crane-man would be doing her a service, not accepting a handout.

On the night before Tree-ear's departure, he presents Crane-man with a gift: a small clay figurine of a monkey that he has molded by hand and fired in the kiln. Crane-man takes a piece of twine and loops it through the figurine, hanging it from his belt with evident pride.

Chapter 10

The journey begins well. The villages along the route are hospitable, and Tree-ear usually finds food and a place to sleep at the end of each day. Ajima has packed him provisions, and Min has given him a small amount of money for expenses. The landscape changes as he moves inland and upward, away from the coastal flatlands toward the mountains.

One night, no village appears at the end of the day's walk. Tree-ear must sleep in the open. He finds a spot between two large boulders, lights a small fire, and settles in with the jiggeh pressed close to the rock face behind him. He is just drifting toward sleep when he hears a sound in the undergrowth nearby. A fox emerges from the shadows and approaches the fire.

Tree-ear is paralyzed with dread. Everyone knows what foxes can do — their eyes can bewitch a man, draw him helplessly toward his own destruction. Tree-ear presses himself into the crevice between the boulders, squeezes his eyes shut, and does not move. He focuses everything he has on remaining still. He does not look at the fox's eyes. He waits.

After what feels like an eternity, the fox moves away. Tree-ear spends the rest of the night rigid with fear, but when dawn finally comes, he is alive and unharmed, and the jiggeh with its precious contents is untouched. He finds himself laughing out loud with relief — and then realizes, with something like wonder, that he has survived an encounter that sent Crane-man fleeing in terror all those years ago. He stayed. He did not run.

Continuing his journey, he reaches the large river town of Puyo. In the marketplace, he sees something alarming: a merchant is already displaying incised chrysanthemum vases — work in the same style as Kang's new technique, now spreading outward from Ch'ulp'o. Min's samples will need to reach Songdo quickly, before the technique becomes commonplace.

Before leaving Puyo, Tree-ear fulfills a request from Crane-man: he climbs to the top of the Rock of the Falling Flowers, a high cliff above the river. The place has a haunting history. Long ago, enemies had cornered a king's court at this spot. The women of the palace, refusing to be captured, threw themselves from the cliff into the river below. Crane-man told Tree-ear about this before he left, adding the caution that leaping into death is not the only form of true courage.

Chapter 11

From the top of the Rock of the Falling Flowers, the view of the river far below is breathtaking. But Tree-ear is not alone for long. Two bandits appear on the narrow path — gaunt, hungry men with the look of people who have been desperate for a long time. They search Tree-ear and the jiggeh, but find no food. Furious, looking for something to destroy, one of them reaches into the jiggeh, pulls out one of Min's vases, walks to the edge of the cliff, and hurls it into the air. There is a long, agonizing silence, and then the sound of pottery shattering on the rocks far below. The second vase follows. Then the bandits walk away.

Tree-ear stands at the edge of the cliff, looking down. He thinks about the court women who jumped from this very spot. For a moment, the thought is not entirely abstract. He is utterly destroyed by what has just happened. He has failed Min. He has failed Ajima. He has made a long, dangerous journey for nothing.

But Crane-man's voice comes back to him: *leaping into death is not the only way to show courage.* And Ajima's voice: *you promised to return.* And his own stubbornness, which has carried him this far.

Tree-ear descends from the rock and searches the base of the cliff along the riverbank, picking through the rubble. The vases are gone — ground to pieces on the rocks. But he finds one shard, a single fragment of one of the vases, that is still intact, its glaze smooth and perfect on one surface. He wraps the sharp edges carefully in a ball of clay to protect both the shard and himself, and he continues walking toward Songdo.

Chapter 12

The remaining days of the journey are the hardest. Without the provisions Ajima packed — which the bandits took along with his money — Tree-ear sometimes goes a full day without food. He sleeps where he can. He keeps walking.

When he finally reaches Songdo, the scale of the capital city is overwhelming. He has never seen anything like it. He finds his way to the palace and is immediately stopped by guards. He is filthy, ragged, and apparently half-starved. Nobody wants to let a boy in this condition anywhere near the emissary. Tree-ear refuses to leave. He insists, firmly and repeatedly, that he must see Emissary Kim. His persistence — born from everything the journey has put him through — eventually gets him past the guards and in front of Kim's assistant, and finally into Kim's own presence.

He explains what happened: the bandits, the destroyed vases, the long walk anyway. Then he unwraps the shard and places it in Kim's hands.

Kim holds the fragment up to the light, turning it slowly. He speaks to his assistant with quiet intensity, saying that this is what is meant when people say the finest celadon has the "radiance of jade and clarity of water" — and that he would say those words of this piece. The inlay work, he adds, is remarkable.

On the spot, Kim writes out a commission for ten more pieces of Min's work. He arranges for Tree-ear to return to Ch'ulp'o by boat — a much faster route than the one he walked.

Chapter 13

The boat journey home is swift. Tree-ear arrives in Ch'ulp'o with the commission document and the news of his success. But something is wrong. Both Min and Ajima receive him quietly, with expressions that do not match the joyful news he has brought.

They tell him gently: while he was away, Crane-man had an accident. He fell from the bridge — the bridge that had been his home for so many years. The cold water was a shock his heart could not survive. He died.

Tree-ear's grief is immediate and total. Crane-man was his father in every way that mattered, the only constant presence in his life since infancy. The bridge, the root cellar, the shared plums, the philosophical advice, the monkey figurine worn proudly on the old man's belt — all of it is gone.

Min brings Tree-ear a small object: it is the clay monkey. Crane-man was clutching it when they found him. Min holds it carefully, and for the first time, he really looks at the figurine — the skill in its small form, the care that went into shaping something so tiny and precise. Something shifts in the old potter's face.

The next morning, Min gives Tree-ear his usual orders — but this time, he tells the boy to chop some extra-large logs, considerably bigger than anything he has been asked to cut before. Tree-ear cannot understand why, and Min begins to scold him impatiently: How is Min supposed to complete a commission for ten vases by himself? How is Tree-ear supposed to help if he does not have a wheel of his own? And how can a wheel be made without large enough logs?

Tree-ear understands. Min is accepting him as his official apprentice. He is going to build the boy his own potter's wheel.

That night, Ajima invites Tree-ear to move into the potter's house permanently. She also gives him a new name: Hyung-pil. Min and Ajima's dead son had been called Hyung-gu. The shared syllable — *hyung* — signals that Tree-ear is now considered a sibling of that lost boy, and therefore a child of this house.

The orphan who was named after a mushroom with no parent seed now has a name, a family, a home, and a wheel.

The novel closes with an author's note describing a real celadon prunus vase from the 12th century, decorated with cranes soaring among clouds, glazed in a delicate grayish green. It is considered one of Korea's greatest cultural treasures. It is known as the *Thousand Cranes Vase*. The name of its maker is unknown — but the reader is left to draw their own conclusion about who that maker might have been.