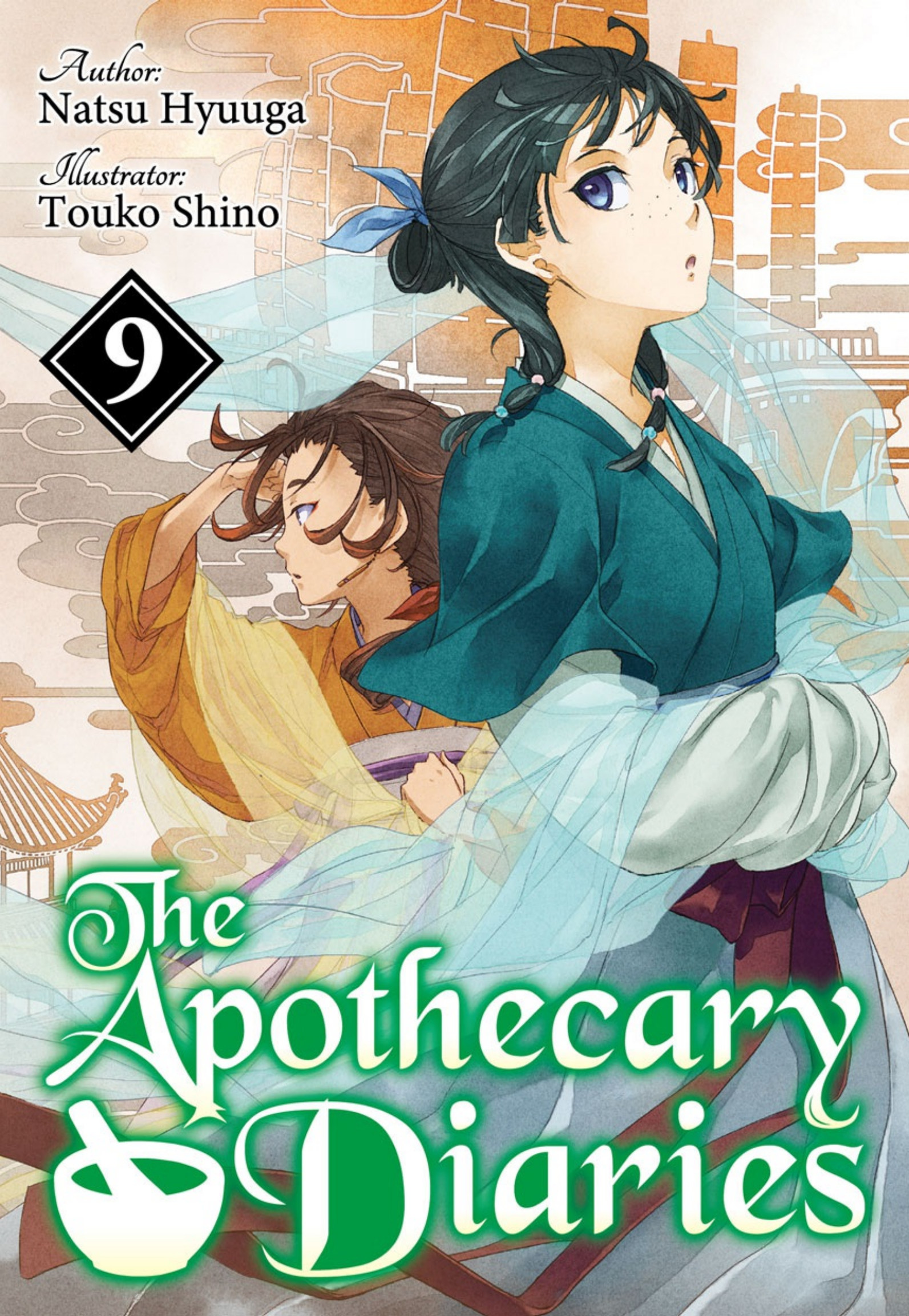
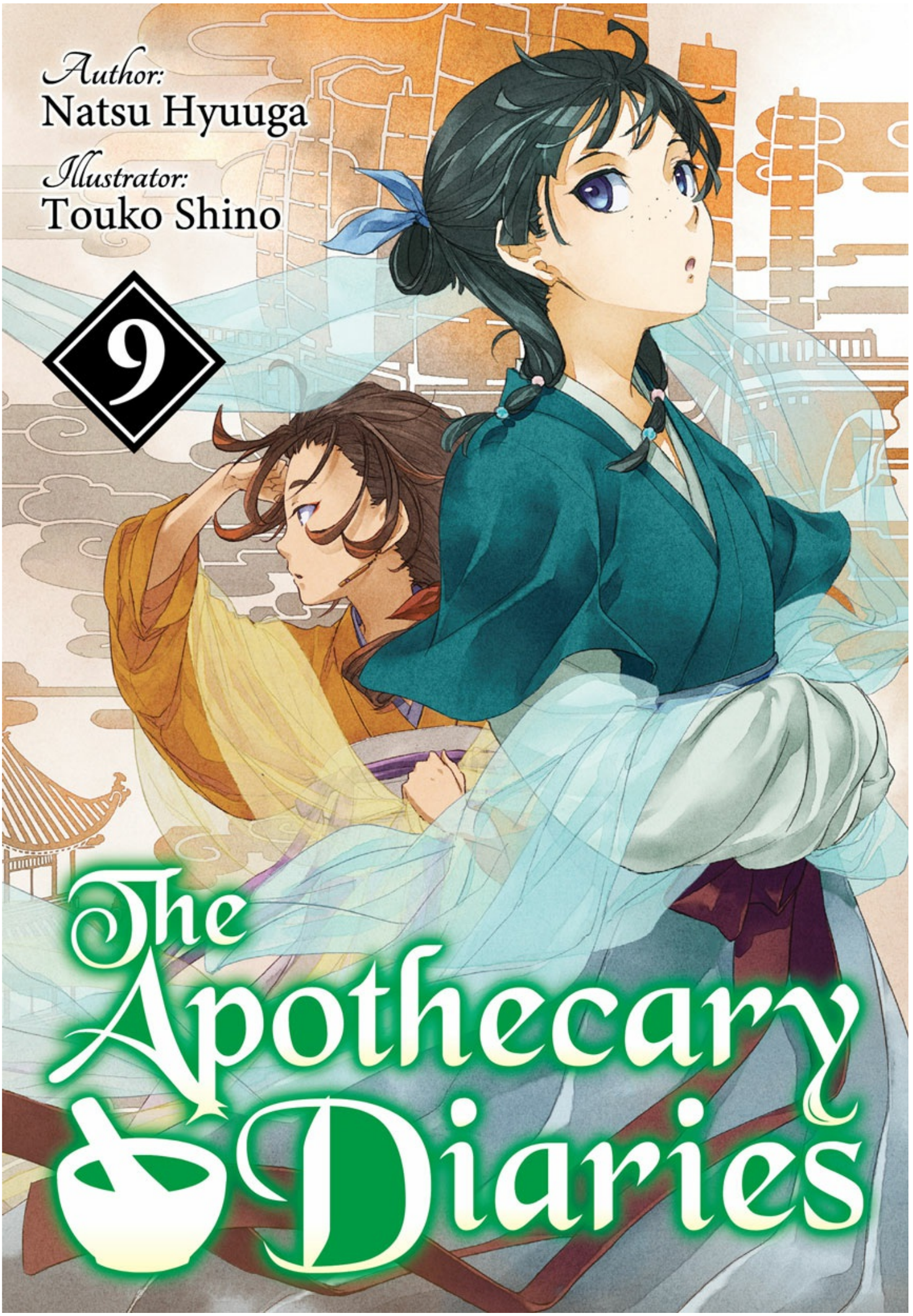

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The Apothecary Diaries: Volume 9 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10
11. Part 11
12. Part 12
13. Part 13
14. Part 14
15. Part 15
16. Part 16


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Prologue

The nightmare refused to end.

Still slung under an arm, Maomao was dragged into the next room. She couldn't even fight.

Her heart pounded. Jinshi, the one who was holding her, had a fresh burn on his side. Although she could well be in danger here, as an apothecary, Maomao was drawn to the injury.

It was a good, clean burn. No blood... She racked her brain, asking herself which medicines she would need. Purple Cloud salve, that might be simplest. *Purple gromwell, touki, and beeswax, I think I can get those. Sesame oil, maybe not.*

No, this was no good. Maomao shook her head. Purple gromwell was only effective on relatively minor burns, as she'd confirmed on her own arm. It could actually have the opposite effect with more serious burns, she recalled.

Things that work on burns. What works on burns?

At the very least, she would need a balm to prevent the skin from drying out. She would have to find more oil and beeswax.

As she was trying to decide how to treat Jinshi, he finally put her down.

"Master Jinshi," she said. He had collapsed onto the bed, grimacing. "Does it hurt?"

"I must say it does."

And indeed it would. It might be slightly numb now, but pressing a burning brand to your own skin was always going to be painful.

Jinshi's pain, however, appeared to be something else.

"Feeling a wave of regret, sir?" Maomao found herself asking. The man who until moments ago had seemed in control of everything was leaning his forehead against the bed and weeping. Maomao could see no expression on his face in profile, and he himself may not have been aware of the tears pouring

from his eyes.



Even as Maomao spoke, she went around the room, wondering what medicines might be available in here. She quickly found a mortar and pestle that she commandeered, along with several trays. She wanted to go to the brazier, try to warm some water, but she wanted to keep it as far from Jinshi as possible. In fact, she moved it to a far corner of the room.

"What would I regret?"

What? It was hard to put into words. Even Maomao understood that Jinshi had absolutely no interest in the throne. Otherwise, he would never have had such good relations with Empress Gyokuyou. If solidifying such relations had been one of his goals here, he had chosen a hell of a way to do it.

Neither did he appear to regret his injury. Much like when he had sustained the wound to his cheek, he had actually seemed pleased. He was not, in fact, as attached to his looks as people around him thought, and he seemed to resent their assumptions.

So why was he so depressed?

Maomao located a spoon and placed it on the table by the bedside. There was a pharmaceutical spatula for stirring medicine, but no bladed instruments.

"His Majesty looked less enraged than...sad. May I take it, sir, that grieving the Emperor was not your intention?"

"That's right... I only needed him to get angry."

So was it the Emperor's bereaved look that had so disturbed Jinshi?

I suspect the Emperor...

Maomao thought this had to do with the relationship between Jinshi and His Majesty. And Ah-Duo as well. It was only a distant guess in her mind, but the more she'd had to do with all of them, the more certain she had become—even if she would never have spoken the secret aloud.

It hurts to have your father get angry at you.

Supposedly, one needed objective proof to change a hypothesis into a certainty. Maomao was trying to find that proof among human emotions. What a very vague and unscientific place to look.

And yet, having seen the Emperor's eyes fill with sadness, and the way he hesitated in front of Empress Gyokuyou, Maomao could think only that Jinshi was the current Emperor's eldest son.

I just keep learning things I'd rather not know, she thought. She sighed as she looked at Jinshi. Things seemed to have calmed down a bit, so she made to go to the other room. But Jinshi immediately grabbed her wrist. "Where are you going?"

"To get medicine. The ingredients are in the other room."

Jinshi rose and began opening the drawers of a cabinet along one wall. There were enough medicines in there to make Maomao's head spin, components of every conceivable kind.

"Ngghaa!" She thought she might devolve into waving and drooling. She wanted to burst into her happy dance, but she fought the urge and took a deep breath instead. Jinshi's eyes on her were piercing. Among the variety of things in the drawers was salve, already prepared. She opened the large clamshell and took a sniff. She was greeted by the aroma of honey and the unmistakable scent of sesame. It didn't seem to contain any other ingredients.

She also located disinfectant alcohol and bandages. Then she took the balm and stood before Jinshi. "Master Jinshi, I'm going to treat your injury now. Please let me see it." She tried to get him to sit back down on the bed, but he spun around and sat her down instead. "What do you think you're doing, sir?" She looked at him, hoping her displeasure was evident.

His fingers brushed her chin. She raised her head, trying to avoid him.

"You're going to pretend you can't imagine, when we've come so far? No one else can serve as my nighttime companion now." Jinshi smirked, but fat droplets of sweat showed that he was reaching his limit.

Maomao simply refused to speak. Annoyed, she grabbed his robe, which he was still only half wearing.

"Which of us is it that lacks imagination? Did you think I wouldn't be angry to be put in this position?" She stretched until they were almost nose-to-nose. "What you're doing is tyranny, Master Jinshi. A damn, dirty trick meant to tell

everyone what *you* want. You don't care about anyone else. You don't care about your status. What you've done is self-centered and masochistic and so deeply exasperating that I don't even know what to say about it!"

Jinshi didn't answer, but his face spoke clearly: *You obviously do.*

"Empress Gyokuyou's son—the Crown Prince—and Consort Lihua's son are both hardly a year old..."

Children were weak. Until they were at least seven, you never knew if they might die. Even if you weren't using a poisonous face powder, they might succumb to illness. Some accident might befall them. They might even be assassinated.

"What exactly is your plan if something happens to the Emperor?"

"I'm working very hard to make sure nothing does." Jinshi's voice was low and rumbling, nothing like the syrupy nymph's voice he sometimes used. His eyes were dark, and he was obviously clear on what he intended here. Maomao was about to say something else, but the words caught in her throat.

What Jinshi had done was insane. That, at least, was the only thing Maomao or Gyokuyou could have called it. She didn't know what His Majesty must think, but it seemed to have been a bolt from the blue for him.

But then, was it any less mad, what Jinshi had been forced to live with? He had the power; he could have done any number of even crazier things. That he had the generosity of heart to listen to Maomao's words made it hard to shout at him now.

Young women are sometimes described as sheltered, but Jinshi had been similarly isolated, packed into a little box until he had been crushed. Many might have simply died, smashed by the pressure.

I sure as hell wouldn't have put up with it.

Neither, it seemed, would Jinshi. Just like Maomao, he would fight back, try to escape. But unlike Maomao, he would do more than simply let his emotions run away with him, let his feelings dictate his actions. He thought things through, and at the end of all his thinking, he had come to a most Jinshi-like conclusion—and had acted on it.

Maomao was a swirl of emotions. She didn't know what to do. She wished she could have been someone more ignorant of the situation, of human nature. How much easier her life would have been if she could have just stood stupidly to one side and watched.

This son of a...!

She raised her hand, stopping it just in front of Jinshi's forehead. She made a circle with her pointer finger and thumb, then tensed the muscles of her hand and...

"Yowch!"

...gave his forehead a good flick. She could have slapped him, but it would have left a mark, and she didn't want that. She knew very well that this was the height of disrespect, and that it could cost her her head if she wasn't careful. But she figured Jinshi would permit her this much.

Hell, I'm the one being generous, here!

Jinshi had a hand to his forehead and was looking at her, amazed.

"Shut up and let me treat you. *Sir*."

Jinshi stuck out his lower lip. "I've got a lot on my mind, you know."

"Well, that's not my problem, I'm an apothecary. Let me do my work." On this point, she wouldn't budge. It had been Jinshi's show earlier, but she wasn't going to let him push her around now.

Maomao picked up the spatula she'd found. "I'm running out of time because you won't leave me alone. I'd hoped I could give you some sedatives, but that ship has sailed." She slipped past him, came around behind him, and pressed down firmly.

"Hrgh!" he said, a very un-nymph-like sound. Maomao somehow managed to flip him onto his side on the bed, a pretty good trick considering how large and heavy he was.

She breathed a long breath out as she heated the spatula in the brazier in the corner of the room.

"Please don't move," she said.

“What the hell are you doing? You’re not planning to *grill* me, are you?”

“I’m not grilling anything! I need searing heat to disinfect things.” She fluttered the spatula to cool it a bit, then wrapped it in a clean cloth. “We aren’t going to burn it away. We’re going to cut it.”

“Cut...?” Jinshi’s face twisted, and then he went pale. But it was too late. He’d done this to himself. Now he would have to live with the consequences.

“If we don’t get rid of the charred skin and flesh, the poison will spread from there. I wish I could get rid of all of it, to keep it from festering, but since there are no knives here, this will have to do.”

She would use the metal spatula to cut away the ruined flesh. It would be painful, but he would just have to bear it.

“N-Now, just a minute. Aren’t you more worried about some made-up excuse for a knife?”

“I don’t want to hear any complaining from the man who burned a brand into his own skin! I don’t have any knives here, and shaving the stuff away is the only effective first aid. We can do more long-term treatment later.”

She wasn’t actually sure that was true—whether she would be able to treat him once they left this room. She wanted to make sure she at least salved the burn to prevent poison from spreading in it.

It’s a question of whether we can make time for treatment later.

The night was already late. Maomao had work the next day, as did Jinshi. She had a suspicion he wouldn’t take the day off even if she ordered him to. After work tomorrow—well, really, today—she would have to get tools and medicines together and redo her treatment.

In her mind, the biggest question was whether Jinshi could really live his life without anyone discovering his scar. “Can you even change your own clothes?” she asked.

“I’m not a baby.”

“I’m sorry, but which of us gets help dressing themselves every day?”

Maomao dipped a bandage into the alcohol from the drawer and pressed it

against the wound. The charred flesh had an unmistakable smell.

Maybe I can get some grilled meat for dinner tonight.

“Hey! Did you say something?”

“No, sir. Nothing.”

Jinshi winced as she disinfected the area around the wound.

“Keep a stiff upper lip, sir. You can bite on, I don’t know, a blanket or something.” She turned up the blanket on the bed and pushed it toward him. He reflexively backed away, his lovely countenance twisting in disgust. “You’ll bite your tongue,” Maomao said.

“I won’t,” he said. Suddenly—what was he thinking?—he was upon Maomao. He bit into her shoulder.

“Stop that, sir. My hand will slip.”

He made a noise that might have been a response. She no longer felt his teeth through the fabric, but he didn’t lie back down. She felt only a gentle tugging at her shirt.

“Just don’t get any drool on me,” she said.

“Mrn...”

Was that a yes? Or a no? She wasn’t sure.

Very well. Maomao took this as justification not to hold back. She pressed the spatula to the burned skin. A muffled scream came from right by her ear, but she conducted her work smartly and professionally.

I have to make sure no one *else hears him yell like that.*

The hand that sneaked around behind her gripped harder and harder. She kept working, even though he seemed bent on making it as difficult as possible.

Chapter 1: Yao's Request

Utterly exhausted or not, morning still came. And with morning came the need to go to work.

Maomao was so tired, she didn't want to think. She was dogged by sleepiness, but the insuperable proposal she faced forced her mind to work.

I wonder if I'll be summoned after I'm done today. I have to think about what medicines I need to treat a burn...

She pondered as she organized a cabinet drawer. The end of the year was approaching, and the apprentice physicians as well as the court ladies assigned to the medical office were cleaning the place top to bottom.

"Phew! Boy, am I tired!" said Yao, giving a big stretch. She had a rag in her hand and was diligently cleaning the shelves.

"You think that about does it?" En'en asked. She wrung out the cloth that she, likewise, was using. The apprentice physicians were mostly handling heavy lifting; cleaning the room itself was left to Maomao and the others.

"Oh, it's fine," Maomao said, returning the drawers. When they were done cleaning, they would be off of work. Court ladies got vacation over the end of one year and the start of the next. The doctors took shifts staying at court, but there was no need for Maomao and the other women to stick around. Word was that if the young ladies weren't given time off, their families objected vociferously.

Most of them are just here to learn to be decent homemakers, anyway. Or find a husband.

Yao and En'en, however, were here to work, so Maomao doubted they would spend their vacation at home. Yao's father was dead, and control of her family had passed into the hands of her uncle, who was bent on marrying Yao off. En'en, who lived for her young mistress, regarded him as an archenemy.

"Maomao, what are you going to do on your vacation? They said you were called home yesterday. Are you going to help out with work there?" Yao asked

as she dried out her rag and washed her hands.

Being “called home” was a convenient cover for being summoned by Jinshi. The story, she surmised, was that an emergency case had turned up at her father’s apothecary shop and she had been called away to help. After all, there had to be something to excuse Maomao’s late-night disappearance and predawn return.

So he was planning this all along! She felt anger bubbling up in her, but she knew she had to stay calm for the moment.

The answer to Yao’s question was no. Maomao could only wish she was going home for a few days—she would be lucky to get a day trip. A certain idiot nobleman had inflicted a major burn on himself. In fact, he seemed likely to come for her this very day once work was over.

The honest answer, unfortunately, was not one Maomao could give. She tried to think of what she could say instead. Probably best to pretend she would be going back to the pleasure district.

“If anything, I expect us to be raking it in this time of year,” she said.

“You do?”

“Not every lord with a bulging purse goes home. The more customers who show up, the more the shop profits. We could be very busy.”

Yao looked perplexed, but En’en took Maomao’s meaning and glared at her. With her information network, she probably knew very well what Maomao’s “family home” did. Maomao hardly expected the two of them to show up at a brothel in the pleasure district anytime soon.

“Maomao, if you’d kindly refrain from saying uncouth things in the young lady’s presence,” En’en said.

But it’s true!

In simple terms, men with ample salaries would come to spend them on the butterflies of the night—and because doctors took this time off just like everyone else, the madam insisted that the apothecary shop remain open. Maomao had been planning to go home, since she didn’t know if her father

would be able to. So much for those plans.

The old hag's going to give me a piece of her mind again. Maomao was particularly curious how the still-amateur apothecary Sazen was getting along, but she wouldn't get to find out this time. *I'm sorry, Sazen! Hang in there!*

Even the madam would have to respect orders handed down by an important noble. (Although she might squeeze something out of them for it.) She was a sharp old battle-axe; Maomao would have to be careful not to give her any hint as to the true import of the command.

I entrusted the shop to Kokuyou, so it should be fine...I hope. She thought of the cheery man with the bandage on his face. His knowledge of medicine was trustworthy, but his somewhat lackadaisical personality was less confidence-inspiring.

To these concerns could be added her little patch of medicinal herbs and the madam's various unreasonable requests.

"The poor don't take vacations, I'm afraid. I'm going to stay busy," she said. Yao was silent at that.

"Sounds like you've got a lot going on," En'en said.

"Sure do," Maomao replied without hesitation.

En'en looked at Yao. The young mistress seemed to want to say something, but unfortunately, Maomao couldn't guess what. She put away the cleaning implements, and when she looked at Yao again, she could see the young woman's mouth almost moving. "Is something the matter?" she asked.

"Um... You live at an apothecary's place, right, Maomao?"

"Yes..." Maomao said cautiously. She'd told Yao about that. The other woman seemed impatient about something.

Maomao looked at her, puzzled, and Yao finally summoned the resolve to come out with whatever she was thinking. "D-Do you think maybe we could come to your house on vacation? I mean, t-to learn something about medicine!"

"Y-Young mistress!" said En'en, shocked. She couldn't believe Yao had said

that.

Well, considering where *my house is...*

En'en wouldn't want to let her precious mistress take a single step into the pleasure district. She was looking at Maomao, silently begging her to come up with some reason to refuse.

"I don't think you should, Yao. It's not very safe there. And besides, it's full of men who smell worse than the soldiers around here. I think it could be a little risky for you." Maomao had already established that she was going to be busy. She needed to put Yao off, and now.

"But *you* live there, right, Maomao?" Yao wasn't deterred; in fact, she seemed more determined than ever.

"Yes. I was born there and have lived there my whole life. I know how to handle myself. Not all of us do."

That seemed like common sense to Maomao, but it only made Yao even more set on not losing this argument. "Then I'll just have to get used to it too!"

"Young mistress, it's dangerous! Be a good girl and spend your vacation at home."

"If I do that, *he'll* come around—you know who!"

Maomao didn't necessarily know, but she could guess: Yao's uncle.

She's looking for a sanctuary somewhere, Maomao realized. Bringing Yao and En'en to the Verdigris House, however, would pose far too many problems. Maomao had to be available to attend Jinshi, and she couldn't let anyone know. If worst came to worst, they could shut the madam up with a few coins, but Maomao wasn't sure the same thing would work on Yao. She had to find some way to deflect the eager young woman.

"But where would you sleep? It is a lodging of a sort, but not the kind of place you'd want to stay."

Customers were forever coming and going at night, and Maomao's residence amounted to no more than a shack. A shack in which Sazen and Chou-u were currently living. No, Yao couldn't stay there.

“I don’t think you could cope with Maomao’s house, young mistress. It’s not, ahem, actually a fit place for human habitation.”

“And how would you know that, En’en?” Yao asked.

Hey! I’m a human! And I habitate there!

So En’en had even investigated where Maomao lived. Talk about your thoroughgoing servants. Maomao wondered if she might even have her suspicions about Maomao’s absence last night. She felt a trickle of sweat roll down her back.

“Don’t you know anyone else around here? You know, a friend you could stay with?” Maomao asked. It must have been the wrong question, because Yao blanched and she looked like she might, just perhaps, start to cry.

En’en snapped, “Apologize right now!”

Oops...

Now Maomao realized: Yao didn’t have any other friends. It was Maomao’s fault for not figuring that out. This was going to take some professional backpedaling. “Of course, with it being new year’s, everyone is going to be getting together with their families. Even your friends might not have room for you...”

“That’s exactly right. And she thought maybe you would, Maomao, since you’ve got work. Right, mistress?” En’en flashed Maomao an approving thumbs-up. Maomao wasn’t so sure about this, though. This looked like it was going to end with Yao being invited to the pleasure district.

Worst-case scenario, I guess I can rent them a room at the Verdigris House.

No, that would never do. There were too many customers to have any vacant rooms. And even if they had any, the crusty old madam would expect to be handsomely compensated for it—and after all that, Yao would have to endure hearing patrons moan and grunt all night long. Maomao questioned if she would hang onto her sanity. Or for that matter if En’en might simply murder the moaners before the night was out.

The biggest problem, though, was that then Maomao wouldn’t be able to

hide her absences. Wasn't there someplace that could solve everyone's problems?

"So you're looking to stay somewhere other than a typical inn, right?" Maomao said.

"That's correct," En'en replied on Yao's behalf. "She tried to move to a different house once before, but her uncle found her the next day."

Who or what is this uncle? Maomao wondered. If En'en was good at information gathering, maybe that was where she'd learned it.

"You aren't afraid he would find my place just as quickly?"

"No, I think anything in your vicinity would be safe."

What was that supposed to mean?

"Because there's someone who would crush any nasty little bugs who showed up," En'en clarified.

Ah...

She understood: En'en was referring to the strategist who shall not be named.

Maomao felt her blood run cold. Did *he* suspect anything about last night? If so, the situation had the makings of a civil war.

No... I think I'm still safe.

If *he'd* had any idea, he would already have smashed through the walls of the medical office. He would be here right now.

Fortuitously, the thought gave Maomao an idea: the perfect place for Yao and En'en to stay. Somewhere safe, somewhere they wouldn't be detected by Yao's relatives, and somewhere they couldn't be extricated even if they were found.

Yes, such a place existed—but Maomao could hardly bring herself to say it.

"It looks like you've got something in mind, Maomao," En'en said, leaning in. "Won't you share with us?"

Her nose was barely an inch from Maomao's. At this distance, Maomao couldn't even avert her gaze.

Thankfully, Yao stepped in. “En’en, give her some space.” Phew. “So, where is this place?” Not phew.

“Where is it?” Maomao asked, holding up her hands in surrender. “Well, it’s the house of someone you both know. I absolutely refuse to ask him for this, so if you want his help, you’ll have to ask him yourself.” Yao came from a good enough family that he wouldn’t begrudge them a room, at least. “And by *him*, I mean a certain penny-pinching, tousle-haired spectacle-wearer.”

She spoke, of course, of the freak strategist’s nephew, Lahan.

Lahan's house would be a dicey place for Yao and her companion to stay. It certainly met their needs, but at the same time, there were some problems.

Problem one: it was the freak strategist's house.

Problem two: they would be staying at the house of a strange man.

It was, in essence, a widower's house. Hardly the sort of place people would expect some young women to want to spend their time...

"Ahh, what lovely flowers," Lahan said, straightening his glasses.

Immediately after talking to Maomao, they'd written to him and convinced a serving man to deliver the letter. He'd come that day after work, slimy-looking, narrow-eyed, and grinning in the entryway of the dormitory.

Maomao slid away from Lahan. "Are you sure about this? He is, after all, a male of the species," she said.

"I think it should be all right. You can see it in his eyes—he doesn't *look* evil," Yao answered, unconcerned. In Maomao's opinion, Yao should give it more thought. Lahan could be much more forward than one might expect when it came to women.

"I agree. I think we should be safe with Master Lahan." En'en, whom Maomao had expected to be against this, turned out to be in favor. The reason? "Master Lahan has never had any particular trouble with women—and always picks older women, anyway."

I didn't need to hear that.

He was a playboy, if a faintly ridiculous one, and Maomao did not want to know about his taste in women. There were men out there who got their popularity with the ladies by being good talkers, not by being handsome, and Lahan seemed to be one of them.

So it was that Yao and En'en would stay at Lahan's house, just like that.

Lahan picked a moment while Yao and En'en were off preparing and came over to Maomao, smiling contentedly. "I'll be perfectly hospitable to them, don't you worry." He tried to place a comforting hand on her shoulder, and she batted it away. "You wound me, little sister."

She considered crushing his toes, just a little, but thought better of it.

"Just see that you're more accommodating than *that* to the Moon Prince," Lahan said, rubbing his foot even though Maomao hadn't stepped on it. What a drama queen.

This son of a...

Maomao glared at Lahan, but he only gave her a meaningful grin. "Now then, I think you'll soon have another visitor, so I'm going to take these two and be on my way." He winked. Did he know Jinshi had summoned Maomao the night before? For that matter, did he still maintain some secret connection with Jinshi? Maomao wanted to corner him about it, but she didn't want to draw Yao and En'en's attention by making a scene.

This guy is too smart for his own good.

She decided she had better change the subject. "I know it's a little late to ask, since you've already agreed, but did you get permission to bring the two of them home?"

Permission from whom? Why, from the one whose name she didn't wish to say.

"You needn't worry on that count. My honored father is out, and won't be back for several days. Hence why they were able to keep *last night* a secret, too."

Just how much does he know?! She doubted Lahan had all the details, but she was afraid of what could turn into a very unpleasant misunderstanding.

Deliberately or not, Lahan chose that moment to whisper in her ear, "And when can we expect the pitter-patter of little feet?" His glasses flashed.

Maomao balled up her fist, all but overcome by the urge to punch him, but she knew she would only regret it if she got angry here. Instead she forced herself to give him her least interested look. "Heh," she snorted. "I don't know what you're talking about—you can see I'm completely fine."

She was going to play dumb to the bitter end. Nothing had happened, nothing at all, and she could hold her head high.

“Perfect health...? Wait—does that mean... Have you been taking customers at the Verdigris House?”

Before she could stop herself, Maomao had crushed Lahan’s toes underfoot. And there was nothing gentle about it.

“Yowch!” Lahan squawked, his normally narrow eyes going very wide for a moment. He looked up, then rotated his neck. After a second, he clapped his hands. “Ah... Ahh, I understand... You only have eyes for the Moon Prince!”

He still seemed to be under some kind of delusion, but then, she’d sort of tried to lead him this way. Lahan was grinning an extremely disturbing grin. “Well! If that’s how it is, then so be it! If you just keep at it, something will happen. I’ll be sure to obtain a guidebook and the most efficacious medicine for you.”

Now his expression outright infuriated her. Maomao thought she might be the very embodiment of an enlightened being, having somehow managed to do no worse to him than crush his toes.

“We’re ready,” said En’en, who emerged carrying two cloth-wrapped bundles and three oblong chests. She looked like she was ready to move house, not stay over for a few days.

“Will that all fit in the carriage?” Maomao asked Lahan, meanwhile grinding his other foot under her heel.

“Of course—ow! Women always bring plenty of—ow! ow!—baggage. There’s more than enough room—ow, ow, *ow*!”

At least he could be counted on to prepare for something like this. Maomao withdrew her foot and gave Lahan a slap on the back as if to order him to get going.

“Maomao?” Yao gave her a confused look.

“Everything all right?” Maomao asked.

“You’re not coming with us?”

What could the dear young mistress be talking about?

“I’m certainly not. In fact, I can’t fathom what you’re thinking, staying with a

man like *this*."

"If En'en says it's okay, then it must be, don't you think?"

She trusted her attendant—and Maomao granted that it was true: En'en would never let her near a man of ill repute.

Rehashing the argument here would do Maomao no good. If Lahan thought Jinshi's messenger was coming, then she wanted him and the girls out of here—but there was one thing she wanted to be very clear on first. "You really don't care if strange rumors start about you?" she asked Yao and En'en. Two unmarried women staying at a man's house—it was as good as inviting the gossips to draw their own conclusions.

There was a beat in which Yao looked at Maomao, conflicted. She seemed to want to say something, but couldn't manage.

En'en, unable to bear it, finally spoke up. "There's nothing wrong with visiting a friend's house!"

"Ex*cuse* me?" Maomao burst out.

"Y-Yeah, so if w-we can make out that that's what we're doing, no one will spread any rumors. You *have* to come with us, Maomao!" Yao stuttered.

"Like fun I do. Anyway, I'll bet that house smells like old person."

"Maomao, you would be surprised how little my honored father smells for his age."

"Ex*cuse* me?"

"Maomao," En'en said, massaging Maomao's face again. Yao watched them, on tenterhooks. "We know his 'honored father' isn't there, so you can relax. And don't make that face. It's scary."

"Excuse me? 'Isn't there'?"

"You remember the Go Sage, yes? He's taken my father on a little trip. To another Go contest. Our household has extensive debts to pay off, so we need to earn *some*thing."

This was Lahan they were talking about—Maomao was sure he'd made

arrangements to sell the strategist's Go book wherever this other contest was being held.

"You sure about that? No telling what he'll get up to. He might come back in more debt than when he left."

"I'm not worried about that. Sir Rikuson's successor has recently begun to settle into his duties, and anyway, the Sage is with him. He knows how to handle my father."

Maomao wasn't clear on what kind of person this Sage was—but if he could beat the strategist at Go, then he must be pretty clever.

"Come on, Maomao, which is it? Are you coming or not?" Yao finally said.

"Yao, my dear, I believe Maomao is otherwise occupied today. Perhaps you would content yourself with me as your guide for the time being."

Lahan looked back. A man in servant's garb was running toward the dormitory—one of Jinshi's messengers. He would summon Maomao elsewhere, put her in a carriage, and take her away.

"I'm very sorry," the messenger said, "but your apothecary skills are needed again today." He was careful to be circumspect about how he spoke with other people present, but he knew his message would get through to Maomao.

"Very well, sir," she replied.

Yao gave her a strange look. "I see... Well, it looks like that's that." She turned away, her expression cold. En'en sighed, but nodded respectfully to Maomao. "We'll see you when we see you, then..." Yao said, but she couldn't quite seem to bring herself to leave.

"Certainly. And if that little man looks like he's going to do anything inappropriate, please run away. Do you have a cleaver to protect yourself with?" This question was directed not it Yao, but En'en.

"I certainly do. Right here." She produced something like a crowbar from the luggage.

"I like the form factor. Short. Useful."

"It won't be useful, because I won't do anything. Nothing to deserve being hit

with a crowbar, anyway...” Lahan was holding up his hands in a *please-don’t-hit-me* gesture. Maomao decided to trust him. For the time being.

“And don’t you dare try to extort money from them for staying with you.”

“I won’t! I swear I won’t!”

Then again, Maomao reflected, if they paid for lodgings, it wouldn’t leave any questionable favors owed. The whole thing stank, but she could only watch the three of them go.



Chapter 2: The Villa

The messenger didn't take her to Jinshi's usual palace, but to a villa outside the court proper.

How many villas does the Emperor have?

Admittedly, it was probably easier to get Maomao into a place like this, given all the stuff she was bringing. Just here in the capital, the Emperor had another villa, the one where Ah-Duo lived. Nobility like him could probably construct a new building or two just to kill some time.

The guard was lighter than usual, and Maomao was brought to a room where Jinshi, Suiren, and Gaoshun all waited.

Not Basen? she wondered, but then she realized this was His Majesty's doing. Basen was smart enough, but he was stubborn. Gaoshun was much more likely to keep his thoughts to himself if she and Jinshi ended up alone together. He might guess something he wasn't supposed to know, but he wouldn't pursue it.

And what's the old lady think of this?

Suiren was smiling like she always did, but her smile could be frightening—precisely because Maomao didn't always know what was behind it.

There seemed to be someone else there too. Maomao could hear the clattering of dishes from within. Had they found someone who could endure Jinshi's beauty and Suiren's severity?

"Is there anything you need, Xiaomao?" Gaoshun asked.

"No, thank you." She'd prepared all her tools herself, along with most of the medical components she might need. She thought it would be best not to give Gaoshun too many clues as to what she would be using. Then, however, she realized there was one thing she did want. "If you happen to have any ice..."

"Certainly." It was not Gaoshun, but Suiren, who answered. "Chue, bring us some ice, please."

There was a name Maomao didn't recognize. Shortly, accompanied by

distinctive footsteps, a woman emerged holding a large bucket. Her face was tan and her nose low. She was roughly Maomao's age, perhaps a year or two older. Many of the servants of the Imperial family were physically beautiful, but when it came to serving Jinshi, looks were less important than job skills.

Like her namesake, the sparrow, Chue almost looked like she was hopping as she moved; her footsteps made a squeaking sound as she walked.

"I could only find a big block of it. Do you want me to break it up?"

In the bucket was a huge chunk of ice wrapped in reeds. It had probably come from some distant mountain, kept frozen in order to make the long journey to the capital. It was still the cold season, and they could have gotten ice from some local lake, but they would have gone out of their way to get it from somewhere far away.

It's not like I'm going to drink it... She felt a little bad, using something so rich for this purpose, but it was all that she had. "Do you think you could smash it into quarters?" she said.

"Understood!" Chue produced a mallet from the folds of her robe, rolled back the reeds, and cracked the ice. Maomao rubbed her eyes. She doubted what she had just seen; it seemed like it should have been impossible to do so casually. "Will that do?" Chue asked.

"Thank you. It will," Maomao said with a respectful bow of her head, which Chue returned. She set the bucket of ice in front of Maomao, then wiped the mallet with a handkerchief and returned it to its hiding place. Afterward, she hop-hopped back the way she had come.

"Her name might mean sparrow, but you could take her for a squirrel," Suiren said, looking right at Maomao. She seemed to mean that there was no way a person should have been able to hide a mallet that large in her robe. Then she asked, "Is there anything else you need?"

"No, thank you."

"If you'd come this way, then, please." Suiren led Maomao to an inner room. "*You* come over here. You can taste-test these new snacks," she said, pulling Gaoshun aside. He didn't question her, but nodded respectfully and sat down

where she indicated. Maomao even thought she caught a twinkle in his eye. She gave him a very conflicted look and closed the door.

Jinshi, looking distant, immediately flopped onto the bed. Maomao wasted no time; she put the ice she'd been given in a leather bag and handed it to him. "Press that on your wound, please. Cool it down." Chilling the abdomen could upset the stomach, but it would be better than administering this treatment with nothing to blunt the pain. "If you find yourself wanting to go to the bathroom, tell me right away."

"Is that all you have to say to me?" Jinshi pressed the bag against his side, looking put out.

After a second, Maomao asked, "What should I say to Master Gaoshun and Mistress Suiren? I suppose I can feel free to ignore the...other person out there."

Maomao took out the medicines and instruments she'd brought along, which included a small knife for cutting away the burned skin. The people out there might trust her, but if they had any idea she was carrying what amounted to a weapon, they would never have left her alone with Jinshi.

What would they do if they thought I was an assassin? True, Jinshi could overpower her if he had to, but it still seemed impossibly incautious.

"Gaoshun is here on the Emperor's orders," Jinshi said. It wasn't really an answer, but Maomao understood what he meant. If His Majesty had told Gaoshun to be here, he had probably also informed him that Jinshi's body effectively had become a bomb, and that no one but Maomao was to touch him. Gaoshun might or might not know the details, but unlike Basen, he would do his duty faithfully. "And," Jinshi continued, "it was Suiren who prepared the brand."

Maomao froze. "Why in the world would she do that?" Had Jinshi deceived his caretaker, duping her into making the brand somehow? Maybe not; Maomao doubted whether he was capable of outwitting the old woman. Neither option seemed possible.

"Suiren is *my* ally," Jinshi said. Maomao found it hard to comprehend. If Suiren had really been Jinshi's nursemaid, contributed to his education and

upbringing, how could she possibly countenance what he had done to himself?

I can't imagine what Suiren is thinking. Was it possible that Gaoshun was here not just to keep an eye on Jinshi, but to monitor Suiren as well? *Stop. Don't think about it. That's not what matters now.*

Maomao brought over the candle that served as the room's illumination and put the dagger in the flame to sanitize it. She shook the knife to cool it a little, then prepared to resume the previous day's work.

Jinshi was still chilling his side.

"Loosen your belt, please," Maomao said.

"Er... Yes, of course." There was a *swish* as Jinshi undid the belt and removed the bandage. Under a thick layer of salve was burnt flesh that Maomao had been unable to remove before.

"You've eaten?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm done."

"Take this, then." She mixed medicine into some hot water, drinking a mouthful for his benefit.

"A painkiller?"

"It's to stop infection. Do you need a painkiller?"

"I do."

"Huh! I wouldn't have expected it. Here I thought you did this sort of thing for fun."

It was a joke, albeit a barbed one. She added some analgesics to the cup. Even if he drank it now, though, it wouldn't stop the pain he would feel when she started cutting.

Maomao wiped the balm off Jinshi's side, then rubbed the skin with alcohol. It was very cold to the touch thanks to the ice; when she poked it with her finger, it was slow to bounce back. She passed Jinshi a handkerchief. "It's going to bleed. Could you wipe it for me? And get off the bed. You won't do any of us any favors getting blood on it. I've got it—lie here, on your side."

Maomao lined up three chairs, and Jinshi lay down as she asked. His feet stuck off the end, but they would just have to live with it. Maomao covered the area around Jinshi's wound with oil paper, spreading some on the ground as well.

Jinshi and Maomao were the only ones in the room. She couldn't ask anyone to help her. Jinshi nodded that he was ready.

"Here I go."

Jinshi, anxiety written on his face, sucked in a breath but said, "All right." Concern was, perhaps, the natural reaction when someone was about to plunge a knife into your skin, but nonetheless his expression seemed odd.

Maomao dug the knife into the burned skin. Blood bubbled up immediately.

Don't tell me he's a little...excited?

Jinshi's pallor was good, showing he had excellent blood flow—but that defeated the purpose of chilling his skin. She would have to work quickly.

She started cutting away the remaining charred flesh. Blood poured out, and she relied on Jinshi to keep it at bay. She was making every effort to keep the cuts as shallow as possible, but this wasn't like filleting a fish. Blood dripped onto the oil paper on the floor. *Ploop, ploop*.

After Maomao had removed the last of the burned skin, the shape of the brand and the details of the crest stood out all the more.

I wish I could just cut that straight off, she thought. Removing all the burned skin so the brand could no longer be seen would cut her troubles in half at the very least. At this moment, however, she had to prioritize proper treatment. Her specialty was herbs and medicines; when it came to what she was doing to Jinshi now, she was barely better than an untrained amateur. She didn't want to do anything that would provoke more bleeding than necessary.

She stanched the blood with *puhuang*, then pressed gauze covered with oil paper to the wound. She cinched the bandage down tight to help stop the bleeding.

Maomao exhaled heavily, then wiped up the rest of the blood with a

handkerchief. Jinshi's hand where he had been holding the cloth in place was filthy.

"Here." Maomao wetted a rag and passed it to him. "I have medicine for you to take each day, and a salve to put on the wound. I've also prepared coagulants, in case the bleeding doesn't stop. I have ten days' worth of fresh bandages and gauze." She patted a small chest containing the supplies. "Since I know you're a quick study, Master Jinshi, may I assume you've already picked up how to secure the bandage?"

"As far as it goes, yes..." Jinshi looked like there was more he wanted to say.

"And you can dress yourself?"

"*Yes*," he said with profound annoyance. Maomao suspected she knew what it was he was holding back.

"I wish I could come to check on your progress every day, but I think the best we can hope for is about once every three days. Daily would be asking too much. That's why I need you to be able to change your own bandage."

During the vacation, it might be manageable. As long as Yao and En'en weren't around, she might even be able to keep them in the dark about her nighttime excursions. But there were too many eyes and ears out there to keep things completely secret.

The rumor mill was already working the last time he came to the pleasure district.

Back then, he'd appeared every ten days so she could check on the scar on his face. He'd worn his mask, but that had only made him more provocative and mysterious. The signs were obvious: from his clothing and perfume, everyone in the pleasure district had been able to tell he was somebody important.

But what the hell am I supposed to do about it?

Considering the severity of Jinshi's current injury, he should have had a proper doctor look at it immediately. Maomao specialized in herbs, internal medicine. She was no expert when it came to surgery. Yes, she'd once helped amputate an arm when a soldier had been wounded in a bandit attack, but that was because her hand, as it were, had been forced.

“You’ve gone quiet. Anything else you need to tell me?”

“I’m thinking, sir. I have a lot on my mind.”

Curse this root of all evil! And now the root was talking to her?

Jinshi came closer to Maomao, who immediately backed away.

“What?” he asked, disappointed that she should run.

“Don’t get so close. I stink. I’ve been sweating.”

“It can’t smell that bad.”

“It’s enough to bother me.”

She’d wiped herself down before setting out for Jinshi’s chambers, but she had been sweating from every pore and felt disgusting. Cutting away Jinshi’s burn had been nervous work. This wasn’t exactly the fine sweat one produced from exercising either; it was oily and stank.

Maomao took another step back. “What do you intend to do in the future?”

“Healing people is an apothecary’s job, isn’t it? Good thing I have one right here.”

The way he said it, so casually, made her want to punch him right in his beautiful face. Instead she took a deep breath, poured some water from a carafe into a cup, and took a drink. She didn’t bother asking Jinshi for permission.

Calm down calm down calm down!

“You’re right, sir, apothecaries do treat illnesses and injuries. But that burn is beyond my abilities. When it comes to surgery, I can only ape what I’ve seen others do—I’ve never formally learned. I’m not even certain that what I’ve done to treat you is correct.”

“You just did it, didn’t you? I don’t suppose you intend to stick any more bladed objects into me?” Jinshi rubbed his side jovially.

Before she could stop herself, Maomao slammed both hands on the table. It made her palms tingle, and she glanced around to see if anyone outside had noticed the noise. The chambers were spacious enough that she hoped not.

“First you put a scar on your cheek, then you put a burn on your belly—and you expect me to just *trust* that you won’t do any more harm to yourself after this?!” She shook out her hands even as she yelled. She wanted to believe that Jinshi wasn’t simply being over-optimistic, but once he did something, it would be too late. In short, Maomao was feeling her own powerlessness, and feeling it keenly.

I have to do something about this!

She thought of her old man. He’d taught her a great deal about herbs and medicines, but of surgery he had taught her only the barest facts. He had ordered her sternly never to touch a human corpse.

Maomao’s lips pinched together and she looked at Jinshi. “Master Jinshi,” she said.

“What?”

“I am currently one of the court ladies assigned to assist the physicians. I’m not sure I’m the most suited for the job, but I passed the test and earned the position on merit. How much privilege does it give me?”

For the moment, Maomao’s work consisted mostly of washing bandages and mixing simple medical concoctions. Maybe administering first aid for the mildest injuries. Those with serious afflictions were always turfed to the veterans. Maomao wanted to know how much treatment she would actually be allowed to do, providing her abilities were up to the task.

Jinshi put a hand to his chin. “There is no official line in the sand. I suppose it would depend on the higher-ranking physicians’ caseload.”

“Is that so, sir?”

Maomao thought of Dr. Liu. Of the ranking physicians, he was first among equals. If she was going to beg anyone to teach her, it would have to be him, or perhaps—

My old man would be pretty sad if I asked him to teach me to do surgery.

Not mad, sad. Her father, Luomen, was just that sort of person.

On some level, she thought she understood why he didn’t want to teach her

surgery. It involved much that people considered impure, and even other doctors acted like it was something wholly different from treatment with medicine. She'd heard that it was worse in the west—that there, barbers doubled as surgeons!

Luomen had been persecuted himself, and had seen it happen to others. No doubt he had raised Maomao in the apothecary's tradition to save her from such calumny.

And I'm grateful for that. But...

Maomao's life had turned out far more full of drama than even Luomen had probably expected.

"Master Jinshi, I'm going to try to ask my father to teach me. You have no objection, I trust?" It would be best, she figured, to ask her old man first.

"Sir Luomen?" Jinshi feigned a moment's thought. "Very well." Luomen was a man of deep insight, and if Maomao came to him asking to learn surgery, he might suspect that something was up. At the same time, he would never speak of anything he only assumed.

I'm sorry, Pops, Maomao thought. She felt so anxious she thought a hole might open in her stomach, but staying silent would be even worse. *You can blame it on* him. She glared at Jinshi.

As for Jinshi, he gazed up at the ceiling. "It will be well if Sir Luomen agrees..." Jinshi started. Maomao, cleaning up her workspace, nearly said that it wouldn't be well at all. She pulled up the bloody oil paper and put it in a leather pouch. She wiped up the blood that had gotten on the chairs and floor. She made her own eyes bloodshot trying to make sure there wasn't a trace of the stuff left anywhere.

By the time Maomao was done cleaning up, Jinshi seemed to have reached his conclusion.

"I'll be going, sir," Maomao said.

"Already?"

"I've done what I came here to do."

The nobleman gave her a beseeching look, but she couldn't stick around and entertain him forever. At this hour, she might still be able to get back to the dormitory.

She picked up the last of her tools, then fixed Jinshi with a look. *I have to make sure this part gets through to him.* "What you have to bear, Master Jinshi, I don't believe I could ever carry. Perhaps that's why you did what you did." She took a deep breath, let it out—then grabbed Jinshi by the lapels. "But you will *not* do it again."

It was a miracle that she didn't sound enraged.

Jinshi awkwardly avoided her gaze.

Is he going to be all right? she wondered. She was still anxious as she took her belongings and left the room.

Chapter 3: Kada's Book (Part 1)

The next day, Maomao was awoken by a shout from the woman who ran the dormitory. "You've got a visitor!" she called.

Maomao got changed, rubbing her eyes all the while, then went to the front door to see who it was. She found a gentle but perpetually worried-looking old man—her adoptive father.

"Wh—" She was about to ask what was wrong, but then she remembered. She'd spoken to Jinshi about contacting Luomen the night before.

He works fast!

Judging by Luomen's expression, Jinshi's letter had explained exactly what Maomao wanted to know.

"Um, so, Pops..." She wasn't quite sure how to explain, but her father narrowed his eyes and let out a small sigh.

"Perhaps we should have this conversation somewhere else." He plopped a hand on Maomao's head.

A carriage stood ready outside. With his bad knee, even walking around town was almost more than Luomen could manage. But where did he intend for them to go?

As they bounced along in the carriage, Maomao talked, but she felt ill at ease the whole time, having to keep secrets. "Are you on vacation too, Pops?"

"For today, yes. I have to work tomorrow. There are no extended breaks for medical staff."

True, nor for much of anyone at the court. A minimum number of medical personnel had to be present at all times. Certainly there would be trouble if there wasn't at least one qualified doctor to attend all the high muckety-mucks.

Wish I could have been part of that, Maomao thought, even though she knew there were limits to what court ladies like her would be allowed to do. Never mind the fact that she was pretty sure she was working harder than some of the

less committed young physicians.

After a bit more being rattled and bumped by the carriage, they reached a mansion that inspired a nameless but unpleasant feeling in Maomao. They were on the eastern edge of the capital, not quite where the nicest houses were, but still, this one was quite large. It must have been a striking building in its time, but it was old now.

The first thing she noticed was a strange monument near the gate. It looked like a giant Go board, and there were big, round, black and white stones nearby. You could have used them to play an ordinary game, except for the massive size.

In addition to the black and white stones, she saw what looked like Shogi pieces. These were made of wood rather than stone, and the color of the ink used to inscribe their names was faded. If the characters hadn't been carved into the wood, it might have been impossible to know which piece was which.

The board had carefully wrought lines, and appeared to be intended for both Go and Shogi. Its size suggested it was a single hunk of rock. She couldn't imagine what it had cost to get it there. A waste of money if there ever was one.

Had the owner of the house commissioned it himself, or had someone given it to him? Whatever the case, the way it stuck out into the road made it an obstacle and nothing but.

At this point, surely we need not explain further whose house they had come to.

Maomao and her father passed through the ruined gate, whereupon *he* emerged with a vile grin on his face.

"Granduncle! Maomao! Welcome home!" It was Lahan, his already narrow eyes narrowing further with his unctuous smile.

Yes: they were at the house of the freak strategist.

"This is a stranger's house," Maomao said.

"And I was chased out," Luomen said, each of them rebuffing Lahan's

welcome in their own way.

When Luomen had suggested a change of location, Maomao had never imagined he would bring them here. Worse, it so happened that two *other* people were there at this moment as well.

“Good morning, Master Luomen. Maomao, how nice of you to join us,” said En’en, approaching from behind Lahan. She gave Luomen a respectful bow, while to Maomao she offered a brisk nod of the head and a reproving look.

“It was never my intention, believe me,” Maomao said.

“Well, it certainly should have been. You belong here.” En’en kept glancing back. Maomao followed her gaze to see Yao hiding behind a post. En’en’s eyes said: *One does feel sorry for the young mistress. But she’s so cute!*

Lahan, perhaps aware of En’en’s proclivities, looked at her with something critical in his glance, then turned to Luomen. “How many years has it been since you lived here, Granduncle? You left before I can even remember—and I don’t think you’ve been back since, no?”

“Let’s see, now... It must be at least eighteen years. I returned once to collect my things, but no more than that.” Maomao’s father was looking fondly into the distance. His banishment from this house would have corresponded roughly with when he began raising Maomao.

“Your room is still here, Granduncle, although one could wish you’d informed me a little sooner that you would be coming.” He scratched his cheek. “I just lent your annex to these two. The library’s still here—but if you’re going to be staying, I can prepare a room in the main house. How would you like that?”

“No, thank you, you needn’t go out of your way. I won’t be staying over. I only came to give Maomao a bit of homework. I must say, though, the place has rather gone to seed since I saw it last.”

“Don’t worry, we clean it regularly.”

Homework? Maomao thought. It seemed Luomen was going to do what he could to maintain face in the teeth of Jinshi’s request. If this homework had to do with surgery, then Maomao would gladly play along. But she had a sense it wasn’t going to be as straightforward as that.

Quite apart from Maomao's ruminations, Lahan continued to speak with Luomen. "In any case, I'm sure my honored father would be overjoyed if you were to come live with us."

"I'm afraid not. My bad leg makes the dormitory much more convenient—closer to court. This house would be a bit far for me."

"Simple enough—just use a carriage."

Maomao suspected that Lahan's true motivation was to rope Luomen into helping him look after the old fart, which had to be a lot of work all on his own.

Luomen kept smiling, but gently refused. Lahan, for his part, wasn't going to push the matter too hastily—but he seemed likely to continue mulling it over.

"Yao. En'en. I'd like to go to the annex; is that all right?" Luomen said.

"I don't mind," En'en said, "but..." She looked at Yao, who, to answer a question from Luomen, was willing to come out from behind her post.

"It's...all right with me, too..."

It sounded like there was something behind her words; she glanced at Maomao, but Maomao limited her response to a polite bow. She was more interested in whatever this homework was that Luomen had mentioned.

Yao said, "What's this homework thing? Is Maomao going to get special instruction that we don't?" Her face was a little bit scary. En'en was gesticulating from outside of Yao's line of sight, trying to communicate something to Maomao.

Sorry... I don't understand.

Luomen looked troubled by Yao's critical tone, but he replied, "A fair question. In fact, I thought it was perfect timing, when Lahan told me you were here. It wouldn't be good to teach certain things only to Maomao."

"Then you'll teach us about medicine, sir?" she asked, the clouds she was under parting ever so slightly.

"Not immediately. One must prove oneself worthy to learn the secrets of medicine. I want to make sure the two of you—really, the three of you, for I include Maomao—are prepared to do what it takes. If that's all right?"

Prove oneself worthy?

That sort of talk wasn't like her old man, Maomao thought. He loved sharing his knowledge and gave freely of the store of his wisdom to anyone who asked. He resisted privileging anyone over anyone else, or considering one person more deserving than another.

"I'll explain once we get to the room. I know Maomao is ready. What about the two of you?"

"I'm all set," Yao said.

"If Lady Yao is prepared, then so am I," said En'en.

They followed Maomao's father, as, needless to say, did Maomao.

So they're coming with us? Maomao felt a surge of anxiety. She knew what "medicine" her father was to teach them about—but the other women had no idea. Yao was a young lady of respectable upbringing, and En'en was her servant.

I know we're not going to teach them to make bold, new concoctions or anything, but still... En'en might be flexible, but Yao could be stubborn. Maomao continued to feel uneasy as she followed Luomen. There was scant conversation, so she busied herself looking around the grounds. *There's nothing as weird as the giant Go board outside*, she thought.

She saw a garden, but it was rather bare of ornamental plants. There were a few large rocks around, arranged in a way that had a certain elegant simplicity. It looked like Lahan's work to her.

She couldn't help noticing an unsettling collection of scorches and cut marks on the house's posts and railings. She wondered if there had been a melee in here.

I guess he did chase his family out, and make plenty of political enemies. Maybe she shouldn't have been surprised if he'd found himself having one or two running battles on the grounds of his own home.

As a matter of fact, this was the first time she had ever been to the freak's house. He'd tried to carry her off several times when she was little, but each

time the old madam had beaten him with her broom and freed Maomao. Not to mention the various times when Lahan had had to come cart off the hog-tied old fart.

"Do you get a lot of bandits around here?" Maomao grumbled, running her fingers along one of the scorched posts. The vermillion lacquer had been stripped off, and it was obvious no one had seen any benefit in trying to repair it.

"Oh, you make it sound like such a pit," Lahan said. "Use your eyes! My honored father made those scorch marks, and can't you tell how old the sword gouges are? There haven't been nearly as many break-ins over the last decade."

That caused Yao and En'en to take a step back.

So they still get a few, I guess?

Maybe the scorches had been caused with fire powder or the like. Talk about being a neighborhood nuisance.

"You just leave it to your big brother. I've hired twice as many guards as usual!"

"Meaning you normally hire half as many as you need, I'm sure. There are to be *no burglars* around here," En'en muttered. She hadn't gone to all this effort to get Yao away from her awful uncle just to be attacked by brigands.

Lahan smirked in response. They passed the main house, making their way toward the annex. It was less expansive than the main building, but still better appointed than the average commoner's dwelling.

"Here it is," Lahan announced.

Maomao looked inside. It was hardly ostentatious, but it wasn't plain either. If En'en had decided it was an acceptable place for her young mistress to stay, it couldn't be that bad.

"Did you both sleep well last night? If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to let me know," Lahan said to his guests, rather more obsequiously than he had spoken to Maomao. *Maybe they need a place where there aren't any break-ins!* Maomao thought.

“Thank you. Yes, we slept quite well. It was an unremarkable night, and so long as no burglars show up, I think we should be fine,” En’en said, not neglecting to slam the point home even as she offered Lahan a respectful nod.

“And you have enough servants?”

“Yes. As long as she has me around, the young mistress doesn’t need anyone else to take care of her.” En’en puffed out her chest; Yao looked away awkwardly.

“Well, if there’s nothing else, then I’ll go back to the main house,” Lahan said.

Maomao took another look at the garden. There were very few servants here, relative to the size of the estate. The only people she saw were a man doing some repairs on the house, and three little girls somewhere around ten years of age. Wait, maybe one of them was a boy.

“You hire children?” Maomao asked, stopping Lahan before he could make his exit.

“I think of it less as hiring and more as making an investment,” replied Lahan.

“Oh, for...,” Maomao said. Yao and En’en now also listened with interest.

“My honored father sometimes takes in children with nowhere to go. He claims to think they’ll be useful.”

“Ah. I see.”

The freak strategist was a write-off as a human being, but he was an excellent judge of character.

“We were only trying to take in the one child,” Lahan added. “But the other two came along themselves, and we ended up with all three of them.” He didn’t appear to feel it was a bad deal—raising three children to get one excellent functionary later. It might mean three mouths to feed now, but the investment would pay off years in the future.

“Um,” Yao said, hesitantly raising her hand. “When will the owner, Master Lakan, be home?”

Maomao had very much wanted to know exactly that.

“He’s away for at least three days. Probably longer. He said something about a best-of-three competition with the Go Sage, and they can’t finish a single game in a day.” Lahan looked directly at Maomao as he spoke, as if to reassure her that the freak really wasn’t here. “It might not be an official engagement, but there are sure to be spectators. They’ll probably rent a building where everyone can stay.”

“He didn’t do that just for us, did he?” Yao asked, surprised.

“No, this is something they do annually. Surely I can be allowed to get out from under my father’s thumb for a *few* days a year? Your letter just happened to arrive at the perfect moment.”

“You’re sure about us, then?” Yao asked.

“It’s all right. As long as you don’t mean any harm, my father won’t care. Even if he gets back while you’re still here, you’re welcome to stay. Notwithstanding his tendency to pick up stray children, he doesn’t have a very good memory for *who* he’s brought into this house.”

There was something within the freak that enabled him to distinguish friend and foe almost immediately. So long as Yao and En’en showed no hostility toward him, there wouldn’t be a problem.

“Now, as I think my continued presence can only hinder you, I’m going to make myself scarce. Good to see you again, Granduncle. Let me know when you want to go home and I’ll have a carriage made ready.”

“Certainly, thank you.”

Lahan was about to head back to the main house when he stopped and said, “Ah, that’s right. Maomao.”

Maomao didn’t say anything.

“If you ever decide you want to live here, you’re welcome anytime.”

“Let’s not waste our time talking about things that will *never* happen,” she said, giving him a glare as if the bespectacled buffoon might as well have been talking in his sleep.

“Never? I think you might find yourself wanting to stay for a good, long time.

We have something you want, and anyway, this place is full of fun surprises."

And with that moderately sinister comment, Lahan was gone.

"Like hell," Maomao grumbled, and looked around the annex. It was an antique. As they proceeded down the hallway, she found a kitchen and a living area to the left, while the bedroom was to the right. The one thing that struck her as strange was the walls. They used two kinds of wood to create a two-tone color.

She opened the door at the far end of the hallway and stopped. She smelled paper.

The room beyond was full of shelves lined with old medical treatises, and against the opposite wall was a chest of drawers of the kind used to store medicine. The walls in the room had the same two-tone pattern as the others, while the floor was covered with a faded carpet, and the ceiling contained a mandala-like image divided into nine segments.

She didn't have enough attention, however, to take all that in.

Now I get it. She looked at Luomen, whose hand brushed the shelves nostalgically.

"This is amazing. I can't believe it's here. This has to be at least as good as the medical archives," Yao said, but it went in one ear and out the other for Maomao. She was pulling out the drawers of the medical chest, her eyes shining. There was nothing in the drawers, as she'd expected, but the odors of old medicines that had permeated the wood tickled her nose.

Next she took down one of the books, an old thing nibbled by silverfish. Her old man had moved to the pleasure district to raise her; the elderly eunuch, late of the rear palace, must have left with hardly more than the clothes on his back.

Maomao spotted plenty of books she'd gotten in trouble for trying to peek at in her younger days. She could feel the drool dribbling from her mouth.

En'en sidled up to her. "I could hardly believe it when I saw this yesterday. All notable books on medicine."

"Huh!" Maomao wiped her mouth and tried her best to look cool and

collected, but the grin quickly overtook her face again.

“There’s no way you could ever read all of these in one night,” said Yao. “You probably couldn’t even get through them if we spent the whole break on it.”

“That’s so true. It’s such a shame. If you were to stay here with us, Maomao, you could read them.” En’en gave Maomao a pointed nudge.

Now Maomao understood what Lahan had meant. He was hoping to appeal to Maomao’s personal interests to hook her.

Maomao gave herself a hearty slap on both cheeks and looked at Luomen. “So, uh, Pops. How exactly do we prove ourselves worthy?” Despite Yao and En’en’s presence, she lapsed into a familiar tone.



Luomen, his brow still furrowed, touched one of the bookshelves. “It’s quite simple. You must be able to take up a certain medical treatise that is somewhere in this room.”

“Take up?”

What an odd way to put it. Did he mean, not pick it up physically, but accept its contents? Was he saying they needed the knowledge to show they could understand this book?

“What’s this about a certain treatise?” Yao asked, focused on the issue at hand.

“It’s called Kada’s Book,” Luomen said. Kada—that was the name of a legendary physician. He was said to have inestimable medical knowledge and be able to heal any affliction. Many of the stories made him sound less like a real man and more like a mythical immortal.

“I don’t understand, sir,” Yao said. Her forthrightness was one of her strengths.

“Then I suppose this task will be very hard for you,” Luomen said. It was strange for him to be so cold; normally he would never be so unkind.

All this stuff about being worthy... I think he doesn’t want to teach us, Maomao thought. She was starting to think it had been a mistake to have Yao and En’en here. Luomen might have made the challenge even more difficult than he’d originally planned in order to save them from whatever was going on. For the sake of their futures, he didn’t want Maomao or either of her companions to continue down the path of medicine.

So out of all the many books in this room, they were to find Kada’s Book, whatever that was, and grasp its contents.

That’s a fiendish job. A kind of problem quite different from the ones Jinshi usually caused for her.

Luomen was about to leave the room, as if to signal that he was done here, when En’en raised her hand and said, “Pardon me, sir. There’s something I’d like to be certain about.”

“And what is that?”

“This book... It *is* in this room, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Or at least it was when I left this house. Assuming no one has been mucking about in here, it should be here yet.”

“And the book *is* named after Kada?” En’en said, writing out the characters with motions of her finger, just to be clear.

Luomen’s face drooped slightly.

I knew En’en was a sharp one, Maomao thought. That slight shift of the features was Luomen’s tell when he felt his back was against the wall. It was as good as announcing that En’en had put her finger on the heart of the problem.

“Yes, that’s right,” he said. “Although I make no guarantees that the book carries that exact title. But yes, Kada it is.”

Maomao searched her mind for anything else she might ask her father, but En’en had more or less covered the bases.

“I have a question too,” Yao said, raising her hand.

“Go ahead.”

“Is this a task Maomao could complete by herself?”

After a beat, Luomen replied, “I doubt it. To be quite frank, the two of you being here was something of a miscalculation on my part.” He said no more, but limped out of the room, leaning on his cane.

“I have *no* idea what he’s talking about,” Maomao grumbled, even as she picked up a book. It was thoroughly insect-eaten, having sat for nearly twenty years. Between the humidity, the sun, and the bugs, some of the books were starting to fade, while others were nearly in tatters. Many of them were made of paper, rather than being written on wood scrolls. Scrolls made of strips of wood would probably have been too bulky to store so many in one room.

“They’ve never aired these things out. Look at the state of them,” Yao said.

“Yeah. I wish I could copy them out—I’d hate to lose all these books,” Maomao replied. She imagined getting the quack doctor to procure some top-

quality paper from his hometown so she could make nice, clean copies. Most of the books contained useful information, and if it hadn't been for Luomen's "homework," she would gladly have perused them all at length.

Ooh, here's a concoction I've never tried!

She shook her head, trying to convince herself not to get lost in the tome she was holding. She didn't have time for this. By evening, she would have to go back to Jinshi. She wanted to do this and be done with it.

"So, uh, you two. You said you've been reading these books since yesterday? What do you make of them?"

"I mean... They all seem profitable," Yao said.

"I agree. All very helpful. But we didn't see anything that I would characterize as Kada's Book," said En'en.

The first problem was understanding what "Kada's Book" even was.

One thing I'm sure of: my old man wouldn't give us a problem with no solution. He said there was a book that met his description—and he had told them to "take it up."

Maomao looked at the shelves with a *Hrm*. Luomen was a genius—give him one and he would deduce ten. He would know perfectly well what was likely to have happened to these books over the previous twenty years. Even if, as Luomen suggested, no one had touched them, they would still be bug-eaten and coming apart at the seams. Some of them might not even be readable anymore.

"Yao, En'en. Do you think we could go over our facts, just for starters?"

Luomen had said Maomao couldn't figure this out by herself. She'd assumed that was because there were so many books that one person could never search through them all alone, but three people together didn't seem to have much more hope. Which meant there was some hurdle besides sheer quantity.

"What do you mean? Like, talk about what books there are?" Yao said.

"The shelves are organized by subject. Would you like me to sketch it out?" En'en said.

“If you’d be so kind.”

En’en began to write on a piece of paper in neat letters, giving the location of each shelf and the subject of the books housed there. “That reminds me—there are numbers on the spine of each book, to help catalog them,” she said.

Maomao looked at the book she was holding. The cover was made of a good, sturdy material, so it had resisted the bugs. She could still clearly read an inscription on the spine: 二—*1*—*I*.

“I don’t, uh, exactly get it, but you said these are numbers, right?” Yao said. No wonder she was confused; she couldn’t read any foreign languages. Maomao and En’en were both familiar with the basics, so they could follow the numbering system.

“Yes, those are western numbers,” En’en said, adding the numbering on the spines to her diagram.

Maomao looked closely at the book, and then she noticed something. “I’m sorry, but did one of you take the book that belongs here?” She pointed in between two books on the shelves.

“No. I put back everything I took out,” En’en said.

“Me too,” added Yao. “The one I have right now, I got from another shelf. Why? What’s the matter?”

“One of the numbers seems to be missing.”

The books were lined up in order of numerical categorization, but one of them wasn’t there.

“Which number is it?” En’en asked.

“一-*2*-*II*,” Maomao replied. “I’m going to check the other shelves.” She proceeded to do just that. Yao moved to help, but since she couldn’t read many of the numbers, she was mostly left to watch Maomao work. Finally Maomao said, “Nothing is missing over here.”

“Anywhere else?”

“I’d have to look... But I doubt it.”

One single, missing book.

Did my old man take it? Maomao *hrrm*ed again. She didn't remember any books in their shack in the pleasure district.

"Do you think we should check with Master Lahan?" En'en asked, adding the number 一-*2-II* to her notes. Then she set down her brush. En'en was very good at finding things out, and Maomao had high hopes for this. "He'll probably be by around noon," En'en said, looking out the window to check where the sun was in the sky.

"So he comes to tell you when lunch is ready?"

"No, he comes to eat. Speaking of which, I should start cooking."

"*You* do the cooking?" Maomao asked, incredulous.

"He said he would provide meals for us, but En'en insisted on doing it herself. Master Lahan provides ingredients and a kitchen to work in, but he seems quite taken with En'en's cooking. He was here for dinner last night and breakfast this morning," Yao said. What useful exposition.

I get it...

Lahan loved beautiful things, lovely things—and that extended to flavor. If he could enjoy sumptuous tastes in the company of two beautiful women, he must be on cloud nine.

What a scumbag.

Maomao thought En'en was giving too much ground here. She should know that the tousle-haired spectacle-wearer couldn't get enough of beautiful women.

"I'll be going, then. I'm making your favorite, young mistress—duck! Kindly take care of things here, Maomao," En'en said, and then she showed herself out of the room.

Guess En'en's a lot more interested in her young mistress's nutrition than in being worthy or whatever. Maomao was starting to regret trusting that En'en would help her learn what she wanted to know.

"She didn't have to ask you. I can look through bookshelves perfectly well,"

said a sullen Yao. En'en's Young Mistress Sense must have been tingling, for despite having just left, Maomao noticed her peeking through a crack in the door. She decided to do her a favor and not say anything. En'en was studying Yao intently, as if engraving her expression into her memory.

"We're going to ask Master Lahan about the missing book, so maybe we should look at the ones that are left?" Yao said.

"Well, about that..." Maomao had been considering a great many possibilities. She knew far more about her father, Luomen, than either Yao or En'en—so she had a better chance of guessing what he was up to. She took a book off the shelf and flipped through it. Pieces of some of the age-worn pages were missing, while others were stuck together from the humidity. Trying to force them apart would probably render them unreadable. "I have a suspicion that Kada's Book isn't a *book* book, like this."

"What do you mean?" Yao asked.

"My old man—er, I mean, Luomen said to take up Kada's Book. I don't know exactly what he meant by 'take up,' but if we can't even read what's in it, we won't get anywhere, right?" She pointedly spoke not of Luomen the physician, but Luomen her father, a member of her family.

"Well, yes..."

"If Luomen doesn't want to do something, he might give us a very difficult task. But he wouldn't give us a problem with no solution. That's why I don't believe the answer is in a book that's been sitting around for twenty years with no one to look after it. At the very least, not one written on such fragile paper."

Yao looked at her. "Maybe he just didn't think the books would be in such bad shape. Aren't you overthinking things?"

"I doubt it. My father is a genius—that much, I can say with certainty," Maomao replied.

Yao looked a bit exasperated at that, but she said, "Okay, suppose it's not a normal book, then. What kind of book is it?"

"That's a good question." Maomao picked up one of the scrolls of wooden strips from the lowest shelf. To save space, there were far fewer of them than

there were paper books. Whether such a scroll was made of wood or bamboo made some difference, but both were longer-lasting than low-quality paper. “I think this would be more survivable.”

“Yeah, so?”

Something still felt off. Maomao undid the tie on the scroll and opened it with a gentle clatter. Yes, it would last a long time, but paper was easier to write on, and this scroll contained nothing of special interest.

There were few enough of them that by each tackling a pile, they were able to quickly go through everything that was there.

“Looks like that’s not it,” Yao said.

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

They both sighed and put the scrolls back.

“Kada’s Book! What does that even mean?!”

“I agree. What’s so Kada about it?” Maomao would have liked to press the subject of En’en’s question to Luomen a little bit. “Why not Genka?”

“That’s another name for Kada, isn’t it? In fact, that’s the one you hear more often,” Yao said. She had enough acquaintance with medicine to be familiar with the name. She also knew that the legendary Kada was more often referred to as Genka. As to why...

“Names with Ka, the character for flower, aren’t smiled upon. Even if he did live long before Li’s founding,” Maomao said. By and large, in Li, only the Imperial family were allowed to use that character in their names. Sometimes an illiterate farmer might inadvertently give the name to his child, or someone might deliberately use it as a provocation...

Like my sister Joka.

She’d taken that name, which meant “flower woman,” when she became a courtesan. There she was, doomed to live a life inimical to someone who hated men—no doubt she resented those who lived in a world that was granted “flowers.” The name was her little strike back.

“A court physician serves the government. In principle, he shouldn’t even

speak the name Kada," Yao said, and she was right. It was a fact that would certainly not have been lost on Luomen.

In which case... Maomao felt herself getting closer and closer to unraveling Luomen's riddle. She still didn't know where this book might be—but she was starting to get an idea of *what* it might be.

If it's what I'm thinking, then it won't be anywhere obvious. They could rule out everything on the shelves, including the scrolls.

So where was it?

Chapter 4: Kada's Book (Part 2)

Maomao and Yao had been scouring the bookshelves for a while when En'en returned. "Food's ready!" she said. She'd brought a nice, hot meal. A small man followed behind her, carrying what she couldn't hold. The annex had a kitchen of its own, but for serious cooking, she must have borrowed the kitchen in the main house.

They moved from the library to a living area, where the meal was placed on a table.

"My apologies for intruding on your afternoon. Thank you for inviting me," said Lahan with a smile. He showed no sign of actual contrition.

No one invited *you!* On this one point, Maomao and En'en were in perfect accord. Lahan had, however, brought a gift. Maomao didn't know how he had figured it out, but he'd brought hasma—Yao's favorite. He must have pulled a few strings.

Incidentally, whenever Yao tried to ask about what it was, En'en dissembled. It seemed the young mistress still didn't know that her favorite snack was made of frogs.

Lahan really must have raked it in at the Go tournament. Plus he seemed to be into some sort of business involving sweet potatoes, and had other hustles besides. It seemed like enough work for several of him, yet he somehow kept all the plates spinning. That much, she had to give him.

"I'm so happy to have all these lovely flowers around me as I eat. A rose, an iris...and wood sorrel." He didn't have to explain who that last one was.

"It's a little early, then, but why don't we eat?" Yao said, gesturing at the food on the round table. There were four chairs around it, and they sat with Yao facing En'en and Maomao facing Lahan. That put a "flower" at each hand for Lahan, but every time he looked up and saw Maomao, he looked vaguely annoyed. Frankly, Maomao could barely restrain a derisive snort herself.

In the center of the table, glistening with its own juices, was the main dish: a

whole roast duck. Maomao found herself swallowing heavily. If it was as good as it looked, then by the end of this meal, Yao wouldn't be the only fan of this dish.

Lahan's eyes were also glimmering. He was still a young man, just twenty-one, and there was so much more to eat in his life.

En'en, observing the scene, stood up from her chair. "I'm going to chop some more vegetables. Maomao, would you help me?"

Did she think they didn't have enough? She looked rather displeased—and well she might be. Here she'd thought she was going to enjoy a little break alone with her mistress, only to find intrusive insects crawling about.

"I'll help too!" Yao said.

En'en, however, was adamant: "You needn't, young mistress. I won't be long. Please, eat up, before it goes cold."

Sigh...

Yao pouted. For all her devotion, En'en had some strange blind spots when it came to the young mistress's feelings. Maybe there was such a thing as being too close to see.

The vegetables were in the next room, a simple kitchen. Maomao wondered to herself if Luomen had prepared medicines here long ago, and smiled at the thought.

"Shall we?" she said. She started mincing some leeks while En'en cooked more flatbread. It didn't take long; the fire in the oven had been left burning for heat. "Are you sure about leaving Yao with tousle-glasses?" Maomao asked. She just wanted to be sure. Even if they were just in the next room, they were still a young man and woman alone together.

"*Mister* Tousle-glasses wouldn't lay a finger on the young mistress. He would never meddle in her affairs, unless he thought there was a political marriage in the offing. And as long as they're simply going to talk, then he's a better conversationalist than the average oaf. No, I'm not concerned."

Lahan could be perceptive at the strangest of times. Yes, Yao had some family members who could mean real trouble for him if he pulled anything—and a servant who could mean even worse. Nothing would happen, not even for a single night.

Still, Maomao was surprised to realize he could have a proper conversation with a young woman. *I would have assumed he would bore her to death with talk about numbers.* Yao would have a hard time contributing to the discussion, but she would just have to try to offer a *hmm* or an *uh-huh* as best she could.

"If you don't mind my asking, is there something on your mind?" Maomao said. En'en was too scrupulous to have really messed up the amount of vegetables. It had to be a pretext to talk to Maomao about something. The fact that she'd waited until Lahan was present meant it was something she didn't want Yao to hear.

"On *my* mind? I thought there might be something on *yours*." En'en adroitly turned the question back on Maomao as she continued working on the flatbread. Maomao put the leeks on a tray and started in on some daikon.

Maomao decided to take the opportunity to clarify something. "Yao is really set on standing on her own two feet, isn't she? She wants to be one of the assistants in the medical office, but I can't believe that's her final goal." If it was as Maomao imagined, then she absolutely couldn't let Yao see Kada's Book. "If what my father proposes to teach us goes against your morals or ethics, what would you do?"

En'en put the finished flatbread on a tray and looked at the ceiling. "You mean it's *that* kind of book?"

"I suspect so."

The two of them shared an assumption that enabled this conversation.

"I appreciate your consideration, Maomao, but I'll respect the young mistress's opinion."

"Even though you guided her to it?" Maomao studied En'en closely; the other woman started baking more bread as if she didn't know what Maomao meant.

"My mistress can be quite willful. Once she gets an idea in her head, she'll see

it through—it doesn't matter what I say. When she saw the announcement of the new post, she swore she would get herself appointed. She spent every day at her desk studying."

En'en expertly flipped the bread over with a pair of chopsticks. Maomao considered herself a decent cook, but she couldn't hold a candle to En'en.

"She was bent on not even being beaten by the men, so it must have stung when you outscored her on the entrance exam. She was acting quite out of character."

Did that refer to tripping Maomao and generally harassing her? It had really been more her hangers-on who had done that, so Maomao didn't hold it against Yao and hardly thought about it anymore.

"I do feel sort of bad about that." Maomao had never expected to score as well as she had. The madam's educational methods were a force to be reckoned with. "Uncle or no uncle, why does Yao feel she needs to work so hard?" Maomao asked. Partly, of course, it was because if she was at home, her uncle would be forever pressing her to get married, but Maomao sensed there was something more at play.

"It's...her mother. She's the reason," En'en said after a moment. "To Lady Yao, her mother is as good as dead. She often says she disappeared the same time as her father died."

"Why is that?" Maomao asked. She didn't have a lot of what you would call empathy on the subject of mothers, but she knew she and Yao had been raised in very different situations.

"I'm sure you understand what happens to a widow who can't manage her own household."

"You mean Yao's uncle took over."

"Yes, but Lady Yao's mother remained head of the household."

The wife of the former master of the house remained the wife. Presumably that meant Yao's mother had then married the uncle. It wasn't that unusual—but for a young woman, it could cause a lot of conflicting feelings, and resentment or even hatred might be among them.

Yao would also have learned that women who can't work have few options. If she simply went along and did as her uncle said, she would end up just like her mother.

"I see," said Maomao. She could understand why En'en didn't want Yao to overhear this conversation. She'd known it might go somewhere like this, and had wisely chosen a change of venue.

Maomao put the sliced daikon on a tray. *That'll do, I think.*

She wanted to hurry up and eat before everything got cold.

Just as En'en had predicted, when the two women got back to the living room, Yao and Lahan were engaged in a lively conversation.

"Our capable En'en's cooking is the stuff of rumors, and I hoped I would have a chance to try it. So strangely enough, this turn of events is quite congenial to me," Lahan was saying.

"Yes, her cooking is wonderful. She could hold her head up anywhere as a chef, and it's nutritious, to boot!"

Where'd he hear rumors about En'en's cooking?

Maomao's question was soon answered.

"Her older brother's restaurant is very popular, and word is that his little sister is nearly as good as he is."

"Yes, I think she's every bit as skilled as any head chef," Yao said, the acclaim coming easily to her lips. Maomao remembered hearing that Yao had helped En'en's brother, making him her family's chef. Apparently he'd struck out on his own sometime after that.

Was it because of the change in family headship? If En'en's brother had been let go by Yao's uncle, that would do something to explain her antipathy towards him.

"I've had the privilege of dining three times at his restaurant. Ahh! It was a meal to remember each and every time."

"Three times? When did you go? The menu changes every season, right,

En’en?”

“Yes. In fact, he finds the freshest ingredients each month.”

Talk of En’en’s brother was enough to get Yao really engaged. She passed the conversation to En’en, who joined in. So far from delivering a lecture about numbers and calculations, Lahan turned out to be quite the conversationalist—a fact Maomao didn’t necessarily like.

Instead, she focused on savoring the crispy duck skin. The mixture of oil and herbs was caught up in the flatbread, which she topped off with some sweet, spicy *jiang*. Each bite filled her mouth with the rich flavor of meat, the herbs providing a pleasing texture, all complemented by the sublimely simple flatbread. It was enough to make her mouth water.

It was, in a word, delicious.

“Ahh, that’s wonderful,” said Lahan, evidently of the same opinion. He was, as we’ve said, an excellent talker. He must be, to have gotten the reticent Yao to open up to him so readily. If anything, the conversation had gone a little *too* well, and En’en was somewhat perturbed.

For a while, the only sound that came from Maomao was chewing. Her plate was empty before she knew it, and there was just enough space left in her stomach for dessert.

“I’ll go get some fruit,” En’en said. She left the room and returned with a glass vessel containing tangerines. The peels had been removed, the seeds carefully extracted, and they’d been steeped in sugar water. The acidity would work wonders in cutting through the fat and oil from the duck.

“That was delicious,” Maomao said as she set down her chopsticks. She was eager to get to the real topic. “Lahan, you haven’t taken any books off the bookshelves, have you?”

“Books from the bookshelves?” he asked, giving her a questioning look as he took another scoop of fruit. “No, I haven’t. And I’m sure my honored father wouldn’t do anything with my granduncle’s possessions. In fact, he sends servants into that room to clean regularly.”

That was an unusual show of consideration by the freak strategist. No wonder

the annex looked so clean.

“You think there’s something missing?” Lahan asked. “It would be natural to assume one of the servants was involved, but my father would never hire anyone less than ethical. He’s much too dangerous an enemy for that.”

Books were valuable objects, and as such liable to be stolen, but would any of the servants who worked at the strategist’s estate be capable of such a thing?

This is a tough one, Maomao thought.

“What is it that’s missing?”

“This.” En’en handed him her list. It bore the code of the missing book, 一-2-II.

“Just the kind of classification system my granduncle would devise. I have to admit, it’s the perfect way to organize the more than a thousand books in there.”

At the realization that Lahan could read the numbers, too, Yao shot En’en a frustrated look. She hated being the only one who didn’t know what they meant.

En’en seemed to understand, for she started writing numbers on some new sheets of paper:

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX

Yao’s expression softened, no longer quite so angry. She was staring hard at the numbers—trying to memorize every one of them. Finally, the paper covered with “*I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX*” seemed to click for her. “Would the next number be written like this?” she said, tracing an *X* on the table with her finger.

“Yes! Excellent job, Mistress!” En’en said, applauding. Yao looked a bit awkward.

“The books were lined up neatly on the shelves, though...” Yao said. At least, they had been when she and En’en had arrived.

“Yes, and there didn’t appear to be any obvious gaps. Now that we look at the

numbers, though, one is definitely missing," En'en added.

"Is it, now?" Lahan studied the number of the missing book.

"I thought a number-cruncher like you would have noticed right away," Maomao said with a touch of vitriol.

"Sadly, I all too rarely come into this building. I have other things to do. Interesting though this place certainly is."

"Other things to do, like eating a leisurely lunch? Or did you have something else in mind?" Oops. Her true feelings were showing.

"Maomao, please be more respectful in Lady Yao's presence," En'en said, entering her teacherly mode. Maomao had let her etiquette lapse because she was with Lahan.

"If the books are numbered, that must mean they go in order, right?" Yao said.

"Yes. The first two volumes are basic information. Volume 1 was about the anatomy of the human body, and volume 2 was about surgical treatment." Maomao's specialty was herbal medicine, but those were still subjects one would want to be familiar with as a practitioner of the healing arts.

The question was, where was the missing book?

Maomao stopped and looked at Lahan. "You said this was an interesting building. What the h—ahem. What, may I ask, did you mean by that?" she said, catching herself just in time. She thought she remembered Lahan saying something about the library in particular being an intriguing place.

"Oh, that? Don't the walls and ceiling of this annex seem unusually lavishly decorated to you?"

"They do, now that you mention it," Yao said, looking at the ceiling. The library had its own decorations; here in the living room, the ceiling was covered in paintings of all kinds of animals.

"And it's not just the ceiling." Lahan rolled back a corner of the rug on the floor to reveal a complicated pattern of wooden boards.

"Somebody put a great deal of craft into this," En'en marveled.

“Before my granduncle lived here, it was the home of a rather eccentric architect. He was the one who built this house. He had a fondness for unusual patterns—and he loved gimmickry.”

“Say what you will about the La clan’s personalities, they do have a tendency towards genius,” En’en said, nodding. So had the architect been a member of Maomao’s family?

“Most unfortunately, in the grip of an idea for a new device, the architect got a little overeager and ended up...well, in the grip of his new device. By the time they found him, he was practically mummified. People had just been saying they hadn’t seen him around for a while, and there he was, a dry husk.”

Neither Maomao, Yao, or En’en said anything. Their gazes swept the room.

“Oh, relax. It wasn’t in this building—it was a different one. And we managed to sell it off. No mummies are going to pop out of the woodwork here.” That was reassuring as far as it went, but they were now doubly sure that this was a very strange place.

“There aren’t any, uh, mummifying gadgets in *this* house, are there?” Yao asked with an anxious look at Lahan.

“Nothing life-threatening, or so Granduncle said. Even I wouldn’t put a couple of young ladies up in a potentially murderous house.”

“Do you think these walls have some special meaning, then?” Yao asked.

“It’s possible. Maybe you can explore them, if you have a few minutes.”

“We really don’t,” said Maomao, who wanted to mop this up before the freak strategist came back. During the day today would be exquisite.

“Any other questions? I don’t know about your book, but I’ll try asking the servants.” Lahan straightened his glasses and got up from his chair. “I’ve got something to do tomorrow, so if you need anything, just shout for someone. Any of the servants can get in touch with me.”

“Thank you,” En’en said, though no more.

“Thank you for the meal. It was excellent. I’m sure you must be tired. You can leave the dishes—I’ll send someone to take care of them.”

Maomao had been planning to help clean up, but if she didn’t need to, then so much the better. She wanted to get back to looking for the book, and fast.

Chapter 5: Kada's Book (Part 3)

Maomao went back to the library and looked around again. *Haven't I seen this design somewhere?* she wondered. The two-tone pattern on the walls tugged at something in her memory, but she couldn't quite think of what.

Yao and En'en, like Maomao, were ignoring the bookshelves and instead looking at the walls and ceiling.

"If what you said is true, Maomao, there's no point checking the shelves," Yao said. She must have told En'en what the two of them had talked about together, because her servant was studying the walls intently.

"I can't shake the sense that that wall looks familiar," Maomao said. The pattern was slightly different from those on the other three walls—although it was also mostly hidden by the bookshelves. "So... A book on human anatomy." That, she surmised, was what the missing volume was, given its number.

Her muttering was interrupted by a crash. She looked over in surprise to find that Yao was flat on her bottom and one of the bookshelves had fallen over.

En'en paled and rushed over to her. "Lady Yao!" Her mistress didn't seem to be hurt; she got to her feet, patting away dust.

"Looks like you're all right," Maomao said. "But what happened? How did you manage to knock over a bookshelf?"

Chances were nothing was damaged—the books were sturdy enough—but the shelf was heavy. It would take an effort to stand it up again.

"Here, look at this," Yao said. She held out a book with the code 一-*2-I*. It was the number before the one that was missing.

"What about it?" Maomao asked.

"Look at the last page," Yao said. She opened the book to show them a small circle drawn on the edge of the final page. It was divided in two: half black, half white.

"Is that a *taiji* symbol?" Maomao asked.

A taiji symbol: a diagram of the Great Ultimate, sometimes called the yin-yang, and sometimes taken to look like a black fish and a white fish swimming after each other. It was a common image in fortune-telling, and it had a connection to “five elements” theory—which, yes, was related to medicine, although Maomao, being of a more pragmatic bent, didn’t know much about it.

“But what’s it doing there?” She gave it a perplexed look.

“There’s another one,” En’en said. “Here.” She brought over a book numbered 一-2-III. “Here, it’s written on the first page.”

Maomao lined the two books up and pondered them. “And the book we’re missing is the one that belongs right between them.”

“That’s right. So I had an idea,” Yao said, giving the wall a confident smack. “I think the missing book is hidden.”

“What makes you say that?”

Maomao wanted an explanation. En’en, however, clapped her hands, her eyes wide. “Of course! Lady Yao, you’re brilliant!”

Even En’en wouldn’t flatter her mistress simply because she was adorable. What was so brilliant about her suggestion?

“These walls show the eight trigrams!”

“Yes! That’s what I thought!” Yao said.

“The eight trigrams?” Maomao, puzzled, searched her mind. *She ate...a gram of what? I guess you could...try.... No... Oh!* “You mean those diagrams?” she said. They had something to do with the taiji, she recalled, but unfortunately she didn’t remember what. This wasn’t her specialty—and her ability to remember things dropped precipitously when she wasn’t interested in them. At least it explained why the patterns had looked so familiar.

My old man did tell me to at least learn them. But it hadn’t seemed as practical as herbal theory, so she’d mostly ignored it. Forget having an acquaintance with them; she’d barely said hello.

“Yes! You know. This pattern here, I think it’s supposed to be a *yao*,” said Yao.

“Yao?” Maomao asked. It clearly wasn’t the other woman’s name, but she

was damned if she knew what it was.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know about them?” Yao looked surprised—but also, maybe, just a little bit pleased.

“I’d guess people who know about them are in the minority,” Maomao grumbled, feeling a rush of petulance. Now she wished she’d paid a little more attention to the subject.

“Do you recognize this sort of pattern?” Yao asked, running her fingers along the walls. There were whitish planks and blackish ones; she touched only the black ones. Unlike the other boards on the wall, which all ran vertically, the ones Yao touched ran horizontally. “Trigrams are made up of yao, which are either a single long line or two short ones. The patterns are said to represent Yin and Yang, or sometimes hard and soft.”

Maomao crooked her fingers, counting. By having three sets of two yao you could make eight possible combinations; hence, the eight trigrams. “So, you knocked over the shelf to...”

“Be able to see the entire wall. And one other thing.” Yao peeled up the faded carpet—showing that there were trigrams underneath it, just like the wall.

“Luomen said the book was somewhere in this room,” Maomao said, remembering. In this room, but not necessarily on the shelves. “And the architect who lived here loved little tricks.” That was what Lahan had told them. There was a good chance this room contained one of those architectural contraptions. “And then there’s the taiji symbols, and the trigrams...”

Not a subject she was very interested in. And her father *had* said she wouldn’t be able to solve this riddle alone.

“So that’s what he meant,” Maomao said, clapping her hands.

“It all makes sense!” said En’en, catching on.

Once they had the idea, Maomao and En’en worked quickly. They started trying to move one of the bookshelves.

“Hey! I found it first!” Yao said.

“You just sit quietly, Lady Yao. This is dangerous. Plus, it’s very physical labor.”

I think Yao is probably the stronger of the two of them, Maomao thought, although she had just enough sense not to say it out loud.

Even working together, it proved impossible for them to move the bookcase. Instead they emptied it out, then slid the empty case into the hallway. Over and over they did this. Yao helped by taking books off the shelves, although she didn't look very happy about it.

When all of the bookshelves had been removed, the walls were revealed in their entirety. It was enough to make the women's heads spin, but when they took up the carpet as well, the sensation became downright vertiginous.

"Is this it?" Maomao said, looking at the floor. Right in the center was a white piece of wood, in the middle of what was otherwise a standard trigram. Like the painting on the ceiling, it was divided into nine parts.

"It's showing the Primordial system!" Yao said, her eyes sparkling. Once again, they were venturing into vocabulary Maomao didn't recognize. She almost asked about it, but it occurred to her that doing so would only slow things down, so she decided to play along instead.

"Yes, of course. The Primordial system. So, where's the book?"

Yao was silent. Evidently that was as far as she'd gotten.

Luomen had given them this task, which meant that there was an answer to be found somewhere. Maomao looked at the two books with the taiji symbols. They were both about human anatomy, one detailing the hands and the other the feet.

"Yao," Maomao said. "Does each of the trigrams have a specific meaning?"

"Lots. They're associated with directions, animals, and even family relationships."

"Are they ever associated with parts of the human body?"

"Yes! Yes, they are!" Yao said, turning quickly to the books.

"Excepting the missing volume, there are eight books with the code 一-2," said Maomao. We're missing the second volume, but all the rest, including volumes four through nine, are still on the shelves. The numbers were divided

the same way as the pictures on the floor and ceiling.

“We’ve already got books on the feet and hands,” Yao said. “That would imply the others are about the head, mouth, eyes, thighs, ears, and stomach. Six volumes.”

“I brought them,” said En’en, ever the quick study. They opened the books and found it was exactly as Yao had predicted.

“In terms of the theory of the taiji, nothing is missing,” Yao said. And yet they were short one number. Did the book not relate to a specific part of the body?

Maomao stood smack in the middle of the room, where there was no trigram. On a hunch, she looked up. “Someone drew a lot of animals up there,” she said.

“You can tell what they are if you take a good look. I see a horse, and a dog, and a pheasant, and... Does that one kind of look like a dragon? You think that’s all right?” Yao said.

“It does seem like a questionable choice,” Maomao said. The dragon represented the Imperial family, and using it without permission could get people in trouble.

“You know what? Even the ceiling pictures are related to the trigrams,” said Yao.

Maomao squinted. The pictures were faded with age, but still visible. “Right in the middle of the ceiling, I see one horse and two sheep. Does that mean anything to you, Yao?” The horse was drawn above and the sheep below.

“The trigram associated with the horse is called *qian*,” Yao answered. “According to the Primordial system, *qian*’s direction is South, its familial relationship is the father, its body part is the head, its element is metal, and its number is one.”

“Number? Well, how much is a sheep?”

“A sheep can be two or eight, but under the Primordial system it’s two.”

“So we have one one, and two twos.”

Maomao looked at the books. Mysteriously—or perhaps not—the missing volume bore the number ━-2-II. One, two, two.

Had Luomen tried not to make the problem too hard? It could, after all, be solved simply with knowledge of the trigrams, whether or not you noticed the books. Conversely, without that knowledge, the challenge would have been insuperable.

Maomao looked back at the floor; it bore a more complex pattern of white and black planks than the ceiling did. “Yao?” she said.

“Yes?”

“Which are the trigrams representing one and two?”

Yao moved over to two spots on the floor. “One is this one, with three long lines. For two, the topmost line is broken, while the bottom two are long.”

☰ and ☳, then. Maomao looked so hard at the wall it seemed like she might burn a hole through it.

“What are you doing?” Yao asked.

“Trying to see if there’s an arrangement of one, two, and two.” It made her head hurt; all the combinations looked so similar. Worst of all, with the slightest lapse in concentration, she would lose her place and have to start again.

“I’ll start looking on the opposite side,” Yao said.

“And I’ll cheer you on! I’ll go make a snack,” En’en said, and made her escape. Maomao wanted to chase after her, but she didn’t dare take her eyes off the wall. She wished she could mark the trigrams off, but she couldn’t go writing on the wall. The headache continued.

Maomao didn’t say anything.

Yao didn’t say anything.

En’en didn’t say anything, since she was preparing tea.

With so many trigrams, one would have expected there to be an arrangement of one, two, and two somewhere—but it didn’t look like it. One, then two, Maomao found repeatedly, but never with that elusive second two.

It’s got to be around here somewhere! she thought—and at exactly that moment, she bumped into Yao.

“Did you find it?”

“No, it’s not here,” Maomao said.

“How can that be?”

“Maybe we missed it?” Maomao blinked several times and looked at the walls. She would have to go through everything again, see if they had overlooked anything, but she really didn’t want to.

“Who wants tea?” En’en asked, coming in with a clatter of drinkware.

“I do!”

“Yes, please!” Yao and Maomao spoke simultaneously.

Since all the furnishings had been moved into the hallway, they unrolled a rug on the floor to have their drink.

“Thath’s delithiouth!” Yao said, very happy, but when they were done, they were going to have to check the walls again. If they still couldn’t find what they were looking for, they would have to admit that Maomao’s guess had been wrong. “It’s frustrating how many times one and two show up, but then the last number is different.”

“Yeah. We never find that last two. We only need it to show up once!” Maomao said.

“That’s right, but one different line makes it another number. Like here—if only this yin were a yang.”

Yang was a single long line; yin was two short ones.

“If yin were yang?” Maomao said, and looked at the trigrams on the floor. If you took the uppermost yang line of ☰ and changed it to yin, it became ☶.

She stood up and looked at the walls again. *It was right around here...*

She found a one, two, and one. She didn’t think this was a pattern that was repeated anywhere else. She went to the third one, the ☰, and touched the uppermost line.

She could feel something under her fingers. She pressed firmly on the middle of the line and it gave way, receding inward.

From yang to yin!

There was a mechanical *bump*, and something came jutting out of the wall—a drawer.

“You’re kidding,” Yao said, her eyes wide.

“That’s a surprise,” said En’en, staring at the drawer.

Maomao pulled it out, and found a book within.

—-2-II.

The construction of the missing book was much less sophisticated than that of anything else on the shelves; the thickness of the pages wasn’t quite uniform.

“Is that sheepskin parchment?” En’en asked.

“From the feel, I would say so,” Maomao said. Sheepskin lasted much longer than crude paper.

With much trembling, Maomao turned the pages. The text was written not with a brush, but a western-style pen. Very little of it was written in the Li script. Instead it was in the spidery, flowing characters of the west, with occasional glosses in Linese.

This must be from when he was studying there. Her father had lived and studied in the west when he was younger, an experience that had bestowed upon him much of his extraordinary medical knowledge. Maomao muttered to herself as she deciphered the foreign text. There were plenty of words she didn’t understand, but she could work her way through it if she took her time.

Then the blood drained from her face. She’d found exactly what she’d expected.

“Maomao...” En’en said, looking anxious.

“What is it? What’s it say?” asked Yao, the only one who couldn’t read western letters. Maomao stood there, not moving. “What’s *wrong*?” Yao reached out and turned the page instead.

There, Maomao and En’en saw what they had feared.

“What is that?” Yao asked.

There was a carefully-wrought drawing of a human body. That wasn’t, in and of itself, a problem. But this picture showed the person without their skin, revealing the details of the flesh underneath.

Yao caught her breath and averted her eyes, looking sick. The image was far too realistic to have been drawn from the imagination. The artist must have had an example in front of them.

Still fearful, Maomao turned to the next page. This one showed a human stomach, sliced open, the guts within depicted in detail.

My old man used the medical expertise he learned in the west to slice open the Empress Dowager's belly. It was how he had delivered her child. Normally, when mother and child were both in danger, a physician would endeavor to at least save the baby—but Luomen had managed to save them both. It wasn't a feat mere knowledge alone could accomplish. He must have done it before—who knew how many people he had cut open? How many bodies he had cut into in the name of practice?

Now Maomao saw why her old man had always tried to keep her away from corpses. Why he'd raised her as an apothecary instead of a physician.

This explains everything.

Maomao closed the vile book. She didn't censure Luomen for what he had done. If you wanted to practice medicine, you had to know about the human body—even Maomao experimented on a real person, namely herself. But most people? They would react the way Yao had.

She was pressing her hands to her mouth, looking at the awful text with repulsion. Maomao didn't know how it was in the west—but the average person in Li would never be able to accept what was in this book. There was faith; there were taboos. This went against both of them.

Maomao looked at the back of the book, which bore spindly letters reading:

w i t c h c r a f t

She didn't know what it meant, but she knew why Luomen had hidden the book. If anyone found out about it, it would be burned. It couldn't be allowed to exist.

Accepting Kada's Book was the condition of Luomen's tutelage. They would have to cope with what they had found here—be willing to live with it.

If any book could be called Kada’s, this was it.

Chapter 6: An Invitation to the Western Capital

“I’ll keep this,” En’en said, wrapping Kada’s Book carefully in a cloth. She and Maomao had guessed what kind of book it was likely to be—but Yao hadn’t. Yet she had seen it. For a few minutes, she sat frozen with the shock.

Still, I guess it shows she’s grown up a little bit. When Maomao had first met her, Yao would have made far more of a fuss about the book. Six months as a medical assistant seemed to have enabled her to accept ideas she might not have before.

Lahan sent word to Luomen, who would come for them the next day. Maomao hoped she could get her thoughts in order before then.

“I’m afraid there’s something I have to do,” she told Yao and En’en. She was concerned about how they were doing, but she had another problem to deal with, one she couldn’t get away from.

Soon she was bouncing along in a carriage, returning from the freak strategist’s house to her dormitory. *It would be a lot faster if I could just go straight there*, she thought. She didn’t want to take a carriage Lahan had procured for her directly to Jinshi’s villa, however. A different carriage would collect her at the dorm. The woman who ran the building gave Maomao a doubtful look, but didn’t ask any questions. Maybe her salary included a little something extra to make sure she wouldn’t.

As soon as Maomao arrived at the villa, she felt the tension in the air. The atmosphere was so dark Jinshi might have been trying to grow mushrooms; Gaoshun was going around with his brow in a perpetual furrow, and Suiren looked disturbed and murmured, “My, my...” The only bright spot in the room was Chue, the serving woman. She brought Maomao tea, making that characteristic squeaking sound as she walked.

“This is fermented tea from the west,” she said. “It smells nice and is lovely

with a drop of distilled alcohol in it, but they told me not to let you have anything to drink." She shot a glance toward Suiren. Maomao wished she could have the alcoholic tea. In fact, she wished they would hold the tea.

After a moment's hesitation, Maomao said, "Should I ask?" She didn't really want to know, but Jinshi looked ready to spore at any moment, and she didn't want any of it to land on her.

"If you'd be so kind?" Chue said, and Gaoshun came hustling over. There was no sign of Basen, and it seemed likely there wouldn't be while his father was on the job.

"Yes, well... He's to go to the western capital again," Gaoshun said.

"Oh. Really. The poor guy."

Jinshi's face puckered in annoyance. From behind him, Gaoshun was making an emphatic *no, no* gesture by crossing his arms in an *X*. For some reason, Chue was mimicking him, although with her it looked almost like she was dancing. She made it look sort of fun.

"Who is she, anyway?" Maomao asked Suiren before she could stop herself.

"If I told you she was Gaoshun's daughter-in-law, would that help?" Suiren replied.

"In law? So that would make her his son's wife?"

"Yes. Not Basen's—there's another older sibling, in addition to the older sister."

"I see."

While Maomao talked with Suiren, the metaphorical spores had practically become a cloud around Jinshi. Maomao turned back to him, resigned that she was going to have to hear the rest of the story.

"So, uh, why is that? Didn't he just go last year?"

"Sir Gyoku-ou requested it. He wants Master Jinshi to see how smoothly things are running even in Sir Gyokuen's absence."

"Goodness," Maomao remarked mildly, but in her head she thought, *Sounds*

like a pain in the ass.

Gyokuen was Empress Gyokuyou's father, currently in residence in the capital. Unless Maomao was misremembering, the Empress's older brother Gyoku-ou was the one currently overseeing matters in the western capital.

Reaching that far city took more than two weeks by land. A round trip, including time at the destination, could easily see Jinshi away from the capital for more than a month and a half.

"Perhaps it's not my place to suggest, but is it possible that someone else could go on Master Jinshi's behalf this time?" Maomao said. It was an admirable idea, and Gaoshun and Suiren both acknowledged it with a nod. Only Chue shook her head, continuing to dance.

She's very, uh...noticeable. I'm not sure what to do with her, Maomao thought. She was trying to be serious here, but with Chue hopping around at the edge of her vision, she felt like she might burst out laughing. Maybe that was the idea. Especially since she was doing it where only Maomao could see her. Not very nice. *I know you're trying to make me laugh.* She tried her best to look somewhere she wouldn't see the other woman.

Maomao's look must have tipped off Suiren, for Chue soon found the old lady delivering a blow to the back of her head. Gaoshun had a most unusual daughter-in-law. He apologized to Suiren on Chue's behalf.

"I'm sorry, but I think we had better go somewhere else," Jinshi said, inevitably distracted by the kerfuffle.

"But of course, young master," Suiren said. She went into the next room to prepare drinks. That was perfect for Maomao, who was eager to get down to the business of treating Jinshi.

She followed him into the next room and closed the door. Now bereft of his matron and his minder, Jinshi heaved a sigh. "May I continue the conversation?" he asked.

"Be my guest. May I have a look at your injury while you're doing it?"

"Be *my* guest."

Maomao took out bandages and medicine. Jinshi stripped off his overrobe to reveal the bandage around his abdomen.

Chue had practically caused Maomao to forget what they were talking about. What was it, again? Thankfully, Jinshi jogged her memory; she listened as she removed the dressing.

“Sir Gyoku-ou himself asked me to return to the western capital. I thought I might well decline, considering I was just there. But first Empress Gyokuyou, and then His Majesty himself, asked me to go, so I suppose that settles the matter.”

“The Emperor and Empress both? Do you think they were planning it, then?” Maomao felt herself break out in a cold sweat. The exposed wound was still red. She had succeeded in stopping the bleeding, but it was clearly still fresh.

“Sir Gyoku-ou’s letter arrived last night. He wants someone to come see how things are going in the western capital without Sir Gyokuen present.”

Maomao didn’t say anything. Jinshi already seemed to be mentally preparing himself. If he was going to the west, then Maomao would have to go with him. She inspected the injury to make sure it wasn’t festering, then applied more salve.

I need to get my old man to teach me some surgery, and fast. The matter was even more urgent than she had realized. *If I knew how to replace damaged skin with fresh...* Jinshi was trying to hedge her in, but she refused to simply let him have his way. *I wonder if anyone’s ever done that successfully.*

She searched her memory for any mentions in the books she’d read. In the past, there had been attempts to graft teeth and skin on slaves, but all of them she’d heard of had ended in failure. However, there had been some successes in moving a person’s own skin from one part of his body to another.

Maybe if I could pick a part of Jinshi’s body where it wouldn’t stand out...

The buttocks, perhaps. She tugged idly at Jinshi’s trousers.

He nearly jumped out of his skin. “Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!”

Guess I can’t tell him I was trying to get a look at his rump.

“Sorry. I needed to loosen your trousers a bit to reach with the salve.”

“You could at least warn me. Have you no shame at all?” He looked at her with the oddest expression.

“*Now* you worry about shame, sir?” Maomao had been somewhat frazzled recently thanks to Jinshi’s explosive antics, but now she was in her element. When she got a new method of treatment into her head, her mind began to work very fast.

She rubbed medicine into the wound, then bandaged it carefully. “I really need you to learn to do this yourself, sir,” she said, showing him the method once more for good measure.

She stepped away, and Jinshi pulled on his robe, looking somehow forlorn.

“This means I’ll have to accompany you to the western capital, doesn’t it?” Maomao asked.

“Yes, that’s what it would mean.”

On their last trip there, she was fairly sure there had been a real doctor among the staff, although she hadn’t paid it much mind. *Maybe there was... Maybe there wasn’t.* Maomao’s memory was not to be trusted in such cases. It would be so convenient if she could remember people after seeing them just once. And as a matter of fact, she knew someone like that.

Rikuson—that was it. The freak strategist’s aide was in the western capital now. Perhaps she would see him.

“Understood, sir. How long will we be there?” If it was about the same as last time, she thought she could swing it, somehow.

“I don’t know. I would expect a minimum of three months.”

“Three months?” That was a long time—and that was at a minimum? Suddenly she had a thought: this was a punitive assignment. He’d done something unthinkable in front of the two most important people in the nation. Of course there would be repercussions.

“Master Jinshi...”

“I know. Don’t say it.”

Did he know what she was thinking, or was he imagining something else? He could tell her not to ask, but ask she must—though she would settle for a comparatively easier question.

"I have a lot of questions, but let me pose this one: why would Lady Gyokuyou insist that you go?"

The Emperor she could understand, but even the Empress had told Jinshi to go to the western capital. Why? That area was ruled by her family, and Jinshi had just sworn fealty to her.

"I don't know for sure yet, but I have an idea," Jinshi said, half to himself. "Sir Gyoku-ou's daughter will soon enter the rear palace."

"Oh?" Maomao nodded, but she was also puzzled. Entering the rear palace meant the girl would become the Emperor's bride. Even His Majesty would be hard-pressed to turn down the daughter of one of the most powerful men in the western capital.

One of his relatives is already the Empress—His Majesty's proper wife, Maomao thought. Was Gyoku-ou trying to shore up his family's power base by insinuating yet another blood relation into the court?

"I have no idea what Master Gyokuen must think of that, but don't you suppose it puts Empress Gyokuyou in a rather difficult position?" Maomao said. The daughter of her older brother would be the Empress's niece. Political marriages often involved partners with close blood ties, but Gyokuyou couldn't be pleased at the prospect. What about Gyokuen? With his daughter's position already secured, would he really want a grandchild to join the court as well?

That's if *she's really a blood relation.*

Maomao thought she was seeing cracks in the facade of Gyokuyou's family.

"Is the Empress opposed to her niece's admission to the palace?" she asked. Jinshi didn't reply immediately, which Maomao took to mean she had the right idea. His expression told the story.

Finally he said, "True, she is not eager. However, she can't chase the girl out of the rear palace either. Which means there must be a compromise."

There were a scant few princes in the current Imperial line. Just three of them, in fact—and two were infants. There was only one serious candidate.

"Congratulations on your marriage, Master Jinshi!" Maomao said, clapping her hands.

Without a word, Jinshi grabbed her by the head and squeezed. She yelped in surprise; when he released her, she rubbed the side of her head and reminded herself that sometimes it was better to keep her mouth shut.

"You think I'm getting married—with *this* body?!"

It's the body you *gave yourself!* Maomao objected privately, but this time she was clever enough to keep it to herself. Instead she asked, "Purely as a point of reference, is there anyone else besides you suited to marry her?"

"You'd have to go back several generations in the Imperial family. The kinds of people who spend most of their time these days cooped up in temples reading holy texts and keeping their distance from the common world. Assuming none of them has started to harbor such outsized ambitions that they're ready to foment rebellion, I don't see any candidates there."

"And I suppose she and her father wouldn't settle for a worthy retainer?"

If, however, Jinshi were to be leaving for the western capital just as the young lady arrived, the wedding could be delayed for months. The father of the bride couldn't even object, because he was the one who'd summoned Jinshi.

I feel bad for the girl, dragging herself all the way here just to sit around and wait.

Sympathetic though she might be, however, there was nothing Maomao could do. Anyway, if Jinshi had been willing to marry a girl just to make her happy, there'd have been no end of young ladies with sob stories showing up at his door.

Can't be overly concerned with other people's affairs.

Maomao had other things to do. "When do you think you'll be leaving?" she asked.

"Two months from now," he replied.

Not much time. She had so much to learn, and she would have to do it in a hurry.

Jinshi looked like he wanted to say something else, so she asked, “Is there anything else on your mind, sir?”

He paused, then said, “I don’t have enough information yet. I’ll get in touch with you another time.”

“Very well, sir.” Maomao gathered up her medicines and bandages, confirmed when she should come back next, and then left the villa.

Chapter 7: Taboo

The next day, the library at the freak strategist's house had been conscientiously cleaned up. The carpet was back in place, the bookshelves were where they belonged. If anything was different, it was only that the faded carpet had been replaced with a new one.

"Master Lahan told one of the servants to clean things up," En'en reported.

"Is that right?" Maomao said with relief. She'd left immediately after the events of the previous day, and had felt bad leaving Yao and En'en to un-tear the room apart.

"I did indeed, and the least you could do is be grateful, Little Sister," said someone to whom she very much did not wish to be grateful. He was presently sitting in a chair.

"What the hell are you even doing here?" Maomao asked.

"What a way to talk! With my honored father away, I'm in charge of this household."

"In other words, you've got plenty of time on your hands. Is my father coming or what?"

"Maomao, watch your tone," En'en said. Yao was already seated and waiting eagerly.

Luomen arrived, announced by the tapping of his cane on the floor. As he entered the library, he thanked the servant who was aiding him.

En'en closed the door. The windows were shut as well; candles had been set out for light, and filled the room not just with the illumination but a sweet smell of honey.

I'm not too keen on using fire in a library... Maomao would make sure to put the candles out and change the air in the room the moment this conversation was over.

She pulled out a chair for Luomen. "Thank you," he said, but he looked

troubled. It probably had to do with the book sitting on the table.

“You don’t mind if I’m here, Granduncle?” Lahan asked.

“You might wish to reconsider where you stick your neck, Lahan,” said Luomen.

“I take your point, but I’d like to be aware of what’s going on in my house. It’s not my style to duck responsibility by saying I didn’t know.”

In some respects, Lahan had a personality the polar opposite of Maomao’s. Perhaps he was simply confident that he would be able to handle any problems that arose from his approach.

“Are we right? Is this Kada’s Book?” Yao asked, rising and propping up the sheepskin tome.

“Yes... I compiled it while I was studying in the west.”

Yao’s face tightened. En’en remained impassive, and Lahan, if anything, looked downright intrigued.

“Did you also make these illustrations, then, Master Luomen?” Yao asked. She flipped the pages, showing the depictions of open human bodies.

“I did. I drew those illustrations, and I did the dissections as well.”

At the word *dissections*, Yao’s face got even stiffer. Human dissection was not many people’s idea of a good time. Desecrating a dead body was considered immoral, and was forbidden.

“Were they...criminals?” Yao asked.

Luomen shook his head sadly. He stood up and turned to the last page of the book, where there was a picture of a woman. She appeared to be a foreigner; her hair billowed, and her light skin tone was depicted in delicate brushstrokes. Her internal organs were drawn in a realistic fashion, but her face bore the stylized, serene expression of a bodhisattva. There were ink stains here and there; this page was noticeably less clean than the others.

“The land to the west knows much that we do not, and there is a great deal we can learn from them. But it doesn’t mean that everything they do is right. I often saw them mete out punishment to people who had committed no crime.”

There was grief in Luomen's eyes; he seemed to be gazing into the past. "This woman was said to be a witch. To test whether the accusation was true, they tied her to a boulder and threw her in the water, where she sank."

Maomao shivered.

Luomen didn't speak much of the time he had spent studying beyond Li's borders. When he did, it was chiefly to share stories of injuries and illnesses he had encountered.

"If she didn't float to the surface, it would prove she wasn't a witch. If she did, it would show that she was a witch, and they would burn her alive. They determined that the woman was no witch, but it didn't put the breath back in her lungs."

Yao was pale and her hands shook. She seemed to be debating whether to plug her ears, feeling that she had to listen but not wanting to hear.

En'en asked the question that was on all their minds. "These witches... Are they criminals?"

"No. They might have been adherents of a different faith. So-called heretics. Students of medicine. Sometimes wandering commoners were treated as witches too. In that sense, perhaps I was one of them." Luomen closed the book, his fingers brushing the word *witchcraft* on the cover. "She understood why they would accuse her of being a witch. She was the one who taught me the ways of western medicine. She asked me herself to use her for dissection when she died. For the advancement of medicine, she would offer up her own body..." There was the slightest tremor in Luomen's voice. "Because of her, I was able to save the Empress Dowager and her child."

The Empress Dowager had become pregnant too young, and hadn't been able to deliver her child—they had had to cut her belly open.

Yao struck the table with a still-trembling hand. "Then you abandoned your own teacher, Master Luomen?! That's horrible!"

There was a charge in the air. Luomen didn't deny it. En'en stayed silent as well.

"No—" Maomao began, but she was interrupted by none other than Lahan.

“I believe my granduncle did the right thing,” he said. “Consider the factors at play. If the woman fled, it would mean she was a witch. If she was rescued, it would show she was a witch. And the one who rescued her—just an itinerant scholar come to their land to ‘learn.’ Witch material, no question. Even if this was back before Granduncle was castrated, what could he have done all by himself? You seem to be imagining something out of a picture book. One man against the world, riding in to rescue the captured princess and defeat the evildoers, and they all live happily ever after. Is that what you’ve got in mind? That’s not what would have happened. The only thing that would have been different is that there would have been two corpses instead of one.”

“But... But...” Yao understood intellectually, but emotionally it was hard to process.

Maomao reached for the book, trying to open to that last page again, but Luomen kept his hand on the cover, holding it shut. “That’s right,” he said, “I was powerless. My teacher would do anything in order to save people. She would dress as a man to attend convocations of doctors, participate in the dissection of criminals. Some people she was able to help, but there were other lives she couldn’t save. She was always asking what more she could do, and she begrudged no answer. The very day before she was arrested as a witch, she was summoned as a physician. She went to the next town to help an injured child, and someone there claimed her methods were unnatural. Her accuser was a woman who was herself suspected of being a witch. To prove her innocence, she offered up my teacher as a sacrifice.”

The story might have seemed like a digression, but Maomao saw what Luomen was trying to say. Two things, in fact. First, that dissection might be anathema, but it was a way to save lives. Second, that heresy would be persecuted.

Kada’s Book, the one my father speaks of, is heretical, but it’s not evil. Yet people insist on equating the two.

When he told them to take up Kada’s Book, he meant that they had to accept the “deviant” practices within it, yes, but also that they must take in that they themselves would step outside the accepted ways of their society.

Women had little status in Li. They couldn't become doctors, and if they somehow got involved with a dissection, there was no telling how they might be treated. Luomen was worried, not only for Maomao's future, but Yao's and En'en's as well.

En'en's expression was hard to read. She'd said she would abide by Yao's choice, but Luomen's story appeared to shake her deeply. Yao was equally troubled. As for Maomao, she already knew what she had to do.

"Right! Granduncle, a question," Lahan said, thrusting his hand in the air hard enough to cut the tension in the room. Maomao would have liked to chase those spectacles and that tousled hair right out. "Was this autopsy the reason you came back from your travels?"

"Yes, it was. I dug up her grave and dissected her, and when I attempted to return her to her resting place, I was discovered and nearly killed. If a fellow student hadn't helped me, I would probably be at the bottom of a river by now. My friend stole a horse and saw me safely to the estate of a merchant with ties to Li. That's how I survived."

It turned out Luomen could be quite brave sometimes.

"This friend of yours. Would it be Dr. Liu?" En'en asked.

"I must say... I've caused Dr. Liu quite a lot of trouble over the years."

Dr. Liu! Maomao could picture the physician's careworn face. She'd always known he was hard on her because she was related to Luomen, an understanding that was now reinforced.

"Another question, if I may," En'en said. "If I'm not mistaken, Li's laws only permit the dissection of executed criminals. Yet you make it sound like Dr. Liu has experience with dissections himself." She sounded like she was choosing her words carefully. To Maomao, it seemed she was already mostly sure about this—but wanted to ask just the same.

"I can say nothing of what's to come after this. But let me ask: if you are gifted at needlework, does that mean you can sew human skin the first time you're called upon to do so? Could you cut human flesh as readily as you slice into a fish in the kitchen?"

The answer, of course, was no. En'en perhaps found the questions foolish; she went quiet.

There was a long moment in which none of them spoke. Lahan broke the silence.

"Perhaps a doctor *ought* to do at least a little dissection, hm? We know for a fact that my granduncle's experience in such things enabled him to save the Empress Dowager and her child. Naturally, that's unlikely to be the last time a member of the Imperial family finds themselves in dire straits—ill or injured."

Maomao wanted to yell at him to shut up, but she had a question of her own that she wanted to ask, so she kept her peace. *An injured member of the royal family, huh?* It reminded her of something she very much wished not to remember.

Luomen looked troubled again. "I think this requires another story," he said. Maomao well knew that stories sometimes took detours. "Long, long ago, there was a physician named Kada. Not the Kada of legend, but a real doctor of unparalleled skill. His name came from both his gift for medicine and a distant connection to the Imperial bloodline."

Was this one of the things that had inspired Luomen to call this text "Kada's Book"?

"And what happened to him?" En'en asked.

"He did many dissections, or so it's said, in the interests of medicine. He wasn't afraid to use his authority as a member of the Imperial family, however marginal, in order to further his work. He didn't limit himself to criminals; he collected the corpses of any people who had died of unusual illnesses. He trusted to his abilities and his conviction that what he was doing was right."

Luomen continued. "But he made one miscalculation. Among the bodies he gathered was a young prince—the son of the reigning monarch and the apple of his father's eye. The prince had died young of a mysterious illness."

Most of the people around the table were quick to see the implications of whatever they were told—only Yao looked like she was having trouble keeping up.

The remains of members of the Imperial family were supposed to stay in the mausoleum for a year after death. It was only too clear the emperor would be furious to discover that Kada had not only spirited the body from its resting place, but then dissected it.

“Kada was expelled from the royal family and executed. His real name wasn’t left to posterity, and even the physician of legend was called Genka from that time forward. Every scroll, every note Kada had made was burned, and doctors were forbidden from practicing dissection. Considering the emperor’s state of mind at the time, I doubt anyone dared to object.”

In those days, it was forbidden even to speak the name Kada.

“Thus this man was wiped out of history—except among physicians themselves, who continue to talk of him and tell each other his story. His actions were the salvation of many patients. But he was neither a god nor an immortal, but a human just like you or me.”

Luomen, Maomao saw, was praising the great deeds of this nameless doctor while at the same time censuring his arrogance. “Did that cause medical methods to become dramatically more crude?” she asked, careful to take a polite tone so En’en wouldn’t get upset.

“Very much so. Otherwise, we might have saved the former emperor’s honored siblings. People whisper that the former empress dowager had them assassinated, but we have written records indicating that in fact it was tuberculosis.”

Tuberculosis? Maomao was surprised; she’d heard only that the brothers had died of a spreading sickness. Tuberculosis was notably deadly, yes, but for it to have killed all of the former emperor’s brothers—treatment must’ve been abominably delayed.

Either they failed to isolate the first patient, or they mistakenly thought it was just a cold.

She’d always assumed it was a matter of bloodline that had prevented the former emperor from catching the illness, but perhaps it was because he’d spent so much of his time apart from the other princes. She’d heard that his mother, the one often called the empress regnant, had been one of the lower

consorts.

“When study is neglected, there is no end to how low a discipline can sink. I went to study in the west because the former empress dowager was alarmed by the paucity of medical knowledge we possessed.”

I’m sure she hoped her own son wouldn’t succumb to some illness.

“Much as she liked to make revolutionary changes, though, Kada still made it impossible for her to openly reverse the ban on dissections. I suppose she understood the feelings of a parent whose child had been so deeply disrespected.”

She couldn’t openly change the laws. That was the key: behind closed doors, in secret, the doctors were conducting autopsies even now for the advancement of medicine.

“Perhaps we could conclude this conversation here?” Luomen looked at each of them as if it were a genuine question.

Yao didn’t answer.

“Yes, sir,” said En’en, still bothered but drained.

“Very well,” Maomao said, more firmly. There were still so many things she wanted to know, but Luomen looked like he was done answering questions.

“Hmm. So that’s the story,” said Lahan. He had begun this conversation as a third wheel and ended it sounding no more involved.

“If you don’t make this decision, then I urge you to forget everything you heard here today. You’ll be happiest that way,” said Luomen, still conscientious enough to leave them a way out. He trusted that Yao, En’en, and even Lahan would keep the secret to themselves. “I’ll be going back, then. Is there a carriage, Lahan?”

“I’ll have one made ready immediately.”

Luomen tucked the book gingerly among the folds of his robes. “This can’t stay here anymore,” he said, and then made to leave the library, his cane tapping on the ground. Maomao took a handkerchief from her own robes and handed it to him.

“You can’t leave a book that valuable just hanging out there. Someone will steal it,” she said, quietly enough that En’en wouldn’t hear her.

“True, true. Thank you; I’ll be careful.”

She watched him go, the tapping of his cane the only sound. She could have excused herself to see him safely to his carriage, but Lahan went with him, so Maomao elected to stay. She was more concerned about the other two in the library at that moment.

I’m hungry, she thought. The sun was high in the sky by now, but En’en showed no sign of preparing a meal, so Maomao resigned herself to doing some cooking.

“All right, food’s ready,” Maomao said. They’d been making buns in the main kitchen, and she’d induced them to share some ingredients with her. She’d added meat filling to turn them into proper dumplings—and she hadn’t done a bad job of it, if she said so herself. She could have stopped there, but there were some other interesting ingredients around, so she’d decided to make one more dish too.

Now she stood in front of the other two women, neither of whom seemed to have much appetite, holding the dumplings and something they’d never seen before.

Yao was the first to react. “What’s that?”

“Perhaps we could call it *basi hongshu*—silk-reeling sweet potatoes,” Maomao replied. In other words, sweet potatoes with a starchy sauce over them. She’d diced the sweet potatoes, peels and all, fried them in oil, and then covered them in starch syrup.

“There seem to be a lot of sweet potatoes in this household. It’s practically a staple food around here,” En’en said.

“I have a relative who’s a potato farmer,” Maomao said. Specifically, Lahan’s biological father.

“I thought I’d been seeing a lot of them in the marketplace. I wonder if Master Lahan is putting them out there.”

“Huh! *Basi*, is it?” Yao took a piece of potato in her chopsticks. She seemed amused by the way it trailed long threads of starch syrup after it. It looked like Maomao had successfully distracted her.

“They’ll go cold if we don’t eat them. How about we get started?” Maomao took one of the buns from the steamer and took a big bite.

“Here, Lady Yao, use this.” En’en handed Yao a dampened handkerchief. Yao took it, wiped her hands, then picked up a bun.

“It’s good, but I feel like it’s missing something,” she said.

“Please don’t compare my cooking to En’en’s.”

“It’s a very good effort for a layperson, Lady Yao.” Even En’en’s remark was,

well, a little bit rude.

I mean, I am *a layperson.*

Maomao had hoped that the food would provide a bit of conversational lubricant, but the talk never came; they ate in silence. En'en seemed even more shocked by the earlier discussion than Yao.

What would she do if her precious young lady took up dissection?

En'en, Maomao knew, always thought of Yao first and foremost. For the time being she batted away every man who got close like a pesky bug, but one day her thoughts would turn to Yao's marriage.

I can see it now.

If some lordling appeared who could weather En'en's gauntlet, Yao would probably be perfectly honest with him about her work—but even a man enlightened enough to accept a woman working would likely struggle to accept the idea of her doing dissections.

Besides, we can't have her blabbing about the physicians' secrets.

There was also the question of how long she could continue to be attached to the medical office as a court lady. Newly created posts often vanished again within a few years.

Lot of obstacles ahead, Maomao thought. There were challenges in store for her as well—but she was who she was. As long as she had medicinal ingredients and sick people, she would stubborn her way through.

The three of them were still munching away when the door opened. "Having a snack without me? Now, that's not fair." Tousle-glasses was back. Lahan helped himself to the empty seat as if it were the most natural thing in the world and grabbed one of the remaining dumplings.

"Hrm. It's missing something."

"Keep it to yourself."

Why was everyone here so obsessed with flavor?

The sweet potatoes seemed to be received favorably; no one criticized them.

En’en’s throat must have been dry, however, for she took a sip of tea. “What are your feelings, Master Lahan?” she asked as she set down her cup.

“My feelings on what?”

“What Master Luomen talked about. To put a finer point on it, I’d like to know what you think about young ladies receiving an education equivalent to a physician’s.”

“Do you want to know what *I* think, or what *people* will think?”

“Both, if possible.”

Lahan looked at the ceiling and mulled it over. “As far as dissection goes, I believe it’s necessary. If you fail to move forward, that’s the very definition of stagnation. Water that doesn’t flow begins to rot.” A notably progressive viewpoint. “However, making such a practice public at this moment would invite persecution. People fear the unorthodox and they hate minorities. If you want a nice, quiet life, I would suggest quitting this harebrained practice of involving yourself with the medical staff immediately.”

“I thought *you* at least would be above such things, Master Lahan! So you believe women should stay at home, then?!” Yao jumped to her feet, incensed. The table shook, and Maomao grabbed the teacups to steady them. “I thought you would judge people on their merits—not their sex!”

“Lady Yao,” En’en said placatingly.

Lahan, for his part, wasn’t bothered. “You’re correct: it’s more difficult for a woman to work than a man. A man can’t bear children—although he can raise them.”

That’s stating the obvious.

Men and women were biologically different, and the roles they took on were likewise different.

“It’s fundamentally not possible for men and women to do the same work. I recognize, however, that there are a great many women of exceptional abilities out there.”

“Then why would you tell them to stay at home?!”

“You haven’t heard all I have to say yet. If you’d be so kind. I believe I prefaced my remark by saying that this was *if* you want a nice, quiet life. Men and women are not and cannot be on equal terms in the workplace—non-business-related burdens inevitably fall more heavily upon women. If you’re both going to walk down the same road, and one of you is in shackles, then you’ll need something to help you make up the difference: vastly greater knowledge, or physical strength, *something*. You’ll need *more* simply to stand on the same ground.”

“That’s right.”

“You already understand, then. Being a doctor is considered demanding work even among men. For a woman to enter that field, she would need much ability and more conviction. Meaning that if your decision can be swayed one way or the other by *my* opinion, then I think you had better quit and go home.”

Lahan was usually so decorous around women—but when he decided to speak his mind, he certainly did so. Yao and En’en sat frozen.

“I’m in favor of women being allowed to do the same work as men. Yet not every woman can or should go into the working world. Anyway, our society as it stands isn’t very welcoming to working women. There are plenty of incompetent men out there—and women too. Even within a given category there are individual differences, so there’s no way *everyone* is going to be able to work when they’re already shackled. If you think it sounds too difficult, if you don’t think you can hack it, then isn’t it logical to suggest you should find something else to do with your life?”

Maomao actually found herself agreeing with Lahan, but with Yao there, she decided not to nod openly.

“To hear it from you, Yao,” he went on, “one might believe that going to work is the one true path, and looking after the household is pointless and insignificant. But I think that itself might be a mistake. One often witnesses hardworking officials at a drinking party deride their wives as useless, yet more often than not, they’re actually in the palms of their ladies’ hands. The higher you rise in the world, the more you need *class*. Clothes, as they say, make the man. Yes, there are exceptions. Of course. A man without any distinguishing

talents, however, needs to look good instead, and the less talent he has, the better he needs to look. So his wife puts together an ensemble, puts his shoes on for him, and sends him out the door. If anything, I think *you* may be a bit too contemptuous of women who can't or don't enter the workforce, but stay at home."

We won't say exactly *who* he had in mind when he spoke of exceptions. Yao's mouth worked like she wanted to say something, but she couldn't respond.

"My mother was chosen by my grandfather to be my father's bride. Pride she has in spades. Any tasteful furniture you see left around here, she paid for out of her own pocket, with the last of her financial resources. What grieved her more than anything when she was chased out of this household was that she would no longer get to enjoy the sparkling life of the capital. You might think at first glance that she had no redeeming qualities, but she had good taste. When furnishings from this household were sold off, many of them fetched nearly the same price they had new—some of them had even appreciated! If I'd been a little more clever at the time, I might have found some other means of employment for my mother rather than letting her be shuffled off to the countryside. She would have been much more successful as the wife of a merchant—or as a merchant herself—than married off to a homespun man of the La family. Although to be fair, my mother is much too strong-willed a person to have entered merchantry, or to have ever consented to marrying a mere businessman."

Lahan had turned quite voluble, yet somehow nothing he said caused Maomao to want to jump in with a sarcastic interjection.

"What exactly are you getting at, Master Lahan?" En'en asked.

"Hah, I've been a little too roundabout. My point is simply that I've become rather stubborn myself, and hate to see capable people embarking on a path that doesn't suit their talents. It's very inefficient, and not beautiful. Both of you are talented, so whether you work in the public eye or offer support from the wings, I'm sure you'll do well. Whether you'll achieve mastery is another question. To see someone pursue what they really want, though—questions of efficiency aside, the passion itself makes the pursuit beautiful."

In sum, for Lahan, the matter seemed to come down to whether or not it agreed with his aesthetics.

He sipped some tea, then rose from his seat looking quite pleased with himself. “If you don’t mind, I’ll excuse myself now.” He wiped his glasses and promptly made his exit.

Maomao rested her chin on her hands and watched him go. No one scolded her for her uncouth behavior—En’en was looking at the ground. Yao, though, was staring straight ahead; she offered Lahan’s departing form a small bow.

I see. She thought she saw which of them Lahan had really been expounding to. *How very thoughtful of him.*

Maomao knew what she was going to do, no matter what answer Yao or En’en gave Luomen. She had no right to intervene in their lives, whatever path they chose.

She took the remaining piece of potato, which sat untouched, and ate it up, then drank the last of her tea.

Chapter 8: Secret Lessons

Maomao went to the pleasure district to check on Sazen, and to Jinshi's villa to look after him, and then her break was over. She wrote a letter to Luomen telling him that her determination remained set, and she wanted to learn more of the medical arts. The vacation ended before she received an answer.

When she returned to the medical office, she discovered a mountain of laundry waiting. There's nothing worse than work that's piled up over a long break.

"Do the laundry. Right away, if you don't mind," Dr. Liu said. He made it sound so simple, but doing laundry in winter was a cold prospect. Her hands were going to go numb. She would have liked to give him a good glare, but now that she knew how much trouble Luomen had put him to in their younger days, she felt like she couldn't say anything—except "Yes, sir."

There was only one thing to do: what she was told. The pile of laundry revealed that while Maomao and the other ladies had been on break, the physicians had been working.

"Guess I'd better get to it," Maomao said.

The bulk of the laundry consisted of dressings that would need to be disinfected. The first step would be to separate them into bandages that were relatively clean and those that were filthy with blood or bodily fluids. The dirtiest would be thrown away, while they would cut the stains from the cleaner ones and reuse them. Bandages were consumables; it was expected that they would be discarded after enough use. Maomao especially didn't want to use anything with blood on it—human blood could be a source of contamination.

"What's this?" Yao said, chewing worriedly on her thumb. She was looking at someone's white coat. They must have been treating a severely wounded patient, because it was covered in blood. It smelled faintly of alcohol, perhaps from an attempt to disinfect it.

"We can't have the doctors throwing their coats in this pile. Whose is that?"

En’en said. She looked at the lining—all the doctors’ outfits looked alike, so their names were embroidered on the inside. She didn’t say anything, but her brow furrowed. Maomao looked over her shoulder to discover the name *Tianyu*. One of the young doctors, a rather...freewheeling man. He’d tried to ask En’en out several times, but she always ignored him.

She just flung it aside...

En’en continued sorting bandages as if nothing had happened.

Both of them had been troubled by the conversation with Luomen, but as far as Maomao could see, it looked like En’en had recovered over the remainder of the break. *I don’t know what answer they gave him, though.*

Luomen hadn’t even replied to her yet; she doubted he had answered En’en and Yao.

“Since we’re doing the laundry anyway, En’en, why don’t we go ahead and wash it for him?” Yao said.

“Lady Yao, you mustn’t indulge these people, even if they are doctors. Rules are rules.”

Specifically, the rule in question was that the physicians were to wash their own medical attire.

“But they were working while we were on break...”

En’en adopted a most uncharacteristic expression of restrained anger. No doubt she was unhappy to hear Yao giving Tianyu any benefit of the doubt.

“I’m not sure how to get the bloodstains out, though,” Yao said.

En’en made no move to solve that particular problem, so Maomao stepped forward. “Give me that for a second,” she said. She looked at the faded bloodstains. Enough time had passed that they had taken on a dark crimson color. Maomao wasn’t sure they would come out, but nonetheless she filled a bucket with cold water and dunked the coat in it.

“What’s your plan? Are you going to use ash?” Yao asked. That was a common tactic for getting filth off of laundry. The young mistress had learned a thing or two in her months of doing the wash. Something else was called for

here, though.

"I'm going to go get some materials," Maomao said. She headed back to the office and started rifling through the stock of medical supplies.

"What are you looking for?" asked Dr. Liu, who was in the room.

"I was thinking of daikon to help get some stains out."

She knew the oversized radish was also used as a cure for a cough. It wasn't just a delicious vegetable, it was also a salubrious medicine.

"Stains? Ah, you mean the blood." Dr. Liu, of course, was quick to connect the dots at the mention of daikon. "If you're doing that anyway, then wash these too." He handed her another bloodstained white jacket—then another, and another. Soon she was holding five or six of them.

She didn't say anything.

"Got a problem?"

"Perish the thought, sir."

He was such an ogre, this doctor—she could hear the barb in his voice. The strong features of his face must have made him quite the popular guy in his younger days, but with age they simply made him a harsh-looking old man.

Yet, she'd heard how he had helped Luomen, and for that she would put up with this.

"Was there a major surgery?" she asked.

"Eh."

With that ambiguous answer, Dr. Liu went back to working on the daily report.

To have soiled so many jackets, there must've been several people who needed surgery—or one person who needed it very, very badly.

Were they even wearing the smocks? Maomao wondered. The actual quantity of blood wasn't that great, but some of the stains bothered her. *And that smell.* She knew the laundry service was closed over the winter, but she wished the doctors hadn't left these so long.

She put the jackets in a laundry basket and grated some daikon.

“Just take the whole thing. We don’t need half a daikon sitting around,” Dr. Liu said.

“Yes, sir... Should I take this to mean we’re to get *all* the stains out?”

This was a direct order from a superior, so there was nothing to do but obey—but it made Maomao regret that she hadn’t simply come in, grabbed the daikon, and ducked out again.



Yao made a sour face when she saw all the new work Maomao was carrying.

Sorry...

Maomao dunked the white coats, then placed fabric under the stains. Then she began pounding the stains with a cloth ball—a piece of cotton filled with grated daikon.

“And this is going to get the stains out?” Yao asked, peering down at her.

“Yes. Daikon has nutrients that break down blood. It also works if you’ve wet the bed or spilled some egg.”

“Huh! I never knew that.”

Maomao pulled out the cloth she’d put under the coats, making sure the openly impressed Yao could see. The bloodstains had faded from the white jackets and transferred to the cloth beneath. The real question was whether they could get the stains out entirely given how much time had passed.

“See how it works? If it’s making sense, then help out, if you’d be so kind. We need to do this while the radish is fresh.”

“R-Right, of course.”

En’en pitched in as well, and they started pounding grated daikon into the soiled garments.

“I’m done!” Yao said.

“Then let’s wash them. It defeats the point if we just replace the bloodstains with daikon stains.”

“Right!”

Yao was a quick study. As long as she understood what someone was doing and why, she was happy to go along with it—although by the same token, if she had any doubts, she could dig in her heels and hold everything up.

They had finished the washing and hung the bandages up to dry when a young doctor came walking by. It was Tianyu, the apprentice physician.

“Excuse me?” Maomao said. En’en took a dim view of Tianyu, and nobody wanted him to start talking to Yao, so by process of elimination Maomao

became the group's spokeswoman. "I'm sorry, but I think your jacket got mixed into our load of laundry."

"Oh, uh, yeah. Sorry about that. Think you could wash it for me?" The response was light enough, but Tianyu seemed subdued compared to his usual self.

"Did you have to help with a surgery?" Maomao asked.

"Yeah... I mean, I guess."

The vague answer nagged at Maomao. First the bloodstained coat, now the obviously fatigued Tianyu.

"You seem very tired. Please understand that we won't wash your coat in the future. As for today, it's hanging over there. Take it when it's dry, if you would."

"Yeah. Sure," Tianyu said with minimal enthusiasm, and then he went off somewhere.

"I've never seen such a listless doctor!" Yao said, angrily cleaning up the bucket they'd used. The jackets were out to dry, but the bandages still had to be boiled to disinfect them. From a sanitation standpoint, it might have been a good idea to boil the jackets as well, but it would damage the fabric, and they weren't consumables. Ironing them would be a better choice, but Maomao didn't feel like going to that much effort.

Sigh. Fine. When they dried, she would at least put them under the cots in the medical office.

She was spent from doing all that laundry and wanted a break. "Since we'll be boiling things anyway, how about we cook up some potatoes too?"

"Potatoes!" Yao said eagerly. She and En'en had brought back armloads of potatoes from Lahan when they returned to the dormitory. So many, in fact, that they had brought some to supply the medical office.

Guess it was a bumper crop this year, Maomao thought. Sweet potatoes yielded a larger harvest than rice, but didn't store as well. The starch syrup she had used when making the *basi hongxiu* had been made from sweet potatoes too—the kitchen servant, who had been finding all kinds of uses for the sweet

potatoes including grinding them up into powder, had told her as much.

But making them is easy and *delicious.* The thought put a bit of the spring back in Maomao's step. Yao's eyes were shining.

"Better keep up, Maomao!"

"Coming!"

With her arms full of sopping bandages, Maomao followed after Yao and En'en.

The sun was already starting to get low in the sky by the time they were done disinfecting the bandages and hanging them to dry.

"I didn't have a chance to do anything..."

The time had vanished partly to the quantity of laundry, but also to cooking potatoes. As the three of them were enjoying their snack, a parade of other physicians had appeared to request some for themselves.

Wish I could mix up some medicine, Maomao thought. As long as she was in the medical office, she wanted to experiment. Unfortunately, as soon as it got dark, the ladies would be sent home. Not to mention that once the bandages were anywhere near dry they had to be brought inside, lest they frost during the night.

Maomao looked at the white coats drying along one edge of the laundry area. There was one fewer than earlier—somebody must have come to collect his garments. *Would it have killed him to take in the rest with him?* she thought.

She checked the linings of the coats, curious to see whose jackets were still there. She found Dr. Liu's coat. That wasn't so surprising—but the names on the other jackets made her stop and think.

He did say something about surgery, right? A major surgery would require a large team of doctors—but why was Dr. Liu the only experienced physician among the entire group? All the other names on all the other jackets belonged, as best Maomao could recall, to the apprentice physicians.

"Don't tell me..."

Could the doctors have been doing a dissection? The apprentices had begun to settle into the work; it would be reasonable for them to take the next step.

If that *was* what they were doing, Maomao absolutely had to be a part of it. *Any chance my old man got in touch with Dr. Liu?* With some trepidation, Maomao took the white jackets back to the medical office.

Tianyu was the only one there. He was ironing his jacket, which he had collected. *Couldn't be bothered to do anyone else's?* Maomao thought, but took care that her vitriol didn't escape her mouth. Instead she said, "I'll leave these here."

"Sure. Right," replied Tianyu, who looked just as tired ironing as he had walking by earlier. He might not be enthusiastic about ironing, but Dr. Liu would chew him out if his uniform was wrinkled, and it was probably more convenient to use the iron here than to get one going at home.

He didn't so much as look at Maomao—was he concentrating that hard, or did he just not care enough to look up? Either way, it didn't bother Maomao, who put Dr. Liu's jacket by his desk. It was still a bit damp, but there was nothing she could do about that.

Hm?

On the desk was the daily report he had been writing. Maomao picked it up and paged through it. Nothing incriminating. Then, however, she looked back over the entries for the past several days.

There are none...

If she was to take Dr. Liu's words at face value, a surgery had taken place, one that had required the attention of a veritable crowd of doctors. She would expect at least a word about it in the report. Instead the entries for recent days each read simply: *Nothing unusual.*

He's got to be hiding something, she thought, looking at Tianyu.

"That surgery must have been a real nightmare, huh, Tianyu?" she said.

After a beat he said, "It sure was. I've never worked so hard in my life." Was the slight delay because he was ironing, or was it a second of confusion or

hesitation?

“What kind of surgery was it?” Maomao asked as she folded the jackets.

“What’s it matter? Nobody *likes* doing surgery,” Tianyu said, his reaction still indeterminate.

Did they do something to shut him up? Maomao wondered. Tianyu’s attitude toward En’en made him seem like a jackass incapable of taking a hint, but he was at least intelligent enough to pass the medical exam—and he did talk more than the other apprentice physicians. He could probably manage a lie or two if he needed to.

Maybe I should have talked to someone else, Maomao thought—or at least used En’en to get to Tianyu. Feeling a pang of regret, she patted the folded jackets. *I’ll try one of the other apprentices.*

She looked out into the gathering dark, then went to collect the drying bandages.

Maomao was sure of it: the doctors were secretly doing something that everyone around them considered taboo. Even with this certainty, however, she hadn't yet found out precisely what was going on. She couldn't exactly walk up to one of the apprentices and say, "Are you doing dissections?" It didn't help that few of them were as gregarious as Tianyu; most were quiet and reserved. Then there was the rumor that talking to Maomao could draw the ire of the freak strategist, which left most people unwilling to speak with her one-on-one.

Maybe I could get Yao and En'en to help me somehow?

No. She couldn't involve them in this when she didn't know what answer they had given Luomen. Her father had told them to forget all about the subject if they chose not to pursue it.

So time passed, wasted and meaningless.

When will we be going to the western capital? Jinshi had said two months—Maomao was starting to feel the pressure. However, she couldn't let it get in the way of her daily duties. Today, Yao and En'en were doing the laundry, while Maomao stayed to watch the medical office.

Huh? She realized that one corner of the office suddenly looked quite empty. Once crowded with equipment, books, and other supplies that one of the apprentices had been using, it was now neat, orderly, and much less cluttered than before.

"Somebody decide to do some cleaning?" she asked.

"He was transferred," said Dr. Liu.

"He finished his apprenticeship?"

"More or less," Dr. Liu replied as he made some notes in a book.

In point of fact, the medical office near the military camp was a prime place for doctors to work. There were always plenty of injuries, giving them a chance to hone their skills. Thus, apprentices were sent here first, to reap the fruits of ample practice, and then after an apprenticeship of several months, they would be transferred to a different medical office. The more talented a physician was, the busier a place he could expect to be posted. If you're curious, the reason

Maomao's old man—that is, Luomen—wasn't stationed near the military camp was due to the intervention of the freak strategist.

I'd like to get out of here, myself...

The monocled old fart had shown up nearly every day since Maomao's assignment here. Lately, she was pleased to note, there had been less of him, perhaps due to his Go game with Jinshi. Then again, he'd seemed quite busy with something since the tournament. She didn't really care what it was; she was just glad not to see him.

Thankfully!

She knew how to be grateful when it counted.

She finished cleaning, as well as restocking some salves they'd been low on and changing the bed sheets. "There's nothing else for me to do, so may I use the stove?" she asked.

"Planning to boil something up?"

"I want to heat some wine to extract the alcohol." She needed enough to use on Jinshi.

"Luomen had the same idea once, quite a long time ago," Dr. Liu said, the mixture of frustration and bitterness on his face bespeaking a woeful tale. "But then he stepped out to relieve himself, and some fool walked into the room with a lit pipe."

"Yikes! I'll bet he was a very singed fool after that."

Anyone knew there could be just one outcome: boom! The words were out of her mouth before she could stop herself, but Dr. Liu scowled. "It's Luomen's fault for not posting a warning!" His distress made it obvious who the fool had been. This time, Maomao was at least wise enough to keep her mouth shut.

Incidentally, the medical office bore a prominent sign forbidding smoking.

Maomao was happy for these occasional glimpses into her father's past, courtesy of another physician who had known and worked with him for so long. She started to wonder if he might possibly tell her a little something about their time in the west.

I wish I could just bring it up with him... She knew, though, that if she broached the subject in the wrong way, it might do just the opposite of what she wanted. Better to wait and let things play out a little more.

"Anyway, it's better not to use the stove. You never know when some idiot cutting work and smoking away might walk in. Here, use this brazier. Take it to the other room."

"I don't think it's going to get hot enough, sir..."

"We don't need *that* much. Besides, I know you. You're wondering if there's something you might be able to mix up to pass the time."

Bull's-eye...

He was sharp, as she would have expected of anyone who had studied alongside Luomen.

"You might also be thinking no one will notice if you help yourself to a cup of the wine."

Why did he have to be so damn sharp?

Maomao took the large-ish brazier; she also got a teapot, a distilling device with a pipe coming out of it, some disinfectant spirits, and a bucket of cold water.

"Ah. Take these too," Dr. Liu said, piling on scissors, medicine packets, and some powders. "Make up a hundred packages."

"Yes, sir..."

Some make-work for her. He obviously didn't intend to give her the chance to have any free time.

Maomao added some charcoal to the brazier and placed the distiller on it. Unlike the jerry-rigged distilling device she'd made in the Jade Pavilion using whatever was at hand, this was a distinguished piece of equipment. There were two things that appeared to be stewpots with upside-down teapot spouts attached to them, one above and one below. Wine was put into the lower one, heated to make it evaporate, and then it cooled in the upper pot, producing the distilled alcohol.

Wish I had one of these at the dorm, she thought. It was pretty specialized, so building one would take a lot of money. The device in front of her was made of ceramic; obtaining one made of metal would only add to the cost. *Maybe they'd give me this one when it gets old and they don't need it anymore?*

Well, it was nice to want things. She let the thoughts amble through her mind as she packed the medicine into the packets. It would be given to the officials who inevitably came in with colds at this time of year. Medicine, like food, went bad if it wasn't used promptly, but she expected these packets would be gone before long.

While Maomao was busily stuffing the little envelopes, she thought she heard someone arrive in the next room. Maybe someone with injuries! She tried to go back, but Dr. Liu was standing at the door; he met her with a sharp "Stay there and do your job." Then he went on, "We have a visitor, but we won't need tea. You don't have to prepare anything for us."

Someone he'd rather not see too much of?

Or perhaps someone he didn't want to waste the tea on? Maomao was puzzled, but went back to stuffing envelopes...for exactly as long as it took Dr. Liu to turn around.

I sure hope it's not the freak strategist, she thought, pressing her ear to the door. She could hear Dr. Liu talking, although he sounded uncommonly respectful and polite. It would seem to indicate he was speaking to someone more important than he was.

"You want another *capable physician, sir? I'm afraid you're really squeezing me dry..."*

Who could he be talking to? Maomao wondered. Her question was soon answered.

"I realize I'm asking a great deal. In fact, however, I could do with two *more physicians."*

Even through a door, she recognized that gorgeous voice. It wasn't quite as honeyed as it had been in the rear palace, but in place of honey it had some ineffable quality that drew people to it.

Less of a heavenly nymph and more of a heavenly immortal, huh?

It was, needless to say, Jinshi.

"I've been giving the apprentice physicians the best training I can, just as you asked, but they're still only halfway to full competency at best. They have the fortitude but not the skill, or they have the skill but not the mind. Developing the skill and the mind takes time, if I may say so."

Strength, mind, and skill? Those were the proverbial ingredients for becoming a doctor...

"Is it not possible to let them learn through, er, practical experience?"

"Hah! Practical experience? Please, sir, spare a thought for the patients they would be learning on! It's true, practitioners of medicine seek to save people, but most unfortunately we have no guarantee of success. Sometimes we fail, and then the patients—or their next of kin—sometimes have very unkind things to say to us. If you don't have an exceptionally strong heart, such moments will soon break you."

Jinshi wanted a physician, but Dr. Liu was stonewalling him, claiming they didn't have enough people. There were fresh young doctors learning their trade, but it wouldn't happen overnight.

Is this about finding people to go with him to the western capital? Apparently Jinshi felt the need to take matters into his own hands. It wasn't easy being at the top.

"Stronghearted people? I should think you have a few of those," Jinshi said, almost lighthearted. Maomao began to suspect that the request for more medical personnel was a pretext to get Dr. Liu to send her with Jinshi.

Dr. Liu normally attends on the Imperial family, Maomao recalled. If Jinshi suddenly stopped summoning him, he might start to suspect something. She knew how perceptive he was; that was what made him so formidable.

"If I had to choose, I'd pick someone without too many ties to the capital," Dr. Liu said. *"If they were to have, say, an overprotective parent, it could only make things more complicated. Besides, no one is eager to go that far away."*

His remark started rather...pointed. In fact, he seemed to have a very specific person in mind. They *were* talking about personnel for the trip to the western capital. Maybe getting Maomao into the entourage wasn't the only reason to have more doctors around—it was, after all, a larger-scale trip than the last one.

The last time it was almost covert. Maomao had found herself brought along almost without knowing what was happening. The group hadn't been small, but considering that Jinshi was a member of the Imperial family, well, it hadn't been very large, either.

Shaoh was in the west, and Hokuaren was in the north. Li was separated from Hokuaren by a large mountain range, peaks several *li* tall, said to be all but impassable. The vast majority of armies from the north actually appeared from the northwest, where the mountains ended. That, at least, had been the claim of one of the reading problems on the court ladies' exam.

In short, if Hokuaren were to make a move, they would appear north of the western capital.

I can't believe I still remember that. I guess I can thank that old hag. The madam had not been about to allow Maomao to try to simply cram everything in a single night.

Maomao was so busy trying to listen in that she didn't notice that the distiller was empty and had begun to produce a strange smoke. Until, that is, she sniffed the air and slowly, fearfully looked back. The moment she saw the smoke, she rushed over and dumped water on the brazier to put the fire out. Her reactions were swift, but there was no way the people in the next room would miss the noisy splash of water.

"What's going on in here?" asked the exasperated visitor—Jinshi, as Maomao had guessed.

"Uh, just sort of fell asleep on fire watch," said Maomao, who was gloomily using a handkerchief to mop up the water.

"Interesting! Does fire watch involve leaning against a door? Because I can clearly see the imprint of one on your cheek," said Dr. Liu. Maomao slapped her hand over her right cheek, but it was too little, too late.

She didn’t say anything.

They didn’t say anything.

She’d been caught eavesdropping red-handed—or perhaps red-cheeked. She averted her gaze from Dr. Liu, but he refused to take his eyes off her. Instead he grabbed her and put her in a choke hold.

Yow ow ow!

She scrambled back onto her haunches. They couldn’t have been that concerned about being overheard or they wouldn’t have left her in the room right next door. Apparently it was the principle of the thing.

Jinshi looked like he was about to burst out laughing and was trying very hard not to. Basen stood beside him along with two other men Maomao took to be guards. Apparently, it wasn’t easy being handsome.

Jinshi successfully quashed the hilarity and coughed in his most somber manner. “Dr. Liu. May I ask you something?”

“Yes, sir?”

“You told me the apprentice physicians were still only half ready, but what’s your opinion of the occupants of the newly created post? The court ladies assigned to your office?”

“I’m not sure what you mean. They’re...well, they’re court ladies, sir.”

“Yes, but from what I’ve heard, the work they do is very nearly the same as that of the apprentice physicians. Meaning that if they had the mind, skill, and strength you spoke of, they could conceivably be promoted to be physicians themselves, could they not?”

The people around Jinshi looked at him in astonishment.

Court ladies promoted to doctors? It wasn’t theoretically possible. There was no way Dr. Liu would stand there and let someone dictate such things to him, not even the Emperor’s younger brother. Pressing the point, however, would only make things harder for Maomao, so she kept quiet.

Over the course of her acquaintance with Jinshi, she’d come to have a fairly good understanding of how he thought. Not everything he did made sense to

her, but she saw what he was trying to say here.

What should she do? How could she help?

“One such lady is right here, sir. If you would have her,” she said.

“Hoh. Well, how strong of heart is she?” Jinshi leered at Maomao, not a friendly smile but a mischievous one.

This son of a...! Whose fault was it that she had to be wiping his ass? *Actually, maybe the skin of his ass would be the perfect solution...*

She resisted shooting back at him out loud.

“Maomao here is audacious, and that’s it,” Dr. Liu said. “Above all, she’s a woman. She can never be a doctor.”

He’s got me there, she thought. She didn’t even specifically want to *be* a doctor—she’d just been cornered into needing a doctor’s skills. *I’m an apothecary!* That was how Luomen had raised her. She wanted surgical training in order to save more people, but it wouldn’t distract her from her true calling.

Meanwhile, she did have her pride as an apothecary. “Didn’t I hear you say I’m even better at mixing medicines than some of the apprentice physicians, Dr. Liu?” she asked.

He gave her a withering look. She trembled with the frustration of knowing this was not a situation where she could talk back to him—knowing she just had to ride this out.

“I don’t need a physician proper on this occasion. As long as they possess equivalent skills, I don’t care if it’s the town sawbones or even an apothecary. I can grant them special permission. Are you certain you can’t find me at least two more people under those conditions?” Jinshi said. It was clear he meant more than he was expressly stating. Maomao was quite familiar with this tone; in the rear palace, it had always presaged his most bothersome requests.

This was going to be as much of a nuisance as anything he had ever asked her to do, but at the same time, it promised to satisfy Maomao’s intellectual curiosity. She wouldn’t get another chance like this. If they could prevail upon Dr. Liu, she would get an opportunity to learn something entirely new. She felt

her heart start to race, accompanied by a pleasant thrill and a decidedly less pleasant cold sweat.

She clenched her fists. Dr. Liu gave her a long, hard look, a look that clearly told her to refuse.

I can't do that, she thought. Instead she knelt on one knee before Jinshi. "I'm an apothecary, sir, if you would indeed accept me."

The corners of Jinshi's mouth twitched upward. "You heard her. What's your professional opinion, Dr. Liu?"

For a moment, Dr. Liu gave Maomao a silent glare. And here she'd expected that he would give her work a fair shake in comparison with the apprentices and the other assistants. Was it really that much of a problem that she was a woman?

Finally he said, "She is, as she says, an apothecary. But there are some problems that cannot be treated with herbs."

"Isn't it the job of her medical superior to do something about that? If she must know about more than herbs, can she not be taught?"

Maomao couldn't see Dr. Liu from her obsequious bow, but she knew at that moment he had to be gritting his teeth and suppressing his rage.

"I'm sure I can trust you to do what needs to be done, doctor," Jinshi said, and then he left the room. Basen obediently followed him, but not without a sympathetic glance at Dr. Liu.

With Jinshi gone, the silent stare only intensified. All Maomao could offer was a weak smile.

"Give me your head. One time, and we'll call it even."

"Yes, sir..."

His knuckle slammed into her skull. Actually, it was pretty painful—he could have given the old madam a run for her money.

"I'll let you off with that. Argh! Curse that Luomen. He's stuck me with a real troublemaker!" Dr. Liu fell into his chair and sucked angrily on his pipe. So he *had* heard the story from Luomen!

Maybe he was planning to play dumb.

In a way, then, it was very good luck that Jinshi had come.

Dr. Liu continued to puff away, still openly annoyed.

“Should you be smoking, sir?” Maomao asked, gesturing at the sign.

“Right now? Yes! Be good enough to look the other way this once. Don’t you have some cleanup left in the other room?”

Oof, look who’s feeling salty.

Still, Maomao knew better than to needle him further. She went into the next room, looked at the inundated brazier and broken distiller, and put her head in her hands.

The still alone was worth six months’ salary for her.

Chapter 9: The Message

At his villa, Jinshi received a letter. It was written not on wood strips nor on paper, but on parchment, rolled up and tied, and sealed with wax. Different lands had their different ways of sending letters; this was characteristic of the west.

Gaoshun bore out Jinshi's suspicion: "It's from the western capital," he said.

"Yes, from Sir Gyoku-ou. I know perfectly well they have paper over there these days..."

Even in the west, where trees to make paper were scarce, it was still cheaper than parchment. Jinshi took another look at the seal, confirming it was the one he expected. It had become quite familiar to him recently—it looked very much like the one now burned into his flank.

He tugged at the tie, trying to break the seal, but it resisted him. The material looked delicate enough. It could be cut, surely. "You have scissors, Gaoshun?" Jinshi asked.

"Here, sir."

Jinshi broke the seal—and sighed. If Basen were here, he would have immediately begun questioning Jinshi about what could inspire such a reaction, but Gaoshun knew better. He waited for Jinshi to speak.

"You want to read it?" Jinshi asked. Gaoshun glanced at the parchment but shook his head.

"What does it say, sir?"

"His daughter will enter the rear palace just about the time *we're* leaving court—as planned. Awfully imperious letter for a man who's simply confirming a schedule." Did Gyoku-ou think Jinshi was still in charge of running the rear palace?

"Practically speaking, her admission to the rear palace will have to be postponed until you get back," Gaoshun observed. Jinshi felt bad for the

princess who would have come all this way, but she would have to stay in a separate villa somewhere and wait. Given Empress Gyokuyou's objections, she couldn't enter the rear palace.

There was an obvious compromise: make her the consort of the Imperial younger brother. The catch being that Jinshi, of course, had no intention of marrying her.

Jinshi, for his part, knew exactly how close the matter had come, and it made the hair on his neck stand on end. If he hadn't branded that crest on his flank, even the Emperor would probably have ordered him to suck it up and marry the girl.

Jinshi didn't say anything, but he tapped his temple. He went back over the matter in his mind—something still felt wrong. Empress Gyokuyou knew about Jinshi's brand. The secret was a weapon in the Empress's hand, but it was a double-edged sword. It must not become public knowledge that Jinshi bore the Empress's own crest on his body. The Emperor and Empress had seen him do it and knew what it meant, but anyone else would assume it was proof of adultery. Adultery involving some very strange predilections, no less.

As potential marriage partners went, even the Empress's own niece was too dangerous.

From Gyokuyou's perspective, it would have seemed less detrimental simply to take the high road and accept the girl's entry into the rear palace. So what if the Emperor visited her a few times? The Empress would never be so petty as to be jealous over such a thing, not now. Was there, then, something about the girl herself to which the Empress objected?

"Gaoshun... Is Empress Gyokuyou close to Sir Gyoku-ou and his daughter?"

"I should think Lady Suiren would be better placed to answer that question than I am, sir."

Jinshi looked at the old lady-in-waiting. She said, "I doubt it. Master Gyoku-ou didn't have this daughter when Empress Gyokuyou was still in the western capital. I suspect they've never even seen each other."

Suiren placed some rice crackers in front of Jinshi. They weren't his favorite;

she was getting ready for Maomao, who would be here soon. The young woman wouldn't eat anything while she was at the villa, but Jinshi knew she would be happy to be able to take some snacks home.

"This is as good as an order to go to the west, eh?" Jinshi said. Yes, the suggestion could only have been intended to chase him out. He'd known the Empress since she had been only a consort at the rear palace, and she had always been a shrewd woman. "I'd like to believe she has good intentions at heart," Jinshi muttered to himself. *Good intentions* could of course be defined in many ways, but the point was that he hoped she had some sort of plan.

Simply as a matter of politics, however, he couldn't trust her uncritically.

Jinshi skimmed the letter again. The seal was authentic, but it appeared to have been written by an amanuensis. The wording was forthright, impetuous—but really what it came down to was only that Gyoku-ou wanted to make sure everything was in order. It was somewhat baffling, this mismatch between form and content. Whatever; Jinshi would have to retain it in his files. He passed it to Gaoshun to put in his letter box.

He was just about to throw the severed tie away when he stopped. The string, he noticed, was made of twisted paper. That was why it had felt so delicate. He was surprised: a paper tie seemed like a strange thing to use to tie a parchment roll.

He began to inspect the paper string, gently working it loose. It turned out to be a letter on a single sheet of paper. When unfurled, it revealed a lengthy series of numbers.

"Moon Prince," Gaoshun said. He no longer used the name Jinshi, and never would again.

"It seems there's something going on in the western capital that I need to investigate," Jinshi said. He didn't know what the numbers meant, but something was obviously fishy. To reiterate, the seal was authentic; at the very least, the letter itself was real. As for the tie, had it covertly been changed? Or had someone other than Gyoku-ou sealed the letter? It was, of course, theoretically possible that Gyoku-ou himself had done this, but Jinshi doubted it very much. "But why?" he wondered aloud. "Is this some sort of coded message

to me?”

Gaoshun said, “It seems awfully roundabout for that, but perhaps if the sender had no other options...” He stopped short of saying anything definitive.

It had been a gamble. Jinshi might find the message, and he might not. If he didn’t, what then? Another message, perhaps. Several more, perhaps, until Jinshi finally noticed.

“I have no idea what these numbers are supposed to mean. I think we had better call in an expert,” Jinshi said. Luckily, he knew just the person.

Gaoshun furrowed his brow. It was a familiar gesture, but the furrows seemed deeper than usual.

“You look like you have some idea what’s going on,” Jinshi said.

“No, sir,” Gaoshun replied. “However, I recall something like this happening before.”

“When was that?” Jinshi asked, looking at the parchment.

“Seventeen years ago. A secret message precipitated the extinction of the Yi clan.”

The Yi clan. They had ruled the western capital before Gyokuen had come to power. Indeed, the area had formerly been known as I-sei-shu, the “Yi Western Province,” after them. But they no longer existed, since the empress regnant had had them destroyed. Supposedly they had been plotting rebellion. Jinshi had been just four years old at the time and had no memory of the events.

“Wiping out the Yi clan was one of the empress regnant’s most notable acts, along with her work on the rear palace,” Jinshi said.

The empress regnant: that is to say, the former empress dowager. She was never able to occupy the throne herself, but had conducted politics on behalf of the former Emperor in a capacity much like a prime minister.

“Her Majesty the former empress dowager managed to involve herself in politics despite being a woman, and she was anything but a fool,” Gaoshun said.

“I’m aware. I know who the fool was in those days.”

The former emperor—Jinshi's father—had had no interest in politics. As far back as Jinshi could remember, the man had been weak with illness; the closest he came to being involved in government was when he would totter about the palace from time to time. In his last years, he hardly ever left his room, but stayed shut up with his paintings.

The empress regnant had made some forceful moves, but almost all of them had been for the people's benefit. She raised up those who were capable—but at the same time, she earned the antipathy and even hatred of high officials who prized bloodline above merit.

Even the empress regnant's most seemingly inscrutable moves had turned out to have a logic behind them. So it had been for the expansion of the rear palace—perhaps it was so for the destruction of the Yi clan as well.

The story was simple: the Yi clan had plotted rebellion, and had been punished with extermination. Yet exactly what manner of rebellion they had been plotting had not been handed down—and more troublingly, this was the first Jinshi had heard of any secret messages.

So he asked: "What kind of rebellion was the Yi clan planning?"

The Yi were not the last clan to be destroyed; the fate of the Shi clan was fresher in his mind. Jinshi brushed the scar on his right cheek as he relived the memory.

"If that were known, I'm sure you would have been told, Moon Prince," Gaoshun replied. A euphemistic way of saying that the Yi clan had been annihilated before it was known what they were scheming.

"And you approved of this?" Jinshi asked.

"No," Gaoshun replied with unexpected honesty. Jinshi realized his question had been unfair. Gaoshun would already have been Jinshi's minder by that time; he would have had no hand in politics. "The empress dowager was only human. That would have been around the time that the former emperor lost his mind."

That was the only former emperor Jinshi remembered, haunted and incoherent.

“I’m sure you’d like to learn more, but Xiaomao will be here soon.”

“Are you still calling her that?” Jinshi narrowed his eyes.

“If I stopped now, I’m sure she would have questions.”

He was right, of course, but it still stung.

“Why not call Maamei Xiaomei, then? To match.” Maamei was Gaoshun’s daughter, and Jinshi was well aware of how forceful she could be with her father.

Gaoshun looked tired. “I used to. But I’ve been forbidden from doing so—so my apologies, sir, but I cannot.”

“Forbidden? What, did you slip up and call her that in public?”

“No... I developed the unfortunate habit of calling the other one Damei.”

“Damei...” In other words, “Big Mei” as opposed to “Little Mei.” Gaoshun’s daughter was Maamei, and his wife was named Taomei. It might not ordinarily have been such a big deal, but Gaoshun’s wife could be as fearsome as his daughter.

“Remind me, how far apart are you?”

“Six years,” Gaoshun said, crooking his fingers for emphasis. A marriage in which the man was six years older than the woman would hardly have seemed unusual, but the other way around, that wasn’t common. Even if Gaoshun hadn’t meant anything by it, it was easy to imagine how it might have gotten awkward.

“Hm, I see. Yes, I believe we should leave Maamei’s name alone.”

“Of course, sir. Thank you.” Gaoshun bowed deeply.

Jinshi put the letter in a locked drawer. They heard a bell ring in the hall, the signal that there was a visitor.

“The cat has come,” said Jinshi. Maomao was still checking on his injury every few days. Since she was coming straight from the medical office, he expected to get an earful about whatever problems she’d had at work that day.

The letter still bothered Jinshi, but he would deal with it later. For now, he let

his face relax into a smile and waited as Maomao’s footsteps approached.

Chapter 10: Practical Exercises

They started with chickens. Still warm, in fact, not yet stiff. Only the breast and abdomen had been plucked; the birds hadn't even been bled. When Maomao stuck the sharp, carefully polished knife into it, blood sprayed out.

"Take out the internal organs—carefully. I don't want to see a single scratch. Those are going to be dinner, so be gentle with them."

Have to be careful to drain all the blood or the meat will smell bad, Maomao thought. The task of bleeding had been left to them to force them to hone their skills.

There were five or six other people there besides Maomao. From the faces she recognized, she concluded everyone else there was an apprentice physician.

She'd been told to come along on a medicine run, but she'd found herself on a chicken farm some distance from the capital. It started with catching one of the free-range birds, which would be nearly impossible in physician's clothes. Instead they were given farm clothes with grimy leather aprons and set to work. When they caught a bird, they had to wring its neck, then they proceeded into a nearby hut to start cutting.

Who would have imagined that these were doctors, the elite, the cream of the capital's crop?

"Just be grateful we aren't asking you to *vivi*sect them," Dr. Liu said. He almost sounded like he was enjoying himself. Having delivered his instructions with all the pomp he could muster, he began haggling with the chicken farmer. They were working out the value of everything medicinal that might come from a chicken, from its liver to the dried lining of its stomach.

Maomao had the distinct impression that she was more used to jobs like catching and butchering chickens than the rest of the apprentice physicians—which made it sting when Tianyu was the first to grab a bird. The annoyance spurred her to ask, "Say, did you grow up on a farm?"

“No. This is my third time through this training, so I’m starting to get the hang of it. Never feels good, though.”

She’d been right: the bloodstained outfits had shown that the apprentices had already started real-world practice.

“Now I’ve got a question for you, Niang-niang,” Tianyu said. Maomao twitched an eyebrow at the name. She didn’t like it very much, but he’d only started using it more since he’d seen it got a rise out of her, so the best thing she could do was not say anything. “How’d you get Dr. Liu to come around?”

Tianyu’s eyes were gleaming. He was somewhere in his mid-twenties, but at that moment he looked like a ten-year-old boy with mischief in mind. To think, he normally showed no interest in Maomao, reserving all his energies for En’en.

But he loves some gossip...

He’d peppered En’en with rumors as well, so at first Maomao had taken him to be simply quick-eared, but it seemed he had innate curiosity as well. For all his loquaciousness, though, he had never let slip a word to Maomao about what the physicians’ practical exercises entailed. It seemed he didn’t share the quack’s loose lips.

In any event, Maomao didn’t feel like talking to him, and knew she wasn’t likely to get much useful information out of him if she did.

“Instead of talking, how about concentrating on the task at hand? I’ll thank you not to split that gallbladder.”

Doing that would get bile everywhere and make the meat taste terrible. Moreover, an animal’s gallbladder was a potential medicinal ingredient, and so ruining one would most likely earn them a taste of Dr. Liu’s knuckle.

Tianyu was a chatterbox and overall seemed like something of a worthless excuse for a man, but he at least seemed to be good with his hands. He cut through the slippery bird flesh with ease.

“As you work, consider how the organs correspond to their human counterparts,” Dr. Liu instructed.

Humans and chickens were built differently, of course, but this was still a

sensible first step. If you couldn't catch a fleeing chicken, how were you ever going to treat a thrashing patient? If you didn't have it in you to wring the neck of a live bird, where would you find the audacity to cut into a human being? And if you weren't adroit enough to cut up the bird even after it was dead, then you stood no chance of working on a human body.

This practice was as basic as it got, but there were apprentices who couldn't handle this first stage.

"What do we work on after chickens?" Maomao asked—on the assumption that she would, in fact, make it to the next stage.

"Pigs," replied Tianyu. "They're big enough that we work in groups of three. When we get to cows, it's groups of five. But there's a lot fewer people by that point. Once you start to get the hang of it, they make you wear your doctor's uniform and tell you not to get any blood on it. There's another step after that, but I don't know what it is."

"You haven't gotten there?"

"No, they made me start again. They claimed I wasn't serious enough."

"I can see why," Maomao said before she could stop herself. Another thing she hadn't been able to stop herself from doing, ultimately, was reaching out to Tianyu—he looked so much calmer than the other apprentices. For that matter, everyone else except Tianyu—who had been here before—had blanched at the sight of the chickens' blood.

"It could be worse. If they decide you're just not suited to this work, that's pretty much it for you."

Not suited, huh?

She wondered what happened to doctors who couldn't manage a bit of dissection—maybe they got transferred to other departments. They would be, as it were, severed from any potential career as physicians.

"I can't give my sweet En'en the life she deserves on an apprentice physician's salary!"

The guy still hadn't given up—didn't he know when to quit?

Hang in there, En'en!

As people cut into their chickens, the odor of blood began to pervade the room. One apprentice who couldn't stand it pressed a handkerchief over his nose and mouth, but the moment Dr. Liu got back the senior physician grabbed it away from him. "Wearing a mask is correct protocol when treating a patient. But not here," he said.

Under the handkerchief, the apprentice's face was as bloodless as his chicken. Soon he was too sick to stay in the shed and went running outside.

"Geez. How many times is that now? He's gonna run out of chances," Tianyu said as if it didn't affect him at all.

Maomao arranged the internal organs on a tray. The heart, the liver, the intestines, the stomach.

The intestines are easy to damage, but delicious. I could almost eat them right now. Chicken intestines were small and delicate, though, frustrating to wash. *What I wouldn't give to put the gizzard on a skewer and grill it up. A dash of salt, that's all it needs.* If they had gotten the blood out correctly, it would be delectable. *And the gallbladder's in one piece. Perfect.* Spilling bile everywhere would have ruined the entire bird.

She set the organs carefully on the tray. When she had finished, Dr. Liu came around to look. "All right. Put them back in and sew it up," he said.

"I'm sorry?" But she already had them arranged by cookability!

"I can tell you're eager to dig in—and I can't let you do all your work in that condition. You'll start to see patients as nothing but hunks of meat."

"I sincerely doubt that, sir," she said, but in fact he had seen straight through her.

She put all the organs back where they belonged, taking special care not to damage the gallbladder.

"You know what to do with this?" Dr. Liu asked, thrusting something under Maomao's nose. It looked like a fishhook and some thread, carefully wrapped in cloth.

“Yes, sir, more or less.”

The thread was probably silk; that would explain the distinctive sheen. She threaded the hooked needle with the silk, then pressed the sides of the cut together with her fingers as she sewed it shut.

At least I’ve done sewing before. Always with a straight needle, but the hooked one proved easier to use than she’d expected. She could see how much more effective it would be once she got used to it. *They sure give you nice stuff when you’re official.*

Thus she went along, sewing and being impressed in equal measure. If she could have asked for anything, it might have been a slightly longer end to the hook—it was somewhat short and difficult to hold. This would have been easier with something she could grip tighter.

Tweezers wouldn’t work to hold it. I need something I can grip better.

She was still thinking about whether they might develop a new tool just for her when she finished the job. She glanced over and saw that Tianyu had already finished. There was that frustration again.

“Let me see that,” Dr. Liu said, inspecting the sutures. “Hmph. All right, you can do what you want with it after this. But I’m collecting the organs that we can use for medicine. You can have the rest.” He turned away, not looking particularly impressed. This was what passed, it seemed, for his approval. “Make sure to wash those needles. Boil and disinfect them. They don’t come cheap.”

From their shape to their delicacy, the hooks were clearly the work of skilled craftsmen. Maomao had quietly been hoping to take one home with her—so much for that idea.

She cut the sutures and took the organs out once again so she could clean them off.

Maomao graduated from chickens to pigs, and thence to cows, and it was around that time that she received a delivery.

“Thank you very much,” she said, taking it from the woman who ran the

dormitory. It was already after dinner; work had run late. The woman had been waiting for her all this time. She was also...grinning a little? Maomao looked at the sender and discovered it was, of all people, Gaoshun.

I can guarantee she's got the wrong idea.

It might have come in Gaoshun's name, but only one person could have sent it. Jinshi. He could have used Basen's name as well, but that seemed likely to cause distress if Basen ever found out, so Gaoshun it was.

Maomao was still going to Jinshi's villa once every several days. She'd worried about how she would hide that from Yao and En'en once the year-end break was over, but the problem turned out to solve itself.

"I know you think you're getting ahead of me, Maomao, but you're not!" Yao had declared. She evidently thought Maomao's visits to Jinshi were further excursions for "practical exercises."

I guess she's not entirely *wrong*, Maomao thought. In any case, she was grateful for Yao's convenient misapprehension. From the way Yao acted, it looked like she, too, had chosen to walk this brutal path.

Gaoshun's name on the delivery led Maomao to think of his son. *I never see Basen around the villa.* He was as strong as a charging boar and about as subtle. He was probably being deliberately distanced from Jinshi's personal life so that he wouldn't notice any change in his master.

Looks like he still accompanies Jinshi at work, though. To the medical office, for example. It was natural not to clue him in to what was going on, but even Basen would get frustrated if they didn't handle him carefully. Thankfully, Gaoshun would know how to do that. Or at least, Maomao hoped he would.

Once she was safely back in her room, Maomao opened the package. There was a letter and something wrapped in cloth, something with a faint scent.

"Elegant as always, I see." She undid the wrapping to reveal a ceramic vessel with incense inside. She brought it to her nose and sniffed.

Sandalwood base with some additions.

The mix-ins were probably all very fancy, but the smells didn't complement

each other very well, and she couldn't escape the impression that the result felt cheap. A bit of a poor showing from Jinshi, who always had only the best.

No... Wait.

Had he purposely sent something not quite as good because it was for Maomao? She seemed to remember him saying something once about how you could tell a person's class by the incense they used. From that perspective, this was a little nicer than what one might expect for a court lady, but not too much.

That still left the question of why Jinshi was sending her incense at all. She sniffed her sleeve and discovered a faint odor of blood.

I thought I got the smell out before I saw him...

Lately, she had been covering for her dissection trips to the farm by claiming she was going out on house calls. The animals themselves were easy enough to explain—the organs were medicinal, and the meat was for food.

Today, it turned out, a hunter had had the good fortune to catch a bear, and the doctors were able to be involved in the dissection. Dr. Liu was ecstatic; he told them that this was a very rare opportunity. The blood had to be drained quickly, lest it taint the meat, so the doctors rarely got to observe.

They'd changed into their dissection outfits and put on leather aprons. Once everything was over, Maomao had taken a bath before going back to court.

Nice to get out to one of the public baths every once in a while, she thought. There was no bath at the dorm, so this was a particularly pleasant opportunity. One of the pleasure district's few luxuries, which Maomao had experienced growing up, was that people took baths every day. Even in the rear palace, she'd been able to wash up once every few days.

Did she like baths? If pressed, she would have to say that she did. This time they even paid for her admittance to the public bathhouse, and taking a bath in the middle of the day was a pleasure all its own.

Oh... Maybe it's my hair. There wouldn't have been time for her hair to dry, of course, so she'd gone without washing it.

She wondered if Jinshi understood what was necessary to become a real

doctor.

Some of it, maybe. But I'm not sure he knows about the human corpse dissection.

Evidently he'd picked up on the odor she brought with her when she came to examine him. He could be fussy about the strangest things.

Still pondering the situation, Maomao took a teaspoon of the incense and lit it. Then she put a basket over it, and on top of the basket she set the clothes she would wear tomorrow.

Let's start with this. She used just a pinch of the stuff; she wasn't even sure if it would be noticeable.

Thus prepared for the following day, she decided it was time to go to bed. She was about to change into her nightclothes when there was a knock at the door. "Come in," she said.

En'en entered with some spring rolls in her hand. "This is left over from dinner. You want it?"

"Absolutely." Maomao would never pass up a chance for some of En'en's cooking. She wasn't that hungry right now, but it could be tomorrow's breakfast. What with all her outings these days, going to see Jinshi and doing medical practice, she hadn't had many opportunities to enjoy En'en's home-cooked meals.

En'en put the plate of spring rolls on the table—and then she spied the incense. "Now, that's not like you, perfuming your clothes."

"I have my moons. It just so happens there's been more blood than usual lately." It wasn't untrue; this was precisely that time of the month when she became rather melancholy for a few days. "I know Yao does it, and I thought it might be a good idea."

She knew, of course, that was probably En'en who was actually doing the work.

"Oh, I see." Maomao had expected some pointed comeback from En'en, but she said nothing more than that. Even though she had surely noticed how often

Maomao was out these days.

So she's not going to try to sound me out about anything?

As long as Maomao wasn't dragging Yao into anything, En'en seemed content not to stick her nose into her business.

Maomao placed a cloth over the spring rolls and went back to changing.

When Maomao arrived at the medical office the next day, she found Yao talking to Dr. Liu and not looking very happy. The two young women often missed each other at work these days, so they hadn't seen much of each other—and it looked like the reunion might be a stormy one.

I hope she doesn't say anything suspicious, Maomao thought anxiously as she set herself to organizing the medicine cabinet.

"And you don't feel the need to send *me* out for anything?" Yao said.

Aaand there it is.

Yao was resolute, seemingly intent on looking every bit as fearsome as Dr. Liu.

"No, I don't," the senior physician responded, and then looked through the daily report as if to say that was the end of the discussion. The report reported only that there had been nothing much to report yesterday.

"Funny. *You* seem to have errands to run all the time these days, Maomao," Yao said. Great. Now Maomao was involved.

"Yes, it seems I do," she replied. There was no point arguing it.

"And where did your errands take you yesterday? To do what?"

"I was retrieving some bear gall," said Maomao. At that moment, in fact, she was putting away the gall she'd obtained the day before. The hunter had given them some, already processed. It was a lovely medicine; it looked sort of like a misshapen dried persimmon.

She thought she caught a hint of a glare from Dr. Liu, but he didn't say anything to stop her. He knew she wasn't saying anything incriminating.

"Gall is such an important medicinal component, I asked to be shown how it

was prepared. I also helped with dissecting a cow to see if there were any stones in its gallbladder. Which, I'm sorry to say, there weren't."

"Stones in a cow's gallbladder—you mean bezoars? I hear those are found in barely one out of a thousand animals. Why would you go looking for something you know almost certainly isn't there?" Yao asked.

"Fair question. The chances of finding a bezoar are much higher if the animal displays symptoms of gallstones. The stones get much more expensive the moment they go on the open market, so if you see an animal showing the signs, it's perfectly logical to look on the spot."

Maomao walked a fine line, trying to prevent Dr. Liu from getting upset with her while also not saying anything strictly untrue. She felt a bit guilty toward Yao, but she needed to bail out of this conversation. *I know it isn't quite fair of me...*

She was hiding behind Jinshi. Yao might give her a hard time for dirty tactics, but Maomao wasn't in the mood to talk. She had other, more pressing things to do.

Yao looked at her and grimaced. Dr. Liu looked back at the daily report. He seemed to be saying he was satisfied with Maomao's answer.

I understand, Yao. Believe me, I do! Maomao knew what Yao really wanted to say. *"Why can't I come too?" That's what you want to know.*

It was Dr. Liu who finally supplied the answer. "If you want some errands to run, start by going to the cafeteria."

"Th-The cafeteria, sir? Why?"

"Let me guess: you've never killed and plucked so much as a chicken in your life. You think Maomao was just *watching* them chop up that bear? That's what's going on here—and she's used to it by now." It was a rare compliment from Dr. Liu, but somehow it didn't bring Maomao pleasure.

"Well, what about En'en, then? She must be even better than Maomao at butchering chickens."

"Maybe so, but why bring someone who's not interested in the errand in the

first place? What, did you think En'en would go on ahead and leave you alone? I'm not going to press-gang anyone who lacks the ambition. You think it's unfair that only Maomao gets to go on these errands? You want things to be different? Then start by making sure you're not dead weight to the people around you!"

Ah, there was the usual Dr. Liu, relentless and unsparing.

Yao clutched her skirt; the physician's words obviously pained her, but she didn't say anything. She knew it was true—she'd never even held a cleaver in the kitchen. The spring rolls Maomao had eaten for breakfast this morning had been entirely En'en's work.

We've got something else to worry about...

There was an audible sound of teeth grinding from behind Yao. It was En'en, who was reaching for a bottle of disinfectant alcohol. Scary. Very scary.

Yao, however, reached out and stopped her. "En'en," she said. She so often seemed to do as her lady-in-waiting wished, but at this moment she showed that she knew how to handle an overprotective attendant. She turned back to Dr. Liu and said, "I understand what you're saying, sir. I'll learn how to handle a cleaver right away."

"Hoh! You will, will you? Well, start by beheading a live chicken."

"B...Beheading?"

It was true that if she couldn't manage that, she wouldn't be able to follow the path Maomao was on. Even one of the apprentice physicians had broken down in ugly, snotty tears as he killed the pig he would use for his dissection. If that was how farm animals affected you, you were never going to be able to work on human beings. After all, a physician might very well find himself having to amputate an arm or a leg without even an anesthetic for the patient.

Happens all the time on the battlefield.

War was a place where you didn't need your father's hidden anatomy books—you would see enough human organs for a lifetime. The ability to ban a book on dissection was, in its own way, a luxury afforded by a time of peace.

“I wonder if you’ve got it in you to hack at someone’s organs while they’re still alive,” Dr. Liu said with a smirk.

“I do! I can! That’s what I came here for,” Yao insisted. She wasn’t just trying to be contrary with the senior physician; she genuinely seemed to want to acquire the skills of medicine.

If Yao was only here in the medical office as a way of getting out from under her uncle’s thumb, this would be an excellent time for her to give up and go home. In spite of the physical injury she’d suffered while tasting food for poison, Yao was still young, beautiful, and smart. There must have been plenty of suitors out there who would be eager to have her.

Stop that. I’m thinking exactly like her uncle.

Yao and En’en both despised Yao’s uncle, but there was, admittedly, some level on which he was still thinking of Yao’s happiness. Li was, by and large, not a place where a single woman could live comfortably. Too many habits, customs, and circumstances militated against it. It wasn’t Maomao’s place to say that to Yao, though. If she had decided that this was what she wanted to do, then Maomao would keep her peace.

That was when she caught a glimpse of En’en, standing behind Yao and was looking at the mocking Dr. Liu. Maomao knew that En’en would, like her, refrain from comment on whatever Yao decided to do. At that moment, however, there was uncharacteristic indecision in her eyes.

I wonder how this is going to play out.

However that was, though, it still didn’t involve Maomao. She jotted down her freshly obtained ingredients as she put them in the cabinet.

Yao lost no time: come that night, she was standing in the kitchen. En’en watched her inexpert handling of the cleaver with trepidation. Maomao, who was home early for once, watched them both and waited patiently for dinner to be ready.

“So I take this, and—” *Whack!*

“M-Mistress...”

Yao brought down the knife like she was chopping wood; she looked like she could have cut through bone, not just meat. Even if Maomao had wanted to help, it didn't look safe to get too close.

"I-It's dangerous, working like that. You should start with something smaller!"

"No, meat! I need to cut flesh!"

En'en was distinctly panicked. She was normally so coolheaded that Maomao would have expected her to make a better teacher for Yao, but they weren't going to get anywhere this way. Maomao decided to pretend she hadn't seen anything and just leave the room—when, unfortunately for her, her eyes met En'en's. En'en gave her the look to end all looks, then pointed at the table. There was food there. Ready to eat. Chili shrimp, no less.

Maomao swallowed heavily. Had En'en prepared something ahead of time? Steam puffed from the fresh dish, which consisted of bountiful, huge shrimp and a whole medley of vegetables. Knowing En'en's cooking, Maomao was sure that she'd used soy paste to give it a kick, but probably also some fruit juice to round out the flavor. It would be heavenly over rice. She could almost feel the juicy shrimp in her mouth.

It was all too clear that En'en was sending a message.

"If you want dinner, then help us," huh?

Maomao scowled but went to wash her hands. She couldn't beat puffy shrimp.

She began by selecting a cleaver a size smaller than the one Yao was holding. Then she put a single carrot on a cutting board. "Start by chopping this, Yao," she said.

"A carrot? But I'm trying to learn to cut meat, here!"

"I think I can hear Dr. Liu now: *You? Cut flesh when you can't chop so much as a sprig of ginseng?*" Maomao replied, substituting something more traditionally medicinal for the carrot.

"Fine," Yao said after a moment.

"Good. Now, take *this* cleaver. There are actually different kinds of cleavers,

and you have to cut with them in different ways. The knife you're holding now is for smashing through bone. It's not meant for something as delicate as soft flesh. If you were practicing amputating a patient's arm, it would be perfect."

Yao didn't have anything to say to that; she bit her lip and switched knives. En'en looked relieved. Yao was dedicated to her studies, so she would know certain things that medicine had in common with the culinary arts—but that didn't include the types of cleavers. When it came to kitchen matters, she was more knowledgeable about eating than cooking.

"Okay, now let's work on how to hold the knife. Do it like this. And when you cut the carrot, it's like this." Maomao moved Yao's hand inch by inch. "Once you have it fixed in place so the carrot doesn't move, you can cut nice and slow; you don't have to hack. En'en takes good care of the equipment, so this knife has an excellent cutting edge. You don't need a lot of force. Remember that when you cut through festering skin or flesh, you're severing living blood vessels."

Thunk went the knife as Yao made an unsteady cut.

"All right. Now slice it into about five pieces."

Thunk, thunk, thunk. Yao was a perfectly capable young woman; she just needed someone to show her what to do. It was worth remembering that as grown-up as she looked, she was still only sixteen.

"There!" she said as she finished chopping the carrot.

"Okay, this next." Maomao set out a daikon.

"No more vegetables," said Yao.

"All you've done so far is slice a carrot," Maomao said. "Let's work on peeling a daikon neatly before we move on to meat."

If anything, peeling the skin off a daikon was the harder task, but Maomao wanted Yao to do her learning on produce. She didn't want her charging into Dr. Liu's office just because she'd managed to chop a little meat. Well, to be fair, she would need to strangle a chicken first.

Yao looked unhappy, but resigned herself to working on the radish.

“Don’t worry, I wouldn’t make you peel the whole thing at once the very first time. Cut it into smaller pieces that will be easier to peel.”

“Sure. That’s exactly what I was going to do,” Yao pouted. While she worked on peeling, Maomao contemplated what to do with the carrot.

“Maomao,” said En’en, pointing first at the pork Yao had been attempting to chop, then at some dried shiitake mushrooms. The mushrooms were a luxury ingredient; Maomao decided not to ask how she had gotten them. The only other thing she saw nearby were some spices.

“Make sweet and sour pork,” is that what I’m hearing?

In fact, there just happened to be sweet potato starch right there. Might be perfect for covering the pork, which could then be fried.

Maomao couldn’t help longing for the shrimp, which was sitting there getting cold, but En’en was fixated on watching Yao to make sure she didn’t hurt herself. Maomao was left with no choice but to go ahead and make the pork.

“Maomao,” said Yao this time. “Just so you know, I’m not giving up on the physician’s path.”

“Women can’t be physicians,” Maomao replied, unwilling to lie to Yao. The most Maomao and her compatriots might be permitted at this point was to obtain equivalent knowledge. They would be given no title and gain nothing from it, other than to satisfy their own intellectual curiosity, and, perhaps, to know that they could respond should some emergency ever arise.

“But they’re already teaching *you* the things you need to become a doctor, right?”

That brought Maomao up short. She didn’t answer; if she was set on not lying to Yao, then silence was the only response.

“I’ve been thinking hard about it,” Yao said. “I mean, since we found the book in Master Lakan’s house.”

That wasn’t a name Maomao liked to hear, but giving Yao a foul look wouldn’t help anything, so she just listened quietly.

“It’s true, I find it hard to accept that way of thinking, but I can understand

that it's probably necessary for those who practice medicine. Master Luomen made that perfectly clear. I always assumed we would learn these things eventually, but now I see there's something else you need in order to put it into practice."

Intelligent girls were all well and good, but sometimes ignorance was bliss. If Yao hadn't known, or if she could have pretended not to know, then a simpler, easier path might have been open to her. Maomao felt the wish for Yao to be happy—and if even she felt it, how much more keenly must En'en?

If Yao was going to learn the same things as a physician, however, then ignorant, blissful happiness would only get farther away.

"Yao," Maomao said slowly, "being a doctor will mean taking a knife to people sometimes. If a pregnant mother can't deliver her child, you may have to cut her open to get to it—and you may have to do it knowing that at best, only the baby will survive. You might have to amputate an arm or a leg from a patient begging you not to, and there might not even be anesthetics available to numb the pain. You may have to stuff spilling intestines back into an abdominal cavity and sew up the skin right over them."

"I know all of that."

"This is a bloodsoaked profession. It may mean there will be no one willing to spend their life with you. People might revile you because they consider blood to be impure. You have to really *want* this life, or you'd be better off steering clear."

"I wouldn't be interested in any man who'd be frightened off by a little blood. Would I, En'en?"

"Y-Young mistress..." En'en, usually so eager to keep any man at bay when it came to Yao, looked conflicted.

Normally, someone like Yao would be walking a more proper path. Even Maomao could see the disappointment of it, but there was no reason she should stop Yao. She could only pray that a little light might shine upon the path Yao chose.

"Oops, it broke. Peeling a daikon is a lot harder than it looks," Yao said,

scowling and showing them a thick strip of radish peel.

“You’re right, it’s not easy,” Maomao said.

“En’en can make them look like peony blossoms!”

“Yes, well, she’s special.” That was the honest truth. While she talked, Maomao dunked the battered pork in the oil and fried it up good. Yao was continuing to give the tattered radish peel a dirty look.

It looked like it was going to be a while before they got to taste that shrimp.

Chapter 11: The Dissection

The weather had begun to get warmer and the butterbur had blown their edible buds when Maomao and the apprentice physicians were brought to a dark, dank spot.

“Finally time for the real deal, huh?” Tianyu said flippantly. He was the only one who had the wherewithal to act unintimidated; the other apprentices were all pale-faced. Once in a while they would shoot Maomao looks that said *What are* you *doing here?* but they refrained from actually saying anything. Maomao had weathered plenty of these looks while they dissected animals together. She wasn’t about to let it bother her now.

Well, it wasn’t *quite* true that no one said anything.

“Someone’s getting *very* special treatment,” remarked Tianyu. As frivolous as he might seem, he had an iron nerve. When they had been dissecting livestock, he’d been the calmest of them all. He might not take to classroom learning as readily as the other students, but his composure made him a more gifted practitioner than the others. Indeed, he was very good.

“If you want to call it that,” Maomao replied.

“Ooh. I’m jealous.”

Maomao was starting to think Tianyu couldn’t stay calm unless he was talking to someone. Most of the other apprentices were too nervous during the practical work to talk to anyone, let alone Maomao, but Tianyu seemed to prattle at her relentlessly.

“If my treatment’s really so special, maybe I could get one of those white coats.”

“Ooh, don’t think that’s possible, Niang-niang.”

It’s Maomao! Was he doing this on purpose? Whatever; it would be too much work to set him straight, so she let it be.

To be fair, she could see where Tianyu was coming from. *Special treatment,*

huh? Guess I can't really blame anyone for accusing me of that. Under normal circumstances, Maomao would never have walked this dim, dank hallway in the doctors' company. As to where the hallway led—it was the room where executed criminals were placed in repose. The doctors were using a special passageway so that no one would see them go there.

It was not, however, the first time Maomao had used it. No, that had been when she'd gone to see whether Suirei was really dead. Suirei, who was now living with the former consort Ah-Duo. *Kind of wish she could've learned surgery too.*

Once, on the way to the western capital, she'd helped Maomao treat some injured guards, and had proven unflappable even though the treatment had involved, among other things, amputating a human arm. She would've done great here.

I guess her birth would have made it impossible, Maomao thought. While it wasn't officially acknowledged, Suirei was the former emperor's granddaughter. She was also a member of the exterminated Shi clan, so although her life had been spared, she was fated to remain in the shadows as long as she lived.

Such a waste. There was nothing Maomao could do but lament it. Anything else was far beyond her power. One might think, then, that perhaps Suirei should have stayed dead—but that would be an affront. One could not forget that there was another girl who had staged a once-in-a-lifetime performance so that Suirei could live.

"So, who's backing your participation here?" Tianyu asked. Very direct.

"Are you accusing me of nepotism?" Maomao asked—the same thing of which she had been suspected when she'd first joined the staff at the medical office.

"No. I think it's something bigger than that. Men's intuition."

This son of a...

How could Tianyu act so frothy and yet be so perceptive? It would be bad for everyone if he sniffed out Jinshi's involvement here.

"I'm telling En'en," Maomao said instead.

“She’s not here, so how could you tell her?” Tianyu replied. So much for throwing him off the subject—but it bought her exactly enough time. They had arrived at their destination.

“Here,” Dr. Liu said, pointing to a door at the end of the hallway. It opened with a great, heavy creaking, unleashing a fresh blast of damp, humid air.

I smell alcohol, thought Maomao. It should have been a comfort to her—she loved spirits—but she just wasn’t in the mood to drink at that moment. Lying on a cot in the middle of the room was a man, face up and completely naked. Bruises from a rope marked his neck. He was a criminal, executed by hanging, and the smell of alcohol was probably because the body had been wiped down.

“We’ll put on smocks, but try not to get them dirty if you can help it,” Dr. Liu said. Maomao took the apron she was given and put it on. She was also handed a white bandanna, not to tie back her hair, but to put over her face, covering everything below the eyes. Dr. Liu continued, “I’m going to do the cutting. You’re going to watch me, and you’re going to burn every organ, every layer of tissue, into your memory.” He was already holding a dissecting knife. “I want you to remember every single thing you see here.” His tone was downright threatening.

They had been warned ahead of time not to take any notes. The very fact that Dr. Liu was here, teaching them this, was supposedly something that could not happen. The only thing they could take with them from this place would be whatever they could remember.

So it comes down to a conflict between public morals and medical progress. The physicians’ compromise was not to do anything too open.

The small, sharp knife slid easily into the body’s portly abdomen. It wasn’t enough to make blood spurt, but at the same time, the flesh wasn’t stiff; Dr. Liu appeared to have chosen a body in which the rigor mortis had worn off. He laid open the corpse and began showing them the internal organs, which were much easier to see than they had been on the freshly slaughtered livestock. Working with an actual human corpse, however, hit a little close to home. The students were by now accustomed to working with animals, but even so a couple of them put their hands to their mouths.

“This is the heart, here. Under no circumstances should you cut the large blood vessels connected to it,” Dr. Liu told them. Then he continued through the organs. “The stomach, the small intestine, the large intestine. These comprise the digestive tract. You should recognize them; we’ve made enough sausages from intestines.”

They’d done it on his orders, in fact; he’d told them their animals were not to be wasted. The sausages had been delicious, but it looked like a few of the apprentices might never be able to eat another one again.

“Here are the reproductive organs. I’ll call you the moment they execute a female prisoner. The reproductive organs take a substantially different form in women, needless to say.” By this point in her life Maomao, of course, was neither surprised nor scandalized by the sight of male genitalia. “Can anyone tell me what disease this man suffered from?” Dr. Liu asked them.

Not sure how we’re supposed to tell, Maomao thought. The man had been dead for days, meaning the color of his skin was no longer a reliable guide to his condition. She thought she could make out some splotches, and although this was her first time seeing the internal organs of a human up close, she thought she could make a guess.

No one else seemed willing to answer, so she ventured, “Was it a disease of the liver, sir?” Maomao wasn’t eager to stand out too much, but somebody had to answer or they would be stuck here forever.

“What’s your basis for suggesting that?” Dr. Liu asked.

“I can’t shake the sense that the color of his liver is poor compared to the animals we’ve worked with. There are also some yellow discolorations on his skin, and jaundice is a good indicator of liver problems.”

Yao had the same symptom.

“Passing marks for you. This man got drunk and turned violent. He picked a fight with another customer at the bar and ended up killing him. His own mother tried to stop him, and he killed her too. As a matter of fact, he’d just been released from prison for a previous offense, and he was out of second chances.”

Hence the hanging.

“As would be more obvious if we could line this up against a healthy liver, this one is noticeably inflamed. Excessive alcohol use is typically the culprit, but sometimes it can be contaminated by the blood, so be careful not to get any cuts or injuries on your hands while working with something like this. The poison can get into your body through the wound and make you sick.”

Dr. Liu’s tone was so intimidating that even Tianyu didn’t have a smart remark. In fact, his eyes were wide; he studied the organ intently. He seemed to show an unanticipated serious streak when they were actually at work.

Maomao looked much like him: she was staring hard at the dissected body, taking it all in, making sure she didn’t miss a word the doctor said, intimidating or not.

When their “special class” was over, the students changed and headed for the bathhouse. They went to one right next to a temple—one imagined that the bathhouse had started as a place for clergy to purify themselves, but by now the establishment demanded secular currency.

The baths were divided by gender, not mixed, and here in the middle of the day the place wasn’t very busy, but nonetheless the changing room felt cramped. Even so, the closely packed shelves probably had room for fifteen sets of clothes. There were a number of bathhouses in the capital, and if this wasn’t the most lavish, it was clean and well-maintained.

“Phew...” The water was good and hot, and the other bathers were few and far between—in Maomao’s mind, this was paradise.

The students had been told they could go home after they washed up, so she would take the time to clean her hair today. She washed off the clinging feel of the dampness and the dark. It mattered so much to have these moments when you could simply soak in the bath and think about nothing.

It sucks that we couldn’t write anything down, she thought. But if they did, their notes would constitute a forbidden book in their own right.

Today they had only observed, but in the future Maomao and the others

would be expected to do the dissection themselves. Maomao had been surprised by how calm and rational she had remained in the presence of a corpse. *Maybe it's because I'd never seen him before. Because he was a criminal. Because I could tell myself it was his own fault he died.*

Would she have been able to do the same if it were someone she knew? Or perhaps it helped that they were cutting not into a live person, but only something that had formerly been a person.

Maomao thought of Luomen's hidden book. He'd said that it was his teacher on the last page. She hadn't looked very old, though, not in his drawings. *I can't imagine how he felt when he was making those illustrations.* What must Luomen's teacher have meant to him?

Just as Maomao was letting out another sigh, some young women came into the bath.

"Think they'd take me?" one of them said.

"Sure! Definitely," the other replied.

Maomao listened, wondering what they were talking about.

"I heard they haven't put out a call in a long time, though. You know, for ladies for the rear palace?"

"That's exactly it! They must be getting low on numbers. Now's your chance!"

A call for ladies for the rear palace? Maomao frowned thoughtfully. Hadn't Jinshi said that Gyoku-ou's daughter, Empress Gyokuyou's niece, was going to enter the palace? Even if they had found a way to postpone it. *So they do ask for volunteers.*

Such a young woman couldn't have exclusively ladies-in-waiting from the western capital around her; and anyway, she was the child of someone very important and influential.

"Everyone talks about the Crown Prince, but the Emperor only has two sons right now. Plenty of chances to find your place. Can't have too many sons, right?"

Wow! This young lady had ambition. She was planning not only to enter the

rear palace as a palace woman, but to become the Emperor's bedmate and even a mother of the nation.

If you're gonna dream, dream big.

Even if, Maomao figured, things would end up very differently from what the woman expected. She nodded her head, causing droplets of water to fall from her sopping bangs. *That reminds me.* She knew they would be leaving for the western capital before this new consort arrived, but she still hadn't heard an exact date. For that matter, she didn't even know who else would be coming with them.

I'll ask him next time, she thought, and then she heaved herself out of the bath and headed for the changing room.

Chapter 12: The Secret of the Numbers

Jinshi gave a great stretch, his just reward for finishing a chunk of his work. He was alone in his office. No, that wasn't quite true—from behind a screen came the sound of someone shuffling papers. Who? Baryou, he of the social anxiety disorder.

Jinshi was almost done with his work, but there was something he wanted to ask Baryou.

"Baryou, may I ask you something?"

"Yes, sir, what is it?" came a thin voice from behind the screen.

"How'd the love start?"

"Hrm? How'd what love start?"

"If I said Chue, would you understand?"

Love might sound like an odd thing to be talking about, but despite his screen and retiring attitude, Baryou was in fact a married man. A man married, in fact, to someone who had recently entered service as one of Jinshi's ladies-in-waiting, Chue. Jinshi's main condition when choosing his attendants was that they never spare him so much as an amorous glance. Chue certainly met that requirement.

"Yes, she hardly seems human, does she?" Baryou replied. Another statement that seemed apt to invite misunderstanding.

"Erm, isn't she your wife? You have *children*, don't you?"

Jinshi had to admit, it was difficult to see how a woman with such a forceful personality ever worked with Baryou. The curiosity had driven him to ask about their love story, but he didn't quite expect the answer he got.

"It was a bit of scheming on the part of my mother and my older sister Maamei. They looked at me, and they looked at Basen, and they picked the surest way of continuing the family line."

Jinshi was struck dumb.

“I accepted, on the condition that she and hers would handle all the child-rearing, and so the marriage was decided. We only see each other face to face once every two weeks, and we don’t talk much, but I must say, I think we get along rather well.”

“Yes... I mean, if you say so...”

The Ba brothers seemed to be polar opposites of each other. Jinshi could see how one might consider the exceptionally frail Baryou a better choice than the exceptionally powerful Basen. It was a political marriage through and through.

“They pointed out that there’s no telling how long I might live, and ordered me to hurry up and produce some heirs. They even wanted me to put it ahead of taking the civil service exam.”

Baryou had passed the civil service exam two years earlier, which implied that he had taken it only after conceiving children.

“She’s certainly...unique, but with Suiren to keep her in line, she’s been quite a trustworthy helper,” Jinshi said. It actually reminded him of when Maomao had been working under him.

“She comes from the Mi clan, albeit a subsidiary line.”

That would explain much. As the Ma clan provided bodyguards for the Imperial family, the Mi clan produced an information network that served the Emperor and his kin directly. They both guarded the royal family, one in the light, one from the shadows. It made sense that they might sometimes marry their members to each other in order to strengthen the bonds between them.

“I see it’s not easy being you,” Jinshi remarked.

“I daresay you have far more troubles than I, Master Jinshi. In terms of both your looks and your rank. As for me, my sister told me to simply lie down quietly at night and my wife would take care of the rest.”

Once again, Jinshi had no answer. Baryou had said something rather impudent, and followed it up with something Jinshi distinctly felt he shouldn’t have heard. How easy life would be if Jinshi could accept a political marriage as readily as Baryou.



Their chat was interrupted by the sound of someone coming down the hallway; the hall outside Jinshi's office was specifically designed to make footsteps echo audibly.

"Ah, speaking of my sister, there she is now," Baryou said. Then he added, "If you ever find yourself unsure how to handle Chue, just ask her."

The footsteps came from a woman's shoes, and because Jinshi went out of his way to keep most court ladies at arm's length (fewer problems that way), it was natural to assume it was Maamei approaching.

"Thank you, but forget about Chue," Jinshi replied. He'd simply been curious about how love took root—unfortunately, the inquiry hadn't gained him any useful insight.

There was a knock on the door, and indeed, Maamei appeared, with paperwork in one hand and tea supplies in the other.

"Hello, I'm back... What's with you two?" she asked when she saw them both staring at her.

Jinshi had no intention of asking her about Chue at that moment; if he wasn't careful, there was even a chance that Maamei would get the wrong idea, and he would never live it down. Baryou and Basen weren't the only ones who found themselves cowed by this formidable woman. Instead he tried to think of some way to distract her.

"You're trying to think of some way to distract me, aren't you?" Maamei said, fixing him with a glare.

"Who, me? No, no. I was just wondering if we had an answer yet regarding what I asked you about."

What he had asked her about was the tie attached to Gyoku-ou's recent letter. Flummoxed by the sheet of numbers, Jinshi had called in an expert.

"Ah, you mean Master Lahan. I happen to have a letter from him right here."

When you thought of numbers, you thought of Lahan. It had been the obvious solution, and in this case, it appeared it had also been the right one. Jinshi opened the letter, which indeed detailed the truth behind the numbers.

“May I see it?” Maamei asked, coming over. Jinshi placed the letter on the desk. Even Baryou was apparently intrigued enough to emerge from behind his screen. “What is this? An account ledger?” Maamei said.

“So it would seem,” replied Jinshi.

Lahan had sent them a copy of some sort of ledger—it appeared to be related to taxes levied on crops. Some percentage of the taxes collected in the western capital were sent to the national center. The tie seemed to have been made of several battered pages, presumably records from the same area covering several years.

“Perhaps this is it,” said Maamei.

It looked to be the first half of the previous year. The western capital didn’t produce many crops, but there were some. Wheat and grapes, cotton and sugar beets, for example. Sheep’s wool was another major export of the region.

As Maamei indicated, the records matched up with the mysterious numbers they’d been sent. The numbers, between two and four digits, showed harvest quantities; multiply them by the tax rate to get the amount of tax collected.

“Hm? Look here—the numbers are different.” Maamei’s finger had stopped over the data for wheat. There, and there alone, the number in the ledger was bigger. “If the numbers are different, it implies someone doctored the ledger. But this doesn’t make any sense...”

“I agree. I don’t understand,” said Jinshi. If the number in the ledger had been smaller, it would have been simple. The impropriety would be exposed. “But the number they reported was *bigger*.” Meaning someone had reported more than had actually been harvested. Naturally, that would mean more taxes would be collected. “They’re deliberately paying too much in taxes?”

Jinshi couldn’t fathom why they would do that. It could only harm them.

It might not make sense to him, but it seemed Lahan had decided that the numbers they had been sent pertained to taxes levied on the harvest.

“That’s very nice of them to pay more than they owe, but I’m sure it smells fishy,” Maamei said.

“Is wheat the only number they doctored?” Baryou asked, looking through the several years of registers. “It seems all the harvests were smaller than average last year.”

“If this message or whatever it is is to be believed, wheat was particularly scarce,” Jinshi said, squinting at the rows of figures. The western capital region had been warned to take precautions against insect plague; if they were seeking to hide the true state of things, this would be one way to do it.

“When is wheat harvested?” Jinshi asked.

“Well, there’s winter wheat and there’s spring wheat, so it depends, but the first half of the year would be the winter wheat harvest, at the beginning of summer,” replied Baryou.

Meaning it was long after Jinshi had left the area, and even after the Empress’s father Gyokuen had come to the capital.

“I’m impressed he was able to spot that in all this,” Maamei said, all admiration for Lahan’s work. It was true that noticing the discrepancy in the numbers was an impressive feat, even if the numbers were ones that he dealt with in his work.

“He said something about that in his last letter,” Baryou said and rifled through his papers. “‘*The registers we were sent included the seal of an acquaintance of mine. I remember it.*’”

“An acquaintance’s seal?” Lahan’s letter went on to give a name that Jinshi recognized as well. He thought back to the people who had accompanied him to the western capital the year before. There had been Maomao and Ah-Duo, as well as Lahan—energetic and memorable people all—but there had been one who was more detached.

“Rikuson... He was Grand Commandant Kan’s aide, wasn’t he?” Baryou said.

“Yes, I believe I’ve heard that name before,” Maamei said.

Rikuson: the eccentric strategist’s right-hand man. The one who had danced with Maomao at the banquet in the western capital. Currently, he was serving as Gyoku-ou’s aide at Gyokuen’s request.

“And did you hear anything specific about him, Maamei?” Jinshi asked. All he really knew about Rikuson was his job title. He didn’t even know what the man was like. All he knew was that he’d seen a side of Rikuson that he didn’t like much, and it was hard to get away from that bad first impression.

“About Master Rikuson? Let me see... I’m afraid everything I know about him is hearsay,” Maamei replied as she prepared the tea. “He was a civil official before he served Master Lakan, but my understanding is that he didn’t get there by passing the civil service examinations. He had connections. He comes from a merchant family, and his gentle disposition always gave him a certain popularity with the court ladies.” Perhaps that was also where Maamei had got her information.

“Who were these connections?”

“I’m afraid I’m not sure. I can look into it if you’d like.”

“It’s no rush. But I would be glad to know before I leave for the western capital.”

Maamei, clever Maamei, placed tea snacks in front of Jinshi and then began jotting a letter. No doubt she would find out about Rikuson, and quickly. When she was done writing, she flapped the page to dry the ink and then tucked it into the folds of her robes.

“Erm... Couldn’t we simply ask Sir Lahan directly?” Baryou asked with a hesitance that implied he felt he might be out of line to suggest it.

Jinshi frowned. “Sir Lahan has already done me several favors. Including this one.”

“I see...”

“If I’m to incur yet another debt, I would rather not go to him as a blank slate. Better to have some knowledge, and pay only for what I can’t get myself. Yes?”

“Y-Yes, of course.”

Lahan was no paragon, but he didn’t go in for dirty dealings—he would have considered them unbeautiful. All the same, the fewer favors Jinshi owed, the fewer weaknesses he had that could be exploited, the better.

“I’ll leave the rest of the paperwork here,” Maamei said, setting it down alongside the tea. Her less than subtle way of telling him to get back to work.

“Good, thank you. I’ll trade you for this—have a look at it, if you would.” Jinshi handed her something; she wasn’t the only one who could fling paperwork around.

Maamei’s usually narrow eyes became quite wide indeed, and she swept them over the paper several times, making sure she was reading it right. “Is this true?” she asked.

“And this when there’s no need for you to go to the western capital yourself, Master Jinshi.”

“Not another word. I’m well aware of the danger.” Foreign nations and natural disasters would not be his only enemies.

“May I ask what you’re planning to do if someone makes an attempt on your life in some far country?” said Maamei. That was the point of greatest concern to her.

“I’ll be traveling with picked physicians and warriors for exactly that reason.”

“Yes, I heard you ordered Dr. Liu to get us more capable doctors. What about your bodyguard, then?”

“As far as the soldiers...”

“The soldiers are exactly what I’m concerned about! Are you sure you’ll be safe with...with whom you’ve chosen?”

Jinshi tugged at his hair; Maamei gave a look that showed she thought that was uncivilized.

“Chosen,” Jinshi echoed. “That implies I had a choice.”

“I’m saying—!”

“Well, now!” piped up Baryou, glancing at the papers from beside Maamei. “Is he really going with you? Master Lakan?”

“Yes, I’ve asked Sir Lakan to come with me.”

“You’ve what?” Maamei’s face contorted in a way Jinshi wouldn’t have

thought possible. Such open disgust wasn't typical for her. "May I ask what you're thinking? He'll go on a rampage! This is terrible! The moment you turn your back, you'll find his blade in it!"

"I *know*. I know."

"And your guards—they're all Master Lakan's men through and through! They can kill you and make it look like an accident!"

"Does he really hate me that much?" Jinshi had been under the impression that the strategist had possessed a modicum of newfound respect for him since the Go tournament.

"Who's going to hold his reins? That's what I want to know. You can bring Master Lakan, but *you* certainly can't keep him under control. Then again, if Master Luomen were among the physicians..."

Ah, Maamei. She knew how the game was played.

"Not Sir Luomen, I can't ask him to come. His age won't permit such a lengthy journey. Especially not with his bad leg. In any event, he would be an absolute last resort."

In fact, this had all been settled long ago. After what Jinshi had done, he *had* to go to the western capital.

"Who, then?" Maamei asked, but then she stopped. "You can't mean..."

Her intuition was excellent; there was no need to explain. If Lahan couldn't come and Luomen couldn't either, that only left so many people. One, in particular—simultaneously the best and the worst.

"You're talking about Maomao." Maamei's face twitched.

Jinshi offered her a wan smile, but he couldn't meet her eyes.

Chapter 13: Gyoku-ou

The quill in Rikuson's hand ran swiftly over the parchment. How many of these signatures had he affixed by now, in the compressed forms so conducive to quick writing? He occasionally compared it to the original just to make sure his version hadn't changed.

Back in the capital, all he'd had to do was press a chop to a piece of paper; it didn't tire his hand out the way this did. He took a moment to shake out his wrist and regarded the paper.

"Master Rikuson. If you would handle these as well?" A functionary arrived with more paperwork. He was the fifth such bureaucrat to come here; from his minimal accent, Rikuson assumed he came from Kae-shu. His earlobes were somewhat large, a shape traditionally associated with blessing. His left shoulder also leaned slightly lower than the right; maybe he had a habit of carrying everything on the right side.

"Thank you. You can put it here," Rikuson said.

"Yes, sir."

This new stuff was, well, busywork. Or at least, the governor viewed it as such.

Most of the population of I-sei-shu was concentrated in the cities along the trade routes that linked the east and the west. This "busywork" involved petitions from peasants living in the rural reaches far from the main trade routes. In villages, not cities. Hamlets. Most of them were farmers of some description, livestock herders or grape growers—things that could survive the arid climate. Some of them wanted irrigation canals built; others complained that increasingly frequent nighttime bandit attacks saw them bereft of their livestock. The wheat harvest had been terrible as of late, and there were several petitions asking for someone to come and look.

"Ha ha ha!" Rikuson was laughing out loud before he knew it, earning him a mistrustful look from the departing bureaucrat.

It must be more than six months since he'd come here from the Imperial city. He had been sent here, allegedly, because they wanted someone who understood the politics of the capital, and yet all he'd been given to do was make-work like this. The only thing that had changed in all this time was that Rikuson had gotten better at it, quicker at going through it, which only meant that he was given more and more of it to do.

"I almost get the feeling they don't trust me," he grumbled to the empty room, the office he had been assigned. He worked his right hand again—he was starting to feel tendonitis coming on—and looked over the papers once more. Even he could detect patterns when given enough paperwork to look at day in and day out. After all, he had (he liked to think) more talents than simply a photographic memory.

"I make sure to report everything to him, and yet here we are."

It was Gyoku-ou who sent all this work to him. If Rikuson spotted something but didn't report it, he might well be cut loose sometime later when something needed to be cleaned up. He had the distinct sense that was why he had *really* been summoned here.

Gyoku-ou was the current, if ostensibly temporary, ruler of the western capital. If Gyokuen, who had gone to the central region, decided not to come back, then his eldest son—Gyoku-ou—would succeed him. Gyokuen had several other children, but none as strong-willed as Gyoku-ou.

"Pardon me." Another bureaucrat appeared with more paperwork. Not more petitions, but papers Rikuson had sent to his superiors that were being sent back. This particular bureaucrat served directly under Gyoku-ou, and Rikuson had seen him exactly twice before. The first time was when they had taken their trip to the western capital last year, and the second was when Rikuson had gone to give his formal greetings to Gyoku-ou—he and this man had seen each other in passing. "These are being returned," the man said.

There was nothing written on the papers; no signature, no seal.

"May I take this to mean permission has been denied?" Rikuson asked.

"Yes. Necessary it may be, but there are several more important jobs. We must have our priorities."

Well. He couldn't be much more clear than that. The corners of Rikuson's mouth raised and he put the papers in a drawer.

"There's one other thing," the man said.

"Yes?"

"Master Gyoku-ou is asking for you. Not immediately—he suggests getting together for tea when you're done with your morning assignments. If you would be so kind?"

Although phrased as an invitation, Rikuson was not at liberty to refuse. Instead he said, "But of course. I should come to the open-air pavilion in the central courtyard before the afternoon bell rings, yes?"

"That's right."

Then, with no further evident interest, the bureaucrat left the office.

The pavilion was where Gyoku-ou always liked to have his tea. It was the coolest place available, right next to the oasis. Rikuson could have guessed: bug-repelling incense was always burning there all morning whenever there was going to be tea.

This man Gyoku-ou was by no means incompetent. He had received an education befitting the son of a man of influence, and even Rikuson could sense a genuine desire—perhaps inherited from his merchant father—to make the western capital a more prosperous place. Gyoku-ou possessed an almost unchecked ambition; it had been in his eyes when he was young, and remained there now.

With such ambition came an element of danger.

"Is this within my jurisdiction as well?" Rikuson asked the empty office. He was often there alone, and found he had taken to talking to himself. "Much as I'd appreciate a few more acquaintances..."

Remembering people's faces wasn't just a unique ability Rikuson possessed; it was also his hobby. Having a perfect memory for every face you saw meant it got boring seeing the same people over and over.

Among the paperwork he found bills for silks, gems, and other luxury

accoutrements. As a trade nexus, they were far cheaper here than they were in the Imperial capital, but he still goggled at the prices. He knew very well what these resources were being used on. Just after he had arrived in the west, Rikuson had crossed paths with a young woman. She was perhaps fifteen or sixteen years old, and seemed much like Empress Gyokuyou.

When Rikuson had inquired with the bureaucrat showing him around, he'd been told that she was Gyoku-ou's daughter. The bureaucrat had added in a mutter that they didn't look much alike—but he'd been wise enough to leave it at that.

"Ambitious... Yes, he is that."

Rikuson no longer saw the young woman anywhere. She had probably been on her way to the capital for days now.

He felt the corners of his mouth lift up again, and then he went back to his work, the quill rushing over the pages once more.

Other than his tanned skin, the honorable personage across from Rikuson didn't look much like someone from the western capital. He had a rich, dark beard, and other than some uncommonly deep wrinkles, he could have passed for a perfectly ordinary person from Li. His straight hair framed a round face; he was slimmer than the average inhabitant of the western capital, but toned and muscular.

This was, needless to say, Gyoku-ou. If the father, Gyokuen, looked like a friendly merchant, the son looked like a warrior. He was somewhere in his forties, but he looked at least ten years younger than that, here among the inhabitants of the western capital, where it was so easy to get a paunch. His perfect, white teeth probably helped him make a good impression.

Rikuson looked at Gyoku-ou's straight front teeth, then averted his eyes. "I'm honored by your invitation," he said with a long, slow bow.

"Oh, you don't have to grovel. Have a seat."

A manservant pulled out a wicker chair and Rikuson sat. There were glasses of juice on the table.

"Would you have preferred tea?" Gyoku-ou asked.

"No, sir. Desk work does make one crave something sweet."

There was condensation on the glasses; Rikuson wondered if they had been chilled with underground water.

"You're trying to be deferential again. What, do you think I have some sort of ulterior motive here?"

"Ha ha ha! No, but I am nervous." Rikuson chuckled and took a sip of the juice. "I confess, I worry you must be disappointed that I was the best the capital could send. I'm in no way suited to your station."

"Ha ha ha. My father would never pick the wrong man, of that I assure you. You served under Sir Lakan, didn't you? I'd say that alone is proof of your competence."

Sir Lakan, was it? Rikuson set down his glass. There was a whole array of different fruit juices on the table.

“If I may ask,” Gyoku-ou said, getting to his feet and turning around. His gaze settled on a group of merchants. “Is there anyone you recognize among that group?”

“Three people, sir,” Rikuson said after a second. “Two of them run the caravans that come to the capital each year. The other does his trading primarily by sea.”

The manservant reappeared and placed writing utensils in front of Rikuson. He put down their names.

“I only know the names of the two. Everyone else in that group is new to me.”

“Understood. I’ll have the names checked against our records.” Maybe Gyoku-ou suspected one of them of something—or maybe he just wanted to put Rikuson’s powers of recall to the test.

A short while later, a bureaucrat came and whispered in Gyoku-ou’s ear.

“Mm,” Gyoku-ou said, sounding satisfied. He stroked his beard. “Impressive. You were right on both counts.”

“I simply happened to recognize them,” Rikuson said with another humble bow.

“Funny thing, that. You must see dozens or hundreds of faces every day, and yet you remember them. You know, in the capital, they claim that members of the La clan are all gifted with rather unusual skills. Are you sure you’re not one of them? It might explain why you were serving Sir Lakan.”

“Wh-What a notion, sir!” For the first time that day, Rikuson laughed from the heart. It might have been the funniest thing he’d heard since he’d come in the west. No traveling comedian could have told a joke funnier than that Rikuson might have La blood flowing through his veins. “That clan is packed full of people who...break the mold, let us say. As for me... Hmm. What I do is more of a habit.”

“Habit?”

“Yes, sir. My mother always told me I mustn’t forget people’s faces.”

“Ah, yes. I seem to recall you come from merchant stock, don’t you?”

“I do, sir, and to forget a customer’s face is to risk a vital business relationship. My mother warned me that to remember was to live.” Rikuson’s laugh seemed to have dissolved his fear, for he spoke easily now.

“It sounds like you had a strict upbringing.”

“Yes, sir.”

Rikuson let the moment breathe; he took a sip of the juice. He was just thinking back on the honored strategist’s habit of juice drinking when Gyoku-ou said something unexpected.

“Do you suppose Sir Lakan would like that juice?”

“You know Master Lakan is a teetotaler?”

“Who doesn’t?”

Rikuson was aware that the story was well-known. After all, whenever that man passed through somewhere, it was like a typhoon—and it fell to Rikuson to clean up after the storm.

“I’ll make sure there’s some of this juice available when he comes to the western capital,” Gyoku-ou said.

“When he comes here, sir?” Rikuson repeated, caught off guard. He suddenly became aware that he was covered in a thin sheen of sweat.

“Ah, you’re tense again. Yes, I suppose it’s the first you’ve heard of it. Let me tell you a little secret.” It seemed they had finally reached the heart of what Gyoku-ou wanted to discuss. “Sir Lakan is coming to our city—with the Imperial younger brother in tow.”

He almost made it sound like the Imperial family member was ancillary.

Rikuson forced the corners of his mouth into a smile, but inside, he heaved a sigh.

Question: How much do 300,000 people eat in a year?

Answer: It depends on what they’re eating.

The answer was so absurd that Rikuson passed through anger and arrived at

sheer incredulity.

After the abrupt tea party, he'd had an opportunity to talk with several people—all of them conversant with commerce. He'd hoped they might have more thoughtful answers for him.

"It's impossible to say for certain. The western regions aren't as fertile as Kae Province. Rice is far more of a luxury here than it is in the central region."

He'd heard the reasoning. He'd heard it many times.

If not rice, then wheat. If not wheat, buckwheat. He was looking for possible substitute foods, wanted to know how much of each they were likely to be able to procure. He'd done the calculations over and over, but he wasn't a mathematician; he couldn't find the answer. Truth be told, however, none of the bureaucrats in the western capital were going to go that far out of their way for Rikuson. He was simply put off, treated as an outsider; or else they claimed someone higher up the chain had stopped them; or else that they were too busy and couldn't spare the time.

"I suppose this is how the Moon Prince always felt," Rikuson said, unable to contain a sigh. For such a young man, that noble, so often the victim of Lakan's interference, worked hard. Unfortunately, hard work wasn't enough. Being part of the Imperial family meant you had to shine brighter than anyone in order to gain acknowledgment and acceptance.

Rikuson trotted back to his office to find a messenger waiting outside. "A letter from Kae Province, sir," the man said.

He gave Rikuson a small box—hardly a letter, in Rikuson's estimation. The box was kept shut with a string tied in a decorative bow. He'd often received such letters in the capital. A variety of esoteric rules governed how the string was to be tied, and once undone it couldn't easily be retied.

There was a knack to undoing these bows, and Rikuson possessed it, but to be perfectly honest, at that moment, he didn't have much energy for such things. Instead he grabbed a knife and simply cut the knot.

Topmost in the bundle was a sheet bearing a wildly stylized *L*, a playful little touch Lahan liked to add to his correspondence.

Lahan was Lakan's nephew, so they were often working toward the same ends. Rikuson had thought of Lahan as more of a friend than a colleague, but in the end, he reflected ruefully, they had only ever talked about work.

"At least he knows what he's doing." Lahan was a numbers man, and he had furnished Rikuson with exactly the data he wanted.

For rice, each *tan* would yield about 150 kilograms, roughly enough to feed one person for one year. Of course, it could be stretched if the rice was mixed with other foodstuffs. There were detailed calculations of how the yield would be affected if they added in wheat, soy, or potatoes. Furthermore, Lahan indicated how readily each could be preserved, the liquidity of the various crops, and even the current market prices.

"I was afraid he would just try to foist his potatoes on us. Guess I owe him an apology."

Lahan's father grew potatoes, but they didn't keep as well as rice or wheat, and Lahan's family was presently trying to develop ways to make them last longer or otherwise process them.

The winding columns of numbers made Rikuson's head spin. He had no doubt Lahan had organized them neatly, but it was a rare person who could look at a bunch of numbers and perceive the truth of things. Rikuson had become conversant with numbers as a matter of necessity, but for most people, the ability to parse prices at the shop was all the numeracy they needed.

Rikuson flipped vacantly through the pages. Most of it was sheer data, but one page bore an inscription: *Interesting things will happen soon.*

"I guess he knows," Rikuson said.

Lakan would be coming to the western capital. Lahan had probably scrawled the note in hopes of giving Rikuson a little shock, but unfortunately for him Gyoku-ou had pulled the rug out from under his surprise.

Rikuson smiled as he put the letter back in its box. Then he picked up the tie he'd cut.

"Hmm." Now he wished he hadn't. He went through his drawers, hoping he might find something to replace it with, and came up with a piece of hemp cord

that he tied around the box. As long as he remembered how he knotted it, he would know immediately if anyone had opened it and tried to retie it.

He placed the box in a chest on a bottom shelf and gave a great stretch. “Time for a little walk, I think.”

Yes, he was talking to himself much more these days. He’d heard of officials quitting their jobs because they’d been done in psychologically by desk work; perhaps he was going the same way.

First a tea party, now a walk. It might look to an observer like he was slacking at his work, but he was normally so diligent. They would just have to live with it.

“I wonder if I’ll be allowed to make the rounds outside one of these days.” This was something else his mother had told him: a merchant who doesn’t know what’s happening on the ground can’t sell anything. It was a long, long time ago now that he’d heard those words, but he still remembered them.

Maybe he could get them to send him to see the farming villages by claiming it was for a petition. He did a lap around the courtyard, pondering how he might explain the situation so that they would approve his expedition.

As he walked, he heard shouting. He took a detour, heading toward the voices, which he discovered belonged to some burly men. They seemed to be fighting; a group of men had formed a circle, and at the center, two of them were grappling with each other. Ah: they were wrestling.

The shouting men were all smiling and laughing; they were enjoying themselves. Rikuson remembered them all to be soldiers. The kerchiefs around their heads were all the same color, a shade of blue. From the colors of their sashes, he judged that they were all different ranks.

Rikuson ducked in among the men, trying to get a closer look at the match. When it was over, the victor turned out to be someone he knew well: it was Gyoku-ou. The man who had been sipping tea with him earlier was now winning a wrestling match.

Standing there sweating and laughing with his troops, he didn’t look like the ruler of an entire city. To those around him, he must have appeared as someone who shared the sentiments of those under him.

Rikuson swallowed heavily. He didn't think Gyoku-ou was wrestling with his minions just to earn brownie points. He enjoyed it as much as they did.

Rikuson didn't want Gyoku-ou to notice him. If the governor invited him to wrestle, he feared he might be snapped in half. The guilt he already felt at being out for a walk just because he wanted a break would compel him to take part.

He turned on his heel, determined to go back to his office. It suddenly seemed better to throw himself into his work than to try to get some fresh air. After all, he'd been sent to the western capital to help take care of the excess work Gyoku-ou couldn't handle himself. The burden on Rikuson was great, yes, but it wasn't as if the governor didn't have his own job to do. Even this friendly moment with his soldiers doubled as an effective way of winning their hearts and minds.

Rikuson thought back to a play he'd seen a long time ago. In it, a general had spent the whole night drinking with his troops, a fleeting moment of enjoyment before they faced the battlefield, where they might be cut down at any instant. Gyoku-ou was much like that general. There were protagonists in this world and bit players. Rikuson understood that he was not one of the former.

In a land at war, his role would have been to die without doing anything of note. Here in this world of peace, it was to do odd jobs and miscellaneous tasks.

Gyoku-ou was different. He was a main character, at the heart of the action.

Not like Rikuson.

Rikuson heaved another great sigh.

"I suppose the western capital needs him."

Gyoku-ou could steal the show in peace as well as war.

Chapter 14: Selection

I felt...surprisingly calm.

Maomao gently pressed a hand to her mouth to keep her opinion from coming out of it. Instead she washed her hands carefully and changed her clothes. Next she would go to the bath. That was all.

She had dissected a human body for the first time, the corpse of a man hanged for burglary. Now he was covered with incisions. If he'd known he was going to be sliced up after he died, he might have reconsidered his life choices.

I have to be sure to wash really well, Maomao thought. She sniffed her hands to see if they still smelled. She'd perfumed her change of clothes to be extra sure, so she thought it was going to be all right...

"Niang-niang!"

She wasn't sure if she should stop or not. Only one person ever called her that. She turned back to see Tianyu.

She didn't say a word—to do so would be as good as admitting that she would answer to "Niang-niang." At the same time, though, it didn't feel quite right to just ignore him.

If it turns out he's just going to prattle at me, though, I'm leaving.

As a matter of fact, Tianyu had a good reason for stopping her today. "Dr. Liu wants to talk to us," he said.

"What about my bath?"

"Sounds like it'll have to wait," Tianyu said with no small amount of disappointment—apparently Maomao wasn't the only one who had been looking forward to washing up. Tianyu pressed his outfit to his nose and sniffed mightily.

If she wasn't the only one being delayed, then Maomao could hardly complain. She followed Tianyu. She couldn't help noticing that the other apprentices, though, all headed home.

“What about the rest of them?” she asked.

“What else? They’ve been held back,” Tianyu said, and then it made sense. The other apprentices had done well enough dissecting animals, but their hands had been shaking as they cut human flesh. It seemed only Maomao and Tianyu had managed to look like they belonged there.

So he swung it too? Bah. Anyway, I thought we might at least get a few more tries, Maomao thought and sniffed her hands again.

They were brought to a room with Dr. Liu, Maomao’s old man (that is, Luomen), and several other physicians. There was a long conference table lined with benches, with everyone arranged around the far end.

They’re...all upper physicians?

All the men present were skilled and learned. The medical office, like everywhere else, had its hierarchy, but broadly speaking the physicians were commonly referred to as being upper, middle, or apprentice.

Maomao rubbed her eyes, for in that august company she saw someone she would never have expected. He waved eagerly to her, his eyes kind, his frame portly. He bore a loach-like mustache despite being a eunuch.

“Master Physician...” Maomao said. Which could, of course, be qualified as: *rear palace* physician.

It was the quack.

What’s he doing here? I mean, I guess it makes sense, kind of. Whatever she might think of his medical expertise, he looked after the medical office of the rear palace all by himself, which meant that he must at least be afforded a title equivalent to the other upper physicians. Nonetheless, he seemed distinctly out of place. He sat there like a piglet among the ranks of men who otherwise seemed distinguished by their intellect and skills.

Come to think of it... The quack had been frightened even to touch a dead body. *How did he ever make it from apprentice to physician?*

It was a mystery. One of the seven wonders of the royal court, one might say.

Maomao's thoughts were interrupted by a clap. "It looks like we're all here," Dr. Liu said, quieting the murmuring room.

Maomao realized several middle physicians had joined them as well at some point, and they were looking at Maomao as if she was even more out of place here than the quack. He might not be as physically impressive as the others, but a woman smack in the middle of this convocation of men was always going to draw attention to herself.

"All right, let's begin. You can take any open seat."

Easy for him to say...

The upper physicians were all seated; now, the middle physicians began to move. Tianyu, an apprentice, remained standing, so Maomao did likewise, waiting until everyone else had a seat. Dr. Liu's invitation sounded universal, but there was still a hierarchy here. An order. It might be different in an emergency, but at this moment it would be best to respect protocol if she didn't want to cause unnecessary friction.

Tianyu took the lowest seat of all, and Maomao occupied the final remaining chair after him.

So I find myself in another ambiguous position, she thought. Evidently no one had the nerve to sit right next to the upper physicians, so the only open seat was beside the quack. He gave her a friendly grin as she sat down. "My, but it's been a while," he said. "Have a bite?" He furtively showed her the candy he was hiding under the table.

What is he, the neighborhood auntie? Maomao thought, but she said, "Maybe not right now."

It was best to politely decline; she would never be able to concentrate on the discussion with candy rolling around in her mouth. Plus, Dr. Liu was glaring at them. The quack hadn't noticed that he had been noticed.

Dr. Liu proceeded to explain why he had called them here, evidently choosing to overlook the quack's full cheeks.

"I've gathered you together so we can decide who's to go to the western capital," he said. The same subject Maomao had overheard him discussing with

Jinshi. Jinshi had wanted physicians to accompany him on the long journey—two more, if possible.

Two more... So I wonder how many there already are.

In the heat of the moment, Maomao had suggested herself as a candidate. She didn't know whether anything would come of it. She knew, however, that if she wasn't chosen, it would mean trouble for her. Lots of trouble.

"Is there anyone here who specifically wants to go to the western capital?" Dr. Liu asked. Maomao looked around and was about to raise her hand, but someone beat her to it, flinging his hand into the air.

"Question, sir!"

If someone had a question, then Maomao couldn't very well volunteer yet. She let her hand slide back down.

"The parameters of this trip are far too vague. *Why* are we being asked to go to the western capital? Is this a punitive posting?"

The speaker was one of the middle physicians, someone who was supposed to be quite adept. Maomao didn't remember his name.

It's a fair question, actually. Jinshi had already spoken to her about this trip, so she naturally assumed it was simply a long expedition. Someone who didn't know the circumstances, however, could well think that Jinshi was effectively being demoted.

Wait... Is *he?*

A punitive posting, a demotion... Well, but the way Jinshi had been talking, it seemed he would set out very soon, so it didn't sound like a demotion. To everyone else, however, it looked like His Majesty and Empress Gyokuyou both wished for Jinshi to go on a very long trip. With the Emperor having fathered a couple of princes, even his own brother could appear to be an obstacle.

"What's that? It's a punishment?" the quack said quietly to Maomao, concerned.

He hadn't heard?

It seemed like all the other upper physicians were familiar with the matter.

Maybe the quack had been left out of the loop specifically because he *was* a quack. Or maybe he'd been so busy sucking on some candy that he'd missed it.

Dr. Liu coughed pointedly; Maomao was left with no choice but to pretend she hadn't heard the portly doctor.

"This assignment is not punitive. It will, however, be a long trip, considering the destination. Even at the most optimistic estimate, you should expect to be away from the capital for at least three months."

"Is there a war starting?" It was a tricky subject, but this middle physician didn't mince words. The assembled doctors began muttering, and the quack clung to Maomao in fear. She could practically feel everyone looking at them.

"My dear Guen. If you'd be so kind," Luomen said, nudging the quack.

He has a name? It's Guen?

Maomao had never had a chance to find out his name in the rear palace; everyone simply called him "doctor." Okay, maybe she'd heard it somewhere along the line, but quite frankly remembering people's names was not one of Maomao's special skills.

That soldier would never forget, she thought, picturing Rikuson. He'd been sent to the western capital, hadn't he? In his case, it was definitely a demotion.

The quack released Maomao, but clutched onto Luomen instead. "What do you make of all this, Luomen?"

"Hrm. Well, let's hear him out and see where this goes."

Dr. Liu was so thoroughly sick of the quack's antics by this point that he'd stopped even looking at him. Being totally oblivious was, in its own way, a sort of genius.

I can't believe they haven't fired him yet. How he still had a job was one of life's mysteries.

"I can't speak to the prospect of war," Dr. Liu said. "Our business is to treat the sick and the injured. We do as we're told. What's more, this trip promises to be a very large-scale one."

Dr. Liu was not finding a warm reception among the physicians. It seemed

unlikely that anyone would volunteer.

They might change their tune if he told them who was at the center of this expedition. Jinshi was a member of the royal family, and a physician who went with him might have the opportunity to speak to him personally. *But I'm not sure it's been made public that Jinshi's going...*

Considering his status, the matter would probably be kept quiet until the last moment—and so nobody would raise their hand. Maomao, feeling more or less comfortable, was once again about to raise her hand, but she saw Dr. Liu glare at her.

What's with him? she wondered. Was he telling her not to put herself forward here? Did her lowly status indeed ultimately stand in her way?

"No volunteers? I figured as much. I've come prepared with a list of three candidates, but I'd like to fill one more place. Nobody wants that final seat?"

Despite Dr. Liu's prompting, no one reacted. The Upper Physicians looked outright tired of this; maybe they had already heard the story.

"Yes, sir!"

One person raised his hand: Tianyu.

"I know I'm still an apprentice, but if no one else will go, may I do it?"

He sounded chipper as ever. As happy as if he were dissecting an animal—or a human being.

His persistence in the face of En'en's total indifference had led Maomao to think that Tianyu must be a brazen man indeed, but as she spoke with him during their work, she had gradually come to understand that wasn't the case. Tianyu simply didn't experience the broad fluctuations of emotion other people did. His talkative nature could make outsiders think he was emotional, but it was even possible he spoke to En'en precisely because he was intrigued by her chilly reception, something he got from no one else.

He's a twisted guy, Maomao thought. Not that she felt inclined to push the matter; everyone had their foibles.

"Anyone else?" Dr. Liu asked. No hands went up. The upper physicians

collectively exhaled.

I'm sure he could get one of them if they knew Jinshi was coming. With Dr. Liu in charge, though, it would never happen. Maomao thought her father Luomen would be a good candidate—he was deeply knowledgeable about the western reaches and knew the language as well—but she shook her head. *He's too old, and he's not strong enough anymore.* Becoming a eunuch had left him even more aged than simply being old. Having a missing kneecap didn't help, either. Such a long journey was beyond him.

If three people had already been chosen, however, what would happen to Maomao? *I guess I just have to have faith that I'm already on the list.*

It seemed a shame. Many people dismissed the western capital as a rural backwater, but nothing could be further from the truth. It was a thriving city, a nexus of western culture. Not to mention a place where it would be much easier to acquire the newest medical skills and technology.

Am I sure Pops won't go?

Even as she asked the question, she knew it wouldn't happen; knew it was impossible. As for Luomen, the quack was still glued to him; Luomen didn't look thrilled but couldn't disentangle himself.

"Anyone else at all?" Dr. Liu asked again, whereupon the overachieving middle physician raised his hand once more. "Are you volunteering?" Dr. Liu said.

"Another question, sir." The physician looked straight at Maomao. "What is one of our court ladies doing here?" No doubt the question had been on everyone's mind—but they all sensed this was not quite the time to ask. "Surely her exceptional presence shouldn't be taken to mean that she's to be counted among the physicians?"

Boy, I hope so. If Maomao could finally get her answer right here and now, that would be wonderful, but the rest of the room didn't share her enthusiasm. The upper physicians didn't betray much reaction, almost as if they weren't listening anymore, but the looks from the middle physicians were scathing. Tianyu watched the scene unfold with no particular change in expression.

“She’s not to be considered a physician. She is, however, coming with us,” Dr. Liu said.

Maomao felt a wave of relief. So he’d found a compromise. The point was, she was able to go along.

“Sir, I’m not sure a court lady is suited for such a protracted trip.” The middle physician wouldn’t give up.

“I grant she may not have the stamina of a man, but she’s passed the practical examination. She has the skills of a physician, if nothing else. What’s more, to be quite frank, her knowledge of medicines is probably better than yours. If and when we run out of medical supplies at our destination, it will be helpful to have someone who can make substitutes using the ingredients at hand and without recourse to a textbook.”

Dr. Liu could be harsh, but he was also a firm judge of character and ability.

The middle physicians still seemed less than pleased. A few of them gave Maomao disbelieving looks, as if to say That *examination?* and *Are we sure about this?*

“Still not happy that a woman gets to come along and be treated the same way as you lot? Then think of it this way. It’s going to be a big group this time. There will be plenty of other court ladies accompanying us to help with other administrative duties. You don’t object to a bit of extra help, do you?”

“It’s still the case that this is the first time a lady has ever been brought along specifically in a medical capacity. And to make her take the examination! That’s going too far, Dr. Liu, even for you.”

Hrm. This middle physician seemed to be the opposite of Tianyu: he was a bit of a pest, but he did seem to be concerned for Maomao. Even his most oblivious outbursts were things that she might have been grateful for under other circumstances. Right now, however, was not that time.

“I didn’t make this decision,” said Dr. Liu, dangerously close to sounding petulant. His next announcement, meanwhile, was enough to silence any dissent. “Grand Commandant Kan will be joining us this time.”

That sent a buzz amidst the middle physicians. Maomao felt all her hair stand

on end. She looked at Luomen, who looked back at her mournfully.

Maomao was no En'en, but she was on the verge of grinding her teeth.

"You all think you can handle him?" asked Dr. Liu, dangerously close to sounding despairing. It was enough to silence any further objections. Maybe Dr. Liu should have kept this confidential information to himself, but regardless, the other physicians would certainly take anyone they could get to help them with this particular person.

Maomao, however, didn't have time to think the matter through in this calm and rational fashion. All she had was an instant, in which she became very angry. *That son of a bitch! He* knew*!*

For the first time in quite a while, Maomao wished Jinshi were there so she could look at him like a worm stranded in a puddle.

Dr. Liu wasn't done, either. "We leave in five days. I'll give you all the time off to prepare, so say your goodbyes and get ready to go."

Maomao's mouth hung open and she couldn't get it to close.

Chapter 15: Preparations

They were to leave in five days. It was so sudden that Maomao had to rush to prepare. She had to do the shopping, and there were quite a few people she needed to talk to.

Maybe I shouldn't go around telling everyone I'm going out of town, she thought, but a communication had already gone out, so evidently it was okay. *I* definitely *have to tell the old madam*. She didn't want to be greeted by another punch in the stomach when she got home.

So it was that she went to the Verdigris House, where the madam said, "Huh. That so? In that case, I want some ambergris as a souvenir."

Yeah, that's not happening.

The name of the substance, in Maomao's language, meant "Dragon's saliva incense," and it was indeed said to be made from a dragon's drool, although that was not, evidently, where it really came from. It was very expensive, and also had medicinal functions; it was effective on the heart.

"What do you mean, you're leaving again?! This is ridiculous! I've never heard of a court lady going so far from the court so often!"

This anguished objection came from the apprentice apothecary, Sazen. There were even tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry. You'll just have to manage somehow. You have Kokuyou, and you can always get in touch with my father if anything comes up." Maomao handed him a signed sheet of paper, and that was it. A customer had arrived at the apothecary shop, so Sazen trudged back to help them.

I think he's more of an apothecary than he gives himself credit for, Maomao thought. He was certainly a chronic worrier—maybe it caused him to think less of himself than he deserved.

"Goodness gracious. You'd better be careful. They say the sun in the west can give you an *awful* tan." Such was the admonishment of Maomao's older sister at the Verdigris House, Pairin, whose skin had a particularly healthy glow today.

Had a good customer last night? Maomao thought. Her sister's sexual appetites went far beyond the ordinary, so for her, a "good" customer was more than just one with a lot of cash. No doubt he'd been a well-built specimen of a man.

"Here. You'll be needing this for sure. Put it on every morning, then wash your face to take it off before you go to bed." Meimei placed a ceramic vessel in Maomao's hand. Presumably it contained some sort of cream that would be good for the skin.

"I'm not sure I'm always going to get the chance to wash my face," Maomao said. The western capital was a long way off, and whether they went by land or by sea, water would be precious.

"They're going to take our little Maomao somewhere like that? What idiot made that decision?" demanded Joka.

Funny you should ask. You might know him as a certain masked noble...

That accounted for all three of the Verdigris House's famous princesses.

"Oohh, I'm worried about you! Is it too late for you to back out, Maomao?" Pairin said, hugging her close. She really had been busy the night before—the warmth was still radiating off her.

"Just think about it. The money we work ourselves to the bone to earn, the nobles are pissing away on a vacation," Joka spat.

"Not at all! Those nobles help our business *thrive*. We'll just have to wring them for all they're worth—make sure the cycle continues," Meimei said, her laughter clear and loud, in pointed contrast to the vulgarity of what she was actually saying. Then she gazed out the window. "I admit, I'm as worried as any of you... But I think there's someone along who will be ruthless if anyone dares to lay a finger on Maomao."

Now she looked at Maomao, her gaze sorrowful.

"Meimei," said Maomao. "I'm going to keep this indirect, but I'm more worried about *him* than anyone."

The freak strategist was going with them. Maomao didn't know why, but if

the people in the western capital had understood who they were dealing with, they would have asked for him to stay home.

Or maybe they weren't in a position to refuse? Don't tell me they actually invited him.

His absence wouldn't be an issue in the capital, as his subordinates could keep his office running smoothly for months without him. Maomao's real fear was about what kind of trouble he might cause on the road. Just picturing it was enough to make her head hurt.

Is this what they're really using me for? She ground her teeth. She'd always known he could and would use anyone available to him—it was her fault for forgetting. In fact, oddly, she felt some small sense of relief to realize that the way he handled people hadn't changed since the rear palace.

Those who stood at the top couldn't afford to be swept away by sentiment. Jinshi's behavior could be emotional at times, but Maomao believed there was still some trace of rationality at work in those moments. At least, she *wanted* to believe.

No... Not possible, she thought, immediately dismissing the idea. Otherwise, he would never have burned a brand into his own skin.

Having said all that, maybe this wasn't really Jinshi's fault. His hands might have been tied in his selection of personnel. It didn't really matter. In the end, it meant trouble for Maomao, and nothing but.

She was putting away the cream Meimei had given her when a smart-alecky voice said from behind her, "Hey, Freckles!"

"Yeah? What, Chou-u?" Maomao turned, annoyed.

"You're dumb!" he shouted, and with that the smart-mouthed brat ran off. He still dragged one partially paralyzed leg, but it obviously didn't dampen his spirits. His lackey Zulin likewise stuck out her tongue at Maomao, then ran after Chou-u.

"What was that about?" Maomao muttered.

"Chou-u misses you, Maomao," Meimei said.

“Hrm. And it looks like Zulin is still following him around?”

“That just started again recently.” Meimei looked troubled.

“Started again?”

“She’s got an older sister, you remember? The girl you brought in with her. She was training as an apprentice, and this year she began taking customers.”

“She did, huh?” So many women came and went in the Verdigris House, Maomao didn’t really keep track of them all. “Isn’t that a bit early?” She recalled the young woman being awfully thin.

“She’s fifteen. A decent diet went a long way towards putting some meat on her bones, and our customers started taking notice. She had everything she needed. She must really have been eating poorly where she came from.”

Moreover, the girl herself was full of ambition; she’d been eager to make her “debut.” It all must have inspired conflicting feelings in her younger sister.

“She’s not very cultured yet, but I think she’ll grow into it, that girl.”

“You think so? I think she’s a bit too prickly,” Joka said.

Pairin laughed openly at that. “That’s the last thing I want to hear from a woman who took the name ‘Joka’!”

It was not the name her parents had given her. The madam had been known to rename girls in order to encourage them to forget their past lives, but Joka had given herself a name that was a parody of the name of the goddess who had created the world—and it audaciously included the supposedly forbidden character *ka*.

“My mother always told me my father was someone very important. I have every right to use it,” she sometimes said.

A father who would justify the use of that character? The only people who could do that were the Imperial family. About the only person fitting that description whose age would make sense with Joka’s was the former emperor, but Maomao was well aware that that was impossible.

How must Joka have felt to know that her mother had been deceived? Maybe that was where her hatred of men sprang from. Maybe.

On top of it all, the old madam had actually let her use that prickly name.

Very scary.

The Verdigris House would carry on without Maomao. It was full of strong women—and actually, the men here were pretty strong, too, so things would be all right.

Maomao sighed and went on to the next stage of her preparations.

The sun was already low in the sky by the time Maomao finished her shopping and got back to the dormitory.

This next part might be the hardest of all, she thought, as she heaved a sigh and entered the building.

She could hear the steady *thunk*, *thunk* of a cleaver. *She's still at it*, Maomao thought, peeking into the kitchen. Yao was there, chopping chicken under En'en's direction. She was hardly an expert yet, but she'd dialed back the bone-smashing vigor of the other day and now looked like she was cooking a proper meal.

Maomao didn't say anything.

En'en didn't say anything.

Yao was too focused on her chicken to notice Maomao; En'en saw Maomao there and shot her a pleading look.

I think she's saying..."We're concentrating right now. Please don't interrupt."

Maomao was heading to her room instead when she met the woman who ran the dorm coming the other way. "Maomao, is it true you'll be going away for several months? I can leave your room for you, but do you want me to clean it?"

The woman's voice carried well, easily all the way to the kitchen. The result was predictable: an "Ouch!" followed by a "Mistress!"

Maomao peeked through a crack in the door and saw pretty much what she had expected. "Don't do that, young mistress," En'en said. "You mustn't put your finger in your mouth! Raw chicken meat is dangerous. Here, I'll give you

some first aid.”

Even meat intended for food could contain poison or bugs.

“I think that’s a bit much, En’en,” said Maomao as she watched En’en wrap so much bandage around Yao’s hand that it was practically immobilized.

Maomao had involved herself now, but Yao looked peeved. It was obvious Yao wanted to say something, but Maomao wasn’t exactly the most socially adroit person in the world and wasn’t sure what she should say to Yao. Given that she was still learning how to hold the cleaver properly, it seemed highly unlikely that Dr. Liu had invited her to join the special classes yet.

Finally, Maomao said only, “I’m sorry. I’m going to be going away for a while.”

“I understand,” En’en said, and she had the good grace to look sorry about it —but just for an instant an expression passed over her face that Maomao couldn’t quite put a name to, one that said “Now it’ll be just me and Lady Yao!” Yao, thankfully, was looking at the floor and didn’t notice.

Yao understood as well as En’en did, Maomao suspected. She was a smart woman, and would get what was going on intellectually—it was just taking her emotions some time to catch up.

She’s still only sixteen, Maomao reminded herself. Four years younger than Maomao.

Figuring she’d said all she could say, Maomao was about to go back to her room when she heard another thump—this time of someone stomping on the floor.

“Maomao!”

“Yes?”

Yao’s breath whooshed out her nostrils like an angry boar. She stood tall, resolution clear on her face.

“Young mistress...” En’en had produced two folding fans, one inscribed *Yao*, the other inscribed *Go for it!* Where had she gotten those? Truly, this was a lady-in-waiting of sublime accomplishments.

Yao gave one more great snort and stood in front of Maomao.

“Here, young mistress.” En’en handed her some kind of booklet.

“Mn!” Yao pressed the booklet at Maomao.

“Wh-What’s this?”

“Wh-What do you mean, what?”

Yao couldn’t quite seem to get an explanation out, so En’en helped. “She copied things out of the books in the library. She collected as many examples as she could find that aren’t in the textbook, so I think even you’ll be surprised by some of what’s in there, Maomao.”

“Wha?” *Holy shit, I want that.* “C-Can I really take this?”

“W-Well, I said you could have it!” Yao shot back, although she had not, in fact, said that.

If she was offering, though, she didn’t have to offer twice. Maomao took the book and immediately began flipping through it. “Wow! Wooooooooow!”

“No! Don’t look now! L-Listen, I didn’t do anything that’s, you know, that big a deal. En’en insisted, so I copied out a little bit. Just a little bit!”

She was as sweet as she was sour, this girl! It was almost too much.

Unfortunately for Yao, Maomao could tell the difference between her handwriting and En’en’s—but she was decent enough not to point out which of them had done the copying.

Instead she bowed her head and said, “Thank you very much.” Almost before she knew what she was doing, she’d even grabbed Yao’s hand in a handshake. To be perfectly honest, she was so happy, snot could have come pouring out of her nose.

“Hmph... Well, you’ll need *something* to pass the time on your trip.” Yao was blushing and her voice seemed very quiet. Behind her, En’en was giving the handshake an icy look.

“I’ll be sure to get you something as a souvenir in return,” Maomao said.

“I don’t need any souvenir!” Yao said, and went back to the cutting board still looking annoyed.

“You can’t chop anything in that condition. At least let me tend to your injury,” Maomao said. If she let En’en do all the treatment, Yao seemed likely to end up as a bandage mummy.

Yao submitted to Maomao’s ministrations, but En’en loomed threateningly nearby the entire time.

Chapter 16: A Voyage by Sea

On the day they were to leave, Maomao found herself riding in a carriage with a single bundle of belongings on her back.

It's as emotional as it is...ordinary, by now.

Yao and En'en had been there to see her off, En'en looking about the way she always did and Yao a bit sulky. Maomao did feel sad to say goodbye, but it wasn't like she was never coming back.

Her medical supplies had all been prepared in advance and packed. Other necessaries were also with the cargo, so all she had with her specifically were some fresh clothes and the book Yao and En'en had given her. Maomao didn't suffer from carriage sickness, so she looked forward to passing the time by reading.

I heard there were four doctors going, she thought, but in the end no one had told her exactly who. It nagged at her—there was every indication that they were hiding something.

No sooner had she boarded the carriage than she found out who one of the doctors was.

"Ooh! Is that the ship we'll be on?"

Tianyu stuck his head out. Maomao had been expecting him—after all Dr. Liu's prodding, he had still been the only volunteer.

Awfully inexperienced for an assignment like this. Guess I'm not one to talk.

Maomao had been chosen as well, although she wasn't counted among the physicians. So there were four doctors and one helper. Dr. Liu had talked about a shortage of personnel, so he must have put a lot of thought into this selection.

Maomao had to constantly remind herself that she was ultimately only there to help—while also not forgetting what she was really there for.

The Imperial younger brother, a.k.a. Jinshi, would be on this trip, as would the freak strategist, so this was going to be a bigger affair than last time. Three

large sailing ships waited for them, the biggest Maomao had ever seen. She was told they would be going by sea, and the ships looked the part. Each had four or five masts, and she saw cannons as well. The ships' construction suggested they had been heavily influenced by western technology, but gaudy red, green, and gold coloring marked them out as Linese vessels. Maomao didn't know how large the ships were inside, but they looked like they could easily hold several hundred people each. Maybe even a thousand, if everyone squeezed.

"Is it really going to be faster than going overland?" Maomao asked before she could stop herself. She'd taken a boat home from her last visit to the western capital, but this time they would be going by sea, not river. The route was definitely longer by sea, but you could also travel uninterrupted, day and night.

"It's probably because of all the cargo. You need it when you have such a big VIP staying somewhere for so long. Plus all the gifts they have to bring." The explanation, offered with a touch of resentment, came from one of the upper physicians, a man with a beard and a rugged face. His skin was noticeably tanned despite the fact that he probably spent most of his time at a desk. He had light hair that suggested at least some foreign blood in his veins. Maomao vaguely recognized him, but because they worked in different medical offices, she didn't know his name. Evidently he was one of the four doctors chosen to go on this trip.

"Yes, that makes sense," Maomao said. Under any other circumstances, she could have simply tried to gloss over the fact that she didn't remember his name, but this time she was going to need to learn it. She would have to find it out later.

"I'm going to be in charge during the trip," the physician said. "I look forward to working with you."

He seemed to have his feet on the ground, Maomao thought. Knowing Dr. Liu, he would have chosen his people not just for their skill, but their attitudes as well. This man gave the sense that he came from the western capital himself.

"The other two physicians are already on board," the man said. "I'm going to be on the lead ship, Tianyu will be on the rear ship, and Niang-niang, you'll be

on the middle one. You'll be accompanied by another of the upper physicians."

Maomao didn't say a word. Should she tell him he had her name wrong? Then again, did she have any right to, considering she couldn't remember his either?

She settled for, "Sir, a question."

"Yes?"

"Who else is going to be on the ship with me?" She gave a great, vast, mighty scowl as she spoke.

"The center vessel is for our most important traveler. A relative youngster. Couldn't you tell by how sumptuous it is?"

The ship in the middle was indeed the largest and most gaudy of all.

"A youngster," Maomao echoed, wondering if she could feel relief yet. That seemed to imply it was Jinshi, not the freak. *I might have guessed, but still.*

At the same time, that left her with the question of which physician would be with her. If Jinshi were to summon Maomao to him alone, it could raise suspicions.

"From what Luomen tells us, Grand Commandant Kan is generally fairly subdued on a rocking boat, he just needs anti-nausea medications and some juice to supplement his nutrition."

"Is that so, sir?"

If he got seasick, that would make him much like Lahan. Evidently it wasn't just alcohol that made his head spin.

"They've told you what you need to know about the ships?"

"Yes, sir. They said there's a medical office on board where all the necessary equipment will be stored—and where I'll be sleeping for the most part."

"That's right. Although you're welcome to sleep with the ladies-in-waiting if you like, Niang-niang."

"The office, please."

The presence of ladies-in-waiting was natural enough; Jinshi could hardly travel without them. *But will Suiren be there?*

Suiren, Jinshi's attendant in the first flush of old age. A trip this long would be hard on her, but if she wasn't here, the only other candidate Maomao could think of would be Basen's older sister Maamei. *Didn't I hear something about her having kids, though?*

Asking a mother to leave her children for such a long time wouldn't be easy either. Maomao pondered the situation, but in any case, there would be other ladies-in-waiting on board. Carefully chosen ones, no doubt, but it would still be in Maomao's best interests to keep her distance.

"The other physician on board can fill you in on anything else you want to know," said the doctor with the beard.

Yeah, okay, but who is he?

They seemed happy to tell all and sundry that the freak strategist would be along, so why were they being so cagey about the doctor? It didn't make sense.

"Oh, it's you, sir?" Tianyu said as he got on his boat.

"Got a problem with that?" snapped, of all people, the middle physician from the convocation. He'd look like something of an overachiever—and apparently on this occasion it had blown up in his face. Of course, Maomao didn't know his name.

Not who I'm worried about. She boarded her boat, still wondering who the other physician could be.

On board, the sailors were working industriously.

I wonder if that's our VIP's room. Sumptuous chambers jutted up from the deck. They would have a nice breeze, and were certainly well appointed. The same room wouldn't have looked out of place at a villa belonging to the Imperial family. *It looks the most comfortable...but also like the most obvious target.*

Maomao went down the stairs, belowdecks. The damp air clung to her skin. There were no walls, perhaps to allow the air to move through better; there were only the flimsiest excuses for dividers in the space. *The bureaucrats will probably have to sleep packed in down here*, Maomao thought. It would be much the same when they were eating. The ship had hired sailors, so the

administrators would have time on their hands. Board games seemed likely to become even more popular, with the ships devoid of other entertainments.

There were enough cannons on board that the vessel could have doubled as a battleship. There were a few areas that were properly walled off—probably rooms for the ladies-in-waiting and the more important travelers. The gender ratio on this ship was skewed very much in favor of the men, and the separate rooms were presumably to keep anyone from getting any funny ideas, as they might have if everyone were sleeping together.

Gee, this is kind of...exciting.

Admittedly, she was probably going to be sick of this ship after seeing it all day, every day for the duration of the trip, but anybody wants to explore a new environment. There were stout ropes and wooden flotation devices here and there on the walls.

The ship had three levels—four, if you counted the VIP chamber abovedeck. The next floor down was similar in construction to the one above, but it contained the medical office and kitchen. Maomao decided to save the medical office for last; instead, she went to have a look at the kitchen. It contained several water barrels and a stove, which was cleverly built to allow smoke to escape.

Scary stuff, using fire on board a ship.

The area around the stove was built with fire-resistant materials, but you would still have to be very careful.

It looked like a very small kitchen considering the number of people aboard—it was probably intended to cook the VIP's meals and little more. Grunts like Maomao would have to be content with warm soup.

Whatever you ate eventually had to come out the other end—Maomao was just wondering where the bathroom was when she saw a structure built out on the prow of the ship. It was probably made to allow things to fall directly into the sea—possibly including an unwary occupant. Maomao intended to be careful.

At the very bottom of the ship was the cargo. Munitions and water were

stored there, along with provisions and what Maomao took to be gifts for the western capital. She was less than pleased to spy some sweet potatoes—it was clear who had done the hard sell on those.

Will they really keep? She peeked into one of the wooden boxes. The potatoes had been stored in rice husks, seemingly as a measure against the humidity.

Once she was satisfied that she had seen the rest of the ship, Maomao went to the medical office. It had real walls, so that they could quarantine anyone who might be sick. When she opened the door, she found the master of the place sitting in a chair—a man of soft and gentle mien.

She didn't say anything; for a second, she thought it was her old man, Luomen—but no, not quite.

"Oh! Hullo, young lady!"

The voice was carefree—and familiar. It belonged to someone who was normally found in the rear palace: the quack doctor.

"Is that you, sir?" Maomao asked. It came out as a question, and with good reason: the quack's trademark loach mustache was missing. His face was smooth as a baby's behind.

"Ack! Don't look at me. I'm too embarrassed..." The quack blushed and pursed his lips, as if he were a young woman just old enough to start trimming her bangs.

"What happened, sir? That mustache was your pride and joy."

He sniffled. "They told me I had to shave it. They said it wasn't normal for a eunuch to grow hair like that."

"I admit, it's somewhat unusual."

Eunuchs were missing what made them men, so they also tended to lose distinctive male physical characteristics. Facial and body hair grew thinner—but of course, there could be exceptions. In some cases, it even seemed that the "male" part actually remained inside the body. In any case, the quack had succeeded in growing a mustache despite being a eunuch, and had appeared to

take great pride in it, frequently stroking the thin strands of hair.

“That still doesn’t explain why you’re here,” Maomao said.

“Well, you see, there are no consorts at the rear palace requiring particular attention right now. Consort Lihua is really the only upper consort, and Luomen is more than capable of taking care of her. I heard there might be a new consort coming, but I guess it fell through.”

Was he talking about Empress Gyokuyou’s niece? So she wasn’t going to enter the rear palace after all.

A demotion, indeed...

Dr. Liu was a very thorough man. He’d found Jinshi his physicians, on the grounds that there weren’t enough of them for a trip to the western capital—and if they had one capable upper physician, it wouldn’t look right if they didn’t have at least one more. So he had chosen to use the quack, who had the rank and title if nothing else. It was even possible he’d gone so far out of his way to equip Maomao with medical knowledge because he knew she got along with the quack. Alternatively, maybe he’d chosen the quack because he knew Maomao would be going.

“Hoo hoo hoo! I’ve never traveled by ship before. Doesn’t it make your heart pound? I don’t know what all is going to happen, but I’m sure it’s going to be a fun trip as long as you’re here, young lady.”

If the quack doctor had anything to recommend him, it had to be his optimistic side. Maomao also had the sense that he had the good luck to somehow survive anything that might happen to him. Someone or something she couldn’t identify seemed to like him.

“How about we start with some tea? I’ll boil some water.”

“I think they might get upset if you help yourself to the stove,” Maomao said.

“Really? Well, we can use a brazier, then.”

“I think we might suffocate if we burned charcoal in here.”

The room didn’t get much air, and the charcoal would burn incompletely. There was a window, but it was very small; the room itself was rather dim.

The quack's face fell. "I'm starting to think traveling by ship might be less cozy than I thought..."

"Needless to say, sir."

The quack buried his disappointed countenance in the cot nearby. "Sigh! And the beds are hard, I see."

"I'm afraid there's not much to be done about it, sir. Just be glad you don't have to sleep packed in with everyone else. Oh, here, we can use this shelf for our cargo."

Maomao put her change of clothes on the shelf and opened the book Yao had given her. She set herself up so she could use the light coming in through the window; it was at the perfect angle to allow her to sit on the bed.

"Aww. You're reading a book, miss?"

"Looks like it'll be a while before we leave. I'm sure someone will come call us."

"Hrm." The quack puffed out his cheeks, disappointed, and took out a portable Go board. "That's fine. I'll work some Go problems." He took out a book of his own—the one by the freak strategist, of course.

They had what amounted to a sending-off ceremony for the ship, and then they set sail. The VIPs, principally Jinshi, were conducting what seemed to be some sort of ceremony, but Maomao was only half paying attention. She spotted the freak strategist nosing around, so she went below and took refuge in one of the rooms.

It was hard to call a ship voyage pleasant, but it was a less dubious mode of travel than she'd pictured. Certainly better than her river cruise, at any rate.

I hear they used to have to eat bug-infested bread on ships. So instead the sailors would put out a live fish to draw out the bugs first. Maomao had been known to eat locusts and snakes, but even she didn't relish the thought of eating bread full of bugs.

I guess the trip's not going to be that *long.*

It felt long to her, but it was nothing like the months that sailors sometimes spent at sea. They might be on the ship upwards of two weeks at most, and they would make several calls at ports along the way. For the first meal, they had meat wrapped in bamboo leaves, fish soup, and even tangerines. A touch of luxury for the first day on board, she supposed.

"They even have fruit! This is wonderful!" The quack said, smiling beatifically as he peeled and ate his tangerine. Maomao had long ago finished eating and was brushing her teeth.

She had a vague sense of why they had been served tangerines. "People don't get enough produce on sea voyages," she said.

"Too true. It doesn't last long enough."

"That causes an imbalance in nutrition and makes people sick."

"Yes, indeed. A balanced diet, that's the thing."

It wasn't quite clear whether the quack knew what she was talking about or not.

He remarked: "Gosh, plenty of free time on our hands here. There don't seem to be any patients."

I'm sure it's no more free time than you had at the rear palace, Maomao mentally shot back. She swished some water in her mouth and spat it out the window. Some might call that behavior uncouth, but it was just ocean outside. This was quick and convenient.

"If it means no one is getting hurt or sick, then it's good news," she said and looked at the office's shelves. For a ship, they had a generous assortment of medicines, including herbs to treat the most common ailments as well as some concoctions to combat ship-specific illnesses. They even had a few topical medications.

"May I ask you something?" Maomao said, deciding to broach a subject she'd been wondering about for some time. "I seem to recall once when you didn't even want to look at a corpse, so how did you manage to pass the test to become a doctor?"

“The test? Ah, the test. Yes, I passed it!” The quack gave a triumphant little snort and pounded himself on the chest.

Maomao gave him a doubtful look. “I don’t suppose you’re talking about a *written* test?”

“Yes, of course. There was no doctor in the rear palace, so they opened the physicians’ examination to the eunuchs. I was the only one who passed!” Another little snort; the quack was obviously quite proud of himself. It was sometimes said that the eunuchs were people who had failed to make it as bureaucrats or soldiers. There were also many among them who were former slaves who had been castrated by the foreign nations. To be quite honest, Maomao could understand why most of the eunuchs failed the test: many of them were simply not very educated.

It seemed unlikely that any physician would be eager enough to work in the rear palace that he would become a eunuch for the privilege, so they’d gone with the opposite and tried to make a eunuch into a physician. She wondered if they had expected what they got.

“And what about after that? The practical examination?” Maomao pressed.

“Practical examination? Hmm... I’m not sure I remember any... Ah, now that you mention it, I guess they did make me dissect a chicken.”

“And?”

“Oh, I was at the end of my rope, let me tell you! When I tried to wring its neck, the bird gave me a good, hard peck on the forehead and knocked me clean out!”

Maomao was dead silent—and startled to realize how easily she could picture it.

“They called me to dissect a pig, too, but when it looked at me with those big, dark eyes, well, I just couldn’t do it!”

Naturally. Also likewise frighteningly picturable.

“I see,” Maomao said. After all that, the higher-ups had probably given up on forging the quack into a real doctor, but they still needed someone who could

do the rounds for the consorts in the rear palace, so they'd given him the title and left it at that. "Did any other eunuchs become doctors after you?" Surely if they'd administered the test a few more times, they might have scared up someone more qualified.

"Well, about that. You remember the Empress Dowager built a building for the ladies she gathered in the rear palace, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

It had been intended to serve as a haven for the girls who had been the former emperor's bedmates, somewhere to keep them safe even though they couldn't leave the rear palace. Unfortunately, in the end, it had been used in the Shi clan's rebellion.

"While they were between doctors, that place became something of a clinic. They were *not* pleased when I entered the medical office, and fought tooth and nail against any other eunuch physicians."

"Ahh..."

It made some sense. The palace women serving at the clinic knew far more about medical treatment than the half-baked quack.

"They claimed the rear palace didn't need any more doctors, so unfortunately, any talk of promoting more eunuchs fell by the wayside." So the quack had ended up as the rear palace's only official physician.

This is a man who lives by his luck alone...

She would have to get him to pull a fortune for her sometime.

Shenyü, that was the woman's name, wasn't it? She ended up at the center of it all.

The quack was gazing into the distance.

Shenyü was a middle-aged woman at the clinic. She'd helped Shisui and the Shi clan to escape, or so Maomao had heard. Not only that, but when she begun to face suspicion, she had reportedly plotted suicide—but Maomao had heard nothing else since then.

I guess she was likely to die one way or another, whether she did it to herself

or waited for them to do it to her. Apparently no one had felt Maomao needed to be informed one way or the other.

The quack finished brushing his teeth and began preparing his medical tools. “Now then, we’ll be doing an exam once a day. After mealtime, I’m told.”

An exam of whom? The most important people, presumably. Or the most important *person*.

“Ahh! I haven’t seen Master Jinshi—ahem! I mean the Moon Prince—in ages. I’m so nervous!”

Maomao hadn’t heard anyone else call him Jinshi in quite a long time. He was the Moon Prince now—or more accurately, he was the Moon Prince once again—and had been for more than a year.

“Yes, of course.”

Granted, the quack had blushed just as hard back when he’d believed Jinshi was a fellow eunuch.

Hrmm...

They’d made Maomao his helper, not that they’d asked how she felt about it.

Jinshi's room was far more sumptuous than any other part of the ship.

He gets a nice breeze in here. Spacious, too. And bright.

Of course, all that came with being abovedeck, but anyway, it had to be pretty pleasant, Maomao thought.

"This way, please," a woman said mildly.

Sea travel can't be easy for someone so old.

It was the somewhat elderly lady-in-waiting, Suiren. Maybe there hadn't been anyone else they could bring. She let the quack doctor into the room without flinching, but when her eyes met Maomao's a scowl passed ever so briefly across her face.

Good luck, you two, Maomao thought at the other two ladies-in-waiting in the room. They likewise glanced at the quack but studied Maomao. *They really did pick good people.*

These two could obviously tell what was going on—the reality of things. Maomao actually felt rather fond of them, insofar as they weren't immediately hostile to her.

One of the ladies appeared to be somewhere in her forties. Old enough that she might've been one of Jinshi's milk mothers. The other lady, Maomao had seen before—it was Chue, who had been at Jinshi's villa of late.

I guess she must be pretty capable, in spite of the way she acts.

Her occasionally odd behavior seemed to remain unchanged.

Most of the women around the Imperial younger brother looked quite plain, but that was very much in character for him. As Maomao walked through the room, she wondered if En'en would be here, had she remained in Jinshi's service.

"P-Please, p-pardon the intrusion," the quack said, already stumbling over his words.

Jinshi, sitting in a chair, waited on the other side of a folding screen. He'd changed out of his ritual outfit into something comparatively easier to move in.

“It’s been quite some time, Master Physician. If you’d be so kind.” Jinshi held out his arm. The smell of incense drifted around the room, but Maomao couldn’t shake the sense that it was Jinshi himself who smelled most fragrant of all. Sparkly Jinshi was on full display, as he had been at the rear palace, no doubt in part because he was with the quack doctor.

You wouldn’t have to be the quack to feel a bit intimidated.

“Eep...” squeaked the quack. Maomao stood to one side and watched him. If he’d still had his loach mustache, it would have been shaking.

The “exam” appeared to consist of little more than taking Jinshi’s pulse and asking him a few questions.

I guess I can’t expect much from this guy, Maomao thought. When it occurred to her that maybe that was exactly why the quack had been chosen, she felt a rush of genuine pity for him. He would never notice the change in Jinshi, let alone have the courage to ask him to take off his shirt for an examination.

Suiren was a woman of experience; she would be quite capable of looking after Jinshi’s health even without the quack’s ministrations.

Maomao, meanwhile, kept an eye out that nothing seemed about to go wrong. Not that she expected the quack, however carelessly and randomly he might work, to suddenly flip up Jinshi’s outfit.

“W-Well, I don’t see any p-problems,” the quack declared, stuttering to the bitter end.

“My thanks. I’ll be seeing you daily from now on.”

“Eep!”

The quack cleaned up his tools, which he had barely touched in the course of the examination. Jinshi was still looking at him. When the quack looked up, he turned up the sparkle even more.

The hell?

Roses drifted behind Jinshi’s back.

“Master Physician, I see you shaved your mustache. It suits you.”

The quack didn't actually squeal, but he might as well have. He looked like he was on cloud nine.

Jinshi continued, "I must apologize for extracting you from your accustomed environs in the rear palace to make you take a journey by sea. However, you have a most important role to fulfill. I would be gratified if you would accompany me to the end."

"Y-Y-Yes! Yes, of course!" said the quack, eyes brimming. He took Jinshi utterly at his word.

To Maomao, meanwhile, it looked like a farce. Suiren and the other ladies-in-waiting likewise weren't buying it. But that didn't matter. Only the quack needed to believe.

"The others here are aware that you're a eunuch, Master Physician. If you should find yourself inconvenienced by anything at all on that account, I do hope you'll tell me."

"Y-Yes, sir!" said the quack, so eager that the tears were now practically pouring from his eyes. His cheeks were as flushed as could be, and Maomao almost thought she could see a flower blooming behind him too.

"One other thing." Jinshi looked at the quack with sorrow in his eyes. Maomao glared at him, but she wanted this ridiculous play to be over as soon as possible. "Your name, Master Physician. It's Guen, is it not?"

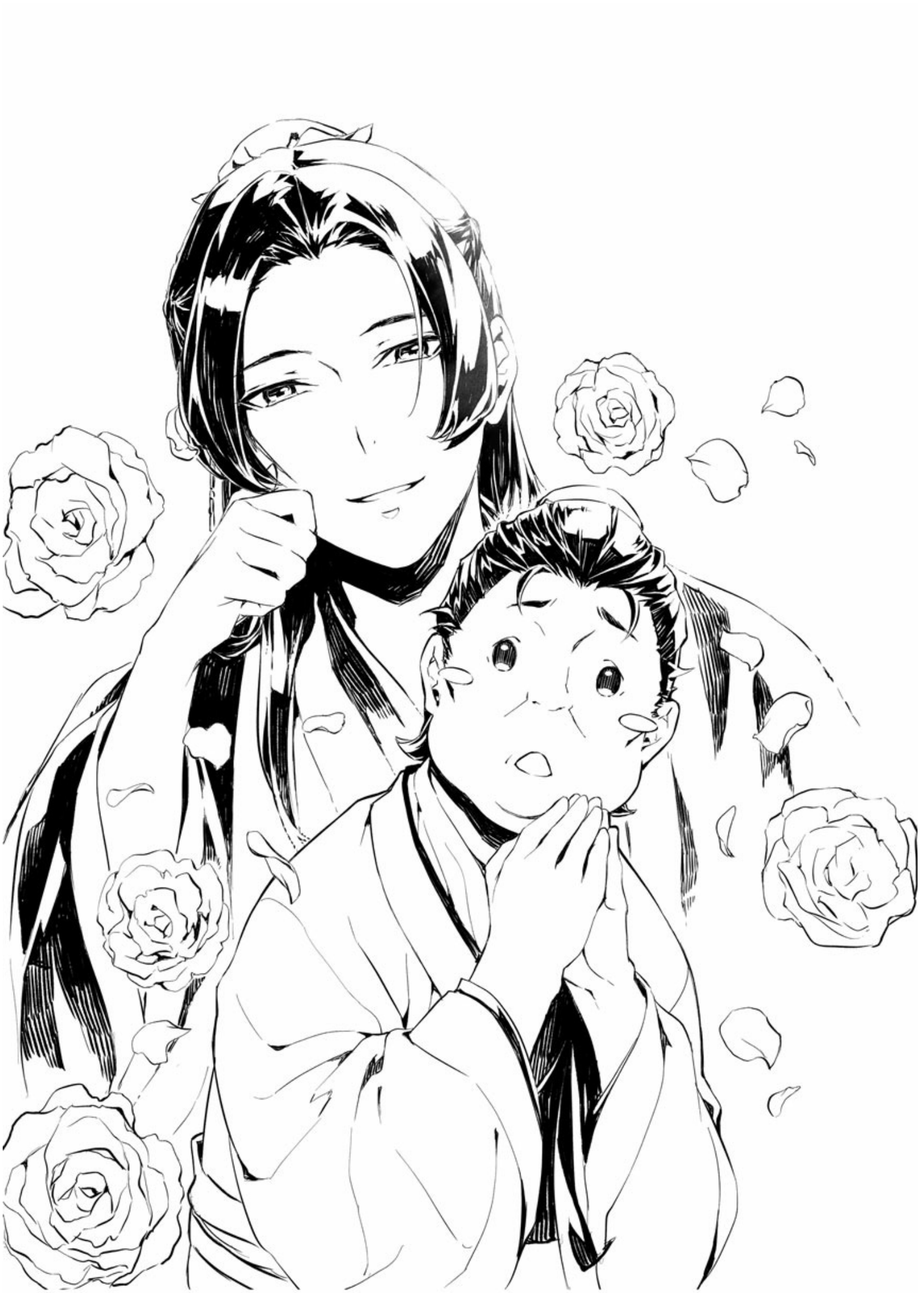
"Y-Yes, sir!"

Oh. Is that his name?

"You are the only physician on this ship, and as such, I've requested that everyone refer to you not by your name, but as Master Physician. If you have no objections?"

"I... I would be honored!"

The quack, indeed, had no objections. He was practically begging to be addressed by that grand title.



Something's going on here, I just don't know what, Maomao thought.

As the quack finished cleaning up his equipment, Suiren said, "Excuse me, but I've got a small request. Do you think we ladies could receive daily examinations as well? Of course, I wouldn't dream of troubling you with such minor affairs, Master Physician. If you could spare the young lady who's helping you, that would be fine."

Ah-hah. It begins.

Maomao looked at the quack. "I'm sure you're very busy, sir. You go on ahead."

"Yes, of course," said the quack, who didn't stumble over his words when speaking to Suiren. "Well then, young lady. Can I trust you with this?"

Maomao took the bag of medical supplies from the quack. "Of course, sir," she said, with all the enthusiasm of someone reading from a script.

She politely accompanied the quack to the door, and when she was sure she couldn't hear so much as his footsteps in the hallway, she turned back to Jinshi, who suddenly looked very gloomy indeed. Maomao was about to snort at him, but Suiren forestalled her with a smack.

"How about something to drink?" asked Chue, ever socially conscious.

"I don't need tea," Maomao replied.

"Of course."

Chue could hardly be called beautiful, but would it be rude to say that that was precisely what made it easy to relax around her?

There are too many beautiful people in the world, anyway, thought Maomao. Suiren herself had probably been quite the lovely lady once; even at her age, she still had plenty of her looks left. As for the other, forty-something woman, her face was stern, but nonetheless quite beautiful.

It was also she who spoke first to Maomao, holding out her hand. "Lady Suiren has said she's willing to wait for her exam, so perhaps you could start with me?"

Hm? Maomao was sure she'd seen the woman somewhere before. If she were just a bit younger...

"What? Is there something on my face?" That face made Maomao think of a predator. She'd definitely seen it before.

"Maomao, Taomei is Basen's mother," Suiren said.

"His mother?"

If she was Basen's mother, that would make her...

"Perhaps you've met my daughter, Maamei," Taomei said. Yes, that was who she looked like. Maamei, the woman who had brought treats to the Go tournament. In another twenty years or so, Maamei would probably be a dead ringer for this woman.

"Er..." Maomao wasn't quite sure what to say. Should she remark politely that she was grateful for Basen's good offices? Well, but he hadn't really done anything for her. And Maamei certainly hadn't.

But wait—one person related to Taomei had.

"I'm always grateful for Gaoshun's good offices," Maomao said. A man attentive to every detail. If this woman was Basen's mother, that would make her Gaoshun's wife.

Shit! That means I should be careful.

Maomao had once offered a lady of the pleasure district to Gaoshun—who had refused on the grounds that his wife was a scary woman. Maomao didn't actually expect Taomei to find out what she had done, but it still gave her a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Oh? That's good to know. He's on this trip as well, you know."

"Master Gaoshun is?"

Maomao stole a glance at Jinshi, but she saw no sign of Gaoshun. Maybe he was patrolling the ship? There were guards at the entrance to Jinshi's room, but it was all women inside—which made her a bit uneasy.

"What about Master Basen, then?"

“He’s taking a separate route to the western capital. Overland.”

He had to go by himself? Didn’t that bother him?

Basen had been carefully and deliberately distanced from Jinshi recently—he was no political animal, but even he must have noticed by now.

“He has his own job to do,” Taomei said and then chuckled, demurely hiding her mouth as she did so. She seemed vaguely amused by the entire situation.

What kind of job? Maomao wondered. She had half a mind to ask—but right now, she needed to prioritize *her* job.

“Give me your arm, please,” she said.

“Of course.”

Taomei offered her arm, and Maomao took her pulse. It was good and strong. She seemed to be in excellent health, but Maomao did notice something odd. Taomei’s left and right eyes seemed to be slightly different colors. She studied them for a moment.

“Is something the matter?” Taomei asked.

“No,” said Maomao. The two eyes also appeared to move slightly out of sync. On an impulse, Maomao moved her left hand around. Then she did the same with her right, and only then did she seeTaomei’s eyes move.

Is she blind in her right eye?

Sometimes people were born with differences between their two eyes, but the color could also change later in life—often because of blindness.

“Was that some kind of test just now?” Taomei asked. She must have spotted the thoughts on Maomao’s face. She pointed to her right eye—she was every bit as sharp as Maomao might have expected of Gaoshun’s wife.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I didn’t mean to be rude. You don’t find it to be any hindrance in everyday life?”

“No, it’s nothing to be concerned about. It happened a long time ago, and I’m perfectly used to it by now.”

“Very well, ma’am. In that case, is there anything else that’s bothering you?”

“No, nothing.”

“May I look at your eyes and tongue?”

Maomao pulled down the skin under Taomei’s eyes and looked at it. The right eye was definitely blind, its color cloudy. There were conditions of old age that could cause the eyes to become cloudy, but since Taomei said she’d lost her sight in that eye a long time ago, Maomao suspected it had been from an injury.

“Please be especially careful on this voyage. Everything rocks on a sailing ship.”

“I’m aware,” Taomei replied. Maomao felt a little silly for having said something so blatantly obvious. “I must say, though, don’t you think the Moon Prince’s traveling garden rather lacks any flowers of note?”

It was as hard to agree with her as it was to disagree with her.

“If only my daughter Maamei could have come on this trip, an old grandmother like me could have stayed home. We could hardly send her with her entire family, though.”

“Goodness. If you’re a grandmother, I must be a dried-up old husk,” rejoined Suiren.

“I have three grandchildren. I can’t go around pretending to be a young woman anymore, can I?” Taomei said. The way she faced Suiren’s jibe head-on showed her stubborn streak, perhaps. Maomao thought she could almost see the sparks flying between the two of them. It seemed Jinshi had a way of whittling down the women around him to only the strongest and most capable. Maomao finished her examination promptly, then moved on to the younger ladies-in-waiting.

“My name is Chue.”

“Yes, I know.”

“But you can just call me Miss Chue. Like friends do!” She looked dead serious.

“Um... Right,” Maomao said. She was a special one, all right. She was Gaoshun’s daughter-in-law, which made her Taomei’s, too. A rather frivolous

young lady for such a stern mother-in-law. Maomao wondered if they got along.

With her dumpling-like nose, small eyes, and tan skin, Chue looked much like her namesake, the sparrow.

She's not exactly beautiful. But at the same time... Now that Maomao saw her for a second time, she realized it was hard not to find Chue charming. She seemed like she might be better suited hawking wares at a street stall than serving the Emperor's younger brother.

"Chue is my son's wife," Taomei explained.

"Yes, Master Gaoshun told me. Your older son, yes?"

"That's right. Not Basen, but Baryou. Much as I wish Basen would hurry up and settle down." Taomei had that same amused look on her face as earlier.

There seemed to be quite a bit going on in this family of Gaoshun's.

"Since we're on the subject, let me introduce my older son," Taomei said. She strode over to a curtain in the corner of the room and flicked it back, revealing a pale-faced man working Go problems.

There was someone else here this whole time? Maomao hadn't even sensed him.

"Y-Yes, mother? Can I help you?"

"You could at least say hello, Baryou."

"H-Hello?" Baryou looked much like Basen, if he were smaller, scrawnier, and hadn't seen the sun in at least six months. "Y-Yes, hello..."

Baryou hardly even looked at Maomao, but he did slump to the ground, holding his stomach. He looked sick, and Maomao was about to trot over and work on him—but Chue got there first, summarily shoving Baryou back behind his curtain.

"Dearest mother-in-law, I sincerely think that when it comes to people he's meeting for the first time, we need to start with written communications, and then once he's used to them, they can talk to him through his screen. Just dropping someone on him face-to-face like that—well, there isn't enough

stomach medication in the world to make him feel better!”

What Chue was saying was perfectly reasonable—well, no, it sort of wasn’t, but it *sounded* reasonable.

“Yes, you always were better at handling him... It seems to me he’s much worse than he used to be, though.”

This was some relationship this mother and daughter-in-law had. Maomao wouldn’t have known what wisecrack to make even if she’d had a chance.

“Don’t you think we should have left Baryou and brought Maamei instead?” Taomei said.

“Yes, but then who would have watched my child?”

“Fair enough. You never were interested in child-rearing. It would be no small help to me if you would pop out at least one more, though.”

The opportunities for wisecracks came thick and fast, but Maomao suspected that if the quipping started it would never stop.

Let’s summarize:

Gaoshun’s wife, Taomei.

Gaoshun’s son, Baryou.

Baryou’s wife, Chue.

All of them very...characterful.

It would have been too much for Basen—for that matter, having him there would only have made things even more characterful. Maomao could see Gaoshun furrowing his brow so clearly it was like he was there with them. However Basen had contrived to get himself a separate trip, it had been the right choice.

Just when Maomao figured that that about did it as far as any interest in exams and was wondering if she should leave, Suiren gave her a poke.

“Yes, ma’am?” she asked. She turned to find herself faced with a gaze as friendly as a swarm of bees. Jinshi was glaring at them from behind his fancy screen.

Maomao had completely forgotten what she was really here for.

“Sh-Shall I call you Master Jinshi?”

After a beat he replied, “Yes.”

Apparently, he had been waiting behind that screen the entire time. He’d finally peeked in when the women’s exams never seemed to end—but all the same, she questioned his judgment for looking when the women were having examinations.

“But only here,” Jinshi added. “Don’t use that name anywhere else.”

“I understand, sir. But the examinations are still...”

Suiren was making tea with a smile. Maomao had said she didn’t need any, but apparently the other party here did. Well, the exams were a facade, anyway. Jinshi beckoned her behind the folding screen, and she had no choice but to go. Behind the screen was a door, and behind the door was a bedroom.

“Take your time, then,” Suiren said, giving Maomao the tea. None of the other ladies-in-waiting followed them. Incidentally, the click of stones could be heard from behind the curtain—evidently Baryou had resumed working his problems.

The bedroom was dark; there were no windows. Instead there was flickering candlelight. There must have been some sort of ventilation, because despite the absence of windows, there seemed to be plenty of air in the room.

“Lock the door, please,” Jinshi said. Maomao set down the tea and obligingly locked the door. It was a swinging door, not a sliding one, perhaps reflecting the western influence on the design of the ship. She placed the bag she’d taken from the quack on the table and took out fresh bandages. It was actually Maomao who had packed the bag, so she’d made sure to include them, along with salve.

I’ll tell the quack I was replacing my bandage. If she showed him the one wrapped around her left arm, he would accept the explanation without thinking too hard about it.

“If you would, then,” Jinshi said. He sat on the bed and took off his overrobe,

as he always did.

“Yes, sir. Pardon me.” Maomao wiped her hands clean, then reached for Jinshi’s flank. She touched the red, raised flesh and Jinshi flinched. “It looks like it’s progressing well.”

“I’m starting to get sick of that salve.”

“We need to watch it a little while longer. I’m going to wipe it down, okay?”

Maomao wiped the old balm away and applied new. Jinshi twitched a little—maybe she was tickling him—but he did the same thing every time, so she paid it no mind, just kept working.

Maomao had several burns of her own on her arm, but she had never really treated one as serious as Jinshi’s. She could only evaluate the scarring, trying to remember what Luomen had done.

I wish Yao had copied a few pages about burn treatment for her book, she thought. She’d flipped through the volume, but hadn’t seen anything offhand. She could conceivably ask the other physicians, but she would have to be careful to do so without arousing any suspicions that Jinshi was involved.

Once the medicine was applied, she replaced the bandage, again as always.

“Done already?”

“Done already,” she confirmed.

“Don’t you have anything else to talk about?”

Well, there was nothing else to treat. *Except maybe his head.* Life would have been so much easier if she could have tightened down the screws he obviously had loose.

Sure, there were plenty of things she wanted to *say*—would it be rude to tell him, though, that there was nothing she wanted to *talk about*?

Jinshi was silent; apparently he was as lost for conversation topics as she was.

Maomao cocked her head, then said: “May I be so bold as to speak first, sir?”

“Go ahead.”

“This trip to the western capital. How long do you expect it to last?”

She didn’t expect him to have an exact answer for her, but she was grasping at conversational straws.

“To be honest, I don’t know. I believe we talked about it being at least three months, didn’t we?”

“Yes, sir. Another question, then. About the merits of bringing me on this trip. Do I have any value at all here other than to treat your wound?”

Jinshi didn’t say anything to that, but he averted his eyes.

Argh. I knew it.

“Did you use me to lure in the freak strategist, sir?”

There was another pause, and then Jinshi replied, “Would it help if I said I felt bad about it?”

Maomao wanted to give him a good glare, but she held back. *There’s no way I’m getting paid enough for this!*

She couldn’t believe it. They had better give her some very expensive alcohol or she would never put up with this. All she had at hand, though, was the tea Suiren had served. She took the first sip, before Jinshi—her tiny way of getting back at him.

“You thinking you’re not getting paid enough for this,” Jinshi said. He could be quite perceptive when he wanted to. He took a cloth-wrapped item out of the folds of his robes and unwrapped it to reveal a whitish-gray stone.

“Is that what I think it is?!”

“It should be. Would you kindly confirm?” Jinshi took a needle out of a drawer beside the bed.

“Confirm? You mean...” Maomao took the stone. It felt lighter than it looked. Very light, in fact. Jinshi appeared to be telling her to investigate exactly what it was. “Gladly, sir.”

Maomao heated the needle in the candle flame and then stuck it into the light stone. It produced a distinctive smell.

“It’s real! Not that I would expect you to bring me a fake, Master Jinshi. It’s

actual ambergris!” They’d hardly left and Maomao had already procured her souvenir for the old madam.

“Laka—ahem. I mean, the strategist absolutely had to accompany us on this trip.”

“Was that a request from the western capital?” Maomao asked.

“It was. But I also wanted to get his opinion on the place.”

So that’s what’s going on.

The strategist was a freak, trash, and pretty much set the low bar for humanity, but when it came to strategy he had no peer.

“I heard there might be a war,” Maomao ventured, looking around. She hoped that, this being Jinshi’s room, it had been properly soundproofed.

“The best thing to do isn’t to win a war,” Jinshi said. “It’s not to start one at all. But doing what’s best is sometimes very hard.”

In other words, the potential for war was very much on his mind. She was starting to see why the doctors had been brought along, whether they liked it or not.

“I don’t think having me here is going to make it any easier to handle the freak strategist. My father might have been another story.”

Yes, Luomen seemed to have a way with the strategist. If he were younger, if his knee weren’t bad, he might have come with them on this trip. Unfortunately, life wasn’t that simple, and it was the quack doctor who had come instead.

He’ll never be a substitute for my—hm? Maomao thought back on how Jinshi had behaved with the quack. He’d talked the man up, made him feel good. To those watching, in fact, he’d appeared downright unctuous.

He’d particularly complemented the quack’s newly shaven face. Knowing the quack, he wouldn’t let that beard grow back for a while. Moreover, Jinshi hadn’t used the quack’s name at all, but had insisted on referring to him as “Master Physician.” Hardly anyone else on board knew the quack. And, assuming Maomao didn’t use his name, he was no quack—just another doctor. Even if his

physical characteristics would probably give him away as a eunuch.

So the upper physicians had been summoned on this lengthy voyage, and one of them was a eunuch. One with whom Maomao was frequently seen.

Suddenly she wanted to pound the table.

No, can't do that! Calm down!

She went to take another sip of tea to calm herself, but found it was already drunk dry. Jinshi offered her his own cup. She took it without hesitation and drank it down. It was made partly with herbs that had a sedative effect, maybe to help him keep his emotions under control. Suiren was quite something, sensing that they would need something like that.

Maomao let out a long breath, then stared hard at Jinshi. "You're trying to use the master physician as a body double for my father."

"You're always so quick to pick up on things. Saves me having to explain." He looked at her the same way he had back in the rear palace.

Luomen and the quack were both eunuchs, but they looked very different and were nothing alike in age. To those who had heard only rumors, however, all they would see was a eunuch doctor—and there were only so many of those. They would never imagine Jinshi would deliberately bring along the doctor from the rear palace. If they expected anyone, it would be Luomen, who had emerged from humiliation to serve in the royal court.

This was the reason they had kept Maomao in the dark about the chosen physicians until the very last moment.

"The western capital—or should I say, Sir Gyoku-ou—was insistent that Sir Luomen should come. You understand what that means?"

"I don't suppose it's as simple as that they have a patient they'd like him to see?"

Luomen was an extraordinary doctor; no doubt there were plenty of sick people in the western capital who could benefit from his services. But it seemed likely there was something else going on.

"From *my* perspective, I think they may be under the impression that this will

keep the honored strategist tame. Of course, I gave them no specific answer. If they happen to mistake the master physician for Sir Luomen, that's their problem."

The tone of authority in Jinshi's voice indicated that he wasn't his usual somewhat pathetic self, but was the Emperor's younger brother. A man who could and would use people as pawns.

"Tame, sir? I think it would be safer to give your hand to an actual fox. Especially because this man Gyoku-ou—he's Empress Gyokuyou's older brother, isn't he?" Maomao asked.

"Many people assume that they can do what others cannot. Sometimes they grow desperate enough to try anything. Not every adherent of a sage is a sage themselves, however. Most of all, there's no shortage of countries that have been brought to their knees by their queen's relatives."

A beat. Maomao felt herself get goosebumps. "Should you really be telling me this?"

"I'm not *telling* you anything. I'm only speaking of possibilities."

Yeah, but not ones you doubt.

At the same time, not being told anything would have irked Maomao as well.

Jinshi raised a pointer finger, then pointed it at Maomao. "When they get desperate enough to try anything, who will they target?"

"You're saying I'm a weakness that could be exploited?"

"You obviously are. And the strategist's former aide now serves Sir Gyoku-ou."

He's talking about Rikuson.

"Sir Gyoku-ou knows about you, of that much we can be sure."

Rikuson would have to tell them, if they asked him. She was starting to understand Jinshi's seemingly harebrained selection of his entourage for this trip.

"You thought they would come after me if I stayed in the capital?"

“Again, it’s a possibility. You know how many enemies the honored strategist has.”

That left Maomao quiet.

“I suspect you are far more widely known than you would ever think, and not all those who know you are fool enough to ignore you.”

On that point, she had to agree with him. She should have thought harder before becoming a medical assistant. It was Jinshi who had arranged the opportunity for her, but her life might have been much quieter had the freak strategist not made such a display of himself. Well, lamenting the past wouldn’t do her any good.

“Lahan will be able to manage things, somehow, which is why I had him stay behind. I’ve also requested Sir Luomen put in an occasional appearance in the rear palace. And, with all apologies to you, I needed you to come with me. I thought it would be better for you somewhere the strategist could see you. Not easier, perhaps, but safer.”

“You” this, “you” that. Just when she thought he’d finally started using her name once in a while.

“It also happened to be quite convenient for me.”

You son of a—! Maomao almost exclaimed, but instead she took a sip of tea, exhaled, and said simply, “Is that so, sir?”

Much as they might have disturbed her, Jinshi’s words showed that he had done what he’d done out of consideration for Maomao. He had taken into account her web of personal relationships, the people he needed and where he needed them, and above all what he had thought would be best for her safety.

“I’ve assigned an old friend of yours as the master physician’s bodyguard. One Lihaku.”

“Yes, sir,” Maomao replied coolly. She gave the ambergris a distant look.

I’m not quite sure that explanation sits right with me. She gathered up the tea supplies and made to leave the bedroom. She hadn’t even touched the snacks.

“Won’t you take some snacks with you, Maomao?” Suiren, ever ready, had

some baked treats all wrapped up and ready to go.

It will make the quack happy, Maomao thought, so she said, “Yes, thank you.” She took the snacks, bowed respectfully, and left the room.

“Are you quite sure about this, young master?”

Suiren was saying something to Jinshi, but Maomao ignored it.

“Oh, er...” Jinshi reached out, starting to say something to Maomao, but to be frank she had had quite enough talk for one day. Pretending she hadn’t noticed, she left.

Gaoshun had returned and was waiting outside. Diligent supporter that he was, he seemed to sense something when he looked at Maomao, for his brow furrowed, but there was nothing he could say. Maomao gave him a quizzical look but decided to head back to the medical office.

Chapter 17: Chue

Maomao wrote industriously in the daily report: three cases of seasickness, two injuries, one person feeling unwell.

“Gracious, it’s been busy,” said the quack, whose idea of work was a quick exam and handing out some medicine. He wiped at some more or less nonexistent sweat on his forehead. For some reason, he seemed more energized than he had back at the rear palace.

He really did have too much time on his hands, Maomao thought.

They had been living on the ship for several days now. Some people still hadn’t quite become accustomed to the constant rocking, but cases of seasickness were down overall. If the first day at sea had seemed quiet, by the second, the seasick travelers had come knocking at their door in droves.

“It certainly has,” said Maomao. She was used to the medical office by the military camp, which frankly saw more action than this, but the quack was used to the rear palace office—which saw more tumbleweeds than patients—and it must have seemed like a madhouse to him.

They’d prepared plenty of seasickness medication ahead of time, but the stuff was only good for taking the edge off it; when it came to those who showed up pale-faced and queasy, Maomao figured that the best treatment was to give them a bucket and lead them to a well-ventilated area.

No wonder Lahan isn’t here. She’d thought he might be, considering the freak strategist was coming—but that penny-pincher got the worst seasickness. He might actually be useful to have around on this trip, much as she hated to admit it, but he must have found some excuse to weasel out of it. Besides, he was—whatever she might think of him—next in line for the family headship, so he and the strategist probably shouldn’t be away from home at the same time.

She’d been concerned that the strategist would somehow notice her and make his way over to her ship, but so far nothing had happened. He was probably down with seasickness.

“Now, then, how about a quick snack? If you’d be so kind, miss, go call our friend.”

The moment there were no more patients in the office, the quack began making tea. Use of fire was strictly limited, however, so he couldn’t boil water. It had to be served cold.

There were three cups—and three snacks. Snack food was at a premium aboardships; this was the one the quack had received when he went to examine Jinshi. In fact, each time since then, snacks had been available upon his visit, and each time he was sent home with a few as souvenirs.

I guess he wants to reinvigorate himself. Maomao sighed and opened the medical office door.

“What’s the matter, young lady?” Standing in the hallway was a man at least two heads taller than Maomao—Lihaku. He had been assigned as their bodyguard, and at the moment he held a large weight in each hand. He was just standing around most of the time, so he seemed to have decided to take the opportunity to work out.

“It’s snack time, sir.”

“Thanks! That’s great news.” He put down the weights and came into the office, although his presence there made it significantly more cramped.

“You don’t mind sweets, do you, my dear Lihaku?” asked the quack.

“I’ll eat anything!” Lihaku said.

“Good, good. Do you take sugar in your tea?”

“What? Does anyone do that?”

“I hear it’s the way in the south.”

“Very interesting! Plenty of sugar, please!”

Lihaku was so taken by the question of how this drink would taste that he was about to put a generous portion of the ship’s precious supply of sugar into his tea. Maomao snatched it away. “I’m afraid I can’t let you. Sugar is extremely valuable.”

“Oh, foo.” The quack pursed his lips. He was a regular offender—Maomao would have to hide the sugar and honey. It was one thing when he was just killing time at the rear palace, but on a trip where their supplies could only dwindle, she needed him to exercise some restraint.

That wasn’t the only thing...

Sweet tea? That can’t be for real.

Maomao liked her food spicy and her alcohol dry—in other words, she was not going to put up with any sweetened tea.

“Surely a little bit would be all right? The flavor’s so weak when you make it with cold water,” said Lihaku, pouting too.

“What if you ground up the tea leaves in a mortar? That makes them more flavorful,” Maomao said.

“Hey, that’s not a bad idea. Do we have a mortar?”

“We do! And maybe you can handle the physical labor for us?” the quack ventured. The talkative eunuch and the amiable soldier couldn’t have looked more different, but they had soon become friends. Lihaku had been the right choice for this job.

Still, there was the matter of the quack, who had unwittingly been made Luomen’s body double. What would he think if he ever found out the truth?

I guess silence is golden, thought Maomao. She knew the quack, and she knew it wouldn’t do him any good to be told something so unpleasant, anyway. *If only Jinshi would treat me the same way.*

She rejected the idea almost as soon as it came into her head. She was sure Jinshi had told her what was going on because he thought that would be best, and Maomao couldn’t deny that it was easier to grasp the options available to her with more information. The Emperor’s handsome younger brother was quite a capable man. At the very least, he thought about things rationally, acting on analysis rather than instinct. It was much easier to accept the answers he arrived at, even if they weren’t perfect, knowing he thought things through—even Maomao couldn’t really complain.

Except about that stupid brand.

That, she still couldn't believe.

She let that thought lead her back to the question of the quack. Was she angry that Jinshi had used him as bait? Or—

"Not going to eat, miss?"

"I'm eating," Maomao said, picking up a snack. It was a bun filled with something pickled, a good way to make sure it would keep. It gave the snack a fairly powerful flavor, but when offset by the tea, it was perfect. She couldn't resist a little *Hrm?!* as she ate; it was really good.

"It's not sweet at all," the quack said, his face downcast. He'd taken his first bite expecting something sugary.

"Wow, that's good! It doesn't look like much, but this thing means business!" Lihaku said.

"It should be. It's a gift from the Moon Prince himself," the quack replied with a little snort like he was very proud of the fact—and here the snacks had technically been given to Maomao.

Maomao got more tea and looked out the little window. "I can see land," she said.

"Ooh! Can you?" The quack came over and squeezed in at the window.

"I heard we were supposed to make port by noon, but it looks like we're running a little late. Nothing unexpected, though," Lihaku said, checking a notebook to be sure. "We'll stay two nights, then leave the next morning. It's going to be busy."

"Which ship is the old fart on again?" Maomao asked.

"The old fart's on the lead vessel," said Lihaku, who knew exactly who Maomao was talking about.

He might try to come over here when the seasickness clears. Maomao scowled. If they wound up traveling on the same ship, even by accident, it was not going to be any fun.

“I don’t think you’ve got to worry about him,” Lihaku added. “Once the old fart disembarks, he’s got a banquet to attend. Got to do a little diplomacy, since we’ve gone to all the trouble of bringing along an Imperial family member.”

“Oh, I heard about the banquet. They’ll need a physician to attend, but since I’m not going, you don’t have to either, miss,” the quack said. Then he gave them a questioning look and said, “By the way, who’s this old fart?”

Maomao was distracted by another thought and didn’t answer him. “Diplomacy? Of course.”

“Sure. Want to have a look?” Lihaku pulled a simple map out from the notebook. It showed the coast along with the ship’s route. “We’re in a foreign land here, even if they do serve Li,” he said. Indeed, the map also included borders. “The princess of this country lived in the rear palace a number of years ago. I heard she was given away in marriage, though.”

Yes, that did sound familiar. Very familiar.

“Ah, Consort Fuyou,” the quack said. “Ahem, well, she’s not a consort anymore.”

“I remember her!” Maomao clapped her hands, her memory jogged by the quack’s interjection. It was the woman who had been seen dancing on the walls of the rear palace.

“Do you suppose Miss Fuyou will be there as well?” the quack asked.

“Hmm. I don’t think so,” Lihaku said. “She’s the one who was given to a soldier who’d distinguished himself with his service, right?”

“I think so. I’m not so sure it was the right thing, though—you can’t go giving away princesses to just anybody, even princesses of a vassal state,” the quack said.

If I had to guess, I’d say the authorities knew very well that there was more to it than that.

If the soldier was an old friend of Princess Fuyou, there was every chance that her family was as well. They might even have felt that if Fuyou wasn’t going to be able to fulfill her role at the rear palace, then the sooner she was out of

there, the better.

“The thing is, we can’t just send our best soldiers back to their home countries, either,” said Lihaku.

“Ah, yes, that makes sense.”

“A bride from the rear palace... If I was going to get a reward for distinguished service, I think I’d prefer cash,” Lihaku went on.

“I must say I’m surprised, my good Lihaku. You don’t seem like the money-loving type.”

“Oh, everyone’s got things they’d like to spend on.”

Like buying a high-priced courtesan out of her contract, right?

Maomao wondered what Lihaku’s current salary was. He seemed to be moving steadily up the ranks, but if he didn’t strike it rich pretty soon, Pairin was going to end up as a madam herself.

Maomao looked out the window again. *If we don’t make land until evening, I guess all the shops will be closed.*

They were in a country just to the south of Li, but they couldn’t expect to get off the ship the moment it docked. Judging by the height of the sun in the sky, they wouldn’t have much time for shopping. If they were lucky, there might be a night market or something—but places like that didn’t tend to sell the items Maomao was after.

They’re usually grilled treats, or skewers, or fruit.

Sure, those things were fun, but they weren’t what she wanted. She hoped they might have some free time the next day.

“Is someone coming?” the quack asked as they heard distinctive footsteps outside the office door. Shortly thereafter, there came a knock. “Please, come in,” said the quack, and in walked Chue.

“Hello! Pardon the interruption.”

“What’s the matter? Is the Moon Prince feeling poorly?”

“No. I have a favor to ask, if it’s all right.” She turned her small eyes on

Maomao. “We’ve been told they want to borrow a food taster for the banquet tonight.” Lihaku’s and the quack’s eyes joined hers.

I mean, I don’t exactly dislike that work. What she did dislike was being in the same place as the freak strategist. She was trying to devise some way out of the request when Chue took something out and showed it to her.

Maomao didn’t say anything. She couldn’t, however, keep her gaze from drifting to the mushroom Chue was holding. It appeared to be dried shiitake.

Hnngh...

Was this Jinshi’s clever little touch, or Suiren’s? Shiitake were a luxury even as mushrooms went, rarely found growing in the wild. En’en used them in her cooking every once in a while, but generally speaking, they were all but unobtainable for Maomao.

If I could cultivate them, think of the business I could do!

Under the name *xianggu*, they were also a medicine, used for treating anemia and high blood pressure. Maomao could use it for medicinal purposes, or she could rehydrate it and use it to add some extra flavor to her cooking. It could even be turned into a soup or stock.

Was this lady-in-waiting, Chue, teasing Maomao? After a quick glimpse, the mushroom disappeared from her hand—only to reappear in the other one. Then it disappeared again—only to reappear with a second, and then a third. It was like she was doing some sort of magic show.

“What do you say?” Chue asked, as polite as could be—but it was clear she wouldn’t be taking no for an answer. She had the good grace to look chagrined about it, but she would do what she had to do—or rather, make Maomao do what she had to make Maomao do. A very Jinshi-esque approach.

“All right,” Maomao said after a moment. “I understand.”

“This is for you, then!” Chue promptly produced a set of clothing, again seemingly out of thin air, and handed it to Maomao. “It’s for you to wear to the banquet. We’ll be making you up too!” Makeup tools, including a brush for rouge, appeared clutched between her fingers with a *snap!* like you might see from the villain of a stage play.

She's so characterful, I can hardly stand it. A simple descriptor like "Basen's older brother's wife" was never going to suffice to explain this person. *She stands out even with all the characters around her.*

Chue's looks might have been plain, but maybe she had bolstered her inner self to compensate. Maybe you just had to be mentally strong like that to survive with the powerful Ma women.

I think I'm going to get buried, here, Maomao thought, wondering if she should do something to up her individuality so as to keep pace. Then again, she thought, there was no reason to go out of her way to stand out. Ending all her sentences with some distinctive speech pattern would only grate before long.

"I'll pass on the makeup, thanks. Just the mushrooms, please."

"If you're sure," Chue said, a bit disappointed at Maomao's very ordinary reaction. Nonetheless, she handed over the shrooms.

Now they have me wondering exactly how many medicinal plants they brought along, she thought, staring at her prize.

When Maomao got off the ship, she was greeted by the reek of fish and the bustle of activity. It was already getting toward dusk and many of the shops were closed, but she could see a few people rushing from place to place trying to do evening shopping.

"Do be careful, now!" called the quack, waving a handkerchief from the ship.

"She'll be fine—she has me with her!" Lihaku called back.

Wasn't he supposed to be the quack's bodyguard? Maomao thought. Evidently she was also part of his mandate, as far as it went.

The clothes Chue had given her were of fine fabric, but they were unadorned and the color was plain. A reasonable compromise for a food taster. The smooth linen felt good on her skin, here in this humid land.

I'm going to wear this all the time starting tomorrow. Maomao had hardly packed any clothing other than underwear, so this was perfect timing. Plus the material would dry quickly after washing, very convenient. She had her medical

helper's uniform, but the thick cloth made it unsuitable for the muggy conditions.

Chue had taken several more opportunities to ask Maomao if she wouldn't like some makeup, but Maomao had consistently declined. Still, it would have been rude to show up completely barefaced, so she put on a dusting of whitening powder and a touch of rouge.

"They said there would be a carriage waiting," Lihaku said, looking around.

"Do you think that's it?" Maomao asked, pointing to a carriage stopped in front of one of the other ships.

"That one? It's already got passengers—I don't think there's room for us." People were piling in.

Women? The ladies-in-waiting of the important folk, she supposed. There seemed to be so many of them, though.

She and Lihaku were standing there, at a loss for what to do, when Chue popped up. "Hello!"

"Yikes! Where'd you come from?" Lihaku yelped. He hadn't noticed her approach at all. Usually her distinctive footsteps gave her away, but this time they hadn't heard anything.

"There's a carriage waiting over that way, all ready for you. Right this way, please."

"You're pretty light-footed, ma'am."

"Miss Chue is as nimble as she is plain. That's what makes her great! You can feel free to call me Miss Chue, by the way." She grinned, spun around, and struck a nonsensical pose.

"Well! Don't mind if I do, Miss Chue."

"Of course, Master Lihaku. Incidentally, Miss Chue is a married woman, so she must decline any advances."

"That's a shame. You're my type. If I'd met you before I ran into the woman I'm destined for, I would definitely have tried to make a move on you."

Which was another way of saying she wasn't his type.

"It's too bad for you. You don't meet many women this good," Chue said.

She just rolls with everything, doesn't she? All that cheerfulness—she was a kind of person, a *type*, that Maomao hadn't had around her to this point. Chue, meanwhile, had somehow pulled a string of tiny flags from the folds of her robe.

I'd like to make a sarcastic quip, but I don't even know where to start, Maomao thought, and then she got into the carriage, ignoring the somewhat lonely-looking Chue.

This country they were in, situated to the south of Li, was called Anan. It had been a vassal for more than a century; even the name "Anan" wasn't its original name, but had been foisted on it by an old emperor. The character *a* meant things like "second," "secondary," or "inferior." It was the same with Hokuaren, the collection of countries to Li's north. That name meant, quite literally, the collection—*ren*—of inferior—*a*—countries in the north—*hoku*.

Whoever gave them that name must have been awfully important, thought Maomao. And awfully full of themselves, to force upon another country such an openly degrading name.

I guess every other country probably has its own name for ours too.

The people from the west had fairer skin than the Linese and were often tall. Thus they sometimes derided the Linese as "monkeys." They were speaking the local language, and probably thought they couldn't be understood—little did they know that Maomao's smattering of the western tongue was just enough to tell her she was being insulted. If the madam had become aware of someone belittling her, she simply would have smiled and raised her prices.

I guess we each do it to the other.

If you didn't want people to insult you, don't insult them—but Maomao was less worried about being insulted and more worried about staying safe. Countries were really just very large groups of people, so relations between countries ultimately came down to a form of human relations.

When Maomao climbed out of the carriage, she was confronted with a huge palace. The vermillion lacquer was the same color as in Li, but the shape of the roof was subtly different. It was a little rounder, and lanterns hung from it, shining.

A pure-white path ran down the center of the palace, through a garden with windmill palms planted in neat pairs.

"This way, if you please," said a man who appeared to be a servant. Thankfully, he spoke the Li language, although with a slight accent.

Doesn't matter what I please. I'm just a food taster, Maomao thought. She even considered saying it out loud, but Chue was already trotting ahead. Guiding Maomao, in her own way. She still made those strange, chirping footsteps. Maomao and Lihaku followed obediently.

"You may use this room," the servant said, leading them to a door. Chue promptly ducked inside, taking a swift look around. She was used to this.

"Everything look all right?" Lihaku asked, joining her in the room and scanning the area.

"It's fine. Sometimes you get bugs or snakes here in the south," Chue replied.

"Snakes?" Maomao asked. Her eyes lit up and she gladly joined in the surveillance. "Are any of them venomous?"

"Yes! Some."

"Are there any scorpions here?"

"No, no scorpions."

After a careful search turned up no bugs and no snakes, both of them looked thoroughly disappointed.

"I understand about the young lady, but why do *you* look so unhappy, Miss Chue?" Lihaku interjected calmly, careful to use "Miss Chue's" preferred form of address.

"Well, wouldn't it be more interesting if there were something here?"

So Chue didn't just like to stand out herself—she was the kind who preferred

when things were lively. Maomao was starting to see how she had ended up in Gaoshun's character-laden household. At the same time, she was a little scared to contemplate how Chue and her mother-in-law must get along.

Chue started making tea. The carafe was evidently full of cold water, because it was sweating—a mark of respect toward the visitors. The cold water must have been fetched very recently.

"Don't worry. I can handle that," Maomao said. She figured Chue must be busy.

She reached for the tea supplies, but Chue said, "It's all right, I'm making some for myself too. I'm going to be with you this evening, Miss Maomao." She worked with such quick movements that there was nowhere for Maomao to join in. "Lady Suiren expressed her concerns about an unmarried young woman being alone with a man, even if he is her bodyguard, so here I am. I'll be watching you!"

Maomao and Lihaku looked at each other—and then, as one, they said, "Hah! I think not."

"And neither do I. But when the big lady gives you an order, you do it. Besides, you've met my mother-in-law. I think I handle her quite well, but it's exhausting to be with her every minute. You've also met my husband—do you think he ever sticks up for me? I can tell you I don't mind leaving him to her and getting myself a break every once in a while."

With that, Chue flopped on the couch and sipped her tea. She looked absolutely relaxed. She even grabbed one of the snacks, some kind of rice cracker, and started munching away on it.

Maomao and Lihaku decided there was no reason not to make themselves at home as well. Lihaku, seeming at a loss for anything else to do, found a post in the corner of the room and started doing pull-ups.

Muscle brain, Maomao thought. She sat in a chair and likewise started drinking. Meanwhile, she resumed reading the book Yao had given her.



“While we have a minute, I’d like to tell you how the banquet is going to go,” said Chue. She still had crumbs on her lips, but apparently she was in the mood to work.

“Please do,” said Maomao.

Chue leaned back, as comfortable as if she were in her own home, and said, “You and I are going to handle the food tasting, Miss Maomao. For the Moon Prince and Grand Commandant Kan. There’s a few other bigwigs around, but they’ve made their own arrangements.”

Chue was supposed to belong to the Ma clan, but apparently, to Maomao’s surprise, she did food tasting as well.

“I’ll take the Moon Prince, if I may,” Maomao said. Neither was, you know, great, but he was the lesser of two evils.

“Certainly. I think Grand Commandant Kan sounds much more interesting.”

Whatever her reasoning, Chue was going to handle the freak strategist, and for that Maomao was glad.

“For the most part, we’ll do the food tasting pretty much the same way it’s done at the garden parties and the like, so I don’t think I have to tell you how it works. This is a diplomatic occasion, though, so we’ll be hidden behind the seats while we work.”

“Makes sense.”

“Just try to feel things out from there.”

That’s kind of lackadaisical. Or, well, I guess more just undirected.

Granted, it would be easier than having to do everything by the book.

At first, she’d seemed more like En’en, but it was starting to feel like she had more in common with Maomao. If anything, Maomao was probably the more diligent about what was going on around her.

“That concludes the explanation! I’m sure they’ll come call us when it’s time, so we can all do whatever we want until then. Dismissed!”

“All right.”

“Sure thing!”

With that, they resumed doing whatever they wanted.

Chapter 18: Anan’s Banquet

Even when you spoke the same language, cultural differences could still be massive. Ananese banquets turned out to look very different from Linese ones.

Being situated to the south of Li, it was quite warm in Anan—hot, in fact. The sound of drums and flutes filled the air, a lighter and more cheerful noise than the music of Li. Carpets were laid out outdoors, and people sat on them—there were no chairs, but instead shiny cushions were supplied on which to sit. The food, likewise, was served not on a table, but atop a carpet, and instead of each person being served individually, everyone ate from large communal plates. The alcohol came in uniquely shaped jars, and was distinctive for its bright color.

The food was prepared by women, all of them scantily clad. They wore skirts that were hardly more than gaudily colored cloth wrapped around their waists, while their tops were short-sleeved. The sinuous alcohol jars almost seemed designed to complement the women’s shapely bodies.

There was a lot of black hair around, but not much of it was straight. Skin tones ranged from ivory to honey colored, and many of the people had rugged faces. Maomao recalled that Fuyou, the former middle consort, had had facial features very much like those of someone from Li. Perhaps she’d been sent to the rear palace exactly for that reason.

The soldiers who had been summoned to attend the banquet couldn’t stop ogling the alluring dancers and servers.

“They just walk different, don’t they!” Chue said to Maomao, swinging her hips demonstratively. No one saw her—the food tasters worked behind a curtain. “I think I’ll buy one of those outfits tomorrow and give my husband a little temptation.”

“Does he like that sort of thing?” Maomao asked, picturing Baryou, who looked like a pale, scrawny version of Basen. She had to admit, she couldn’t help but wonder what their married life was like.

“Not at all,” Chue said bluntly. Evidently, she just wanted to wear it.

Events like this in Anan were evidently less highly formal dinner than friendly banquet; still, the people important enough to need food tasters sat on a raised dais with a lovely low table and footed trays. Maomao's job was to take food off a tray one piece at a time and taste it to make sure there it wasn't poisoned. The curtain seemed intended to conceal the fact that she was doing this, but it also conveniently concealed that the food tasters were chatting together.

"There's a lot of undistinguished faces in the royal family here," Chue remarked impertinently. "I guess it's only natural. All those political marriages were bound to introduce a lot of foreign blood."

That answered Maomao's question—Fuyou looked relatively Linese, it seemed, because she had a fair amount of Li heritage. Such matches were a common way for two countries to forge a stronger bond, by making themselves family. Alternatively, a ruling country might seek to thin out the bloodline of a vassal state with such a tactic.

Everything looks peaceful here, but I'm starting to wonder if maybe Anan doesn't like Li very much.

She couldn't stop the thought. After all, the people of Anan knew that the very name Li had given their country was meant to mock them.

Maomao peeked out from a gap in the curtain at the person who seemed overwhelmingly the most likely target of any such resentment. Jinshi sat holding a cup of alcohol and smiling. From behind, she could only see his face in profile, but the scar in his right cheek looked redder and more prominent than usual, maybe because of the heat.

Jinshi had his diplomatic smile on. He had been poured a hefty serving of alcohol, but there was scant sign that he had drunk any of it. Maomao could see servers at the edge of her vision, hovering and keeping a sharp eye for any empty cups.

It wouldn't be easy to get close to him, huh?

They kept stealing glances at Jinshi, but he seemed to have an assigned server, and not just anyone could wander up to bring him something.

"Here you are," said a mild voice—it was Gaoshun, passing some food

through the gap in the curtain. It would eventually make its way to Jinshi, but only after Maomao had taken a taste.

This dish was glistening pork spareribs. Carefully, Maomao ran a silver chopstick along the surface. She checked that it didn't cloud over, then began taking out the bone and dividing the meat into several slices of roughly equal size that she then put on a small plate.

She sampled the food. It was a bit sweet, maybe stewed in fruit. It had the crisp, cool taste of tangerine.

Very good, she thought. She swallowed her sample and resisted the urge to take another bite. She was on the job now: it wouldn't look good to eat any more.

"Very good!" pronounced Chue, who was munching away. She was well beyond the point of tasting for poison.

"Miss Chue, what about your job?" Maomao asked.

"I checked, and there's nothing wrong with it! It's quite delicious." She put a hand to her cheek, but it was obvious that she was just eating at this point.

If only Hongniang or Sazen or Lahan's brother were here now, Maomao thought, thinking of the three best quippers she knew. It was too much work having to come up with sarcastic responses for *everything* Chue did all by herself. She would have appreciated some help.

Maomao passed the tasted plate on, indicating it had met with her approval. It was Gaoshun who actually took the plate and gave it to Jinshi.

By contrast, it was the freak strategist's aide who had to take Chue's plate, with next to nothing left on it, and give it to his superior. It was the same man who had been with the strategist when he'd poisoned himself with his own juice.

For a long, silent moment, the aide looked at the plate. Then he looked pleadingly at Chue.

"Go right ahead," she said. "There's no poison!" Some fat still glistened around her mouth.

The man was left with no choice but to take the beleaguered dish to the strategist. When the next course arrived, it was more spareribs.

“A girl would like a little variety!” Chue said with a sigh, polishing up a new pair of silver chopsticks.

Something different came to Maomao—three things at once, in fact. “Seems like a lot,” she said to Gaoshun, who had brought the plate. She hadn’t quite meant to let the thought out her mouth, but it managed anyway.

Gaoshun’s brow furrowed. “It’s from the honored guest over there,” he said, sounding like he wasn’t quite speaking of his own free will. From the other side of the curtain, the freak strategist waved.

“Help yourself, Miss Chue,” Maomao said.

“Well! Don’t mind if I do.” Chue dug in—er, started tasting it for poison—without a second invitation.

The freak strategist might be let down, but Maomao’s job was to taste food to see if there was poison in it, not to eat other things until she got full.

This might be a fancy dinner, but Jinshi was really here to conduct diplomacy. He had on his smoothest smile and was talking and laughing. He ate only a modest excuse for a meal, so Maomao didn’t have that much to do.

If Jinshi had been a woman, his looks might have brought a country to its knees—and when it came to diplomacy, they were a weapon he could wield to his advantage.

If nothing else, he knows how to handle people. Even if the shine did come off pretty quickly when you got into his inner circle.

The other VIP was doing substantially less work. The freak strategist picked at Chue’s leftovers, swigging down not alcohol, but juice. Someone appeared to be trying to talk to him, but he didn’t look interested. He kept taking little glances back to try to catch a glimpse of Maomao.

“Maybe it’s not my place, but don’t you think you could try to be a *little* nicer to him?” Chue asked around a mouthful of chicken.

“Do you know what will happen if I give him an inch?” Maomao veritably spat.

Chue tilted her head back and closed her eyes as if she was trying to imagine. “Something very interesting, I suspect.” She sounded like she enjoyed the prospect—well, she wouldn’t be the one in the middle of it.

I wish this dinner would hurry up and end. Maomao sighed and picked up the next bit of food.

For all its trials and tribulations, the dinner did eventually conclude.

I’m pretty sure there was nothing funny in any of that, Maomao thought. As the food taster, it was also part of her job to keep an eye on the state of her health after the meal. A slow-acting toxin could take anywhere from several hours to several days to show up. She still had room in her stomach, but she wanted to wait and see how she felt for a while before she had anything else to eat.

“Phew! I couldn’t eat another bite!” Chue said, rubbing her bulging belly. To the bitter end, she’d more enjoyed than sampled the strategist’s food.

Now all they had to do was go back to their rooms for the night. They had permission to go shopping the next day, and Maomao was actually sort of looking forward to it.

So the evening of the banquet ended without incident. Yes, *that* night was quiet...

Chapter 19: The Quack Vanishes

Sunlight pried at Maomao's eyelids, and she heard birds twittering outside.

"Hm... Mmm..."

She slowly opened her eyes and gave a great stretch. The bed was soft and smelled lovely, and since they were on land, it didn't even rock. She felt like she'd had her first deep sleep in a long time.

This is Anan, right? she thought, trying to recall where they were through the haze of a freshly awakened brain.

When she got out of bed, she found breakfast, consisting of congee and a medley of relatively sumptuous dishes on the table. She also saw that Chue was already eating.

"You're prompt," she remarked.

"Yep. Miss Chue is an early riser—otherwise her mother-in-law gets mad. Come on, let's have breakfast!" She continued stuffing food into her face. The richness of the dishes suggested they were leftovers from last night's banquet—except Maomao didn't recognize any of them. Apparently, guests were guests, and were not to be served leftovers.

"I don't need much," Maomao said, putting some vinegar on the porridge and starting to eat. On the surface, it looked like a fairly ordinary Li-style breakfast, but the unmistakable tang of fish sauce in the vinegar reminded her that she was in another country.

Notwithstanding the impossibility of keeping up with the necessary quips, Maomao didn't have to be on any kind of special behavior around Chue, so she didn't worry about eating daintily. When she had finished breakfast and was brushing her teeth, the door flew open with a bang.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Young lady!" said Maomao's bodyguard, Lihaku. He looked mildly distressed. "I was informed a few minutes ago that that friendly old doctor isn't on the

ship.”

“What?”

Why would the quack doctor be missing?

Did someone kidnap him?

The whole reason the quack had been brought along was to be a body double for Luomen. Lihaku was supposed to be the quack’s bodyguard as well, but at the moment he was with Maomao. There were other soldiers stationed on the ship, though, and abducting the quack shouldn’t have been an easy task.

“I don’t understand what you mean. I mean... *Why*?”

Maomao held her head in her hands; Chue looked very intrigued.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” said Lihaku. “I’m going to go back to the ship and see what’s happening. What about you, miss?”

“What *about* me?” Maomao said. She couldn’t just walk around on her own out here. Someone would need to know where she was going...

“All right, I’ve heard the story,” said, of all people, Chue. “This smells like a mystery! Don’t you worry—I already went ahead and got permission.” She winked at them, her teeth sparkling.

“How could you *already go ahead* and do that? We just found out about this,” said Maomao, sadly picking the most ordinary and least interesting response. She knew this might be a good time for an amusing comeback, but she had the feeling that if she started dealing them out, they’d never stop, so she let the opportunity pass.

“Simple. They told me that if you went outside, Mister Lihaku and I could go with you. And since I figured you’d have nothing but time to kill today, I went ahead and got permission for you to go out. If you just stayed here all day, Miss Chue would have to stay with you, and then we would miss the chance to see Anan, and I would have to sit here fretting about whether my mother-in-law might drop in for a visit.”

In other words, she had been ready and eager to make herself scarce all along.

Hey, if they'll let me go, I might as well.

Chue's eagerness turned out to be rather helpful.

"If it's all right, I think I'll start by going back to the ship," Maomao said, looking to Lihaku for confirmation.

"Sure. I thought you would, miss; that's why I told you. As far as I'm concerned, there's no problem, but..." He looked away.

"But what?"

"Er, well, when I was talking with the messenger, I was spotted by...someone I would rather not have been spotted by."

"Someone you would rather..."

With mounting dread, Maomao looked toward the entrance to the room. Chue pattered over to the door and opened it.

"Yikes!" said an eavesdropping monocled freak.

"Good morning, sir," Miss Chue said, although her greeting was purely for form's sake.

"Good morning! Maomaoooo! What lovely weather we're having, eh?"

She didn't say a word, only gave him her most scathing possible look.

"So! I hear you're going out! Maybe Daddy should come with you!"

"Please don't." Maomao's expression was like ice, but it failed to dampen the freak strategist's spirits.

"All those stores! Oh, what shall I buy you? Some clothes? A hair ornament? Oh! Or maybe you'd like some nice medicine!"

He was, as ever, not listening to her.

"Miss Maomao," Chue said, nudging her. "It doesn't look like we can keep him from coming with us. Why not give in and let the nice wallet come along?"

"Wallet? I think we'd be lucky if he had two coins on him to rub together." Maomao had the distinct impression that it was typically Lahan or the like who handled any money matters for the strategist.

“Well, then I’ll go grab the aide. He *must* have the purse.” With that, Lihaku was off to go call the man.

“Master Lihaku! Wait!” Maomao called after him.

“Maomaaaooooo! Ooh, I hope they have lots of medicines! We have to find a souvenir for my honored uncle too.” The fox eyes arched excitedly.

“The purse! We need money. It’ll cost time to leave him here,” Chue said. “If the master physician might be in trouble, we haven’t a moment to lose. Also, I want a hair stick with Ananese coral.”

“You’re always ready to mooch, aren’t you, Miss Chue?”

Chue was a very friendly person, let it be said.

“I have to be! My husband’s income isn’t stable enough for anything else. By the time we’d gotten married and even had a child, he was still studying for the civil service exams. Once he passed them, I thought we were set, but then he didn’t get along with his colleagues and retired. At least his connections finally got him a new job. But it all meant Miss Chue had to go to work almost as soon as the baby was born.”

Chue waved a string of small flags as she spoke. She certainly didn’t *look* like someone who had it as rough as all that, but, well, who knew?

“Incidentally, ever since my husband got his new job, I’ve been under pressure to pop out the next kid. Sure, goes the logic, maybe my brother-in-law will end up head of the family, but who knows if he’ll produce a child? I think the big lady’s just bullying her daughter-in-law.”

“I can’t say I don’t see her point.”

If Basen really was guaranteed to inherit, then it was understandable to worry about heirs given his distinctly *shy* attitude toward women.

Even things with former consort Lishu could be over if he’s not careful how he goes about it. Maomao thought of the luckless princess who had gone to a nunnery the year before.

What was Basen doing on that separate overland route?

Maomao and Chue’s conversation concluded when Lihaku returned. “All

right! I got him!” he shouted. He had the purse—er, the freak strategist’s aide—with him.

When they got back to the ship, they found it awfully quiet. Maybe everyone had gone out. The sailors were making sure everything was shipshape, while the cleaners, a group of middle-aged women dressed in men’s clothing, removed trash from the rooms, swept the deck, and industriously polished every surface on the ship. The cleaners also made the travelers’ meals, and most of them seemed to be family members of the sailors.

“Maomao! Let’s not waste too much time doing whatever we have to do here—we should go shopping!”

An obnoxious old man was jabbering about something, but Maomao ignored him. The handful of soldiers remaining on board scurried away the moment they saw the strategist, eager not to be caught up in whatever he was doing.

“Here,” said one of the soldiers who’d been appointed to guard the quack doctor—the man who had informed Lihaku of his disappearance.

“What in the world were you doing?” asked Lihaku, who seemed to know the man, slapping him on the back.

“I—I’m sorry. We only took our eyes off him for a moment, while we were changing the guard, and he vanished. Then we tried to get into the medical office...”

Maomao tried the office door, but it wouldn’t open. “It’s locked,” she observed.

With all the medicines inside, the door had to lock to keep anyone from waltzing in and helping themselves to the supplies. The office was always kept locked when there was no one there.

“I tried to peek in, but I didn’t see anyone there, so when the physician didn’t show any sign of coming back, I thought I should tell you.” The soldier bowed his head.

“All right, I see. You said you were changing the guard. Go get the guy who was on duty before you.”

“Yes sir!” The soldier rushed off.

“A locked room! This smells like a mystery,” Chue announced with glee.

“Where’d the old guy go?” Lihaku mused.

“If we’re lucky, he just fell asleep somewhere,” said Maomao. She had a backup key, so she opened the door—but the quack doctor was not in the room. “Nothing too unusual here,” she said. If there was anything out of the ordinary, it was that the quack’s sleepwear lay on the bed in a heap.

“Not a very neat guy, I take it,” Lihaku said.

“I don’t know. That’s not what he normally does with his pajamas.”

He might toss them aside for a moment, but he would be sure to fold them later. He might be incompetent, but he wasn’t uncivilized.

Out of the corner of her vision, Maomao saw the freak strategist reaching for the medicine cabinet, so she slapped his hand away. She would have sworn he looked happy about it—but it made her feel ill, so she ignored it. The aide bowed his head repeatedly toward her in apology.

“If I were the quack, and I was in a hurry...” Maomao muttered. She tried to picture what he would do once he had gotten up in the morning and changed his clothes. They’d spent the last several days living their lives with only a curtain between them, so she had a pretty good idea of what made him tick.

“He probably went to the bathroom,” she said.

The bathroom was at the prow of the ship. A eunuch’s missing equipment made the need to urinate more frequent. It was possible quack had woken up and badly needed to go to the toilet, so he’d sloughed off his sleepwear in a rush. Last night, there had been classy food aboardships as well as on land, and there was a good chance alcohol had been served. It was impressive that the quack had even remembered to lock the door in his hungover haze.

“I think we should try the bathroom,” said Maomao. They took the quickest route from the office to the head, passing one of the cleaning ladies as they went. She was busily working near the stove, trying to get out some stubborn stain, maybe oil that had jumped out of a pot or pan.

They eventually reached the toilet at the ship's prow, but there was no quack there.

"We're pretty sure he didn't fall in, right?" Lihaku said, and he was mostly joking—but it was true that the toilet was a hole that simply let waste fall directly into the sea.

"No, he didn't. With his waistline, he would just get stuck," said Chue.

Maomao didn't say anything, but crossed her arms and cocked her head. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the old fart snacking on some dried fruit, but she decided to ignore him. His aide was offering him some tea in a bamboo tube.

"What's the matter, Miss Maomao?"

"I was just thinking... The master physician might get stuck, but what about something else? Something that wouldn't?"

"Such as?"

Maomao took the key to the medical office out of the folds of her robes. "What if he was sleepy and in a hurry, and dropped this? Seems like a possibility, doesn't it?"

"Yikes!" was Chue's reaction.

"Y'know, with that guy, I could just see it," said Lihaku. Neither of them contradicted Maomao.

Without the key, the quack wouldn't be able to get back into the office.

"Excuse me," Maomao said to one of the sailors.

"Yeah? What?"

"You didn't happen to see the master physician around the toilet this morning, did you? Maybe in a tizzy?"

The sailor looked at her, confused, then called over some of his mates. One of them clapped his hands. "I d'nno if it was your physician or not, but I did see a fat little man in an awful hurry. He was getting in the way of cleaning the deck, so I told him to go somewhere else."

“Do you know where he went?”

“Hrm... Well, he was going to be in the way of cleaning anywhere belowdecks, so I told him he could be on deck, just once I was done swabbing.” The sailor pointed to the wharf. On it there was a wooden chest, and on that Maomao could easily picture a quack doctor, sitting and looking quite dejected.

“Even if he thought of trying to get in touch with you to borrow your key, miss, most of the soldiers were away,” said Lihaku. The timid quack would have had a hard time stopping one of the obviously busy sailors to ask a favor—and his qualms would only have been compounded by the guilt of having lost the key in the first place.

Maomao sat down on the chest where she imagined the quack doctor had sat. Sailors and cleaning people bustled around the pier. As Maomao sat there, just looking around, several of them gave her dirty looks: she was definitely in the way.

I can see why the soldiers all left.

It would be awfully awkward, being on the ship at that moment. No doubt the men standing guard in the halls had been the subjects of many a reproving glare from the cleaners, who saw them as mere obstacles. No wonder the guard hadn’t waited for his relief to arrive before leaving his post.

“Where could he have gone?” Maomao mumbled.

As she sat there, staring into the distance, one of the cleaners, a plump middle-aged woman, bustled right up to her and her companions and said, “You wouldn’t happen to be the extra help, would you?”

“No. Do we look like it?”

If it had been just Maomao and Chue, it might have made sense, but Lihaku was standing right there. Not to mention the old fart and his aide—the former of whom had started climbing up the mast, the latter of whom had followed, trying to stop him, and both of whom had been dragged down by the sailors the moment they were spotted.

“I can’t say you do. I was just hoping for a few more pairs of hands. The lady we sent to do the shopping hasn’t come back in all this time and I’m at the end

of my rope. If you're not busy, maybe you could take a message for me?"

The lady they sent to do the shopping?

Maomao pictured the quack as he must have looked most recently: changed out of his sleepwear but not into his physician's uniform. A clean-shaven eunuch. Eunuchs often looked somewhat gender-neutral, so it was possible someone could have mistaken him for a middle-aged woman. It wouldn't have helped that the cleaners wore men's clothes for ease of movement.

"Pardon me, but could you describe the person you sent to go shopping?" Maomao said.

"Well, she was a helper sent over from one of the other ships. They told me they couldn't spare anyone too young, but even so—what a piece of work they came up with! Just sitting there, no idea what she should be doing. So I gave her this errand, and now here we are. It's been more than two hours and she's still not back!" The woman spread her hands in frustration.

"Hullooooo!" came a woman's shout from the pier. "The help's here! What do you need us to do?"

Maomao, her companions, and the cleaner all looked at the woman coming down the jetty toward them.

"It looks like your helper has arrived," Maomao said.

"Yes, well... But then...who did I send shopping?"

The quack spent most of his time cooped up in the medical office, so the woman hadn't recognized him.

Maomao and the others shook their heads at each other. "What did you ask 'her' to buy?"

"Well, soap. Cheap bar soap is easy to get at Anan's port. Cheap liquid soap always smells. No one likes it on a ship."

Bar soap wasn't much used in Li.

"Do you know where they sell it?"

"Probably one of the stalls around town. Would you be so kind as to go and

get some?”

“All right,” Maomao said. She and the others now knew where they had to go next.

“Ooh, those clothes look nice! Maybe I should buy them.”

“Ah, not bad, not bad. This hair stick would look lovely on you, Maomao!”

“How’s the juice at that shop? Bit of a strange color, but I think it looks drinkable.”

The freak strategist had been going on going on like this ever since they’d gotten to the marketplace. Incidentally, all of his hair stick and clothing choices were at least a thousand years ahead of their time, and the juice looked like it would do a number on your stomach. Maomao repeatedly stopped his aide from producing the purse.

“My. He doesn’t slow down, does he, Miss Maomao?” Chue, who seemed totally unfazed by the strategist’s antics, had several skewers of grilled bird meat in her hand. It wasn’t chicken—it was leaner and bonier. Probably a sparrow or some other pest bird from the fields.

I thought orders had gone out not to catch sparrows for the time being, Maomao thought. It was one of Jinshi’s attempts to forestall the swarm of locusts. Maybe Anan wasn’t subject to the command, even if it was a vassal state.

“Are you sure that’s not cannibalism?” Maomao asked.

“It tastes good, and that’s what counts! Here, have a bite.”

“Thanks.”

Chue offered Maomao one of the skewers, and she gladly took it. The meat was tough, but some people liked it this way.

“Excellent. Now, my good aide, I’ll be needing another skewer.” Chue stuck out her hand and the aide, looking defeated, dropped a few coins into it. It looked like the most natural thing in the world.

She’s not even paying for it!

Chue was definitely too shrewd for her own good, or at least for everyone else's. The freak strategist was munching on fruit he'd skewered on a chopstick.

Maomao, taking a bite off her own skewer, looked around for anywhere selling soap.

"Bar soap isn't cheap. Should they really be using it to clean the ovens?" Lihaku asked. He was right—even Maomao and the others had no better than ash, or maybe liquid soap, when they washed. Bar soap wasn't very familiar in Li and wasn't widely sold.

"I don't think it's the same in Anan." Maomao patted a nearby tree. It looked similar to a windmill palm, but it lacked the bushy trunk. Large berries grew high overhead. "This is a palm tree," she said. She'd only seen them in pictures in books, but this one was also known as the betel nut palm. The nuts could be chewed like tobacco, or ground into a powder to clean the teeth, and also to flush worms out of the body.

The plant they were looking at just then, however, was a little different.

"Some kinds of palm are used for their fruits or berries, and others are used for their oil. Some palms have a berry that's a lot like a red date. The oil palm is used to make oil, just like the name implies, and if you mix the oil with seaweed ash, you can make soap."

She didn't know, though, how it was hardened into shape—by reducing it, drying it, or perhaps by mixing in another ingredient.

Maomao looked at the shops. Just by the palm trees was one selling their berries, large fruit in which the vendor put a hole and inserted a straw.

"One please...er, for each of us," said the considerate aide, purchasing enough of the fruit for all of them. Maomao decided to accept his hospitality, since they were here. What came through the straw was both somewhat sweet and somewhat salty.

"Wish this were a bit sweeter. Sugar! Don't you have any sugar?" The insatiably sweet-toothed old fart was disappointed.

"I'm fond of the salty stuff myself," said Lihaku. At that, the aide offered him a leaf piled with something white.

“The shopkeeper says this is on the house. Palm meat, he claims.”

It was pale, translucent stuff doused in fish sauce. Maomao and Lihaku both took a piece and tasted it.

“It’s a bit like raw squid,” Maomao remarked. She couldn’t pretend she didn’t like the al dente quality—it would be a good side dish with some wine.

“Hmm. Not quite my thing. It’s a bit...rubbery.” Lihaku wasn’t as enamored. Oh well. That meant more for Maomao and Chue.

“Excuse me. Do you know where we might find a soap vendor?” Maomao asked the palm seller.

“Soap vendor? Bit farther in. He sets up right next to the fried food places a lot of the time. There’s a square just ahead. He’s often there,” came a reply colored with a distinct Ananese accent. Apparently the shopkeeper was willing to indulge customers who had spent some money. He added, “You all are Linese, yeah? Your stout friend there should keep you safe, I think—but be careful.”

“Careful of what?” Lihaku asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Lot of Linese around these days. Seems you’re not like most of them, but there are plenty who like to make fun of us. Last night, there was even a fight at the bar. Taxes have gone up, see, and there’s talk that our princess got chased out of the rear palace because they didn’t like her enough. Just try not to give anyone an excuse, that’s all I’m saying.”

Taxes had been raised as a protective measure against locusts. Meanwhile, the princess “chased out” of the rear palace must have been Fuyou, who left after causing a scare about a ghost.

They’re not exactly wrong. Maomao wanted to push back, but it was true: some of the Linese visitors had a bad attitude. There was a lot of pent-up frustration from the unaccustomed ship travel, not to mention some people were convinced that they were suffering a punitive demotion.

“Huh,” said Lihaku, and Maomao saw a new look come into his eyes. “We’d better find that old doctor fast, then.” The flighty quack would make an easy target all by himself.

Maomao and the others finished their drinks and threw the shells away, then headed deeper into the market as the shopkeeper had suggested.

“Boy, something smells really sweet,” Lihaku said.

“And really oily,” said Maomao.

The air seemed thick. The square itself was paved with flagstones, and something that looked like a mausoleum stood in the center. Trees lined the area. Some of them were even fruit trees, sprouting small mangoes. There might even be some lychees among the plant life, but it was probably the wrong season for them.

The shops seemed calculated to catch the interest of passersby. Maomao felt like she would be overpowered by the sweet smell, but there were also places selling incense, candles, and cards. Available snacks included sesame dumplings and fried bread, among others. The freak strategist bought some immediately, and just as quickly Chue started sponging off him. The aide was kept very busy.

“Where’s the soap?” Maomao muttered. She looked around until she spotted a place with what looked like white bricks piled up at the stall. She trotted over, to be greeted by a scowl from the shopkeeper.

“You Linese?” he demanded as they walked up. His accent was less noticeable than that of the palm seller.

“Who cares what I am? I’m a customer. I want to buy some soap. How much?” Lihaku said.

“Doesn’t matter, because I don’t have any to sell you. Try somewhere else.” The shopkeeper pointedly turned away.

“Well, that’s a problem. Want to tell me why you won’t sell to me?” It was easy to assume that Lihaku must literally have muscles for brains, but he was making a wise choice here. Maomao, seeing that she couldn’t be of help, took a step back and watched.

They could see the gears turning in the shopkeeper’s head. Lihaku simply stood with an easy smile on his face.

“If you want to buy soap, go directly to where they make it. We *need* soap for

our daily lives around here. What are we supposed to do when you buy up all our stock just because of the novelty of it? The price of materials has gone up recently. When I sell out of this batch, I'm going to have to raise my prices."

It turned out even a surly shopkeeper had a story. He should have just said so upfront. Why did bitter people always have to take so long getting to the point? He would make the same money no matter who he sold to, but he was trying to keep his price low for the locals. There were some residential areas nearby: this was a perfect place for them to come buy their soap.

"Materials are more expensive?" Lihaku asked. "You mean because the Linese are buying everything?"

"No—because the materials we had burned up. There was a fire."

A major ingredient in soap was oil—practically made for burning.

"I see... Well, thanks. The place that makes the soap, is it farther along here?" Lihaku asked with his friendliest smile. The shopkeeper made a point of looking put-upon, but he pointed the way nonetheless.

"Walk straight that way and look for the signs of the fire. There's a little hut there where they're working on more soap. There'll be plenty of craftspeople around, I'm sure you can ask one of them. I warn you, though, they're not as nice as I am."

"All right, well, we appreciate it. And since you're so nice, maybe you could tell me one more thing. Did an older guy, a Linese like us, happen to come by earlier today trying to buy soap?"

"An older guy? Wait... You mean the old lady? Pudgy, with kind of droopy eyebrows?"

"Yeah, that's him! He's no old lady, though. Where'd he go?"

"He asked the same questions as you lot, and I gave him the same answer. He went toward the soap makers'. Would've been about half an hour ago by now."

"Great! You've been such a big help. We really appreciate it." Lihaku shook the man's hand, and Maomao offered a bow. By that point, the strategist had purchased all of the snacks at the snack stall, and Chue was busy mooching off

him. At least he was relatively calm while he was eating.

Maomao couldn't help being impressed by Chue's adaptability. She felt bad for the aide, though, who had to be in about three places at once.

"Maomaaaoooo! Look! Fried bread!" The freak strategist stuck the bread out at her, trying to stuff it straight into her mouth, but she dodged him. Chue moved to intercept and got the mouthful instead.

"Delicious!" she said, wiping her lips as if this were nothing out of the ordinary. Just what kind of stomach was she packing?

After a bit of walking in the direction the soap seller had indicated, the group found themselves among a cluster of houses. Windmill palms grew here and there in lieu of other garden plants.

"Do these trees produce any kind of fruit, I wonder?" Chue asked, eyeing them closely.

"They do, and it can be used in medicine, but no one seems to think it tastes very good," Maomao said.

"Why are they here, then?"

"I think maybe because they can also be used to make brooms, ropes, that sort of thing. The leaves have medicinal properties too."

The palms were quite versatile, in fact, but Chue seemed uninterested in anything that wasn't edible.

"Please stop, Master Lakan!" said the aide, who looked like he was at the end of his rope. If this was what he had to deal with every day, Maomao hoped he kept some stomach medicine on hand.

"Think that's it?" Chue asked when she spotted a half-burned building. There was some sort of crowd near it. Maomao hurried over, her bad feeling growing. When she got there, she spotted a very familiar back.

"I'm telling you, it wasn't me!" the back's owner pleaded. It was the quack doctor, practically in tears. He was surrounded by several men, one of whom had him by the collar.

"Master Physician!" Maomao exclaimed, running up. The quack, snotty nose

and all, grabbed hold of her. She tried to peel him off—he wasn't going to make it any easier to talk to anyone—but that was when the freak strategist broke in.

"What are you doing to my little girl?!" demanded the old fart, who still had sugar around his mouth.

"My! Is this man your father, young lady?" the quack asked. The fact that, in spite of his obvious fear, he still sounded somehow unconcerned was, well, just him.

"He's a total stranger," Maomao replied promptly.

"Who is this person? Tell me his name!" Lakan demanded.

"I could, but you would never remember it, Master Lakan," his aide said. The aide did, however, imitate Lakan in staring at the quack. "You're the master physician, aren't you?"

"Er, ahem, yes, that's, er, that's right," said the quack. He wiped away the worst of the snot with a handkerchief, but he still looked pretty pathetic.

"Oi, you bunch! You know this guy?" said one of the men. He had a thick accent, filthy clothes, and comparatively dark skin. He was young, and obviously his blood was all in his head. By his feet was a jar full of cloudy oil.

The quack tried to hide behind Maomao, so she found herself out in front by default—until the freak strategist stepped in front of her protectively.

Knock it off. You're not going to do anyone any good here.

She'd hardly had the thought when Lihaku stepped in front of the strategist, that ingratiating smile on his face again. "That's right, this old guy is with us. Something seem to be the matter?" He was their bodyguard, and he was doing his job. He might be a big mutt, but he made a decent guard dog. The Ananese men started muttering among themselves.

"Wh-What, can't you see? Just look!" The dark-skinned man pointed at the wall. The scorched bricks were drenched with water, and on the ground was a wooden chest that appeared to be the source of the fire. "The fire came from there, and the old guy was right next to it. Meaning he started the fire! He must've started the one the other day too!"

“N-No! I didn’t! I just wanted to buy soap!” the quack moaned.

“I’ve seen him, lurking around here! I know this is all your fault!”

“Okay, just calm down. I hear what you’re saying, but I want you to get our side of the story too,” Lihaku said. He never raised his voice, but he gave the man a look like a large dog putting a puppy in its place. Five men surrounded the quack doctor, all of them vigorous and muscular—but not as well-built as Lihaku. The angry man considered shooting back, but fell silent under Lihaku’s gaze.

Maomao watched the man from behind her bodyguard. Between their dirty outfits, the jar of oil, and the fact that they were standing in front of a soapmakers’ shop, she suspected that they were soap makers. She could see the damp patch on the blackened wall and smell the scorched odor in the air. It seemed likely that after the first blaze had been put out, another, smaller one had started.

“First things first. I don’t know about this fire of yours, but this guy only came to Anan last night. Until then, he was rocking across the sea on a boat. That much, I can tell you for certain. You follow?”

That set them talking.

“Yeah, okay. But that box was set on fire, and *he* was the only guy around. What’s your excuse for that, huh?”

“Set on fire?” Lihaku looked at the quack for confirmation.

“N-No! Nooo! It caught fire on its own, I tell you! I didn’t do anything!”

“Liar! How’d it light itself, then?”

“Yeah!” said one of the other men.

“It couldn’t have just burst into flames by itself!” added a third.

“All right, all right, I hear you. Stay calm,” Lihaku said.

Maomao pushed past the quack and peered at the blackened box. There appeared to be fibers of some kind inside, along with grains of something, although both were thoroughly charred.

“Maomao! That’s filthy. Why don’t we get something nice from the snack stall

and head on back?”

The freak strategist was the only one with no idea what they were doing there.

“Imagine what it’ll do to our diets if we only eat sweets. I think another savory skewer on the way back would be just the thing. Chicken wouldn’t go amiss, but some shrimp could also be really good.”

The strategist wasn’t the only eccentric character in attendance—there was another who thought only of eating.

“Y-You too, Miss Chue?!” wailed the quack.

“Well, we can’t leave empty-handed. Let’s buy some soap and hurry back,” said Maomao.

“Oi! You’re the ones who aren’t listening!” said the soapmaker, incensed.

“We are listening. In short, if we can prove that this man didn’t start your fire, you’ll let him go, yes?” Maomao said, looking at the man still holding the quack by the collar.

“Yeah, sure. But you better be real convincing.”

“Very well. If I can’t answer to your satisfaction, you’ll receive ample compensation. Just get it from the old fart over there.”

“L-Lady Maomao!” The strategist’s (that is, the old fart’s) aide looked like he was going to cry.

The craftsmen started muttering amongst themselves again. The huddle soon finished.

“All right. Get ready to pay up.”

“Of course. But if he’s innocent, you’ll sell us soap at the market price.”

“Done.”

“Very well.” Maomao looked at the burned box. “Were you using this for garbage?” She turned the box over. The sopping fibers were from the bark of the windmill palm. Some small, round things also rolled out.

“’Sright.”

“Is the bark of the windmill palm part of the soap-production process?”

“No. We make scrub brushes from the palms. Soap’s not the only thing we make here.”

Soap and scrub brushes. Two products that might well be used together—reasonable enough to manufacture them in the same place.

“So these blackened things, these are fried scraps?”

“Yeah.”

Fried scraps—that is, literally, leftovers from something being fried. Making soap required a great deal of oil, and no matter how abundant resources might be, they would have to find a way to keep expenses down if they were to sell it at a price people would accept for a daily consumable. What were they to do?

“Were you using used oil in the soap?”

Plenty of establishments in town sold fried food. Lots of places to get supplies.

“Not exclusively. What would that have to do with anything, anyway?”

“I see. And you were throwing away the batter scraps here?”

“Yeah.”

Maomao looked hard at the men, then glanced at the sun to check its position. It wasn’t yet high noon.

It’s not very nice of me, but maybe I can stretch the truth here.

“These fried bits, you filter them out of the oil?”

“See for yourself. Right over there.” The craftsman pointed toward a pot brimming with oil. Beside it was a wire strainer with a cloth over it.

“And you do this while the oil is still hot?”

Cold oil was harder to strain . The strainer was probably made of metal wire to allow the hot oil to flow through it. *I suppose the cloth is cotton.*

“That’s right. We go around and collect it while it’s still hot. These days it’s a bit of a race—other soap makers are also coming to this area to get oil.”

Maomao nodded and looked into the strainer. There weren't too many scraps in it.

"So you throw away any scraps?" she asked.

"Sometimes we eat them—but there's too much for us to eat everything."

"Enough to fill this strainer?"

"Sometimes. But we throw 'em out before it gets full."

Maomao raised an eyebrow and looked at the burned-out trash bin. "It seems to me that your trash box is quite a ways away. You didn't move it, did you?"

The man paused. "Yeah, we have another receptacle here. What about it?" He went over to a large jar near the strainer and looked into it. "Hey, who emptied this?"

Maomao looked back to the workers, who had started mumbling again.

"Do you think you can help me, young lady?!" the quack pleaded, looking at her with a hangdog expression. Maomao braced herself, afraid that the freak strategist would jump in again, but he didn't do anything. Surprised, she looked over to find him watching the soap makers. Occasionally he would creep very close, looking intently at them, inevitably to be rebuffed with a contemptuous look. His aide scurried back and forth apologizing. It couldn't have been easy to be him.

Why's he looking so close? He can't tell one face from another. The strategist was oblivious to people's faces, which was one reason why he treated everyone but his own family so indifferently. It made Maomao wonder why he was staring at these people, but she couldn't bring herself to ask. *The question is, what do I do?*

She had most of what she needed to prove the quack's innocence, but her explanation would be bolstered if she got one thing ready in advance.

"Miss Chue! Miss Chue!"

"Miss Maomao! Miss Maomao! What do you need?"

Maomao whispered to Chue. Chue's small eyes went very wide; then she said "Roger!" and set off running. It would be a while before she was back. Maomao

would have to watch the men's moods and judge her moment.

"Excuse me. I think I can explain how the fire started. If you would come over here?" she said to the chattering craftsmen.

"Yeah? Can't wait to hear it."

"Hope you've got a good story."

"I believe I do. The fire wasn't set; it started naturally. Therefore, this man is innocent." Maomao patted the quack on the shoulder.

"Y-Young lady!" the quack looked at her, quaking violently.

"Is something the matter, Master Physician?" she asked.

"They'll never just take your word for it! Look how they're glaring at us!" The men were indeed fixing the visitors with scary looks.

"Yes, thank you. I understand. I don't suppose that you all would take my word that the fire started naturally?"

"Damn right we wouldn't. How'd this fire start? And don't bullshit us just because you don't want to pay!"

"It's no such thing, I promise you. All those cast-off fried scraps—those are the source of your fire." Maomao plucked some of the leftover scraps out of the strainer. "You have a lot of fried bits and pieces in one place. They retain heat inside them, and can potentially catch fire. As will, for example, oil-soaked rags that are with them."

"Catch fire? On their own? I've never heard anything so stupid."

"It can happen. Look."

Chue came trotting back, a large pot almost overflowing with fried scraps in her arms. "Miss Maomao, I got it!"

"Thank you very much, Miss Chue."

Maomao had sent Chue to collect fried scraps as quick as she could.

"Do you think we can expense this? They didn't have enough just lying around, so I had to beg them to make more for me. It wasn't cheap, I can tell you!"

“Kindly ask the good aide there,” Maomao said. She wasn’t about to pay for this. Instead she left it all to the freak strategist’s man, who was plying his master with occasional snacks to keep him from getting out of hand. The strategist was munching on a fried treat and still staring intently at the soapmakers. It was most unusual for a man who normally took no interest in other people.

“All right, you see the pile of scraps. What do you think will happen if I just leave it here?”

The soapmaker shook his head. “You’re tryin’ to say it’ll catch fire? Joke’s on you. It’ll just cool down!”

“Are you sure about that?” Maomao leered at him, then put the scraps in the jar that served as a trash receptacle.

A moment passed.

“See? Nothing’s happenin’.”

“Just wait.”

Maomao glanced at Chue, who had taken out some artificial flowers and was playing around with them.

“Hey, uh, young lady? Are you sure about this?” Lihaku didn’t look entirely convinced, either. He was keeping his distance from the trash container, as befitted a man who had survived having his hair singed by an exploding box.

“Wait a little longer,” Maomao said.

“Screw waiting! This is a waste of time! I’m going back to work,” one of the craftsmen said. He turned to leave—and that was when they noticed it: warm air accompanied by a distinct burning odor. Smoke was coming from the jar.

“Is this for real?” one of the craftsmen asked, hurrying over to look.

“Wait, is it safe to get close to that thing?” asked another.

“It won’t explode. At least, I don’t think,” Maomao said, walking over to the jar herself. She couldn’t see any flames yet, but she expected some soon. “There you have it: spontaneous combustion of the fried scraps. You see now that this could very easily be the cause of your fire?”

“N—Now, just a minute! If it’s so easy for a fire to start, why hasn’t there been one before? We’ve been doing this work here for decades, and this is only the second fire we’ve had!”

“Have you always thrown away large quantities of hot scraps?”

“No... No, just recently. Wasn’t long ago we started doing it.”

Maomao remembered the man saying that they were in competition with other soap makers to get the supplies. That could well inspire someone to collect hot oil, even though it was dangerous, and simply toss out the hot scraps that came with it.

Maomao looked at the big jar and thought, *It’s a risky business, collecting the oil while it’s still hot.* She said, “I gather you still don’t believe me, but you can’t doubt your own eyes. The fire started naturally.”

The soap maker was silent and, as Maomao said, obviously incredulous. To be fair, she hadn’t thought it could be true either when she first heard about it. So she’d done an experiment.

Granted, today, she’d stacked the deck in her favor—in two particular ways. Normally, it would have taken longer for the scraps to catch fire, as she knew because she’d tried it herself before. *I really had to wait that day.*

She hadn’t been using fried-food scraps, but old rags soaked in highly flammable incense oil. Nothing at all happened with just a few of them, so she’d piled more on until they started to trap the heat. Still there had been no fire; she’d waited so long that she’d drifted off to sleep. Only then did they ignite. She’d woken up when someone doused her with water, thankfully before she was burned.

I really wanted to see the fire actually start.

She’d hoped to try again so she could confirm it with her own eyes, but she had been angrily informed that there were to be no more experiments in this field.

In this case, the craftsmen didn’t seem likely to put up with much waiting, so she’d had Chue pull a little trick: along with the copious amount of scraps, she’d asked her to procure a cinder. Chue, with her gift for sleight-of-hand, had easily

slipped it to Maomao, who had surreptitiously included it when she dumped the scraps in the jar.

I'm glad it caught. She wasn't proud of this modest con, but she hadn't had much choice.

As for the second advantage she'd given herself—well, she was fairly confident that the cause of the first fire had been what she'd described. But the second one, the one that started while the quack had been standing there, that was harder to explain.

Not impossible, but it wouldn't be very likely.

The trash container that had caught fire had been full of palm leaves and fried scraps—but not really enough of them to spontaneously combust. Maomao's experiment had involved rags, not fried scraps, so it wasn't exactly the same thing, but it seemed clear to her that they would need a hotter environment to catch fire.

Question: why would they use a wooden *chest to throw those things away?*

Luomen would no doubt have warned her against saying things she couldn't prove.

While Maomao was still thinking about it, the freak strategist abruptly broke off his study of the craftsmen and leapt into action. Maybe he'd run out of fried snacks to eat.

"Tell me something! Why're you trying so hard to pin this on someone else?" the strategist demanded.

"'Scuse me?" one of the men said, befuddled. The strategist never made much sense, but this was above and beyond.

"Erm, Master Lakan is saying that someone here is lying, and that that person is the real culprit," the aide said, helpfully interpreting.

"Wh-Who? Who would do such a thing?" asked the quack, looking at Lakan with pleading eyes.

"That black Go stone right on the edge of the group there."

"Go stones are, ahem, how Master Lakan sees people whose faces he can't

distinguish.” It wasn’t easy being the strategist’s aide. He’d probably worked harder than any of them today—and Maomao didn’t even know his name.

“Oh yeah? You think I’m lyin’? You got any proof of that?” demanded the man Lakan had identified as a black Go stone.

“You’re blinking. Your heart is pounding—I can practically hear it. And you stink of sweat.”

“P-Pardon me. I’m not sure what to say about that one...” Even the aide was at a loss.

People blink more when they’re lying, and their heart rate increases. Sometimes they start to sweat.

A popular rumor around the Li court held that you couldn’t tell a lie in the presence of the strategist. Just when it seemed he was making wild pronouncements based on nothing more than pure instinct, Maomao discovered that in fact there was some method to his madness.

I remember Pops saying... The freak strategist might not be able to tell people’s faces apart, but he could discern the parts of faces. He could see eyes or noses, they just didn’t cohere into a human face for him. Instead, he had other ways of telling strangers apart. Their voices, their movements, their characteristic smells. He might be the most perceptive *observer* you could find.

It just doesn’t do us much good, because he usually doesn’t give a fig about other people.

No, that wasn’t quite true—in his work, it was perfectly helpful. This worthless old fart was a better judge of talent than anyone.

“Hey, you can’t talk about me like that!”

“No, no, I can smell it. Smoke. Tobacco. The soap fragrances—the honey, the aromatic leaves—they almost cover it, but you were smoking until a few minutes ago, weren’t you?” the monocled old man said. The rest of the soapmakers immediately looked at the new suspect.

“Hey! You said you quit!”

“We told you not to smoke around the oil. Don’t tell me you freakin’ did it out

here!”

The others closed in on the accused man, and shortly tobacco leaves were discovered in his robes.

A tobacco fire! That would certainly explain how this blaze had started. Looking for a chance to take a puff, the man had said he was going to take out the trash as a pretext to have a smoke somewhere the others wouldn’t see him. In that trash had been leaves and scraps. The fibrous leaves were readily flammable, and the scraps may as well have simply been oil. When tobacco ashes were thrown on top of them...

The fire wouldn’t start immediately. First it would begin to smoke, and only after that would burst into flame—just as the quack doctor happened to be passing by. The freak strategist had probably been able to pinpoint that the smoker was lying because the man had suspected on some level that it was his tobacco that had started the blaze.

The other workers appeared to take the man’s tobacco leaves as proof; they had him surrounded and were giving him a piece of their minds.

“Ahem, er, thank you very much. You saved me,” the quack doctor said, straightening the front of his rumpled outfit.

“It’s wonderful, isn’t it? Perhaps you could thank Miss Chue by buying her a coral hair stick,” Chue said, never one to miss an opportunity.

Maomao went over to the shouting men. “Excuse me,” she said. She was glad she had been able to establish the quack’s innocence, but there was one more thing she needed to do. “I’d like some soap, please.”

This errand was turning into quite an ordeal, and she just wanted to get it over with.

Chapter 20: Smack Up Against the Wall

It had been a very...characterful day. And a long one, for that matter. It was still only just past noon.

Just as Maomao had suggested, the quack doctor had dropped the key in the toilet.

“That’s right! Then I was so depressed about not being able to get into the medical office—and then someone asked me to run an errand.”

She’d called it, alright. The cleaning woman hadn’t even given the quack a chance to explain, and in the end he’d shuffled sadly away from the ship. By his own report, the market was nearby and he had figured he would be back soon.

Maomao gave the quack the extra key, then returned to the palace. She had no interest in looking after the freak strategist, and she was hoping to unload him on someone as soon as she could. In the event, she didn’t have to worry. Having had a nice walk and plenty to eat, all that was left was to take a nap. He was as drowsy as a three-year-old—and living about the same life—and when he was told to go to his room and get some sleep, he obediently did so.

It was hard not to feel bad for the freak’s aide, though. Maomao hoped he would be able to take a break himself. As for her, she went back to her room as well.

“I’ll be in the next room,” Lihaku said, stationing himself in the adjoining chamber. It was nice to know that if anything out of the ordinary happened, he would come running.

Well, looks like there’s nothing going on. I think I’ll get a little sleep too.

Maomao lay on her bed with every intention of not getting up again for the foreseeable future, but suddenly she found herself in the grip of a surge of anger. It was the quack doctor’s own fault that he had gotten into trouble, because of the way he just wandered from one thing to another. At a very deep level, he lacked any sense of danger. He had no business being on this trip.

Why the hell did they even bring him?!

Yes, that was the question. The quack was too laid back to have so much as a twinge of doubt about it, but he was there as Luomen's body double, and if he was unlucky, he could find himself kidnapped or worse. She knew they had done this for Luomen—or had they? Who had they done it for?

If anything happened to my old man, who would take it the hardest?

The freak strategist? Or maybe even...

Maomao buried her face in the sheets and kicked the bed.

"I'm glad to see you're keeping busy," someone said. It was Chue. She had witnessed the petulant display, much to Maomao's chagrin. How long had she been there?

"I'm sorry. I seem to have kicked up some dust," Maomao said, sitting up and straightening the bedsheets as if nothing had happened.

"No worries. We're going to go see the Moon Prince now, okay?"

"The Moon Prince? But it's barely noon."

Typically, Maomao changed Jinshi's dressings after he had washed for the day. Putting on fresh salve only for him to take a bath would defeat the purpose.

"Don't worry, you'll see when we get there. I've brought boiled water—wipe yourself down." Chue trotted in with her squeaky footsteps and laid out some fresh clothes for Maomao. It seemed to be a not-so-subtle message that she needed to change after hiking around outside and getting all sweaty. Chue's behavior was every bit that of a lady-in-waiting, but watching the way she veritably danced around, her tail shaking, as she got ready—she was obviously having fun, but it also looked very tiring.

No wonder she eats so much.

All the dancing and sleight of hand and other little things must use a lot of energy. Thus enlightened, Maomao took the new clothes—although they weren't completely new; they were the same as the ones she had gotten yesterday. Chue looked like she probably had a supply of several more of them.

Maomao wiped herself down and changed.

“Pardon us,” Maomao said as she entered Jinshi’s room. It was a chamber fit for a guest of state, with all the ornate decorations that entailed. It was several times larger than Maomao’s room and was divided into several chambers. She could even see a balcony outside.

“Please, come in,” said Suiren, who was there to greet them. She led Maomao to an inner room with a gentle smile. Past a curtain, Jinshi was lounging on a couch, Gaoshun at one hand, Taomei at the other. She didn’t see Chue’s husband, Baryou, but suspected he might be in the next room.

Oh-ho! Gaoshun and wife!

Maomao might have felt better with Taomei showing her around rather than Suiren, but maybe the old lady was being considerate, trying not to take any more family time away from Gaoshun. He and his wife were both busy people; it didn’t seem like they got to see much of each other. As Maomao might have expected from Gaoshun’s description of his “fearsome” wife, Taomei was the older of them, and she acted like it.

What with the banquet and all, Maomao hadn’t come to Jinshi’s rooms the night before. Now she saw that a member of the Imperial family truly was treated differently. There was an arrangement of fresh fruit on the table (no such thing had been present in Maomao’s room), including some that weren’t in season yet, like lychees, mangoes, and even bananas.

I wonder how they grew those.

She was most interested in the fruit, many of which she knew only in dried form or from pictures. She thought she could feel the spark in Chue’s eyes right over her shoulder. It was almost enough to make her reach out and take one of the pieces of fruit, but she knew she couldn’t do that. Having the old lady glaring at her was bad enough, but even Taomei had her one good eye fixed on Maomao. Gaoshun, for his part, was watching with his standard pleading “Please don’t do anything” face.

Maomao collected herself and looked at Jinshi. “Did you need something, sir?” If she sounded a bit stiff, it was because her anger from earlier hadn’t completely ebbed away yet.

“Need something? Not so much. At the moment, I mostly need you to wait.”

“Maomao,” Suiren said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll have a visitor soon. If you would step back for the time being.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Maomao said after a beat. Why had they called her here, if they just wanted her to wait?

Shortly thereafter, a large man entered the room accompanied by a woman. He appeared to be supporting her body weight.

Wait. Is that... Maomao thought she recognized the woman, who possessed a restrained, ephemeral beauty.

“Princess Fuyou. Allow me to congratulate you on your pregnancy. I can only apologize that I wasn’t able to greet you sooner,” said Jinshi, conclusively identifying the woman.

Fuyou! The woman who had caused the stir about the spirit in the rear palace. The woman whose somnambulance had made her dance upon the palace walls. The man with her must be the soldier to whom she had been given, then.

“Moon Prince. Never is there a moment when I forget the kindness you’ve shown me. It was thanks to you that I was able to return to my home country.” Fuyou sat slowly. Her clothing was billowy, but still her body looked heavy. Her belly was probably quite big under that outfit.

Her husband said nothing, most likely because here and now, his wife ranked higher than he did.

“Without your intervention, Moon Prince, I doubt I would find myself here today,” Fuyou said.

Could it be? Maomao thought. The people riding in the other carriage when she’d arrived in Anan—could that have been Fuyou and her husband? Lihaku had said Li was loath to let go of one of its best soldiers, but Fuyou had evidently been sent back to her home on account of being pregnant. And Jinshi had evidently helped her.

So what happens to her husband in this situation? Would he stay in Li, or go back to Anan? Maomao didn’t know, but being able to have one’s child in one’s

own homeland mattered a lot. *I think I get it.* Jinshi had wanted Maomao to see the two of them.

There was just one thing: *I didn't really* do *anything in that case.*

Jinshi had told Maomao to cure Fuyou's sleepwalking, but Maomao had suspected that it was only an act anyway. Seeing the princess now, she was virtually certain. Yet she had never informed Jinshi of those doubts.

Did he figure it out himself?

She'd told Empress Gyokuyou the truth, quietly, but she doubted the Empress had let anything slip. If Jinshi had realized that Maomao had been covering for Fuyou, that made her somewhat uncomfortable. At the same time, she was glad to know that Fuyou was happy.

Fuyou and her husband spoke to Jinshi about something or other, civil and courteous the whole time, and then they left.

They seem like a good couple. Even in those few minutes, Maomao could tell. The soldier fawned over Fuyou so much that it was almost embarrassing. He had earned the right to marry her through his deeds, but it was thanks to Jinshi that they had been able to come back here after that. It also seemed increasingly likely that Jinshi knew what Fuyou had been up to in the rear palace.

Maybe he's just a soft touch.

He had a sentimental streak he couldn't quite shake. A nice thing as a person, but a weakness as a man of power.

It's going to hamstring him.

It was the same with how he treated the quack doctor. On some level, he was using the quack, but he was only doing that because of that same devotion to sentiment.

Jinshi tended to sell short his own abilities.

I mean, no, he manages to do things. He just took too much upon himself. Things would go so much better for him if he could let certain things go, yet instead he continued to reach out. The more he thought he could help, the more he got involved, until he was spread too thin.

I know someone else like that... She thought of the person she was always chasing after. He, too, spent himself in the service of others. He was the man Maomao respected more than anyone.

I guess it's my fault the quack got mixed up in all of this.

It was Maomao—Maomao was the one who would take it the hardest if Luomen found himself in danger. Jinshi had proven himself a kindhearted politician, yet at the same time, still naive.

That's why he was able to be such a complete ass.

Why had Jinshi done something so idiotic?

"You're half responsible for this," Empress Gyokuyou had said. Jinshi had a strong sense of duty. Maomao might have expected him to be less impulsive. She might have thought he could have at least waited until the princes were a

little older.

It turned out he couldn't.

Some people just have the weirdest tastes, she thought for the umpteenth time. Jinshi sometimes seemed to show a liking for creatures with strange dispositions. The unworldly little master had found himself unable to find a new toy among all the people around him. Like a baby chick, he imprinted on one single toy, and it became his whole world.

If I'm just a thing to him, then he should treat me like one and order me around. The naive child was unable to do that, however, and so had chosen a more cruel method instead.

When Jinshi had burned that brand into his side, the one he had hurt the most was not himself, but the Emperor, or so Maomao thought. She found her hypothesis turning to suspicion, and then suspicion turning to certainty: she began to think she knew what the true relationship was between Jinshi and His Majesty.

The Emperor is Jinshi's real father.

Jinshi had lived his life as the "Imperial younger brother," but if he was actually the Emperor's supposedly dead son... Surely he wouldn't have done what he did? The question left Maomao with a shadow of a doubt. If what she suspected was true, what then?

What do I do? Even as she asked the question, she felt she already knew the answer.

"You can step forward now," said Suiren, giving her a gentle push. Maomao wasn't sure she liked the pregnant tone in the old woman's voice.

"I see you wanted me to know what became of Lady Fuyou," she said, bowing to Jinshi. For the moment, she took the other thoughts she'd been having and stashed them in the corner of her mind.

"Not as such. I simply thought it might benefit you to be aware, since I did ask you for help with her."

"Yes, sir. I admit, I feel somewhat better having seen this."

Maomao glanced around. She couldn't escape the sense that Jinshi was trying to be thoughtful towards her.

All right, time to play the game.

She looked over at the balcony. "This is quite a sumptuous room, sir. It even has a balcony."

"You like it? Feel free to go out and have a look."

"If I may, then." She trotted straight for it.

"Xiaomao!" Gaoshun tried to stop her, but out of the corner of her eye she could just see Jinshi holding him back.

She stepped out onto the balcony. *Well!* She'd assumed it would be the perfect place to be assassinated by an arrow, or a feifa gun, but that turned out not to be the case. *There's so many trees around, it would be hard to get a good shot. And there's nowhere to shoot from nearby, either.*

It seemed to her that the balcony had been deliberately designed to be safe. She was no expert, but she supposed that anything else would have been inappropriate in a VIP's room.

Because it was safe, no one followed Jinshi when he stepped onto the balcony with her. Taomei was saying something to Gaoshun; it was clear he was no match for his wife.

Not sure I like the sense that we're being set up here, though...

She was alone with Jinshi. That wasn't so strange; she was going to have to look at his burn later, but she wanted to do it before her mood changed.

"I hear you had a trip into town today," Jinshi said.

"Yes, sir, and the townspeople have much to say about Li."

The locals could hardly have been called favorably disposed, but at least things didn't seem about to explode.

At least, they were favorably disposed enough that they might try to send a woman to a guest of state...

"Master Jinshi, please be careful tonight. As every night," Maomao said. There

was always the risk that some woman might try to invite herself into Jinshi's bed.

"I never can guess what you're going to say next." Jinshi leaned against a wall, out of sight of his attendants. It looked like Gaoshun wasn't the only one walking on eggshells around Taomei.

"Surely you can imagine what I mean, sir? Just think back to your nights at the rear palace."

"Hngh," Jinshi groaned, looking upset. So he did have some idea what she meant. He looked at her like he had something to say, but couldn't quite get it out. Finally he managed, "Ahem. As you can see, Princess Fuyou has come home. The King of Anan's niece will be entering the rear palace—I hesitate to say in exchange, but..."

"It sounds very busy."

"Yes. Empress Gyokuyou's niece is supposed to be coming as well."

"I heard that, sir. Interesting that you have, though. Remind me who it was that ran away from the rear palace?" Maomao pressed. "You're no longer Jinshi, Master Jinshi, and I think it would be best if you stopped troubling yourself about the rear palace forever and focused on your own work."

"I would agree, but it turns out I can't seem to cut myself off completely."

Maomao looked at him, unimpressed. He managed to meet her gaze, but he didn't look very comfortable.

Maomao found herself angry again. "Master Jinshi, you're a man of power, and I think it's time you behaved like it."

"I know..."

"You should use the things that are available to you to use."

"I am..."

"In that case..." Maomao stepped up to him and smirked, standing on her tiptoes to look him right in the face. She slammed her right hand against the wall, effectively trapping him. His eyes went wide. "I can't say I enjoy being used. However—" Here she lowered her voice so that only Jinshi could hear.

“Half-assed attempts at being nice are a far greater nuisance. I’d much rather be a useful tool than a meaningless burden. Your hesitation is the country’s hesitation, and a moment’s indecision on your part could mean the deaths of tens of thousands of your subjects. I know you’ll only regret that. So you might as well pick a path and throw yourself headlong down it.”

Finally, she leaned away from him.

“If you’re going to use something, then use it. Medicine doesn’t work unless you take it.”

She closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. Everything she’d pent up inside had come pouring out her mouth. Maomao was no princess, she was a common apothecary. If he was going to pull her strings, then it was better he just go ahead and do it. He should use her till she fell apart.

If she could escape all of it, of course, she would have liked to, but she wasn’t going to cut off her nose to spite her face. There was more she wanted to say, but she figured she had pushed it about as far as she could.

She discovered, though, that there was something else behind her boiling anger. Her hands went to Jinshi’s cheek. “You’re only human, Master Jinshi. You’re not some mythical immortal who can save everyone.” She held his face in her hands, the fingers of her left hand brushing his scar. “You can be wounded, scarred, brought low. Only human.”

Who was she talking to? She knew Jinshi was standing in front of her, but for some reason she kept seeing Luomen’s face.

No wonder I’m so upset.

The principle that drove Jinshi’s behavior seemed very similar to Luomen’s. She was afraid that if he went on like this, he would end up just as luckless in life as her old man. *Just like Pops...* He’d spent himself trying to rescue everyone and everything. Like a fool. He should have *wanted* more, been greedier, but instead he’d suffered his fate patiently.

Suffered and suffered, and for what? To become an old man resigned to his empty hands.

This was, it was fair to say, Maomao’s one single criticism of her father. She’d

felt it keenly in the affair with the Shaonese shrine maiden. She respected Luomen immensely. A man who never lost his kindness no matter what unhappiness he encountered was like a miracle. The price, though, was that his body and his heart were both battered. In time he became so that everything he did, he did in the expectation of defeat. Would Jinshi end up like him one day? Or—

"Please, please don't go doing anything else like burning a brand into your skin," Maomao said.

"I heard you...the first several times," Jinshi replied.

"Are you sure?" A smile flitted across Maomao's face, and she slowly pulled her hands away. Except they didn't leave his cheeks. Jinshi held them there. "Please let me go, sir," she said.

"Don't want to."

He sounded like a child. It was something he did sometimes, resorting to childlike language.

"I'd like to be going back soon," she said.

"Just a few more minutes."

"Master Gaoshun must be beside himself."

"Then just rejuvenate me a bit."

"Rejuvenate?"

He let go of her hands and spread his arms wide.

Oh no. Is he coming in for a hug? She was just about to tell him that she would do no such thing, but the outstretched arms didn't reach for her. Instead they shifted, so that they appeared to be ready to receive something.

"What exactly do you want?" Maomao asked.

"I *wanted* a hug, but I thought that at this moment, perhaps I need something else." Jinshi scratched his left cheek, the one without a scar. "Vigor. Help me out."

"You want me to slap you."

“As hard as you can. The way you slapped that lady-in-waiting at the Crystal Pavilion.”

His eyes were sparkling. What the hell was she supposed to do now? And what was he doing remembering her worst possible moments?

“Have you already forgotten what I said?” She’d just warned him not to do anything like that brand again, and hardly a minute later, here he was engaging in more self-destructive behavior.

“I understand,” he said. “This won’t leave a scar.”

“It’ll leave a *mark*!”

Maomao would be the one who got in trouble. They’d trusted her enough to leave her alone with Jinshi; she couldn’t betray that.

“Please.”

“I can’t!”

“I’m asking you!” Jinshi slumped to his knees. “There’s no one who can tell me what to do anymore,” he almost spat. Gaoshun and Suiren could scold him all they wanted, but they were still, in the end, his servants. The only person who could conceivably contradict Jinshi to his face would be the Emperor.

No one to tell you what to do, huh?

Jinshi’s request to be reduced to a commoner would mean severing his connection to the ruler.

I don’t know what their relationship is like, how they talk to each other, Maomao thought. From what she gathered, though, they seemed to have a good rapport, as royal blood relatives went. *But you reap what you sow.*

That would explain why he didn’t want her to take it easy on him. Maomao could only sigh.

“Fine. Close your eyes.”

“Thank you.”

Maomao pulled her hand back and whacked Jinshi across the face. It was not quiet.

Jinshi sucked in a breath and was about to open his eyes, so Maomao placed her hand gently over his eyelids. “Let me see it,” she said. Even her hand hurt, so Jinshi’s cheek must be burning. She could see the flush rising in it.

Suiren will never miss this. Whether the old lady got upset would depend on how Jinshi reacted.

“Pain, pain, go away,” Maomao said, recalling a rhyme her older sister Pairin had often used on her. She kissed the reddened cheek ever so gently. Her lips were colder than her fingertips, and made the cheek feel that much hotter.

I know a children’s verse can’t actually work. It was funny, though: somehow the cheek looked less red than before. *Nah, that can’t be.* And it wasn’t: rather, Jinshi’s entire body was redder than it had been.

Maomao lifted her hand off his eyes. He couldn’t quite look her in the eye, but his hands clasped hers firmly.

“M—Maomao,” he said.

“Yes, sir?” she answered, drawing away slightly.

“The other side too, please.”

He pointed at his right cheek, the one with the scar.

Maomao glowered at him. “Absolutely not, sir.”



Epilogue

Maomao looked out the small window. She could see more and more ships come into view. Their fleet seemed to grow larger with every port they called at. Most of the additions were merchant vessels, also going to the western capital and presumably joining them to help protect themselves from pirates.

“Funny. This trip has felt so long, but we can finally see the destination!”

“What are you talking about, Miss Chue?” the quack asked. Chue was lounging in the medical office like she belonged there, as she so often did.

“Oh, nothing. It just seemed like the right sentiment, so I said it.”

“You say the strangest things. I just don’t follow,” said the quack. Maomao agreed that Chue’s pronouncements could be obscure, but there were a handful of creatures like her in the world.

Maomao stepped away from the window, intent on taking inventory of their remaining stock of medicine. As Chue’s helpful exposition indicated, they would soon be arriving in the western capital. They would have to think about restocking their supplies, but the quack—ostensibly the key to the functioning of the medical office—spent all his time chatting, as he always did.

Chue now spent as much time in the medical office as Lihaku did. She insisted that it was “for work.” Maybe she mispronounced “cutting work.”

“Master Physician, if you could at least take some notes as to our quantities of medicine,” Maomao said, pressing a notebook and brush into the quack’s hands. It wasn’t a big job, and she could easily have done it by herself, but she thought it was important not to spoil the doctor.

“Want me to help?” Chue offered.

“No, thank you. We’ll never hear the end of it if we let nonmedical staff touch the medicine.”

“That’s too bad. Miss Chue knows a lot about poisons, you know!”

She also never missed a chance to promote herself. Trying to justify her

continued presence in the medical office (and absence from real work), Maomao supposed.

“Enough to do food tasting, at least, I see,” Maomao said. She thought back to the banquet in Anan. The banquet, then the case of the missing quack, then slapping Jinshi...

That last one was a real problem for her. Maomao put a hand to her lips. *Why’d I do that?* She knew perfectly well that children’s charms didn’t have any medicinal effect. She’d treated Jinshi like a child who could be deluded by a little charm.

The one silver lining was that the people in the room hadn’t appeared to have heard anything—maybe the balcony had been built specifically for such secret conferences. Maomao had been worried what would happen if Suiren, Taomei, or Gaoshun had heard them. Yet only Chue had displayed any interest.

As for Jinshi’s request that she slap “the other side too,” he’d just needed something to wake him up. It definitely wasn’t a masochist thing, he’d explained.

What else was I supposed to think, with that look on his face?

His story for the red mark on his face was that he had given himself a good, hard slap on the cheek just before coming back into the room. Suiren and the others were aghast, but he’d simply chuckled and explained that “I just needed to make sure I was good and alert.”

Maomao had remained absolutely silent. It was all she could do.

She was so very, very tired.

“Ooh, I had such a good time in Anan! I can’t wait to see how much fun we have in the western capital,” said Chue, her small eyes sparkling. She produced little flowers, flags, and even, for some reason, doves out of her hands, but Lihaku and the quack had already handled the witty comebacks on those subjects. No need for Maomao to get involved in that game now. She did have a question, though.

“How are you doing that?”

“Oh-ho! Interested in Miss Chue’s mysterious abilities?” She snorted proudly with her bean-bun nose.

“Yes. Because in my experience, such abilities usually require some preparation.”

She’d seen the White Lady do similar things on stage, although her tricks had involved less “preparation” than a knowledge of human psychology.

“What would you do if I told you?” Chue asked.

“I thought they might be perfect for when the bigwigs ask me to entertain them,” Maomao replied. Her brothel jokes always seemed to fall flat, so a little performance she could put on seemed ideal. Even better if it could help take the tension out of a situation.

“I’m sorry to burst your bubble, but I’ve already shown the Moon Prince what I can do on this trip, and if you’re thinking of amusing His Majesty, I did this for him before we left so he could help me decide where to go with them in the future.”

Where to go! The quip almost escaped Maomao’s mouth, but she forced it back. Truly, Chue was a woman who knew no propriety.

Maomao emptied out bags of medicine, made the quack take notes, then put them back in the chest. Again and again they did this.

“Oh! I haven’t told you about our upcoming schedule yet, have I?” Chue said.

“So you do have an actual job here,” said Maomao, who had been certain Chue was just slacking off.

“Yep! Miss Chue always works hard so her mother-in-law won’t get mad at her.” She straightened up and fished a roll of wood strips out of the folds of her robes.

“Goodness, you’re behind the times, Miss Chue. You should get some nice paper, much easier to use,” said the quack, stretching his fingers. He came from a family of papermakers, and he sounded pleased to be in the know.

“Nopers! I am a woman of elegant taste who loves the old ways. I adore the texture of wood, I savor its smell!”

Paper was convenient, but there were plenty of aesthetes like her who preferred the virtues of wood. Maomao didn't really get it herself, but neither did she have a reason to stop Chue from writing on whatever she wanted. She was, however, curious how Chue had managed to conceal such a lengthy scroll in her robes.

"When we reach port, we'll get in a carriage with our luggage. It should be about a thirty-minute ride to the western capital. You're advised to look out for scorpions."

Maomao nodded, hoping that there would in fact be scorpions.

"Once we get to the western capital, the quack—ahem, I mean master—physician is to join up with the other doctors. You'll go with him, Maomao. There will be someone to show you to the room where the medical staff will be based. It's somewhere in Master Gyokuen's villa, and all of you won't be able to fit in there at once, so you'll be divided into three groups. Also, the higher-ups will be all together; you'll just have to live with it."

Did she say quack?

She hadn't done a very good job of covering for herself, but the quack was so busy writing that he didn't seem to have noticed.

"Miss Maomao, you're going to be working with the other doctors for the most part, except when summoned for things like food tasting. I think you'll be seeing a lot of me and Lihaku."

Lihaku was the quack's bodyguard, but what about Chue? A messenger, maybe? It mostly seemed to Maomao like she was trying to come up with an excuse to cut work and avoid seeing too much of her mother-in-law, or "the big lady," but she politely pretended not to realize it. The last thing she wanted was for Suiren to get involved instead; it would be a disaster.

"One other thing. At night, I'm off the clock, so please don't call for me then."

"What? Not even in an emergency?" the quack asked, although he continued to work, the brush agile in his plump hands.

"Not even then. My mother-in-law is giving me the hurry-up about the second one, so I have to use my most transcendent techniques." Somehow, she

managed to say this with a straight face.

The quack doctor was perplexed at first, but when Maomao said, “Miss Chue is a married woman,” he seemed to connect the dots—because his face went beet red and he dropped his brush. Maomao was surprised he’d survived as the rear palace’s physician, based on that reaction.

Still, knowing that Chue’s husband was literally the man behind the curtain, Maomao questioned whether he could fulfill his role.

“Fwoooo! Now, big, deep breaths!” Chue had squatted down and was gliding her hands around her stomach.

Maomao interrupted. She felt bad, but Chue showed no sign of stopping otherwise. “Miss Chue, enough with your weird exercises. Anything else we should know?”

Chue straightened up as if nothing had happened. “When we get to the western capital, I think you’ll find yourself living pretty much in the manner to which you’ve become accustomed on this ship. The only difference is, your instructions will come from Dr. Yoh, one of the upper physicians.”

Yoh—so that was the name of the tan-skinned doctor. It was a reasonably common name, especially in the west. Maomao would have to try to remember it.

“Like I said, I think we’ll be spending a lot of time together, so if you have any questions, feel free to ask Miss Chue or Dr. Yoh. Except at night, like I said. Nobody knows if the young Ma boy will be able to produce an heir, so there’s a lot of pressure on me! The continued existence of the Ma clan rests on my shoulders! Well, okay, so there’s a branch family still, but... Well, you know my mother-in-law...”

Chue looked downright desperate. So there *was* something that could scare her.

I guess it’s not easy being the wife of the eldest son, Maomao thought, not that it really concerned her. She put away the last of the medicine, and with that they were done taking inventory.

Chue stood up. “We’ll arrive very soon, so I’m going to go back.”

“See you next time, Miss Chue!” the quack doctor said as if she were a friend just dropping by for a visit.

Chue waved and was about to leave, but then she paused and turned back. “Miss Maomao...”

“Yes? Is something the matter?” What else could Chue want?

“People lie in the palace just as much as they do in the pleasure district. There are going to be plenty of liars in the western capital, so do watch out. Oh, and I’ll keep quiet about what happened—don’t you worry.” Then she grinned, her dark face looking even darker in the minimal light of the lower decks.

What happened? Maomao wasn’t sure what she meant by that.

“All right then! Bye!”

Chue closed the door with a clack, and then there was only the gentle rocking of the ship.

Thus Maomao arrived, again, in the western capital. She could only wonder what awaited her on her second visit.