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In food this slow acting poison is impossible to taste. As a serving girl at the Emperor's table I had an ideal place to both 'spice' the food and deliver it. It would pass the Imperial Food Taster's lips and rest in the Emperor's belly before it was ever discovered. Much too late for the Emperor. There was but one fault encircling this plot and hindering it like a silver lining a dark night:

The Food Taster, Tsai, and I were close.

I have never known where he came from; one day after the last Taster died he just arrived. At sixteen he was scrawny, unpredictable, and charming. Last month, at nineteen, he was still charming and unpredictable but unearthly attractive and no longer scrawny.

A palace guard had plagued me since my brother was banished. Gradually this year, he got braver until this night, a month ago now, and a world away.

After dinner I exited through the servant's door, walking to my quarters.

A gentle breeze blew pulling at my hair and begging me to be a child again. I could not. While the Emperor lived I was his prisoner as a lowly serving girl; a living insult to the memory of grandfather.

The Palace Guard delved too deeply into the rice wine tonight; he grabbed me.

He mocked me, calling me a cold princess as we oozed into the dark. My arm ached up to my shoulder; he had it twisted so tight. In the back corner of the palace walls in the darkened gardens he threw me down, pinning me with his body.

"Get off me!"

He forced his hand over my mouth. His breath was so foul I almost fainted, “Has your brother’s absence helped to lower your opinion of yourself Princess Serving Girl?” He kissed my jaw-line, “Your daddy never reclaimed it and your brother will never be Emperor.”

He laughed as I struggled. Son of a rutting sea serpent!

“Still not ready to accept your lowly station?” His lips were disgusting, like dead fish, moving against my skin. While he slid his other hand up and down my body he purred, “Maybe I can help.”

He was ripped away, scratching me as he clung to me.

Freed, I scrambled to my feet, staring at the sprawled guard and the broad shoulders and tapered waist of the man standing over him.

The palace guard scampered off bloody, probably planning to take out his embarrassment on the next smaller person he found. I prayed that person beat him too and he killed himself in shame.

“Are you okay?”

As the man turned to me I focused for the first time on his almond shaped eyes so dark they seemed black, thick dark hair, and smooth face. “Tsai?” I never expected the Food Taster to be my rescuer. I hadn’t thought he could fight.

He stepped closer to me, “he didn’t hurt you?”

We stayed there awhile before he walked me to my quarters. We both knew what would happen if the Emperor caught us together and perhaps the very thought of going

against him, in at least some way, was why we decided to meet the next night and the one after that.

It was dangerous and it was something I couldn't have fought had I wanted to. There was something compelling in his smoky gaze and in the taut lines of his muscular lithe body moving under his clothing.

Two nights ago we were in the back part of the garden, bathed in moonlight, and in each other's arms.

"Why didn't you ever approach me before that night?"

"You're an Emperor's grand-daughter." He said and the corners of his lips curved up, making me tingle.

"I'm a serving girl now—"

"All I see is a moonlight ethereal princess."

I peeled back, looking into his mysterious eyes, wondering if I'd ever know their secret, and it escaped my lips when I parted them to invite his kiss: "I love you." I hadn't expected to say it but once it was out I didn't want it back.

He stared at me before kissing me, pausing to whisper his love against my lips.

Last night we made plans:

"I'll take you away from here; to my home town in the mountains."

"Please, don't tease—"

He caught me as I turned from him. “We’ll go in the night. In the winter you’ll have gowns of snow; in spring of lush wild flowers. We’ll have an entire valley, a new life as man and wife.”

“Wife...” The euphoric warmth of his voice and the future it presented caught me, “If the Emperor knows... if he catches us...”

“We’ll go after dinner.”

“But if he wants a midnight meal he’ll know you’re gone.”

“Jaasdyn, once we’re out of the city and into the country I can keep us hid—”

“I don’t know.”

“Trust me.”

I looked up at him, sure my eyes shone like his. Dry mouthed, I nodded, “I do. If we’re caught it’ll cost our lives.”

“We’ll gain our lives.”

We stayed there, pressing together as the moon made its arc across the velvet sky and once the silvery bath was gone we slipped away.

Tomorrow night. Any longer would steal our resolve.

Mid-morning I was summoned to the Empress—she knew, somehow she knew.

No. It was my brother, Naol. He was teetering on an apex, with my aid we could be rid of the Emperor and reclaim for Naol the throne and Empress he’d loved in his youth. Without me the Emperor would continue on the morrow to lead his men out to find Naol and his men, crushing them.

Anything to save my brother, and help reclaim what was stolen from my grandfather.

She explained her plot, showing me the poison I'd use in the Emperor's favorite dish tonight and I balked.

"Fool! As princess... Tsai could never be in the Imperial family."

I lowered my eyes, "We have plans. We love—"

"You speak of the love of a stranger, what about your brother, father, and grandfather before them?"

I took the poison, because I was afraid. I'd lose Naol if I refused. Could even Tsai protect me from her if I declined? The Emperor was nothing to the Empress crossed.

The poison would not act until after the last plate was cleared. Could I get Tsai the cure in time? We'd have to wait until we were left alone or risk warning the Emperor. What a sticky wicket.

Taking the dish, I felt the two small sachets in my sleeve pockets. I'd demanded the antidote, in case I accidentally poisoned myself, she wouldn't face my brother responsible for my death. I fondled the cure in my right pocket, shaking my head.

Even as I fought blushing at Tsai's wink, delivering the dish, I wasn't sure if it was love of my brother or fear of forsaking duty that steadied my hand when I poisoned the dish and awaited my escape.

I brushed my voluminous right sleeve against Tsai's arm and over his lap before retreating to the wall where I caressed the empty air of my right left sleeve pocket.