a halo of moonlight

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a halo of moonlight

by nightmareofthelake

Summary

an old fairy tale mentions a flower that only blooms during a full moon and only while the moon fairy dances other the lake. It supposedly has the power to heal many illnesses.
Maomao doesn't belief in fairy tales but just the idea of a flower with such power was enough for her to give it a try.
Unfortunately for her she did not find any magical flowers or a moon fairy. Even the moon itself was covered by clouds.
Instead she found a young noble man laying face down in the dirt.

or

this is the story of how Maomao made the Moon Fairy fall in love with her.

Chapter 1: the cat and the noble

The forest north of the capital is said to contain beauty, mystery and danger. There are countless stories about the old ruins that were once the old palace. The forgotten shrine that is supposedly housing a devious fox spirit. The old village whose people refused to leave their homes even after death.

Maomao heard them all from her sisters at the Verdigris House but she was only interested in one specific story. The great moon lake.

By day it’s a majestic body of water with beautiful scenery. By night it’s rumored to turn into a black mirror that reflects one’s true self. But on a full moon night - then the moon is directly above the lake - you could witness the moon fairy dancing on the water's surface. An enchanting being whose beauty supposedly could topple entire nations. Her presence made flowers wither away in jealousy. Her movements are so elegant that the wind can only follow her lead.

But Maomao couldn’t care less about pretty faces because she was already surrounded by beautiful flowers every day. No, she was interested in something that could only be found during the moon fairy’s dance.

The moon halo flower only blooms during a full moon and only as long as the moon fairy keeps dancing. Some stories say that a tea brewed from these flowers could heal many illnesses and give back youthfulness. Maomao usually wasn’t someone who believed in fairy tales but the idea of a flower that could be turned into an all-healing medicine was just too enticing.

This is why Maomao studied the moon phases pretty closely the past few days and prepared both basket and lantern for immediate departure. She even packed some mooncakes just in case she had to make an offering to the moon fairy (not a single story about the moon lake mentioned any offerings but Maomao packed some anyway. If the stories were real she would be prepared. If not, she would have a midnight snack). So once the moon was full she took basket and lantern and made her way to the lake.

She had walked the same path countless times in preparation for this night. She figured out the fastest way possible that avoided the ruins and the shrine but she also made sure to leave marks of her own so she could find her way back. She just had to reach the lake before the moon is directly above the lake and wait a few hours. It was a simple plan. In theory.

While she was making her way through the forest, clouts started to obscure the moon and total darkness fell over the forest. Maomao did bring her lantern but while it did its job it also attracted every single insect in a ten meter radius. Every few steps she had to swat some insects away that got too close to her face and she was convinced that some of them actively tried to fly into her mouth.

Two moths managed to crawl under her clothes and she had no other choice but to take a break and try to get rid of the invaders. She placed her lantern on the ground and loosened some of her layers to chase them out while making sure no other insects were able to crawl in.

After she was sure that nothing was crawling around on her anymore she bowed down to reach for her lantern. That's when she noticed something shiny under a rhododendron bush. Under closer inspection it appeared to be a silver hair stick. The design was intricate and the silver was polished to such an extent that she could see her own reflection. It was beautifully crafted and seemed to be of great value.

‘I could sell it for a good price,’ she thought to herself while admiring it under the dim light of her lantern but a loud yell stole her attention away.

She recognized it as a yell of distress. It was almost the same sound the old hag at the Verdigris House made every time she tripped and fell. It was pure instinct at this point for Maomao and before she knew it she was already running in the direction of the yell. She didn’t even notice that she put the hair stick in her own hair.

After only a few meters she reached the shore of the moon lake which thankfully she noticed because otherwise she would run directly into the lake. She looked around and tried to find the source of the yell. For a moment she thought that the person might have fallen into the water but she would have heard the water splatting just as clear as the yell itself.

Then she heard a muffled groan and she followed it a few meters to the right where she found someone lying face down in the grass.

She hurried to the stranger and kneeled beside them.

“Are you alright? Do you need help?” she asked and placed a hand on their shoulder.

The person froze for a second and then tried to hide their face by turning away from her.

“I-I’m fine. I tripped over a rock and fell. Just leave and let me be.”

The stranger sounded both male and young. There was also a hint of both exhaustion and embarrassment.

“Let me see your face. I need to see if it’s bleeding or not!”

“No, I’m fine!”

“What do you mean no? Do you want me to let you bleed out? Show me your face!”

“What are you? A doctor?”

Maomao was now actively pushing at the stranger's shoulder in hopes of flipping him over. But Maomao wasn’t strong enough and the stranger didn’t move a centimeter.

She let out an annoyed sigh.

“No, but I’m an apothecary! Now let me see!”

This seemed to catch the strangers attention. He turned his head in her direction just enough to look at her through his long hair. Maomao used that opportunity to move his hair to the side and have a look at his face. The stranger froze again and held his breath while Maomao looked over him.

The first thing the young apothecary noticed was the mud on his face. She carefully removed the dirt with her sleeve.

“No blood. That's good.”

He really got lucky otherwise it would have been a shame if his pretty face got any permanent markings.

“Your face only needs a good wash and you’re good to go.”

The stranger made a confused squeaking sound and immediately sat up. Maomao used that opportunity to take his hands and have a look.

His hands were covered in mud as well but she could also see some red mixed in. She couldn’t clean them like she did with his face so she took the basket off her back and looked for something that could hold some water. After some searching she finally found a small bowl she didn’t remember packing and a small piece of fabric. Perfect!

She walked over to the lakes and filled the bowl with water and then hurried back to the stranger who was staring at her in confusion.

Maomao began to clean his hands. Thankfully only the upper skin layer got scraped off.

“It’s nothing serious. You don’t require any stitching or bandaging but I don’t recommend playing in the mud for at least two days.”

The way it was worded sounded like a joke but her deadpan delivery made it sound way more serious.

She grabbed her basket again and pulled the small package out that contained the mooncakes. The walk through the forest, the two moths and the sudden sprint had made her hungry and was the best time for a break anyway. She took one mooncake and bit into it while offering the other one to the stranger.

“Thank you…”

He took it from her and looked down at it and then to his now clean hand only to then look back at her. Her face didn’t really show any emotions. Just pure calmness and indifference. Not even exhaustion could be seen on her face. She just sat there and ate like he wasn’t even there.

“You said you’re an apothecary…don’t tell me you were out here collecting herbs and weeds in the middle of the night!”

Maomao just shrugged. “I was looking for something specific.”

“Is it only growing at night or why can’t you look for it during the day?”

“It only grows during a full moon…if the stories are true…”

“During a full moon?” The stranger seemed to think for a moment before looking at her in surprise. “Are you talking about the moon halo flower?”

Maomao only nodded.

“You believe in fairy tales?”

Maomao shrugged again. “Many fairy tales have some truths to them. Might as well give it a try.”

“I see…”

“And why are you here?”

“Huh?”

“You’re also here in the middle of the night.”

The stranger looked to the side almost as if he was embarrassed.

“I lost something and tried to find it!”

“What did you lose?”

He looked back at her and pointed at something in her hair. Maomao reached up and felt around until her fingers touched the hair stick that was still in her hair. She immediately pulled it out and held it out to him.

“My apologies. I found it right before I heard you fall.”

The stranger took the hair stick from her and looked at it. The silver was cool to the touch and it reflected the light of Maomao's lantern beautifully. He fought for a moment and then looked back to the apothecary. With a smile he placed the hair stick back into her hair.

“Keep it as payment for helping me.”

“There is no need for-”

“Keep it.” He said with a firm voice. It sounded almost like he was giving her an order.

His smile was charming but there was something else that made chill creep down her spine. Like something is telling her that he shouldn’t be made into an enemy. As if he was way more than just a noble.

“As you wish…”

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Maomao was walking back home. Lantern illuminating her path and a stranger following her close.

“Do you have to follow me?” She asked without sounding too annoyed.

“How else should I find my way to the capitol? You have the only lantern!”

Maomao let out a sigh but kept walking. She had to think of a plan because she didn’t want him following her home. Maybe he will leave if she went to the Verdigris House and if he tried following her inside the old hag won’t let him in if he doesn’t pay.

The stranger didn’t really seem like someone who would go after young women. After all he is keeping enough space between them and after the hair stick he didn’t come too close to her either. But it’s better being safe than sorry.

“Apothecary! You haven’t told me your name yet!”

Maomao opened her mouth to answer him but her gut feeling told her that this was a terrible idea.

“You haven’t told me your name either,” she answered. “You can just call me apothecary.”

The stranger was silent and Maomao was almost tempted to look behind her but before she could even come to halt she heard him giggle.

“Well, in that case you can call me Jinshi.”

Maomao just nodded. Not really caring if he could see it or not.

Jinshi tried to make small talk a few times but Maomao only gave short and vague answers and after the third attempt he seemed to finally get the hint and stopped talking.

Maomao on the other hand tried to get through the forest as fast as possible without actually running. She really just wanted to get home, especially since she wasn’t able to find out if the moon halo flower was real or not because the clouds had been covering the moon the entire night. And because she wanted to get away from this mysterious noble.

At least she got a pretty hair stick which she could sell for a lot of money.

After some time they finally reached the forest edge and the lights of the capitol could be seen in the distance.

Maomao took a deep breath. Just a little more and she was home.

Suddenly Jinshi grabbed her by the shoulder and forced her to stop. Maomao's grip on her lantern got tighter and she was ready to use it as a weapon if he tried something funny.

“Thank you, little Apothecary~” Jinshi whispered into her ear and placed a small kiss on the shell of her ear. Maomao whipped around and was ready to hit him but after turning around there was no one.

Jinshi was gone and on the spot he once stood grew a little moon halo flower.

Chapter 2: shiny things

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maomao had already forgotten about Jinshi once she saw the delicate blue flower in front of her. She ran back home immediately while having only one thing on her mind. At home she filled the cattle with water and put it on the fire and searched for a tea pot while she waited for the water to boil. Once the tea pot was found and the water hot, she took the flower and ripped the petals off. That's then she had the realization. The flower had only six petals and she needed to think of how she wanted to tackle this. She could make a full teapot full with diluted tea or she could make a tea cup full with concentrated tea.
Maomao decided to make the diluted tea since she didn't know how potent a single flower was or if in high concentrations it could have some side effects.

The flower itself was vibrant blue and seemed to weakly glow in the dark but the tea itself was a nice indigo. Both smell and taste were weak but this was probably due to the fact that it was extremely watered down tea. Maybe she could mix in some green tea for flavor.
About the effects Maomao couldn't say anything since she didn't suffer from any illness herself and she was also still young so she couldn't say anything about it granting youthfulness.

"Maomao. You're up early."
The apothecary looked up and saw Luomen standing beside her. She also could see that the sun was rising behind him. Looks like she pulled an allnighter.
"Actually I haven't slept tonight," she admitted.
Luomen just gave out a sigh and looked at the tea pot. "A new experiment?"
Maomao beamed with excitement and offered him a tea cup. "I found the flower that could heal many illnesses!"
He took the cup and smelled the liquid inside it. "What flower?"
"The moon halo flower!"
Luomen looked at her in surprise which shortly turned into a warm smile. "So that is what you've been doing all night." He drank the tea and returned the cup back to Maomao.
"Did you have much trouble finding it?"

Excitedly, Maomao was about to tell him how she found it until she remembered a certain someone.
"Well, the moon was covered by clouds and it was completely dark and there weren't any flowers by the lake. Instead I helped a young noble man who tripped and fell."
"A young noble?"
Moamoa nodded. "He wasn't really hurt. I just cleaned the mud off his face and hands and shared my mooncakes with him." She pulled out the hair stick out of her hair and presented it to him. "He gave me this hair stick as payment and later I guided him out of the forest and that's where I found the flower."
His face was unreadable when he looked at the hair stick but smiled again when giving it

back to Maomao. “This is a great and valuable gift. You should keep it safe.”
“I wanted to sell it later at the market.”
Luomen shaked his head. “This would be rude. You need to wear it with pride and good things will come to you.”
She looked at the hair stick in her hand and gave out a sigh of defeat.
“Whatever you say old man…”

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The morning was peaceful. Luomen went on preparing herbs while Maomao took a nap to catch up on lost sleep.
She dreamed of blue flowers and dancing fairies and a pretty noble but thankfully nobody had to know about that. It was high noon when she woke up. It was also the time Lihaku appeared at her doorstep.
“Looks like someone slept in today!”
His voice was bright and had the same energy as a giant bell. There aren’t many people Moamao really liked but Lihaku was one of few people she was genuinely happy to see. They usually meet at the Verdegis House or in the fields but sometimes he would show up at her house to deliver sweets and presents from her sisters.
“I assume my sisters are sending you?”
Lihaku smiled and showed her small bag he was holding. “It’s dragon beard candy from Joka. It was a gift from a customer but she thought you would enjoy it more.”
Maomao smiled. Her sisters loved giving her the sweets they received from customers but she wished they would share their booze more often instead.
“Thank you, Lihaku.”

He gave her the bag and wanted to leave but something shiny caught his eye.
“Where did you find that thing?” he asked while pointing at the hair stick. Maomao reached out and felt the cold silver in her hair. She should try to hide it somehow since it is catching so much attention.
“It was given to me by a noble as payment for helping him after he tripped and fell and for guiding out of the forest.”
“The forest? What was he doing there?”
Maomao shrugged. “Maybe he wanted to see the moon fairy? It was a full moon after all.”
Jinshi had said that he was looking for his hair stick but he never said why he lost it there in the first place. The moon fairy was a good guess and honestly Maomao didn’t really want to know.
“I guess. Still a little strange.” Lihaku gave Maomao a pet on the head. “Well, time for me to get going. I still have a lot of work to do.”
“Just don’t over do it like last time!”
“Don’t worry about me. And even if something happens I still have you and Luomen to take care of anything serious!”

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The rest of the day remained uneventful. Maomao did try selling the hair stick off but for some reason no one wanted to take it. Everyone who took a look at it admired the beauty and craftsmanship but every time she mentioned that it was for sale they acted like it was cursed and didn't want to have anything to do with it.
The tea also went nowhere. It seemed to work well as a hangover cure but it was too weak for anything else. She needed more flowers but she had to wait another month until the next full moon.

It was now early evening. The sun was setting and the sky was painted in pink and orange. Maomao was sitting on a small hill facing the setting sun. Mentally she was already planning all the experiments she wanted to make once she had more moon halo flowers so she didn't notice that someone was approaching her.
"Good evening, Apothecary!"
Maomao flinched in surprise before acknowledging Jinshi's presence with a face you would only give to an unwashed pig.
"Good evening."
"No need to make that face."
"Do you need something?"
Jinshi looked at her confused like she was some kind of strange being. "I just wanted to see how you're doing and if you are wearing the hair stick I gave you."
Maomao rolled her eyes and turned her gaze back to the sunset. "I'm fine. And yes I'm obviously wearing it as you can see. Pops said it would bring good things my way if I did."
Jinshi chuckled. "He sounds like a wise man."
"He is."

The young man looked at Maomao. He saw her for the first time in the dark forest with nothing but a small lantern for light. Now he could actually see all the details of her face. He was especially fascinated by her freckles.
After a few moments he decided to sit down next to her and watch the sunset with her. It was surprisingly calming and he somehow felt at peace. Just sitting here in silence and watching nature's beauty.
He stayed silent until the sun disappeared and the waning moon was the dominant light source in the sky.
"And did you like my other gift?"
Maomao looked at him in confusion. "What other gift?"
"The flower I left you."
Her eyes grew wide in surprise. "You left it for me?"
"Of course I left it there! They only grow by the lake and nowhere else!"

As if to make a point, Jinshi pulled out another flower from his sleeve and presented it to Maomao. She on the other hand looked at him as if he was holding precious jewels.
"You have more of these flowers?"
Her sudden excitement hit him like a boar.
"Yes, I have countless more of these."
Suddenly she was very close to him and was holding him by his sleeve. "What do you want for them? Name me your price!"
The wheels in Jinshi's head started to turn. He would have given her the flowers for free but now a special opportunity presented itself to him. An opportunity that could solve many of

his problems.
“Well, there is something you could do…”
“Yes?”

Jinshi cleared his throat and shifted into a sitting position that was a little more dignifying.
“There is a high ranking lady who recently lost her child. He was only three months old and had been suffering from a mysterious illness. The doctor was unable to find the cause and whatever he tried didn’t seemed to make it better. To make things worse his mother also suffered from the same illness and after his death she became bed ridden."
“It’s only logical that the loss of a child would worsen a mothers health…what symptoms did they have?”
Jinshi crossed his arms and looked up, trying to remember what the doctor had said.
“Headaches…stomach pain and…nausea if I remember correctly. Do you have an idea what it could be?”
Maomao shaked her head. “The symptoms could have been part of any illness. I can’t really give a proper diagnosis without seeing the patient…why don’t you use the flowers?” she pointed at the blue flower he was still holding. “You said you had countless of these.”

Jinshi looked at the flower like it was a traitor. “As powerful as they are, they have no effect on Lady Lihua or anyone of her bloodline.”
Both anger and sadness painted the young man's face and he gripped the flower so hard it seemed as if he was trying to strangle it. Suddenly his demeanor shifted completely and a wide smile bloomed on his face.
“I can bring you to Lady Lihua!”
He sprang up, dragging Maomao to her feet as well. “I will bring you to her right now and you can make a proper diagnosis!”
“What do you mean right now? I can’t just leave!”
“Don’t worry about that. If things go smoothly I can bring you back home before the sun rises!” He smiled at her and waved the moon halo flower in front of her face. “And you will receive a full bouquet of these as payment.”

Chapter End Notes

I remembered that this site exists and I'm now slowly starting to move other stuff here because I don't really want to share my fics through google drive...

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