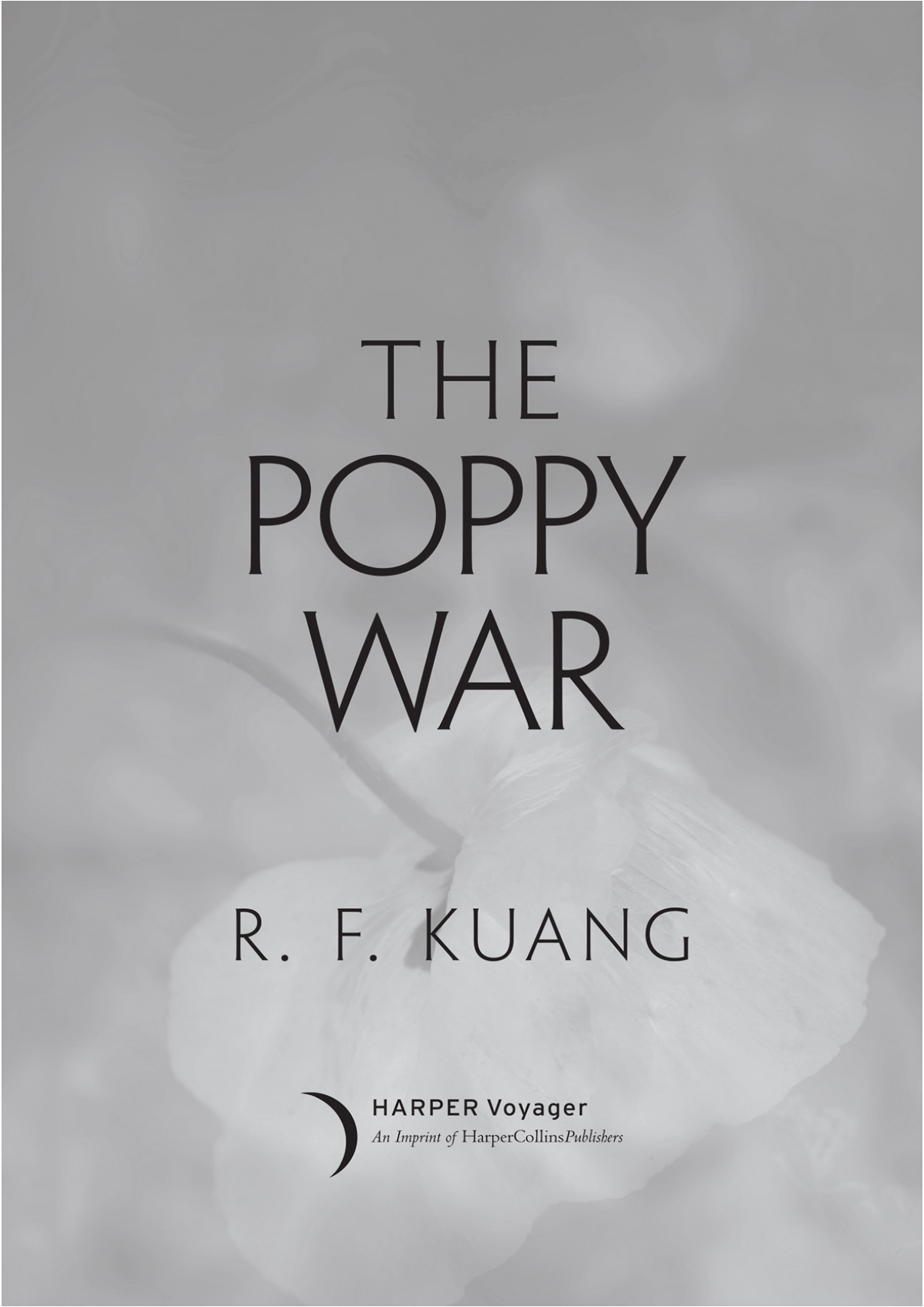




THE POPPY WAR

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

R.F. KUANG



THE POPPY WAR

R. F. KUANG



HARPER Voyager

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Dedication

This is for Iris

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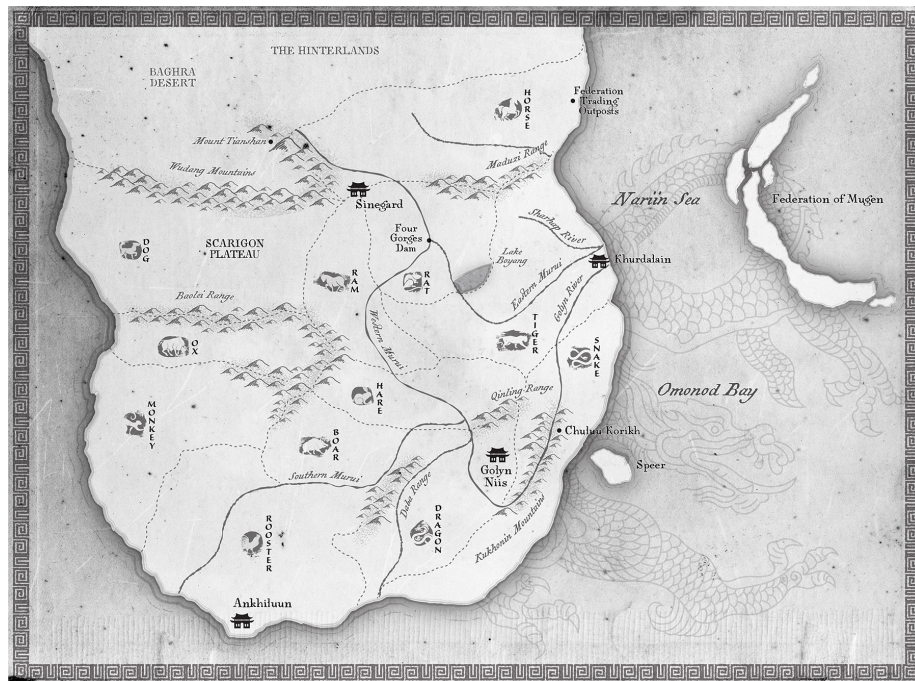
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Part I

Chapter 1

"Take your clothes off."

Rin blinked. "What?"

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

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

"Put this on," said the proctor.

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

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

Rin obliged.

The proctor prodded her tongue with a slim rod. "No discoloration, that's good. Eyes wide open."

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

Satisfied, she waved Rin down the hallway where other prospective students waited in a straggly line. Their hands were empty, faces uniformly tight with anxiety. They had brought no

materials to the test—pens could be hollowed out to contain scrolls with answers written on them.

“Hands out where we can see them,” ordered the male proctor, walking to the front of the line. “Sleeves must remain rolled up past the elbow. From this point forward, you do not speak to one another. If you have to urinate, raise your hand. We have a bucket in the back of the room.”

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

The proctor gave him a long look.

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

The proctor shrugged. “Try to be quiet.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the corner, a water clock rang softly.

"Begin," said the examiner.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sit down, Rin," said Uncle Fang.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Auntie Fang liked to keep her cruelty private.

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

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

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

"Kesegi is *eight*."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wow," Rin said faintly. The floor seemed to wobble beneath her feet. "That's great. Really great. Terrific."

Matchmaker Liew beamed again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I came to return a book," she said, holding out a waterproof satchel. "Also, I'm getting married."

"Oh. Oh! What? Come in."

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

That made him the linchpin in her escape plan.

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

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

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

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

"Yes, but they think I'll be more useful in the import inspector's bed."

Tutor Feyrik looked revolted. "Your folks are assholes."

"So you'll do it," she said hopefully. "You'll help."

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

"But—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't you have actual responsibilities?"

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

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

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

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

She was being dramatic, but not hyperbolic. She could leave town, probably with enough stolen opium to buy herself a caravan ticket to

any other province . . . but where to? She had no friends or family; no one to come to her aid if she was robbed or kidnapped. She had no marketable skills. She had never left Tikany; she didn't know the first thing about survival in the city.

And if they caught her with that much opium on her person . . . Opium possession was a capital offense in the Empire. She'd be dragged into the town square and publicly beheaded as the latest casualty in the Empress's futile war on drugs.

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

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

"Yes," he said without checking his ledger.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She knew what Tutor Feyrik was trying to tell her.

The Nikara believed in strictly defined social roles, a rigid hierarchy that all were locked into at birth. Everything had its own place under heaven. Princelings became Warlords, cadets became soldiers, and

orphan shopgirls from Tikany should be content with remaining orphan shopgirls from Tikany. The Keju was a purportedly meritocratic institution, but only the wealthy class ever had the money to afford the tutors their children needed to actually pass.

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

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

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

"I don't," she acknowledged. "But I'm stubborn, I study hard, and I really don't want to be married. It took me three days to memorize Mengzi. It was a short book, so I'll probably need a full week for the longer texts. But how many texts are on the Keju list? Twenty? Thirty?"

"Twenty-seven."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He balked visibly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But Rin had covered her tracks.

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

"They could still beat you."

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

Tutor Feyrik was staring at the satchel with obvious greed.

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

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

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

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

He gave her a wry smile.

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

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

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

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

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

Rin stiffened. "Nothing."

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

"What is so wrong with getting married?" Auntie Fang demanded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But the Keju—"

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

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

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

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

But now she could fight back.

"If I go missing, then Tutor Feyrik will tell the authorities precisely what happened to me," she said loudly. "And he'll tell your son what you've done."

"Kesegi won't care," Auntie Fang scoffed.

"I raised Kesegi. He loves me," Rin said. "And you love him. You don't want him to know what you do. That's why you don't send him to the shop. And why you make me keep him in our room when you go out to meet your smugglers."

That did it. Auntie Fang stared at her, mouth agape, nostrils flaring.

"Let me at least try," Rin begged. "It can't hurt you to let me study. If I pass, then you'll at least be rid of me—and if I fail, you still have a bride."

Auntie Fang grabbed at the wok. Rin tensed instinctively, but Auntie Fang only resumed scrubbing it with a vengeance.

"You study in the shop, and I'll throw you out on the streets," Auntie Fang said. "I don't need this getting back to the inspector."

"Deal," Rin lied through her teeth.

Auntie Fang snorted. "And what happens if you get in? Who's going to pay your tuition, your dear, impoverished tutor?"

Rin hesitated. She'd been hoping the Fangs might give her the dowry money as tuition, but she could see now that had been an idiotic hope.

"Tuition at Sinegard is free," she pointed out.

Auntie Fang laughed out loud. "Sinegard! You think you're going to test into Sinegard?"

Rin lifted her chin. "I could."

The military academy at Sinegard was the most prestigious institution in the Empire, a training ground for future generals and

statesmen. It rarely recruited from the rural south, if ever.

"You *are* deluded." Auntie Fang snorted again. "Fine—study if you like, if that makes you happy. By all means, take the Keju. But when you fail, you *will* marry that inspector. And you will be grateful."

That night, cradling a stolen candle on the floor of the cramped bedroom that she shared with Kesegi, Rin cracked open her first Keju primer.

The Keju tested the Four Noble Subjects: history, mathematics, logic, and the Classics. The imperial bureaucracy in Sinegard considered these subjects integral to the development of a scholar and a statesman. Rin had to learn them all by her sixteenth birthday.

She set a tight schedule for herself: she was to finish at least two books every week, and to rotate between two subjects each day. Each night after she had closed up shop, she ran to Tutor Feyrik's house before returning home, arms laden with more books.

History was the easiest to learn. Nikan's history was a highly entertaining saga of constant warfare. The Empire had been formed a millennium ago under the mighty sword of the merciless Red Emperor, who destroyed the monastic orders scattered across the continent and created a unified state of unprecedented size. It was the first time the Nikara people had ever conceived of themselves as a single nation. The Red Emperor standardized the Nikara language, issued a uniform set of weights and measurements, and built a system of roads that connected his sprawling territory.

But the newly conceived Nikara Empire did not survive the Red Emperor's death. His many heirs turned the country into a bloody mess during the Era of Warring States that followed, which divided Nikan into twelve rival provinces.

Since then, the massive country had been reunified, conquered, exploited, shattered, and then unified again. Nikan had in turn been at war with the khans of the northern Hinterlands and the tall westerners from across the great sea. Both times Nikan had proven itself too massive to suffer foreign occupation for very long.

Of all Nikan's attempted conquerors, the Federation of Mugen had come the closest. The island country had attacked Nikan at a time when domestic turmoil between the provinces was at its peak. It took two Poppy Wars and fifty years of bloody occupation for Nikan to win back its independence.

The Empress Su Daji, the last living member of the troika who had seized control of the state during the Second Poppy War, now ruled over a land of twelve provinces that had never quite managed to achieve the same unity that the Red Emperor had imposed.

The Nikara Empire had proven itself historically unconquerable. But it was also unstable and disunited, and the current spell of peace held no promise of durability.

If there was one thing Rin had learned about her country's history, it was that the only permanent thing about the Nikara Empire was war.

The second subject, mathematics, was a slog. It wasn't overly challenging but tedious and tiresome. The Keju did not filter for genius mathematicians but rather for students who could keep up things such as the country's finances and balance books. Rin had been doing accounting for the Fangs since she could add. She was naturally apt at juggling large sums in her head. She still had to bring herself up to speed on the more abstract trigonometric theorems, which she assumed mattered for naval battles, but she found that learning those was pleasantly straightforward.

The third section, logic, was entirely foreign to her. The Keju posed logic riddles as open-ended questions. She flipped open a sample exam for practice. The first question read: "A scholar traveling a well-trodden road passes a pear tree. The tree is laden with fruit so heavy that the branches bend over with its weight. Yet he does not pick the fruit. Why?"

Because it's not his pear tree, Rin thought immediately. *Because the owner might be Auntie Fang and break his head open with a shovel.* But those responses were either moral or contingent. The answer to the riddle had to be contained within the question itself. There must be some fallacy, some contradiction in the given scenario.

Rin had to think for a long while before she came up with the answer: *If a tree by a well-traveled road has this much fruit, then there must be something wrong with the fruit.*

The more she practiced, the more she came to see the questions as games. Cracking them was very rewarding. Rin drew diagrams in the dirt, studied the structures of syllogisms, and memorized the more common logical fallacies. Within months, she could answer these kinds of questions in mere seconds.

Her worst subject by far was Classics. It was the exception to her rotating schedule. She had to study Classics every day.

This section of the Keju required students to recite, analyze, and compare texts of a predetermined canon of twenty-seven books. These books were written not in the modern script but in the Old Nikara language, which was notorious for unpredictable grammar patterns and tricky pronunciations. The books contained poems, philosophical treatises, and essays on statecraft written by the legendary scholars of Nikan's past. They were meant to shape the moral character of the nation's future statesmen. And they were, without exception, hopelessly confusing.

Unlike with logic and mathematics, Rin could not reason her way out of Classics. Classics required a knowledge base that most students had been slowly building since they could read. In two years, Rin had to simulate more than five years of constant study.

To that end, she achieved extraordinary feats of rote memorization.

She recited backward while walking along the edges of the old defensive walls that encircled Tikany. She recited at double speed while hopping across posts over the lake. She mumbled to herself in the store, snapping in irritation whenever customers asked for her help. She would not let herself sleep unless she had recited that day's lessons without error. She woke up chanting classical analects, which terrified Kesegi, who thought she had been possessed by ghosts. And in a way, she had been—she dreamed of ancient poems by long-dead voices and woke up shaking from nightmares where she'd gotten them wrong.

"The Way of Heaven operates unceasingly, and leaves no accumulation of its influence in any particular place, so that all things are brought to perfection by it . . . so does the Way operate, and all under the sky turn to them, and all within the seas submit to them."

Rin put down Zhuangzi's *Annals* and scowled. Not only did she have no idea what Zhuangzi was writing about, she also couldn't see why he had insisted on writing in the most irritatingly verbose manner possible.

She understood very little of what she read. Even the scholars of Yuelu Mountain had trouble understanding the Classics; she could hardly be expected to glean their meaning on her own. And because she didn't have the time or the training to delve deep into the texts—and since she could think of no useful mnemonics, no shortcuts to learning the Classics—she simply had to learn them word by word and hope that would be enough.

She walked everywhere with a book. She studied as she ate. When she tired, she conjured up images for herself, telling herself the story of the worst possible future.

You walk up the aisle in a dress that doesn't fit you. You're trembling. He's waiting at the other end. He looks at you like you're a juicy, fattened pig, a marbled slab of meat for his purchase. He spreads saliva over his dry lips. He doesn't look away from you throughout the entire banquet. When it's over, he carries you to his bedroom. He pushes you onto the sheets.

She shuddered. Squeezed her eyes shut. Reopened them and found her place on the page.

By Rin's fifteenth birthday she held a vast quantity of ancient Nikara literature in her head, and could recite the majority of it. But she was still making mistakes: missing words, switching up complex clauses, mixing up the order of the stanzas.

This was good enough, she knew, to test into a teacher's college or a medical academy. She suspected she might even test into the scholars' institute at Yuelu Mountain, where the most brilliant minds

in Nikan produced stunning works of literature and pondered the mysteries of the natural world.

But she could not afford any of those academies. She *had* to test into Sinegard. She had to test into the highest-scoring percentage of students not just in the village, but in the entire country. Otherwise, her two years of study would be wasted.

She had to make her memory perfect.

She stopped sleeping.

Her eyes became bloodshot, swollen. Her head swam from days of cramming. When she visited Tutor Feyrik at his home one night to pick up a new set of books, her gaze was desperate, unfocused. She stared past him as he spoke. His words drifted over her head like clouds; she barely registered his presence.

"Rin. Look at me."

She inhaled sharply and willed her eyes to focus on his fuzzy form.

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

"I can't do it," she whispered. "I only have two more months, and I can't do it. Everything is spilling out of my head as quickly as I put it in, and—" Her chest rose and fell very quickly.

"Oh, Rin."

Words spilled from her mouth. She spoke without thinking. "What happens if I don't pass? What if I get married after all? I guess I could kill him. Smother him in his sleep, you know? Would I inherit his fortune? That would be fine, wouldn't it?" She began to laugh hysterically. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "It's easier than doping him up. No one would ever *know*."

Tutor Feyrik rose quickly and pulled out a stool. "Sit down, child."

Rin trembled. "I can't. I still have to get through Fuzi's *Analects* before tomorrow."

"Runin. Sit."

She sank onto the stool.

Tutor Feyrik sat down opposite her and took her hands in his. "I'll tell you a story," he said. "Once, not too long ago, there lived a scholar from a very poor family. He was too weak to work long hours in the fields, and his only chance of providing for his parents in their old age was to win a government position so that he might receive a

robust stipend. To do this, he had to matriculate at an academy. With the last of his earnings, the scholar bought a set of textbooks and registered for the Keju. He was very tired, because he toiled in the fields all day and could only study at night."

Rin's eyes fluttered shut. Her shoulders heaved, and she suppressed a yawn.

Tutor Feyrik snapped his fingers in front of her eyes. "The scholar had to find a way to stay awake. So he pinned the end of his braid to the ceiling, so that every time he drooped forward, his hair would yank at his scalp and the pain would awaken him." Tutor Feyrik smiled sympathetically. "You're almost there, Rin. Just a little further. Please do not commit spousal homicide."

But she had stopped listening.

"The pain made him focus," she said.

"That's not really what I was trying to—"

"The pain made him focus," she repeated.

Pain could make *her* focus.

So Rin kept a candle by her books, dripping hot wax on her arm if she nodded off. Her eyes would water in pain, she would wipe her tears away, and she would resume her studies.

The day she took the exam, her arms were covered with burn scars.

Afterward, Tutor Feyrik asked her how the test went. She couldn't tell him. Days later, she couldn't remember those horrible, draining hours. They were a gap in her memory. When she tried to recall how she'd answered a particular question, her brain seized up and did not let her relive it.

She didn't want to relive it. She never wanted to think about it again.

Seven days until the scores were out. Every booklet in the province had to be checked, double-checked, and triple-checked.

For Rin, those days were unbearable. She hardly slept. For the past two years she had filled her days with frantic studying. Now she

had nothing to do—her future was out of her hands, and knowing that made her feel far worse.

She drove everyone else mad with her fretting. She made mistakes at the shop. She created a mess out of inventory. She snapped at Kesegi and fought with the Fangs more than she should have.

More than once she considered stealing another pack of opium and smoking it. She had heard of women in the village committing suicide by swallowing opium nuggets whole. In the dark hours of the night, she considered that, too.

Everything hung in suspended animation. She felt as if she were drifting, her whole existence reduced to a single score.

She thought about making contingency plans, preparations to escape the village in case she hadn't tested out after all. But her mind refused to linger on the subject. She could not possibly conceive of life after the Keju because there might not be a life after the Keju.

Rin grew so desperate that for the first time in her life, she prayed.

The Fangs were far from religious. They visited the village temple sporadically at best, mostly to exchange packets of opium behind the golden altar.

They were hardly alone in their lack of religious devotion. Once the monastic orders had exerted even greater influence on the country than the Warlords did now, but then the Red Emperor had come crashing through the continent with his glorious quest for unification, leaving slaughtered monks and empty temples in his wake.

The monastic orders were gone now, but the gods remained: numerous deities that represented every category from sweeping themes of love and warfare to the mundane concerns of kitchens and households. Somewhere, those traditions were kept alive by devout worshippers who had gone into hiding, but most villagers in Tikany frequented the temples only out of ritualistic habit. No one truly believed—at least, no one who dared admit it. To the Nikara,

gods were only relics of the past: subjects of myths and legends, but no more.

But Rin wasn't taking any chances. She stole out of the shop early one afternoon and brought an offering of dumplings and stuffed lotus root to the plinths of the Four Gods.

The temple was very quiet. At midday, she was the only one inside. Four statues gazed mutely at her through their painted eyes. Rin hesitated before them. She was not entirely certain which one she ought to pray to.

She knew their names, of course—the White Tiger, the Black Tortoise, the Azure Dragon, and the Vermilion Bird. And she knew that they represented the four cardinal directions, but they formed only a small subset of the vast pantheon of deities that were worshipped in Nikan. This temple also bore shrines to smaller guardian gods, whose likenesses hung on scrolls draped over the walls.

So many gods. Which was the god of test scores? Which was the god of unmarried shopgirls who wished to stay that way?

She decided to simply pray to all of them.

"If you exist, if you're up there, help me. Give me a way out of this shithole. Or if you can't do that, give the import inspector a heart attack."

She looked around the empty temple. What came next? She had always imagined that praying involved more than just speaking out loud. She spied several unused incense sticks lying by the altar. She lit the end of one of them by dipping it in the brazier, and then waved it experimentally in the air.

Was she supposed to hold the smoke to the gods? Or should she smoke the stick herself? She had just held the burned end to her nose when a temple custodian strode out from behind the altar.

They blinked at each other.

Slowly Rin removed the incense stick from her nostril.

"Hello," she said. "I'm praying."

"Please leave," he said.

Exam results were to be posted at noon outside the examination hall.

Rin closed up shop early and went downtown with Tutor Feyrik half an hour in advance. A large crowd had already gathered around the post, so they found a shady corner a hundred meters away and waited.

So many people had accumulated by the hall that Rin couldn't see when the scrolls were posted, but she knew because suddenly everyone was shouting, and the crowd was rushing forward, pressing Rin and Tutor Feyrik tightly into the fold.

Her heart beat so fast she could hardly breathe. She couldn't see anything except the backs of the people before her. She thought she might vomit.

When they finally got to the front, it took Rin a long time to find her name. She scanned the lower half of the scroll, hardly daring to breathe. Surely she hadn't scored well enough to make the top ten.

She didn't see *Fang Runin* anywhere.

Only when she looked at Tutor Feyrik and saw that he was crying did she realize what had happened.

Her name was at the very top of the scroll. She hadn't placed in the top ten. She'd placed at the top of the entire village. The entire *province*.

She had bribed a teacher. She had stolen opium. She had burned herself, lied to her foster parents, abandoned her responsibilities at the store, and broken a marriage deal.

And she was going to Sinegard.