

Yellow Sky
Historical Novel

Editor's Note

The following work of historical fiction was created as a part of a larger graduation paper by Arnaud H. Koglin.

Due to restrictions put in place by the academic reviewers of this work, the author, editor, proof-reader and beta reader of this book are all the same person. For more information on sources used and the production process of this work, please refer to the graduation paper and project diary for this graduation project, respectively.

Character Index

Editor's note: The following entries are all names of Chinese origin. This means that the surname comes first, then comes the given name.

Yellow Turban Rebellion – A peasant uprising that started in 184 AD.

Empress He – The Empress of China at the time the story begins, in the summer of 189 AD.

Emperor Ling of Han – The Emperor of China.

He Jin – The General-in-Chief of the imperial army of China and the half-brother of the Empress.

Lady Tian – Empress He's charwoman.

Ten Attendants – A group of corrupt eunuchs. They work in bureaucratic functions at the imperial court.

Li Song – The youngest of the Ten Attendants.

Jian Shuo – A senior eunuch in charge of the imperial army's acquisitions department. He is also a member of the Ten Attendants.

Zhang Rang – The eldest eunuch. He can generally be considered the leader of the Ten Attendants.

Yuan Shao – A Chinese warlord from the northeast expanses of the country. He offered to help in the fight against the Yellow Turbans.

Dong Zhuo – A Chinese warlord from the north-western steppe. He is widely considered to be a brutal tyrant. He offered to help in the fight against the Yellow Turbans.

Gongsun Zan – One of China's four border lords. He is known and lauded for his heroism. He offered to help in the fight against the Yellow Turbans.

Ma Teng – Another one of China's four border lords. He is a close friend of Dong Zhuo. He offered to help in the fight against the Yellow Turbans.

Cao Cao – A Chinese warlord of exceptional strategic prowess. He offered to help in the fight against the Yellow Turbans.

Liu Bei, Zhang Fei and Guan Yu – An inseparable trio of warlords and the protagonists of Luo Guanzhong's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Guo Si, Li Jie – Two generals in Dong Zhuo's military.

Liu Bian, Liu Xie – The two princes of China. Whereas the former is the son of Empress He, the latter is the son of one of the Emperor's former concubines.

Zhang Jue – The Daoist 'wizard' who launched the Yellow Turban Rebellion.

Yi, Guiren and Bao – Three experienced Yellow Turban

insurgents. They are on the run from authorities. Yi is their elected leader and the oldest of the three.

Zheng Xiaoling – The daughter of a retired mercenary and the protagonist of the story.

Zheng Cheng – Xiaoling's father, a retired mercenary who worked for Yuan Shao. He has since become a merchant.

Zheng Mingzhu – Xiaoling's mother.

Hou Xuegong – an elite horseback archer and a retired Major who used to serve in Dong Zhuo's military.

Hou Peizhi – Xuegong's wife.

Zhang Yan – The leader of the Black Mountain Bandits. Appears at the end of this book.

Black Mountain Bandits – A gang of marauders that lives in the Taihang mountain range. They are sometimes also referred to as the *Heishan Bandits*.

Prologue

“Close the gates,” General Hou commanded, perceiving the deafening screams originating from the dark woods surrounding Taiyuan. “Our scouts are lost.”

A rabid animal was lurking outside of the settlement he was appointed to protect – no, a beast, a predator so fearsome and savage that even his most valiant of men were shivering despite the awful heat of this summerly night. Was it too late to disregard the tyrant’s orders, and to flee the scene?

“Yes,” General Hou mumbled to his Lieutenant as he tried not to lose his mind in this internal disputation of his, eyeing the paths leading out of the forest in a distressed demeanour. “It is too late. For all we know, this mad brute may have set up an ambush at the mountain pass already; besides, I doubt we would manage to cross in time even if she has not. Our wives and the elderly wouldn’t make it, and I would never feel comfortable leaving them behind for the enemy to feast upon as we run.”

The citizens of Taiyuan had provoked a monster wielding unrelenting, reckless power, and were about to be devoured in its wrath. Mothers and their infants began to cry, and the men standing waveringly behind the gates bit

their tongues, for they desired not to demonstrate their consternation as well; if they were to die tonight, they were to die in honour, not in cowardice – some of them younger than thirteen winters, others old and frail enough to give the appearance to be withering away as they stood.

General Hou's Lieutenant, Xia, felt the need to lift his comrades' spirits, so he climbed up the ramparts to stand next to his commander-in-chief and smile brightly for all to see in the bleak moonlight. Readying himself for an improvised speech, Xia took a few deep breaths, and started.

“Listen to me, for today will not be the eve of our deaths, if only we gather the courage needed to stand strong in the face of danger. We banished her from this town many years ago, we told her not to return, and we did so for a reason! Today, she is nought but a ghost of the past; a spectre embodying the supposed lack of unity amongst us, this missing integrity she uses as justification to commit her appalling crimes. Brothers and sisters, we have to defend our city from this abomination!”

Lieutenant Xia would not live to witness the horrified reaction of his fellow guardsmen as a silent arrow pierced through his crown from behind. Watching him collapse and fall to the ground lifelessly from the ramparts, General Hou gawked at his corpse, and so did the many men who had been bracing themselves for battle before the gate, supported by the Lieutenant's motivating words.

And so, it began.

As the sound of trebuchets catapulting their payload into the air could be heard from a distance, flaming projectiles came crashing down onto the city and its inhabitants, subjecting their victims to a firework of doom they'd surely remember; provided they would somehow manage to survive it. Taiyuan was burning in rapacious, orange flames, and so was the starry, clear night sky above the helpless people trapped within its fortifications. The screeches of dying men that had come from the forest had now arrived at the central square, where militia troops were being decimated by the onslaught of fireballs the dangerous predator outside had brought upon them as punishment for their disobedience. It was as though the very realm of hell had been unleashed unto the earth.

It was not long until the bombardment would cease entirely and give way for the first assailants to attempt to climb the ramparts, being met with weak resistance from terrorised, disoriented guardsmen. Knowing that any opposition to their breakthrough into the city was futile, General Hou ordered his men to get off the walls and regroup in front of the gate below, which would be breached mere moments later. Cloaked figures, clad in unrefined, dirty animal hides stormed into Taiyuan, each looking more menacing than their preceding invader. Instead of directly engaging the injured and frightened militia men, they arranged themselves in a formation resembling a crescent, giving way for the obscure,

curvaceous silhouette of a woman to come through the gate.

“Welcome home, Xiaoling.”

General Hou had called her given name in hope to invoke feelings of familiarity within her rotten heart, or at least, that is what he had convinced himself he was doing. In reality, this was not to implore her empathy – as he would not have expected that tactic to be effective anyway – but much rather to remind himself of the days in which he and her father were close enough for him to be endearingly referred to as her uncle – the accomplished officer was likely still too proud to admit that he had been missing those times ever since his adoptive niece had excused herself from his life until now.

“When I first swung by your childhood home and offered to help your father transport his various goods to the market many, many winters ago, I would never have thought, not even for a single moment, that his joyous, adorable daughter who’d always generously treat me to the berries she and her mother had gathered and preserved throughout the seasons would be the one to spell my doom.”

The remainder of Taiyuan’s defenders cowered behind him, their knees weak from standing for so long, their minds exhausted from keeping up this feigned courage and resolve to survive. All of them had known that this

day would come for a long time now, and had desperately clung to the foolish fantasy that maybe, they would be spared by their lost child just this once and live to see another decade go by, and with the blessings of the gods, perhaps a second, third or fourth one after that.

Discerning the partly shrouded smirks and cackles of the heavily armed marauders surrounding them, it had come to the point where the vast majority of the guards were making their peace with this world, praying to the deities above for the continuance of a legacy that was destined to be lost in the depths of human history – only to be rudely interrupted by the high-pitched, tasteless and hysterical laughter of their vile and ruthless killer, now stepping out of the shadows and into the torchlight beyond the gatehouse. Determined to clear her mind of any and all sentimentalities, she brandished her battle axes menacingly, furiously glaring at General Hou as her unveiled face revealed the distinct trait of a scarred, irredeemable demon; eyes as cold and piercing as daggers, with a subtle, glimmering hint of profound disappointment and eternal sadness lingering at the very core of her ferocious scowl.

“Times have changed” she spoke, in a voice as austere and steely as she could muster. “I’m no longer a child, and know better than to allow the farcical deliberations of a feeble old man to make me shy away from what must be done in order to rid this country from its most notorious plagues – the Han’s corruption, elitism and

negligence. The imperial family has lost their mandate of heaven and surrendered the laughable amount of dignity they had left in their name to that abhorrent regent of yours, that sweaty, putrid man, as tall as two and as fat as ten of your wealthiest damsels, all so that they could keep idiots such as yourselves believing in a cause long rendered void. And what do you, Hou Xuegong, esteemed protector of this commandery do? You choose to bow before him and abuse of your followers' trust to help subjugate all of China under his tyrannical rule.”

The bandit maiden would not permit him to respond. To the horror of his subordinates, his skull was shattered to a thousand fragments as she had launched one of her battle axes in his direction faster than lightning could strike; she had murdered the man she had once considered an irreplaceable part of her family without a trace of remorse to be seen in her spiritless gaze following the incident.

“Burn them all.”

By the dawn of the next day, the city of Taiyuan and its inhabitants would be no more.

1

“You’re far too impatient” the woman said, watching her daughter eagerly shove blackberries into her satchel. “Your father won’t arrive before sundown, so what’s all of this buzzing around for?”

“We’re heading to the market, mother” she answered, now moving on to package the loaves of bread she had baked from broomcorn flour earlier in the day. “It’s going to be a long trip, and this time around, chances are we’ll encounter bad weather as we tread. Therefore, I’m making sure that I’ve got sufficient foods with me to feed father, uncle and myself, should we be forced to make an additional halt somewhere and find shelter due to heavy rainfall.”

“Yes, but why must you stuff all of it into your bag this instant?” the woman inquired, moving closer to the adolescent that was visibly trying to act like a responsible adult, all of a sudden. “Look at yourself, you’ve got flour all over your clothes. You’re making a huge mess in your handbag, too!” The parent pointed at the leather constituting the bottom of the satchel – it appeared to have been impregnated with the juices of those supposedly dried berries, the ones her daughter had

withdrawn from the furnace less than two hours after initially placing them above its embers to dehydrate.

“I want to be ready in time.” she sighed in response, losing herself in the sounds of the nearby river speedily flowing past her home, which could be perceived from within her mother’s kitchen. “I wouldn’t want to be a burden to father. If I do not prepare now, I would surely become just that as I were to gather our necessities shortly before departure and possibly cause a delay. I don’t want to hold anyone back.”

“Listen to me, sweetheart. You could never be a burden to him,” the woman spoke in a soft tone, drawing her daughter into a warm embrace from behind. “He is so immensely proud of you, and would never give you away, not for all the gold and silver in the world.” The girl repositioned herself in her mother’s arms, turning around to place her own around the waist of the woman who had given birth to her fourteen years ago. Despite her apparent willingness to calm down a little and try to be more self-aware from now on, sparkling determination remained locked in her lively, hazel eyes.

“Alright. Time for me to go fill our waterskins.” Slipping out of her elder’s grasp, Xiaoling left the cosy cabin her mother always took great care to keep clean and perfumed with all sorts of floral scents. The sun was shining brightly outside despite the overcast; its rays were battling their way through the grey clouds, breaching their heavenward blanket of ashen darkness

that had settled in a while back. Skipping through the green pastures surrounding her village and up to the nearby well, the girl smiled, thanking the gods for the peaceful life she lived. She knew for a fact that her father and uncle did not come to enjoy such luxury when they were young; from what she had been told from other villagers, she deduced that the two of them must have been conscripted into military service at around her age to fight in an armed conflict of some sort, the specifics of which were still entirely unknown to her. Her mother had repeatedly refused to explain them to her, stating that this was not her secret to share.

Inconveniently enough, her father was hardly ever around for the girl to talk to, and the one time Xiaoling had dared to inquire, she was met with an irritated reaction and the firm statement that ‘the past ought to be left alone’, ‘those times are over’ and that he did not want to talk about it.

It could not really matter that much anyway, she thought to herself, taking a peek down into the abysmal hole that was the old well. It was located on the side of a hill overlooking the entire village. Rumour had it that a hundred years ago, a reckless youngster fell to his death here after leaning back onto the fragile frame maintaining the pulley system of the waterhole – ever since then, one was required to access the precious liquid in the old-fashioned, painfully inefficient way; manually retrieving the water with a bucket attached to a cord, hoping not to whack it against the treacherous walls of the well’s shaft

and losing not only the scarce water, but also the bucket itself. Those rocks down there, sharp as knives, loved to punch massive holes into the vessels the villagers had spent their hard-earned money on purchasing, or valuable time making. It was for precisely that reason that twenty years later, the citizens of Wanzhen decided no longer to put up with this nonsense and draw water from the Yellow River directly; this turned out not to be the best of all ideas, as a dysentery epidemic would soon wipe out half of the population, or so Xiaoling's mother said, doubling as the settlement's self-appointed elementary school teacher. On the very same day she chose to teach that to her class of no more than five gullible children, an aggravated mob of parents came by her home. They motioned toward the fact that they all very well remembered how their immediate ancestors mostly died of old age or during one of the various raids conducted by nomadic tribesmen, and the ones who came before them as well; none of them had ever come up with the ludicrous proposal to draw water from the notoriously dirty Yellow River, either. Their complaints would not see themselves supported for much longer, however – an infernal glare from the village's only *de facto* pedagogue and a threat to resign from her duties as such was enough to persuade them to let her be. Her hostile look had also been accompanied by an explanation that she had solely told this 'inexactitude' so that their cherished little brats wouldn't drink the toxic water – she had caught them in the act of orally probing its consistency the day before she so decorously advised them not to.

Giggling at the thought of this anecdote, Xiaoling ultimately succeeded in retrieving the water from the well, on her seventh attempt. Luckily, the bucket had not taken any substantial damage, which meant that it would live to go down this terrible shaft once more the next day. The thought of her mother having to be the one to guide it down there until her return jumped into her mind; this was the first time Xiaoling was set to embark on a journey outside of her village – she was not quite sure what to expect. Was travelling really as dangerous as they claimed? No need to worry about it now – she would find out very soon.

As the sun was rapidly setting, Xiaoling contemplated whether going for a small detour before heading home would be permissible. Designating herself as the sole judge of that for the time being, she consequently chose to take another path back to her home; one that would lead her further up the hill and swung back around to return to the small, quiet hamlet on this chilly and delightful evening.

The village of Wanzhen was an unconventional community, to say the least. There was no mayor or leader, here. The few individuals that had isolated themselves from the rest of Chinese society in this secluded valley did not feel the need to abide by such a hierarchical system – all decisions were made by the village's council of elders, the oldest one of them no more than fifty winters of age. Whether one could be considered a 'local' or not was not determined by

whether their bloodline had called this place home for centuries either – Wanzhen was not older than three generations at most. What made somebody a respected part of this community was what they could contribute to it – everybody had their part to play in the survival of the village. Apart from this, Wanzhen possessed many more attributes traditional Chinese villages were not necessarily able to boast with – such as the fact that this place and its predominantly agricultural orientation was fully exempted from any and all taxes on produce, provided that said produce would not be traded on any market throughout the empire. This was due to the administrative idiosyncrasy surrounding this settlement; it did not figure on any official maps and was not recognised as a part of Taiyuan Commandery either, as it was situated just a few yards to the west of the security demarcation established by the imperial court, beyond which no Chinese citizens were legally permitted to establish their homes.

Yet, around thirty men and women chose to settle here anyway, have children, and keep this forbidden collection of small cabins resting on an idyllic mountainside beyond the Yellow River from disappearing forever. They seemed unafraid of the omnipresent, looming threat that were the Xiongnu raiders, said nomadic tribesmen local to the area on the other side of the aforementioned security demarcation.

A little more than two centuries ago, this loosely confederated band of itinerant tribes entered a tributary relationship with the Han Empire at their request; their

leader at the time, a witty man by the name of Huhanye, opted to side with his former enemies to successfully outmanoeuvre his brother, Zhizhi, during the late Xiongnu Empire's brutal civil war. That proved to be a dubious move which left him as the unchallenged leader of his people. This narrow victory of his, various conflicting claims on the title of *Chanyu* by his successors after his death and several military interventions by the then all-powerful Han Empire caused the Xiongnu people to be subjected to a gruelling schism; half of them relocating to reside within the borders of the territory claimed by the Han, the remainder dispersing further northeast only to be reportedly crushed and subjugated by another tribal confederation, the Xianbei, native to the broader Eurasian steppe these disoriented Xiongnu tribes found themselves retreating to.

The southbound Xiongnu outcasts were slightly more fortunate than their fellow fugitives to the northeast. They were allocated rights to live within Xihe Commandery, which soon brought forward a wide array of questions, such as whether they were now to be considered a part of Chinese society, supported by the Han government, taxed, counted, monitored and proactively integrated. Top bureaucrats determined that this was not necessary, and so, they were essentially left to fend for themselves in China's arid and windy northwest. Some of them radicalised themselves in the process and began to assault Chinese assets nearby, including Taiyuan Commandery. It shared an extensive

border with Xihe, which, stretched across the mountain range right before the fruitful plains housing a particularly low part of the basin of the Yellow River, geographically separated the two remote regions. Later called into existence by Emperor Ling due to the Xiongnu's aggressiveness and unpredictability, the security demarcation designated everything beyond the Yellow River as an inhospitable no man's land, and no Lord or Lady had ever dared to stake their claim on it since.

Slowly treading back towards the main cobblestone road linking all the cabins in the village together, Xiaoling sighed contently and looked up at the sky. The clouds were still partially obstructing its deep blue evening hue from being marvelled at, but a few bright stars had fared equally as well as the sun earlier and managed to conquer an opening for themselves. They were now glistening like diamonds. A cool breeze blew into the leaves of nearby trees, causing their solemn rustling to become audible.

To the young woman carrying the filled waterskins back home, this rustling carried the sound of change – a sound that would bring both exciting new horizons and challenges into her life.

“Now look at who's come to welcome us outside, Cheng!” a familiar, masculine voice called from behind her, causing Xiaoling to jolt up in surprise and nearly blind the two homecoming men with the brightest smile they had seen anyone cast upon them in a dozen years.

“Uncle! Father!” the girl exclaimed, running towards them to embrace them. “I’ve missed you so much!” Unable to prevent herself from sobbing uncontrollably, glistening tears rolled down her cheeks as she crashed into her father’s chest, later reaching to the left to ensnare her uncle as well.

“We’ve missed you too,” her father said, dropping the heavy cart he was carrying uphill so that his daughter’s hug could be appropriately reciprocated. “It’s been quite a journey, but we’ve made it back unharmed, as you can see.”

“Barely so, might I say. It’s truly wondersome to me how those highwaymen managed to find us within the cave we slept in yesterday night,” her uncle spoke in a heavily ironic fashion, frowning at his companion before devoting his full attention to the little creature demanding it so eagerly. “Your father snored loud enough for all of China to hear!”

“Highwaymen?! Did you fight them?” Xiaoling yelped, her mind racing with curiosity, imagining her two greatest idols fending off waves of brigands with nothing but their old, rusty service weapons they had brought with them for self-defence.

“Yes,” the father responded before his crony could boast about taking on four armed men all at once. “Your uncle briefly entertained a squabble with them while I quietly snuck out of the cave and brought our goods to safety. They were of negligible strength and stature, so he managed to repel them.”

“Of negligible strength and stature compared to mine!” the uncle claimed, pounding his muscular chest like an

ape trying to assert his dominance. “Of course, they were no match for the great Hou Xuegong, harvester of souls!”

“Nobody ever called you this,” his old friend retaliated, stating the obvious.

“But in all seriousness, I think that they simply weren’t expecting resistance.”

“They must’ve have been really stupid highwaymen then, trying to rob the two of you!” Xiaoling determined, the pride she felt for the two men radiating from her hazel eyes. “You’ve taught them a good lesson, Uncle. Well done!”

Her father conveniently interjected before the addressed could go off on another bragging session.

“Enough of this, now.” He picked up the handles of the cart again, and motioned for everyone to carry on walking, including his daughter who did not seem to want to let go of him. “Your mother is also entitled to hold me in her arms again, isn’t she? At this rate, she’ll have fallen asleep by the time we make it to the cabin, and I won’t be able to spend time with her for another eternity to come!”

He had a point. By now, the sun had long disappeared behind the mountain range walling off the village to the west, and most of the fireplaces that lit up the porches of the tiny houses of Wanzhen had been extinguished for the night. The cries of the playing children the girl had perceived earlier could no longer be heard, and other than the distant sound of the hamlet’s blacksmith hammering against hot iron ingots, silence reigned supreme. Even the Yellow River appeared to have been moved by the peace

of the night; her waters were no longer racing each other.

“Yes, allow me to excuse myself,” Xuegong muttered, suddenly remembering that he too had a wife to come home to, if only for the six hours or so he had before his travels would resume. “Peizhi will butcher me if I fail to manifest the gratitude she deserves for taking care of our kids all on her own for so long. Swinging by for a quick hello is the least I could do.”

“Indeed, old friend. Be sure to wait for us at the gate – we’ll meet you there at sunrise. Good night.” Cheng said, shortly interrupting his stride to watch him run off to the woman whose love and sharp wits had saved him from quite a few bad ideas over the years.

Peizhi was the village’s only healer and as such, an intrinsic element to the community’s survival, just like Xiaoling’s mother was. Originally born and raised in a wealthy family of merchants before moving here, it was not atypical of her to impress with the intellectual prowess she possessed. She knew how to read and write, and gladly taught Xiaoling how to do so too whenever she found the time. Considering herself equally as responsible for the maiden’s education as Xiaoling’s mother was, she never missed an opportunity to transmit words of guidance and wisdom. The girl was impressed by her immense range of knowledge more than anything else; Peizhi was especially knowledgeable of medicinal plants, various illnesses and the magical ways in which the human mind and body operated – no one knew why a lady as bright as her was content with a remote,

unspectacular life in Wanzhen and how in the world she found the strength to put up with her husband's shenanigans. Apart from wandering off to the provincial capital for months at a time like he just had, throughout the rare times in which he *was* home, he proved to be a good-for-nothing spouse who could not even cook up rice without inundating the entire house. As a result, the whole burden of managing household chores rested upon her shoulders – a seemingly impossible task she effortlessly manhandled like nobody else Xiaoling knew. Yet, Peizhi never complained about her relationship with him. Despite the apparent complications, she would speak nothing but well about her husband. She always stressed that he was a charming, humorous and gleeful man, and lo and behold, the girl had come to see him a secondary, more easily approachable father figure. She could very well see why Peizhi chose to marry him despite his flaws; as airheaded as he was sometimes, uncle Hou was a great man.

“Onward, little one,” her father said, nudging her to resume their walk to the cabin. “I believe that’s your mother right there, can you see her?” Indeed, it was her, well awake and waiting at the porch to see her family reunited at last.

“There you are, silly!” she called in a playful tone, looking at her daughter with a raised eyebrow to feign a perplexed facial expression. “And who is this man you’re bringing back into my arms, again? I haven’t seen his face in so long, I forgot where I even know him from.”

“Of course you have, Mingzhu. Of course.” Cheng retaliated, dropping his cart before the house and running over to his woman as swiftly as he could to remind her of who he was – her loving husband.

Her father had brought half a goose home from his travels, and so, dinner was exceptionally tasty and filling on this peaceful evening. Throughout all this, the girl could not help but notice how her father endearingly watched her mother’s every move; how she would smile and giggle upon listening to the various anecdotes he told, how her selflessness pushed her to pretend to have eaten enough so that there would be more left for him and her daughter to eat – either way, the girl hoped that she too would one day find a man who would look at her with as much adoration as her father glanced upon her mother.

Xiaoling quietly excused herself to accord her parents some intimacy together and headed back into her room, or well, the space between the two makeshift walls of clay her father had built to give her the sense of privacy, independence and ownership youngsters desired. This was her sanctuary; barely six feet in length and four in width, the girl’s ‘chambers’ (as her parents euphemistically called them) had been her passion to clean, decorate and live in since their creation a year ago. Their soft, perpetually crumbling walls were engraved with motives of all sorts the girl would poke into the material whenever her father would slap new clay onto them to consolidate their structure. Her latest inscription

was that of an elephant; an animal she had never seen, but often heard of in the tales of conquest and adventure the village's elders told – uncle Hou amongst them. Evidently, as its proportions and appearance were drawn not from memory, but from mere hearsay, one who knew better would come to notice that various features were a little off – for one, the elephant's ears were exaggerated in size and its trunk appeared to be as coiled up as a pig's tail, but the animal also happened to stand upright, pounding its chest like a primate or uncle Hou would. Xiaoling imagined elephants to be fierce warrior beasts within southern Chinese and Vietnamese armies which fought alongside the men they served, stabbing their foes with their mighty tusks and sweeping waves of assailants from the battlefield in an instant. She could very well see how they represented a formidable opposition to any military force, however big – such giant creatures could easily plough through a line of pikemen, opening up the front they defended to the opponent's cavalry which would lead to the inevitable destruction of the detachment in question. The analysis of the development of battles, or at least their discussion, was another one of Xiaoling's major passions in life – albeit a forbidden one. As a girl, she was not supposed to show any interest in military affairs whatsoever, yet, whenever her uncle or another person with experience in said matters came to tell of their wisdom, Xiaoling was sure to ask an unfathomable amount of questions, even more so than her male peers. Subsequently, it was obvious why her excitement for her upcoming trip to Taiyuan's market was so great – she expected to learn plenty more about

military affairs in a town whose very identity was defined by its past and present strategic value. The city was built right before the mountain range that walled off the north-western expanses of the Empire, so therefore, its crucial location made it a highly desirable prize for the many hopefuls who had attempted to conquer it over the many decades of its existence. Unbeknownst to her, she would one day become the most successful of them all.

2

“Your Majesty,” one of the very few eunuchs Empress He had permitted to enter her quarters called, humbly depositing a collection of sealed documents atop her nightstand. “I bring forth good news upon your divine self, some of which concerning the impending return of your half-brother from the Vietnamese front, and others elucidating the heroic defence the great Gongsun Zan mounted against invading Wuhuan¹ forces to the northeast. As you have asked not to be informed about the current status of your spouse’s health, no mention of it has been made in today’s briefing. I have personally curated and recompiled all of the provided reports to ensure that this would be the case.” The eunuch, still averting his gaze from the bare silhouette of his resting regent, slowly trotted out of her pompously furnished dormitories and disappeared around a corner, only to be called back seconds later. He was now shivering in fear of seeing himself reprimanded for any imaginable mistake he could have made in the simple act of delivering the ominous woman’s morning bulletin.

“Bring us our headdress and celebratory garments, Li

¹ Proto-mongolic, nomadic tribes in northeast Manchuria; descendants of the Donghu, defeated and forced into diaspora by the Xiognu around 209 BC.

Song,” the Empress spoke in an assertive tone, discarding the report she so hastily read. “Lady Tian has plead childbirth as grounds for her absence this month, and consequently, she will not be around to assist us in our morning routine for a little while longer.

Thou wouldn’t wish for thy ruler to be obliged to clothe herself, or would thee?”

“Certainly not, your Splendour” the eunuch immediately replied, fetching the desired outfit from her expansive wardrobe as swiftly as his sophisticated attire, comprised of many layers of heavy, ornamented fabric, would allow him to. “I take it that you seek to look your absolute best for your brother’s return, yes? How considerate of you, your Majesty.”

“Forsooth. He Jin has been making the Han proud from the moment he was entrusted with control over the imperial army, and evidently deserves no less than a formidable reception.” Empress He cast aside the silk bedsheets she had been concealing her lower half under, and slowly crawled out of bed, sighing at her discovery that yesterday’s bad weather was still looming over the capital. “Close the windows, while thou art at it – this sombre climate is draining our soul.”

“Very well, your Grace.” The servant was so incredibly focused on his current assignment that he had not noticed the Empress’s impressively tall and curvaceous frame standing up behind him. Thereupon, he was quite shocked to see the woman he had devoted his life to serving towering above him, devoid of any shame or cover for her naked form, as he turned back around to hand her the ensemble he had selected for her.

“I, uh, believe that this costume may be to your tastes,” he stammered, reminding himself that he had been castrated for the exact reason that if he ever came to be ushered into such a delicate situation with a lady of great importance (this would be his first and hopefully last time), he would not struggle to control himself. “Permit me to hear your thoughts.”

“We like it,” she responded happily, grabbing the garments out of Li Song’s shaking hands at once to observe their various, fine features. “We had no idea that our tailors added this to our collection for this spring – they’ve outdone themselves yet again with this pleasant surprise, so do communicate our profound gratitude to them later on.” In awe, Empress He fiddled around with the ensemble a little longer before returning it to her servant, so that he could lay it upon her buxom frame – a brand new task he seemed just as terrified as she believed him excited to complete.

The set of clothing in question was obviously of the most exquisite kind – the Empress was known to wear nothing but magnificent, custom-made articles the second wealthiest dame in China herself could only dream to afford. The get-up her attendant had chosen for her consisted of a multitude of layers; the first of which being a lacy, figure-hugging undergarment that served no other purpose than to mould her generous curves into a shape the next layer, a tight and restrictive bodice, could more easily fit upon. The bodice had been handcrafted from various patches of splendiferous leather and embellished with engravings of masterful design, meant

to illustrate the many blooming flowers one could find in the imperial palace's astonishingly vast and beautiful gardens.

Having been first bleached and then dunked in highly concentrated purple dye to obtain its fruity, violet hue, the bodice was sure to compliment the third layer of this obscenely expensive habiliment; a striking white robe featuring what was likely the magnum opus of the empire's most accomplished needleworker; a dozen of embroidered, colourful carps vying for the attention of whoever laid eyes on the equally bewitching woman wearing them.

Contrary to common belief, Empress He had not always had the pleasure to spend a fortune on what she wore. Born to an ordinary butcher and his wife in Nanyang, she grew up in a relatively modest environment alongside her half-siblings He Jin, He Biao and He Mei, whom she always loved very dearly. It was not until her teenage years that the family's name would ascend to a position of prestige; through careful bribery of the mighty eunuchs tasked to select new concubines for the Emperor's harem, the soon-to-be Empress's father, He Zhen, set all four of his children up for a bright, glamorous future. As the butcher's eldest daughter almost instantly became Emperor Ling's¹ favourite concubine, he was accorded various favours as compensation for giving her away – one of them being an

¹ Emperor Ling of Han; personal name Liu Hong.

opportunity for He Jin to attend a reputed military academy in the capital, Luoyang¹.

In 184 AD, the Yellow Turban Rebellion first ravaged China – a peasant uprising spearheaded by a Daoist ‘wizard’ by the name of Zhang Jue. He had promised the common people of the middle kingdom much-needed land and tax reforms as an exchange for their efforts to bring down the Han government, rendered inefficient, merciless and rotten by the corrupt Ten Attendants, the very same eunuchs who had arranged for the Empress to meet her divine spouse in the first place. Li Song was the youngest of the Ten Attendants – just as inexperienced in the upkeep of civil order as his co-conspirators were, he too had been left with no choice but to delegate all control of the situation to the recently nominated General-in-Chief of the imperial army, He Jin, by order of his Majesty.

Together with other warlords, the zealous General eventually succeeded in quelling the revolts to a substantial degree, so that the Emperor would accord him the same political might the trusted eunuch in charge of the administration of military acquisitions, Jian Shuo, held.

This was massively inconvenient; He Jin knew of the Ten Attendants’ deceitfulness and was sure to rid himself of

¹ One of the four historical capitals of China, located in modern-day Henan province. It featured a complex layout of streets and buildings, hinting at the fact that urban planning was already a common practice at the time.

them the very moment his sister would give him *carte blanche* to do so.

Fortunately for Li Song and his guileful friends, as long as they remained in her favour, she was very unlikely to grant her half-brother the right to eliminate them; after all, she was directly indebted to them, thrice. Firstly, the eunuchs had managed to smuggle her into the imperial harem as a commoner, which had lined her up to become the Emperor's preferred concubine. Then, they had also supported her in her conspiracy to poison and kill her only true competitor, Lady Wang, who had a child of her own with Liu Hong. And lastly, the eunuchs were the ones making sure that the Emperor wasn't receiving the medical attention needed to make a full recovery, hence safeguarding the Empress' control over the imperial court. Whatever reason the Empress had to wish death upon her spouse, Li Song did not know, but one thing was certain – in order to execute her schemes, the Empress required the assistance of another powerful entity at court, and of one that would be willing to commit to the treacherous stratagems she sought to carry out.

Therefore, this moment in particular could prove to be of some consequence for the relationship between them and the Empress – if Li Song managed to make the lady comfortable around him in an intimate setting like this, maybe he could whisper auspicious 'advice' into her ear evermore?

“About your son,” Li Song informed, shifting the flow

of conversation towards something personal in hope of easing the Empress into a much more talkative mood. “Liu Bian has been asked not to see his father for the time being, as you demanded. Yet, I regret to inform you that he will not heed our words; it isn’t a rare sight to catch him sneaking in and out of the Emperor’s chambers.”

“We understand that Liu Bian can be as stubborn as his uncle,” the woman chuckled, reminiscing the hundreds of occasions on which her half-brother would not take her advice and fail pitifully as a result of his misadventures. “However, we must request that you continue to discourage him from visiting his father, for he is sick and in no need of pestering.”

“Of course, your Majesty.” Li Song pledged, knowing just as well as she did that the Emperor’s illness was not the reason why she would not condone Liu Bian seeing his father. There was definitely a lot more to this than would meet the eye of an outsider, but the subtleties of imperial court culture required the eunuch to accept the given explanation and pry no further. This would not, however, mean that their conversation would come to an indefinite standstill; after a minute of sighing and shaking her head at the many thoughts circulating in her mind, the Empress decided to seize the initiative. She asked Li Song something that was guaranteed to render the eunuch astonished of her famed bluntness once again.

“That whore’s cowardly boy – what was he called again? – Right, Liu Xie.” she whispered, right about when her servant finally managed to tie the glamorous bodice around her midsection.

The woman's conversational tone and style had changed completely, going as far as to drop her majestic plural in favour of a nonchalant attitude.

“Say, you do not, by any chance, despise him just as much as I do?”

“Your Majesty, I do not think that –” Li Song exclaimed, seeing himself harshly interrupted by his interlocutor.

“Oh, quit pretending like you have no grounds to resent him whatsoever. I know that my mother-in-law was appointed his mentor, and I also know that ever since, she's been using the alleged importance of his education as a reason to compromise your underhanded devilries all around the court.” The Empress laughed at her attendant's nonplussed demeanour, circling around him to push her ample bosom up against his back.

“What are you –?”

“What am I doing? Letting you know that I am hardly as oblivious to your horseplay as you believe me to be. Promising an eager payer a court position there, smiling upon the opportunity to advance your agenda here; you eunuchs are all about as predictable as the four seasons!”

“P-Predictable?!” he stuttered, shocked to learn that the Empress had figured out his true motive in this conversation so easily. Gently catching hold of his shoulders, she continued her discourse.

“Yes, truly and amusingly so! It's almost as though you *want* all of China to recognise your mischievousness.”

“We operate solely in service to the Emperor.” he remarked, sweating like a boar. “We work to safeguard the prosperity of China.”

“Unfortunately for you and your little friends, I’m not anywhere near as stupid as my husband, and neither is my brother; I assure you, if it were not for my benevolent protection of your interests, your heads would have already been paraded in front of the people of Luoyang five years ago, and your bodies impaled for all to see. Either by the sword of my brother or by the word of the Empress dowager, you would long have been put to rest.”

“W-What do you ask of me, your Grace?” Li Song carefully probed, understanding that he had lost this battle of wits against the middle kingdom’s greatest manipulator.

“I want you to become my information broker, Li Song. Bring me the knowledge that I need, and you will be handsomely rewarded. Cross me and my ambitions, and I’ll see to it that He Jin decapitates you and your gang of swindlers.” On that final note, the Empress softly kissed his cheek, and Li Song was seen out of her quarters.

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“Li, over here –” a womanly voice called from the shadows as the eunuch made his way from the main palace to the Yong gate¹ a few hours after the incident with the Empress.

“Hmm?”

“It’s me, Tian. Don’t you remember me?” The maid was frankly difficult to recognise, even upon taking a second look at her emaciated silhouette.

¹ Fortified western gate of the city of Luoyang.

“Of course I remember you. You’re the Empress’ charwoman, right?” he speculated. “The one who birthed a child?”

“Yes, a stillborn. The gods wouldn’t – no matter. I was asked to bring you this letter.” The woman expeditiously surrendered the paper to him, and disappeared around a corner in the blink of an eye.

How peculiar. Li Song rarely, if ever, enjoyed the privilege of receiving mail, let alone addressed to his very person. Whatever message was awaiting him within the envelope had to be exceptional.

Li Song,

The time has come. Upon the General’s return, I ask you to abide by your earlier promise and fulfil the task hereby assigned to you.

Within the guardsmen’s dormitories at the northernmost gatehouse, a small casket was left behind for you to open and retrieve a letter from. This letter contains an invitation for our returning officer, asking him to come see me by the imperial gardens, for I was asked by His Divine Majesty to grant him a reward for his remarkable service. You are to bring our venerable guest this letter and see to it that he follows the given instructions.

Yours respectfully,

Jian Shuo

There went the young opportunist's plans to find peace and meditate at the temple across the moat.

He Jin was set to arrive this very evening, and evidently, retrieving the casket *after* his coming would prove to be impossible. His entourage of elite soldiers would long have settled into their shared barracks with the imperial guardsmen, and the place would be too crowded to subtly smuggle the item out of the gatehouse. If Li Song was to acquire this letter, he had to run and get it right now.

Why in the world Jian Shuo hid that godforsaken box in the guardsmen's barracks, Li Song did not know. He could have just as well stashed it in the mess hall, or in the astronomical observatory; or yet again, simply kept it in his own office – but no, as always, the senior eunuch chose the most infuriatingly inaccessible emplacement there was. How very typical of a man whose paranoia and conscientiousness was so legendary that the Emperor himself appointed him China's top military procurer. In hindsight, this was not as much of an undesirable trait as Li Song would have liked it to be – what a shame for his ego.

Darting across the city as fast as he could, the servant found himself bumping into at least four merchants from afar. Commerce had skyrocketed as of late, and with it came an incredible population boom within the provincial capitals of China. In the aftermath of the gruesome punitive expedition launched against the Yellow Turbans, this sudden spike in domestic migration had been regarded as reassuring and beneficial, seeing as

it made up for the thousands of civilian lives lost. But now that time was of the essence when it came to retrieving the letter the man was ordered to deliver, the extra manpower substantiated itself as a nuisance rather than as a blessing. It was in the smells of exotic spices being traded at the market that the eunuch found solace – their fragrances sure made for better meals at court. Within less than an hour, Li Song stood in front of the gatehouse, catching his breath as he blankly stared at the two lion statues sat before the entrance. They were made of jade stone, the imperial family's preferred material to build testaments of their wealth and might. Their painted eyes stared back at him scornfully, as if they were mocking him for his lack of composure. 'Even the weakest of our warriors could run twice that distance without breaking a sweat!' or so he heard them shout at him without words.

It was already late. The last rays of the sun were fading into oblivion, dignifying the pristine sky above with a stunning gradient of white to black. A lone lantern was providing the light needed to perceive the ostentatious decorations of the gatehouse; apart from the two choleric lions, there was a lot more to be marvelled at. The flawless bricklaying of the building, the ornamented, golden window frames – all things that Li Song decidedly did not want to be distracted by further. On his race across the city earlier, he could have sworn to have perceived the horns of an incoming army in the distance – this meant that time was truly running out. He had a mission to fulfil, and now was not the right moment to

dream away the few minutes he had left to recover that obnoxious little casket. Stepping into the gatehouse at last, the youngster made his way to the exact location described by the letter he had received.

3

Xiaoling had made it her personal duty to turn around every now and then and check whether her home was still visible from where she stood, and for the first time in the initial five hours of this lengthy hike, it was not. The sleepy village of Wanzhen had fully disappeared in the morning mist, and so had the Yellow River. Not even the sound of its ever-contending waters could be heard – in truth, if it were not for the huffing and puffing of her father and uncle pushing the dilapidated carriage up a hill, the girl would have been surrounded by absolute silence. Eerie silence, like she had never experienced it before. The noiselessness was not quite distressing enough to designate it as ominous, but Xiaoling could not hide that she was scared; shivering despite the tempered climate, she hurried her pace to catch up with her vigorous guardians up ahead.

“Father,” she called. “How long until we make it to Taiyuan?”

“Just a few more hours, I assure you. There’s a ridge an odd thousand yards in front of us, and once we climb over it, Taiyuan will be in sight.”

“I hope you’re right,” she conferred. “My legs are starting to get tired.”

She could hear her uncle whisper something to her father, upon which he nodded. Then, a few moments later, uncle

Hou made his way towards her. He too seemed a little winded. It was apparent that for the totality of this trudge through the mountains, her uncle was the one to have invested most of the strength needed to push the carriage. Of course, the girl's father was also strong and very determined to carry his part of the burden, but the size of his frame paled in comparison to the one of a seasoned soldier like uncle Hou. From her little intelligence network back at the village, Xiaoling had gathered that her father had solely served as a mercenary, whereas her uncle had been an elite horse rider in the army of China's north-western border lord, Ma Teng.

“Come here,” her uncle beseeched. “I’m going to carry you on my back.” Effortlessly lifting her up and swinging her around his shoulder like a quiver, uncle Hou resumed his determined stride, hardly waiting for Xiaoling to catch on to him properly. His annoyance was only feigned, however – a somewhat suppressed yet noticeable smile on his face gave away that he was happy to have found a good enough excuse to leave all of the carriage-pushing to his best friend.

For the next perceived eternity, nobody would speak a single word. It turned out that her father's ‘odd thousand yards’ were actually more than a dozen miles, oh-so-conveniently adorned with an ungodly blend of mud, branches, leaves and pebbles. The mountainside they soon found themselves ascending would not relieve them of their suffering – it instead complicated things further, its slippery slope only begrudgingly tolerating the

battered wheels of the carriage. The path, pre-made by mountaineers a decade ago, was in a state of utterly appalling disrepair. Therefore, it came as a surprise to nobody that the various goods the group were bringing to the market would constantly fall off the cart and need to be recollected, slowing the travellers down. There was wheat, corn, lettuce and medicinal herbs gathered and curated by Peizhi – so much of them in fact that even when optimally stacked atop the carriage’s hole-ridden, wooden floor, they culminated into a massive mountain of vegetation, prone to be blown away by the strong wind.

“Bollocks,” the girl’s father cursed as torrential rain chimed in, sticking its oar into the already miserable situation of the travellers. “Absolute bollocks. What’s next? Thunder and lightning?”

Luckily, the gods proved merciful, and no thunder or lightning came to torment them further. In addition, by the time all three of them were drenched beyond belief, the rain too decided to come bucketing down on other poor souls, elsewhere. From that point onward, it would not be long until they made it to the ridge; within another quarter of an hour, Xiaoling was overlooking an expansive valley from her elevated position, and as small and distant as it appeared there and then, the great city of Taiyuan.

“I proclaim victory,” uncle Hou cheered with his usual enthusiasm. “Victory over rain, mud, rocks and this

godforsaken mountain.”

“Salvation, at last –” Xiaoling’s father voiced weakly, collapsing near a large boulder. He had been pushing the shabby cart before him with all of his might, and was now understandably exhausted. Gently putting the girl down and rushing to his side, uncle Hou looked no more zestful than he did, but made proof of his undying loyalty and friendship once anew – he would not rest until his partner was up and running again.

“We should make a halt here,” Xiaoling spoke softly. “I brought the bread that mother baked yesterday, blackberries and a waterskin for each of us. That should be enough to recover the energy we need to move on.”

“Godsend,” uncle Hou stated. “I’m hungry as a tiger. Yet, I think you should have the largest loaf, Cheng. You need it more than I do, and your daughter can’t eat as much.”

“Very well, I shall eat it.” he responded, having regained his composure.

And so, they all sat, each scoffing the bread down their throats atop the rocks they had chosen to rest their backsides on. None of them were even remotely satiated after their awkwardly modest meal – even Cheng, whose loaf had been twice the size of anyone else’s, was still very much ravenous. To distract from the sound of their collectively grumbling stomachs, Xiaoling thought it wise to speak up and dish out compliments, as she always liked to do.

Compliments were free to give, and always nice to receive. They wielded such incredible power, too; the power to put a smile on the face of others, and spark lively conversations amidst a beautiful climate of mutual appreciation. Those were the moments the girl lived for – nothing was quite as enjoyable as having a pleasant exchange with your loved ones, she thought. They were only around for so long until inevitably, the winds of passing would whisk them away, as they would surely whisk her away in a few more years.

“I couldn’t be more impressed by the two of you,” she said, her eyes glistening like stars. “I take it that you were made to be this resilient by your many successful years in the army.”

“Oh Xiao,” uncle Hou replied. “If only you knew how many more miles than this we had to walk in one day back when we were on an expedition together... I distinctly remember how once –”

He was interrupted by her father, who cast an irritated frown upon him.

“I don’t think we should be telling her about our days in the military, Xuegong. For the past fourteen years, I’ve been making a great effort to keep those secrets as far away from her as possible.”

“Come on,” he retaliated. “She’s almost a grown woman, and definitely old enough to hear this. Plus, it’s not like you keep those ‘secrets’ from anyone but her.” Xiaoling felt the need to ask for confirmation about this, but refrained from saying anything at all for the time being. The two men had established such intense eye

contact that she sensed that speaking a single word would spell doom over this conversation. Nonetheless, she was shocked to discover that her father would only forbid *her* to learn about his time in service; she had always been under the mistaken impression that he rarely talked about those things to anybody, not just to her.

“Fine,” her father grunted after a long pause. “You can tell her, but don’t mention the *unpleasant* parts. She’s still too young for that, in my esteem.”

“Understood,” uncle Hou asserted sarcastically. “I’ll solely tell her about the heroic moments, and leave out the reality of conquest and war.” He then proceeded to smile gleefully, and accord his adoptive niece the kind of look that said it all.

“Xiao, can you read?” he asked, fetching a folded piece of paper from his travel bag.

“Yes, a bit.” she hesitantly answered, stupefied by what she was seeing. “Peizhi taught me a little, and I kept practicing at home with mother.”

Paper was something incredibly rare; ever so recently invented by eunuch Cai Lun in 105 AD, it was a commodity only the richest could afford, and only the most important of texts deserved to be immortalised on. The girl had first come across mention of its existence when she spoke to a merchant from Linfen¹ who came by Wanzhen on one of his many travels. Her mother had cordially provided him with a bed to sleep in at night for

¹ City located in modern-day Shanxi province, about 160 miles south of Taiyuan. Believed to have been Emperor Yao’s city of residence around 2250 BC, it may have been one of China’s earliest capitals.

a week or two, and every evening, Xiaoling would try and see what knowledge she could extract from him. Once, he told her that made out of mulberry tree bark, remains of old fishing nets and organic pulp obtained from industrial hemp cultivation, paper was a revolutionary invention that was sure to impact the world immensely. And now, she learnt that her very own uncle possessed a piece of this famed material, and was handing it over for her to read. Her amazement was palpable.

To whom it may concern,

This document certifies that Major Hou Xuegong, after eight years of exemplary service with China's north-western border forces, was honourably discharged on the fifteenth day of the seventh moon of the sixteenth year of His Divine Majesty, the Emperor Ling of Han.

His indefatigable resolve to defend his country from all threats, foreign or domestic, contributed to China's current state of harmony and peace.

*Ma Teng
Colonel*

*Dong Zhuo
General*

Xiaoling slung her arms around her uncle in an expression of overflowing pride. She could hardly believe her eyes; the language used in the letter had prompted her to think that her uncle indeed was a hero like no other.

“Uncle, I would never have thought, not even in my wildest of dreams... that the greatest of all warriors in your stories stood right beside me.”

“The wording is just standard procedure,” he divulged, blushing bashfully. “Every soldier in my battalion received a paper like this. General Dong wanted to ensure that we would all be respected for our commitment to China.”

“Dong Zhuo issued your discharge papers?” Cheng asked, expressing his disbelief.

“Yes, jointly with Ma Teng. We were also given ten rolls of silk each in addition to our pay.”

“How very much unlike the Dong Zhuo I came to know and loathe. He never struck me as the kind of man to manifest such an exorbitant amount of generosity,” the girl’s father remarked, with what could only be described as a look of disgust on his unshaven face.

“It is there, old friend, that you are mistaken,” Xuegong claimed. “Dong Zhuo is the most indulgent man I have ever met.”

“Who even is Dong Zhuo?” Xiaoling queried, reckoning that he must have played an important role in the military careers of her father and uncle.

“I heard of the brave Ma Teng, but never was I told of a magnanimous Dong Zhuo.”

“That is because such a man does not exist,” her father growled. “Dong Zhuo is a cruel tyrant whose military might was cemented by his infamous audacity and disregard for human life.”

“That is a lie, Cheng. No wonder you always failed to understand his ways – you avoided him as though he

were the oil to your water.”

Cheng jolted up, furiously glaring at his old friend. His muscles had grown tense, and his veins were pumping blood through his body forcefully enough for the process to become visible to the naked eye. There seemed to be nothing left of his earlier fatigue; with his pupils wide open, it was clear that his anger gave him a far greater boost to his vitality than any amount of nutrition possibly could have. His facial traits grew coarse and sharp, and he started breathing heavily— Xiaoling had never in the fourteen years of her existence seen her father in such a state.

Xuegong, on the other hand, remained perfectly calm. Still comfortably seated atop his respective rock, he showed no sign of unrest or aggression. Instead, he imperturbably ate his remaining share of blackberries, and stuffed his discharge papers back into his travel bag. He then took a sip or two from his waterskin and sighed, looking down upon the valley the group was soon to step into. Its vast scenery was embellished by the large forests, peaceful creeks and soft hills that were scattered all around the city of Taiyuan. Politically, culturally and economically, the provincial capital was the valley’s heart and soul, without a doubt. Intriguingly enough however, it managed to establish itself as such even from a distance at which none of its societal importance could be perceived. It appeared so intertwined with the gorgeous landscape around it that the valley would have seemed like it was missing something if the city was not

there, or so the ex-Major hypothesised. Maybe his perception was a little biased, he thought. Having made an uncountable amount of friendly acquaintances there, evidently, if Taiyuan disappeared from one day to another, he would not feel the same about travelling the long way to its valley anymore just to sell his wife's wares, or those of his still fuming friend. He had no clue when he became a merchant – but he would not lie and claim he did not appreciate the change in lifestyle.

“We should move on,” he finally said, rising from his rock. “It would be preferable if we arrived before nightfall. Also, the thin air up here is giving me a headache.”

“You're right,” Xiaoling quickly added. “The earlier we make it there, the sooner we will be able to return to mother.”

“Agreed.” Cheng snarled.

Xiaoling's father would not speak another word until sundown, walking very far ahead of his daughter and brother-in-arms in an obvious attempt to distance himself emotionally.

Xuegong had offered to be the one pushing the carriage for the rest of the journey, and so, he did, chatting away hours upon hours of otherwise monotonous walking with his niece. She walked next to him, listening intently to every word he spoke. Most notably, it were the stories of the various campaigns he went on with her father that intrigued her to a great extent. She would ask a plethora of questions, demanding every single detail be elucidated

upon. The girl was concentrating as much as she could to retain everything that was said to her, and it showed. She was witty, attentive and reactive like the women who raised her; her questions were notoriously elaborate, and there was not a single exchange that felt out of place or repetitive. The girl's exceptional intellect was a delight to admire, and to the veteran, having somebody to explain his former life to was oddly satisfying. It were those very qualities that Xuegong had valued so much in Peizhi, prompting him to ask for her hand in marriage at once – hence, to rediscover them in the innocent soul of his niece made for a welcome dose of nostalgia.

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As the sun set behind the trees in the distance, the local songbirds hesitantly gave way for a singular raven to parade his unnerving croak. He was not happy at all that the clunky carriage being shoved down the paved road underneath his treetop interfered in his 'singing'. Upset, he elected to challenge his sole competitor, croaking louder and more cacophonously than he ever had, to the dismay of his many feathered friends (or foes). They had probably hoped that for once in his life, he would surprise them with an exhibition of a thus far hidden musical talent, which he of course did not possess. A constant desire to prove himself, joined with the innate and unchangeable inability to do so – such was the tragicomedy of his existence, Xiaoling thought.

“Aye, we have a problem.” Cheng declared, having waited for the two others to catch up with him at the next crossroad. He had seemingly calmed down, and was now offering a faint smile to make up for his earlier choler. The travellers had made it to Taiyuan’s central administrative region – this was evidenced by the improved state of the paths they walked on as well as by roadside signs indicating directions to various places of interest in the valley. “There’s a barbican¹ up ahead.”

“A barbican?” Xuegong repeated, raising an eyebrow in surprise. “It must be new, there hadn’t been one when I used this very route to bring our mushrooms to the market last fall.”

“Anyway, I don’t have money on me.” Cheng admitted. “Do you have spare coins, brother?”

“Neither.”

“And you, Xiao?” he asked, hoping that his wife had given her a small bag of change as a precautionary measure – something he would never have thought of doing himself.

¹ In this case: A heavily fortified military installation built at the end of a bridge for the purpose of taxing merchants more efficiently and providing a first line of defence against incoming raiders or enemy armies. Barbicans were instrumental to maintaining control of a commandery and ensuring that brigands would not attack popular merchant routes. Few barbicans were maintained by the imperial army; most were directly under the control of the local warlords, who selected soldiers from their own militias to man the facilities. These men were capable of fighting, but by no means knowledgeable in Han bureaucracy.

“I don’t, father. I have nothing,” she said. “But we should go and hear their demands. Maybe there’s a way to pay in produce.”

“I doubt that will be possible. Nowadays, cash is all they want. Gone are the good days in which surrendering a bag of rice was enough to pass – local noblemen seem to become greedier by the day. But, I will go and see what can be done.”

And so, Cheng ran off to meet the guards manning the fortified bridge as Xiaoling and her adoptive uncle slowly followed up with the carriage.

“This bridge belongs to the kind and venerable Gao Gan, who so generously accords you the right of passage for the meagre sum of three copper coins!” one of the guards announced, brandishing his halberd pre-emptively as his comrades standing atop the rampart took aim with their bows. “Holders of official trade permits may pass free of charge.”

“Free of charge, you say?” Cheng verified, granting Xuegong a subtle wink and motioning for him to come to his aid.

“Forsooth, this I said. I doubt the likes of you would own such a document, though.”

“It is there that you lie in error, my friend. My partner here happens to have such a paper, recognised as valid nationwide!”

Xuegong approached the soldier and handed him his discharge papers in their original envelope, boasting the seal of the Dong family in the centre.

“What is this? I have never seen a permit like this one in my twenty four winters.”

“It is one of the finest there are,” Cheng asserted charismatically, leaning forward into a humble bow. “You and I both know the renown of the Dong name.” “Get back! Let me see it with my own eyes.” The soldier took the outermost sheet out of the envelope and stared at the writing blankly. Unable to make sense of what he saw, for he could not read, he chose to take the authenticity of the documents as a given – the seal and quality of the paper seemed convincing enough, or so he believed. “Indeed, a trade permit of excellent grade. You may pass. We wish you best of luck on all your future endeavours.”

“Thank you.” Cheng said, suppressing a smug smile as the guard returned the ‘trade permit’ to its sniggering owner.

The bridge was long and well-lit with various lanterns, periodically placed above its freshly renovated stone walls on either side. They illuminated the swamp below in comforting shades of orange and red, casting light upon the many toads still trilling at this hour. On the other end was the city of Taiyuan, glistening like a sizeable treasure straight out of a fairy tale.

“Now if that isn’t a sight for sore eyes,” uncle Hou began. “Then I don’t know what is.”

“Looks like the action hasn’t started yet.” Cheng murmured as the travellers walked through the gates and into the luminous city. The market square was absolutely packed with people. There were children chasing each other, mothers standing by and discussing the day’s gossip, merchants setting up their stands and potential

customers waiting for business to open on this unexpectedly warm evening. It seemed like with every step they took further into Taiyuan, the three citizens of Wanzhen would sink deeper into a hidden paradise of vibrant, libertarian mentality.

“If we’re fast enough, we might be able to sign up for the night market.”

“Night market?” Xiaoling asked. “Do people trade goods at night, here?”

“Of course they do,” the voice of a teenage boy spoke from behind. “Perfect timing. I can just about get you sorted.”

“Ah, Xia. Good to see you, son.” Xuegong cordially exclaimed, violently smashing his hand into the boy’s back. “We’ve got a lot of good stuff loaded in the carriage. Count us in for high sales tonight!”

Xia was the mayor’s son, the kind of person one could have sworn to have met before, when really, one had not. He was a sprightly young fellow with a never-fading smile tethered to his otherwise ordinary face. On busy nights like this one, he would assist his father in organising the seller’s stands and choosing who got to sell what where, whilst the mayor would go around with his men to check trade permits or evict unregistered solicitors. Sometimes, he would find and confiscate counterfeit merchandise which he would later auctioneer to whoever was willing to purchase it for a cheap price. The two of them made an honest living managing the town; ever since the death of his mother, Xia had assumed more responsibility, and chosen to assist his sole

remaining parent in any way possible. His dreams and aspirations had remained unchanged, nonetheless – he wanted to join the imperial army and serve the Emperor to the best of his ability.

All of this Xiaoling found out from listening to the conversation he had with her elders for less than five minutes. She was taken aback by his honesty and openness. There was something else she noticed about the boy, too – throughout his entire time speaking with her father and uncle, he would not take his eyes off her.

“Alright, back to business,” he finally decided after gloating about how a certain general by the name of He Jin was his idol for another five minutes. “I had a feeling you would come, so I’ve been saving the best stand for you all week.”

“I can’t thank you enough for this,” Cheng said, inspecting the prime lot Xia had reserved for him to sell his goods, right by the central fountain where residents gathered by the dozens. “You really are the best, Xia.”

“Anytime, mister. Call me if you need anything – I’ll be right over by the fruit vendors.”

“We’ll keep that in mind, kid.” uncle Hou affirmed.

“Thank you, once again.”

As Xia wandered off to tend to the needs of other merchants, the girl’s father began setting up his shop, laying a brown, durable blanket over the wooden stand. He then began to stack his produce on top of it. He did so meticulously and with a grin on his face; it was apparent that he enjoyed the aesthetic arrangement of his

laboriously transported merchandise. In the meantime, Xuegong laid down for an uncomfortable but much-needed nap on the low wall enclosing the fountain's basin – his niece opted to follow suit. She was really tired, too; they had been walking from dusk until dawn, or even longer than that. Understanding that he would have to brave his shift on his own, Cheng got to work, attracting customers with his catchy slogans and cheerful salesmanship. Within an hour or two, all of the herbs were sold, and one further hour saw the wheat, corn and lettuce go as well. With a carefree mind and two hundred copper coins in his pocket, Cheng went to sleep as well. He was satisfied with his sales and completely ignorant of the fact that he was about to incur the biggest loss of his life.

4

“And who the devil might you be, huh?!” a guardsman yelled, frowning angrily. He had just caught Li Song searching through his private belongings, and was now understandably aggravated. This was not the first time that an unwelcome visitor had snuck into his dormitories, and he was not having any of it, no more.

“I...uh...I’m here for a sanitary inspection!” the eunuch lied, cowering behind one of the beds. “Jian Shuo sent me to make sure your living conditions are satisfactory.”

“You must think I’m stupid.” The armed soldier picked him up by the collar and pinned him against the closest wall. “You castrated bastards really have no shame, have you? First you cut our salaries, and now you come here to steal from us directly?”

“Sir, I’m not...I wasn’t...”

“Shut up!” he bellowed, punching the trespasser in the face as hard as he could. “Isn’t it finally time to stop? Don’t you think you’re going a little overboard?”

“W-With what?” Li Song was afraid another punch would come his way if he retorted.

“With your damned, corrupt shenanigans! We’re out here protecting you and your masters from harm, and you rob us constantly and without remorse. I have a family to feed, for heaven’s sake!”

“I understand y-your frustration, but please —” A stoic voice interrupted him.

“Let this man be, soldier. I hate the eunuchs with a passion, just like you, but we cannot take our anger out on them. It’s the system that harbours their corruption – we must plead for the Empress to change the organisational structure of the court and have them removed from office.”

“Very well,” the guardsman said, immediately releasing Li Song from his grasp. “I trust you will take care of this, milord.”

“I promise you I shall.”

As the guardsman made his way out of the room, Li Song collapsed and began coughing up blood on the floor. The punch he had received had been of astonishing force – he himself did not know how he managed to stay standing for so long afterwards. Maybe it was his resolve to deny the soldier’s allegations that kept him upright, or his determination to fulfil the task given to him. No matter – the act was up, and the youngster was reduced to the appearance of an insect shuddering at the foot of a bunk bed. For the next couple of minutes, the eunuch would have to fight to maintain his consciousness. His vision had suddenly become blurry, and his limbs felt weak and immovable. Periodically, his eyesight would desert him entirely, leaving him in an endless sea of anguish and darkness.

Nevertheless, he could feel the eyes of his unlikely saviour still lingering somewhere above him, meticulously observing every detail there was to his outward semblance. There was something uncomfortable about this situation, something disquieting enough to

catapult the eunuch out of his vegetative state. At least somewhat so.

“Who are you?” he asked, slowly rising to his feet again. He could still not distinguish the face of his interlocutor, but could tell he was wearing some sort of armour. The metal of the man’s cuirass, glistening in the light of a nearby candle, was one of the very few sights he could perceive.

“It seems like I volunteered to be your saving grace for this evening.” The man stepped forward and helped the distraught youngster find a place to sit and gather his senses. “My name is Yuan Shao.”

“Yuan Shao...I have heard of you before. Are you not a friend of the General?”

“Indeed, I am. I have come to Luoyang to attend his reception.”

“I will...be there, too.” Li Song had paused to try and focus his vision on the man’s visage – in vain. Everything about his surroundings still looked jumbled; the walls he could have sworn were narrow now seemed vast, and the dim candlelight appeared as bright as the sun.

“What were you doing in here?” the man asked, distancing himself from the eunuch again.

“Sanitary inspection...” Despite his poor condition, Li Song was determined not to give away the reason for his intrusion into the gatehouse. “I was looking for bugs.”

“Have you found any?”

“No. I haven’t looked around much, yet.”

“And who was it who sent you to do this?”

“Jian Shuo.”

“Ah,” the warlord spoke. “I know him well. I had the pleasure to entertain a meeting with him the other day.”

“I see.”

“Well then, I’ll leave you to it. We shall see each other at the reception, should the gods will it.”

And so, the man vanished from his field of view. If Yuan Shao wanted to cross-examine his claims by consulting Jian Shuo on the matter of his assignment, he surely could; Li Song had nothing to fear. Jian Shuo would certainly have his back and claim responsibility for the incident – or would he? On second thought, he might not; after all, the eunuchs’ schemes had always been extremely secretive in nature, and it was not uncommon to disassociate from your clumsy accomplices, should they have compromised your plot with their imprudent behaviour. And, seeing as Jian Shuo had gone through so much effort to have his orders impersonally delivered in the first place, chances were that he would not shield the youngster from incoming backlash this time around. He had already done so far too often in the past, to little or no personal gain.

So, here was to hoping that Yuan Shao would forget about this all in due time, Li Song thought, grabbing the nearest object and raising it in the air as though it were a glass of wine. He could not possibly have known how ridiculous he looked in that moment, sitting on top of a sweaty bunk and having a toast to fool’s luck, visually impaired and devoid of drink. His head was still throbbing in pain, and his ears were ringing. Out of all of

his senses, the only one that had remained fully operational was touch – and it was through that sensory faculty that he received a funny stimulus.

The item he held in his hand was rectangular, relatively light, and rich in surface texture – quite like the small casket he was looking for. His eyes had completely stripped him of his ability to see once anew, so he could not tell what it was at first. After another minute of idle sitting all on his own, it occurred to him that maybe, this item felt like a small casket *because it was one*. He jumped up from the mattress in an overly excited demeanour, hit his head against the berth above and knocked himself out for good. The last sound he perceived before losing consciousness was Yuan Shao's distant laughter. Earlier, the warlord had walked out of the room with a crooked, sinister smirk on his face – absolutely everything was going according to plan.

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When Li Song woke up from his involuntary slumber, his head had not stopped hurting. However, he could see again, and that was more than good enough in his esteem. Without his eyesight, he had felt vulnerable and powerless, in the same way he imagined an injured animal would. Zhang Zhongjing¹ must have spoken the

¹ Zhang Zhongjing (150 – 219 AD) was an eminent physician of the Eastern Han dynasty and is attributed the writing of a collection of medicinal knowledge by the name of *Trairise of Cold Pathogenic and Miscellaneous Diseases*. He is remembered for his immense

truth in his controversial papers, then – humans and animals really were alike.

A noisy crowd that had assembled outside the gatehouse would cause the eunuch to lose his train of thought – it was then, in perfectly unwarranted annoyance, that he remembered how he ended up in this bizarre circumstance in the first place.

He still had a job to do, and the blend of cries and chatter outside meant that He Jin had arrived.

Li Song grabbed the casket, ran out of the gatehouse and back onto the plaza with the jade lions, where at least a thousand people were gathered. The Empress was also there, clad in impeccably fashionable clothing as always.

It was apparent that she had done her utmost in preparation of her brother's long awaited return. There were scores of musicians waiting to commence their performance, decorative banners hanging everywhere – this was a testament of her grandiose affinity for spectacular displays. She wanted everybody to be astounded by the sheer magnitude of this wasteful demonstration of her wealth, which she masqueraded as a homecoming celebration for the nation's legendary hero. That much could be told by the emboldened look on her

contributions to traditional Chinese medicine and extraordinarily advanced understanding of the human body for his day and age. For example, he researched and acknowledged the fundamental principles of the circadian rhythm, a scientific discovery that would be formalised and defined by the International Society for Chronobiology in 1977.

face. Li Song knew her well enough, he thought. A fatal misconception.

“Aye, your Majesty!” the youngster called, hoping that she would be able to distinguish his voice amongst the prattle she was surrounded by. She briefly moved her gaze in the vague direction of his holler, yet would not spot him from within the crowd until he had wrestled his way right in front of her.

“Good to see you, Li Song. I take it you have come to ask me about my satisfaction with your arrangements for this event?” The woman immediately discerned the bruises on her interlocutor's face, yet chose not to pry. Scuffles between palace workers were not uncommon, and she held no desire to hear more about them.

“Yes but –”

“That is very mindful of you, but at least six of your friends came to ask already.”

“I am pleased to hear that my *associates* brought forth such consideration upon your Splendour.” The adolescent felt the need to emphasise that even though he maintained a positive relationship with the other eunuchs, they were not his friends. Within their faction, there had been a lack of consensus as to how the bond between the individual members was to be defined; whereas elder eunuch Zhang Rang counted his fellow servants as ‘brothers’, more ruthless schemers like Song Dian and Bi Lan¹ merely referred to the other men of their kind as

¹ In 186 AD, Emperor Ling tasked the eunuchs Song Dian and Bi Lan with overseeing a variety of ludicrously expensive construction projects all around the capital – an assignment off of which they profited greatly, pocketing most of the allocated funds.

‘accomplices’. Li Song stood somewhere in the middle of that debate. Whilst he did not feel overly attached to the rest of his gang, he did not feel too disconnected either. “Anyway, the true reason for my coming is that there is a letter I must urgently deliver to your brother. It is easier for me to do so if I stand next to the person he is most likely to greet first.”

“A letter, you say? What about?” the Empress queried, offering a gentle, albeit inquisitive smile.

It was then that the servant realised his grave mistake – Jian Shuo had revealed that the Emperor was the one who sought to reward He Jin for his service, and maybe, his spiteful wife was not supposed to hear of this.

“Nothing of relevance,” he awkwardly chuckled. “I assure you, it should be of no meaning to you.” All of a sudden, the eunuch could feel the pain of something sharp digging into his right shoulder. He turned his head in shock, only to see that the Empress had pierced through the many layers of fabric he wore with her mere fingernails and was now using them to perforate his skin.

“You remember what I told you the other day, or do you not?” When Li Song met her glare, he saw a monster. A monster baring its jagged teeth, its mouth watering at the sight of its prey. All of her usually elegant traits seemed horribly deformed – sufficiently so for him to believe that his earlier concussion may be causing him to hallucinate.

“Cross me and be devoured by my wrath.”

If it had not been for He Jin and his regiment parading into Luoyang in that very moment, Li Song would have surely died. The Empress’ razor-edged nails had crept up

all the way to his throat and were oscillating nervously, ultimately deciding to retreat as the General approached his sister, hailed by the jubilant masses. He Jin was not as tall as his sibling, but what he lacked in height, he made up in muscularity – the man resembled a mountain more than a human being.

And, to the surprise of no-one, the Empress' demeanour dramatically changed as he came closer. What was once a bloodthirsty grin had instantly changed into a pure, welcoming beam.

Also, the regent took no more than five seconds to produce a cascade of tears, pretending that she was ushered into an eon of anguish ever since her brother left to fight and win the Empire's wars.

If the saying held true that all women were born actresses, then she must have been the deity after whom they were modelled. This was insanity.

“I hate to keep you from reuniting for one minute longer,” the servant interjected, trying to ignore the sensation of his own blood gushing out of his wounded shoulder. “But it is for the venerable He Jin that I bring urgent mail.” The eunuch took the sealed letter out of its casket and handed it over to the officer.

“Ah, I thank you. Who's the sender?”

“You shall see upon reading it, sir.” Li Song offered a subtle wink, letting him know he should rather appreciate the contents in private. “Now, if you would please excuse me – I need to help prepare the banquet for your return.”

“Off you go.” said the Empress, struggling to balance

her act with her staggering anger. “We shall talk again later.”

Li Song happily accepted his cue to leave. He could still feel his head throbbing, and his shoulder was still bleeding, so he had not fully woken up from his nightmarish dream as of yet – if it had been a dream at all. Choosing not to ponder further about the disturbing things he saw, he made his way back towards the main palace. He mindlessly scurried through the masses that had gathered around the General and his sister, and he felt like a sack of flour being brought to the market whilst doing so; being pushed around in every possible direction, he wondered how he was managing to maintain his sense of orientation.

Upon escaping the rowdy mob he felt had been sucking him in like quicksand, he passed a line of workers that were transporting boxes of gravel across the street. That prompted him to take a closer look at the box he himself was still carrying around with him; the little casket He Jin’s letter had come in. Li had admired its beautiful ornaments ever since he had gotten a hold of it, but it was now that he discovered a new, intriguing detail. The box featured the imperial seal, in form of a small engraving carved into the casket’s bottom. This was somewhat outré, as Jian Shuo was not the seal’s keeper – the eunuch hence assumed that the Emperor personally commissioned for the tiny container to be made, likely desiring for He Jin to better understand the importance he was given. Too bad – Li Song had not bothered to

surrender the casket, nor would he have wanted to if he had thought about it, in hindsight. This box would be compensation for his troubles. Tough luck for whoever begged to differ.

Eventually making it to the palace, the eunuch spotted an odd bamboo crate sneaking about.

The bamboo crate saw him and ran in the opposite direction. Determined to either disprove or embrace his delirium, Li Song ran after the crate, asking himself how and why his possibly unsound mind could have come to be so obsessed with various receptacles, all of a sudden. After a good minute of running in circles around the many pillars supporting the palace's ceiling, the youngster finally tackled his target and espied that in reality, the sneaking bamboo crate had been no other than Prince Liu Xie, the estranged stepson of the Empress. He had been hiding out in this container for a while, in which he had punched holes for his legs and arms to sprout out of like branches of a very strange, rectangular tree.

“Your Highness, what is it you're doing inside of this vile box?” The eunuch helped the Prince get back up on his feet, and bowed in apology. “As your charwoman would also say, it is dreadfully unbecoming of someone of your standing to wander the halls of the palace in this manner.”

“I'm hiding.” he answered.

“Hiding? From whom?”

“From my stepmother.”

“Why would you be hiding from her?” Li Song inquired. He understood that there must have been some bad blood between the eight-year-old and the Empress ever since the *unfortunate passing* of the woman who gave birth to him, but the servant could have sworn to have seen the Empress at the initial reception ceremony just a moment ago, located half an hour away from where the Prince was cowering now. “She’s at the homecoming celebration, is she not?”

“I saw her just before,” the Prince asserted. “She was creeping out of my father’s bedroom.”

“She was?”

“Yes, and when she noticed me, she did something really scary!”

“What did she do?” Li Song asked hesitantly, able to feel the child’s fear radiate from his terror-stricken demeanour.

“She stared right at me, her eyes glowing like coals from a fireplace. She then cast a grin that was wider than any I had ever seen before!” Liu Xie demonstrated its sheer size with his hands and fingers, pointing them in opposite directions – each stretched as far away from one another as possible. “As she moved towards me, she made a slashing motion across her neck and laughed like a demon. I quickly turned around and ran as fast as I could!”

“You sure do have a wild imagination, your Highness.”

“Why won’t you believe me? It’s always the same with you eunuchs – you always take her side anyways, and I’m always the one lying. As was my mother before me.”

And with that closing remark, the bamboo crate took off again, disappearing around the nearest corner. Li Song was left to stand there like a mule and reason about his words. He was not particularly proud of himself – the Prince had evidently shared his experience in an attempt to obtain the comfort he so desperately needed. Also, the servant doubted that Liu Xie’s account was entirely fantastical; not only was the Empress known to incessantly terrorise her unwanted stepson, but Li Song had also just so recently entertained an eerily disquieting interaction with her. His injured shoulder made for decent evidence of that – what he saw may have been a dream, but what he felt was most definitely not.

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“Elephants,” He Jin theatrically declared, relishing the feel of the many eyes that were laid upon him at the dining table. “Elephants indeed, and more than enough of them to instil fear in the hearts of my valiant men. We proceeded cautiously, praying we would not be spotted.”

“Oh my,” one of his concubines called, excitedly sipping from her glass of liquor. “What happened next, milord?”

Undeniably, the General had enraptured the minds of every guest attending his reception gala. The unspeakably huge variety of dishes that had been served up by the palace’s greatest chefs was left largely ignored – all were feasting on nought but the senior officer’s brilliant storytelling.

Whereas more distinguished servants of the throne got to enjoy the lavish dinner alongside their liege, lesser retainers such as Li Song were made to stand idly by the walls, functioning, quintessentially, as living decorations. They would not eat, drink, or even sigh – this was all common practice for those on the lower echelons of the imperial court’s hierarchy. In moments such as these, a typical means of self-entertainment was to reflect upon one’s past actions and think of plans for the future. One could also try and follow the often incoherent flow of conversation at the table, but this would prove to be notoriously difficult – except for tonight. Li Song was able to listen attentively to everything that was said, and even managed to make a few mental notes for himself. At the beginning of the year, he had come up with a little ‘game’ to keep otherwise inevitably ensuing boredom or melancholy at bay. He would observe the guests as though they were actors in some elaborate drama, and try to make out the ‘plot’ of the play. He was getting pretty good at this. Who were the protagonists of the story? Who were the antagonists? They were not always of his own kind – surprisingly enough, Zhang Rang and Jian Shuo, the only two eunuchs permitted to sit at the buffet, were always rather tame at events like these. It were mostly the court’s female menials who fell out of line; usually upholding an innocent and sweet demeanour, they saw such galas as prime opportunities to engage in ruthless gossiping. The noblewomen did not consider themselves too good for such cheap customs either – their voices echoed across the mess hall louder than any other, and their incessant laughter would have been

rambunctious enough to awaken a bear from hibernation. That is, if this feast was held somewhere in the desolate mountains of China and not in the midst of her wealthiest metropolis.

There was glitter and gold everywhere, enough to make the youngster nauseous at its offensive sight. The guests were all clad in expensive silk habiliments, there were crystal statues embedded in the glamorously painted walls – all of this could truly be considered a new record in extravagance, the likes of which Li Song would bet his life no other court on this earth could replicate. The adolescent himself had hardly known anything else than the luxurious environment Luoyang provided, yet he could very well imagine why the impoverished peasants of the land were angered by the discovery of the living standards here. No wonder their fury gave way to the still-ongoing Yellow Turban Rebellion – they slept in the same dirt livestock was kept and slaughtered in, whilst their rulers suffered from tough choices such as what outlandish delicacies should be on the menu tonight. The Empress and her entourage had far transcended the degustation of the finest hares or stallions – rats and snakes were now in season. The disparities between the rich and the poor were abhorrently immense; the dichotomy between the two classes did not, however, outshine their interdependence.

“Words cannot express how proud we are of you,” the regent said, reclaiming her majestic plural for the purpose of formality. “You truly are China’s greatest hero.”

“Oh please, do not direct all of your admiration towards me, sister.”

“Is there any other man I’d have grounds to eulogise more?”

“Most definitely,” the General claimed, to the surprise of all. “There is no greater warrior than Gongsun Zan, our eternal guardian to the north. Yuan and I could never have left to fight the rebels in the hills, if not under his aegis. His service has been of crucial importance to the security of this country for decades.”

“Absolutely,” Yuan Shao affirmed, taking a small bite of the cobra flesh on his platter. “Gongsun Zan should be regarded as national treasure. Every day, he wards off hordes of savages aspiring to invade our peaceful realm.”

“It’s a shame he could not make it to this dinner. We would have liked to praise him as well” The Empress smiled and raised a toast in his honour. “To the indispensable and brave Gongsun Zan, our benevolent champion. May he and his sons forever live to defend our empire.”

“Hail!” everyone cheered, drawing either their swords or cups into the air.

The happy celebration was interrupted by aggressive, repetitive knocks on a nearby door. The Empress fixated her stare on the entrance, yet would not give the order to have it opened and the intruder let in. For a brief moment, silence reigned supreme over the mess hall, formerly dominated by horrisonant tattle. Nobody made a single move, as though whatever abomination may be waiting beyond the door was sure to kill them if they dared to even tremble. There was a sense of impending

doom in the air – even though no mention of more nefarious matters had been made throughout the evening, it was apparent to every guest at the table (and every attendant beside it) that the following moments were not to be merry and bright. This would be the end of the world.

“I’ll go.” He Jin courageously rose to his feet, and slowly approached the gate into hell. He clutched the grip of his sword and carefully answered the ominous knocking – only to witness Lady Tian awkwardly stumbling into the hall, visibly out of breath and mortified by the message she bore. There were tears all across her face, and she was breathing very heavily. The highly-decorated General helped her get up and stepped aside to let her make her announcement.

“The Emperor,” she said, shivering in absolute terror.

“The Emperor has died!”

“**DIED?**” a voice asked, appearing to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. “**WHAT A TERRIBLE, TERRIBLE SHAME!**”

Li Song looked around the room, his heart nearly having stopped at the sound of this dreadful tone. The oppressive atmosphere that had arisen around him was making him feel very dizzy.

And then, he saw it.

An eerie inferno burning out of the eye sockets of the creature standing at the head of the table.

The eldritch being's rapacious fangs were now showing in all of their glory; drenched in venomous saliva, they made for a spectacle of horror that was unparalleled in ghastliness.

“HOWBEIT, THIS STRIKES ME AS VERY STRANGE. HE SEEMED SO WELL WHEN I VISITED HIM EARLIER. HE TOLD ME THAT HE WAS FEELING BETTER, TOO; IT APPEARED TO BE ONLY A MATTER OF TIME UNTIL HE MADE HIS GRAND RETURN TO HIS RIGHTFUL THRONE.”

“There is only one way he could have so suddenly perished, Lady Tian.” the Empress softly spoke, offering her ungodly, breathtakingly wide grin.

“YOU MUST HAVE POISONED HIM.”

5

Xiaoling woke up at the sound of birds chirping. She could also perceive the banter of workers sitting atop the scaffolding at the city walls – their exact words were by no means distinguishable, but the carefreeness of the scene made her smile nonetheless. There was also a soldier enjoying some leftover fruit from last night’s sales, and a tanned woman conversing with him as he did.

The couple was standing in between the rows of now-empty stands; the night market had vanished into oblivion like the vitality of an ephemeral butterfly.

“Yue, I have a gift for you.” The guard smiled sheepishly, and asked the lady to close her eyes and open her palms before him. “It’s not much, I know.”

“It’s...” The woman’s eyes were fixated on the singular pearl she was given as she marvelled at its simplistic beauty.

“Small? Inadequate?” he muttered. “I promise you, I will be able to buy you many more in near future. Please have faith in me.”

“What are you saying, silly?” she said, jumping into his arms. “It’s the prettiest gift I’ve ever received.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes! You don’t need to buy me a necklace of pearls, neither now nor in the coming days, weeks, months and

years of our lives together. I adore you as you are, and no ceaseless gifting or lack thereof will change anything about that.”

“You’re not going to marry the butcher’s son?” he said, a tear rolling down his cheek.

“Never.” She kissed him passionately, and the two disappeared in the morning fog.

The girl snoozed by the fountain for a little longer. Her uncle was loudly snoring by her side, but her father was nowhere to be seen. Apart from the bantering workers and the couple she had perceived, the city was relatively quiet, in stark contrast to its vibrant nightlife she had witnessed upon her arrival. Serenity or gloom? Xiaoling could hardly tell in this instant; the earlier sight of unconditional love spoke for the former, the current emptiness she found in her surroundings and in her heart spoke for the latter. Her father returned before she could ponder about it for too long, carrying a small bag of coins in his hand.

“The mayor and his son have invited us to have breakfast at their house.”

“Oh,” she whispered. “That’s very forthcoming of them, but would we not be abusing of their kindness if we accepted?”

“How so?” Cheng asked in a hushed tone, having caught the hint. Uncle Hou was still sleeping, and waking him up would prove catastrophic. If there was one thing the decorated veteran hated, then that was to be abruptly torn from sleep. Being subjected to such careless

treatment would usher him into a terrible mood that would last all day. This could be useful if it were armed highwaymen who so discourteously interrupted his slumber, but definitely not if those who inconvenienced him were none other than his travel companions. "I really don't see the problem."

"Well, they've granted us the best lot at the market already." she elucidated, playing with her shoulder-long brown hair.

"I also paid them a generous premium this morning, from our proceeds."

"I suppose we're even, then." Xiaoling silently stood up and followed her father to the mayor's home. The two of them simply let Xuegong doze where he did; he had chosen the safest spot for it.

The mayor's house was modest and quaint. It was a one-story building that enjoyed the luxury of a tiled roof and a carpeted floor, but there were no superfluous decorations or embellishments to speak of. A noteworthy difference to Cheng's cabin back in Wanzhen was that all the walls were made of thick wood, and not of mud or clay. This made them much more aesthetically pleasing, but brought equally extreme disadvantages. Walls made of wood were more susceptible to fire and water damage, and would not retain the same insulating faculties as consolidated dirt. Furthermore, they had high maintenance costs and any preservation work of large proportions had to be done by a skilled carpenter, or else they would unavoidably sustain even more defilement. The mayor and his son were not penurious by any stretch

of the imagination, yet Xiaoling could deduce that they were unable to pay for such a craftsman's services more than once a year.

The mayor himself was a greying man of short stature. The perpetual expression of woefulness on his face made him look a bit like a weeping tree; embodying both the sorrow and wisdom he must have accumulated over the course of his life. He rarely ever said a word, therefore, the meal was mostly held in silence. This was because it would have been impolite for anyone else but him to take charge and spark up a conversation. Yet, this did not mean that he would not communicate – he and the girl's father appeared to be having a telepathic conversation on some higher, spiritual level, inconceivable to the youth seated at the table beside them.

There were muskmelon seeds and various sorts of baked beans for breakfast. Whoever believed themselves to still be hungry thereafter could have a slice of pumpkin, or the remains of yesterday's vegetable stew. The meal was fairly filling, all things considered. It had been a while since the girl last had a breakfast as copious as this one.

“There is something of utmost importance I must discuss with the mayor in private.” Cheng finally said, motioning for his daughter to retreat from the table with a dismissive gesture.

“I take it I am to go with her?” Xia asked, sighing audibly. He would have liked to stay.

“Yes,” his father answered. “Take her on a sightseeing tour across the city.”

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A handful of men gathered outside of the mayor's house watched Xiaoling and Xia walk out in silence. The pair could not see them, but they could very well see the pair. They were not particularly worried about these two, however. There was a person much more threatening to their cause they knew to be present – if not at this exact location, then at least worryingly close.

“Brother,” one of them whispered, hiding behind a pile of firewood. “The officer. What's our guarantee that he won't make an appearance?”

“We never enjoyed the luxury of guarantees and certainties in life. If we did, we would be no different from our imperial overlords.”

“It could be a trap,” a third one said, leaning against a tree. “That merchant could very well be setting us up for a nasty encounter with the guards, don't you think?”

“No.”

“What, no?” The man who hid behind the firewood jolted up, casting an angry gaze upon his elected leader. “Yi, how are we supposed to trust you if you never justify your answers?”

“Shut up,” the third one said. “I'm sure he has an emergency plan ready. Have faith in him.”

“Thank you, Guiren.”

“You're welcome, brother.”

“Come on, my own life is on the line here, too!” Bao was still not satisfied. “How can you possibly fail to

understand why I'd also like to know what's happening around me? All of this was supposed to be over by jiǎzǐ¹, and it's clearly not!"

"I understand that some of you may doubt my leadership," Yi said. "Especially you, Bao. You have every reason to, yet I value your patience and tolerance immensely."

"Patience and tolerance which you're draining rapidly." Bao mumbled, sitting back down. He then sighed and saw reason – a typical emotional progression for him to experience. He was a miscreant, but no scoundrel.

"Anyway, since you're certain we'll be alright, should we not just go in? We're wasting time out here."

"Yes." Yi confirmed. "Tan and Dai, please stay outside and set up a search perimeter. I want to know where he is before he knows where we are, should he come our way."

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"What do you think this is about?" Xiaoling asked, her curiosity boiling over into this vulpine question.

"I have no clue." Xia admitted, shaking his head. "My father likes to keep all sorts of things from me, until they unavoidably explode in both our faces and necessitate a hasty response."

"I can relate to that." She made sure to match his pace, so that she could watch his smile. It was inconceivable to

¹ 184 AD, the beginning of the then-current cycle in the Chinese calendar. This was the year in which, according to Zhang Jue's prophecy, the heavens would alleviate the peasants of their troubles.

her how somebody could be smiling constantly and naturally like he did. At some point during breakfast, she wondered whether his lips were just conveniently misshapen to form a smile, but renounced this hypothesis as muscle tension could clearly be observed around the corners of his mouth. Was he really just a perpetually happy person? That too, seemed like an unlikely key to the problem. Xia's standard of living was surely higher than hers, yet he evidently faced troubles of his own. That much could be discerned from his solemn tone.

“Can I ask you a question?” The girl could restrain her nosiness no longer.

“Sure, go ahead.” He stopped to look at her, as though he had instinctively grasped the profundity of the yet unuttered inquiry.

“Why are you always smiling?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“It interests me. I have never met somebody like you. You're quite special.”

“I see.” He started rubbing his hands together amidst the morning cold in an attempt to warm himself. The fog was still all around them. “In that case, I'll tell you.”

“I once met an innkeeper who told me something I will never forget.”

“How come?”

“Well, I asked her how she found the strength to be so courteous and kind to every new customer, no matter her current state of mind. She then made a long pause, and the two of us faced each other in absolute silence for a while. Finally, she revealed the reason for her unfading

warmth; she told herself that she would welcome every new person into her life as though it were her only chance to meet them – and often, it was.”

Xiaoling did not know what to respond. She never expected to hear a reason as simple yet admirable as this one. The truth in that statement moved her to tears – in a world as heartless and violent as theirs, neither survival nor everlasting connection to friends and family was a given. People came and went; this was the sole conviction she held in life. All else was ever-changing, swiftly flowing past her like the waters of the Yellow River back at her small, insignificant village.

“Don’t cry,” the boy said, wiping her tears off of her face. “Smile with me, instead.”

“I will.”

“Also, there’s something your father asked me to procure in his name, for your safety’s sake. He had it especially commissioned according to your needs and specifics over three years ago – the blacksmith is holding on to it at the moment. Shall we go fetch it now?”

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“Greetings, Brother Cheng.” Yi said, entering the mayor’s house through a backdoor near the kitchen. His two allies stood right behind him, both wearing yellow scarves.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” Cheng said, walking over to embrace the men. “Yet, I cannot help but

worry that this is no place for a first meeting. Taiyuan is teeming with Gao Gan's lackeys, and if I am seen with you here, this would surely be my end."

"We do not fear Gao Gan," Yi explained. "He is nought but a purchasable opportunist, and we have compensated him for his silence already." Guiren and Bao nodded intently; the local warlord valued money more than his honour.

"Good," Cheng gulped. "That is relieving. I had not anticipated the extent of his corruption."

"Don't think we're out of the woods yet," Bao interjected. "We still have your friend to worry about. He's no longer at the fountain, and if he does something funny, we will hold you personally accountable."

"Indeed," Guiren said, affirming his associate's stance. Bao was rarely in the right, but when he was, he felt the need to emphasise it. "We want to trust you, Cheng. We cannot do so until we know for a fact that you're not trying to sell us out to him and his army fellows."

"I can hardly give you more than my word, and my promise that if we are found, I will fight by your side and no other."

"I thank you for your commitment." Yi put a hand on Cheng's shoulder, and offered a comforting smile.

"Everything will sort itself out."

"Provided we stick together." Bao added. "The moment our faith in one another crumbles, we're dead. All of us shall live for their brothers from hereon in, never again for themselves."

"True words, brother." Yi stepped onto the kitchen table, and loudly proclaimed their oath, to the horror of

the aging mayor. “The Azure Sky is already dead; the Yellow Sky will soon rise. To that end, we swear to breathe and bleed as one!”

The three raised their blades into the air and cheered, taking a moment to relish what felt like newfound freedom. Even Yi had momentarily lost faith in the Yellow Turban Rebellion, for he had witnessed its defeat in the promised year of salvation. Three years later however, he found himself chanting the very same proclamation Zhang Jue first introduced the country to; there would be salvation for the enslaved, and justice for the disadvantaged. Sweeping land reforms would better the lives of the farmers, and never again would a craftsman be inadequately compensated for his work. A mother would never again see her sons and household belongings be requisitioned for war, and every beggar would find employment and a roof to call his own; such had been the prophecy of the great Daoist wizard, a prophecy Yi, Guiren, Bao and Cheng would help make true – or so they foolishly believed.

The men were ruthlessly forced out of their revolutionary utopia by the sound of the morning herald’s trumpet, and the devastating news he bore. They all scrambled to reach the main square so that they could dissuade themselves of the gravity of the message they believed to have heard; in vain, for they had perceived the herald’s words in their brutal, saddening actuality.

“Yesterday’s storm has caused the Yellow River to flood

vast swaths of its basin! All of Xing and Jia County was obliterated by the flood – this includes the remote communities of Hekou Cha, Fuxingwan, Lijiapan and Wanzhen. Regional authorities list no survivors.”

6

“Bring us the cauldron,” the Empress ordered, presiding over the jury that was soon to oversee Lady Tian’s execution. “Justice must be served.”

The petrified charwoman found herself tied to a metallic contraption, above which a blazing cauldron full of liquid gold was raised. Heavy chains of iron were tightly wrapped around her bare legs and arms, and a leather harness was fixating her back to the rear of the apparatus. Her face had been locked inside of a copper mask. There were hooks within the mask that forced her jaw to remain open, and her tongue had previously been ripped out of her mouth to prevent her from screaming that she was innocent. Desperate, disfigured and trapped, she faced the inequitable verdict of the vicious Empress and her mindless acolytes. Just two days ago, she had been servicing her in her pompous chambers.

“Dishonoured Lady Jiayi Tian, this jury hereby sentences you to death for the murder of Emperor Ling of Han, a heinous act which you have committed in a premeditated, devilish fashion.” Eunuch Zhang Rang was the one to speak these words, with an apparent uneasiness in his eyes.

“Your remains will be exposed at Luoyang’s market square, so that all can witness the kind of punishment that awaits an assassin. May you burn in the lowest, hottest of

hells. Begone from the world of the living.”

And so, the cauldron was made to collapse over her face, and the flaming gold was poured into her eyes, nose and mouth. The pain she felt was indescribable – nothing on this earth compared to perceiving one’s own body be simultaneously filled and disintegrated by molten metal. Her senses were stripped from her one by one – her eyesight and olfaction were first to go, followed by her hearing. The entire world appeared to be sinking into a realm of suffering around her. Luckily for this poor soul, she would soon cease to feel anything at all. Within seconds, she was dead, yet her killer would watch the golden mass she had turned into for several hours more.

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At the earliest hour of the next day, General He Jin made his way to the location described in the letter he received. This meeting had now become even more important to him; now that the Emperor was dead, his posthumous legacy would be marked by the men he trusted the most, and the award the General was promised would distinguish him as one of them.

Despite the sinister conclusion of the day before, the officer felt rather good about himself. This was because he forced himself to – there was no reason why his sister’s knavery would entitle him to feel anxious and sullen. He was the General-in-Chief of the imperial army, and he would soon collect his due reward for his

formidable service.

He treaded through the palace gardens in hope of finding the pavilion Jian Shuo wanted to meet him at. The gardens were expansive enough to lose oneself in their floral pulchritude, which they maintained despite the damage dealt by yesterday's torrential rains. The footpaths were muddy, and there were branches all over the ground. If anything, those imperfections made this idyllic piece of land more attractive to the man; they appeared to blend the disorder of a battlefield with the harmoniousness of a paradise full of singing birds, swimming fish and fluttering butterflies. They conjoined the charms of his two tremendously different homes.

If it had not been for the irregular shape of the pavilion's rooftop, the warrior may have had to keep searching for much longer still. It was hexagonal and angled, and the pillars sustaining it were unlike any he had ever seen before. The pavilion's architecture as a whole appeared foreign to him – maybe stonemasons from a distant land had offered to build it as a gift to the court? Yet, despite its outlandish design, the pavilion was in concert with its surroundings, and added a welcome, exotic touch to the scene. If the General were asked to describe its sight with a single word, he would have chosen 'refreshing'.

This was, without a doubt, the place Jian Shuo had described in the invitation. The building's originality had been mentioned in the letter, and notwithstanding the fact that He Jin did not currently carry the paper on him, the

realisation that it appeared completely deserted would not shake him from his belief that he had come to the right spot. There was no need to fetch the letter from his chambers and verify his conviction. The man trusted his memory – it was only through absolute certainty in himself that he had succeeded in maintaining his rank in the first place.

Contrary to common belief, He Jin was never designated to hold the title of General-in-Chief indefinitely. His background had been in public administration, a field within which he rapidly ascended to higher responsibilities as his sister synchronously became the Emperor's favourite concubine and finally, Empress Consort of China.

When the Yellow Turban Rebellion erupted in 184 AD, the military's highest-ranking officers and most elite detachments were thinly stretched across the country so that representation of the central government in Luoyang could be achieved even in remote regions. This was done in an attempt to show that the Emperor's Mandate of Heaven¹ was still valid, and that any and all insubordination to his divine rule would bring about grave penalties. Punitive expeditions were launched to subjugate rebelling provinces, and for the first months of this fateful year, all went according to plan. Hordes of

¹ The Mandate of Heaven was a Chinese political principle which aimed to justify the current Emperor's rule over the country. As the purported 'son of heaven', he was accorded supreme control over state matters.

rioters were hunted and exterminated, and vast parts of the land were seemingly cleared of insurgents in their entirety.

That was, until Zhang Jue and his followers demonstrated their tactical prowess – the Yellow Turbans drew the imperial forces into a war of attrition, in which their morale quickly began to wane like the beauty of a withering flower.

Out of nowhere, small squads of rebels would appear at narrow mountain passes to compromise the movement of imperial troops, unleashing devastating surprise attacks on unsuspecting battalions. Pockets of insurgents would also destroy bridges in the region, further inhibiting the logistical support of army groups standing on their last legs further into the countryside. Those would then be systematically encircled and wiped out, with casualties in the thousands. In a perfect echo to the Emperor's previous orders to execute rebel leaders upon apprehension, captured officers were beheaded by the Yellow Turbans on the spot, their bodies later tossed into mass graves. No threat nor plea could halt their ruthless advance; by autumn, almost all vanguard companies had been overrun, and a large-scale assault on the capital appeared probable, if not unavoidable or even imminent.

Military planners were also concerned by the fact that the imperial army was becoming increasingly dependent on the 'goodwill' of local warlords. As the highly-trained troops proved impossible to replace at the rate they were

being slain, deficient retinues had to be reinforced with members of private militias belonging to regional rulers. Such men were the only kind to possess sufficient skills to somewhat compensate for lost, elite warriors, but evidently, their services came at an exorbitant cost. The warlords who offered their men as a 'favour' or 'good deed' towards the Emperor's cause wanted to turn a profit on their investment, and priced their 'gifts' of manpower accordingly.

Spending money on recruiting trained professionals meant that those funds could not be allocated towards reconstruction efforts and campaigns to garner the support of the peasant population – a department in which the Empire's forces were clearly lacking, and the Yellow Turbans far superior. It was decided that an advantage like this could not be granted to the rebels; capturing the hearts and minds of the civilian population was what had kept this uprising going ever since its inception in Julu Commandery, the home province of Zhang Jue.

The bureaucratic committee He Jin had been a part of at the time, a group of policymakers, philosophers and eunuchs, concluded that the best course of action would be to recruit plenty of low-skilled mercenaries instead, and reorganise the military's structure to allow for executives outside of its rank hierarchy to be momentarily appointed as generals as needed. Obviously, military leadership did not agree to this plan, and neither did the acquisitions department. Whilst the

former angrily rejected the idea on grounds that eunuchs could not possibly command armies of *true* men, the latter believed the projected purchasing scheme to be unsustainable and detrimental to the quality of the units in question – correctly and sagaciously so, as He Jin would later have to admit.

He Jin therefore asked his sister to sway the Emperor to throw his weight behind the project, and it took her a single night in summer to get it done. The regent acknowledged the unorthodox nature of this enterprise, yet was easily convinced by his wife that it was necessary.

It hence did not take long for the plan to be put in motion – against the will of the opposition. A compromise was made that no eunuch would command an army, but beyond that, the Emperor forcibly pushed through with this agenda without much regard for top military brass or the acquisitions department. Officers who still opposed the structural overhaul were deposed or dispatched to the frontlines, and clerks who would not commit to hiring the needed amount of mercenaries would see themselves fired and replaced – among them the former head of acquisitions, whose place Jian Shuo happily took. This was not something uncommon for the Emperor to do, therefore, the ensuing scandal quickly died down.

There was a disadvantage to that came with this political thuggery, however. It did not leave the Emperor with a particularly large selection of candidates when it came to

choosing who to grant the rank of Grand Marshal¹. As per agreement, he could not appoint a eunuch, and he was vehemently opposed to appointing a governmental worker without any strategic understanding or experience.

As He Jin was the only one to have attended a military academy and had assisted in the suppression of past revolts, he naturally made for the best choice. He was given a handcrafted sword and a tailor-made set of armour, then asked to assume command of the entire army the next day.

At first, the other officers doubted his capabilities, and the enlisted mistrusted his orders. No matter what he commanded and how well he explained the reasons behind his decisions, he would be met with a wall of questions that was just as difficult to permeate as the enemy's defence strategy.

All of this changed when soldiers who disregarded his authority began dying en masse – either because being so stubbornly antagonistic lead to fatal mistakes being made on the field of battle, or because He Jin indifferently ordered their execution, one by one. Unsurprisingly, betrayal and insubordination were two behaviours that were swiftly eradicated from the armed forces as a whole, within a matter of weeks, if not days.

¹ In this context, the term 'Grand Marshal' is synonymous with the rank of General-in-Chief. The two designations can be used interchangeably. However, it was not uncommon for specific Generals to receive particular designation according to their prestige.

He also reformed the military's subdivisions and structure of command, abolishing outdated concepts and drafting completely new ones.

Among other changes, one of his concepts mandated the creation of dedicated engineering companies tasked to rebuild destroyed infrastructure progressively in order to sustain the advance of other units. Previously, combat engineers in small numbers had been a part of every company there was, no matter its speciality.

This had evidently limited them in their efficiency, for they were required to share resources with units serving a different purpose.

He Jin also possessed another attribute which made him uniquely suitable to lead governmental forces in this particular conflict: he had a prodigiously large network of political connections, and maintained very good relations with the warlords of China. He let them know that he saw right through their earlier extortion scheme and reminded them that by law, they were required to support the Emperor in case of war. That most definitely *included* civil war, and there was nothing the warlords could do to talk themselves out of giving free assistance to the imperial cause at this point – after all, there was not a man among them who desired to be arrested or executed for treason against the state.

The likes of Cao Cao, Liu Bei and Sun Jian were promptly persuaded. Gongsun Zan required no convincing at all, for he had already been fighting the rebels out of his own will – a stern talking to by this

legendary warrior eventually induced all lesser warlords in the region to follow suit.

And of course, Dong Zhuo, Ma Teng and the Yuan (half-)brothers¹ were delighted to personally assist in this endeavour as well; they were not the kind to miss a golden opportunity to flex their military prowess for all of China to see.

Huge armies mobilised whilst smaller detachments of troops fought the Yellow Turbans using their very own tactics – bush fighting therefore became as common as field engagements – and a few months later, the Yellow Turban Rebellion as history remembers it came to a climactic close.

Back in March of that year, a squad of skilled Daoist assassins infiltrated the capital of Nanyang Commandery, Wancheng, and murdered its administrator, a man by the name of Chu Gong. All of this happened in the dead of night, and the murder went unnoticed until the next day.

They were initially led by the veteran insurgent Zhang Mancheng who, according to local sources, was in turn killed by Chu Gong's aggravated successor.

He was beyond enraged by the reckless assassination of his forerunner and desired revenge, but making Zhang

¹ Yuan Shao and Yuan Shu, the rulers of Jin and Henan Commandery, respectively.

Mancheng meet his maker¹ was not enough for him. Seeking to exterminate all rebel forces in Wancheng and return the city to imperial control, he rallied a force of around eighteen thousand men with help of General Zhu Jun² and Inspector Xu Qiu³.

In a world-class display of his affinity for ruses, General Zhu Jun tricked the rebels into believing his troops would launch a massive offensive from the southwest when in reality, he was planning to breach the city's defences from the northeast with no more than five thousand men. The insurgents were forced to retreat into the citadel and were instantly subjected to a siege.

He Jin heard of this and immediately resupplied Zhu Jun with an additional battalion. He was hoping that his friend would secure an easy victory in a decisive attack on the Yellow Turbans' final stronghold, but Zhu Jun had a different plan in mind. His longing for devilries was still not satisfied, and there was one last scheme he wanted to test for feasibility.

Winter came, and heaps of snow began falling on the middle kingdom. The ground was frozen and so were

¹ Zhang Mancheng's second-in-command, Zhao Hong, was then also killed, upon which the intrepid Han Zhong assumed control of remaining rebel forces barricaded in Wancheng.

² A Han General renowned for his unconventional strategies and strong sense of justice.

³ Xu Qiu was the Inspector of Jing Province, tasked to oversee development in the region and report enemy clandestine operations to the imperial army HQ.

many insurgents within the isolated citadel – it was only a matter of time before they would offer to surrender, and as expected, they did by the end of the year. No response came, and as supplies were running dry, they braced themselves for a fight to the death. Completely cut off from reinforcements and devoid of drink and nourishment, the situation appeared hopeless; until rebel leader Han Zhong noticed something strange. It appeared as though his foe had lifted the siege and had set up camp near a forest further down the adjacent river – perhaps so because he could no longer sustain the lengthy beleaguerment. He was very excited by his discovery, and so he told his men that the time was ripe for a surprise attack on their camp; after all, Sun Tzu¹ had always preached that sometimes, a daring assault could constitute the best defence.

And so, he held an inspirational speech as his comrades prepared themselves for battle, claiming that as their cause was just, the heavens could not forsake them. And indeed, it were not the heavens which would chastise them the following night; it would be his own arrogance and thoughtlessness.

The Yellow Turbans stormed the enemy camp, but

¹ Born in 544 BC, Sun Tzu was a gifted military strategist and is attributed the writing of *The Art of War*, a collection of famous stratagems that has inspired Eastern and Western military leaders alike. Even to leaders in unrelated fields of work, his magnum opus has been a phenomenal guide – the teachings within can not only be applied to armed conflicts, but to life at large in a general sense.

something was off. There were no men to be found resting within it. There were empty boxes and fireplaces scattered across the location, but not a single enemy soldier in sight. That was, until all eighteen thousand imperial troops came rushing out of the nearby forest and began slaying the insurgents with such aggression and speed that they beat into a disorganised retreat, fleeing for the plains to the north in hope their legs would carry them far enough to avoid certain death.

Little did they know that the battalion He Jin sent to reinforce Zhu Jun and his associates had come with a cavalry regiment. The horsemen took no more than three days to round up and slaughter all fleeing insurgents, including Han Zhong, for whom Zhu Jun sought amnesty so that he could live to tell the tale of his crushing defeat.

Unfortunately, the newly-appointed Administrator of Nanyang Commandery¹ was still furious, and demanded the General execute Han Zhong nonetheless. He was impaled by the side of a road popular amongst regional merchants, so that all who travelled to Wancheng could see his corpse.

Jiǎzǐ concluded with the Yellow Turban Rebellion's successful suppression as various other Han Generals claimed similar victories in almost every province affected by the revolt. Although there were whispers of Yellow Turban remnants hiding out in the mountains and

¹ Qin Jie, unknown date of birth.

planning their next attempt to destroy the Han, He Jin and his allies were confident that they had defeated the lion's share of insurgent forces.

For He Jin, this affair proved to have been advantageous in every regard; never again would he have to worry about money, or about losing his hard-earned political influence at court.

As compensation for his trouble, Emperor Ling of Han permanently enfeoffed him General-in-Chief of the imperial army, and with this rank came more money and concubines than he could have ever dreamed of. Exalted among men, every aspiring soldier knew and revered his name.

And now, he was about to be rewarded once anew, this time for his many expeditions to cleanse China's humid southern expanses from barbarians – or so he mistakenly believed. He proudly stood in the centre of the pavilion and patiently waited for Jian Shuo to arrive, but he would not, not now nor any time soon. Instead, a young scribe appeared in the distance and came running his way, waving at him apprehensively.

“General,” he yelled, accelerating as much as he could to reach the officer in time. “Run! This is a trap, Jian Shuo wants you dead!”

“What did you say?”

“Jian Shuo wants to assassinate you! Please, sir, follow me and run!”

And almost as though this were some sort of cue, fifteen

masked assailants jumped out of bushes close by and started coming towards the man. They were armed with misshapen sickles that had been sharpened to the extreme, and appeared to be very agile and quick on their feet.

He drew his sword and pursued the running scribe without much thought, knowing that he would surely be slain if he remained in the area – but, running was not much use, for the death squad swiftly caught up to him and his unlikely saviour. He and the boy were now standing back to back on a narrow path, blocked off from both ends by their numerous opponents. The scribe picked up a stick he found on the ground and braced himself for a fight.

“Sir, my name is Pan Yin, and I swear by the honour of my fathers that I shall defend you with my life!” the boy shouted, courageously brandishing his stick before the attackers.

“Be quiet,” the General ordered. “Don’t ridicule yourself and drop that stupid branch. You have fists, so use them and fight like a man.”

The scribe complied and brandished his fists instead. They were not sufficient to intimidate the challengers, and so one came running at either defender simultaneously.

The marauder barrelling towards He Jin crudely swung his sickle at his face, a move the trained warrior narrowly avoided. He retaliated with a fatal stab through the

attacker's abdomen and turned his attention towards the assassin harassing the boy. Pan Yin was visibly struggling to dodge the generous swings that came his way, and if it had not been for the General head-butting and then tackling the killer just in time, the lanky scribe could have met his end there and then.

In a second wave, four masked men crept up on the duo, two of them launching throwing knives ahead of themselves. One of them strafed the boy's cheek, the other planted itself in the General's shoulder. He Jin roared in pain and charged towards the men, beheading three and maiming another. He would not go down so easily, but there were more than a handful of bushwhackers remaining. With an injured shoulder, no armour and nought but a sword to defend himself, He Jin did not know how many more he could fight off, but told himself that if he died today, he wanted the world to remember him for who he was: a fierce combatant who had never known fear.

“You vile animals, is that all you have to offer?” he exclaimed, baring his teeth at the mercenaries.

“Here's an incentive to come at me once more, you filthy bastards. If you fail to slay me this morning, I will have you and your client executed in the most horrid of ways. I will spoon out your eyes, rip out your tongues, fill your ears with smouldering lead, cut off your noses and sever your bodies in so many pieces that cremating them will not be necessary anymore. You are the lowest of the low,

the most rotten kind there is and I, He Jin, vow to ensure you are treated as such.”

He then grabbed one of the severed heads that were laying on the ground, and launched it up into the air. He proceeded to cleanly slice it in half, causing the cerebral matter in either side of the skull to ooze out as it came crashing back down onto the footpath between the flower beds.

“Do you want a taste of this soup?”

Nobody wanted a taste of this soup, and so, the assassins routed in absolute horror, as did Pan Yin, having witnessed a sight which would surely scar him for life. The General was left to stand alone in the gardens in complete silence, for even the birds had stopped singing, the toads had ceased croaking and the butterflies were shivering underneath the fallen leaves.

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“Yuan Shao!” the General yelled. “Yuan Shao, where in the Emperor’s name are you?” He ran down one of the palace’s long hallways, hoping to find Yuan Shao’s room as quickly as possible. There was absolutely no time to waste; if they acted fast, they could outmanoeuvre the eunuchs. Knowing them, they were likely already preparing their next move, so the General had to be extremely careful from hereon in. In his wounded state, it was questionable whether he could survive another assassination attempt, and he knew this very well. He

was not as young and strong as he once was, too. This did not make for a distinctly good self-defence cocktail. Yuan Shao was comfortably seated in his quarters at the gatehouse, entertaining a game of Go¹ with a lovely concubine he had previously enjoyed sexual intercourse with. She was of stunning, exceptional beauty.

Her supple breasts were still bare, and she had evidently not bothered to cover them up after the deed – why would she? If their ideal size and shape distracted the warlord from winning the game, it would be ill-advised for her to willingly negate her own advantage.

Howbeit, when He Jin came bolting into the room virtually showered in blood, she shrieked and took off to her dormitories as fast as she could, leaving her master clueless as to whether this precipitous move was to be considered a concession of defeat or a unilateral decision to postpone the game until further notice. Either way, he would be looking forward to seeing her again soon.

“I’m here,” he said, bewildered by his comrade’s sudden and unkempt appearance. “Did we not say we would leave the fighting be throughout our stay at court?”

¹ An ancient Chinese game in which the aim is to surround a greater portion of a 19×19 grid than the opponent. First references to this game being played date back to around 400 BC. With more than twenty million active players today, it is still very popular.

“You peerless clown, an attempt was made on my life!” He Jin was breathing heavily, so his friend invited him to take a seat.

“By whom?”

“The eunuchs. That much is clear, as Jian Shuo was the one to invite me to the site of the botched assassination.”

Yuan Shao sighed and poured He Jin a cup of lukewarm tea. He seemed oddly withdrawn; an uncommon state of mind for this charismatic man.

“What’s wrong?” He Jin asked, drinking some of the tea. To his surprise, it was fairly spicy.

“This is beginning to bore me.”

“What?”

“You know, your sister asked me to help her with the transition yesterday. I got her son ready for the ceremony, prepared a banquet, and so on. I talked to her about the eunuchs, saying that I did not want Liu Bian’s rule to be plagued by the same scum as his father’s.”

“And what did she respond?” He Jin was nonplussed by the fact that Yuan Shao maintained such a close relationship with his sister, but convinced himself he cared too little to pry.

“She sneered at me and spouted a bunch of platitudes about how the eunuchs are an ‘integral and irreplaceable part of the court’s ecosystem’ and that I better not dare try and kill them or else.”

“Or else what?” The General laughed, perfectly able to picture his sister acting in this way.

“She would not allow me to come see her in her bedroom at night anymore.”

“Very funny, dork.”

He Jin splashed the remaining tea in Yuan Shao’s face, and for a moment, neither of them said a single word. Then, they both dissolved into laughter. Yuan Shao was the only man who could get away with taking the mickey out of the General like that. Any other would, without a doubt, have become acquainted to his blade.

“Alright, so what do we do?” he asked, staring at the warlord expectantly. “How do we fix this huge, bloody mess?”

“I’m not sure. Have you had Jian Shuo arrested, or is he still out and about scheming?”

“I had my men throw him in a cell. He will be executed by dawn, and I’m sure my sister will agree to such punishment for trash like him.”

“Good. We still don’t have much of a valid reason to rid ourselves of his colleagues, though. We can’t prove they did anything wrong, so the Empress won’t let us.”

“Can’t she be persuaded?”

“I’ve tried, but she said she’s not afraid of ‘men like me’. That’s problematic, indeed.”

“Forsooth,” the General chuckled. “You’re not particularly frightening.”

Both of them burst into laughter again. Whenever she was quoted, it was as though they could hear her voice say those very words in their heads. Not a man at the imperial court would have disagreed to the statement that she was one of a kind, for all the right *and* all the wrong reasons.

“Well, if she is not afraid of a man like you, *who* would she be afraid of, huh?”

“I know *who*”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No, Yuan, anyone but him.”

“We have no other choice, and you know it. If you do not send for him this instant, your nephew is done for.”

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Li Song was still shaking. He had barely managed to steal the keys from the sleeping guard supposed to guard the dungeon, and was now descending into its dark, rotten depths.

The lantern he had brought provided him with much-needed light and warmth; winter was coming soon, and it were such underground places that harboured the icy cold before the start of its rightful season. Rats could be heard squeaking all around him, and he could have sworn to have spotted at least three snakes slithering across the slippery stone steps he was sneaking down. Those steps would hopefully lead him to the correct cell, but the eunuch remained vigilant nonetheless. One never knew what could encounter them in hellholes such as this one.

“Jian?” he hesitantly called, carrying his lantern close to his chest. No answer. “Jian?”

“Who is this?” a weak voice responded, almost too quietly to be perceived. “Who are you, and why are you here?”

“It’s me, Li,” the youngster replied. “I am here to speak to you.”

“Make it quick, then. Straight ahead, then take a left. My cell is the last one in that corridor.”

Li Song obliged, feeling a little more comfortable now that he had heard a familiar voice. He followed the given directions and eventually arrived before the purposefully befouled cell.

“They are really trying to make you miserable in here, aren’t they?”

“Without a doubt,” Jian Shuo said, pointing at the pile of animal excrements the guards had shovelled into his cage. “They are.”

“Have you been told what you are being accused of, Jian?”

“No, what is it?”

“Can’t you imagine?”

“No.”

“They say you’ve tried to murder He Jin,” Li Song elucidated in a serious tone. “This country’s greatest hero since time immemorial.”

Jian Shuo did not respond to the allegation. Instead, he stood up from the begrimed floor of his cell and leaned his head against a wall. He appeared profoundly disappointed.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out, friend. I did everything I could – snuck into the gatehouse, retrieved the casket, delivered the letter. Anything possible to make sure–”

“What letter?”

“What?”

“What letter are you talking about?”

“The invitation you asked me to give to him, remember? I fetched it from the gatehouse and gave it to him at the reception parade, upon which I let him know he should open it in private.”

“Li.”

“What?”

“I never asked you to do this. You were fooled.”

“Father, father!” Xiaoling screamed, trying to find him among the crowd that had gathered at the main square. Xia was following her with vacant eyes, surely in about as much shock as she was.

“I’m over here!” he bellowed, looking around to see if he could spot her. Within seconds, she came crashing into his chest, crying profusely.

“Mother...”

“I refuse to believe it. We will go find her, right now. I’m leaving everything here.”

Xia understood this to be his cue to leave. He did not want to interfere in the girl’s family matters, or stand by idly while she was vulnerable and sobbing. He waved a faint goodbye to the girl and her father, then vanished in the morning fog.

“We can’t go alone, it could be dangerous! Where is uncle?”

“I don’t know,” Cheng replied. “But I think he will be alright coming back to Wanzhen on his own. He is a reliable man, and would have wanted for us to go without him to see if his family was okay. That, or he is already on his way there.”

“You’re right.” The thought of her uncle’s well-known courage inspired her to be brave, so she wiped her tears from her face and smiled weakly.

“Furthermore, we have made powerful new friends, love. Everything will be alright – I promise you that.” Cheng pointed towards three men standing near him, one of them wearing a very large straw hat. They had yellow war paint on their faces, and were visibly trying to conceal their weapons.

“I’m Bao.”

“I am Guiren.”

“And I am called Yi,” the man with the hat said. “We are pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“I know your kind,” Xiaoling sneered. “And my uncle says that you are evil incarnate!”

“Xuegong is wrong.” Cheng declared. “He is wrong, as wrong as he has always been about such things. If that were not true, do you think I would be associating with them?”

“You just said he is a reliable man,” Xiaoling retorted. “Now you’re suggesting that he is a liar? What is wrong with you, father?”

Not knowing what to say, Cheng struck his daughter across the face. He then motioned for Guiren to snatch her, and the rebel gently loaded her onto his back. The girl resisted as much as she could, making her arms and legs flail back and forth in an attempt to make her captor lose his balance. Unfortunately, the man remained as still as a rock, and so, she eventually had to give up and accept the fact that she would have to tolerate their presence in her life. Those were her father’s new friends, and she did not find it within her heart to condemn him for trying to establish new bonds in dark times such as these. Her father had never struck her before.

“Do not do this again, Cheng.” Yi looked at her father in disappointment. “It is against the Dao to hit your children.”

“It is against the Dao to be insolent,” Cheng retaliated, glaring at the insurgent leader. “Now get the horses and let us go.”

And so, they went, over the scenic bridge before the city gates and beyond the barbican Cheng had intelligently smuggled them through on their way to the market. The girl was riding on Guiren’s horse, holding on to his muscular back as they galloped past countless trees. There were many signposts by the side of the road, but never did they take a glance at them – they knew exactly where they were going and how to get there. If they refrained from taking any breaks, they could be in Wanzhen before sunset.

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“Ah, Xuegong. I’m glad you came.” The warlord embraced him with brotherly love. “Ma Teng could not make it, but Li Jue and Guo Si are here. They arrived last night.”

“Whereabouts? There are so many people in this tent, I cannot see them.”

Indeed, the tent was utterly crowded with soldiers and servants. It was bewildering to think that a yurt as large as this one could be so packed with guests (it was probably larger than Wanzhen as a whole), yet,

Xuegong's eyes were not failing him; there were at least one thousand people in here, and that was most likely still a severe underestimation. There were further thousands gathered outside of the yurt, so for a more exact tally, those guests would have to be considered. "They must be enjoying themselves with the women somewhere," the tyrant said nonchalantly. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"Milord, how many have you summoned here?"

"What, women?" He stopped to think for a moment.

"Five or six hundred?"

"In a joke, maybe."

"No, I'm serious." Dong Zhuo guffawed loud enough to drown out the cacophonous prattle behind him. "You can go count them if you want. We have them in all shapes and sizes, so whether you prefer them short, tall, slender or plump, your tastes will be done justice."

"Never change, milord. Never change."

"Only the best for my finest warriors. Welcome home, Hou Xuegong."

He gave the Major a pat on the back almost strong enough to dislocate his spine, and sent him on his way to find the two other officers. Xuegong eventually spotted Guo Si standing on top of a table, visibly inebriated. This meant that Li Jue could not be too far; the two were inseparable.

"And that's when I punched him in the face and whacked him with my chair – such impudence I could not tolerate!"

“The yellow monkeys would agree,” another soldier said. “It’s against the Dao.”

“Against the Dao indeed!”

Guo Si’s entourage broke out into hysteric laughter. Around him stood both servicemen and attendants alike, a truly exotic blend of characters originating from places Xuegong had never even heard of. There were quite a few Xiognu as well, but this was not surprising. Dong Zhuo liked the nomadic peoples, and demonstrated this by not only tolerating but respecting them. It had always been this way, for as long as the elite horseman could remember.

“Nay, I must be hallucinating,” Guo Si vociferated. “Or is this *the mighty, the glorious, the incredible*—”

“Yes, it’s me. *I have returned*,” Xuegong enthusiastically announced, mimicking his friend’s sensationalist hogwash. “I have come just in time for the party, as I can see.”

“Forsooth, you have. There is turkey, beef, lamb, all paid for by our magnanimous leader!”

“Where’s Li Jue?”

“Breeding a black-haired, buxom mare back in his tent. She’s a fine specimen, I wish I had got the chance to ‘inspect’ her myself.”

“What a slayer,” a bald Lieutenant remarked, biting into a slice of bread with cheese. “This is his seventh one tonight, I think he’s trying to break a record.”

“Well, he *is* a handsome boy,” a waitress admitted, desperately trying to get Guo Si to climb off the table

before he hurt himself. “Much unlike the lot of you. You’re the worst in all of the land.”

She was right. Guo Si and his mob were all unshaven, unwashed and probably reeked of all the meat, cheese and beer they were speedily cramming down their throats. Xuegong liked to believe he was a little more elegant than them – after all, he always watched both his appearance and language around women – but could not be sure after such a long trip on horseback.

He had departed from Taiyuan in the morning, leaving behind a note at the fountain saying that he had important business to take care of and would return shortly to explain what was happening. On his way to the gathering point, he passed a wasteland of death and destruction. It was apparent that a catastrophe had occurred in the region, but duty would not allow him to dwell on the bad feeling he received for too long. His Lord and brothers-in-arms needed him; this was to be the start of a massive campaign, just like in the good old days. He was very much looking forward to the adventure, yet felt poorly about himself for leaving Xiaoling and her father behind. What had ultimately cemented his determination to go was not that he felt alienated by Cheng’s differing opinion about his tribe and its leader, but rather that through achieving peace for China during the upcoming operation, he wanted to prove him wrong. For that to happen, he had to go, and he was sure that Cheng would understand – or so he prayed. This kind of business had always constituted a point of friction between the two,

and Xuegong had learnt to avoid such subjects entirely, if at all possible. Every time Dong Zhuo and his principles came up in a conversation, Cheng would interfere and effectively terminate the pleasantness of the discourse – what use was there to engage in the first place, then?

“Settle down, settle down,” the waitress commanded. “Lord Dong wants to say something, I think. You wouldn’t want to inconvenience his speech, or would you?”

The tyrant was not particularly difficult to make out in the crowd, despite the sheer amount of guests present. This was mostly due to his giant proportions, humongous both in height and width, but also due to his natural, autocratic aura. He waved his huge hands at the cheering troops, and stood behind an awfully small podium in contrast to his astonishing size. Next to him stood a young warrior Xuegong had seen just once before. “Revered ladies and gentlemen,” Dong began in a theatrical manner, filling the little space that was left in the yurt with his deep, intimidating voice.

“We were last gathered here five long years ago, when I summoned you to aid in the repression of the Yellow Turban Rebellion. Just as today, we entertained a generous feast in the tradition of my people, and we laughed and cried about days gone by. It was a beautiful thing to witness – so many of us, Han or otherwise, reunited to pursue a righteous cause; to rid China of the scourge that was the Daoist insurgency, and now their

remnants cower in the mountains, deathly afraid to meet our blades once anew. The Yellow Turbans as we came to know and loathe them may be no more, but I fear I must announce that there is another dark force threatening the integrity of our beloved nation: the Ten Attendants at the imperial court, a group of crooks so corrupt that they precipitated Emperor Ling first into sorrow, then illness, and finally, the diseased arms of a saddening, gruesome death.”

Distraught whispers erupted everywhere as the crowd found itself at a total loss. It was hard to believe the Emperor was truly dead, but as the news had come from the mouth of a man who had been closer to him than most, they had to be true. This was a sobering reality to acknowledge; Liu Hong was gone and would never return. This event would mark the beginning of a new era, a new age all attendees knew would be difficult. “Not all hope is lost, however. Within the mysterious palace walls lives a hero of unparalleled courage and craftiness, a man whose illustrious name I am certain you know: He Jin, the General-in-Chief of the imperial army. He has implored us to assist him and the eminent Yuan Shao in their endeavour to bring the duplicitous eunuchs to justice, once and for all. They are to be slain for the crimes they committed against our motherland; because of them, millions of workers and peasants have suffered in extreme poverty, considering themselves lucky on days they have more than roots or bugs to eat for supper. Our coastal towns further east are being raided by Japanese pirates without consequence, and our southern

expanses were overrun by barbarians.”

That much Xuegong had heard about. There were foreign bandits travelling aboard staggeringly fast junks¹ attacking villages and murdering civilians, especially those residing on the shores of the Beihai peninsula. Due to the Han’s thinly stretched military budget, a defence fleet could not be maintained to counter threats such as these.

“Five years ago, China was in turmoil. Today, China is at the brink of collapse.”

“So, I ask you, beloved brothers and sisters, do we want to stand by twiddling our thumbs whilst the scheming eunuchs make our beautiful country collapse into ruin and be lost forever? Do we desire for our sons to be tortured by savages, for our daughters to be raped by bandits and for the sacrifices of our forefathers to have been made in vain? Do we want to give up our green, fruitful plains, our soft, rolling hills, our racing, cool rivers and our proud, ancient mountains in favour of all eighteen courts of hell here on our sacred earth? Should this truly be the fate of China?”

A resounding ‘no’ was to be heard from the masses. All were intently listening to the tyrant’s words – he was succeeding in making them feel the resentment they

¹ A junk is a type of sailing ship that can travel at relatively high speeds thanks to its fully battened sails and lightweight construction. It was first designed in China, but soon became especially popular among foreign pirates due to its special properties.

needed to wreak havoc on the eunuchs and their network of compromised politicians, inspectors, heralds and informants.

“No, we do not! We do not want the expectations of our elders to be failed, we do not want the hopes and dreams of our children to be shattered. We seek only the best for our motherland. We want China to remain what she always was: the most graceful, advanced and powerful country to exist in the history of humankind!”

The guests and the host were in concert; to each of his prompts they cheered, to each of his rhetorical questions they eagerly replied. Whether one liked to admit it or not, Dong Zhuo was a phenomenal public speaker with an unexpected eloquence.

“Therefore, I appeal to you, ladies and gentlemen. Let us free China from the grasp of the unworthy. Let us liberate the imperial court from personal vendettas and noxious ulterior motives. Let us, fighting as one, defeat the fools who dared to scare our people into submission, for they are no more than snakes among men, to be slaughtered in the same way they slaughtered the innocent citizens of China. Together, we can ensure they will never rise to enslave us again!”

All men in the tent promptly brandished their swords and began swearing death to the eunuchs in a terrifying display of their newfound resolve to go on a crusade once

more, so that the land could be cleansed of the scum that were the bureaucrats.

“To that end, I present to you today an invaluable asset to our endeavour,” Dong Zhuo asked the young soldier next to him to step forward. “His name is Lü Bu, and I have made him my adoptive son. He is a warrior without equal, you have my word. I understand that this is a bold claim to make, yet I am confident that he will prove his skill to you on the battlefield.”

Xuegong had first seen Lü Bu when he received his discharge papers. The warrior stood next to Dong Zhuo that day; their bond was apparent, but until now, Xuegong had not made out what it was.

“Yes, you have heard me right – I did say that he will prove his skill to you on the battlefield, for he shall slay a thousand men before your eyes – all of this in very near future, for we, the protectors of the Han, are going to war!”

The crowd’s zeal overflowed into deafening screams, and within seconds, the immense yurt was completely deserted as the largest military force in the world gathered in the plains outside.

For soldiers who had just been excessively drinking and eating at a bounteous feast, the men were extraordinarily quick to organise themselves into battalions, companies and platoons. The next hour saw the assembly of catapults, siege towers and battering rams, as well as the

readying of horses and munitions. Torches were lit, flags were raised – the expansive grasslands surrounding the site of the gathering were soon transformed into a sea of fire, carried by warriors armed to the teeth and prepared to fight to the death if needed.

“Xuegong,” a thrilling voice spoke from behind as the officer was inspecting his detachment of elite horseback archers. “I hereby appoint you General of our vanguard. I trust that you will make me proud.”

“I will, milord.”

“Good.”

“Those eunuchs will be slain, and I shall bring you their heads on a silver platter.”

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Chaos.

Chaos was all the girl could see when she looked at the place she had once called home. The small cabins were all devastated, not a single one of them spared by the flood – not even those that had been erected further up the mountainside. The only building that remained, albeit in a disastrous state, was the blacksmith’s workshop, for it had been constructed using stone and not mud or clay like the other houses.

It was apparent that highwaymen or Xiognu raiders had already ransacked what was left of Wanzhen; the workshop had been broken into, and all of the wares

within had been stolen. From where she stood, Xiaoling could tell that the improvised pulley system up on the hill had vanished as well – just like the workshop, the well had been left in a state of total disrepair.

“Father, will we find mother?” She asked this in a low, sullen voice. There was little hope they would find her mother alive, and she was mature enough to understand that. What she was actually asking for was a reason to hold on.

“I promise you we will. If not today, then in a few years. It won’t be long until we are reunited with her, if the gods will it.”

Bao sat on a wet rock near the workshop and started sobbing as well, even though he never knew any of the people who lived here.

“Why are you crying, brother?” Guiren sat next to him, and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Just look at this mess, man. Because our country is so broken, the gods are raising hell on earth. Now even a girl as innocent as her must mourn her late mother, for the mistakes of those in power drowned out her life.”

“Such is the dynastic cycle, Bao.”

“What are you talking about?” Bao’s tearful eyes looked at him in mild irritation – it was inconceivable to the young insurgent how Guiren could still come at him with grand philosophical concepts at a grave hour such as this one.

“A new dynasty rises in the shadow of an old one, and promises to protect the people, secure the borders and heal the land. Generations go by, and all goes well until

what used to be the new dynasty grows old and rotten. Then, decay can be observed anywhere you look; natural disasters occur, banditry becomes rampant in the countryside, and the imperial court grows corrupt beyond what had been deemed possible. The situation escalates into civil discord, war, death and disease – until a new dynasty claims the Mandate of Heaven, and the cycle starts all over again. This is in line with the Dao, brother.”

“You are right,” Bao admitted. “It is in line with the Dao, and precisely what Zhang Jue preached.”

“Yin and Yang¹,” Guiren muttered. “Illness can be a doorway to health, and disasters can turn into blessings. Here’s to hoping that this will come true for the girl, her father, our cause and our country.”

Xiaoling dropped to the ground like a bag of sand, and laid on her back, staring at the darkening sky. The ground was soggy and uneven in its consistency. In some places, it was still relatively firm, but in others, it had dissolved into small patches of soil swimming in ankle-high puddles of murky water. Some areas likened a sullied rice field. The girl’s clothes would surely be full of sludge and dirt when she stood up again, but for once,

¹ Yin and Yang is an ancient Chinese principle that expresses an omnipresent, cosmological notion of dualism. In practice, it describes how seemingly reciprocal positive and negative forces could not only be interconnected and interdependent in the world around us, but also complementary to one another. According to this principle, without good, there cannot be evil, and without evil, there cannot be good.

she did not care in the slightest. What use was there maintaining a tidy appearance anymore? Her home was destroyed, she would now have to live as castaway – she might as well give up on trying to be presentable, she thought.

What she felt within her heart and soul could only be described as a draining, enfeebling emptiness. It was as though a greedy monster lived inside of her, she surrender all of the energy she had left. The monster would not even allow her to spill a single tear, no matter how hard she tried; her eyes felt dry and itchy, and so did her mouth. Among all this water, she felt like an arid desert.

Her mother had obviously died in the flood, yet for some reason, her mind refused to accept that. She was blocking out this thought as much as she could, forcing it down the monster's throat in an attempt to satiate it with something else than her will to live. Xiaoling had always been very close to her mother – the housewife had not only been her loving parent, but also her very best friend. She had kept no secrets from her; whatever she had known and struggled with, her mother had known and struggled with as well.

Someone with as much love to give the world could never die young, or so the girl had always believed. In the words of her mother, love was what kept the world together, and the very moment people would stop loving each other, everything would crumble and subside, like a

table without legs.

The moon would not show its face on that night. The howls of wolves could be heard in the distance – they had replaced the cheerful laughter of the children who had frequently been frolicking outside way past their bedtimes. Xiaoling had played games with them, every now and then. She would have pretended to be some sort of wild animal, and the younger kids would have had to chase her through the nearby forest. Only once had they ever caught her before sunset – on that day, the girl had been absentmindedly hiding behind a rock, and forgot to pay attention to the footsteps that she had been hearing all around her.

She did not have a clear memory on what she had thought about that day, but it must have been something particularly captivating for her to lose her powerful sense of awareness – maybe she had been daydreaming about being a soldier again.

This was something she did rather often. Something would remind her of the thrill of battle as she imagined it to be – perfectly round pebbles shaped like miniature catapult munitions, broken branches arranged as though they were a tiny palisade – whatever it was, it would usher her into a state of reverie she would only reluctantly come out of. In this predicament, all that would matter to her was what she could make out of the various scenarios she came up with in her beautifully imaginative mind.

Now, she felt like a defeated commander after a devastating engagement. She had been faced with insurmountable odds, made wrongful or even naïve assumptions, and had based her approach on nothing but hopes and fantasies according to which all would go well, because that was how she had been living her whole life up until this point. She had been raised as a child of a poor merchant, but it would have been unreasonable self-pity for her to claim she encountered much difficulty in her childhood. Xiaoling had been very lucky – the stars had aligned perfectly for her to grow up in such a safe, welcoming environment as her village.

Wanzhen had been like a bubble, a utopia so exclusive that it had not figured on official maps. It had been a safe haven for misfits and the ones stifled by the oppressive atmosphere of the real world; people who, in essence, could not fit into Chinese society and had sought to escape it.

Only those who had been fortunate enough to be in Taiyuan at the right time had been able to witness and participate in the founding of the village three generations ago. Other than those people, millions of others were also suffering, desperately trying to find opportunities to reinvent themselves as well. Yet, the heavens would not grant them relief from their tribulations, while the founders of Wanzhen stole this opportunity that was never supposed to exist.

No wonder the small community had been punished by

nature; its existence had been unwarranted, undue and without consequence for several decades. Observing the Daoist with the large straw hat as he gazed into the horizon, the girl could tell he thought the same.

“Stand up,” he said, walking towards her. He had likely felt Xiaoling’s stare linger for too long. “You still have so much to live for in this world. You have not yet founded a family, raised children, or fulfilled your responsibility towards your ancestors, which is to honour your bloodline by leading a noble, virtuous life.”

“I’m not sure I want to pursue those things,” Xiaoling replied. She frowned as she debated whether to tell this man what she thought of him and his betrayal of law and order, ultimately deciding that she would do so if the man chose not to leave her alone this instant. “I don’t care.”

“You don’t care?” Yi seemed very surprised. He looked in her father’s direction, who had begun digging up what was left of his possessions with his bare hands. “How can you refuse to care?”

“Look at what’s left of my bloodline,” Xiaoling urged after she determined her remaining parent was too far away to hear her words. “I have myself a father who unites with scoundrels such as you, and that is all. Everyone else has died. I was born and raised an only child, and I have never met any other relatives I may have.”

“We are no scoundrels, but merely harbingers of change.”

“That, you surely are.” Xiaoling jolted up and closed in on the man. She was hiding the sharp object her father

commissioned Taiyuan's toolmaker to forge for her.
"You and your damned ideology have most definitely changed my life!"

"I understand your frustration, but please know that it is not in line with the Dao to—"

"Not in line with the Dao to *what?* To question the oh-so-wise teachings of the men who've done precisely the *opposite* of what they had claimed they would do? To refute their empty, treacherous words, for they are not the salvation but the nemesis of every honest commoner?"

"What are you—?"

"I am telling you of what you have achieved. With your pointless rebellion, you have made it so that the Lords can no longer afford to care for their peasants. They can no longer invest in the survival of their people, for they must focus all their spending and attention on hiring guards to safeguard their own." The girl drew her blade and pressed it against the man's throat, threatening to cut deep into his flesh. "How dare you tell me that I have much to live for?"

Yi was speechless. He could feel the cold dagger forcing down on his neck, as well as the raging fire in the young woman's eyes. Not once in his life had he met such fierce opposition to the values he represented from an adolescent her age. She was truly furious, and her anger visibly radiated through every fibre of her being — Xiaoling's body was shaking profusely. He would forgive her for this outburst, without a doubt. He bore too much guilt to do otherwise, as was illustrated by his calm reaction. Watching her run away and disappear into the

woods, he received the feeling that this was not the last time he would see her in his life. She would come back to him and her father in a while – as a changed woman.

“I will not ask again,” He Jin warned his sister, standing in between her oversized frame and the exit to her bedroom. “You will have the eunuchs killed, or Yuan Shao and I will.”

“I don’t think you understand, dear. The eunuchs are essential to this court as is medicine to the diseased. I cannot order for them to die – that would be wholly suicidal.”

“Medicine, you say,” the General chuckled lightly, relishing her hypocrisy. “I am sure you administered plenty of essential medicine to your husband before he died.”

“How dare you suggest—!”

“How did *you* dare to suggest your charwoman poisoned him?”

The Empress dowager¹ said nothing. She played with her hair for a moment, waiting for her brother to go on with his scolding.

“That was too weak of a move for a woman like you. Even I am profoundly disappointed in your behaviour, to be honest.”

¹ Empress dowager is the English translation of the title that was given to the mothers of Chinese Emperors. Historically, the title carried plenty of prestige and commanded respect, for its holders often assumed regency over the nation until their child came of age.

“Disappointed in my behaviour?” She stared down at him condescendingly. “Who are you to evaluate how I behave?”

“Your sibling, who has nearly been working himself to death to sustain your megalomania. How do you think you survived this long at court? Someone like you is more than just an inconvenience to everyone else.”

“I survived because I mastered the art of intrigue,” she said sharply. Her facial traits deformed themselves into a bitter smirk. “All you have mastered is to profit from nepotism. You’re less of a *Grand Marshal* than you are my brother – you and I both know that.”

He Jin stomped out of her bedroom, shaking his head a hundred times over. As Yuan Shao had predicted, his sister would not change her stance. She was very stubborn, but the General was prepared to be even more headstrong than she was if it meant that his nephew’s reign would be saved from the eunuch’s corruption.

Historically, child emperors had always found themselves in a tricky situation right from their ascension to the throne. Leagues of men would fight to function as their often selfish and flagitious regents, and chances were that even upon reaching maturity, those parties would still attempt to manipulate them. There were many ways in which young monarchs could be turned into puppets; for instance, keeping them busy with plenty of gorgeous concubines would divide their attention and focus it on trivial matters. That way, their supposed guardians would essentially get to play king for far too

long – until the real Emperor woke up from his daydream, facing a country in ruin and disorder. He would then grow so weary that he would fall ill and die young, leaving behind yet another child emperor who would yet again have to meet the same fate someday.

In He Jin's mind, his sister was contributing to the problem with her irrational comportment, and subsequently promoting this vicious circle so that it could survive for many more generations to come. This was unacceptable; he hence considered his earlier decision to enlist the help of Dong Zhuo to have been very wise, in hindsight. A brute like him would certainly convince his sister to back down, or so he earnestly believed.

Little did he know, Li Song had stood right outside of the Empress dowager's chambers all this time, and had been eavesdropping on their entire conversation.

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“I suppose we have no other choice,” Zhang Rang lamented, speaking to his associates. Upon receiving Li Song's report, he had summoned them all to appear in the palace kitchen for an emergency meeting. “We must kill him first, for otherwise, he will kill us.”

“And how do we go about doing that?” Bi Lan asked sceptically. “We cannot exactly poison him, for all his food is probed by his servants prior to serving; we do not have the time to prepare an ‘accident’ for him to perish

in, either. There is no longer enough leeway for such things to happen anymore. He's already suspicious."

"If only Jian Shuo was still around," another eunuch complained in a sour tone. "He would have known what to do in a situation like this one."

That much could be safely assumed. When it came to preparing elaborate plots to make competitors disappear, Jian Shuo had truly been one of a kind. Two years ago, he had even instigated a small peasant revolt to kill a minor court official who would not pay his tax surcharge for an earlier case of non-compliance. It was a shame that Jian Shuo was executed, but such were the risks that came with life at the imperial court. The farewell was very emotional, but before saying his final goodbye, the elder eunuch had entrusted Li Song with a secret he had made him swear to tell no one else.

"I think an idea may have come to me," Li Song spoke, hesitating a little. This was his chance to make up for his earlier lack of prudence; he still felt very much responsible for the old man's death. "Bi Lan, did you not say that the kid who warned him ahead of time is an aspiring scribe?"

"Yes, I did. He's learning from a reputable master, a man who knew over fifty winters."

"Here is what we will do, then. From what I could gather, that kid has no sense of self-awareness and most likely does not know we are conscious of his treachery. If you and Song Dian go spook him a little, he may come around and agree to help us."

“How would he be of any help?” Song Dian inquired.
“Is he not the finest idiot in all of China?”

“He might be, but one thing he *could* very much be capable of is imitating somebody else’s handwriting.”

“I see where this is going,” Zhang Rang sniggered, taking a bite from a loaf of bread that had been left on the counter adjacent to him. “You would like to forge an invitation of your own, do you not?”

“Forsooth, I—”

“I am not convinced.” Bi Lan turned his back to the group and began pacing around the cooking area. “He just received a fake letter, why would he fall for another one? There is nobody he would agree to meet in private at a time like this, he probably *knows* we’re out to get him anyway.”

“Actually, there is,” Li Song offered a confident grin. “Remember how I told you about him angrily darting out of his sister’s dormitories? I am positive he would have *liked* for his sibling to surprise him by demonstrating just a slither of tenability in her ways.”

“We could capitalise on that,” Song Dian correctly added. “If we write up some soapy nonsense about the Empress dowager having changed her mind on the affair, maybe he will buy into it and come.”

Bi Lan was still walking back and forth, trying to harness his agitation. “The handwriting better be good.”

“If it is not, the boy will have to die.”

“I agree. He has been too big of a pain to fail us now. He cannot afford to let us down once more, and we must ensure he understands that well.”

“Who will be taking care of that?”

“I will,” someone said. “Do not worry about it.”
The eunuchs had now united as one.

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Xuegong rode his horse across the pastures ahead of the main force. Guo Si and Li Jie were following him closely; the latter had made the wise decision to leave his women be for now, and go rescue the Emperor from the grasp of the Ten Attendants instead – or at least, that is what he believed he would be doing.

“How long until Luoyang?” he asked, moaning as though he were a child tired of travelling. The army had been moving for less than a month at this point – the route to the capital was nothing compared to the distances they had wandered on foot five years ago.

“We should arrive by sundown tomorrow,” Xuegong projected. He was not so sure, himself; his formerly excellent sense of orientation had faded a little in the time he had retreated from military service.

“Aye, works for me,” Guo Si readjusted his helmet in an attempt to make it fit his egg-shaped head better. “I am not in a hurry, are you?”

“No,” said Li Jie. “Though I would not mind returning from this campaign by spring next year.”

“Why do you care so much?”

“Personal reasons,” Li Jie rode off ahead of his comrades. “I will not tell.” Maybe he had found a prospective spouse to marry, possibly even the black-haired mare he had enjoyed himself with the other night.

The terrain leading up to Luoyang was almost completely flat, which made for a welcome change in topography. Around Wanzhen, Xuegong had only ever known hills and mountains – in some places, even craters of unknown origin. Here, despite the autumn season, the grass was green and luscious. Nearby trees produced ample shade, but as the sun's rays were especially dull on this cloudless day, to stop and rest under it would be equal to volunteering to catch a cold.

Withal, Dong Zhuo's army was well-equipped to deal with frosty weather. Mostly hailing from the frigid northern expanses, none of the men were unfamiliar with low temperatures, and all had brought sufficient wolfskins and woollen covers to keep warm. In total, they were about three thousand men marching on the capital; there were five hundred under the orders of the recently promoted General Hou, a further thousand under the direct command of the warlord and his adoptive son, and the remaining troops were organised in special archer, artillery and sapper divisions.

It were the catapults that would strike an onlooker as the most impressive components of the tyrant's army, though. Enormous and capable of launching heavy projectiles at great distances, they were sure to lessen the span of every beleaguerment. During the Yellow Turban Rebellion, city after city captured by the rebels would fall upon deployment of those grandiose instruments of war, with the mere sound of their wooden wheels rolling over the countryside being enough to strike terror in the hearts

of their luckless prey. To Dong Zhuo, they were perfect symbols of his might; spine-chilling and deadly.

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“I-I-Is this to your satisfaction?” Bi Lan was still threatening the young scribe with a knife, long after he had been *convinced* to aid the eunuchs in their plan. He had been abducted from the archives and made to try over and over again until his fingers began throbbing in intense agony.

“Seems good enough to me,” Li said upon inspection of the document. “You can let him go, Bi Lan.”

“One more thing,” The eunuch made a profound cut into the boy’s cheek and watched as blood came gushing out of the wound and onto the kitchen floor. “Should you sell us out to the General again, *we* will be the ones to spoon out your eyes, rip out your tongue, fill your ears with lead and do whatever else your officer friend threatened to do to *our* operatives. Begone, now.”

The boy ran out of the kitchen as fast as his legs would carry him while Li Song started reading the contents of the letter to the rest of his team. The handwriting had been expertly reproduced; comparing it to an old sample of the Empress dowager’s chirography, the eunuchs determined that there was no way He Jin would possibly be able to tell it was counterfeit. All of this would soon be over – the General would receive the correspondence, believe it to be genuine and walk straight into the trap.

My dearest brother,

I am writing to you to ask for forgiveness. My earlier demeanour was not only uncouth, but also profoundly unjust towards you, an eternal ally who never sought anything else than to make my dreams come true.

I distinctly remember how two decades ago, you were the one to implore our father to send me in for appraisal by the officials in charge of selecting concubines for the Emperor, soon to be my husband. If it had not been for your undying resolve to see your sister ascend from a mere butcher's daughter to the mightiest dame in China, I would not be sleeping in a golden bed today, nor would I have come to enjoy all the foods the world had to offer. I would never have come to wear the most expensive garments in all of the land, nor would I have come to appreciate the serene beauty of the imperial gardens.

Upon much pondering, I have concluded that your proposition to eliminate the most dangerous threat to our nation was wise and mindful; therefore, I would like to announce my support of your cause to you in person, by the shores of the Luo River. Come see me there this evening, and our bond as brother and sister shall rejuvenate in great splendour.

Yours sincerely,

Empress dowager He

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He Jin had come to the meeting point. The river before him was flowing gently, and small fish were to be seen swimming upstream. The full moon was illuminating the scene with its ethereal light, causing the weeping trees by the shore to cast strong, well-defined shadows.

The General had been surprised by the letter. It had been delivered to him in a red envelope as he was meaning to take a bath – the contents enclosed within convinced him to postpone the cleansing of his body until later. There was still a little blood to be seen on his face, though most of it had been hastily removed by his caring charwoman. He felt incredibly exhausted – it seemed to him as though he had made his return to the court eons ago, when really, no more than a month had passed since the pompous reception ceremony that had been arranged in his honour.

Now, a funeral would have to be organised.

With a lateral slash across his neck, Li Song chopped off his head and watched it roll slowly into the river. China's hero was dead – his sister could no longer threaten the eunuchs with the illusion of his power at court, nor would another military chief be found that she could easily manipulate into becoming her slave. The sixteen-year-old felt neither guilt nor pride; he had done what needed to be done to save the lives of his collaborators and forever cripple the Empress dowager's influence over the imperial court and government as a whole.

He silently walked back towards his friends that were hiding in nearby bushes, only to in turn lose *his* life to the blade of a masterful schemer.

Fighting erupted at the shores of the *Luo* as Yuan Shao's men scrambled to slay the eunuchs, spilling gallons upon gallons of blood into the river. Some of them put up a fierce resistance, while others ran for their lives – none of which would be spared by the warlord's elite pikemen.

It did not take much longer than half an hour for all of Luoyang to be transformed into an ocean of flames. The Emperor's guardsmen also elected to get involved in the bloodshed, supporting the warlord's men to attain retribution for the years of financial hardship imposed on them by the Ten Attendants, while the philosophers and policymakers took the side of the eunuchs in hope to conquer the court for the bureaucrats once and for all.

Needless to say, the Empress dowager considered herself too precious to partake in such savagery. She took her son by the arm and fled into the hills, where she was promptly received by Dong Zhuo and his army of three thousand battle-hardened warriors.

“I appear to have achieved perfect timing,” he remarked in a sardonic tone. “The capital is on fire, your brother was killed, the eunuchs are being slain as we speak and I now hold you and the Emperor in the palm of my hand. All of a sudden, the question as to who is to be the next regent of China does not seem so debatable anymore.”

Epilogue

There was not a single guard to be seen patrolling the barbican up ahead. From what Xiaoling could perceive in the dark of the night, the fortification appeared to have been abandoned a long time ago.

She had been running for several days, and her legs felt like they were about to shatter into a million pieces. Her uncle's sudden disappearance, her father's defection to the Yellow Turbans, her mother's death – all of this had been too much for her to take. When she had stood before the rebel leader and held a dagger to his throat, she had realised that she could no longer live with her father, for she had effectively alienated his new family. There had been no better choice to make but to run away. Her race through the woods had allowed her to clear her mind of clouded judgment, therefore, she could now sit and think about her situation.

She chose a thick root that was firmly lodged in the ground to rest her buttocks on. It was thoroughly infested with bugs, but it would have to do for the time being.

The girl was now completely alone in a world full of dangers, and there was nobody out there she knew would help her. She was aware that she had relatives somewhere in the east, but she had only heard of their

existence through the tales of her father and could not even remember the name of the commandery they lived in.

She had often fantasised about running away from home when she was younger, despite lacking a good reason to do so. Now that she had found one and had chosen to make that exact decision, the appeal of a solitary adventure had entirely vanished, as though she had never felt it in the first place. She was tempted to reminisce about the happy days of her childhood and sink into a quagmire of nostalgia and despondency, yet told herself that this was neither the time nor place to do so – the distant howling of wolves assured her of that belief.

Although she could tell this was not the same barbican her father had smuggled her through on their way to Taiyuan, she had no clue what could be found beyond its open gates. All she could determine was that the geography of the land differed drastically from one side of the bridge to the other; on the side she was currently on, there was forest atop moderately hilly land, whereas the other side was much more mountainous.

Her stomach growled as she considered her options, weighing them out to see which could yield the most advantages at the lowest risk. If she were to stay on this side of the bridge, she would benefit from her knowledge of the area after sunrise as everything would be clearly visible again, and she did not believe that she had run too far away from her place of origin. If she wanted to, she

could probably get back to the village in half the time she needed to make it here, for she remembered the path she took rather well.

However, she was *certain* that there were highwaymen or tribal raiders in the area, on top of the howling wolves she had just heard. They had stolen property that had been left behind by the villagers of Wanzhen after the flood, and as the rule of law and order had most definitely been compromised in the aftermath of the disaster, they likely knew that they could afford to be as brutal and as inhumane as ever. A nightly encounter with them would be less than optimal, to say the least.

So, that left her with little choice but to sneak across the barbican and go over to the other side. Unknown territory was more favourable to traverse than lands she knew to be hostile, therefore, this was the best decision she could make given the circumstances. Relocating to an entirely different area would also ensure that her father and his insurgent friends would lose her for good – the thought of that worried her about as much as it motivated her.

Xiaoling initially wanted to rest her exhausted frame on top of the large root for a little while longer before making her crossing, but at the sight of what she believed to be two yellow eyes hungrily leering over her from behind a tree, she elected to stand up and make a break for it.

Before she knew it, she was on the other side and felt as though she had just stepped through a portal to a different world. This region looked nothing like Wanzhen's immediate surroundings – the mountains had an elongated, conic shape, and there were different kinds of trees planted here, some of which she had never seen before. Howbeit, there was still a feeling of danger in the air, and it seemed to her as though despite the fact she had just come barrelling out of a forest, she was not out of the woods quite yet.

She eventually found a small plain sparsely populated by individual pines, erratically scattered around the place. There appeared to be no particular logic or structure to their arrangement, which she felt resonated very well with her new mindset; from hereon in, she would take things as they came, and never again hesitate to make up new strategies of approach on the spot.

The stakes were as high as ever – in the same way as a single bad call could seal her fate, a single missed opportunity could do the same. In order to keep her sanity in an environment like this, Xiaoling knew that she needed to develop supreme confidence in her judgment and instincts.

Laying down under one of the pines, she closed her eyes and endured the bitter cold of this early winter night. No snow had fallen as of yet, but it was soon to be expected. Maybe the girl had two weeks left before that happened, or maybe just two days – in any case, she needed to find

appropriate shelter to survive the toughest season of the year. If she somehow managed to find her way towards a small town, she was saved. Unlike in the big cities, townspeople were generally much more open and willing to accommodate, provided you made a good first impression and would not strike them as a fugitive with a bounty on your head – maybe then, Xiaoling should have thought twice before rolling in the mud three days ago; the sludge from the inundated pastures was still all over the leather clothes she wore.

Coincidentally, there were men lurking all around her boasting plenty of experience in the art of arousing immediate suspicion, right in this very moment. They were armed to the teeth with crude battle axes, repurposed farming tools and old military equipment claimed from deserted battlefields, and by the time Xiaoling heard their footsteps and opened her eyes in shock, it was already too late.

"Hello, hello, hello," one of them spoke in a tone so unsettling it rendered her speechless. "What is a birdie like you doing in a dark place such as this, in the middle of the night?"

"Her clothes are in tatters," another remarked, sporting a black eyepatch. "She must have ran away from somewhere."

"Who did you run away from, birdie?" No response. "Did you run away from your husband? Was he *beating* you?"

The bandits started cackling, all in the same, abysmally low pitch. A few of them had lit torches to observe her better, but this was conversely allowing for her to see their faces more easily as well. Many of them were horribly disfigured, and others were hideous by nature. There was something they all had in common, however; no matter where she looked, she saw imperfections. Not a single one of them lacked a blemish, an asymmetric facial feature, a scar or a physical fault. They were all, without exception, flawed in their appearance.

"We'll treat you better than your husband," the one who had been first to speak asserted. "He may have beaten you, but we will do no such thing."

"Indeed," another said. "We shall offer you a choice between two delicious meals, the finest in all of the land."

"Right," a third one continued. "You can either have rape with a side of murder, or murder with a side of rape."

Xiaoling could not believe her ears. These men wanted to violate her. She was completely surrounded, but would not go down without a fight. She vowed to herself that the moment one of them came too close to her, she would at least try to defend herself with the dagger she was concealing inside of her sheepskin.

"It's entirely your choice, you know?" The first one added, determined to mock her as much as possible. "We are giving you options, birdie."

"So, which will it be?" The second one was getting impatient, and started approaching her. "I understand that you may find our menu to be overwhelmingly dense, but I assure you, either option is a once-in-a-lifetime experience you really can't miss out on."

Just about when Xiaoling was bracing herself to jump up at the man and dig into him with her blade, another bandit came forward and held back his friend. He was wearing a green headband and there was a deep scar running down the left side of his face. He seemed a little younger than the others, but somehow exuded a much greater aura of authority.

"Don't be fooled," he warned his friend in a calm voice. "This one is not right for raping."

"Why not?"

"She may be wearing a thick layer of clothing on top of her frame, but I am confident that she is as bony as a skeleton under all this. If you want to breed the dead, go look for some in Luoyang. I got word that things are escalating over there."

The bandit looked into the girl's eyes as though he had lost something in them, though his gaze was in no way dreamy or amorous; it seemed truly as though there was something very specific he was searching for inside of them. He asked his fellow outlaws to step back a little so that he could have a talk with her.

"So, you're no good for raping, you're clearly not a fighter, you do not have any money you could give us and it seems like you're in much worse of a situation than we are. Say, would you like to join us?"

THE END

Afterword

When I decided to write a historical novel for my graduation project in the fall of 2019, I never imagined that it could look like this. I had an entirely different setting in mind, and I was very much adamant about following through with what I had planned – the book's story was to be set in the war-torn Asia of the mid-twentieth century, a time period I was already familiar with and wanted to explore in writing. My fictional protagonist was to be a Japanese soldier who would experience the horrors of the war as they happened around him.

I was fully aware of the sensitive nature of my chosen subject matter, for the outcome of the war has forever marked the relationships between the various countries coexisting in the Asia-Pacific region today. Yet, I initially held the belief that it would do little harm to address the elephant in the room as part of a graduating project maybe twenty people would read.

As I started working on developing characters, themes and subplots for my novel, the world around me quickly began to change. An airstrike on a Middle Eastern general gave rise to speculation about the prospect of an imminent global conflict, bushfires were claiming the homes and livelihoods of thousands of people in

Australia and international health authorities were declaring the outbreak of a new virus to be a worldwide emergency. How could I then, a seventeen-year-old high school student supposed to prove my maturity with my work, write a story about such a polarising issue when what the world needed most right now was unity and not division?

I scrapped all the progress I had already made and started over from scratch – and that's when I began viewing the Three Kingdoms era in Chinese history as a viable option when it came to picking a new setting for my novel.

With its overabundance of powerful actors vying for dominance and the recurring themes of loyalty, betrayal, alliance and rivalry, I figured that if I chose to dive deeper into this particular setting and adopt it for my project, I would be able to communicate what I wanted to say whilst remaining vastly apolitical. In hindsight, that was likely one of the best decisions I have ever made. I fell in love with the Han dynasty and their crumbling Empire, the scheming eunuchs, the mighty warlords, the Yellow Turbans, the Black Mountain bandits and the workers and peasants of an age long gone by.

I thoroughly enjoyed myself while writing this book and I feel like it has helped me reinvent myself both as a writer and as a human being. I can now more easily see commonalities between different political ideologies and ways of life, and this allows me to be a better friend, brother, son, teacher and student.

