

A Beijing Story 大宅門



A Novel

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Forward



I like this story so much that I want more people to know about it. So, I wrote this novel.

I sought to follow the original plot and the viewpoint, but soon realized that the story told in movies and novels is quite different. Through years of trials and errors, I finally reached a solution.

This densely-plotted story is divided into several parts. Each part is told through only one person, respectively, Doctor Bai (the protagonist's father), Madame Bai (the protagonist's mother), and the protagonist himself (Bai Master), each representing an era of the family history. As a result, the plot is simplified, giving room for more characterizations.

A good story always strikes a universal note, and if in reading the story you are taken to another place, another era, or feel a strong connection to a part of that character, then so much the better.

Please relax and let the story take you to a high-walled gray compound in the far-away Beiing, when China is 130 years younger ...

Hijewel Teng, San Jose, CA, USA, October, 2009

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Contents



4 -----	Chapter 1	Diagnosis	49 -----	Chapter 6	A Prayer
13-----	Chapter 2	Elder Princess	55 -----	Chapter 7	The Arrest
22 -----	Chapter 3	Lady Jeng	59 -----	Chapter 8	Che Appeared
32 -----	Chapter 4	A Shocking News	66 -----	Chapter 9	In the Jail
38 -----	Chapter 5	Visit Lord Jeng	73 -----	Chapter 10	The Last Visit

prologue



My father was a fine man and an excellent doctor, the best **around** only to my Big Uncle and my grandfather. Before I had any memories, my father had the most extraordinary encounter with a powerful lord, whose family, then and years after, brought tremendous pain to us. He used to tell me the story with a prologue about the Manchu dynasty, which, at the time, was failing disastrously.

“The luxurious years and imperial pride were gone. China was ill, very ill, and its future was as hopeless as a broken ship on a monstrous sea. Almost all of the European countries you can name came to China to make war, and we lost every time. One drawing on a newspaper showed a vigorous foreign butcher brandishing a knife at a horde of frightened Chinese.”

“At the time, our shop, Hundred Herbs, was the exclusive supplier of medicine to the kings and queens. Our Happy Longevity Wine and Loquat Syrup, just to name two, couldn’t sell fast enough. We were very rich and highly-respected. ‘Hundred Herbs - the Bai’s Shop’ was, and still is, a household name that makes the sky thunder. Oh, son, I wish you could see, or just imagine how prosperous we were then.”

In the spring of 1880, a strange day began for my father, Doctor Bai, when a carriage stopped in front of Hundred Herbs ...

Chapter 1

1880 -

The bell of the Bell Tower rang in the distance. It was a sunny afternoon. The Front Gate Street was full of shoppers as carriages, mule carts and rickshaws crackled through, causing small clouds of dust to wisp about.

Doctor Bai was in the shop preparing to leave when he heard the sound of hooves suddenly come to a halt. He turned and looked down the door. There stood a new carriage of royal beauty: four shining wheels, above them an enclosure made of decorated glass, and the horse, he noticed, of Mongol origin. The owner must be an important person, he thought, possibly even a Mongolian nobleman.

A stern-looking man dressed in a bare gray robe stepped out of the carriage. He strode into the store and spoke aloud to the clerks. "I'm from Lord Jeng's Mansion. Where is Bai First Master?"

"I'm sorry, sir, Bai First Master is not available at this moment." a clerk answered.

"In that case, is Bai Second Master available?"

Doctor Bai came forward. "I'm Bai Yinshawn. May I help you, sir?"

"I'm Che, the housekeeper of Lord Jeng's Mansion. Both Great Lady and Elder Princess are not well. Please come with me now."

Doctor Bai hesitated. The Jengs had been his elder brother's patients, and as a general rule of ethics, a doctor should not look after other royal patients other than his own unless a prior arrangement had been made, such as a referral or a discussion of the patient's health history.

“I'm honored by the summons,” he said as politely as he could. “However, I'm not familiar with either Great Lady or Elder Princess, so I'm afraid that my diagnosis may not be as accurate as that of my elder brother's. If you don't mind waiting, I believe my elder brother will return soon.”

“Waiting? I can't keep my mistresses waiting! You must come with me now.”

The impatient look on Che's face was not to be taken lightly, Doctor Bai thought, so he gave in. “It is my honor to be regarded highly by your mistresses. I'm at your service and will be ready momentarily”.

However reluctant, he grabbed his medical pouch and boarded his own carriage. His carriage followed the Jengs closely. After numerous turns, they arrived at a grand house by a lake.



As Doctor Bai stood before the mansion, he couldn't help but admire its elaborate entryway. Two stone lions sat on both sides of the wide red gate. A sloped roof of glazed green tile, which only high-ranking officers were allowed to use, covered the deep recessed doorway. The façade between the extended roof and the top of the door was most beautiful. Decorated woodwork was painted red, green and blue, and below it, a relief depicting a famous war adorned the door beam. Just as he began to study the figures on that relief, his heart beat hard as he caught sight of seven petal -shaped door clasps. "Seven" was the most dignified number next to nine. “Nine” was the number of the emperor.

Che struck the bronze ring on the door, and momentarily, Doctor Bai was led into a huge courtyard. In the deepening dusk, a building with an encircling terrace loomed. His palms sweated as he suddenly realized the true power of this Jeng family.

Doctor Bai was first taken into the Great Lady's chamber. She was Lord Jeng's mother, and a very kind lady. He did his routines and told her not to worry, for her symptoms were merely a reflection of the season. Some mild tonic infusion was prescribed for her.

Then Che led him to a path that began at a tranquil pond, meandered through a host of pavilions and gardens, and continued into a cluster of lower, older buildings.

"Elder Princess must be a very quiet person, living at the rear of the house, away from all the fun." Doctor Bai said to his companion, in an attempt to converse.

"Indeed. She is very quiet, and hardly seen in this house."

"Why would that be?"

"She is not close to her father, or any one, as far as I know."

Along the path, lanterns were lit up one by one. When they stopped, Che pointed to a door. "I'll wait outside."



Once inside, Doctor Bai was surprised at the bare interior. The canopy bed was plain with bare poles rising at the four corners and a white cotton curtain hanging down. A standard desk stood at a

corner of the room where a shining, lacquered curio chest full of porcelain dolls and silk fans should have been.

A light cough came from behind the curtain. Doctor Bai cast away his curious thoughts and approached the shadow on the curtain.

"Many blessings, My Lady." He greeted her as pleasantly as he could.

His patient didn't answer.

Regardless, Doctor Bai sat down beside the bed, took a small pillow from his pouch and placed it on the bedside table.

"I'm Doctor Bai. I was summoned by Mr. Che to make sure you are all right. Please give me your right hand."

A hand slowly stretched out from the slit of the curtain. Doctor Bai gently took the hand and placed it on the pillow. It was a skinny hand, with purple veins spread beneath the transparent skin like a small tree. Doctor Bai closed his eyes to concentrate, and then placed his second, third and fourth fingers on her wrist.

Immediately, he had his diagnosis. The pulse was strong and vibrated quickly and smoothly like "pearls rolling on a jade plate". It was a pattern that even a novice doctor couldn't miss. Doctor Bai let go of her hand and said cheerfully. "My Lady, there is nothing to worry about. Your discomfort has a wholesome cause. You are with child. Congratulations!"

He expected to hear or see some sign of happiness, either a low and shy "thank you" or an appreciative hand gesture. But his patient stayed soundless and motionless behind the curtain until Doctor Bai couldn't stand the silence anymore. He rose to bid her goodbye.

Just as he stepped out the room, Lord Jeng appeared. He was a tall, strong man, with a round

face and mustache with turned up ends. He was still in his court clothes: a shining blue robe with golden lions and tigers embroidered on the chest and shoulders, two strings of beads-of-ranking front and back, and a maroon conical hat adorned with peacock feathers. He nodded at Doctor Bai and inquired about his elder daughter's health.

“I’m really happy for your family,” Doctor Bai said joyfully. “Elder Princess is very healthy. Congratulations!”

He placed his right hand over the other to mark the happy announcement.

Lord Jeng stared at him and made a muffled sound from his nose.

“Sir,” Doctor Bai felt like elaborating for the father. “Your honor will be a grandfather.”

“What?”

Lord Jeng’s face turned ashen. He pushed Doctor Bai aside and left the room.

Embarrassed at first, followed by a chill rippling through his body, Doctor Bai recalled a common saying, “Tending royalty is like tending a tiger”. He quickly packed his things and dashed out.

Doctor Bai fell over small bridges, trampled on flower pots, crashed onto balustrades, and finally reached the main gate. Just then, he heard a horse neigh frantically, followed by a thud. He froze as his heart leaped into his throat. Then, he saw a guardsman appear like an apparition, sneering at him. "Happy ride home, Dr. Bai!"

The moment he stepped outside, a group of armed, torch-bearing men surrounded him. Their faces grimaced in the blazing light, with mysterious, sly smiles. Then they made way for him, as if to introduce him to a grand sight.

There, his carriage was smashed apart, his horse lay dead in a pool of blood with its eyes still wide open, and his coachman was gone.

Doctor Bai almost fainted.

“Why? For heaven’s sake, why?” .

A man in charge of the group pointed a big knife at him and scowled. "Dr. Bai, count your blessings!"



When Doctor Bai woke up, he was in his comfortable bed. The soft light of early morning and the familiar aroma of hot jasmine tea brought him a sense of restfulness. Then he heard his father’s anxious voice.

“What happened to you, Second Son? You scared us!”

“I don’t know, Father, all I can remember now is ... I ran, ran, ran ...”

“You passed out at the door,” his elder brother added. “It took three men to bring you in.”

“Oh, I must have been such a wreck ... terrible ... terrible ... How could they ever do such a thing?”

“What happened last night in Lord Jeng’s Mansion, son?”

Off and on, Doctor Bai told them how the terrible day had started, and how strange the Jeng family had been. “After I informed Lord Jeng that his daughter was with child, he changed to another person ... and before I could even figure out the reason for his sudden anger, my carriage

was destroyed and my horse slain, and..." Doctor Bai pointed to his neck, his voice husky. "A sharp blade was that close to me."

His father, Bai Old Master, sank into thought. "It wasn't the same Lord Jeng. For as long as I've known him, he has been an arrogant person, but not unreasonable. Son, did you say or do anything improper that might have enraged him?"

"Nothing I can think of. I know what's expected of a doctor in royal households. For instance, a male doctor, while taking a pulse, is not allowed to see the face of a young princess."

"That's true. But then, what else could have enraged him? Do you have any idea, First Son?"

Doctor Bai's elder brother, First Master, who would have gone to Lord Jeng's Mansion instead if he had been in the store, lowered his head as if in guilt. "I wish I did."

"Well... sons," Bai Old Master rose and paced around the room. "We definitely deserve an explanation from them. Otherwise, our family's reputation will be ruined. I can't bear to imagine that people know us as having been kicked out by our patients."

Doctor Bai sat up. "But how, Father? I don't think any of us should go to the Jengs at this time. They'll throw us out!"

"You're probably right. I'll see what I can do. Now lie down. You need rest."

"It's all my fault First Master looked out at the window with misty eyes. "If I had gone to the Mansion instead, this thing wouldn't have happened. I'm really sorry."

"There is nothing for you to feel sorry about," his father voice tightened. "It's them who started it."

Doctor Bai turned to his beloved Big Brother. "You've been their doctor for some time, so you must know something about them. Please tell us."

“Well... Lord Jeng's mother has been a long time patient of mine, so I do know their background. They came to Beijing ten years ago because Lord Jeng's daughter was chosen as an imperial concubine. And Lord Jeng himself has fought fearlessly for the court, hence his wealth and power. But truly, this is the first time that I've heard of Elder Princess. I've always thought of Lord Jeng having only one daughter.”

“It's very strange ... an obscure, mysterious princess ...” the father rubbed his eyebrows, thinking hard.

“Second Son, do you think you could be wrong ... that she is not pregnant?”

Doctor Bai chuckled. “Father, if one can't recognize the obvious pulse pattern the instant it's felt, he shouldn't be in this profession at all.”

“True, true ... well, sons, let's call it a night. Tomorrow morning, I'll send Hu to find out the truth for us. He is a street man. He knows his way around the townsfolk.” He sighed. “By now the whole Beijing must have known about this. What an embarrassment! Oh, before I go, I have to say this one more time.” Bai Old Master rubbed across the medical books sitting on the wall shelf with a proud look, then, he turned to face his sons, with lines of concern on his face. “As doctors, we have to be very careful about our surroundings, especially in royal households. In some cases, the doctors were made scapegoats, being accused of murdering their patients with malign herbs. The saying ‘Tending royalty is like tending a tiger’ is more true in our profession than in others.”

After his father and Big Brother were gone, Doctor Bai sank into his bed. His diagnosis was correct, but obviously “offensive” to the Jengs. Why it was so, he didn't know, and he grew depressed when he realized there was no way he could have prevented it. He was caught up in

some unpleasant situation. It was there for him.

On the other hand, he was relieved that nothing worse had happened to him. What if that blade had advanced one inch more? Oh, what a strange profession he was in! He spent his life saving lives, but by doing just that, could put his own life in danger.

“Elder Princess, her stark, skinny hand, the new life in her, her powerful and nasty father, a beautiful doorway adorned with seven door clasps ...” Those thoughts threw him into an dungeon of emotions. He had never felt so tired. #

Chapter 2

It was mid summer. The pomegranate trees were laden with wine-red fruits and cast cool shadows on the stone-paved courtyard. Under a tree, Doctor Bai was playing Go with his nephew. He played very slowly, hoping that in the long meditation for each move, he could cast away reality. Two hours into playing, he had lost all three corners.

“Uncle, I’m going to defeat you,” His twelve-year -old nephew cried out, “Do you remember that you once said that if I ever defeat you, you were going to buy me a pair of binoculars?”

“Binoculars? What are those?”

“Uncle, you can’t go back on your words!”

“I’m sorry, I ... I haven't been paying attention. I can’t think straight now.”

Just when they were about to finish the game, he saw the head housekeeper Old Hu hurry through the courtyard. When their eyes met, Old Hu earnestly asked him to join him in his father’s study.

“What’s the matter? You look troubled.”

“Troubled? Oh, my master, I am much more than just troubled. Come, Second Master, and let me tell both of you what I’ve just learned.”

When they charged in, Bai Old Master looked up at them from a desk, displeased. “My hand jerked the moment you intruded. I would’ve completed it with a long, steady upstroke.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Old Hu said. “But when I heard the news, I came back home right away. I ... I still can’t believe it!”

“What did you hear? Another foreign country declared war on us?” Bai Old Master threw the ruined calligraphy into a waste basket.

“For us, it’s worse than a war! You see, sir, I met Che this morning in East Tavern ...”

“Who’s Che?”

“He is the head housekeeper of Lord Jeng’s Mansion.”

“I see. Go on!”

“He was there, blabbing and laughing loudly. He said his men had given the Bais a lesson they would never forget. And when he saw me, he laughed even louder, drunk, I guess. Anyway, when he finally finished, I dragged him to a corner and asked him what had made Lord Jeng angry. He shook his head as if it was set on a rocking toy, and he said, ‘Uhm ... your young master was out of his mind.’ Then he snickered, again and again.” The housekeeper stopped to catch his breath.

Doctor Bai felt his heart would stop at any time.

“Go on!” Bai Old Master said.

“Yes, sir. I would never forget the scorn on his face. He said, your young master made a fool of himself by congratulating Lord Jeng, for Elder Princess is not married!”

“Not married?” The father and son cried out at the same time.

“No! The Jengs are from Mongolia. Ten years ago, the younger daughter of Lord Jeng was chosen as an imperial concubine, so the family moved to Beijing, but his elder daughter stayed in Mongolia until a year ago. Old Master, Elder Princess is a spinster!”

“A spinster?” Bai Old Master turned to his son. “Second Son, think! Think really hard, could your diagnosis be wrong?”

“Wrong? It was impossible. The pulse pattern was too indicative to miss, even for a novice.”

“Very strange ... something happened in that family ... “ Bai Old Master murmured.

“May I say something, Father? Let’s apologize to the Jengs.”

“Apologize?” Bai Old Master raised his voice. “For what? Is it our fault that his daughter couldn’t resist temptation?”

“Of course not, but ...let the Jengs handle that. As far as we are concerned, the sooner we get out of this, the better. The Jengs are very powerful.”

“Yes, they’re powerful, but that doesn’t mean they can walk over us. His daughter misbehaved and we took the blame? Does that make sense?”

“Nothing is supposed to make sense when the powerful are involved.”

“What is that supposed to mean, Second Son?”

Doctor Bai always admired his father’s uprightness. But at this moment, he was more on the side of being “bendable”, like a first rate bamboo. “Father, please ... There was no need to stir the water where a crocodile lived. Let’s keep ourselves out of harm’s way.”

“It’s not fair. Absolutely not! I’ve lived my whole life an honest and just man, and I demand to be treated likewise.” Bai Old Master stopped to catch a breath. “What we’ve witnessed is an arrogant lord who has no regard at all for our family’s name or our feelings. Well, we might be able to get over our feelings if we try hard enough, but how about our reputation? We were kicked out and threatened! It’s a downright humiliation!”

“Father, please don’t think that way. The wise men have said, ‘If you step back, this sky appears broader.’”

“The wise men have also said, ‘A man of dignity can tolerate being killed, not humiliated.’”

Doctor Bai exchanged glances with the housekeeper. Both remained quiet.

“I must say the silence from you is disappointing to me.” Bai Old master looked at them sternly, “And that’s exactly what has made China so powerless in the face of the Western threat. ‘Peace’ is good for China,” the court said, but see what happened? China seeks peace, but is never given peace!”

The faithful housekeeper ventured, “Old Master, my only concern is the peace of our family ...”

“What do you think my concern is? Dignity is what makes this family great. Dignity! I won’t sacrifice it for anything, ever!”

“But ...”

“I’m going to Lord Jeng's Mansion right now. Get the carriage ready!”

Doctor Bai was lost at the end of the conversation. All he knew was that yesterday he had exposed a noble lady to a scandal, which made two fathers very angry. One father had taken action against him, and the other was going to take action to make the wrong right again.

“Come with me, Second Son.”



Once again, Doctor Bai stood before that magnificent gateway. Now its beauty in art and architecture was nothing but a reminder of Lord Jeng’s power. His father stood beside him, soundless.

“What are you thinking, Father?”, he said to break the silence.

“Son, I’ve never imagined that I would say this, but, at this moment, how I wish you were a lesser doctor. You could have had a mind lapse yesterday and given an incorrect reading of her pulse.”

Doctor Bai felt guilty. His father was a reputable doctor, a man of great integrity, and the undisputable man behind the success of Hundred Herbs. At age sixty-five, his father had said that he could not wait to step down to enjoy a carefree, comfortable late life.

But because of him, all this could change when the door opened.

A doorman answered the door, and coldly directed them to wait in one of the southern rooms until they were called. In a compound, the southern rooms were for servants, horsemen and sedan carriers, a place too humble to accommodate gentlemen in fine silk robes, pairs of leather slippers, and caps decorated with jade pieces, which the Bais had put on for this formal visit. Doctor Bai could easily imagine how his father would feel for this insulting arrangement, for he himself was enraged.

Finally, a servant appeared and led them to the Great Room.

“Many blessings, my dear Lord Jeng.” Following a Manchu custom, Bai Old Master knelt on his right knee and touched the ground with his left hand. Doctor Bai followed suit.

Lord Jeng coughed to recognize their presence, and stretched out his hand indicating they might rise. They stood up and stepped back.

“My inexperienced son has offended you, and in such cases, the father is always the first to blame for failing to teach his son good manners. So, here I am.” Bai Old Master started fluently

with a humble manner of speech, which in essence was more a courtesy than an apology.

However, Lord Jeng immediately started raving about how young doctors had disgraced the great medicine tradition with their poor training and judgment. Though angry, Doctor Bai lowered his head as if in repentance, while his father listened with a raised, icy face.

As soon as Lord Jeng finished, Bai Old Master asked for his permission to examine Elder Princess himself, “for the sake of her ladyship’s health,” he explained.

Lord Jeng’s tightened face relaxed a little.

“Since she is still in pain, I give you my permission. But I warn you, if I hear that same trash again, I’ll make sure you pay for it.”

The father and son followed a servant to the rear of the mansion. This time, Doctor Bai waited in the outer room for his father to come out with a diagnosis. Before long, Bai Old Master appeared at the door of Elder Princess’ bedroom. He looked nervous, and whispered to his son that they should leave as soon as possible.

Fortunately, they were able to leave the mansion without making a stir.

“Well ... Father,” Doctor Bai started, after some silent moments riding in the carriage. He was very anxious to know what happened in that obscure room.

“You are right, son, she is with child. Two months into pregnancy.”

“Two months ... wouldn’t she possibly know?”

“Possibly not, if she has never been pregnant before. In fact, I’m pretty sure it’s her first time. Or, it might be just that she refused to believe it.”

“Poor lady! Is there any way we can still help her?”

“Help?” Bai Old Master murmured.

“Did you tell her the truth?”

“The truth?” Bai Old Master looked away.

“What happened, Father? You seem lost.”

“Oh, Son, how I wish I didn’t make this trip at all.”

Then Bai Old Master recounted what had happened in a slow, pensive manner.

I sat down before her bed, and asked for her right hand. ‘Who are you? I don’t need another doctor!’ were the first words I heard from her.

I told her I was the old Doctor Bai, and I would give her peace of mind. She hesitated, but then slowly rested her hand on the little pillow. However, I knew her peace of mind would never come the instant I felt her pulse. No one in our profession would ever miss it. The pulse pumped smoothly and quickly, and the left side vibrated more strongly than the other side. Yes, she is with child. Heaven forbid! But that’s the whole truth.

In my long years of practicing medicine, I have never come across such situation. Should I tell her the truth? Yes, I should, but the moment I thought of what they had put you through, and how her father had just warned me about the ‘same trash’, my mouth turned dry and the words stuck in my throat.

To make things worse, that princess was as arrogant as her father, and didn’t have the least respect for a man of my seniority. “You said you would give me peace of mind,” she said, “and you will.”

I couldn’t overcome the fear and disgust I felt at that time, so I lied.

Doctor Bai hung on to the side of the carriage to steady himself. His father had faked a diagnosis!

“You didn’t!” he cried.

“Yes I did. I told her a harmless internal tumor was causing her energy to leak and made her weak. That was all there was to it. She sounded relieved and thanked me.” He paused, and gazed at his son with a mysterious look. “Don’t stare at me like that, son, you haven’t heard the best part yet.”

“The best part?”

“My prescription went: make tea of ten ounces of ginseng, two ounces of mustard seeds, an ounce of chiretta and medlar, two pieces of ginger, use as an infusion ... ”

“Father,” Doctor Bai cried. “That’s the formula for nourishing an unborn child!”

“Yes. I felt a life, and that life must grow. Yes, she’ll be a proud mother in seven months, and Lord Jeng, a prouder grandfather, I hope.”

Doctor Bai was in shock. “ ... I don’t know what to think. It sounds like we are a part of the scandal, but we are not. Are we, Father?”

“Of course not. But it’s possible that Lord Jeng would point his finger on us.”

“That’s absurd!”

“It is, son. Remember what I have said about doctors being used as scapegoats. That’s what it means.”

Doctor Bai turned and looked out toward the street. There were scores of Manchu women strolling around with their elaborate high coiffure and long straight robes. He had never paid attention to the Manchu one-piece robe which revealed the waistline better than the typical Chinese

women's blouse and skirt, but now, he had a wealth of imagination on it. By the end of summer, Elder Princess' robe would be too tight to cover her 'internal tumor'. By fall, she would have no regular robe to wear, but must order a special one. By early winter, she would be covered with a loose quilt and give birth.

Doctor Bai could clearly imagine these things, but what he could not imagine was what would be Lord Jeng's reaction, and the fate of his unwed daughter and her fatherless child. #

Chapter 3

None of the Bais knew exactly what happened at Lord Jeng's Mansion that winter. But rumors swirled that soon after Lord Jeng found out about the scandal, one night, nerve-wrecking wails from the rear of the mansion shattered the silence of the darkness. And around midnight, the sound of hooves and wheels shook the neighborhood as an urgent dispatch would have done. After that night, the peace of the mansion was restored, even quieter than before, some argued.

The days went on. The Bais tried to conduct their lives as if nothing had happened, while carefully keeping their distance from the Jengs. As for the Jengs, they stopped all associations with the Bais for as long as a year, until they asked another member of the Bais for a regular and personal service. Before the incident, Lord Jeng's mother had been a faithful patient of Bai First Master. Now she was older and required more frequent care, and she trusted no one but Bai First Master, Doctor Bai's elder brother.

It was during these visits that Bai First Master was able to piece together what really happened in that eventful winter. "Elder Princess gave birth to a baby girl without ever revealing who the father was," he told his family. "Lord Jeng was so angry that he immediately sent the baby away to a remote village and threatened to send the scandalous daughter back to Mongolia. The poor mother, desperate and determined to find her baby, escaped from the mansion one night and has never been seen."

Three years passed. The argument between the two families no longer bothered Doctor Bai. He worked happily, believing that "every life saved is a credit toward his afterlife." Not only

that, as his father headed toward retirement and more responsibilities had fallen on the sons, Doctor Bai would assist his elder brother in any way he could and they became closer than ever. They discussed medical cases regularly, tried new acupuncture positions on each other, and shared stories of their patients. Recently, his elder brother was awarded a palace pass so that he could enter the Forbidden City at any time, an honor few doctors had.

Since then, the tales about the imperial concubines had been a part of their conversations. Doctor Bai was very curious about how the girls were chosen, how most of them passed their long, lonely days in the so-called “Icy Chambers”, the living quarters of those undesirable concubines and since the emperor was only thirteen years old, the prospect of their love lives, if any.

His brother always talked about them sympathetically, calling them “noble, suffering girls” because they were confined without choices and stripped of all human comforts due to pretty, budding young girls. Doctor Bai understood right away what “all human comforts” could mean, and stretched it to flatter his elder brother, who was very popular among the concubines.

“I don’t doubt a bit that they would like you,” Doctor Bai said, half-jokingly. “Having lived in the cold palace for so long, they would appreciate any chance to see other men than porters, craftsmen and eunuchs. Besides, Big Brother, you are very good-looking.”

Then they would laugh away such suggestions, not thinking for a moment that anything serious would result from the little “something” between a male doctor and a young, lonely concubine.

However, when Doctor Bai learned that a concubine by the last name of Jeng had summoned his elder brother, he became alert.

“Don’t go, Big Brother, that name still gives me a chill.”

“You have a lively imagination. What’s strange about a concubine requesting my service? I’ve been in the palace so many times that I know what to expect. Those girls might complain a little about their lonely lives, cast you meaningful looks, once or twice, or tell jokes to make you laugh. But all in all, they’re harmless, really.”

“I’m not talking about just any concubine, I’m talking about the one named Jeng. Would she be the younger daughter of Lord Jeng? I know that he has a daughter living in the palace.”

“Jeng is quite a common name.”

“But shouldn’t you find out before you go?”

“I don’t know how, and there isn’t time. Even if she is the Jeng’s daughter, why should I be worried? I’m a doctor and she is my patient, simple as that. Brother, are you still afraid of the Jengs?”

“Of course not.”

“Well, then I’ll go right now. And if I’m late, start dinner without me.”

They were walking to the main gate when they crossed a row of boys playing the soldier game. The youngest dropped his wooden knife and asked for a hug. Doctor Bai was always amazed at his elder brother’s charm, which appealed to the old and the young alike. For the little ones, no game held a candle to spending a few minutes with their beloved Big Uncle.

“Where are you going, Big Uncle?” The youngest one asked.

“To the Forbidding City, my child.”

“Don’t go, Big Uncle, play with me. You haven’t tried my wooden sword yet!”

“I can’t, I don’t have time now. But I promise, as soon as I come back, I’ll make a paper dragon for you.”

“Then take me to the palace with you -- that big, big place.”

“Yeah! Yeah!” the other boys echoed.

“By no means. It’s not a place for children to be.”

“But isn’t the emperor a child himself?” First Master’s own son asked. He was twelve years old, the eldest of the boys.

“Yes, but it’s all different for him.” First Master chuckled and ruffled the boy’s hair. “I would say all of you are much more fortunate than the boy emperor. Imagine playing a soldier game with a long line of aging palace eunuchs.”

“No! No! Never!”

“What does the Forbidden City look like, Father?”

“Well, it’s the most magnificent place you could ever imagine. Tall, arched gates, high purple-red walls, yellow-tiled roofs that stretch as far as you can see, and nine thousand rooms with countless courtyards and gardens. But, despite its grandeur, it’s a place with many dark rooms and corners.”

“Dark rooms and corners? Are there ghosts?”

“I wish I knew,” Bai First Master laughed. “Boys, let’s save this conversation for another day. Now I really have to go. I can’t let my patient wait for me, and ...” He turned to his son. “I want to examine your calligraphy after I come back.”

Doctor Bai saw his brother to the carriage. Before the horse trotted away, his brother assured him one more time that there was nothing to worry about.

“Most likely, she won’t be Lord Jeng’s daughter. I’ll see you at dinner.”

As the family was about to start dinner without its eldest son, Doctor Bai began to dread that his brother's visit had not been as usual and quick as expected.

"I just can't help but worry. He's been out there for too long." He mentioned his concern to his family

They all laughed at him for being preoccupied by his own fear of the Jengs.

"Don't worry, Second Brother," his younger brother Third Master winked at him. "The younger princess of the Jengs, if that is what she is, can't possibly be pregnant. That much is certain. Ha ..."

"Could it be possible that we would have trouble with both of Lord Jeng's daughters?" Bai Old Master said, "The chances are slim."

"Maybe that noble lady is so beautiful that Big Brother forgot the time." Third Master joked.

"Can't you be quiet?" Bai Old Master gave his youngest son a reproachful look and turned to his daughter-in-law. "Don't mind him. He's just trying to be amusing."

Maids brought in a pot of rich melon and ham soup and started serving. A few minutes later, as Doctor Bai finished his portion, he was relieved to see his elder brother step in with that familiar look of a proud doctor. As soon as First Master sat down at the table, he apologized for being late and explained what had delayed him.

"On my way back, I stopped to help an old woman who collapsed on the sidewalk. She – "

"Is she?" Doctor Bai interrupted him.

"Is she what?"

"Is she Lord Jeng's daughter?"

"The sick woman? Oh, you mean Lady Jeng, Yes, she is his younger daughter."

Doctor Bai lost his appetite.

“Well,” Bai Old Master shook his head. “Well, Heaven has its own arrangement, doesn’t it? We’ve been so careful not to encounter them again, but out of the blue, here comes another Jeng woman.”

“I don’t see why all of you are so upset about this. She is just another patient of mine. We are doctors.”

“You’re right, First Son. So now, let’s talk like doctors. What was her problem?”

“She has a slight liver weakness, probably because of her overflowing emotions.”

“Usually, it takes a tremendous level of emotion to make the liver weaken. Son, how emotional did you say she was?”

“I ... I can’t tell ...” First Master suddenly lowered his eyes.

“She just used her poor health as an excuse to meet men.” Third Master threw a peeled shrimp into his mouth. “They all do, those lonely concubines. By the way, Big Brother, what does she look like?”

“She looks like ... I can’t say. The only thing I’m certain is that she doesn’t resemble her father.”

“That’s a relief!” Third Master pretended to cool himself down with a fan. All of them laughed.

For a long moment, the Jeng daughters were the center of their talk, and the ladies were more enthusiastic than men in giving remarks and guesses. Doctor Bai soon got tired of it, and asked about the condition of the sick old woman whom his brother had earlier saved.

“My speculation was that she had a brain fever, a dangerous kind ... poor woman! I hope the rhinoceros horn powder I gave her was enough.”

“You gave the most precious rhinoceros horn powder to a homeless, poor devil?” Third Master cried. “Big Brother, you’re hopelessly divine. No one would ever believe we’re related. In fact, anyone who nears you would blush at his own pettiness. I myself, for example, am a victim of your greatness. I must appear worse than I really am.”

All were amused. For Doctor Bai, the laughter brought back happy memories of his childhood. The memories of three boys growing up together in endless laughter were sweeter than the vintage wine. Sibling fights, too, were fond and unforgettable. When they fought, he remembered that always, he and his elder brother would stand together against their baby brother, who was so naughty that he would do anything to get his elder brothers into trouble.

As soon as the dinner was over, Doctor Bai followed his elder brother to the First House. He wanted to know every detail of the palace visit. Still now, he felt a pinch in his heart whenever the Jengs were mentioned. For others, the animosity between the two families could be just a passing tale. But for him, it had been so heart-felt.

“Tell me everything about Lady Jeng,” he said as the brothers leaned against the balustrade in the roofed gallery.

“Everything? I’ve just met her.”

“Please ...”

“Well, let me see.”

First Master spoke slowly and softly, as if relishing an unforgettable adventure.

I followed a eunuch through a labyrinth of structures until we arrived at a small courtyard, plain but for a tall jade tree in the center. The building was also plain. There were no gold-plated dragons flying on the columns and beams, nor were there door knobs made of silver. The quietness and antiquity of that secluded corner reminded me of what people said about the “Ice Chambers”, a burial ground for young, joyless concubines.

“Many blessings, My Lady,” I greeted my patient at the door.

“I don’t deserve to be addressed as ‘My Lady’.” From behind the pink curtain came a low, sweet voice.

I have to admit that I was quite surprised at her directness. However, I had no intention to dwell on my stray thought. So I asked her to give me her right hand. She did, without the least hesitation.

Doctor Bai gazed at his brother, who was drying his face with his sleeves. It must be such a beautiful hand that even his “divine” brother couldn’t resist, he thought.

As I was feeling her pulse, I saw her peek out at me through the slit of the curtain. Then she asked me how old I was, and I told her.

“Oh, so you are a tiger. I am a sheep, Doctor. What a coincidence! As the proverb says, ‘a sheep will fall into a tiger’s mouth.’” Then she laughed. It was a strange laugh -- happy but with a tinge of bitterness and scorn.

After I told her that the deep suppression of the spirit had overheated her liver, she giggled and didn’t seem to mind. Then, to my total surprise, she asked me to accompany her to the garden.

“Oh, no!” Doctor Bai cried. “She went to far! A court lady should hide her face and body behind the bed curtain when seen by a male doctor. She was out of her mind! You didn’t go to the garden with her, did you?”

Yes I did, and there was more. As she put on her cloak for the stroll, she revealed her painful life to me as if I was the perfect listener she had been waiting for. She said it with sighs and tears, and every now and then her hurt gaze would wander towards me.

She said she could see her dreadful future now, aging and finally dying in the deep, cold palace like a poor widow, without any human comfort, except the company of other women of her kind.

I listened patiently, for it was part of a doctor’s duty to listen to the patient’s heart. But at one point, I had to stop her because she mentioned Empress Dowager, and that was dangerous. She said that the long-nailed hag hated her; “She wanted me to die before she did” were her exact words.

So I comforted her as much as I could, and finally, she smiled through her tears, and we walked through the garden together. Before I bid her goodbye, she invited me to return in five days when the jade tree would bloom at its fullest.

“You will not, Big Brother. You should never see her again. That lady acted like a fool. She had no concern for her own safety, nor for yours.”

At this time, Old Hu appeared and asked both of them to join Bai Old Master in the Great Room. “Master Wei is here, and he seems extremely anxious.”

Master Wei was an old friend of the family. He was one of the imperial doctors who worked in the Imperial Clinics in the Forbidden City, and their best consultant when imperial orders were involved.

Doctor Bai frowned. He had a very bad feeling, almost a premonition of disaster. #

Chapter 4

Three of them hurried toward the Great Room as all lamps around the courtyard were lit, and maids bustled about preparing food for the unexpected guest. The moment they entered, a pale-faced Bai Old Master grabbed his eldest son by the arm. “First Son, Master Wei has some bad news for you, terrible news.”

“What is it, Master Wei?”

“Did you see Lady Jeng this afternoon?” Master Wei was still in his court dress, which showed that he had come directly from the palace.

“Yes, I did. What about her?”

“She died.”

First Master stared at him, eyes enlarged.

“She died, after taking the prescription provided by you.”

First Master flinched, froze, and dropped into a chair.

“What’s worse,” Master Wei rubbed his furrowed forehead. “The imperial doctors were saying that the drug was directly from Hundred – ”

“Please! Master Wei, don’t say another word.” First Master buried his head in his hands. “You disgrace yourself by saying things like that.”

“Are you suggesting that we have anything to do with it?” Bai Old Master raised his voice. “You’re out of your mind!”

“My friends, I’m as shocked as you are to hear this. I ... I still don’t know what to make of it. All I know is that I must come here as soon as possible, so that you can be prepared.”

“Prepared for what?”

“For what? Oh, my friend, can’t you see how serious the situation is? First Master is the last one who saw her, and there is no question that she was poisoned. I’m afraid that First Master will be charged with murdering her.”

Doctor Bai could not stand it any more. It was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard. “How can you ever suggest such a thing? Master Wei, my Big Brother is the best doctor in Beijing, and you know that!”

“I’m afraid this case involves more than just a doctor’s reputation. The palace is involved, the palace! We are not born yesterday, are we?”

“But my son has nothing to do with the palace,” Bai Old Master put his hand on his chest to smother a surge of emotion. “Oh, Heavens! Is there still a place in the world where doctors can just be doctors? Oh, I know, I know. Let’s ask the court to examine the formula and the dregs, then we’ll come out of this, clear and clean.”

“It sounds reasonable. I’ll go to the court to submit a request first thing in the morning. Meanwhile, stay calm!”

As Master Wei stood up to leave, Bai Old Master cried out. “I know what we should do,” then he turned to his eldest son. “Now, write down everything you prescribed for her, down to the very last grain.”

Writing apparatus was immediately brought in. First Master wrote with a shaking hand and the paper was wet with his sweat before the first brush of ink. All the men in the room came to the table and gazed at the tip of the brush pen as it brought forth word after word.

The moment First Master stopped, Master Wei cried. "It's just a common, remedial formula. If this can kill, so can a leaf of parsley. Are you sure this is all you prescribed for her?"

"Absolutely, I wrote this only a few hours ago."

Bai Old Master paced back and forth. "Did she ever show any serious symptoms?"

"No, she was very healthy except a minor liver problem. They can't make white into black!" First Master's large, soft eyes glimmered. "The facts will speak for themselves."

"Let's pray that tomorrow will be just another day." Master Wei headed to the door. "And please keep this visit absolutely secret. In my line of duty, I shouldn't have come."

"Thank you, Master Wei. Since you know your way around the palace, please put in a good word on our behalf."

"I definitely will. Good night, my friends."

Doctor Bai saw Master Wei to the door. Under the flickering light of the lamp, he begged the guest to do whatever he could to have the dregs tested. Master Wei nodded with a tired smile.

All through the night, Doctor Bai tried to think what might have gone wrong, and the closest he could get was that somehow the "Eighteen Reverse Interaction" was in play. In herbal medicine, concoction was handled with extreme care. The same herbs that were used to heal, if improperly mixed, could kill. In principle, the primary substances, which were considered tonic and nourishing, were very safe to use. However, the slightly harsh, supportive substances added to

the primary substances might either enhance or reduce the effectiveness of the primary ones, and in some extreme cases, might turn one of the substances poisonous. Among the trade's seven golden rules of mixing herbs, the "Eighteen Reverse Interaction" was the most risky. It meant that there were eighteen substances whose medicinal properties were contradictory in nature, and should not in any case appear in the same formula.

Whenever Hundred Herbs received an imperial order that might involve such interactions, the standard three steps were taken. First, each of the two pharmacists mixed the ingredients separately, then they compared the result against each other. Once matched, they would present it to the supervisor to get approval. The safety measure had worked very well in the past and they have never received any complaints.



About noon the next day, Master Wei returned with more shocking news. The test showed that both a rare seaweed and licorice root were found, which caused a poisonous interaction. Surrounded by his father and brothers, First Master, with an ashen face, insisted there was no seaweed in his prescription, and to ensure his innocence, he sent for the pharmacists to testify. Under a solemn oath, the two pharmacists said they found no seaweed either in the written formula or in the drug being sold.

“Do you remember who placed the order?” Master Wei asked.

“Someone spoke like a palace eunuch, if you know what I mean,” one of the pharmacists replied.

Master Wei nodded, then looked at the Bais gravely. “If I were you, I would settle this case through private means. The palace has a part in it. I’m almost certain about it. Why so? I don’t know, and I don’t want to know. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

“No, I don’t,” First Master rose from his chair. “I don’t understand why we have to give in while we have all the proof in our favor. It’s as clear as day that someone added the seaweed afterward. We should be able to catch that person!”

“You’re a great doctor but a poor survivor,” Master Wei adjusted his court hat to the right side. “If my long years in the palace taught me one thing, it is that serving the Imperial family is as dangerous as combing a tiger’s hair -- one rough stroke sends you to the grave. If you persist in finding the culprit, you’re risking your neck!”

Silence fell on the room. Doctor Bai had been listening to the dreadful revelation with thoughts racing through his mind. He believed he knew what happened. The past Lady Jeng was either seen or heard by a eunuch who happened to pass by or was spying on them. Moments later, that eunuch whispered “a betrayal” in the empress’ ear. The empress, known for her wanton cruelty, ordered that Lady Jeng be killed.

Doctor Bai shuddered at his conclusion, but at the same time, realized that he could not tell what was on his mind. Master Wei was right, the truth would only bring more disasters to them.

“You said private means,” Doctor Bai turned to Master Wei. “What exactly do you mean?”

“First, make peace with Lord Jeng. Beg him, bribe him, send beautiful women over if that’s what he wants. As long as he accepts her daughter’s death as accidental, then you’ll have no major problems.”

“The Bai family whimper for mercy?” Bai Old Master’s voice cracked. “Our ancestors will turn over in their graves if we did this.”

“Is there a better way? Is there a better alternative other than to beg, bribe, and ... oh! It’s so humiliating!” Doctor Bai said.

“I wish I had a noble speech for you, but unfortunately, survival has become an immoral business when the powerful is concerned. The loss of dignity, starting from the Opium War, has encroached into every part of the country, and distressed all walks of life.” Master Wei rose from his chair. “It’s getting late. I have to go now. Sorry for all these awful things I have said. Listen to me! Buy your way out with money. It usually works.”

“Buy our way out?”

“Yes. That’s what people are doing these days. Likewise, there are an equal number of people using the same method to turn the whole world upside down. Sad, isn’t it?”

After Master Wei left, Bai Old Master called a family meeting. They all agreed that nothing would be spared to save First Master. Each house would contribute with its own money, and if that was not enough, they would use the working capital of Hundred Herbs.#

Chapter 5

“We’ve been here for four hours and we still can’t decide whom we should ... bribe. All of them seem to have the power to save us, or the other way around.” Bai Old Master broke out in the middle of a family meeting. “And to satisfy them all means we’ll lose our shirts.”

The family had gone through a list of names: the head of the Imperial Internal Office who might change the drug test in their favor, a senior courtier who might intercede for them, and three magistrates of various justice levels who might throw their case into the waste basket.

“None of them,” Third Master said while still chewing beef jerky in his mouth. “None of them are as good as Mu Gong Gong.”

“Are you out of your mind, Third Son? Leave our fate in the hands of a eunuch?”

“You don’t understand, Father. Eunuchs are very reliable because they love money so much. They get rich by satisfying their customers, desperate people like us. Killing poison with poison, that’s the beauty of it.”

“Isn’t the situation complicated enough?” Doctor Bai felt compelled to stop his younger brother. This younger sibling of his hated the smell of herbs and trembled at the sight of acupuncture needles. Never had he voiced a worthy opinion, done a good day’s work, nor had the least idea of what a disappointment he had been for the family.

“I’ve been quietly listening with both my ears, Second Brother, and I know if I don’t speak now, I’ll be sorry for the rest of my life. Look, all of you have complained that I’m a useless bum. Well, you maybe right, I’m kind of a bum -- an opera bum. It’s not easy to be an opera bum these days, for you have to have the talent, the time, and the money to hire musicians – ”

“What’s your point?” Doctor Bai said impatiently.

“My point is, even a bum like me has a heart -- a tender, caring heart. At time like this, I must offer my golden advice.”

“Say it, then.”

“To start with, play is good, because you’re able to make friends with people who can afford to play, and those who can afford to play are rich, important people.”

“Who’s Mu Gong Gong?” Bai Old Master asked.

“He is now the favorite of Empress Dowager. He combs her hair every morning; he told me so.”

“Where did you meet him?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. We met in an opera club. Eight months ago, I accompanied him in a skit playing a clown. He liked my performance so much that he said he would give me any favor if I ask.”

Seeing that all eyes were on him, Third Master cleared his throat, straightened up, and changed his voice to one that was deep and resonant.

“Talking about Mu Gong Gong, the story goes on and on. Before he became red-hot, he was no more than a – maid, if you know what I mean. But he has a pair of hands so skillful that with one look at the foreign magazine pictures, he is able to make similar coiffeur the next moment. He uses this skill to please the Empress, um! Now that old lady can’t live without him. Every morning at five o’clock – ”

“You are besides the point, Younger Brother.”

“Ok, ok, here comes the best part. We should ask him to find out what really happened ...”

“No, we shouldn’t. Didn’t Master Wei tell us again and again that we should leave the truth alone?”

“I’m shocked, Second Brother. You’re such a dead honest person, but all I hear from you is that the truth doesn’t matter.”

“Making peace with Lord Jeng is our most important concern.”

“No one can save us except Mu Gong Gong.”

“As long as Lord Jeng lets us go, we are safe. Dealing with the palace is to have one foot in the grave.”

“Nonsense! Once Mu Gong Gong turns to our side, he can single-handedly drive Lord Jeng back to the desert. What a better place Beijing will be without that shameless family, in particular their ghostly daughters. Oh, I forgot, one daughter disappeared, the other died. Good! Heavens have clear eyes after all.”

“We have no intention to destroy anyone. We just want to prove that Big Bother is innocent.”

“How can you prove that without finding the truth first?”

“Truth! Truth! Think, Younger Brother, did truth ever bring us justice? I told the truth, didn’t I? Then what? I was kicked out and threatened. As for Father, he saved the unwanted child in the face of tremendous danger, and if that wasn’t a courageous act of truthfulness, then I don’t know what is. But would the Jengs ever, ever thank him for what he did? I don’t think so!”

“So that’s why we need a powerful person like Mu Gong Gong to turn the tide. How much longer can we live under the menace of the Jengs? Maybe you can, but I definitely can not!”

“All the people you call friends are not trustworthy!”

“Now the fox can no longer hide its tail.”

“Whom do you call fox?”

“Who else?”

“Younger Brother, I’ve been covering it for you for so long, but now I have to let everyone know. You’ve been lining your own pockets – ”

“That’s a lie!”

“Our last trade was short of two thousand silver dollars ...”

“I had nothing to do with it!”

“Stop!” Bai Old Master shouted. “Do you mean to break up this family before others do? Shame on both of you! Now, I’ve reached a solution. We shall carry out both plans. Second Son, you go knock on the Jengs’ door, and Third Son, you try your luck with Mu Gong Gong.”

“Fine with me,” Third Master said through his nose. “But I can’t go empty-handed.”

“How much do you need?”

“How much do we have?”

“Take it all if that’s what it takes.” Bai Old Master swept his arm across the table, sending the teapots and the teacups crashing to the floor. “All! All!”



“Who would expect such a gloomy day in the summer?” Doctor Bai said to himself when he boarded the carriage.

“Where to, Second Master?” the driver asked.

“Lord Jeng’s Mansion.”

“Oh, no,” the driver jumped down from his seat. “Not me, sir! I have a family to raise.”

He was the same driver who took Doctor Bai to the Mansion four years ago. He saw the horse slain and the carriage smashed, and would have been beaten if he hadn’t run away quickly.

“I assure you that this time will be alright. See how many gifts I’m bringing with me? The freshest grapes, just arrived in Beijing from the Northwest region, two lustrous black jade bracelets that used to be the crown jewels of my wife’s dowry, and this,” Doctor Bai lifted the golden silk cover from an intricately-weaved bamboo basket. “Snow Lotus from the peak of the Tibet mountains, the first crop in four years.”

“So deliciously white. What are they good for?”

“Stops the process of aging. Gives back twenty years of life.”

“And you want to give this to Lord Jeng?”

“A very good question,” Doctor Bai chuckled. “Now, get back on.”

The driver arched himself back to his seat. “Master, If something happens to me, please take care of my three little ones ... Giddyup!”

Low clouds gathered in the northern sky. A gust rippled the surface of the lake alongside the affluent East Side. Daylight faded away into a creeping darkness. Suddenly, it began to downpour.

“Let’s go back, Second Master!” The driver tightened his grips on the reins.

“No, we can’t go back. Keep on going!”

“Let’s go back. I’m soaked.”

“Keep on going!”

The horse broke into a canter, throwing Doctor Bai off his seat. He straightened up, and struggled to fake a composure which was easily betrayed by the nervousness in his eyes.

Doctor Bai waited under the roofed entryway for a long while before a man opened the door. He assumed the long wait was a natural one, because all sound, including the clanking on the door, must have been submerged by the beating rain.

The man stared at the visitor. His mouth opened to a perfect oval shape. That shape stayed whole until he cried out, “Doctor Bai!”

“It’s been a long while, Che.”

“You have quite the nerve to show your face here after what happened.”

“I’ve come to explain, and send my condolences ...”

“Get out! The Bais are not welcome in this compound.”

Doctor Bai squeezed himself into the opening of the double door. “I’ve brought Snow Lotus for Lord Jeng. I don’t think your master would be happy if he knew you shoed me away.” Then he lifted the silk cover to reveal the precious plant.

Che pondered at the gift. “For the sake of Snow Lotus, get in, but I warn you, one false move and this is it. Follow me.”

The Great Room was guarded by four soldiers with long spears in their hands. They glanced down with alertness at the visitor and then clanked their weapons on the ground. Doctor Bai knew immediately that he couldn’t have come at a worse time. The guards were on duty.

Lord Jeng was a military officer, and a very good one. His command was exact, his execution was faultless, and his men were among the best trained in the nation. At this moment, he could be

at a war council with his colleagues, or preparing himself on the eve of an important war battle. When a man sets his mind on abolishing an enemy, empathy does not play a role.

Doctor Bai had no choice but to proceed.

He entered the room, knelt on his right knee, and after hearing a cough acknowledging that he could relax, he glanced up at the head of this great mansion.

Lord Jeng had changed. His once round, florid face was now dark and skeletal, dominated by his revealing cheekbones and bloodshot eyes. His court dress was so large on him that it rippled and wrinkled like a woman's skirt. Doctor Bai had never seen a person deteriorate so fast in just four, short years. Lord Jeng not only lost a lot of weight, but also his vivid life signs.

"The Bais, the Bais ..," a low, menacing voice crept into Doctor Bai's ears.

"Many blessings, my lord," Doctor Bai lowered his eyes.

"I've fought many fights: the Russians, the British and the Frenchmen. They were hard, damn hard, with cannons that blew us into pieces before you could blink. But was I ever afraid? No, I was never afraid, because I knew their positions and how strong they were. Strange, isn't it? Facing a strong enemy and I was not afraid. But I'm afraid of the Bais. All of you can't even hold knives squarely in your hands yet you destroyed both of my daughters, my only daughters."

"It's not true, my lord. It just happened ..."

"Once maybe, but twice?"

"My dear lord, you must believe me, my elder brother is innocent. Why in the world did he want to harm a Jeng's daughter?"

"That's exactly why! Because she was *my* daughter. You hate me, all your family hate me!"

“It’s not true, Lord Jeng, we hold no animosity toward anyone. We are a doctor family. We are born and raised to help people live well, and live long.”

“Oh, my dear daughters ... Now I am childless, and the Bais have a room of offspring, most males. How many there are, twenty, thirty? Your women do have good, healthy bellies.”

Doctor Bai’s fear deepened as he realized that the dire situation of being childless was occupying Lord Jeng. He presented his gift.

“My father sends his condolences – ”

“Your father, that sly old fox!” Lord Jeng’s sullen complexion suddenly shed light. “He lied to me right here in my own house. How many heads does he think he has! No one ever lied to me!”

“Please forgive him. It was under a very extraordinary circumstance.”

“Is he still breathing?”

“Yes, he is very well.”

Lord Jeng leaned forward and swept the gift basket off Doctor Bai’s hands. “Tell that old sly thing to get lost! I don’t want anything from him! I swear I’ll personally see him kick the bucket!”

Doctor Bai flinched. He did not know what set Lord Jeng off into such a fiery mood; moreover, his brutal manner was a sharp slap on his face. Shaken and distraught, he bent down to pick up the bruised Snow Lotus from the floor one by one.

“Simmer the Snow Lotus with wild mushroom could be so remedial for him,” he murmured.

“What are you muttering about?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“Why did you come anyway?”

Putting the gift basket aside, Doctor Bai composed himself. “I know I came at a very delicate time, a painful time, but I beg you, sir, let the tragedy stand where it does, let time take care of our wounds, and let hard feelings fade away in the course of time. Please, sir, let’s face it in good faith.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What I wanted to say is, any member of the Bais has never, and will never lay a finger in harming anyone. We were as shocked and heartbroken when we heard that Lady Jeng ..,”

Doctor Bai stopped, for he saw Lord Jeng cover his face with his hands.

The rain kept beating on all sides, submerging all sound.

“She was such a sweet girl ... I only saw her once after she was brought into the palace, and she told me she wasn’t happy ... oh, what did I do to her? Why didn’t I just leave her in Mongolia? She would be galloping on the green, green grassland now, as happy as a lark ... but there she was, cold, stiff, poisoned,” Lord Jeng raised his eyes. “Who would ever do such a thing?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“You do, you must. It was your elder brother!”

“No, you must not think so. In fact, my elder brother made her very happy during the visit, if that is any comfort to you ...”

“He killed her, whether accidentally or not, he killed her!”

“How could I ever make you believe that someone else changed the formula?”

“It sounds so familiar. Someone changed the formula! All doctors say so when they are in trouble.”

“Oh, Heavens!” Doctor Bai exclaimed.

“I will never forgive him! Your brother must pay!”

“Sir, you know very well that my brother is innocent. You’re finding a scapegoat because of your own guilt.”

“What?”

“You wished that you had never brought your daughter to the palace. If she had been elsewhere, she would have lived.”

“Guard!” Lord Jeng rose in anger.

But Doctor Bai could not stop now. He was so desperate and agitated that the words came out before he could think.

“I can never understand why the Jengs continuously and relentlessly blame us for your own flaws. Elder Princess was pregnant and you kicked me out! Younger Princess was foolish enough to try to charm a doctor and my brother was accused of murder. My father saved your grandchild and you curse him – ”

“Guard!”

“Has justice ever occurred to you?”

“You’re risking your neck, Guard!”

At this time, Che and four guards charged in.

“Drag him out!”

Doctor Bai struggled in vain to free himself. He was dragged all the way to the front gate, bruising his back and limbs severely over door thresholds and rough stone paths. The moment he was released, he fell face down into a puddle.

Then from the sound of beating rain came a scream. A moment later, a long neigh and a loud thud followed. This mixture of sounds brought to his mind a terrifying scene. “Lord Jeng did it again!” Doctor Bai whispered in pain.

He stumbled to open the gate. Seeing what had happened, he dropped to his knees and howled.

In a pool of blood lay his horse and his driver. #

Chapter 6

The Bow you carry should be strong

The shaft you use should be long

Aim at the rider's horse, the king

Of brigade first to justice bring

The children in the home classroom read in unison as loudly as they could. Their young, spirited voice drew a laugh or two from those who happened to pass by. But this family had all but lost its bustle and liveliness.

Doctor Bai was watching from outside the classroom, making sure that the three young children of the past driver were comfortable in their new environment. Whenever he saw the orphans who lived with them now, he felt a gnawing pain. He was not even close! His humble and just cause was ridiculed, humiliated and punished with the cost of an innocent life.

After the funeral of the driver, the family turned to Third Master for a glimmer of hope. Was the offer of money enough to make Mu Gong Gong happy? Would he follow through his promise to manipulate the court for their sake? In this line of “business”, honesty and trust were not valued. Would his promise fall short?

“Mu the old fox turned me down flat out!” Third Master cried as he walked into the dining room later that day. “Only after taking all of the money.”

No one said a word. Doctor Bai closed his eyes. This was it.

Overwhelmed, he forgot where he was until his father said with a trembling voice. “Children, let’s pray to our ancestors.”

All the adult family members, except First Master and his wife, followed Bai Old Master through the meandering gallery until they reached an east-facing hall in the third courtyard. The home temple of the Bais was the most venerable place on the premises. Tables and chairs decorated with elaborate woodwork featuring longevity animal symbols such as dragons and bats, and ceilings and walls draped with fringed white brocade are only part of the sacredness. Every morning, fresh flowers and fruit flooded the worship table. Every night, servants cleaned the ash urns and refilled them with new incense sticks.

“Second Son, tell the first house to join us.”

“Yes, Father.”

Doctor Bai also missed his elder brother. Since Master Wei’s visit, First Master had all but become a recluse. He wanted that food be sent to his household, and excused himself from all family meetings. The only thing that could attract him to the outside world was when his patients had medical emergencies.

The First House occupied the largest quarter in the second courtyard. At age thirty-one, First Master had four children, aged from twelve to two. He loved his wife and children very much, devoting all his spare time to caring for them. His wife was a daughter of a bookstore owner, knowledge, capable, and very quiet.

The silence in the First House struck Doctor Bai’s sensitive nerves.

“Elder Brother,” he called.

A maid appeared from behind the door curtain. "First Master is in bed."

"Wake him up and tell him to meet us in the home temple."

"I dare not, master, I dare not."

"What do you mean you dare not?"

The maid turned sideways. Doctor Bai took the hint and went inside.

The smell froze him. It was the smell of opium!

He saw his brother, eyes closed, lay beside his wife, who was smoking on a long brass pipe.

"Are you crazy?" Doctor Bai dashed forward to grab the pipe.

"Let her be! Let her be!" His brother rose to stop him.

"Are you crazy? Are you on this thing, too?"

"No, I'm not, but I might any moment. It must be a careless world out there."

"Sister-in-law, give that to me."

"No!" She whispered.

Doctor Bai went ahead anyway. He took the pipe out of her mouth, and threw it on the ground. "I'm shocked!" he cried.

"You are shocked? Why shocked? If you were in my position ..."

"You can't go on like this, Brother. We had to fight."

"It's useless, doomed, hopeless, I give up."

"You can't! If you do, then we have nothing to hang on to. Do you know how much money we have spent on getting you out of trouble?"

"Don't tell me, don't ever tell me!"

“It’s half of the Bais’ worth. It’s huge! We can still survive on what is left, but if you and Sister-in-law fall to the drug, then we will lose everything -- money, dignity, and hope.”

“I want my pipe,” First Master’s wife whimpered.

“Help her, Brother. Help her to get out of this. You must!”

“Do you know how much pain she has endured? Nightmares night after night...can’t eat, can’t sleep, and can’t even bear the sight of sunshine ...”

“Heaven forbid!”

“How long do you think she can go on as a normal human being?”

“My Buddha!”

“So, let her be.”

“And you will never touch it?”

“I promise I won’t. My blood and flesh are trained against it. I can’t, even I want to.”

“Finally, a word of promise. I need it, we all need it.”

“What are you here for?”

“We are going to pray in the home temple. Father wanted you to be there.”

First Master put on his coat. “Let’s go then.”

Inside the temple, on the reflections from the candle light, emerged a portrait of a poorly dressed man walking. And in his hand, a medical case and a doctor’s ringing bell. This humble traveling doctor died two hundred years ago. He was the founder of Hundred Herbs.

Bai Old Master knelt, followed by all his children. He kowtowed three times, and raised himself up to gaze at the faded portrait of the founder.

“My venerable ancestor,” he started with a groaning voice. “I, Bai Montang, the ninth in the lineage to run the family and the business, am beseeching for your forgiveness. As hard as I have tried to continue the glory of the Bais, I have disappointed you.

Our ancestor started out as a traveling doctor. You saved lives with each step you took. By walking through thousands of lanes and alleys you saved thousands of lives. You lived on no more than wind and dew, and devoted your entire life to making the ancient medical formula work. The rich and the powerful knew your name. You became the head of the Imperial Pharmacy.

The founding of Hundred Herbs was a blessing to all mankind. The Old Plaque, bearing the store name, which was your own hand-writing, still hangs on our shop.

In our long history, The Bais have never betrayed your faith in making the best medicine possible, and in training our children to be the best human beings. In years of famine, we were the first to set up food stations. In years of flooding, we were the first to help dig the sewages. Our fourth ancestor collected and compiled our first medical book, citing three hundred and sixty two formulas, and set up the professional standard which we still live by. No process is too complicated for us. No ingredient is too expensive for us.

In the following years, the publication of Hundred Herbs Medicine Directory was a further proof that we were the best in all China. In the forty-ninth year of Emperor Chenlung, Japan sent their ambassadors over to study herbs. The court assigned them to the Bais.

Pages of pages of royal accolades are only part of our glory. More proudly, every member of the Bais has grown to be a loving, honest and respectable person.

By passing down our family history, I, Bai Montang, am telling my children what a great tradition we must carry on. Any deviation from the honorable path will bring shame to our ancestors and to this sacred shrine.

However, with all of my effort put into making this generation great, I must have erred, somewhere, some time. I beseech you, my dear ancestor, to tell me where I went wrong.”

The women began to sob. The men still knelt as their heads dropped to their chests.

“Our first son, Yinyun, the best son of all sons, has a bright future, and yet ... yet, he was wronged, so wronged that the heaven will not bear to hear ... ”

“Father!” First Master fell to the ground.

Through teary eyes, Doctor Bai glanced up at the portrait. Something caught his attention for the first time. The walking man had a smile on his face.

The founder of Hundred Herbs was smiling at them. #

Chapter 7

Bai First Master was arrested two days after the Mid Autumn Festival. Around noon, four policemen charged into the compound, and quickly took position at the four corners of the courtyard.

Then, a red-hat captain entered. He checked the name on his list with the doorman and then cried out at the top of his voice, “Arrest Bai Yinyun!”

“Arrest Bai Yinyun!” The four policemen echoed back.

The courtyard was immediately filled with wailing and crying. Doctor Bai dashed to the courtyard. He directed all women and children back to their rooms, while demanding all maids and servants run their errands as though nothing had happened.

“Are you mistaken, Sir?” He came forward.

“Is this the house of the Bais?” The captain answered politely.

“Yes.”

“The famous Bais? The owner of Hundred Herbs?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m afraid I am not mistaken.”

“My brother is innocent.”

“I know,”

Doctor Bai was taken aback. He did not expect to hear this. He stared at the captain.

“But, sir,” the captain avoided Doctor Bai’s gaze. “An order is an order.”

“Who issued the order?”

“It is not your concern. Is Bai First Master ready?”

Doctor Bai closed his eyes.

“Arrest Bai Yinyun!” The captain cried again. The policemen clanked their long spears on the ground.

From the East Wing, Doctor Bai saw his brother, neatly-dressed and very peaceful, with his distinctive easy gait, walk towards them. There was no expression on his face, nor was there a glimmer of emotion in his eyes. He moved forward like a graceful statue.

The male members of the family stood there watching in pained silence. Suddenly, a woman, her hair shrouding her face, darted into the courtyard, wailing, “Husband, take me with you! Take me with you ...” Then she plunged forward to touch her husband. She missed. Her whole body crashed to the ground, face down.

Bai First Master dropped to his knees beside her, groaning, “My dear wife, my love, why ... why didn’t you stay in bed...” then he doubled over her.

Doctor Bai rushed to her side to take her pulse. “She is conscious, for heaven’s sake. She is conscious.”

“Take the lady inside,” the captain said to his men. “Be very gentle with her.”

After the four men were gone and order was restored in the courtyard, the captain turned to Bai First Master. “Sir, please forgive me for what I’m about to do. If I had a choice, I would resign from this duty.”

Biting back his tears, First Master laid out his arms.

“I’m truly sorry, sir.” The captain handcuffed him.

The clanking sound of the handcuffs struck Doctor Bai numb. His mind went blank until a voice floated in the air. “Take good care of Father and Mother for me, and my four little ones, and your poor Sister-in-law. You’ve been such a good brother, and we’ve had such wonderful times.”

“Don’t you want to say goodbye to Father and Mother?”

“No, I can’t bear it ... what a bad son I am by breaking their heart. Gone too soon ”

“Elder Brother!” Doctor Bai could not hold his tears anymore.

“Tears are not for men, Yinshawn. Be strong, be strong for me; now the family is in your hands.” First Master patted Doctor Bai on the shoulder.

“May I say a few words with you, sir,” The captain turned to Doctor Bai, “privately.”

Doctor Bai wiped his eyes and stepped to the side of the court. “Here?”

The captain came over. “If this is any comfort to you, I assure you, sir, that as long as I live, Bai First Master will not be mistreated in jail.”

Doctor Bai stared at him. “Who are you?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t sound like a police captain. You’re much too kind.”

The captain smiled. “Even a police captain has a heart.”

“Do you know my elder brother?”

“No, I don’t. But I know more than anyone else what a noble person he is.”

“Tell me more.”

“I can’t now, and it is not important.”

The captain looked up at the sky. “It’s noon. We must finish our morning duty by noon.”

Bai First Master glanced around the courtyard, drew a deep breath, and followed the policemen to the door. Outside, curious neighbors had gathered, whispering among themselves. When they saw First Master, they stopped talking, stood back with their heads down, as if paying respect to a highly-regarded man.

Under the painful gaze of the Bais, First Master boarded the cart. #

Chapter 8

Without First Master, the Bai compound lost its Chi, a collective energy that makes trees vibrant green, things fall into their places, men and women healthy, vivacious and charming. It was a universal, mystical power believed to be the deciding factor of phenomenal success or failure. When it came to human Chi, doctors were trained to cure their patients by bringing out their good Chi, and in some cases, transport their own Chi to their patients for immediate result. Excellent doctors, such as First Master, spent years in nourishing their own good Chi, which could become so strong that it encircled them and benefitted those who came near.

The maids and servants were whispering among themselves that without First Master, there would be only bad Chi for the Bais. For example, Bai Old Master fell ill and coughed all through the night. The constant vigilance took its toll on the maids, and they fell ill one by one. The other day, a pharmacy apprentice lost three of his fingers while operating a pressing machine. The poor young man was about to get married the next day. And there were other accidents that even bad luck could not explain. “Once the Chi began to plunge, it seemed there was no end to it,” said one servant. “The First House is now as dead as a tomb,” said a maid from the First House. “The mother has one foot in the grave.”

In yet another hopeless, joyless day, the worst of Chi came in a form of a verdict. It read that Bai Yinyun, found guilty of murdering Lady Jeng, was sentenced to decapitation.

Doctor Bai was the first one to know. He locked himself up for a whole morning, then came to his father’s bedside. He felt that it was better for the patriarch to deal with the blow early while he was still able.

“Don’t ever let your Sister-in-law know,” Bai Old Master said weakly. “It will definitely kill her.” Then a surge of anxiety seized him. He started coughing relentlessly.

But in a compound with a population of thirty, there was no such thing as keeping a secret. The next morning, a chilly scream from the First House shook the whole compound. As Doctor Bai rushed to the scene, he bumped into the screaming maid who had horror all over her face.

“What happened?”

The maid continued to scream.

Preparing for the worst, Doctor Bai darted into the chamber. He found his Sister-in-law fallen flat on the ground, dead. By her side was a bottle of toxic, raw opium.



Who could explain the hellish misfortune of the Bais? No one. Doctor Bai prayed in various temples for an answer, but the Buddhist prophecies written on the wood boards offered none, nor were there any indications of any good fortunes in store for them.

Just as the Bais were able to conduct a normal life again, words came that the Great Lady of the Jengs was dying. Doctor Bai could not care less, “Lord Jeng’s mother! A good lady, but the immorality on her son’s part must have taken her years away.”

So when Che, the housekeeper of the Jengs, visited them, the Bais were indeed surprised. A moment later, their anger flared.

Third Master immediately motioned the men to give it back to the Jengs. Old Hu fetched an ax for himself and gave one to Third Master. The gardeners sharpened their picks and spades, and the kitchen-hands stopped cutting and chopping and went outside with knives in their hands. Even the boys, roused by the din, surged out from their classroom toward the gate, while picking up pebbles along the way.

Doctor Bai, with nothing in his hands, followed this tempestuous crowd to the gate. He saw Che, this time as humble as an old goat, look nervously around him.

“How dare you show your face here!” shouted Third Master. “We’ll give you a lesson that you deserve. Come on, my men!”

“Stop where you are!” said Doctor Bai.

His younger brother stopped and stared at him in disbelief. “I can’t believe my ears! You should be the one to kick him to his grave. He killed our driver, your driver ...”

“It was an accident,” said Che.

“Dog shit! Accident?” Third Master turned to Che. “Tell me! My Sister-in-law killed herself by accident! My dear eldest brother, to be beheaded, will also be an accident! You say that word one more time and I’ll chop your head off!” Third Master swung his ax across in front of Che’s face. “Oh, I’m sorry, it was an accident, too!”

“Stop threatening him! Yinlee, it’s never the Bais’ way to treat a visitor with knives and stones, never!”

“Don’t play Buddha please, Brother, he is as bad as Lord Jeng himself. He is one of them!”

“Let him speak first.”

“He’ll speak after I’m done with him. What are all of you waiting for?” He turned to his men. “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth! It’s time for vengeance! The horse first, come on!”

Just as the crowd was going to surge forward, Doctor Bai stood before Che. “I said, let him speak first. He must have an important message for us. For all their arrogance, I have been able to walk into their mansion safely. Let’s give the Jengs the same treatment, at least.”

“Second Master,” Old Hu came forward. “You know how I hate ‘eye for eye and tooth for tooth’, that sort of thing. But whenever I think of how much we have suffered because of the Jengs, I have hate. It’s not about revenge; it’s about something called fairness. Please, Second Master, let the Jengs feel exactly how we feel.”

“Hear me out! We are a family of doctors; how can we ever encourage bloodshed at our own house? Take a step back and read what’s written on this door.”

All the men withdrew to the side of the door. On the dark red door were two lines of gilt characters. “Our family motto,” Doctor Bai said. “Have all of you forgotten? Honesty Preserves, Integrity Endures.” Then he looked up at the sky, “Our forefathers are watching us.”

The crowd silently moved back. Seeing that he had lost command over their men, Third Master threw his ax on the ground. “You win, my noble brother. The good man wins. But isn’t it funny that once outside this compound, a good man is always the loser?”

In the Great Room, Che nervously finished his cup of hot tea, then said in a quivering voice. “Thank you, Doctor Bai. That was close.”

“Close, indeed,” Doctor Bai said tiredly. “What do you want?”

“Lord Jeng sends his condolences. He can’t come in person, so here I am.”

“Do you know what made my Sister-in-law end her own life?”

Che fell silent.

“If your Lord had had a heart and let an innocent man go, my Sister-in-law would be here to welcome you.”

“What an awful misunderstanding!”

“Misunderstanding?” Doctor Bai rose. “How arrogant you sound! You’d better leave now.”

“I’m sorry sir, I am not a learned man. I spoke bluntly and stupidly. Please forgive me. If it should please you, I’ll slap my face.”

“No one slaps his own face in this house. Tell me why you came!”

“Yes, sir. Great Lady is sick, very sick, and she trusts no other doctor but First Master.”

“So?”

“Where is Bai First Master? Where is Bai First Master? She asked her son this everyday.”

“Why didn’t you tell her?”

“And my lord said, Mother, there are many good doctors in Beijing. I’ll find you the best ones. But she said, ‘I’ll chase them out if they come near -- only Bai First Master can save me. I want my own doctor. Why in the world didn’t you send for him?’”

“My brother is the best.”

“My lord is a very faithful son. He’ll do anything and everything to make her happy. But Great Lady very stubbornly, in my opinion, cried and howled like a spoiled child, ‘I want my doctor, I want Bai First Master.’” Che sighed. “No one can calm her down.”

“It’s not unusual. Sometimes patients look up to their doctors as if they are their saviors.”

“But there is one man can calm her down, sir, there is one.”

“You don’t suppose ...”

“Now my lord is as anxious as an ant on a hot pan. He said to me ...”

“You don’t suppose ...”

“Sir, this was what my lord said to me, he said, ‘Let’s ask Bai First Master’” –

“Get out!” Doctor Bai pounded the table. “Get out!”

“Please listen to me, sir. I understand your anger. The Jengs had been so wrong to do what they did, and I, shame on me, have been a part of it,” he slapped his face. “But I have come to know what a honorable family you are. Just now, you saved my life, even though you have all the reasons in the world not to do so.”

“Don’t you think your grateful tears came too late? My brother will be beheaded when the winter comes.”

He lowered his head. “My lord said he could move Bai First Master out of jail for this purpose, if Bai First Master is willing.”

Doctor Bai murmured, “Moving Big Brother out of jail?”

“There is nothing that money can’t do, sir.”

“Can he remove my brother from death row?”

“Except that. The verdict was final. After the visit, Bai First Master has to return to jail.”

Doctor Bai pondered. “Out of jail for one night to save a life? I know my brother is fond of Great Lady. If he had been free, he would definitely rush to her side. Never has he hesitated when his patients needed him.”

“Now you’re talking, sir. I’m so happy that you think this way.”

“Yet it’s up to my family to decide -- my father and my brother himself. If one of them says no, then that’s it.”

“I understand, but please do put in a few good words for us.”

“It would be hard.”

Che moved uneasily.

“There is one more thing. On that night, our family will be there to meet him ... for the very last time.”

“I love to see that happen, really sir. I’ll make sure it will happen. Truly, sir, you’re such a good man.”

“Let’s hope this is the beginning of a better world, Che,” Doctor Bai fell back on his chair. “Now I’m really tired. Old Hu will see you to the door.” #

Chapter 9

Surrounded by pots of yellow chrysanthemum and scrolls of his calligraphy, Bai Old Master lay on a couch and coughed into a porcelain pot from time to time. The series of tragedies had cost him his health, his spirit, and his recent memory. Now he spoke only of the happy days when he was in his promising youth. How he gallantly rode horses and galloped across grassy, open fields. How he and his friends roamed the Shang Mountain ablaze with red maple leaves, and howled in response to their echoes. How he was hailed as a prodigy when he issued prescriptions that even the most experienced doctors marveled at. Doctor Bai came to listen to his father every morning, encouraging him that there was still worth in living his life.

“Is it autumn now?” Bai Old Master murmured. “If it is, imagine the fog rising from the Han river, so beautiful that the willows on the banks weep ...”

“Yes, Father, the fog is as thick as it can be ...”

“Go visit the Han river for me, would you, Second Son?”

Doctor Bai was caught by a surge of sadness. His father used to say, “Second Son, let’s go visit the Han river together.” Now he wanted him to go alone.

“We’ll go together, Father.”

“Yes, we’ll go together -- all my three sons and me.”

“Do you still remember Great Lady?”

“Who? What Great Lady?”

“She is the mother of Lord Jeng. She is sick.”

“The Great Lady of the Jengs? Oh, I remember her. We were born in the same year. I was her doctor. Once she had a throat bruise; she couldn’t talk for days. It was I who made her talk again. And she never stopped talking ever since, ha ha ... is she married?”

“She was, a long time ago, Father. She is very old now, and very sick.”

“I can’t treat her. I’m not her doctor anymore -- Yinyun is. Ask Yinyun.”

“I will, but I have to ask you first. Do you agree that elder brother should visit her?”

“A strange question. Who else? Of course, it’s Yinyun’s duty to make her talk again. I still have that throat recipe.”

“I see.”

Doctor Bai took that as a “yes”. His father no longer remembered anything that happened after the first incident in the Jengs. He was grateful that the memories of the old man were now all happy ones.

He cuddled his father and tucked him into bed. “Don’t worry about a thing, Father. We’ll go see the Han river together -- you, Yinyun, Yinlee and me -- just like the old days.”



To the southwest of the Forbidden City, there were blocks of low, dark, tattered, and windowless buildings. Rain or shine, this area remained moist and foul because it was the lowest point of the whole city and all the earth water flowed here and stayed. The muddy road was lightly trodden except on days during the execution season – Post Autumn Horror, as it was known.

During that time, prisoner carts rumbled to the sites, carrying loads and loads of death row convicts.

Doctor Bai came to Jail Streets on a chilly morning. He brought with him a basket of freshly steamed pork buns, a bottle of Tiger Bone Wine, a pair of brush pens made of rare wolf hair, sheets of paper, and two antique medicine books he had just purchased from a book bazaar. Thanks to the police captain, he was able to visit his elder brother every ten days and bring anything he thought his brother might need. In addition to the privileges, his brother's cell was the biggest and the cleanest of all cells, and a private one. To the envy of all other prisoners, he had a straw mat to sleep on, a bucket of clean water for wash, and a night pot. Above all, First Master was never shackled.

The prisoner, though withdrawn, had kept his mind alive by studying. Aside from extensive reading, he would discuss with Doctor Bai the medicinal formula he had fashioned in his head, and ask him to experiment with them at home.

Once again, Doctor Bai faced his brother, separated by iron bars.

"How did the mule skin gel go?" Bai First Master was anxious to know the processing result of a remedy for aging women.

"The temperature wasn't quite right, so the gel did not form well."

"Did you boil it or simmer it?"

"Simmer, maybe next time I'll try boil."

After a short silence, Doctor Bai looked at his brother uneasily.

"Something bothering you, Yinshawn?"

"Oh, no, I'm fine. Are you well?"

“With good books to read, I can’t be better. What did you bring me this time?”

Doctor Bai tucked the books through. “They are of the Ming Dynasty Woodcut Edition, very precious ... oh, do you still remember Great Lady?”

“All the matriarchs call themselves great ladies. Which one do you mean?”

“The one who adores you very much.”

“They all do.” First Master smiled. “Don’t they?”

“But no one adores you as much as the Great Lady of the Jengs.”

First Master stopped browsing the book. His face turned pale. “Why mention her?”

“She is about to die unless--”

“Unless what?”

“Unless you tell her she will not die.”

“I am no god, my dear brother.”

“To her you are. All these years, you have been telling me how a doctor’s Chi could work magic in saving lives, especially those of the true believers. Great Lady truly believes in you.”

“Tales, tales. If it were true, I could have saved my own life.”

“It’s different.”

“I know it’s different,” First Master smiled. “I’ve been pushing too hard. But anyway, since when did you begin to care for her?”

Then Doctor Bai told him what had happened. “I know there is no call for you to do this, but we thought you might be willing. It’s all about saving lives.”

“Would saving another life improve my standing in the Underworld?” First Master lowered his eyes. “How many more lives do I have to save before I save my own? Oh, what’s the difference? Even though I’m willing, I can’t go.”

“Yes, you can.”

“How?”

“Lord Jeng will let you out, for one night.”

“Then ...”

Doctor Bai bit his lips.

“What a clever man! Always ahead of us.”

“If this is any comfort for you, the whole family will be there to meet you.”

First Master started, as if awakened from a dream. “The whole family?”

“With the exception of Father and Mother. The meeting will be too much for them, I’m afraid.”

After a moment of silence, First Master looked up with misty eyes. “Is it really necessary? It’s not that I don’t want to see you. It’s because ... tears, dismay, hopelessness...I’ve had it.”

“I understand, but it is still very important for us.”

“In that case, just bring my own household over, my wife and the children. I really miss them, especially your Sister-in-law. You’ve never mentioned her since I ... left home. How is she?”

“Big Brother ...” Doctor Bai choked on words.

“What happened to her? You look pale. Tell me what happened!”

“She ... she ... she had too much opium, raw opium.”

“Oh!” First Master stumbled back.

“Look at it this way, Big Brother, she chose not to suffer.”

“Oh, No!” First Master doubled over, groaning.

“She is in peace now.”

“I’ll join you soon, my dear wife!”

“The children have been very brave. The eldest has shown so much talent in herbs –”

“No more herbs!” First Master burst out, throwing a book onto the wall. “Promise me, Yinshawn, none of my children will be doctors! None! Never!”

Doctor Bai retreated to the side, letting his brother through with his emotions.

The police captain showed up to see what the noise was about. Doctor Bai shook his head, and sighed deeply. Then he thanked the captain for keeping his brother as comfortable as possible. “I can’t complain, sir. The Bais owe you a great deal for all of your arrangements.”

“Your family owes me nothing. I’m just doing my part to make this world a little more livable. If I could, I would let your brother free.”

“I’ve asked this question before, and I’d like to ask it again. Sir, do you know my brother?”

“No, I don’t. I’ve never met him before.”

“Yet, you believe in him.”

The captain smiled. “Without the faith in human kindness, what is the world good for?”

“May I know your name, sir?”

“Chu Shun is my name.”

“It’s such an honor to meet you, Captain Chu. Please accept my admiration.” Doctor Bai stepped forward and knelt.

“I’m utterly flattered. Please arise, please.” Chu Shun came forward to return the courtesy. The cell restored its peace. Doctor Bai turned and found his brother lying quietly on the mat. “Let him rest,” Captain Chu said. “He’ll be fine tomorrow.”

Before he left, Doctor Bai told Chu Shun that his brother might be summoned by the Jengs for a medical visit as early as the next day. Chu Shun’s eyes widened, and then glowed. “I’ll drive him to the Jengs, I’ll drive him to the Jengs myself,” he murmured. “I certainly don’t want to miss it.”

“That will be most kind of you.”

“If I were you, I would bring him some warm blankets and a bag of gold coins.”

“What for?”

“I don’t know. I just thought it might be a good idea.”

“Can I ask a favor of you?”

“Certainly.”

“Please help him shave and find him a fine robe. He’ll look exactly like a doctor for the very last time.” #

Chapter 10

There was a full moon at night. The soft illumination alighted on the foreground of the Bai compound. In the light were four heavy-curtained carriages. Ready to plunge into the long night, the drivers rubbed their hands to keep warm, and cursed in a low voice that the night wind was too harsh for this time of the year. Then they buttoned up their coats, fell silent, and waited. Soon, the driver closest to the door whispered to the others, "Here they come."

The door opened quietly, and out came a procession of about twenty. They were all clad from head to foot, unrecognizable except for their faces, which glimmered in the clear, white light. There were young faces, old faces, worried faces and innocent faces. When the innocent faces let out a smile, the worried faces looked down at them reproachfully.

Doctor Bai immediately gathered his family in a line and instructed them to board the carriages, one by one. Each household took one carriage, and the main servants, led by Old Hu, took the fourth. The carriages started. The sound of hooves and wheels reverberated around the soundless neighborhood.

In the second carriage sat Doctor Bai, his wife, and his four-year-old son Junchi. The face of the youngster shone with excitement. He fidgeted on his father's lap and asked repeatedly, "Father, how much longer?"

"Hush –"

"It must be fun, since all of us are going. Oh, Father, what's in your robe? It's poking me on my butt."

"Move over to your mother's side, then."

Doctor Bai touched the bundle he hid under his robe. He did what Chu Shun told him, bringing with him some warm blankets and a bag of gold coins. He thought it must be something that Chu Shun needed for himself, maybe a reward that he thought he deserved.

The carriage stopped. Doctor Bai got off. After a small confusion, the Bais stood in a line across the Mansion, watching and waiting.

The Mansion was still. Its foreground was empty, except for the accidental play of moonlight and its shadows.



The rumbling of a cart was heard in a steady crescendo through the echoing lanes. Then out from the dark lane and into the moonlighted foreground appeared a driver so wrapped up that only his eyes were revealed. He stopped the cart, jumped down from his seat, and glanced nervously around himself. When he saw the Bais, he turned back to remove a piece of hard board on one side of the vehicle.

Doctor Bai's heart leaped into his throat. He stretched out both of his arms to keep his family back and calm. Third Master and Old Hu began to groan in anguish as tears rolled down their faces.

“My poor Big Brother! I'll make the Jengs payback their wrongs!” Third Master cried out. “Yes, they'll pay miserably!”

Little Junchi rubbed on his father's thigh. "What's happening? What is up there?"

"Hush – "

When Bai First Master appeared, groans and moans rippled through the small crowd. He wore a gentleman's attire, his forehead shaved and his queue neatly-braided. He had a medical pouch in his hand.

"Big Brother!" Doctor Bai broke away and ran to him, followed by the rest of the family.

First Master reached out his hands to touch as many heads and shoulders as possible, and whomever was touched, tried to hang on. Little Junchi jostled to the front and grabbed First Master's robe by the corner. "Where have you been, Big Uncle? Will you come home with us tonight?"

Doctor Bai pulled his son aside and brought First Master's eldest son to him. "Show your father your latest calligraphy."

The boy respectfully unfolded a piece of paper before his father.

"It's dark, Son. I can't see, can you read it to me?"

"Yes, Father."

*Flowers in the spring, the moon in the autumn,
Circling endlessly,
How much of the past is still in memory?*

"How much of the past is still in memory?" First Master said lowly. "You've chosen a very good poem ... how old are you now?"

“I’m fourteen.”

“You’re going to be a man, a strong and brave man. Will you?”

“Yes, I will.”

At this time, the door opened with a clank. Che appeared with a lantern in his hand.

“I heard the noise so I came outside. I’m really glad you’re able to make it. First Master, let’s wish it’s the beginning of a better world. Lord Jeng is waiting for you.”

“I’d like to take my younger brother with me. It will be the last time I ever teach him anything.”

“Our pleasure, this way, please.”

Doctor Bai was surprised that his elder brother wanted him to go inside together. How he loved to spend a little more time with him!

In the Great Room, Lord Jeng received them cordially. He thanked them for coming, promising a handsome reward when they left.

“It is not important, Lord Jeng,” First Master said. “I am a dying man.”

Lord Jeng sighed, then rose to lead the way to his mother’s chamber. “This way, please.”

Great Lady, still with a loving, motherly glow in her eyes, struggled to sit up when they went in.

“Here you are, Doctor Bai -- finally -- and your younger brother, too. How lucky I am to have two Doctor Bais take care of me. I really missed you.”

“Please don’t move,” First Master put on a cheerful tone and came to her bedside. “I missed you, too. Come, come, my dear lady. Lie down and let me take a good look at you. Open your

mouth ... hmm ... your tongue is as pink as it should be. What a good girl! You're living back, not forward."

"I know once I see you, all my discomfort will be gone. Your Chi is so strong that I can feel it right now. My whole body feels warm. Doctor Bai, you're simply the best. You must live longer than me. Don't ever leave me to those terrible doctors. None of them know how to use needles, and none of their herbs ever work."

"It's not true, Mother," Lord Jeng said. "They are very good doctors."

"Good? They don't have any inner Chi, even they do, their Chi is as weak as an instant puff of air."

First Master simply smiled and went ahead to take her pulse. "My lady, have you been keeping up with your diet?"

"No more diets! Doctor, at my age, I'm entitled to the little pleasure that is still left for me. I don't care. I want to eat everything I want to eat. Have you ever tried the Mongolian grilled lamb chop?"

"No, I haven't."

"Son," she turned to Lord Jeng. "Make reservations in the Grass Wind Grill House. Once I am out of this bed, I'll play host to Doctor Bai and all of his family."

"Mother, talking is not good for your health. Please--" Lord Jeng said.

"Because I am so happy to see Doctor Bai that I cannot hold my tongue. Doctor Bai, where have you been anyway?"

First Master leaned back, drawing a deep breath. "I've been ...around."

"Didn't my son call on you earlier?"

“Yes. But I’ve been busy. The past year hasn’t been peaceful, in many respects ...”

“Mother, talking will make you tired.”

“Who said so? Can’t you see that I’m much better now? Seeing Doctor Bai is all I need.”

“Thank you, Great Lady, I am flattered.” First Master leaned forward to thank her.

“How old are you, Doctor Bai?”

“I’m thirty-one, but why?”

“Only thirty-one? But your hair has turned gray.”

First Master stopped checking her pulse. “Has it? Early gray hair runs in the family, I suppose.”

“It reminds me of a drama about white hair. Do you want to listen?”

“I am all ears.” First Master started to insert acupuncture needles on her forehead.

“In that drama, General Wu killed six archenemies and survived five life-and-death threats, and then he escaped only to find out that his black hair turn white the very next day.”

“Mother,” Lord Jeng said impatiently. “Please rest.”

The younger Doctor Bai listened with mixed feelings. How she trusted his brother! How she adored him! And yet, her son had deprived the Bais of its best son.

Neglecting her son’s advice, Great Lady continued. “How is your family? Are your parents well? Is your wife well?”

First Master’s hand jerked, causing his patient to groan. The younger Doctor Bai immediately took over the needle treatment apologetically. “My brother is tired after a long trip. Please allow me.”

Lord Jeng's face tightened. "Mother, I must ask you not to speak anymore. It's distracting to the doctors."

Great Lady sighed. "Well, old women do always talk too much. Fine, I'll say no more."

First Master composed himself and resumed his treatment. He told his patient that she could eat anything from now on for she was going to live to one hundred years old.

Smiling, Great Lady thanked him and closed her eyes. First Master began to twist the needles one by one in order to transport his inner Chi to her. By the time all the needles were tried, Great Lady had fallen asleep.

First Master walked right out of the room, and was heading toward the gate when he was stopped by Lord Jeng.

"Please wait, Doctor. You forgot to write a prescription."

"There is none."

"None?!" Lord Jeng raised his voice. "I don't understand."

"The patient has met the years that Heaven allows her. She has lived through her life cycles."

"I can't believe my ears! It's the worst thing that a doctor could ever say! I brought you here to save her, not to give up on her! Do you know how much money I've spent to move you out of jail?"

"I didn't ask you to bring me here. In fact, you are the one who begged –"

"But you're a doctor, and such a good one ..."

"I know my duty, sir."

“Is this revenge or something? I know you have a thing with my family, but you shouldn’t make my mother a victim of your nasty mood.”

“If you insist, I’ll write you one.”

First Master came to the desk and scribbled on a piece of paper. Lord Jeng picked it up and read it aloud.

“Be restful till the end,” his face turned ashen. “Are you putting me on? This is not a prescription, this is announcing--”

“I’m sorry to say that she can’t live past next spring.”

“How dare you!”

“Lord Jeng,” First Master looked straight into his eyes. “Has it ever occurred to you that arrogance and threats will not turn things around? Shall I remind you that blaming others has become a bad habit of yours, if not a silly one.

“Guard!”

“It’s absolutely unnecessary to call in your guards. You make me laugh,” First Master confronted Lord Jeng. “You have sent me to death row.”

“I have nothing to do with it. It’s the Court who decided.”

“You know very well that I didn’t kill your daughter. Why didn’t you tell the truth to the Court?”

“To whom? Who would ever listen to me?”

“Can you at least tell me now that I am innocent? I’m listening, so is my brother.”

“You hate me! That’s why you refused to treat my mother and left her to die.”

“If you don’t trust my diagnosis, please consult other doctors, Beijing is full of them.”

“Crap! You know very well that she won’t let other doctors touch her. The only diagnosis I will ever get is from you!”

“If I had given her some medicine, what will you say when she is gone?”

“What do you mean?”

“You will say, ‘the Bais did it again!’ Bai First Master hated me so much that he poisoned my mother.”

“Nonsense! I’ll never say such a thing.”

“No reasonable person would ever say this. But you will, Lord Jeng, because power and fortune has corrupted you so much that you simply don’t have the least respect for truth. You simply don’t know how not to blame others for your own misfortunes.”

“You’ve gone crazy!”

“By not giving you any prescriptions, which is not necessary anyway, my reputation is able to live on.”

“Get lost! Get back to where you belong, this minute!”

“Make your mother proud, Lord Jeng, by being a good human being.”

With this, First Master strode out of the room, followed by the heart-wrenching Doctor Bai.

Once they appeared, the family ran up the doorsteps and surrounded them, one speaking over the other about what had happened inside the Mansion. Doctor Bai described briefly that Great Lady was very sick. “She probably can’t see the next spring.”

“How about Lord Jeng?” Third Master asked. “Is he still an animal?”

“He is a very good son, to say the least,” First Master replied.

As the night deepened, the talk receded into sighs and sobs, and painful, endless gazes. With a choking voice, First Master said that he would be going on a far-away journey. This time, he would not write them, and would not plan for a return. “But I will always be with you.” Saying this, he covered his face.

Before their emotions became overwhelming, the driver came over to separate them. Not until then did Doctor Bai begin to realize that there was something unusual about this driver. He almost forgot a very important thing.

“Are you Captain – ”

“Hush – ”

Doctor Bai stepped aside, lowering his voice. “Are you Captain Chu Shun?”

“Yes,” Chu Shun pulled down his mask and revealed one side of his face. “Yes, I am. Do you have what I asked you to bring?”

“Yes, warm blankets and a bag of coins.”

“Did you ever wonder what these are for?”

“I don’t know what these are for, but I believe in you.”

“These are for Bai First Master.”

“What?”

Then Chu Shun whispered at his ear. Doctor Bai’s eyes widened, his eyebrows shot up, and he stood shot as if waiting to fall.

“What?” He kept gaping at this man.

“It’s dangerous, but worth trying.”

“I don’t know what to say. We are almost like strangers to you, and yet ...”

“None of your family would remember this. Almost four years ago, Bai First Master saved a poor, old woman from dying on the street. She was my mother.”

“Good lord!”

“Two years ago, my mother passed away. Before she died, she told me that Bai First Master was a heavenly messenger. Anyone with a heart should help him do what he does best -- saving lives. Yes, those were her last words.”

“Heaven knows best!”

“Now we have to be on our way. Remember what I said to you, otherwise, all of us will be in danger.”

“Buddha bless you!”

Doctor Bai turned and helped his brother board the cart. This time, there was a smile on his face. “Have a nice trip, Big Brother.”

In the second carriage, Little Junchi soon fell asleep. Doctor Bai gazed at the top of the interior until his wife shook him. “You’ve been smiling like a fool. For heaven’s sake, why?”

How Doctor Bai wished that he could tell her about Chu Shun’s amazing plan: the captain would drive the cart westward to the desert, set First Master free, then both men would assume new identities and live like hermits until the power of the death sentence became history.

In order to seal the case permanently, Chu Shun had earlier located an unclaimed corpse to be buried as First Master. “In a month, the Bais should hold a funeral for First Master. Your family should let the whole world know that First Master has died suddenly in the prison.”

Chu Shun also told him that they should never look for either of them; for a police captain to help a condemned man escape was a crime that could lead to the elimination of his whole family.

“Now your eyes are wet, why?” his wife asked softly.

“Shouldn’t they be, my dear?” he put his hand over hers. “I’ve just bid goodbye to two very noble souls. I may never see them again.” #

The end of Part I.

