

Chapter 6 No.6

Chinatown was a sensory explosion. Dried seahorses in jars, hanging ducks, the smell of ginger and sulfur. Aurora navigated the crowded sidewalks with ease. She needed ingredients. Her body was weak, and standard vitamins weren't enough. She needed a tonic to boost her qi and accelerate muscle recovery.

She ducked into "Chen's Herbal Apothecary," a narrow shop stacked floor-to-ceiling with wooden drawers.

Outside, the black Maybach idled at the curb. Elias sat in the back, pressing his fingers against his temple. The headache was back, a blinding white agony that made his vision blur.

Sir, Graves said from the front seat. "We need to get you your medication. The pharmacy is blocks away."

Stop here, Elias gritted out. "Get... something. Anything for pain."

Graves hesitated, then nodded. He jumped out of the car and ran into the nearest shop—Chen's Apothecary.

Inside, Aurora was inspecting a bin of dried ginseng when Graves burst in.

I need painkillers! Graves shouted at the bewildered shop owner, Mr. Chen. "Strong ones. Now!"

Mr. Chen blinked. "We have herbs. No pills here."

Graves looked frantic. He knew his boss was incapacitated. "Herbs then! Whatever works for a migraine!"

Aurora glanced past Graves, through the shop's glass front, to the Maybach idling at the curb. She could see the silhouette of Elias slumped against the window, his posture rigid with pain. She stepped closer to the door, her eyes narrowing as she studied the tension in his neck, the way his hand was clamped to the side of his head.

"Is the pain a sharp, stabbing sensation behind his left eye?" Aurora asked, her voice cutting through Graves's panic. "And has he been consuming large amounts of coffee lately?"

Graves spun around, recognizing her. "You. The woman from the alley. How do you know that?"

"Answer the question," she commanded, her tone leaving no room for argument.

"Yes," Graves admitted, desperate. "The headaches have been crippling him for weeks. And the coffee... he drinks it by the gallon. How can you possibly help?"

Mr. Chen looked confused, reaching for a random jar.

That's ginseng Aurora's voice cut through the panic. "It will raise his blood pressure and make the migraine worse."

She turned back to the counter, her mind already processing the symptoms—a classic case of liver fire rising exacerbated by stimulants. She grabbed a piece of brown wrapping paper and a charcoal pencil from the counter. She began to write furiously.

Corydalis Yanhusuo

Ligusticum Wallichii

White Peony Root

Licorice

She wrote the measurements in grams. Precise. Dangerous if unbalanced.

She ripped the paper off and shoved it into Graves' hand.

Give this to Mr. Chen, she ordered. "Tell him to brew it. Three cups of water boiled down to one. Drink it hot. It tastes like dirt, but it will stop the pain in twenty minutes."

Graves looked at the paper, then at her. "Why should I trust you?"

Because your boss is currently suffering from a vascular constriction in his brain, Aurora said calmly. "And because I don't have time to watch you kill him with ginseng."

Do it, Graves decided. He handed the list to Mr. Chen. "Please. Hurry."

Mr. Chen took the list. He whistled low. "Old recipe. Very strong. Who is girl? She is master?"

Just brew it, Graves snapped.

Aurora picked up her own basket of roots. She paid Mr. Chen quickly while the old man was weighing Elias's cure.

She walked out of the shop. As she passed the Maybach, she didn't look inside. She kept walking, disappearing into the crowd.

Inside the car, Elias watched her retreating figure through half-closed eyes. The pain was blinding but his mind was still recording.

She was here. Again.

Graves returned minutes later with a thermos of dark, pungent liquid.

She wrote the recipe, sir, Graves said apologetically. "I... I didn't know what else to do."

Elias took the thermos. He smelled the bitter earthiness.

She wrote it? Elias whispered.

Yes, sir. In Mandarin characters...

Elias hesitated. It could be poison. But the pain was a living thing eating his brain.

He took a sip.