


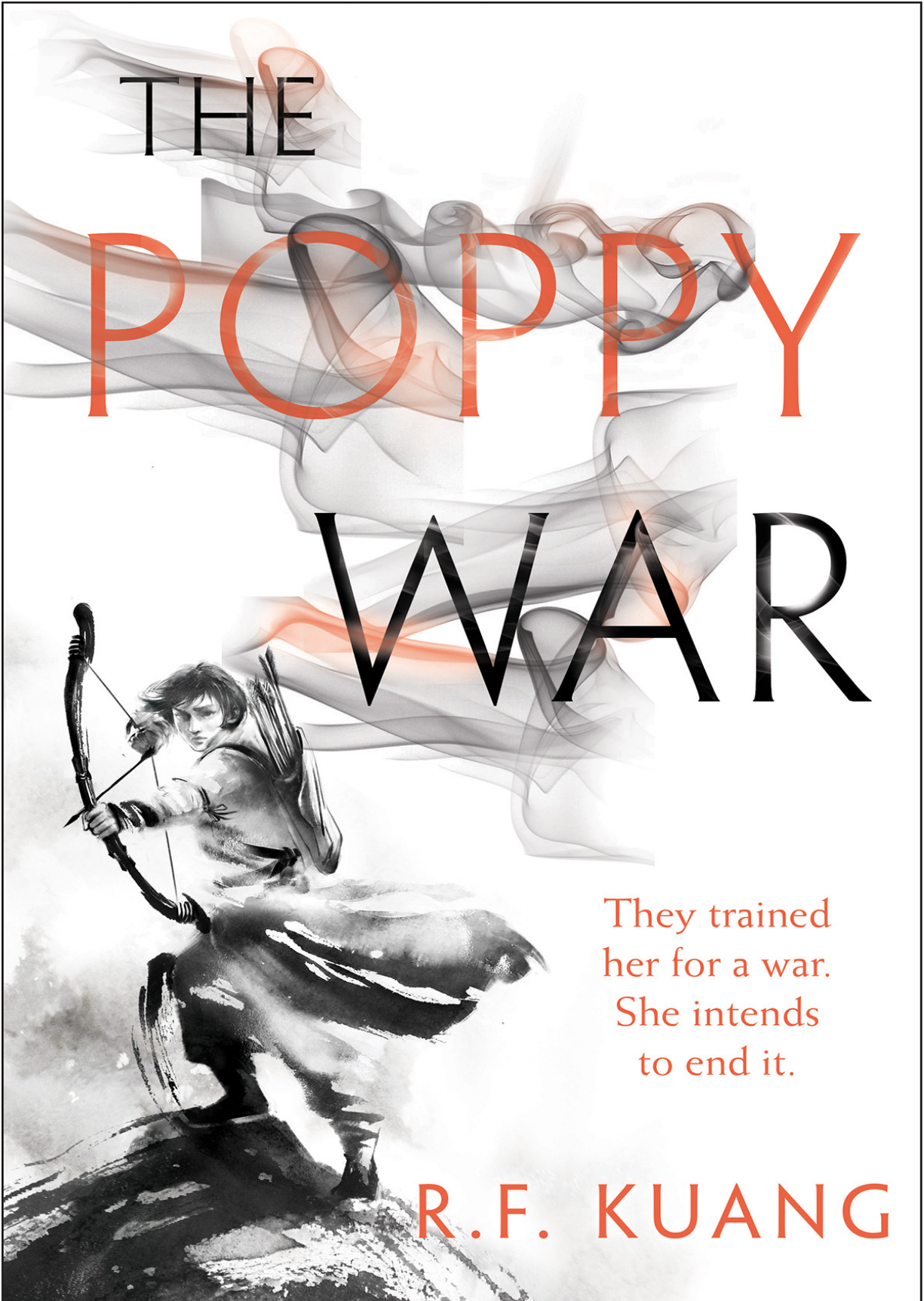


THE POPPY WAR



They trained
her for a war.
She intends
to end it.

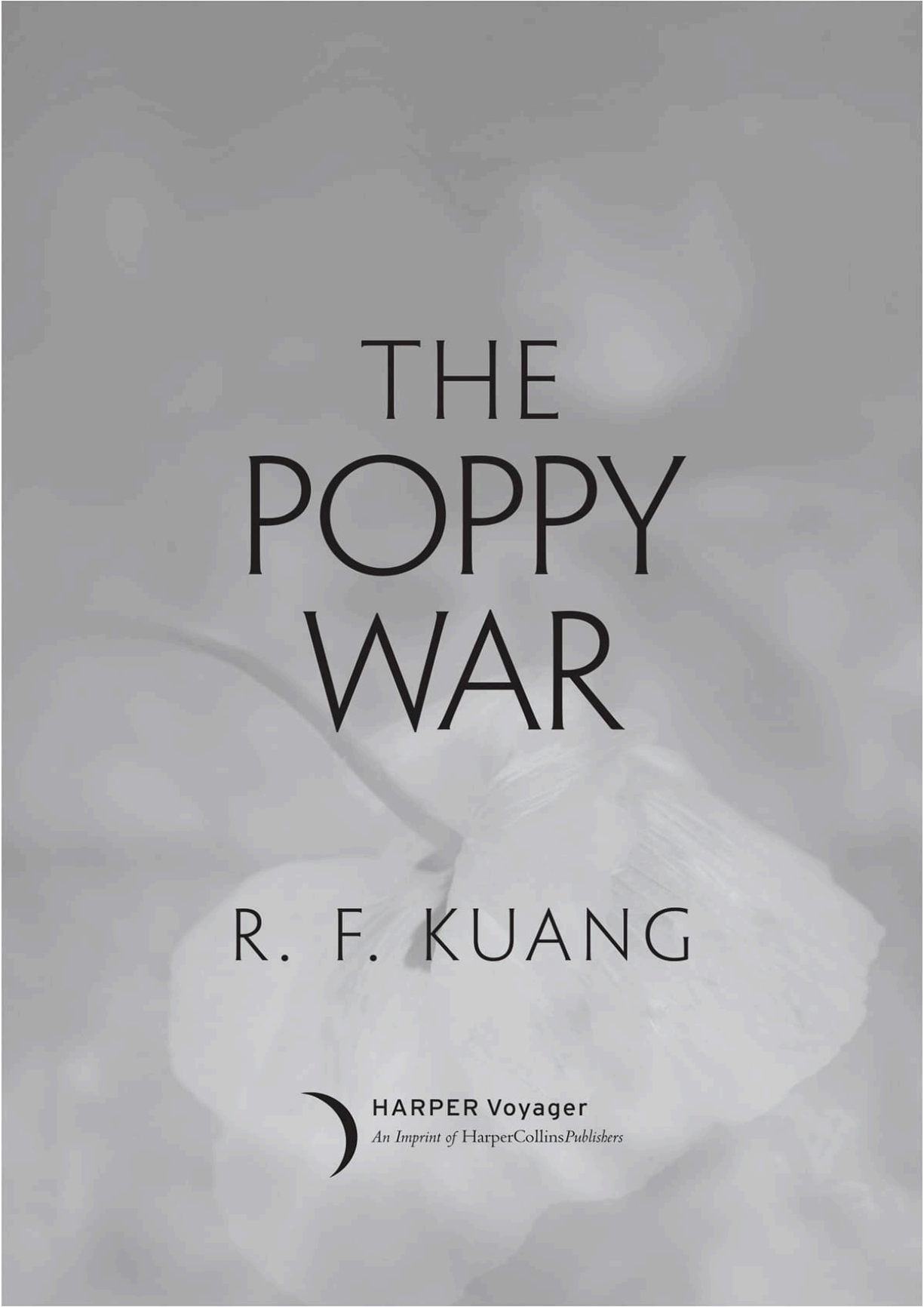
R.F. KUANG



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HARPER Voyager

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Dedication

This is for Iris

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Part I

Chapter 1

“Take your clothes off.”

Rin blinked. “What?”

The proctor glanced up from his booklet. “Cheating prevention protocol.” He gestured across the room to a female proctor. “Go with her, if you must.”

Rin crossed her arms tightly across her chest and walked toward the second proctor. She was led behind a screen, patted thoroughly to make sure she hadn’t packed test materials up any orifices, and then handed a formless blue sack.

“Put this on,” said the proctor.

“Is this really necessary?” Rin’s teeth chattered as she stripped. The exam smock was too large for her; the sleeves draped over her hands so that she had to roll them up several times.

“Yes.” The proctor motioned for her to sit down on a bench. “Last year twelve students were caught with papers sewn into the linings of their shirts. We take precautions. Open your mouth.”

Rin obliged.

The proctor prodded her tongue with a slim rod. “No discoloration, that’s good. Eyes wide open.”

“Why would anyone drug themselves *before* a test?” Rin asked as the proctor stretched her eyelids. The proctor didn’t respond.

Satisfied, she waved Rin down the hallway where other prospective students waited in a straggly line. Their hands were empty, faces uniformly tight with anxiety. They had brought no materials to the test—pens could be hollowed out to contain scrolls with answers written on them.

“Hands out where we can see them,” ordered the male proctor, walking to the front of the line. “Sleeves must remain rolled up past the elbow. From

this point forward, you do not speak to one another. If you have to urinate, raise your hand. We have a bucket in the back of the room.”

“What if I have to shit?” a boy asked.

The proctor gave him a long look.

“It’s a twelve-hour test,” the boy said defensively.

The proctor shrugged. “Try to be quiet.”

Rin had been too nervous to eat anything that morning. Even the thought of food made her nauseated. Her bladder and intestines were empty. Only her mind was full, crammed with an insane number of mathematical formulas and poems and treatises and historical dates to be spilled out on the test booklet. She was ready.

The examination room fit a hundred students. The desks were arranged in neat rows of ten. On each desk sat a heavy exam booklet, an inkwell, and a writing brush.

Most of the other provinces of Nikan had to section off entire town halls to accommodate the thousands of students who attempted the exam each year. But Tikany township in Rooster Province was a village of farmers and peasants. Tikany’s families needed hands to work the fields more than they did university-educated brats. Tikany only ever used the one classroom.

Rin filed into the room along with the other students and took her assigned seat. She wondered how the examinees looked from above: neat squares of black hair, uniform blue smocks, and brown wooden tables. She imagined them multiplied across identical classrooms throughout the country right now, all watching the water clock with nervous anticipation.

Rin’s teeth chattered madly in a staccato that she thought everyone could surely hear, and it wasn’t just from the cold. She clamped her jaw shut, but the shuddering just spread down her limbs to her hands and knees. The writing brush shook in her grasp, dribbling black droplets across the table.

She tightened her grip and wrote her full name across the booklet’s cover page. *Fang Runin*.

She wasn’t the only one who was nervous. Already there were sounds of retching over the bucket in the back of the room.

She squeezed her wrist, fingers closing over pale burn scars, and inhaled. *Focus*.

In the corner, a water clock rang softly.

“Begin,” said the examiner.

A hundred test booklets were opened with a flapping noise, like a flock of sparrows taking off at once.

Two years ago, on the day Tikany's magistracy had arbitrarily estimated to be her fourteenth birthday, Rin's foster parents had summoned her into their chambers.

This rarely happened. The Fangs liked to ignore Rin until they had a task for her, and then they spoke to her the way they would command a dog. *Lock up the store. Hang up the laundry. Take this packet of opium to the neighbors and don't leave until you've scalped them for twice what we paid for it.*

A woman Rin had never seen before sat perched on the guest's chair. Her face was completely dusted over with what looked like white rice flour, punctuated with caked-up dabs of color on her lips and eyelids. She wore a bright lilac dress dyed with a plum-flower pattern, cut in a fashion that might have suited a girl half her age. Her squat figure squeezed over the sides like a bag of grain.

"Is this the girl?" the woman asked. "Hm. She's a little dark—the inspector won't be too bothered, but it'll drive your price down a bit."

Rin had a sudden, horrifying suspicion of what was happening. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"Sit down, Rin," said Uncle Fang.

He reached out with a leathery hand to maneuver her into a chair. Rin immediately turned to flee. Auntie Fang seized her arm and dragged her back. A brief struggle ensued, in which Auntie Fang overpowered Rin and jerked her toward the chair.

"I won't go to a brothel!" Rin yelled.

"She's not from the brothel, you idiot," Auntie Fang snapped. "Sit down. Show some respect to Matchmaker Liew."

Matchmaker Liew looked unfazed, as if her line of work often involved accusations of sex trafficking.

"You're about to be a very lucky girl, sweet," she said. Her voice was bright and falsely saccharine. "Would you like to hear why?"

Rin clutched the edge of her chair and stared at Matchmaker Liew's red lips. "No."

Matchmaker Liew's smile tightened. "Aren't you a dear."

It turned out that after a long and arduous search, Matchmaker Liew had found a man in Tikany willing to marry Rin. He was a wealthy merchant who made a living importing pig's ears and shark fins. He was twice divorced and three times her age.

"Isn't that wonderful?" Matchmaker Liew beamed.

Rin bolted for the door. She hadn't made it two steps before Auntie Fang's hand shot out and seized her wrist.

Rin knew what came next. She braced herself for the blow, for the kicks to her ribs where bruises wouldn't show, but Auntie Fang only dragged her back toward her chair.

"You will *behave*," she whispered, and her clenched teeth promised punishment to come. But not now, not in front of Matchmaker Liew.

Auntie Fang liked to keep her cruelty private.

Matchmaker Liew blinked, oblivious. "Don't be scared, sweet. This is exciting!"

Rin felt dizzy. She twisted around to face her foster parents, fighting to keep her voice level. "I thought you needed me at the shop." Somehow, it was the only thing she could think to say.

"Kesegi can run the shop," Auntie Fang said.

"Kesegi is *eight*."

"He'll grow up soon enough." Auntie Fang's eyes glittered. "And your prospective husband happens to be the village import inspector."

Rin understood then. The Fangs were making a simple trade: one foster orphan in exchange for a near monopoly over Tikany's black market in opium.

Uncle Fang took a long draught from his pipe and exhaled, filling the room with thick, cloying smoke. "He's a rich man. You'll be happy."

No, the *Fangs* would be happy. They'd get to import opium in bulk without bleeding money for bribes. But Rin kept her mouth clamped shut—further argument would only bring pain. It was clear that the Fangs would have her married if they had to drag her to the bridal bed themselves.

They had never wanted Rin. They'd taken her in as an infant only because the Empress's mandate after the Second Poppy War forced households with fewer than three children to adopt war orphans who otherwise would have become thieves and beggars.

Since infanticide was frowned upon in Tikany, the Fangs had put Rin to use as a shopgirl and opium runner since she was old enough to count. Still, for all the free labor she provided, the cost of Rin's keep and feed was more than the Fangs cared to bear. Now was their chance to get rid of the financial burden she posed.

This merchant could afford to feed and clothe Rin for the rest of her life, Matchmaker Liew explained. All she had to do was serve him tenderly like a good wife and give him babies and take care of his household (which, as Matchmaker Liew pointed out, had not one but *two* indoor washrooms). It was a much better deal than a war orphan like Rin, with no family or connections, could otherwise hope to secure.

A husband for Rin, money for the matchmaker, and drugs for the Fangs.

“Wow,” Rin said faintly. The floor seemed to wobble beneath her feet. “That’s great. Really great. Terrific.”

Matchmaker Liew beamed again.

Rin concealed her panic, fought to keep her breathing even until the matchmaker had been ushered out. She bowed low to the Fangs and, like a filial foster daughter, expressed her thanks for the pains they had gone through to secure her such a stable future.

She returned to the store. She worked silently until dark, took orders, filed inventory, and marked new orders in the ledger.

The thing about inventory was that one had to be very careful with how one wrote the numbers. So simple to make a nine look like an eight. Easier still to make a one look like a seven . . .

Long after the sun disappeared, Rin closed the shop and locked the door behind her.

Then she shoved a packet of stolen opium under her shirt and ran.

“**Rin?**” A small, wizened man opened the library door and peeked out at her. “Great Tortoise! What are you doing out here? It’s pouring.”

“I came to return a book,” she said, holding out a waterproof satchel.

“Also, I’m getting married.”

“Oh. Oh! What? Come in.”

Tutor Feyrik taught a tuition-free evening class to the peasant children of Tikany, who otherwise would have grown up illiterate. Rin trusted him above anyone else, and she understood his weaknesses better than anyone else.

That made him the linchpin in her escape plan.

“The vase is gone,” she observed as she glanced around the cramped library.

Tutor Feyrik lit a small flame in the fireplace and dragged two cushions in front of it. He motioned for her to sit down. “Bad call. Bad night overall, really.”

Tutor Feyrik had an unfortunate adoration for Divisions, an immensely popular game played in Tikany’s gambling dens. It wouldn’t have been so dangerous if he were better at it.

“That makes no sense,” said Tutor Feyrik after Rin recounted to him the matchmaker’s tidings. “Why would the Fangs marry you off? Aren’t you their best source of unpaid labor?”

“Yes, but they think I’ll be more useful in the import inspector’s bed.”

Tutor Feyrik looked revolted. “Your folks are assholes.”

“So you’ll do it,” she said hopefully. “You’ll help.”

He sighed. "My dear girl, if your family had let you study with me when you were younger, we might have considered this . . . I *told* the Fangs then, I *told* her you might have potential. But at this stage, you're speaking of the impossible."

"But—"

He held up a hand. "More than twenty thousand students take the Keju each year, and hardly three thousand enter the academies. Of those, barely a handful test in from Tikany. You'd be competing against wealthy children—merchants' children, nobles' children—who have been studying for this their entire lives."

"But I've taken classes with you, too. How hard can it be?"

He chuckled at that. "You can read. You can use an abacus. That's not the kind of preparation it takes to pass the Keju. The Keju tests for a deep knowledge of history, advanced mathematics, logic, and the Classics . . ."

"The Four Noble Subjects, I know," she said impatiently. "But I'm a fast reader. I know more characters than most of the adults in this village. Certainly more than the Fangs. I can keep up with your students if you just let me try. I don't even have to attend recitation. I just need books."

"Reading books is one thing," Tutor Feyrik said. "Preparing for the Keju is a different endeavor entirely. My Keju students spend their whole lives studying for it; nine hours a day, seven days a week. You spend more time than that working in the shop."

"I can study at the shop," she protested.

"Don't you have actual responsibilities?"

"I'm good at, uh, multitasking."

He eyed her skeptically for a moment, then shook his head. "You'd only have two years. It can't be done."

"But I don't have any other options," she said shrilly.

In Tikany, an unmarried girl like Rin was worth less than a gay rooster. She could spend her life as a foot servant in some rich household—if she found the right people to bribe. Otherwise her options were some combination of prostitution and begging.

She was being dramatic, but not hyperbolic. She could leave town, probably with enough stolen opium to buy herself a caravan ticket to any other province . . . but where to? She had no friends or family; no one to come to her aid if she was robbed or kidnapped. She had no marketable skills. She had never left Tikany; she didn't know the first thing about survival in the city.

And if they caught her with that much opium on her person . . . Opium possession was a capital offense in the Empire. She'd be dragged into the

town square and publicly beheaded as the latest casualty in the Empress's futile war on drugs.

She had only this option. She had to sway Tutor Feyrik.

She held up the book she had come to return. "This is Mengzi. *Reflections on Statecraft*. I've only had this for three days, right?"

"Yes," he said without checking his ledger.

She handed it to him. "Read me a passage. Any will do."

Tutor Feyrik still looked skeptical, but flipped to the middle of the book to humor her. "The feeling of commiseration is the principle of . . ."

"Benevolence," she finished. "The feeling of shame and dislike is the principle of righteousness. The feeling of modesty and complaisance is the principle of . . . the principle of, uh, propriety. And the feeling of approving and disapproving is the principle of knowledge."

He raised an eyebrow. "And what does that mean?"

"No clue," she admitted. "Honestly, I don't understand Mengzi at all. I just memorized him."

He flipped toward the end of the book, selected another passage, and read: "Order is present in the earthly kingdom when all beings understand their place. All beings understand their place when they fulfill the roles set out for them. The fish does not attempt to fly. The polecat does not attempt to swim. Only when each being respects the heavenly order may there be peace." He shut the book and looked up. "How about this passage? Do you understand what it means?"

She knew what Tutor Feyrik was trying to tell her.

The Nikara believed in strictly defined social roles, a rigid hierarchy that all were locked into at birth. Everything had its own place under heaven. Princelings became Warlords, cadets became soldiers, and orphan shopgirls from Tikany should be content with remaining orphan shopgirls from Tikany. The Keju was a purportedly meritocratic institution, but only the wealthy class ever had the money to afford the tutors their children needed to actually pass.

Well, fuck the heavenly order of things. If getting married to a gross old man was her preordained role on this earth, then Rin was determined to rewrite it.

"It means I'm very good at memorizing long passages of gibberish," she said.

Tutor Feyrik was silent for a moment. "You don't have an eidetic memory," he said finally. "I taught you to read. I would have known."

"I don't," she acknowledged. "But I'm stubborn, I study hard, and I really don't want to be married. It took me three days to memorize Mengzi. It was a

short book, so I'll probably need a full week for the longer texts. But how many texts are on the Keju list? Twenty? Thirty?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Then I'll memorize them all. Every single one. That's all you need to pass the Keju. The other subjects aren't that hard; it's the Classics that trip people up. You told me that yourself."

Tutor Feyrik's eyes were narrowing now, his expression no longer skeptical but calculated. She knew that look. It was the look he got when he was trying to predict his returns at Divisions.

In Nikan, a tutor's success was tied to his reputation for Keju results. You attracted clients if your students made it into an academy. More students meant more money, and to an indebted gambler like Tutor Feyrik, each new student counted. If Rin tested into an academy, an ensuing influx of students could get Tutor Feyrik out of some nasty debts.

"Enrollment's been slow this year, hasn't it?" she pressed.

He grimaced. "It's a drought year. Of course admission is slow. Not many families want to pay tuition when their children barely have a chance to pass regardless."

"But I can pass," she said. "And when I do, you'll have a student who tested into an academy. What do you think that'll do for enrollment?"

He shook his head. "Rin, I couldn't take your tuition money in good faith."

That posed a second problem. She steeled her nerve and looked him in the eye. "That's okay. I can't pay tuition."

He balked visibly.

"I don't make anything at the store," Rin said before he could speak. "The inventory isn't mine. I don't get any wages. I need you to help me to study for the Keju at no cost, and twice as fast as you train your other students."

Tutor Feyrik began to shake his head again. "My dear girl, I can't—this is —"

Time to play her last card. Rin pulled her leather satchel out from under her chair and plunked it on the table. It hit the wood with a solid, satisfying smack.

Tutor Feyrik's eyes followed her eagerly as she slipped a hand into the satchel and drew out one heavy, sweet-smelling packet. Then another. And then another.

"This is six tael worth of premium opium," she said calmly. Six tael was half of what Tutor Feyrik might earn in an entire year.

"You stole this from the Fangs," he said uneasily.

She shrugged. "Smuggling's a difficult business. The Fangs know the risk. Packages go missing all the time. They can hardly report it to the magistrate."

He twiddled his long whiskers. "I don't want to get on the Fangs' bad side."

He had good reason to fear. People in Tikany didn't cross Auntie Fang—not if they cared about their personal safety. She was patient and unpredictable as a snake. She might let faults go unacknowledged for years, and then strike with a well-placed poisonous pellet.

But Rin had covered her tracks.

"One of her shipments was confiscated by port authorities last week," Rin said. "And she hasn't had time to do inventory yet. I've just marked these packets as lost. She can't trace them."

"They could still beat you."

"Not so badly." Rin forced a shrug. "They can't marry off damaged merchandise."

Tutor Feyrik was staring at the satchel with obvious greed.

"Deal," he said finally, and grasped for the opium.

She snatched it out of his reach. "Four conditions. One, you teach me. Two, you teach me for free. Three, you don't smoke when you're teaching me. And four, if you tell anyone where you got this, I'll let your creditors know where to find you."

Tutor Feyrik glared at her for a long moment, and then nodded.

She cleared her throat. "Also, I want to keep this book."

He gave her a wry smile.

"You *would* make a terrible prostitute. No charm."

"**No**," said Auntie Fang. "We need you in the shop."

"I'll study at night," Rin said. "Or during off-hours."

Auntie Fang's face pinched together as she scrubbed at the frying wok. Everything about Auntie Fang was raw: her expression, an open display of impatience and irritation; her fingers, red from hours of cleaning and laundering; her voice, hoarse from screaming at Rin; at her son, Kesegi; at her hired smugglers; at Uncle Fang, lying inert in his smoke-filled room.

"What did you promise him?" she demanded suspiciously.

Rin stiffened. "Nothing."

Auntie Fang abruptly slammed the wok onto the counter. Rin flinched, suddenly terrified that her theft had been discovered.

"What is so wrong with getting married?" Auntie Fang demanded. "I married your uncle when I was younger than you are now. Every other girl in this village will get married by her sixteenth birthday. Do you think you're so much better than them?"

Rin was so relieved that she had to remember to look properly chastised. "No. I mean, I don't."

"Do you think it will be so bad?" Auntie Fang's voice became dangerously quiet. "What is it, really? Are you afraid of sharing his bed?"

Rin hadn't even considered that, but now the very thought of it made her throat close up.

Auntie Fang's lip curled in amusement. "The first night is the worst, I'll give you that. Keep a wad of cotton in your mouth so you don't bite your tongue. Do not cry out, unless he wants you to. Keep your head down and do as he says—become his mute little household slave until he trusts you. But once he does? You start plying him with opium—just a little bit at first, though I doubt he's never smoked before. Then you give him more and more every day. Do it at night right after he's finished with you, so he always associates it with pleasure and power.

"Give him more and more until he is fully dependent on it, and on you. Let it destroy his body and mind. You'll be more or less married to a breathing corpse, yes, but you will have his riches, his estates, and his power." Auntie Fang tilted her head. "Then will it hurt you so much to share his bed?"

Rin wanted to vomit. "But I . . ."

"Is it the children you're afraid of?" Auntie Fang cocked her head. "There are ways to kill them in the womb. You work in the apothecary. You know that. But you'll want to give him at least one son. Cement your position as his first wife, so he can't fritter his assets on a concubine."

"But I don't want that," Rin choked out. *I don't want to be like you.*

"And who cares what you want?" Auntie Fang asked softly. "You are a *war orphan*. You have no parents, no standing, and no connections. You're lucky the inspector doesn't care that you're not pretty, only that you're young. This is the best I can do for you. There will be no more chances."

"But the Keju—"

"*But the Keju*," Auntie Fang mimicked. "When did you get so deluded? You think *you're* going to an academy?"

"I do think so." Rin straightened her back, tried to inject confidence into her words. *Calm down. You still have leverage.* "And you'll let me. Because one day, the authorities might start asking where the opium's coming from."

Auntie Fang examined her for a long moment. "Do you want to die?" she asked.

Rin knew that wasn't an empty threat. Auntie Fang was more than willing to tie up her loose ends. Rin had watched her do it before. She'd spent most of her life trying to make sure *she* never became a loose end.

But now she could fight back.