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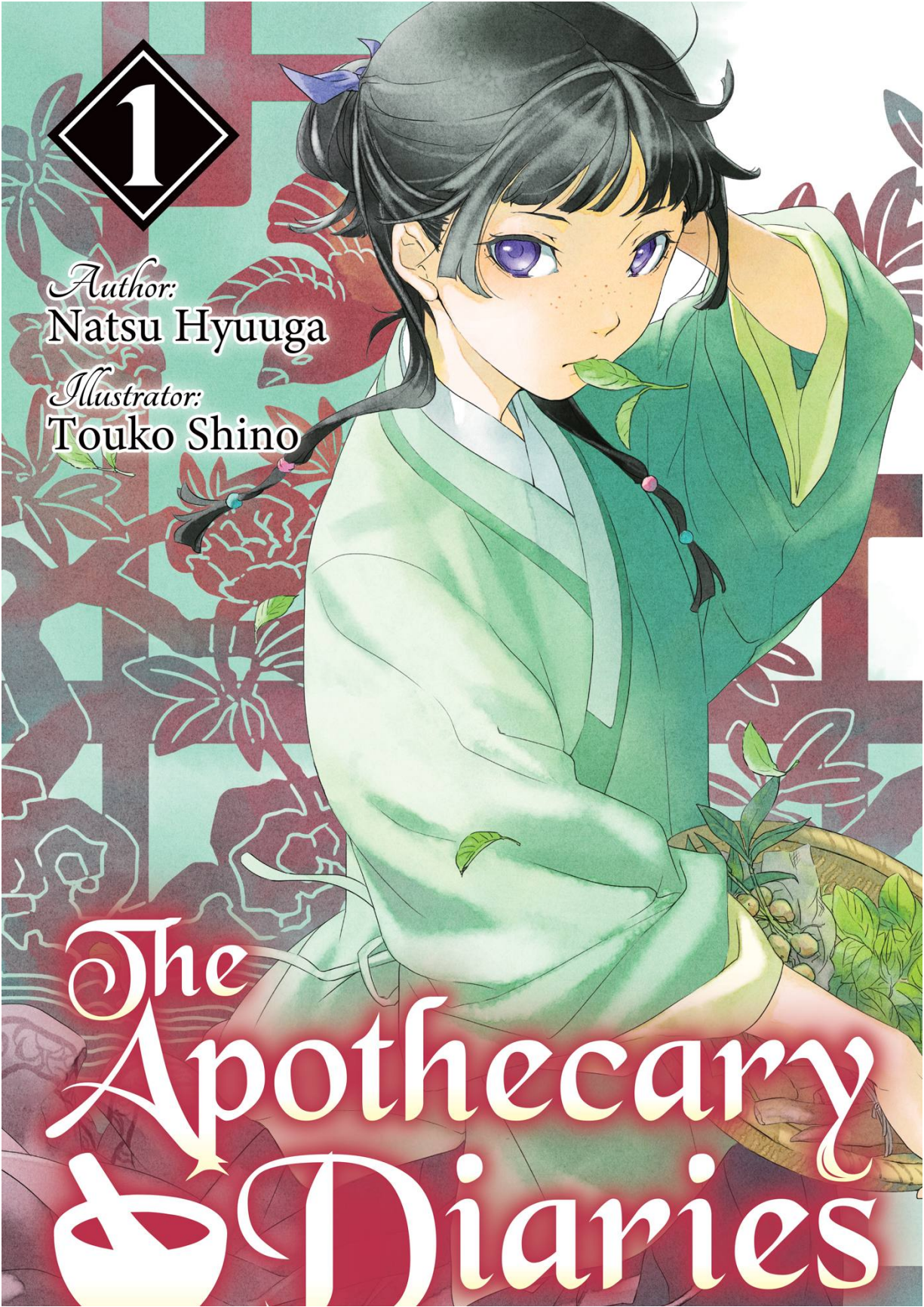
The
Apothecary
Diaries



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“Perhaps
you could
make a
love potion.”

For just
an instant,
Maomao's
eyes lit up
with a mixture
of surprise
and curiosity.



“May I whisper
in milady’s ear?”

And then, quietly so that no one else would hear her, she gave Consort Lihua some advice. Lihua’s face went as red as an apple when she heard it. What Maomao might have told her was a subject of lively debate among Lihua’s ladies-in-waiting for some time afterward.



“Consort Gyokuyou, if I were to find the author of this message, what would you do with her?”

Gyokuyou

When he saw the branch with the note on it at the Jade Pavilion, the eunuch Jinshi remembered something – someone.



“No, sir.”

This time it was Maomao's turn to look annoyed. Jinshi reached out again.

“There won't be any less of you afterward.”
“It takes my energy.”
“Just one hand. Just a fingertip. Surely that's all right.”
Maomao had no answer.

“Surely one touch is all right.”



The Apothecary Diaries

Introduction

She's On the Case!

It was a simple story of a young girl, a food taster in a medieval palace who could solve the most perplexing mysteries. Against that bracing backdrop, my heroine—a woman who could be as outwardly prickly as she was inwardly sweet—turned out to be well received. It's been two years now since the trade volumes went on sale, and by popular demand, the story is now being reissued in mass-market paperback format.

These new versions have been much revised from the trade releases, hopefully in ways that will make them even more exciting and suspenseful. In fact, I dare say I think a new name is about to be added to the annals of the great light-novel detectives. I hope you'll find our heroine Maomao's deductions and discoveries thrilling and surprising!

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Chapter 1: Maomao

What I wouldn't give for some good street-stall meat skewers. Maomao looked up at the overcast sky and sighed. She lived in a world that was at once a place of unparalleled, sparkling beauty and a noxious, foul, suffocating cage. *Three months already. Hope my old man's eating properly.*

It seemed just the other day she had gone into the woods to gather herbs, and there had met three kidnappers; let us call them Villagers One, Two, and Three. They were after women for the royal palace, and in a word, they offered the world's most forceful and unpleasant marriage proposal.

Now, it wasn't that she wouldn't be paid, and with a couple years' work, there was that glimmer of hope that she might even be able to come back to her hometown. There were worse ways to earn a living—if one went to the royal city of one's own accord. But Maomao, who had been making her way just fine as an apothecary, thank you very much, saw it solely as so much trouble.

What did the kidnappers do with the nubile young women they captured? Sometimes they sold the girls to the eunuchs, putting the proceeds toward a night of drinking for themselves. Sometimes the young ladies were offered in lieu of someone's own daughter. To Maomao, it was a moot question, for now she found herself caught up in their schemes, regardless of the reason. Else, she would never in her life have wished to have anything to do with the *hougong*, the “rear palace”: the residence of the Imperial women.

The place was so thick with the odors of makeup and perfume as to turn the stomach, and even more full of the thin, forced smiles of the court ladies in their beautiful dresses. In her time as an apothecary, Maomao had come to believe there was no toxin so terrifying as a woman's smile. That one rule held true whether in the halls of the most ornate palace or the squalid

chambers of the cheapest pleasure house.

Maomao hefted the laundry basket at her feet and headed into a nearby building. Unlike the dazzling front façade, the dreary central courtyard housed flagstone-paved washing areas, where the court's servants—people who were neither quite man nor quite woman—did laundry by the armload.

Men, in principle, were not allowed in the rear palace. The only men who could enter were either members and blood relations of that most noble family in the country, or former men who had lost a very important part of themselves. Naturally, all the men Maomao was looking at right now were the latter. It was twisted, she thought, but admittedly a logical thing to do.

She set down her basket and spotted another one sitting in the next building over. Not dirty clothes, but clean laundry that had dried in the sun. She glanced at the wooden tag dangling from the handle; it bore an illustration of a leaf along with a number.

Not all of the palace women were literate. It wasn't that surprising: some of them had been brought here by force, after all. And though the rudiments of etiquette were beaten into them before they arrived, letters were not. It would probably be lucky, Maomao reflected, if half the girls that got snatched from the countryside turned out to know how to read. It was, one might say, a hazard of the rear palace growing too populous. Quality was being sacrificed for quantity. Although it in no way equaled the "flower garden" of the former emperor, the consorts and ladies-in-waiting together numbered two thousand people, while with the eunuchs that number came to three thousand. A vast place indeed.

Maomao was a serving girl, a post so lowly she didn't even have an official rank. What more could she expect, as a girl who had no one to back her at court, who had arrived by way of kidnappers to fill out the palace staff? If she had perhaps possessed a body as shapely as a peony, or skin as pale as the full moon, she might at least have aspired to the status of one of the lower concubines, but Maomao possessed only ruddy, freckled skin and limbs with all the elegance of withered branches.

I need to just get this job done.

Maomao picked up the basket with its tag depicting a plum flower and the number 17, and trundled off as quickly as she could manage. She wanted to get back to her room before the frowning sky began to weep.

The owner of the laundry in the basket was one of the low-ranked consorts. Her room was rather more lavish than those accorded to the other low consorts—in fact, it was downright ostentatious. The occupant, Maomao surmised, must be the daughter of some affluent noble family.

When a woman was assigned a palace rank, she was also permitted her own ladies-in-waiting. A minor consort, however, could have two ladies at most, which was why Maomao, a serving girl with no mistress of her own on which to attend, was carting around the woman's laundry like this.

A low consort was permitted personal rooms in the rear palace precincts, but they were inevitably on the fringes of the grounds, where the Imperial eye was unlikely ever to fall upon her. If she should, nonetheless, be graced with a night with His Majesty, she would be granted new rooms, while a second such night meant she had truly found a place in the world.

As for those who ultimately never excited the Emperor's interest, after a certain age a consort (assuming her family didn't wield particular influence) could expect to see herself demoted, or even granted as a wife to some member of the bureaucracy. Whether that was a blessing or a curse depended on whom she was granted to, but the fate the women feared most was being bestowed upon one of the eunuchs.

Maomao knocked discreetly on the door. A lady-in-waiting opened it and snapped, "Just leave it there." Within, a consort redolent of the sweetest perfume was sipping some alcohol from a cup. She must have been much admired for her beauty in those halcyon days before she had arrived at the palace, but when she got here, she discovered she had known as much about the outside world as a frog who had spent its life in a well. Crowded out by the array of dazzling flowers in this garden, she had lost her will to continue fighting for a place here, and of late had ceased to come out of her room at all.

You know no one is going to come visit you in your own room, right?

Maomao traded the basket in her arms for the one sitting outside the door and went back to the laundry area. There was so much work to do still. She may not have come to the palace of her own volition, but they were at least paying her, and she intended to earn her keep. Maomao the apothecary was diligent-minded, if nothing else. If she kept her head down and did her job, she could hope to leave this place someday, if never, she assumed, to gain royal notice.

Sadly, Maomao's thinking was—let us say naïve. She didn't know what was going to happen. No one does; that's the nature of life. Maomao was a relatively objective thinker for a girl of seventeen, but she had a few qualities that continually dogged her. For one, curiosity; and for another, a hunger for knowledge. And then there was her budding sense of justice.

A few days hence, Maomao would uncover a mysterious and terrible truth concerning the deaths of several infants in the rear palace. Some said it was a curse laid upon any concubine who dared to produce an heir, but Maomao refused to regard the matter as anything supernatural.

Chapter 2: The Two Consorts

“Huh! So it’s true?”

“It is! She said she saw the doctor go into their rooms with her own eyes!”

Maomao sipped her soup and listened. Hundreds of serving girls were having their breakfast in the vast dining room. The meal consisted of soup and a porridge of mixed grains. She was listening to two women diagonally across from her as they traded gossip. The women took pains to look chagrined about the story, but it was an unseemly curiosity that lit their eyes.

“He visited *both* Lady Gyokuyou and Lady Lihua.”

“Gracious, both of them? But they’re only six months and three months, aren’t they?”

“That’s right! Maybe it really is a curse.”



The names were those of the Emperor's two favorite consorts. Six months and three months were the ages of the ladies' children.

Rumors were rife in the palace. Some of them sprang from contempt for His Majesty's companions and the heirs they bore him, but others had more the savor of simple ghost stories, the sorts of tales told during the summer doldrums to beat the heat by chilling the blood.

"It must be. Otherwise, why would three separate children have died?"

All of the offspring in question had been born to consorts; that is to say, they could in principle have been heirs to the throne. One of the poor victims had been born to His Majesty before his accession, while he still lived in the Eastern Palace, and two more since he had assumed the throne, but all three had passed away in infancy. Mortality was common among infants, of course, but that three of the Emperor's own progeny should die so young was strange. Only two children, those of the consorts Gyokuyou and Lihua, still survived.

Poisonings, perhaps? Maomao mused, sipping her porridge, but she concluded it couldn't be. After all, two of the three dead children had been girls. And in a land where only men could inherit the throne, what reason was there to murder princesses?

The women across from Maomao were so busy talking about curses and hexes that they had stopped eating entirely. *But there's no such thing as curses!* Maomao thought. It was stupid, that was the only word for it. How could you destroy an entire clan with one curse? Such questions bordered on the heretical, but Maomao's expertise, she felt, constituted proof of this pronouncement.

Could it have been some kind of sickness? Something blood-borne, maybe? How exactly did they die?

And that was when the detached, quiet maid began talking to her chatty dining companions. It would not be long before Maomao regretted succumbing to her curiosity.

"I don't know the whole story, but I heard they all wasted away!"

Apparently inspired by Maomao's show of interest, Xiaolan, the talkative maid, thereafter regularly brought her the latest rumors. "The doctor's been to see Lady Lihua more often than Lady Gyokuyou, so I guess Lady Lihua must be worse." She wiped at a window frame with a rag as she spoke.

"Lady Lihua herself?"

"Yes, it's mother and child both."

Maomao supposed the doctor paid closer attention to Lady Lihua not necessarily because she was more sick, but because her child was a little prince. Consort Gyokuyou had borne a princess. The Imperial affection fell more upon Gyokuyou, but when one child was a boy and the other a girl, which one should receive preferential treatment was clear.

"Like I said, I don't know everything, but I've heard she has headaches and stomachaches, and even some nausea." Satisfied that she had divulged all her newest gleanings, Xiaolan busied herself with another task. By way of thanks, Maomao gave her some tea flavored with licorice. She'd made it with some herbs that grew in a corner of the central garden. It smelled strongly medicinal, but was in fact quite sweet. Xiaolan was thrilled—serving girls had all too few opportunities to enjoy sweet things.

Headache, stomachache, and nausea. Maomao had some ideas as to what illnesses these might portend, but she couldn't be sure. And her father had never tired of admonishing her not to do her thinking based on assumptions.

Maybe I'll just pay her a little visit.

Maomao was determined to finish her work as quickly as possible. The rear palace was in fact a vast place, housing more than two thousand women and five hundred eunuchs on the premises. Lowly workers like Maomao slept ten to a room, but the lower-ranked consorts had their own chambers, mid-ranking ones had whole buildings to themselves, and the highest-ranking consorts virtually had their own palaces, sprawling complexes including dining halls and gardens, large enough to dwarf a small town. Thus, Maomao rarely left the eastern quarter where she lived; there was no need. She had neither the time nor the means to leave unless she was sent on

some errand.

Well, if I don't have an errand, I'll just have to make one.

Maomao spoke to a woman holding a basket. This basket contained fine silk that would have to be washed over in the laundry area in the western quarter. No one seemed to know whether there was something different about the water there, or perhaps about the people who did the washing, but apparently the silk would soon be ruined if handled here in the eastern quarter. Maomao understood that silk degraded more or less depending on whether it was dried out in the sun or kept in the shade, but she felt no particular need to tell anybody that.

"I'm just dying to get a look at that gorgeous eunuch they say lives in the central area," Maomao said, invoking one of the other rumors Xiaolan had mentioned in passing, and the woman gladly gave her the basket. Chances for anything resembling romance were few and far between in this place, so that even the eunuchs, men who were not really men, soon became something to swoon over. Stories were even told, from time to time, of women who became the wives of eunuchs after they left palace service. Presumably this was all healthier than the women lusting after each other instead, but still it puzzled Maomao.

Wonder if I'll end up like everyone else one day, she thought to herself. She crossed her arms and grunted. Romantic matters held scant interest for her.

She delivered the basket of laundry as quickly as she could, and then a red-lacquered building of the central area came into view. Carvings were everywhere, every pillar like a work of art unto itself. Each detail had been attended to, so that the whole was far more refined than anything on the fringes of the eastern quarter. At present, the largest quarters in the rear palace were occupied by Consort Lihua, the mother of the prince. The Emperor was without an Empress proper, which made Lihua, the only one of his women with a son, the most powerful person here.

The scene Maomao discovered looked almost as if it could have come from the city itself. One woman fulminated, one hung her head in gloom,

while others fussed and fretted, and a man tried to make peace among them all.

It's hardly different from a brothel, Maomao thought, a cold observation made possible by her status as a third party, if not a gawker.

The upset woman was the most powerful person in the rear palace, the one hanging her head the next most powerful, and the fussy women were attendants. The man (no doubt a man no longer at this point) interceding was the doctor. So much, Maomao gathered from the whispering she heard and the general state of things around her. That first woman would have to be Consort Lihua, mother of the Imperial prince, and the second woman would be Consort Gyokuyou, blessed—though not quite so blessed as Lihua—with a daughter. As for the eunuch doctor, Maomao knew nothing about him, but she had heard that in this whole great palace there was only one person who could truly be called a practitioner of medicine.

“This is your doing. Just because you had a girl, you got it into your head to curse my prince to death!” A beautiful face distorted by anger is a frightful thing. Eyes as furious as a demon’s, set in a face as pale as a ghost’s, were turned upon the beautiful Gyokuyou, who held a hand to her cheek. There was a red mark under her fingers; she had, Maomao surmised, been slapped with an open hand.

“That isn’t true, and you know it. My Xiaoling is suffering just as much as your son.” The second woman had red hair and eyes the color of emeralds, and she answered the charges calmly, referring to the young Princess Lingli by an affectionate nickname. Consort Gyokuyou’s looks suggested no small amount of western blood in her veins. Now she raised her head and glared at the doctor. “And that is why I request that you not neglect to attend to my daughter as well.”

It seemed the doctor himself was the reason intercession had been needed between the two women. He had been spending all his time looking in here at the young prince, and Gyokuyou was appealing in her daughter’s behalf. One sympathized with her, but this was the rear palace, and male children were more prized than female ones. The doctor, for his part, looked

caught between trying to make an excuse, and total speechlessness.

What a knave, that sawbones, Maomao thought. To fail to notice with the two consorts right in front of him. How could he not have figured it out already, anyway? The dead infants, the headaches, the stomach pains, the nausea. To say nothing of Consort Lihua's ghostly pallor and frail appearance.

Muttering to herself, Maomao put the raucous scene behind her. *I need something to write on,* she thought. She was so busy thinking it, in fact, that she didn't even notice the person passing by.

Chapter 3: Jinshi

“They’re at it again,” Jinshi muttered glumly to himself. It was unseemly, the way the blossoms of the palace carried on sometimes. It fell to Jinshi—one among his many responsibilities—to quiet things down.

As he waded into the crowd, Jinshi saw one person walking along as if the uproar didn’t concern her. She was a petite girl with freckles peppering her nose and cheeks. There was nothing else distinctive about her, except that she paid no heed at all to Jinshi as she walked along muttering to herself.

And that could well have been the end of it.

It was not quite a month later that word spread the young prince had died. Consort Lihua was consumed with weeping, and was thinner now than ever; she no longer looked anything like the woman who had once been considered the blooming rose of the court. Perhaps she suffered from the same illness as her son, or perhaps it was an affliction of the spirit that blighted her. Regardless, she could hardly hope for another child in such condition.

Princess Lingli, the half sister of the deceased prince, soon recovered from her indisposition, and she and her mother became a great comfort to the bereaved emperor. Indeed, it seemed likely Consort Gyokuyou might soon bear another child, given how often His Majesty visited.

The prince and princess had both suffered from the same mysterious illness, yet one had recovered while the other had succumbed. Could it be the age gap between them? It had been just three months, but such a span could make a significant difference in an infant’s resilience. And what of Lihua? If the princess had made a recovery, then there was every reason the consort should be able to as well. Unless she was suffering chiefly from the

psychological shock of losing her son.

Jinshi turned these thoughts over in his head as he reviewed some paperwork and pressed his chop to it. If there was any difference between the two children, perhaps it lay with Consort Gyokuyou.

“I’m going out for a while,” Jinshi said as he stamped the final page with his chop, and promptly left the room.

The princess, cheeks as full and rosy as steamed buns, smiled at him with all the innocence a child could muster. Her tiny hand clasped into a fist around Jinshi’s finger.

“No, child, let him go,” her mother, a red-haired beauty, scolded gently. She wrapped the infant in swaddling clothes and put her down to sleep in her crib. The princess, apparently too warm, kicked the coverings off and lay watching the visitor, gurgling happily.

“I presume you wish to ask me something,” said the consort, always a perceptive woman.

Jinshi got right to the point. “Why did the princess recover her health?”

Consort Gyokuyou allowed herself the smallest of smiles before pulling a piece of cloth from a pouch. The cloth had been torn off of something and was adorned with ungainly characters. Not only was the handwriting uneven, but the message appeared to have been written using grass stains, so in places it was faded and difficult to read.

Your face powder is poison. Don’t let it touch the baby.

Perhaps the faltering quality of the handwriting was deliberate. Jinshi cocked his head. “Your face powder?”

“Yes,” Gyokuyou said, entrusting the child in the crib to a wet nurse and opening a drawer. She took out something wrapped in cloth: a ceramic vessel. She opened the lid to a puff of white powder.

“This?”

“The very same.”

Perhaps, Jinshi conjectured, there was something in the powder. He remembered that Gyokuyou, already possessing the pale skin that was so

prized at court, didn't need to use the powder to try to make herself more beautiful. Consort Lihua, in contrast, looked so sallow that she used more of it every day to conceal her condition.

"My little princess is quite a hungry girl," Gyokuyou said. "I don't make enough milk for her, so I hired a nurse to help." Sometimes mothers whose children had died shortly after birth found work as wet nurses. "This face powder belonged to that woman. She favored it because she felt it was whiter than other powders."

"And where is this nurse now?"

"She took ill, so I dismissed her. With ample funds for her livelihood, of course." Spoken like a woman who was both intellectual and perhaps too kind for her own good.

So say there was some kind of poison in the face powder. If the mother were to use it, it would impact the child; if whatever was in the powder got into the mother's milk, it might even end up in the child's body. Neither Jinshi nor Gyokuyou knew what such a poison might be. But if the mysterious message was to be believed, it was how the young prince had met his end. By simple face powder, makeup used by any number of people in the rear palace.

"Ignorance is a sin," Gyokuyou said. "I should have taken more care with what was going into my child's mouth."

"I'm guilty of the same crime," Jinshi said. It was ultimately he who had allowed the Emperor's son to be lost. And there may have been others who had died in the womb.

"I told Consort Lihua about the face powder, but anything I say only makes her dig in her heels," said Gyokuyou. Lihua had dark bags under her eyes even now, and used ample helpings of the white makeup to conceal the poor color of her face, never believing it was poisonous.

Jinshi gazed at the simple cotton cloth. He thought it looked strangely familiar. The hesitant quality of the characters appeared to be a ruse, but the hand had an unmistakably feminine quality. "Who gave this to you, and when?"

“It came the day I demanded the doctor examine my daughter. I’m afraid I only succeeded in causing you trouble, but this was by the window afterward. It was tied to a rhododendron branch.”

Jinshi remembered the commotion that day. Had someone in the crowd noticed something, realized something, left a word of warning? But who? “No doctor in the palace would resort to such circuitous methods,” he said.

“I agree. And ours never did seem to know how to treat the prince.”

All that commotion. On reflection, Jinshi did remember a serving girl who had seemed distanced from the other rubbernecks. She had been talking to herself. What was it she had been saying?

“I need something to write on.”

Jinshi felt the pieces fall into place. He started to chuckle. “Consort Gyokuyou, if I were to find the author of this message, what would you do with her?”

“I would thank her profusely. I owe her my daughter’s life,” the consort said, her eyes sparkling. Ah, so she was keen to discover her benefactor.

“Very well. Perhaps you would allow me to keep these for a short while.”

“I eagerly await whatever you may discover.” Gyokuyou looked happily at Jinshi. He returned her smile, then collected the jar of face powder and the cloth with the message on it. He searched his memory for any cloth that felt quite like this.

“Far be it from me to disappoint His Majesty’s favorite lady.” Jinshi’s smile had all the innocence of a child on a treasure hunt.

Chapter 4: The Nymph's Smile

Maomao first learned of the prince's passing when black mourning sashes were distributed at the evening meal. The women would wear them for seven days to demonstrate their sorrow. But what caused more frowns than anything was the announcement that their serving of meat, already miserly, would be eliminated entirely for the duration. The women servants ate two meals a day, chiefly millet and soup, with the occasional vegetable. It was enough for the petite Maomao, but many of the women found the meals something less than filling.

There were many kinds of women among this lowest class of servants. Some came from farming families; others were city girls; and although uncommon, a few were the daughters of officials. Children of the bureaucracy could expect a modicum more respect, but even so, the work a woman was given to do depended on her own accomplishments. A girl who couldn't read or write could certainly not expect to become a consort with her own chambers. Being a consort was a *job*. You even got a salary.

I guess maybe it didn't matter, in the end.

Maomao was aware of what had killed the young prince. It was Consort Lihua's and her serving women's liberal use of white powder to cover her face. That powder was so expensive, the average citizen couldn't expect to use it a day in her life. Some of the more established ladies in the brothel had had it, though. Some of them made more money in a single night than a farmer would earn in his entire lifetime, and they could afford their own makeup. Others received it as an expensive present.

The women would cover themselves in it from their faces down to their necks, and it would eat away at their bodies. Some of them died from it. Maomao's father had warned them to stop using it, but they ignored him. Maomao, attending at her father's side, had witnessed several courtesans

waste away and die with her own eyes. They had weighed their lives against their beauty, and in the end had lost them both.

That was why Maomao had broken off a couple of convenient branches, scrawled a brief message to each of the consorts, and left it for them. Not that she had expected them to heed a warning from a servant girl who couldn't get her hands on so much as paper or a brush.

After the mourning period was over and the black sashes disappeared, she began to hear rumors about Consort Gyokuyou. People said that after the loss of the prince, the Emperor, sick at heart, had begun to take comfort with Gyokuyou and his surviving daughter. But to Consort Lihua, who had lost her child just as he had, he did not go.

How convenient for him. Maomao drained her bowl of soup—today furnished with the smallest sliver of a piece of fish—then cleaned up her utensils and headed to work.

“A summons, sir?” Maomao was carrying a laundry basket when she was stopped by a eunuch, who told her to report to the office of the Matron of the Serving Women.

The Office of Serving Women was one of the three major divisions of service in the rear palace, and encompassed responsibility for the lowest-ranking of the women servants. The other two divisions were the Office of the Interior, which dealt with the consorts, and the Domestic Service Department, to which the eunuchs were attached.

What could she want with me? Maomao wondered. The eunuch was talking to other serving girls nearby, as well. Whatever was going on, it involved more than just Maomao. They must need more hands for some chore or other, she reasoned. She set the basket outside its proper room, then went following after the eunuch.

The Matron of the Serving Women's building was situated just to one side of the main gate, one of the four gates that separated the rear palace from the world outside. When the Emperor visited his ladies, this was the

entrance through which he passed.

Despite being there on an official summons, Maomao didn't feel comfortable in the place. Although it was somewhat lackluster compared to the headquarters of the Office of the Interior, located next door, it was still noticeably more ornate than the residences of the mid-level consorts. The railing was worked with elaborate carvings, and brightly colored dragons climbed the vermilion pillars.

Urged inside, Maomao was somewhat less impressed than she had expected to be: the only furnishing in the room was a single large desk. Ten or so other serving girls besides her were present, and they seemed animated by anxiety, anticipation, and a strange sort of excitement.

"All right, thank you. The rest of you may go home," the eunuch said.

Huh? Maomao felt unnatural, being singled out this way. She went alone into the next room as the remaining women left with suspicious glances in her direction.

Even for the chamber of an appointed official, it was a large space. Maomao looked around, intrigued, whereupon she noticed that all the serving women in the room were looking in one particular direction. Sitting unobtrusively in the corner was a woman, attended by a eunuch, and not far away was another, somewhat older woman. Maomao remembered the middle-aged woman to be the Matron of the Serving Women, but the haughty-looking lady she didn't recognize.

Hrm? Now she registered that the person's shoulders were rather broad for a woman's, and their dress was so plain. Their hair was mostly held back by a sort of scarf, the rest of it cascading down behind them. *He's a man?*

He was surveying the female servants with a smile as soft and gentle as that of a heavenly nymph. Even the Matron was blushing like a girl. Suddenly Maomao understood the flush in everyone's cheeks. This had to be the immensely beautiful eunuch of whom she had heard so much. He had hair as fine as silk, an almost liquid presence, almond-shaped eyes, and eyebrows that evoked willow branches. A heavenly nymph on a picture scroll could not have competed with him for loveliness.

What a waste, Maomao thought, not remotely blushing herself. The men in the rear palace were all eunuchs, deprived of their ability to reproduce. They now lacked the equipment they needed to bear children. Precisely how gorgeous the offspring of this man would have been would remain a matter for the imagination.

Just as Maomao was thinking (with no small amount of impertinence) that such almost inhuman beauty might ensnare even the attentions of His Majesty, the eunuch stood up with a flowing motion. He went over to a desk, took up a brush, and began to write with elegant movements of his hand and arm. Then, with a smile as sweet as ambrosia, he displayed his work to the women.

Maomao froze.

You there, with the freckles, it said. *You stay here*.

That, at least, was the gist of it. The beautiful man must have noticed Maomao's reaction, because he turned his fullest smile on her. He rolled up the paper again and clapped his hands twice. "We're done here for today. You may all go back to your rooms."

The women, with plentiful disappointed glances back over their shoulders, exited the room. They would never know what had been written on the nymph's paper.

Maomao watched them leave, and after a moment it occurred to her that they were all petite women with prominent freckles. But they hadn't heeded the sign, which must mean that they couldn't read.

The message hadn't been for Maomao alone. She made to leave the room with the others, only to feel a hand placed firmly on her shoulder. With much fear and trembling, she turned around to find herself confronted with the almost blinding smile of the nymph-man.

"Now, now, mustn't do that," he said. "I want you to stay behind."

That smile—so bold, so bright—wouldn't take no for an answer.

Chapter 5: Attendant

“Most interesting. I was given to understand that you couldn’t read,” the beautiful eunuch said slowly, deliberately. Maomao followed uncomfortably behind him as he walked along.

“No, sir. I am of lowly birth. There must be some mistake.”

Who the hell would teach me? she thought, but she would hardly have said the words if she’d been under torture. Maomao was set on acting as ignorant as she could. Maybe her language was a little off, but what could she do about it? Someone of such mean origins could be expected to do no better.

The lower-ranked serving girls were handled differently depending on whether or not they could read. Those who were literate and those who were not each had their uses, but if one could read yet pretend ignorance—ah, now that was the way to walk the fine line in the middle.

The beautiful eunuch introduced himself as Jinshi. His gorgeous smile suggested he wouldn’t hurt a flea, but Maomao felt something shifty behind it. How else could he needle her so remorselessly? Jinshi had told Maomao to be silent and follow him. And that brought them to this moment. Maomao was aware that, as a servant of no import, shaking her head at Jinshi might be the last thing she ever did with it, so she had obediently done as he said. She was busy calculating what might happen next, and how she would deal with it.

It wasn’t as if she couldn’t guess what might have inspired Jinshi to summon her; what remained mysterious was how he had figured it out. The message she had delivered to the consort.

A piece of cloth dangled with affected nonchalance in Jinshi’s hand. It was festooned with unkempt characters. Maomao had told no one she could write, and had likewise kept silent about her background as an apothecary

and her knowledge of poisons. He could never have tracked her by her handwriting. She thought she had been careful to ensure there had been no one around when she delivered the message, but perhaps she had missed something, been seen by someone. The witness must have reported a petite servant girl with freckles.

No doubt Jinshi had begun by canvassing all the girls who could write, collecting samples of their calligraphy. One could attempt to appear a less competent wielder of the brush than one was, but telltale signs and identifying characteristics would remain. When that search had proved in vain, he would have turned to the girls who could not write.

Suspicious fart. Too much time on his hands...

As Maomao was having these uncharitable thoughts, they arrived at their destination. It was, as she might have expected, Consort Gyokuyou's pavilion. Jinshi knocked on the door and a placid voice responded, "Come in."

So they did. Inside they discovered a gorgeous woman with red hair, lovingly cradling an infant with curly locks. The child's cheeks were rosy, her skin the same pale tone as her mother's. She was the picture of health as she lay dozing sweetly in the consort's arms.

"I have brought the one you wished to see, milady." Jinshi no longer spoke in the jocular manner of earlier, but comported himself with perfect gravity.

"Thank you for your trouble." Gyokuyou smiled, a smile that was warmer than Jinshi's, and bowed her head to Maomao.

Maomao looked at her in surprise. "I possess no station to warrant such acknowledgment, milady." She chose her words carefully, trying not to offend. Although, not having been born to a life where such care was necessary, she wasn't sure she was doing it right.

"Oh, but you do. And I will do much more than this to show my gratitude to you—my daughter's savior."

"I'm certain there's been some misunderstanding. Perhaps you have the wrong person," Maomao said. She felt herself break into a cold sweat: she

was being polite, but she was still contradicting an Imperial consort. She wished for her head to remain attached to her shoulders, but she did not wish to be a part of anything involving people such as this—to be pressed into any kind of service for any kind of noble or royal.

Jinshi, alert to the concern on Gyokuyou's face, displayed the cloth to Maomao with a flourish. "Are you aware that this is the material used in the maids' work clothes?"

"Now that you mention it, sir, I see the resemblance." She would play stupid to the bitter end. Even though she knew it was useless.

"It's more than a resemblance. This came from the uniform of a girl connected to the *shang* of sartorial affairs."

The palace serving staff were grouped into six *shang*, or main offices of employment. The *shang fu*, or Wardrobe Service, dealt with the dispensation of clothing, and it was this group to which Maomao, who was largely charged with doing laundry, belonged. The unbleached skirt she wore matched the color of the fabric in Jinshi's hands. If anyone were to inspect her skirt, they would find an unusual seam, hidden carefully on the inside.

In other words, the proof was there before them. Maomao doubted Jinshi would do anything so uncouth as to check for himself right in front of Consort Gyokuyou, but she couldn't be sure. She decided she had best own up before she was publicly humiliated.

"What exactly is it that you both want from me?" she asked.

The two of them looked at each other, apparently taking this for confirmation. Both had the sweetest of smiles on their faces. The only sound in the room was the whispering breath of the sleeping child and, almost as soft, Maomao sighing.

The very next day, Maomao was obliged to pack up her meager belongings. Xiaolan and all the other women who shared a room with her were properly jealous, and pestered her endlessly about how this turn of events had come about. Maomao could only give her most strained smile and try to pretend it was no great matter.

Maomao was to be a lady-in-waiting to the Emperor's favored consort.
She had, in a word, made it.

Chapter 6: Poison Tester

Jinshi found this a most congenial turn of events. The unusual girl he had discovered by sheer chance would now help him solve one of his many problems.

Lady Gyokuyou, the Emperor's favored consort, was presently served by four ladies-in-waiting. That might be enough for some concubine of mean account, but for a high-ranking consort like Gyokuyou, it seemed rather too few. The ladies-in-waiting, however, insisted that the four of them were perfectly sufficient to take care of everything that needed doing, and Gyokuyou herself didn't seem inclined to press for more servants.

Jinshi understood well why this was the case. Consort Gyokuyou was a cheerful and generally tranquil person, but she was also intelligent and careful. In the garden of women that was the rear palace, a woman who received the Imperial favor and was not suspicious of others was in mortal danger. There had, in fact, been several prior attempts on Gyokuyou's life. Notably, when she had become pregnant with the child who would go on to be Princess Lingli.

And so, although she had had ten ladies-in-waiting at first, she now had less than half that number. Typically, a lady only brought her own servants with her when she first arrived at the rear palace, but Gyokuyou had called on special privilege to bring in that nursemaid. She would never accept an anonymous servant girl from some far-flung corner of the rear palace as one of her ladies-in-waiting. But she had her station as a high consort to think of. Surely she could take on at least one more woman.

And this was where the freckled girl came in. She had saved Gyokuyou's daughter; surely the consort wouldn't be averse to her. What was more, the girl knew something about poisons. That could only be useful. There was always the possibility that this freckled girl would put her knowledge to evil

ends, but if she tried anything, they would simply have to corner her somewhere she couldn't do anything harmful. It was all so simple.

If all else failed, Jinshi thought with a grin, he could always use his charms. Yes, he found it just as repugnant as everyone else that he was so ready to take advantage of his ethereal beauty. But he had no intention of changing his ways. Indeed, his looks were what gave Jinshi his value in life.



When one became a servant assigned to a specific mistress, and a lady-in-waiting to the Emperor's favorite consort at that, one found that one's treatment improved. Maomao, who had heretofore been squarely at the bottom of the palace hierarchy, suddenly found herself in the middle ranks. She was told her salary would see a significant increase, although twenty percent of what she earned went to her "family," which was to say, the merchants who had sold her into this life. A distasteful arrangement, in her opinion. A system created so greedy officials could line their pockets.

She was also given her own room—cramped, but a far cry from the overcrowded accommodations she had shared in the past. From a meager reed mat and a single sheet for bedding, she now found herself with an actual bed. Granted, it took up half her room, but Maomao was frankly happy to be able to get up in the morning without treading all over her coworkers.

She had one more cause for celebration as well, although she wouldn't know it until later.

The Jade Pavilion, in which Gyokuyou lived, was home to four other ladies-in-waiting besides Maomao. A nursemaid had lately been dismissed, allegedly because the princess was beginning to be weaned, but Maomao thought she had an inkling of the real reason. It was an awfully small number of women, in view of the fact that Consort Lihua had more than ten ladies-in-waiting attending upon her. Gyokuyou's ladies were more than a little taken aback to discover that one of the least important people in the

palace had suddenly been elevated to their colleague, but they never harassed Maomao in the way she had half expected. If anything, they seemed sympathetic toward her.

But why? she thought.

She would find out soon enough.

A palace meal, packed with ingredients traditionally believed to be of medicinal benefit, sat before her. One by one, Hongniang, the head of Gyokuyou's ladies-in-waiting, took samples and put them on little saucers, placing them in front of Maomao. Gyokuyou observed the scene apologetically but gave no indication that she was going to stop what was happening. The other three ladies-in-waiting likewise watched with pitying gazes.

The location was Gyokuyou's room. It was appointed in the highest style, and it was where the consort ate all her meals. Before the food reached her, it would pass through the hands of many others, and being the Emperor's favorite, it behooved her to consider the possibility that one or more of those hands might try to poison the product.

Thus a food taster was necessary. Everyone was on edge because of what had happened to the young prince. Rumors were rampant that the princess might have been sickened by the same poison the infant boy died from. The ladies-in-waiting hadn't been informed of what the toxic substance had ultimately been discovered to be, and so they were understandably paranoid that it might be in anything or everything.

It would not have been strange if they'd viewed the lowly servant girl sent to them at that moment, specifically to be a food taster, as nothing but a disposable pawn. Maomao was charged not only with tasting Consort Gyokuyou's meals, but also the baby food served to the princess. On those occasions when His Majesty was present, she was also responsible for sampling the luxurious edibles offered to him.

After it was discovered that Gyokuyou was pregnant, Maomao was given to understand, there had been two separate instances of attempted

poisoning. In one, the taster had gotten off without real injury, but another had found themselves subject to a nerve toxin that had left their arms and legs paralyzed. The remaining ladies-in-waiting had had, with much fear and trembling, to check the food themselves, so they frankly must have been grateful for Maomao's arrival.

Maomao furrowed her brow as she looked at the plate in front of her. It was ceramic.

If they're so scared of poison, they should be using silver. She picked up the little bit of pickled vegetable in her chopsticks and regarded it critically. She took a sniff. Then she placed it on her tongue, checking to see whether it caused a tingling sensation before she swallowed it.

I don't think I'm actually qualified to be tasting for poisons, she reflected. Fast-acting agents were one thing, but with regard to slower toxins she expected to be somewhat useless. In the name of science, Maomao had accustomed her body to a variety of poisons by gradual exposure, and suspected there were few left that would have a serious effect on her. This was not, let it be said, a part of her work as an apothecary, but purely a way of satisfying her intellectual curiosity. In the west, she heard, they had a name for researchers who did things that made no sense to people: mad scientists. Even her father, who had taught her the apothecary's trade, grew exasperated with her little experiments.

When she was satisfied that there were no untoward physical effects and that she detected no poisons she knew of, the meal could finally make its way to Consort Gyokuyou.

Next would come the flavorless baby food.

"I think it might be best to change the plates to ones made of silver," she said to Hongniang, as flatly as possible. She had been called to Hongniang's room to provide a report on her first day of work. The chief lady's chambers were generous in size, but unadorned with any frivolous objects, bespeaking Hongniang's practical bent.

Hongniang, an attractive, black-haired woman not quite thirty years of

age, let out a sigh. “Jinshi really had it all figured out.” She confessed with some chagrin that they had deliberately not used silver tableware at the eunuch’s instruction.

Maomao had a distinct suspicion that it was also Jinshi who had ordered her appointed food taster. She struggled not to let her already cold expression turn into one of outright disgust as she listened to Hongniang talk. “I don’t know why you decided to hide your knowledge, but it’s amazing that you know so much about poisons and medicine both. If you’d told them from the start that you knew how to write, you could have gotten a lot more money.”

“My knowledge comes from my vocation—I was an apothecary. Until I was abducted and sold into this place. My kidnappers receive a portion of my salary even now. The thought turns my stomach.” Maomao’s hackles were up now and her words came in a sharp rush, but the chief lady-in-waiting didn’t rebuke her.

“You mean you were willing to put up with receiving less than you were worth to make sure they had one less cup of wine when they were carousing.” Hongniang, it seemed, was more than perceptive enough to grasp Maomao’s motives. Maomao found herself simply relieved that Hongniang hadn’t scolded her for what she said. “Not to mention that women of no special distinction serve a couple of years and then go on their merry ways. Plenty of replacements out there.”

She didn’t have to understand quite that well.

Hongniang took a carafe from the table and gave it to Maomao. “What’s this?” Maomao asked, but almost as soon as the words were out of her mouth, a pain shot through her wrist. She dropped the carafe on the floor in her shock. A large crack spidered through the ceramic vessel.

“Oh, my goodness, that’s quite an expensive piece of pottery. Certainly not something a simple lady-in-waiting could afford. You won’t be able to make remittances to your family anymore with that hanging over your head—in fact, we should probably bill *them*.”

Maomao understood immediately what Hongniang was saying, and the

slightest ironic smile crept over her otherwise expressionless face. “My profound apologies,” she said. “Please, deduct it from the amount of my salary that’s sent home each month. And if that isn’t enough, by all means, take from my own share as well.”

“Thank you, I’ll make sure the Matron of the Serving Women knows to do that. And one more thing.” Hongniang put the broken carafe back on the table before taking a wood-strip roll out of a drawer and writing on it in quick, short strokes. “This details your additional salary as a food taster. Hazard pay, you might call it.”

The amount was almost as much again as Maomao was currently receiving. And insofar as nothing would be taken from it to pay her captors, Maomao came out ahead.

This woman does know how to use the carrot, she thought as she bowed deeply and left the room.

Chapter 7: Branch

The four ladies-in-waiting who had always attended Consort Gyokuyou were exceptionally hard workers. Granted, the Jade Pavilion was not the largest place, but they kept it humming along neatly, just the four of them. Serving girls from the *shangqin*—the Housekeeping Service, those charged with keeping rooms clean—did come sometimes, but by and large the four ladies-in-waiting handled all the cleaning and tidying themselves. That was not, for the record, something ladies-in-waiting typically did.

All of this meant that the new girl, Maomao, had little to possess her other than tasting the food. Besides Hongniang, none of the other ladies-in-waiting ever asked Maomao to do anything. Maybe they felt bad that she was stuck with the most unpleasant job, or maybe they simply didn't want her intruding on their turf. Whatever the reason, even when Maomao offered to help, they would gently rebuff her with an, "Oh, don't worry about it," and urge her to go back to her room.

How am I supposed to settle in here?

Cooped up in her room, she was summoned twice daily to meals, once to afternoon tea, and every few days to try one of the sumptuous banquets offered when the Emperor came calling. That was all. Hongniang was kind enough to try to find little tasks for Maomao to do, but they were never anything difficult, and didn't occupy her for long.

In addition to her tasting duties, she found her own meals became more elaborate. Sweet treats were offered at tea, and when there were extras, they would be sent to Maomao. And because she was no longer working like an ant as she once had been, all those extra nutrients went to flesh.

I feel like some kind of livestock.

Her new appointment as food taster had brought with it another thing Maomao didn't like. She had always been rather slim, but this meant that if a

poison caused her to waste away, it would be hard to detect. What was more, the dosage of any given toxin that might be deadly was in proportion to one's body size. A little extra weight could improve her chances of survival.

In Maomao's mind, there was no way she could miss a poison so powerful as to make her waste away, and meanwhile she was confident she could survive an ordinarily fatal dose of many toxins. But no one around her seemed to share her optimism. They only saw a small, delicate girl being treated like a disposable pawn, and they pitied her for it. And so they plied her with congee even after she was full, and always gave her an extra serving of vegetables.

They remind me of the girls from the brothels. Maomao could be cold, reticent, and unsentimental, but for some reason the women had always doted on her. They always had an extra treat or a bit of something for her to eat.

Although Maomao didn't realize it, there was a reason people were so inclined to look kindly on her. Running along her left arm was a collection of scars. Cuts, stabs, burns, and what seemed to be repeated piercing with a needle. That is to say, to others, Maomao looked like a petite, overthin girl with wounds on her arm. Her arms were frequently bandaged, her face sometimes pale, and once in a while she was given to fainting. People simply assumed, with a tear in their eye, that her coldness and reticence were the natural result of the treatment she had suffered to this point in her life. She had been abused, they were sure—but they were wrong.

Maomao had done all of it to herself.

She was most interested in discovering the effects of various medicines, analgesics, and other concoctions firsthand. She would take small doses of poison to inure herself to them, and had been known to let herself be bitten by venomous snakes. And as for the fainting, well, she didn't always get the dosage quite right. This was also why the wounds were concentrated on her left arm: it was preferable to her dominant limb, her right.

None of this sprang from any masochistic proclivity for pain, but was fueled entirely by the interests of a girl whose intellectual curiosity inclined

rather too much in the direction of medicines and poisons. It had been her father's burden to cope with her for her entire life. Yes, it was he who had taught Maomao her letters and first instructed her in the ways of medicine, in the hopes that she would see a way forward in life other than prostitution, even though he had been obliged to raise her in and around the red-light district. By the time he realized he had far too apt a student on his hands, it was too late, and the calumnies about him had already begun to spread. There were a few who understood, just a few; but most turned cold, hard gazes on Maomao's father. They never for a moment imagined that a girl of her age might commit self-harm in the name of experimentation.

And so the story seemed to be complete: after suffering long abuse at the hands of her father, this poor child had been sold off to the rear palace, where she was now to be sacrificed to discover poison in the consort's food. A sorrowful tale indeed.

And one of which the protagonist was entirely unaware.

I'm going to be a pig at this rate! About the time Maomao began to fret about this particular possibility, her woes were compounded by a most unwelcome visitor.

"It's rather late for you," Consort Gyokuyou said as a newcomer entered the room.

The caller in question was the nymph-like eunuch, this time with one of his compatriots in tow. The gorgeous youth evidently made routine rounds of the chambers of the upper consorts. Maomao tasted the sweets the compatriot had brought for poison, then withdrew discreetly behind Consort Gyokuyou where she reclined on a chaise longue. Maomao was standing in for Hongniang, who had gone to change the princess's diaper. Eunuchs these men may have been, but they were still not allowed an audience with the consort without the presence of a lady-in-waiting.

"Yes, there's been word that the barbarian tribe has been successfully subdued."

"Has it? And what's to come of it?" Gyokuyou's eyes glowed with

curiosity; this subject was more than enough to excite the interest of a bird trapped in the cage that was the rear palace. Though she was the Emperor's favorite, Gyokuyou was also still young, not more than a couple or three years older than Maomao herself, as Maomao understood it.

"I'm not certain it's appropriate to discuss in front of a lady such as yourself..."

"I wouldn't be here if I couldn't endure both the beautiful and the terrible in this world," Gyokuyou said boldly.

Jinshi glanced at Maomao, an appraising look that swiftly vanished. He insisted there was nothing interesting about the subject, but proceeded to speak of the world outside the birdcage.



Some days before, a band of warriors had been sent out, on information that a tribe was once again plotting ill. This country was largely a peaceful one, but issues such as this did sometimes mar its tranquility.

The warriors successfully drove back the barbarian scouts who had ventured into the territory, with hardly a casualty to speak of. The trouble started on the way home. The food in the encampment was compromised, and almost a dozen men came down with food poisoning. Many more were deeply demoralized. They had obtained the provisions at a nearby village just prior to coming into contact with the barbarians. The villages in this area were technically part of Maomao's nation, but historically they were not without their ties to the barbarian tribes.

One of the soldiers, armed, arrested the village chieftain. Several villagers who attempted to resist were killed on the spot for conspiring with the barbarians. The rest of the villagers would learn their fate after it was determined what would happen to their chief.



When Jinshi had delivered this précis of events, he took a sip of tea.

That's outrageous. Maomao wanted to grab her head in her hands. She wished she had never heard the story. There were so many things in the world one would be happier not knowing. The eunuch saw the furrow in her brow and turned his fine countenance on her.

Don't look at me.

Ah, if only wishes made things so.

Jinshi's lips formed a gentle arch as he took in Maomao's expression. He almost seemed to be testing her with his smile. "Something on your mind?"

It was as good as an order to say something, so she had to find something to say.

Will it even matter? she asked herself. But one thing was for certain: if she said nothing, then at least one village would disappear off the map of the frontier.

"I offer you only my personal opinion," Maomao said, and picked a branch out of a nearby vase in which some flowers had been arranged. This branch, which had no blossoms itself, was from a rhododendron. The same kind of branch upon which Maomao had left her message. She plucked off a leaf and put it in her mouth.

"Is it flavorful?" Consort Gyokuyou asked, but Maomao shook her head.

"No, ma'am. Touching it can induce nausea and difficulty breathing."

"And yet you've just had it in your mouth," Jinshi said with a probing look.

"You needn't fret," Maomao said to the eunuch, setting the branch on the table. "But you see, even here on the grounds of the rear palace, there are poisonous plants. The rhododendron's poison is in the leaves, but others contain their toxins in the branches or roots. Some release poison if you so much as burn them up." These hints, Maomao suspected, would be enough to lead the eunuchs and the clever Gyokuyou where she wanted them to go. Despite doubting it was necessary to continue, she did so: "When encamped, soldiers make their chopsticks and campfires from local materials, do they not?"