The Instructress 女史箴

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The Instructress 女史箴

by yunyu

Summary

"If only she'd been a boy!"

Wang Yuanji grew up hearing this over and over, about her intelligence, her martial skill, and her perception.

But it is for precisely her unladylike traits that Zhang Chunhua chooses her as a wife for her son. Not only that, but she and her husband Sima Yi want her to pretend to be her future husband's tutor until he is ready to wed. Her new family are loyal retainers of the Cao Wei emperor... or so they say.

How can she see the hidden meanings behind all of this?

(The title is a reference to a famous Jin dynasty poem about how women of the court ought to be behave. Bonus trivia for DW fans: the poem was written to criticize Jia Chong's daughter.)

Notes
I know I normally avoid referring to characters by single character names, as this sounds really odd in Chinese, this work is very strongly inspired by Dynasty Warriors 8's English cutscenes (you'll notice some direct quotes from the dialogue) and for some reason I've managed to accept that people referring to Sima Shi and Sima Zhao as just "Shi" and "Zhao" is fine and okay. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

I've had some comments on Clouds and Rain eager for Jin dynasty content, and since I've just been sitting on this, and it is my birthday and time to be self-indulgent, I'm publishing it for those who might enjoy it.
Chapter 1

“If only she’d been a boy!”

Wang Yuanji had downcast her eyes to wait for her grandfather’s opinion of her poem, and it was easy to keep them downcast now.

“She does everything well—she even fights better than most men. And this poem is exquisite! What a waste!”

She still didn’t look up. She knew very well he was shaking his head.

“In such times as these, father,” said her uncle in a conciliatory tone, “may not a talented daughter be of as much value as a talented son? Too much talent and ambition in a man is dangerous, but a well-married daughter protects her kin.”

Yuanji looked up at that, startled.

Her grandfather noticed and laughed. “Surprised at that? You are fifteen, little miss! Did you think we weren’t looking for a husband for you by now?”

“Who, grandfather?”

Her uncle would have told her that it was not her concern, but despite his frequent lamentations that she was not a boy, her grandfather always treated her as if she had not only the intelligence but the rights of an favoured heir. “We’re thinking of Sima Yi’s son.”

“Sima Shi? But he is married already,” she said, confused.

He laughed, but shook his head too. “I know. It’s too bad. Nothing but daughters from his wife, too. But that means the younger son—or your sons by him—may yet inherit all! His name is Sima Zhao.”

She had not even heard of him. “What is he like?”

He grunted. “I won’t lie to you, girl, he’s not promising in anything but name. But that name means a lot. And his parents are very eager to get a girl like you for his wife. His mother is particularly impressed with you. She even liked the way you fight.”

“She’s seen me?” She felt somehow violated. Her family had initially indulged her interest in fighting. When she had been a young girl and they were still hopeful that a younger brother would come along, it had seemed cute to see her taking kitchen knives and throwing them at handmade targets in her eagerness to learn battle skills. But in the last few years, it was obvious that none of them, even the grandfather whose indulgence permitted it, thought it was cute anymore. She persisted because she enjoyed it so much, but even she felt that she was being shameful somehow in doing it. That a potential mother-in-law was spying on her while she practiced… and if she had seen that, what else had she seen?

“Believe me, I didn’t want her to! I don’t even know how she did it, but she brought it up at our last meeting.” He paused. “We meet again tonight, little miss, and if things go well, I expect you to be betrothed to him.”
The day of her betrothal was a day of unremitting bitterness. She saw the contract being signed, but she was not a signatory. She was being sold, no differently than a piece of gold or a horse. More like a horse, she thought, because her purpose would be to be ridden.

She shuddered and pulled her knees up to herself in the carriage. The firecrackers were still barely audible. Her soon-to-be mother-in-law smiled at her. “Cold, my dear?”

“A little, Lady Zhang.” She was afraid of Zhang Chunhua, although she didn’t know why. The woman had done nothing but smile at her, had said everythingsweetly, and yet she knew somehow that she was dangerous. And not just in the ordinary way that a mother-in-law can make a daughter-in-law’s life hell. It was something worse than that.

The older woman pulled out a blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders tenderly. “There. Now that we’re alone together, we can speak about the challenges ahead of you.” She sighed. “My idiot son.”

Yuanji was startled. She had heard the woman playing up her son’s amazing qualities during the last negotiation, which her grandfather had permitted her to spy upon behind a screen. If her description of him had been excessive, it had at least seemed sincere. She had seemed like any other proud mother. Now she was shaking her head in sad disappointment and continuing, “I am so glad to have caught you for a daughter-in-law, my dear, but I am afraid he is simply not ready to be a husband yet.”

A horrible thought gripped Yuanji. “He isn’t… really an idiot, is he?”

Lady Zhang laughed. “Ahahaha, I see I’ve frightened you too much. No, there’s nothing at all wrong with his wits, if he would only apply them.” She stared off into the middle distance, and for a moment her face looked openly terrifying. Her mother-in-law then seemed to recall herself and see her, and that little tinkling laugh sounded again. “Oh my. I’m frightening you again so soon! You need not worry. I only punish incompetence and treachery. Neither of which I will ever receive from you, I’m sure.”

She smiled that sweet smile again, but Yuanji now understood exactly what her intuition was telling her about this woman. She really was dangerous, and she would stop at nothing. “No, indeed, Lady Zhang.”

“What a good girl you are,” said Lady Zhang approvingly. “Now. As I was saying. He is not actually aware that we have acquired you for him as a wife, and I somehow feel that if he knows he has a beauty like you in the bag, it will not be helpful for his motivation. My husband suggested that we introduce you to him as his tutor.”

“His tutor! But… he must be older than me?”

“A few years ahead in age, but far behind you in skill,” she said with distaste. “The talent is there, I am sure; it is only getting him to apply himself. He needs education in battle, horsemanship, decorum, strategy… my god, even his handwriting is terrible. You are perfect for this task: you are talented, skilled, educated, wise, and beautiful. He will actually want to please you and win you. And when he has succeeded, who knows? Perhaps we’ll let him think it was a love match.” She grinned wickedly.

Yuanji twisted the blanket in her fingers. Since she had learned of her probable fate, she had been schooling herself to accept submitting to sex and all the other duties of a wife. Farewell not only to her shameful indulgence in knife throwing; all her mannish hobbies would not befit the future mother of little Simas. Now she was being told that she would not be expected to take up any of the duties of
a wife, or even the name of one. It was her manliness that they wanted…

…except that whole “beautiful” thing.

This was a lot to think about…

Her mother-in-law did not attempt to engage her in further conversation during the rest of the short journey into the capital itself.

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Sima Zhao leaned back, hands crossed behind his head and staring out the window, wishing he actually felt as carefree in his heart as his posture was suggesting. His father and brother were lecturing him together this time; apparently his behaviour was so appalling that they had felt the need to hire outside help. Another tutor, at his age?! He was an adult and yet they still treated him like an incompetent child.

As if he was reading his mind, his father said, “For as long as you insist on behaving like an incompetent child, you will be treated as one!”

“Father, I think they’re here,” said Shi.

His father and brother turned and went out. He sighed, but followed them.

His mother was already being handed down from the carriage, and directing the servants with regards to the baggage. But instead of a man stepping out of the carriage on his own, the servant at the door reached in to assist out another woman. No, not even a woman. A girl.

Then the servant entered the carriage himself to take out any items inside. But then where was the tutor? He looked at the other carriage, but it was clearly just holding baggage. Had he already gotten out?

“Ah, just the person I wanted to see,” said his mother sweetly. He found himself standing up a little straighter, which he hadn’t bothered to do for his father or brother. She smiled, and the girl bowed as she introduced her. “Husband, Shi, Zhao, I present to you Lady Wang Yuanji. Lady Wang, my husband—— he bowed correctly—— my son Shi—— he bowed just as correctly—— and your new charge, my son Zhao.”

Zhao didn’t bow at all. He was in shock. His father’s whip struck him hard across the lower back, and he winced and quickly bowed.

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Wang Yuanji only knew the two older Sima men by reputation for their intellect and skill, so she was surprised to see that all three men were in their own way handsome. The older two both were so in a dangerous, cold way. Fascinating but repellant at the same time, like snakes.

The youngest one was just as handsome, but there was absolutely nothing dangerous about him. He trailed after the others like a dog who didn’t know whether he was about to get a treat or a kick.

She winced a little herself when she saw his father strike him. That wasn’t very fair… for a young man like that to be told his new tutor is a girl younger than himself was shocking. She didn’t blame him for that. And the whole way that the striking occurred and how they both behaved about it— clearly it was a very frequent occurrence. That wasn’t the way to train a dog, or a dog-like man.
So already she was thinking of how to train him…

Her new… father-in-law? Boss? The same thing in the end, anyway, she thought. He began to speak to her now. He skipped completely over all the usual cliches of greeting and welcome; he merely said that even after a short journey, she must need time and space to collect herself and become adjusted to her new surroundings, so she would be shown to her rooms to do so, and they would all be pleased to see her at dinner.

She bowed, and followed the servant. She was not even close to out of earshot when she heard her new charge say, “But she’s a girl!” and then another crack of the whip.

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Zhao hoped that this was all just some kind of stunt. That his parents had gotten impatient with his lack of response to their normal punishments and were resorting to new and innovative methods of public humiliation.

He was not only hoping this, but dead certain about it when he reported to his first lesson. His mother had swanned into his room when he was barely awake to inform him that she wanted Lady Wang to begin by mentoring him in target practice. There was nothing wrong with his fighting skills. Obviously nothing he did could be good enough for his parents, but fighting was probably his strongest subject, and he had paid more attention to his prior tutors on it than on anything else. The idea that some little snip of a girl would have something to teach him about fighting was so obviously ludicrous that his family could only mean it as an insult. He would have to watch this Lady Wang pretend to observe him and then hear her parrot what his father had told her to say, while the servants stood by snickering. Well, whatever. He was the family fool, after all. Might as well play the part.

Accordingly, he strolled into the practice yard about fifteen minutes late, disheveled, yawning as if he had just come from his bed. The girl was standing there, dressed not in the beautiful hanfu she had worn the day before, but in a military style coat and dress. At first glance it was much less alluring and feminine than her previous attire, but the second glance (and let’s face it, the subsequent stare) put all that aside.

There were her breasts, of course. He had certainly been aware she had them yesterday, but he didn’t think the hanfu had pushed up her breasts the way the frogs that fastened this jacket seemed to. Nor had he seen the tops of them, the way he could in her current outfit.

That wasn’t the glimpse of skin that would drive him the most crazy, however. She was wearing black stockings that went all the way up past her knees, meeting her lacy underskirt. Well, not quite meeting it. Depending on how she moved, usually only a inch or even less of her skin was showing, but the possibility of more kept his eye drifting down there.

“My lord, you are late,” she said, and released a small throwing knife, which whistled past his shoulder. He heard a small thunk and turned to see it embedded in the centre of a target.

He was definitely awake now. “Uh… sorry.”

“You mother told me you needed target practice,” she said, “but she didn’t tell me what weapon you preferred for that purpose. So I had a few brought here. Short bow? Long bow? Crossbow? The throwing knife is my own preference, but I am passably familiar with bows.”

“Oh… a crossbow, usually.” He said. “It’s the easiest.”

“Hmm.” She narrowed her eyes, but said nothing, turning away to load a crossbow with a quarrel.
“Here, my lord.”

He took the crossbow, aimed, and fired. He did it as carelessly as possible, but it was hard to conceal his thrill when the bolt hit almost dead centre.

“Ha!” he said. “How was that?”

Not only did she not look impressed, she didn’t even look pleased. “That was terrible.”

“But I hit the target!”

“That was a fluke,” she said brutally. “You didn’t even look through the sights, let alone consider your shot. A crossbow’s disadvantage is its loading time. You have to make every shot count.” She took the crossbow away from him and demonstrated the proper form. “Let me see you load it.”

As soon as he picked up the bolt, she began counting aloud. It flustered him, so that he took longer than usual.

“Ninety-five,” she said as he finished. “More than a minute and a half. Don’t bother protesting that you usually do it faster, my lord. I’m willing to believe that you do. You can’t possibly do it fast enough to make a careless shot worth it. Let me see you shoot properly.”

Well, what the hell. He actually tried. He did hit the target, although he didn’t come anything like as close to the centre. Zhao waited for her to tell him how shit he was.

“Much better,” she said. “Do it again.”

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At the end of the week, Sima Yi summoned her to his office.

She quickly figured out that while he was willing enough to accept any reports of his son’s failures, he expected her to justify minutely any sign of improvement. He didn’t seem disturbed that Zhao hadn’t improved in much. That he hadn’t been late after the first day seemed to particularly impress the cold strategist.

After she had finished explaining in detail what precisely she thought had improved in his brushwork, there was a pause, then Sima Yi had said, “You may go. Take the day off to enjoy yourself.”

She didn’t move, unsure. Yuanji had thought there would have been an opportunity to bring up…

“You don’t move?”

“My lord… may I observe something?”

His eyes narrowed at her. “Did I forget something?” he said, coldly.

She gripped her hands behind her back to keep from trembling. This had been a bad idea, but she couldn’t unsay it. “No, my lord, but… I feel that the frequency and intensity of your… chastisements… are doing more harm than good.”

“Oh?” he said softly. “And what do you base this on, my dear? Are you tender-hearted, perhaps?”

Despite the softness, she did not miss the contempt. She had to speak quickly. “No, my lord. I base this on the results that I see. Master Zhao fails frequently, but he does not dwell on his failures. I
believe this is partly because when you beat him, he feels that this completes the... the transaction, so to speak. He has... served his purpose... and everything is as it should be. He is very strong and I believe has a high pain tolerance. I do not think he fears being beaten by you."

"Doesn’t he,” said Sima Yi, still very softly. She was worried that instead of sparing her charge, she had signed him up for the thrashing of his life, and she couldn’t hold back a slight tremble. Her boss-in-law noticed it and smiled. “Please don’t let your fear keep you from continuing. You interest me extremely.”

“That’s... that’s pretty much all, my lord,” she managed. “I have noticed that if he can be kept in the state of shame, he actually considers his actions. It is desire to please that causes actual change in him. But... there is the more difficult task of getting him to believe that change, and even more, success, is possible... I haven’t quite figured that one out yet.”

He smiled wider, and this was far more unnerving than the coldness with which he had regarded her as she had begun to speak. “Lady Wang, how is it that you have only been here a week and you are already teaching me something about the son I have known for eighteen years?”

She didn’t know what to say, and she felt her cheeks reddening.

“I see my wife was correct about you, although I don’t think even she knows how correct.” He stood up and actually bowed to her; numbly, she bowed back. “May I suggest that you don’t presume to tell my wife not to beat our son? She may not take it as well as I have.”

“As you say, my lord.”

“Is there anything else? Perhaps something I can do to make your day off more pleasant?”

“No, my lord.”

“Be off then.”

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Sima Shi let himself into his brother’s room and laughed as the young man pulled his hand away from himself and quickly pulled up the blankets, as if it wasn’t perfectly obvious what he had been doing.

“Haven’t you ever heard of knocking?!” said Zhao. “Are you some kind of pervert?”

“Yes, but not for you,” his brother said. “I came to see if you were in a similar mood to myself, and it seems you are.”

“Don’t you have Lady Xiahou for that?”

“She’s pregnant,” he said, flatly.

“Again, already? Don’t you give the poor woman any time to breathe?”

“Not until she gives me a son. Don’t remind me about that. You know where I want to go, and I don’t want to think about my wife there.”

“Why do you want me to come with you?” his brother said suspiciously. “You’re not thinking of doing that... that both of us with one girl thing again. Not only was it sick, but you slammed into her too hard and she bit me!”
He laughed. “Do you know I had forgotten about that? How old were you, sixteen?”

“You wouldn’t forget about it if it was your dick bleeding all over a brothel floor,” his brother said vehemently. “The worst pain I’ve ever felt in my entire life!”

“I do remember it now,” he said, still laughing. “Did I apologize?”

“Yes, but not until you had finished,” Zhao growled. “It was great to see where I landed in your priorities.”

Sima Shi waved this off. “I didn’t come here to recruit you for any activity of my own. I merely thought you might require an outlet after a hard week.” He walked over to his brother’s side and took his hand, examining it critically. “I can understand why you might want to save your money and just spend your evening here with Lady Wang. I can see how beautiful she’s looking.”

Zhao flushed even darker and yanked his hand away from his brother. “I wasn’t thinking about Lady Wang.”

“Then come with me. I’ll even pay.”

The madam and the unoccupied ladies of the brothel were pleased to see Sima Shi walking in, but he did not miss how much more pleased they were that his brother was with him. This was a puzzlement. He did not have any illusions that prostitutes cared about the love-making skills of their clients, and he knew—though he disliked thinking about it—from the disastrous threesome that his brother’s erection was certainly not small. So what could they have a preference about?

“My lords, how happy we are that you have come to enjoy life with us this evening,” purred Madam Mao. “Master Sima Shi, I have a beautiful new girl just come to us. If you’ll promise to be gentle, I’ll let you be Meimei’s first client.”

“Certainly,” he said, evaluating the girl, “as long as you don’t expect me to pay a premium for something I’m sure I won’t be taking.”

The madam laughed, hiding her irritation almost well enough. “Well, for such a good client as yourself, the normal rate is enough! And as for Master Zhao, it is so nice to see you after such a long time, my lord! Do you have any preference?”

“I’ll take her,” he said gruffly to hide his embarrassment, pointing, to his brother’s surprise, to the oldest of the girls.

“A-Ling, of course! She has pleased you before, hasn’t she? Lucky A-ling. Show them to your rooms, girls.”

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Sima Shi never took long with prostitutes. He had an itch, she scratched it for him, and he moved on.

As he walked down the hall back towards the front to pay, he couldn’t miss his brother’s voice saying “You’re so beautiful.” Aha. So was that it? His brother was actually romantic with prostitutes? It was difficult not to laugh and give his presence away as he paused outside the door.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” his brother moaned. “You’re too young and innocent to touch me like this…”

“Do you want me to keep going with my hand, my lord, or use my mouth now?” came the hesitant
voice of the prostitute.

“I don’t care,” snapped his brother, the lover-like tone in his voice entirely gone. “Just don’t speak anymore.”

Sima Shi slowly walked away. That irritation… so she had broken him out of his fantasy. He wasn’t speaking to the prostitute at all. Shi had meant to tease him when he accused him of mistaking his hand for Lady Wang, but apparently after just one week Zhao was already besotted to the point of pretending that a prostitute was her. He shook his head. The poor fool, completely unaware that by right he could take Lady Wang whenever he wanted. Maybe he shouldn’t have agreed to his parents’ demand to keep Zhao in the dark.

“My lord,” purred Madam Mao again. “How was Meimei?”

“Fine,” he said. “My brother’s not finished yet, but I’ll pay for both of us now. I expect you not to forget that I’ve paid for him whenever he comes out.”

“Certainly not, my lord! A lady like myself has to think of her long-term situation,” she said, with a false little laugh. She accepted the money, and he turned to go. “Ah—my lord! Just a mistake I’m sure, but this is not quite enough for two!”

He turned back. “I told you I would only pay the normal rate.”

“But you haven’t paid the normal rate for your brother, my lord.”

His eyes narrowed. How dare this woman try to cheat him? “She’s only giving him a blowjob. I know what it costs.”

The lady put her hands on her hips, as if she suspected him of trying to cheat. “If you know your brother only ever gets a blowjob, my lord, then you should know that he still always pays the full rate for it! Why do you think the girls are so enthusiastic about him?”

Huh. “I see. I wouldn’t have thought he would care… well. If that’s what he wants.”

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He waited for his brother outside, and saw him come out looking no happier than when he went in. “Well Zhao?”

His brother was startled, but gave an exaggerated yawn. “You waited for me? I can’t believe it. I always just want to fall asleep afterwards.”

“Falling asleep in a brothel is nature’s way of saying ‘I didn’t really need what’s in my purse,’” said Shi dryly.

“Oh, so you were worried I might not come out? You shouldn’t worry about me so much,” he said. “I didn’t even bring any money, anyway, because you said you’d take care of it. You did pay, right?”

“They wouldn’t have let you leave if I hadn’t paid.”

“Oh, right…”

They walked in silence back towards the palace for a few minutes, before Shi said, “You didn’t enjoy yourself?”
His brother shrugged. “It was fine, I guess.”

“If it was as bad as that, I paid far too much. I paid for you to fuck her and she only sucked you off, now you tell me she wasn’t even any good at that?”

Zhao flushed. “How do you know I didn’t fuck her?”

“You were being a bit loud when I walked by your door. Before you call me a pervert again, I didn’t linger any longer than I needed to determine what was going on. I don’t like to pay more than I owe. Imagine my surprise when the madam said you always paid the full rate yet never got what you paid for.”

“Is that any of your business?”

“No, but it does make me curious. If that’s the only way you can orgasm, I guess that’s fine, but you should learn to do it another way if you ever want children once you marry.”

“It’s not that I wouldn’t like to fuck them,” said Zhao. “I just hate the thought of not knowing if I had kids out there.”

“Prostitutes’ children don’t mean anything,” said Shi, honestly bewildered by his brother’s discomfort. “They have ways to stop them coming and if one slips through they usually just let it die.”

Zhao actually shuddered. What was with him? Was he ill?

“Let’s just talk about something else,” said Zhao. “Or not talk at all. I just want to sleep.”

“Alright.”

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The next day, Yuanji noticed something was up with her charge when she attempted to instruct him in that day’s assigned topic, calligraphy. She constantly had to touch him to correct his posture, the way he ground the inkstick, the way he held the brush. She had had to touch him just as much the previous time, but he hadn’t been this flustered about it.

She had displayed a variety of brushes and then quizzed him on which one would be best for a bold, dark line, but he didn’t answer. His hand was fidgeting with the chain that hung from his belt buckle.

“My lord, you are not attending again,” she said mildly, and he jumped a little and flushed.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “What was the question?”

“Has one day off really undone your respect for me to this extent, Lord Zhao?” She was testy, but then she felt a little bit of doubt. “Did your father… talk to you, yesterday?”

“My father?” he said, and he sounded confused. “I didn’t even see him.”

She relaxed a little. Her boss-in-law had given her the impression that he meant to heed her advice, but she couldn’t be sure with him. But if not Sima Yi, then… “Your mother, perhaps? Your brother?”

“What are you asking?” He sounded a bit testy himself.

“I am just trying to understand, my lord, what happened to you yesterday that has so changed your
“Nothing changed for me yesterday,” he said, with vehemence. “I respect you just the same, Yuanji.”

He looked up at her startled face. “What is it now?!”

“You called me Yuanji…”

“Uh… I’m sorry… Lady Wang.”

He looked so downcast. Yuanji felt like she had kicked the puppy herself. “I don’t mind if you do,” she said hastily, “I was just surprised because you’ve never done it before. After all, I’m here to serve you.”

“To serve me?” He laughed. “You mean my parents.”

“I mean you, my lord,” she insisted. “I am training you for your benefit.”

He looked at her with a strange expression. It was confused, but there was something else to it as well. She wanted to just stare back and try to decipher it, but they had a task to complete. “Now, these brushes…”

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Zhao winced as he landed flat on his ass again.

“You’re not even trying,” he heard his fair tormentor say. It had been over a month of her severe tutelage. Just once he would like to go a day without hearing her scold him.

“You expect me to actually try to hit you?” he groaned.

“It’s a wooden sword, and I’m even wearing armour,” she said. “Your gentlemanly restraint is not doing me any favours, my lord. Do you think our opponents in Mt. Xingshi will be so reticent?”

He sat up quickly at that. “You’re coming with us?”

“So your father commands. Officially as your mother’s companion, but I am aware of where she expects me to accompany her.”

“And you’re going to fight with that?”

She was carrying a wooden sword identical to his own, and she gave him a look of disgust. “You think I’m going to fight with a wooden sword?!”

God, she really does think I’m stupid. “No, I mean a sword. Obviously not a wooden one.”

“No. A real sword would be too heavy for me. I’m going to use my throwing knives. My advantages are speed, accuracy, and presenting a small target; my disadvantages are physical weakness and inexperience. I intend to keep as much distance between my opponents and myself as possible. I have almost no experience in hand-to-hand combat, as you would know if you actually tried even the smallest amount. You can actually be useful to me for once.”

He didn’t miss that for once. He got up. What was his father thinking?

Well… if he did injure her a little bit… then she would have to stay here in Luoyang where she’d be safe…
Sima Shi could hear the sounds of a man and a woman engaged in heavy exertion of some kind or another as he walked to the practice rooms, and a smile twitched on his lips. Had some couple picked a place like that to have a secret tryst?

“Zhao, don’t stop,” he heard Wang Yuanji’s voice say, surprising him very much, and then she wiped away the surprise with her next words. “You had me, why didn’t you press the attack?”

Shi walked into the room to see his brother scratching his head with embarrassment again. “I just… I can’t hit you like that. Even for practice.”

“How would he have hit you, my lady?” Shi said softly, startling them both.

His secret sister-in-law bowed. “My lord, it would have been nothing. He had the opportunity to disarm me—at most, a sore wrist.”

“Show me the position you were in.”

He could see her thinking for a moment, and then demonstrated what looked like an ill-advised counterattack. Shi relieved his brother of his sword and took a posture. “And Zhao was like this?”

“Yes.”

Shi laughed. “You are inexperienced in this area, are you not, my lady?” He swiftly brought the blade to her pale throat. She gasped and stepped back. “I took you by surprise, but that is not the only place Zhao could have struck you. Why would you think an opponent would seek to disarm rather than kill?”

“Zhao isn’t seeking to do anything,” she said. “I told him I don’t know how to fight hand-to-hand.”

“And after all your tutelage of him, he’s unwilling to return the favour? How ungrateful of you, brother.” He smiled at Zhao. “Shall I school her for you?”

Zhao kicked at a bit of dust. “Yeah, whatever. I’m going to get something to eat.”

“Lord Zhao!” Yuanji said, but her charge was disappearing. She turned back to her brother-in-law. “You’re going to get me into trouble with your father.”

“You should be more concerned about disappointing my mother,” said Shi. “We all are, you know. But don’t misunderstand him. Zhao knows you need to learn this skill, and he knows he’s incapable of teaching it to you. He doesn’t even want to watch me do it.”

“Why not, my lord?” He saw a shadow of nervousness cross over her, but she quickly regained her coolness.

“Because he knows I don’t show anyone mercy by nature,” he said softly. He stepped back and tested the heft and swing of the weapon. It was modelled after Zhao’s barbaric thing. He much would have preferred something more like his own elegant rapier. But perhaps it was better this way. He wouldn’t have to worry about muscle memory causing him to hurt her more than necessary.

Zhao had to keep telling his feet to slow down. If he didn’t pay attention to them, they kept trying to speed up. This was ridiculous, because it had only been half an hour.
He nearly dropped the tray of meat buns when he walked back into the practice room and saw Sima Shi slamming the blade of the wooden sword at a spot on the floor where Yuanji’s shoulder had been a moment ago. She had rolled out of the way in time. He then lifted his foot as if he was planning to try to pin her with it.

“Hey!” protested Zhao—what was he thinking, trying to step on her?

Shi looked up, and in that brief moment of inattention, Yuanji suddenly slammed herself into the one leg he was standing on, causing him to fall over himself. She quickly picked herself up and darted over to the wall, where her weapon had apparently been torn from her and tossed. His older brother began to laugh as he picked himself up to a sitting position. “You don’t mean to continue this bout when you’ve bested me, do you Yuanji?”

“That was just luck,” she said.

“Taking advantage of chance weakness in your opponent is not luck,” Shi countered. “Anyway, aren’t you hungry?” He held a hand out to Zhao.

The younger brother hesitantly approached him with the tray. It was his fault that Shi had been knocked over, and while his older brother seemed to bear no grudge against Yuanji, Zhao knew how much he hated to lose. “So, uh, how did it go?”

“What?” said Shi, while at the exact same moment Yuanji said “Horribly.”

Shi bowed and selected the largest meat bun. “I’ll let you go first, my lady,” he said, and tore into it.

“He disarmed me within a few minutes,” she said. “Then he just kept attacking, for however long it was. It felt like forever.”

“Wonderfully,” said Shi, “but I never really hit you.”

“I’m not sure that he really hit me,” she said, thinking. “I kept having to dive to the ground to get away though. He almost had me dozens of times.”

Half of Shi’s meat bun was gone, which apparently was enough for him to take a break to speak. “So why did you think it went horribly, Yuanji? You just described why I thought it went wonderfully.”

She was looking at him thoughtfully, as she picked up a meat bun. “You’re not saying that it went wonderfully just because you’re glad you were winning,” she said slowly, “but…” She trailed off. “Of course.”

Sima Shi nodded and smiled at her, and took another bite of meat bun.

“Let me in on the secret,” growled Zhao.

“I was thinking it went horribly because I never even came close to hitting my opponent and he dominated me the entire fight, but I see now that I could never have a chance of defeating an opponent except at range. My only hope is to prolong my defence as long as possible until someone comes to rescue me. As you did, Lord Zhao.”

“Inadvertently,” drawled Shi, and finished off the meat bun. “Smart woman. You’re wasted on Zhao.”

To Zhao’s surprise, Yuanji blushed. “Not at all,” she protested feebly, and began eating her meat bun.
“I know she is,” said Zhao, and his brother regarded him with surprise.

“Oh? Do you intend to take more advantage of her then?”

Zhao said defiantly, “Of course. Even a fool would want to learn from a teacher like her.”

Shi laughed again as he pulled another meat bun off the tray.
Chapter Notes

All translation from classical Chinese texts (in this chapter the Book of Rites) is my own translation/wording/interpretation. It may not be accurate but it is not intentionally inaccurate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the journey to Mt. Xingshi, Yuanji became acquainted with Jia Chong. Although perhaps that was too weak and too strong a term at the same time. She became deeply aware of him, while he hardly seemed to notice her. She was not sure if she understood him correctly—what was surface, what was under the surface, what was under even that.

On the surface, and even just beneath the surface, the officer seemed to have taken to Sima Zhao to a puzzling extent. Why was he speaking words of ruling and conquest into the unambitious younger brother’s ear, almost under the nose of the power-craving older brother? Was he trying to stir up trouble between them? And for either Sima to openly admit to such ambition was technically treasonous—and the co-regent Cao Shuang was there too, although he was much easier to fool than Sima Shi. Was Jia Chong under the pay of enemies of their clan?

It would be hard to imagine anyone more obviously untrustworthy than Jia Chong. Not only were his actions suspicious, the man even looked like a betrayer out of the opera. And yet she didn’t warn Zhao against him. There was something about him… something in the depths beneath the layer beneath the surface. Her intuition, or whatever it was, had gone down there and decided it liked what it saw, but her intellect remained totally in the dark about it.

She was torn between reassurance and exasperation that regardless of what Jia Chong said, it only seemed to make Zhao determined to act like more of an idiot.

The battle turned out to be a disheartening introduction to war. She had been warned that it was a foolish plan from the beginning, but she did not know if even Sima Yi had foreseen just how foolish. Within a few weeks of their arrival, they were fleeing for their lives, and yet Cao Shuang was arrogant to the very end, even in the face of continual proofs of his incompetence.

Yuanji had known that throwing her knives in battle would be very different than aiming them at a target, but it was even worse than her worst estimate. Her allies, especially Zhao, stuck very close to her, and she was terrified of accidentally hitting one of them. She became obsessed with counting exactly how many knives she had left, remembering how helpless she had been unarmed against Shi. The horror of actually seeing a man die with one of her blades in his eye or his throat was overwhelming at first, but even more terrible was how quickly she seemed to get over it.

When they were finally going back to Luoyang, she asked if she could ride in the baggage carriage.

“You are my daughter,” said Lady Zhang. “I shall make that fool take you in his carriage.”

That fool was of course Cao Shuang. “No, please—I just want to be alone to think for a while. I can’t think with him prattling at me non-stop.”
“That imbecile,” her mother-in-law said, tightening her fists in a way that made Yuanji very glad she was not still wearing her garotting gloves. “Alright, my dear, if that is your wish.”

She drew her knees up to her chest in the carriage, and shook her head remembering making the same posture on her way to her new family. It was a defensive gesture. She knew what she was afraid of back then—being handed to a stranger and fucked into submission. Reality had turned out very differently.

Yuanji sighed. She had power and no power at the same time. Despite his whining, complaining, laziness, stubbornness, that infuriating way of melting her exasperation away with his smile…

In her own brain she trailed off. Where had that come from?

She hugged her knees a little tighter. Despite all of that—she forced her mind back onto the track—she really enjoyed teaching Zhao. Remaining patient while watching for every little particle of improvement in him reminded her of the old story about the farmer who attempted to make his crops grow faster by pulling them up by the roots. It was hard work to keep calm with him, but every little glimpse of his inner talent felt all the more thrilling for that.

But wouldn’t she be a victim of her own success?

Her reward for turning him into a competent man, after all, was destined to be the same thing that had drawn her knees to her chest all those months ago.

But now I know it wouldn’t be so bad, that same part of her that had stunned her by inexplicably bringing up his smile whispered to the rest of her. He would be very gentle…

She released her knees and pressed her palms to her eyes as if to push away the disturbing internal images.

“Are you alright Yuanji?” came Zhao’s worried voice at the window.

She pulled her hands away from her eyes and tried to look dignified. “I just have a headache, my lord. That is all.”

“Are you sure?” he said. “I know this was your first battle, and I was just worried—“

“Did you not hear me say that Lady Wang requested to be left alone?”

“I did, mother, but—“

“Ah, you heard me. So you were deliberately disregarding me?”

“Mother, I—“

Yuanji could see the reins of his horse jerked from his hands and heard the sound of two horses falling back. She clambered with difficulty around the baggage to stick her head out the window just in time to see Lady Zhang, still holding both reins with one hand, smacking her son across the face vigorously with the other, while both horses whinnied and shuffled. She thought of calling out to her to stop, but remembered Sima Yi’s warning in time and drew her head back inside with a sigh.

———

Zhao slung his sword across his shoulder, listening in disbelief to his father announcing that they were going to launch a coup d’etat while Cao Shuang was temporarily gone from Luoyang.
It had been a year since the disaster at Mt. Xingshi, a disaster which should have been ample proof even to an emperor as young as Cao Fang that his kinsman was incapable of serving as regent. However, not only did the teenager not remove Cao Shuang from power, he didn’t punish or even rebuke him. The imbecile had immediately resumed a lifestyle of hunting and carousing.

That his father could do it, sure… but… “Aren’t we getting a little carried away..? I mean, Cao Shuang has to go, sure, but…”

“Zhao, these things have to be thorough in order for these fools to understand their place,” his brother said.

Jia Chong chimed in as well. “Give it up. If you show them mercy, then you’ll really have a mess on your hands.”

Zhao lifted one hand in a gesture of submission. At least his mother and Yuanji hadn’t added to the chorus telling him how weak and stupid he was for having misgivings.

Then it turned out the the coup d’etat was not merely a plan for the future. Spies had been listening. It was going into effect now.

———

As she undressed to go to bed, Yuanji felt more confused than ever.

Intellectually, she agreed with Sima Yi’s assessment of Cao Shuang and the necessity of removing him before he could plunge Wei into further disasters where tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands more would die pointlessly, weakening the land to the point where the chaos might not be ended for decades more.

Emotionally, she felt nothing like regret about watching Cao Shuang be executed. She didn’t even feel regret about helping to kill some of the same soldiers and officers that she had cordially greeted during her months in Luoyang. Not regret… but it was still strange. At least many of them had defected… but more bloodshed was ahead, she could see that clearly. It would be the Sima clan versus the Cao clan and its cousin clan the Xiahou now.

What would happen to Xiahou Ba, whom she had fought side by side with in Cao Shuang’s disastrous campaign and who had displayed courage, talent, and virtue? The young officer had fled Luoyang in the wake of the coup, and she couldn’t blame him for fearing for his life. Sima Yi had justified the rebellion under the argument that talent was more important than family connections—would it not be baldly hypocritical to throw away Xiahou Ba’s talent just because of his family connections?

And what would this mean for Sima Shi’s wife, Lady Xiahou? In these few years she had been with the Simas, Wang Yuanji had barely interacted with her, but she had observed enough to tell that Sima Shi was entirely fed up with her failure to produce a son.

*And the production of sons, she thought bitterly, is considered the only talent of a woman. Without family connections to make up for it, Lady Xiahou is in grave danger. She may count herself lucky if my brother-in-law merely sets her aside. I hope that is what he will do… I cannot let myself believe that he could be so cruel as to deliberately deprive his own daughters of their mother…*

Then had come the biggest shock of all… Sima Yi’s… was it right to say abdication? His so-called “withdrawal from public life,” at Lady Zhang’s obvious behest. Sima Shi was now in control of them all.
She slipped under the sheets and replayed the scene in her mind’s eye.

“What are you going to do, Zhao?”

“What do you mean? You know I’ll always be there to support you.”

“Okay.”

Lying in her bed, Yuanji pursed her lips together and frowned, thinking of how the brothers walked off in opposite directions—Zhao to the gardens, Shi to the interior.

*I have been blind not to see this until now,* she thought. *The older brother and the younger brother… it’s one of the oldest stories there is.*

So many things were clear to her now, but they cast even more things into confusion and shadow.

She still feared Lady Zhang, though she had grown to love her too, in an odd way that she guessed was a weaker version of what her sons felt towards her. Despite the older woman’s brutality to her “idiot son”, Yuanji knew that his mother truly loved him in her own way and wanted the best for him, and that she trusted Yuanji to help him achieve that. She no longer exactly feared Sima Yi, at least regarding what he would do to her of his own initiative, but she at least respected him and knew that he respected her and her intentions towards Zhao.

Sima Shi… it was fear and love again, like the way she felt for his mother…

…but somehow not at all how she felt for his mother.

Sima Shi definitely loved his brother. She was sure of that.

She just wasn’t sure if he would let it stop him, if he felt that his brother was a threat.

Then there was another complicating factor: because Shi had daughters, but no sons, Zhao was his heir.

And Zhao, of course, had no children at all…

Tomorrow things would change. It was the first day of the week, the day that Sima Yi or Zhang Chunhua would give her the slate of topics they expected her to train Sima Zhao in that week. Would Sima Shi simply continue that pattern?

She sighed and turned over, wishing she knew how to shut her brain off and sleep.

———

Sima Shi did not enjoy how he was feeling. Even internally, it was hard to admit he was flustered. He wanted to do so much more than just take control of the teenage emperor—he wanted to be the emperor, in name as well as in power. And yet having the regency dumped in his lap all at once… why didn’t he feel like he knew what to do?

Maybe his mother had been right to yank his father’s leash and pull him into retirement. At least his father could still be consulted like this. When his father died, then he would really be on his own. All he would have left would be Zhao.

He opened his father’s appointment book. For the most part the notations were now irrelevant. He had to smile at the notation that his father’s first appointment was meant to be with Cao Shuang.

Clearly this was referring to Yuanji. He couldn’t imagine his father consulting his own wife about any of those subjects. So his father called Yuanji “daughter-in-law” in his mind, did he?

Did Yuanji expect him to take over his father’s role as her supervisor in this charade? She must be feeling even more uncertain about this new regime than he was.

“Summon Lady Wang to me,” he ordered.

———

“My lord,” Yuanji said, bowing.

“Am I correct that this was when my father gave you your orders for Zhao’s education for the week?”

She hesitated. “Yes, my lord.”

“Not fully correct? Enlighten me, Yuanji.”

He was certainly perceptive. “It was… especially in the past year… more of a discussion than orders, when your father was in charge.”

He smiled. “My mother gives orders.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “As you say, my lord.”

“Do you still think you will best serve my brother as his tutor, Yuanji?”

She did not know how to reply. She hadn’t been certain that Shi knew that she was contractually betrothed to Zhao. Even in private, he had never mentioned it. Was he implying it here? Why didn’t he just come out with it?

“I am genuinely curious to hear your thoughts,” he said.

“My thoughts are inchoate,” she said. “I believe Zhao is capable of so much more, but I do not know at what point his progress would be considered sufficient.”

“Sufficient for..?”

She reddened a bit. “Sufficient for my role to change.”

“Do I need to pull it out of you bit by bit? Very well. I can continue prompting you forever. Your role to change to..?”

Why did he want her to admit it like this? “To that of his wife.”

“Was that so difficult, Yuanji?” he said softly. “Are you so resistant to the idea? You could rule him like my mother rules my father. You have that in you.”

“I don’t—” she stopped suddenly. She hadn’t been able to keep the beginning of a denial from coming out, but to supply the details was so intimate. I don’t want to rule him, and I don’t think he wants to be ruled either. Not deep down. Though I can’t be sure.
He apparently interpreted her aborted denial completely the wrong way. “You doubt your capability? I believe if you were to even once strike him, he would eat out of your hand. He would do anything you wanted to keep you satisfied. Why slog on through this slow building up and up of his will when eventually you know you will need to break it?”

There was nothing overtly lascivious about his tone, but something about his smile and the odd, subtle inflections he placed on eat and satisfied sent a creepy feeling up her spine and a cold chill spreading out from her groin, a kind of disgusted, defensive arousal. She forced herself to speak. “Would you want your brother to be in the thrall of a woman?”

“It seems to have turned out pretty well for my father, wouldn’t you say? I admit that it is not what I would want for myself, but then I take after my mother.”

She was silent. What to say? I don’t think Zhao wants that… and I know I don’t want that…?

“However, with such major changes recently,” Shi continued, “perhaps further upheavals are inadvisable for the time being. I will be assigning Zhao a task, and I will want you to assist him. Xiahou Ba fled the capital during the coup before we could speak with him. I want Zhao to find him and convince him that there is still a place for him in our service.”

This was encouraging. Yuanji raised her hands to bow. “Yes, my lord.”

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“You’re… you’re going… you’re going to kill me…” Xiahou Ba, out of breath and disarmed, staggered into a crouch rather than a kneel. “You want to overthrow our lord, and you’re cutting me down so you can take my troops for yourself!”

Zhao could think of few things he had wanted less than this insurrection in the first place. To be accused of wanting to give himself even more aggravation by increasing his troop count was almost insulting. “Just calm down,” he said, and he saw Xiahou Ba’s eyes widen in surprise. “You and I have always gotten along pretty well, I think. I don’t see why that has to change.”

Xiahou Ba looked even more confused and troubled, multiple emotions flitting across his face, not all of which Zhao even was sure he could identify. “But Lord Cao Shuang…!”

“The fact is, he was an incompetent fool,” Guo Huai said, walking forward to drop to Xiahou Ba’s eye level. “You’re too blinded by fear right now to see that. Lord Cao Shuang was not killed for his name, and neither will you be. Your father was a great man, strong and brave, exactly what a man and officer should be. Your most importance inheritance from him is not house or bloodline—what do you think it is?”

Xiahou Ba breathed for a few moments, then answered, “I see… not his house… but his way of life… He would never have run away in fear like I did… I’ve shamed him.” He stood up. “And all of you… I’ve caused you all this trouble.” He helped Guo Huai stand back up. “I apologize.”

Zhao was deeply relieved that Guo Huai had so quickly handled the diplomatic side of things. “Good! Then let’s go home.”

Yuanji caught up with him as they walked away, and actually put her slender hand on his elbow. He looked down at her.

“My lord,” she said, “why did you let Guo Huai do all the talking?”

He could have groaned. With Yuanji, these questions were never simple. If it had been his mother,
father, or brother asking him do you think you did the right thing? he would know that the answer was No, I was a total fuck-up, as usual. But Yuanji never just took I was wrong as an answer.

So Zhao thought about it. “Well… Guo Huai’s known Xiahou Ba since he was a child, I’d guess. And Guo Huai was good friends with his father. I don’t think I ever even met Xiahou Yuan. Plus, y’know, I’m only a year or two older than him, and he’s always interacted with me as a comrade, not a superior.” He paused, and thought some more. Yuanji didn’t say anything. “If I tried to act like I had a right to lecture him, it’d just convince him that the Sima clan thinks it’s better than the Xiahou, come to think of it…”

He glanced at Yuanji to see what she thought. She was smiling.

“I agree with your reasoning, my lord,” she said. “Although I think I am right in saying you would not have bothered to apply your reason if I hadn’t prompted you?”

He grinned back at her. “Well, you’re always right in what you say, Yuanji.”

She even laughed a little at that. He felt a warm glow of happiness in his chest.

———

Zhao had his head in his hands again. Jia Chong, seated next to him, was looking out the window. Zhuge Dan had insisted on riding for the retreat from the Wu border, despite the danger in being sniped. Jia Chong had stopped Zhao from pushing the subject and Yuanji suspected he was hoping that a Wu arrow would succeed in eliminating the unfortunate strategist.

“My lord, since we must ride in a carriage,” Yuanji said, “I think we could pass the time by resuming your study of the Book of Rites.”

Zhao didn’t initially look at her, but Jia Chong did, though the latter was expressionless. After a moment, however, Zhao laughed a little and sat back.

“You know how much I would normally hate this,” he said. “but right now I’d much rather be thinking about things from a thousand years ago than about how my brother is going to give me the beating of my life when we get back to Luoyang. So let’s hear it.”

“The only fault in your actions, my lord,” Jia Chong said, “was in not asserting your authority to overturn Zhuge Dan’s foolish strategy.”

Yuanji opened her copy of the book to her bookmark while the two of them talked. Zhao weakly protesting that his brother had put Zhuge Dan in charge. The next section of the Book of Rites was talking about ancient marriage ceremonies… A young man goes in person to welcome his bride, he must take the initiative and not her, because the strong leading the weak is what is called righteousness… women follow men; her father and elder brother in her youth, her husband when she marries, and when her husband dies, she follows her son…

“We’ll skip over this section,” she muttered.

Jia Chong made a low sound of amusement, and she saw that he had been looking at the book on her lap. Even upside down, surely a man like Jia Chong would recognize the subject. She blushed and flipped the page.

The next section described ancient human sacrifices. Zhao listened with more interest than usual to these gory details.
“The hair and the blood announced to the spirits the wholeness of the victim. Announcing to the spirits the wholeness of the victim, was for the *daο* [the Way] of perfection. A blood sacrifice flourishes with *qi* [Breath, Spirit]. They offered the lungs, the liver, and the heart, as the noble source of *qi*."

“Gross,” said Zhao, looking delighted. Jia Chong snorted again.

Yuanji continued reading, “…the ruler bows twice with his head to the ground; with his own chest bare he himself cuts the victim apart: this is extreme reverence. Such extreme reverence, is a submission. To sacrifice, is submission; to bow one’s head to the ground, is extreme submission; and to bare one’s chest, is the utmost submission.”

“How is *that* submissive?” laughed Zhao. “Take your shirt off and cut somebody up? I always thought like that sounded pretty dominant.”

“Such things obviously have a certain barbarity that we are now past,” Yuanji answered, “but do you not see that the ruler does not take up the knife on his own behalf?”

“On whose behalf does he take it up then? ‘The people’?” The latter phrase he did in a passable imitation of Zhuge Dan’s prissy attitude. Then Zhao changed his expression to a smug smirk, and deepened his tone to imitate his brother as he said, “‘Or is it ‘his mandate from the heavens’?”

Yuanji bit her cheek to keep from laughing. “We study these things, my lord, not simply to mindlessly repeat them,” she said when she was confident her voice would come out smoothly. “Just because we understand the choices of the rulers of the past, does not mean that the rulers of today should follow either their intentions or their actions. Wisdom, in one era, may be folly in another, do you not agree?”

Zhao sighed, and rolled his shoulders in as much of a stretch as the cramped carriage would allow. “Whatever. It’s not like *I’m* going to be a ruler of any kind.”

Yuanji glanced again at Jia Chong, but the man was looking out the window again, seemingly unconcerned. She looked down at her book. “To continue…”

Jia Chong had not thought much of Wang Yuanji before the carriage ride, in either sense. He had categorized her in his mind had as a mere mouthpiece of Sima Yi and Zhang Chunhua.

That had been a mistake, yet the truth was if anything more favourable to his own desires.

Sima Shi had summoned both Zhuge Dan and his younger brother for a meeting first thing in the morning on the day of their arrival in Luoyang. Jia Chong had expected that Zhao would want to work out his frustrations in the practice rooms after his dressing down, and thus gone there to wait for him.

Lady Wang had, apparently, had the same idea, as she had come in not long off after he did. She didn’t initially notice him, leaning against the wall in a shadowed corner, and when he said, “Lady Wang, good morning,” she visibly startled.

“Oh, Master Jia Chong.” She bowed. “I didn’t see you there. Did you want this room for your own use?”

“No, I’m waiting for Zhao. Please, don’t leave on my account.” He stepped into the light. “Are you training him today?”
“I have no instructions,” she replied.

“Ah, of course.” He smiled, raising in hands in resignation. “We all await Lord Sima Shi’s instructions.”

The corners of her mouth twitched. She glanced away for a brief moment, and when she glanced back, she effected a marvellous transformation before his eyes. In an instant, her posture and her placid smile were that of a lady of the court.

“The weather, at least, is seasonable,” she said.

He began to applaud, and her placid smile wavered. Smiling himself, he said, “I just wanted to let you know how I admire the performance. You imitate an ordinary woman very well. But I’d rather we talked of real things.”

The mask slipped off. “What sort of things?”

“Who is fit to conquer the land,” he said, “and who is fit to rule it, once it is conquered.”

“Why do you say such things to me?”

“Because I think we agree on the answer.”

“You put him in danger.”

“There is no getting him out of danger, my lady. That was not my doing. The Sima clan has mounted a dragon; they might ride it to heaven, but there is already no getting off without falling down into hell.”

She repeated, but without anger, “Why do you say such things to me…”

He frowned, because she was turning away, as if she didn’t even care about his answer. “I believe, as I’ve said, that we are of the same mind.”

“I have no mind,” she told the wall perpendicular to him. “I am only a woman.”

He laughed darkly. “I’ve been married too long to pass that off on,” he told her shoulder. “That reminds me, I advise you by all means to avoid my wife.”

That drew her eye. “Why? I would have thought…”

He could easily finish that sentence for her. “…that I would wish to further ingratiate my clan with the Sima by having her befriend you? My wife could not possibly befriend any pretty woman without suspecting her of designs upon me.”

Lady Wang actually laughed in clear disbelief, then abruptly stopped, flushing.

“I take no offence,” Jia Chong said. “Indeed, it is absurd to imagine that you would choose me when you have Zhao.”

“If your wife is as jealous as that,” she said, “then it is most unwise for us to converse secretly.”

He bowed. “I honour your caution.”

As he walked back to his own home, he thought to himself that even without speaking to Zhao directly, he had accomplished a great deal for the day.
His brother somehow turned disaster into strength.

The dreaded beating never materialized. Sima Shi had been all self-recreation, which had thrown Zhuge Dan into an apoplexy of shame.

Shi had met Zhao’s eyes briefly as Zhuge Dan had wept onto his lord’s boots. For just that moment, he smiled, and Zhao realized that he would not, this time, be blamed for anything.

His brother, in fact, blamed no one but himself, loudly and widely.

It caused his popularity and support in the court and among the officers to skyrocket.

“Sima Shi is so humble,” people said. “Sima Shi is willing to admit his mistakes.”

And when subsequent campaigns against Wu and Shu were successful, the initial loss to Wu faded from public memory.

Having gained support dealing with external threats, it was time to prevent internal ones.

The emperor, Cao Fang, had grown up.

“So how did it… go…”

Zhao had entered his brother’s office without announcing himself, assuming from the silence that his brother’s meeting with the emperor’s closest friend, Li Feng, was over.

And it was over, but only because Li Feng was crumpled on the floor, his face a swollen mess. Zhao prodded the body with his toe to confirm it was a corpse.

“He refused to speak,” Shi said. “As if he had to right to refuse to speak. If he won’t support my rule with his words, then he shall support it with his permanent silence.”

“How’d you kill him?”

“You are one dramatic fucker.” Zhao shook his head and clucked. “Do you need help getting rid of the body?”

Shi, who had been writing furiously throughout all this, paused at that, looked up, and laughed. He set down his brush. “Zhao, you are always so refreshing. You put my heart at ease. Have you eaten?”

“Not since breakfast.”

His brother stood up. “Let’s eat together then. Afterwards, rather than helping me dispose of this corpse, I’ll need your assistance in creating some more.”

Zhao shrugged. “Whatever. Anyone I know?”

“Zhang Ji and Xiahou Xuan, and their associates. The emperor himself, I think, will then be willing to quietly step down—”

“Xiahou Xuan?” Zhao interrupted, staring, as his brother threw his cloak around his shoulders.
“Your wife’s brother Xiahou Xuan?”

“My former wife,” Shi said, as if it were a minor thing. “I was just writing my writ of divorce. I have a place in mind near Hua where she can live quietly with the girls.”

“Is Lady Yang pregnant?”

“No, can you believe I haven’t touched her yet? The Yangs are being coy, but after our display of force today, they will be eager to form a marriage tie with me.” Shi laughed again.

Zhao whistled. *You are going to slaughter one set of in-laws and think that will make another set desire you… and the worst thing is, I’m sure you’re right. This world is crazy.*

Shi was still laughing, but suddenly he stopped and winced, pressing a hand to one side of his forehead.

“Is your eye bothering you again?” Zhao said. “Maybe you had better rest and just have me do it.”

“It’s nothing. Just a headache from too many fools.” Shi rubbed at the temple on one side. “I want to do this together.”

“Alright, I’m your man.” Zhao readied his sabre.

———

Yuanji watched through a window as the carriage train bearing Lady Xiahou, her young children, a retinue of servants, and their baggage departed the Sima compound.

Only Sima Yi and Lady Zhang had been there to see them off, and Lady Zhang was actually burying her face in her husband’s coat, while he stroked her hair and murmured something to her.

It was a most unexpected aspect of the scene, and not just for the novelty of seeing Lady Zhang, for once, depending upon her husband. Yuanji had long known that her future mother-in-law adored her granddaughters. But she had known even longer that Lady Zhang would never reveal her feelings carelessly. To make a public display of grief like this was tantamount to a declaration that Lady Zhang was unhappy with her son’s decision to send his wife away.

Sima Shi was no longer able to be checked by her, in other words.

But to whom was she declaring this?

As if in answer, Lady Zhang pulled back delicately from her husband, turned, and stared directly at the window.

The two women regarded each other solemnly for a long moment. Yuanji’s heart felt like it was in a vice.

Then Lady Zhang lowered her gaze, took her husband’s arm, and let herself be guided back away.

*She is telling me this, because… she wants my help to keep Zhao safe.*

Yuanji wished she knew how to tell Lady Zhang that she already thought of nothing else.

Chapter End Notes
I depart slightly from the Dynasty Warriors version of events in favour of, well, not historical accuracy, but more just ideas that I like better that happen to be historically accurate. Rather than being shot or otherwise injured in the eye area, history suggests that Sima Shi actually had a tumour near his eye which he had surgically removed. Also from history: history(tm) thought it was really important that we know not only that Sima Shi killed Li Feng but that he did it by beating him to death with a sword handle. It's just such a savage image, I had to include it.
“The illustrious Cai Wenji,” Shi said to Zhao as the two of them played the board game *liubo* together over tea, “is coming out of retirement for a final performance.”

“Who?” Zhao threw the sticks onto the mat and crowed with delight. “Ha! I’ve killed you, I’ve killed you!”

He moved his piece forward the required number of steps, and tossed his brother’s piece back to the beginning.

“Cai Wenji, the famous poet,” Shi said, as he took his own turn, “and daughter of the great Han poet Cai Yong. And also my wife’s aunt. Yuanji asked me to take her.”

“Good, well, enjoy that.”

“I think you should take her. You would enjoy it even more than me.”

“A poetry performance?” Zhao laughed. “Not likely.”

Shi smiled. “Trust and see.”

“God, Yuanji already makes me read enough poetry,” Zhao groaned, “and you know she would quiz me about the performance afterwards, so I would have to pay attention. Are you mad at me for something? Why are you trying to set me up?”

“Shi leaned back in his chair without taking his turn. “Zhao, you wound me. Is it genuinely impossible to believe that I would ever seek to do you a good turn without ulterior motive?”

“No, but… poetry…”

His brother picked up the sticks, without saying anything.

Zhao sighed. “Fine, I’ll do it. When is it?”

———

Zhao’s new sister-in-law, Lady Yang, was apparently hosting the event, something that his brother had not mentioned, so when he walked into the venue with Yuanji at his side, the first thing he saw was Sima Shi, smiling at her side. It took considerable effort not to glower at him. Shi hadn’t mentioned that he would be going regardless. Now Zhao was sure he had been set up.

And he had, but not for punishment.

“I will begin with a few compositions of my father’s,” the elderly woman said, and sat at the *guqin*
After listening for a minute, finding the music nice enough, Zhao glanced down at Yuanji to see how she was enjoying it.

She was absolutely riveted. He had never seen her like this before. Her whole face shone with her awe and rapture; her hands were tightly clutching each other in her lap.

He’d never seen her looking so… cute.

Yuanji was always so formal… no, not formal; reserved. But under the influence of the music, it was like her mask or her shield was down. Whatever was the emotion of the music or the poem, that was the emotion in her face. The pieces were works of joy, amusement, reflection, idleness, and paeans to nature and virtue. Seeing that kind of wholehearted, open expression on Yuanji’s face was mesmerizing.

“Now I will play some of my own poor works, the Eighteen Songs of the Nomad Flute.”

The pleasure vanished from Yuanji’s face in an instant, but it was replaced with a look of concentrated anticipation.

When I was born / nothing had happened
After I was born / the Han throne waned
Heaven was cruel, sending down calamities
Earth was cruel, that I encountered such times…

A barbarian captured me / for his home
And made me go / beyond the horizon

The cloudy mountains are countless, the way back is lost
A storm travels a thousand miles, the wind tossing the sand…

I left the land of the Han, I entered the barbarian’s city
Home destroyed, body violated, it is worse than not to have been born…

As Lady Cai sang through the series of songs, tears began to fall silently from Yuanji’s eyes.

Part of him wanted to comfort her, but at the same time he did not dare disturb her.

When Lady Cai sang of her being ransomed by Cao Cao and brought home, yet without her barbarian children, so many years later, Yuanji’s tears flowed even faster.

Joy to return alive, to meet with the emperor
Lamenting to part from my young ones, never to reunite…

My body went home, but my children could not follow
My heart aches and aches / as if I were starving
Dreaming, I hold their hands—it is joyful and sorrowful
Waking, there is pain in my heart, which never ceases…

How bitter are my grievances, as vast as the sky
Though the world is wide, it contains no answer for them!

Lady Cai sang this final verse, and the music died out, Yuanji finally took a handkerchief to her face, while all around people clapped politely.
Afterwards was the usual opportunity for gossip and intrigue under the guise of socializing. Though Lady Cai was nominally the person everyone had gathered to hear, it was obvious to Zhao that the real person most of the people there had come to see was his brother.

Yuanji did not get up, but just sat there, a dreamy look on her face as she sat, slightly hunched forward, with a finger to her lips.

“Do you want to speak to Lady Cai?” Zhao said at last.

Yuanji started. “Oh! I’m sorry, my lord, I was lost in my thoughts… I appreciate the thought, but I couldn’t possibly speak to Lady Cai.”

“Well, I think my brother is sending her over to us.”

Yuanji’s eyes got very wide. He saw her compose herself; then she stood, and he stood with her, as Lady Cai approached.

“Lord Sima Zhao,” Lady Cai said with a nod. Then, turning to Yuanji, she said, “Lord Sima Shi tells me you are Lady Wang Yuanji. Lord Sima Yi showed me some of your poetry a few years ago, so I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Yuanji actually gripped onto him for support. “Oh?” she said, faintly. “You… you read my work?”

“Yes, I thought it showed remarkable insight and precision for one so young. I hope you enjoyed my humble performance.”

“It was magnificent!” Yuanji blurted, then reddened. “I’m so sorry, I am being terribly… vulgar and awkward, but your work is so exquisite, so important…”

“Now that is certainly praising me too much,” Lady Cai said kindly.

“But your work is so true,” Yuanji insisted. “Other poets merely put men’s thoughts into women’s mouths—for the real thing, there is only you, my lady.”

“Ah, this is rather a credit to your own keen eye for veracity, not my own poor talent,” Lady Cai said, with good humour. “When there is only one of something, it seems remarkable. When there are many lady poets, in the future, history will not judge me so generously.”

Yuanji shook her head. “No, but only you are speaking for us now, for what we—” she faltered, “I mean, for what you experienced. Future poets will never be able to do it.”

“You must come and drink tea with me, my dear,” Lady Cai said. “I shall tell my niece to arrange it. I would dearly love to read your more recent works. Now, I’m afraid it’s late and I have, alas, too many whom I must speak to before I can collapse into my bed.”

The poet drifted off. Zhao looked down and saw that Yuanji looked flustered, which for her was near to panic.

“I didn’t know you wrote poetry,” he said.

“But that’s just it, I haven’t written any poetry in years.” She looked up beseechingly into his face. “What am I going to do, Zhao?”

He couldn’t help laughing. “If you’re asking me for help, you must really be desperate. Can’t you just… write some?”
“There’s been no time… my duties… even if I could find time to write something, I’m so out of practice… and the pressure…”

“It’s just my luck… whenever you need help with something, it’s something I can’t possibly help you with.” Zhao stretched. “Well, let’s duck out of here before my brother ropes me into something diplomatic.”

As they walked back to the Sima family home, Zhao was by no means as carefree as his stroll suggested. *Her duties* were, of course, him and his continued failure to meet his family’s expectations.

She had looked so beautiful… not that she didn’t always look beautiful, but without the shield of her dignified reserve, the lovely heart within shone so brightly. Even her sorrow was breathtaking.

Music and poetry clearly made her happier than anything else… and because of him, she had given them up entirely. Since she had come to the Simas, she had been entirely unable to play or write. Just like Lady Cai, forced into marriage with a barbarian.

*I never defied heaven, so why did it pair me with a mate so different from me?*

So sang Lady Cai, and Zhao realized that Yuanji could rightfully have similar feelings. It was no comfort at all to think himself superior to Lady Cai’s kidnapper and rapist. He was only different in degree, not kind; she had been purchased for him, rather than stolen by him. And how much of his restraint was not from any sliver of virtue but rather because he just didn’t have the guts to…

Zhao cut off his own thoughts, disgusted with how low his own mind would go to torment himself. He needed to think of something else, anything else. “Are you hungry?”

———

“How dare you even suggest such a thing?!” Sima Shi had taken off his rapier for the doctor’s examination, but the doctor, backing up in a hurry, did not underestimate the danger he was in.

The door opened and his wife, Lady Yang, appeared. “What’s the matter, my lord? I heard shouting.”

“A tumour,” Sima Shi hissed, “This imbecile has the temerity, the shamelessness, to suggest that *I* have a tumour! Who is paying you?”

“It-it-it’s not that bad, my lord, truly! It is near the surface and not too large… if we remove it now —”

“I cannot have a tumour!” shouted Sima Shi. “Whoever’s paying you wants you to kill me… if I had my sword—”

“My lord,” interceded Lady Yang, “you cannot terrify every doctor who brings to you an uncomfortable diagnosis. That is not the way to be assured of hearing hard truths.” To the doctor she said, “This is so unlike Lord Sima Shi, as you know, he is so humble and patient ordinarily. I assure you, it is only the shock.”

“Shock, shock, naturally,” said the doctor.

Shi put his hand to his head. His eye… his eye had actually started bulging out… that was what had gotten him to relent to seeing a doctor, as his family had been after him to do for so long.
He couldn’t have a tumour, he couldn’t have something so grossly wrong with his body. Such a disfigured person as that couldn’t be the one favoured to become the Son of Heaven.

“He needs time to process it,” his wife was saying, as she escorted the relieved doctor out.

A few minutes later she came back.

“He will be discreet, of course,” she said. “He has been a doctor to my family for a long time.”

“I’ll see another doctor,” Sima Shi said. “That one is a fool. This time I’ll arrange it myself.”

“Very well, my lord,” Lady Yang said, “but I must insist that you decide in advance what you will do if the other doctor says the same thing.”

He stood up. “You can have no reason to insist anything of me, madam, until you carry my child.”

She stiffened, and her mask of concern slipped off, revealing the frightened anger beneath. Good. He was sick of seeing Lady Yang try to act like his mother. She didn’t have one tenth of his mother’s ability.

———

Sima Zhao looked up and gave a little gasp. He hadn’t heard her approach at all, yet somehow his mother was there, looking down at him with that lovely smile that foretold intense punishment nine times out of ten.

“Mother,” he said, and hurried to stand up and bow. “You’re… what are you doing here?”

“How did I find you, you mean?” She sat down primly under the same tree he had been sitting under, and gestured for him to reseat himself, which he did warily. “I am your mother, of course I know where you will go, in these circumstances. I remember when you were a little boy, how you loved anything natural. Gardens or wilderness… even a little weed growing out of a crack would claim your attention… how cute you were.”

She took his hand, and when he managed a glance at her eyes to see how angry she was with him this time, he was even more frightened to realize that she was not angry with him at all.

“Your father is very ill,” she said, simply.

Zhao swallowed. “I know.”

“And unfortunately, your brother must have this surgery now,” she continued. “This will undoubtedly look like a time of weakness to our enemies. But they will underestimate us at their own cost.”

“Mother…?”

“I have been very hard on you, I know,” she said. “I will tell you a secret. I know you and your brother both think that he’s the one who takes after me, but that’s not true. You are more like me by far.”

He couldn’t help laughing, even though long experience was screaming at him that there could be no stupider idea than to laugh at his mother. “Me, like you?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “You have just not had to face sufficient threats to those whom you love, yet. When you do… you will find that you also know, down to your bones, how to be merciless.”
He didn’t know what to say.

She patted his hand. “Help me up,” she instructed.

He did so in haste.

His mother reached up and caressed his cheek. “My son,” she said, and then kissed the hand that had helped her up.

“Mother,” he breathed. “May I… take you back to Father?”

“That would be very considerate,” she said, and took his arm.

Wang Yuanji handed the letter to the messenger, but Sima Zhao, coming in the other way, neatly grabbed it out of his hands. “What’s this?”

“It’s just a note to Lady Cai, that I unfortunately must refuse her invitation under the present circumstances,” Yuanji said, confused at this uncharacteristic behaviour from Zhao. Curiosity? He wouldn’t trouble himself. Suspicion of her? Never.

“No,” he said, and ripped the note in half. “Tell Lady Cai that Lady Wang will be happy to see her at… whatever the time was.”

The messenger bowed and left, paying no attention at all to Yuanji’s protests that he should stop. Well, of course not.

“My lord!” she said reproachfully. “How can you possibly think I could go at a time like this when your father and your brother are both in such critical states? I must be here.”

“The surgery went very well, the doctor says,” Zhao said. “My brother simply needs to rest.”

Yuanji sighed with relief. “Well, that is very good news, but even so…!”

“Yuanji…” He took a step closer to her, then stretched and crossed his arms. “Look, as long as my brother’s out of commission, there’s no ‘orders’ for you, are there? And if you’re thinking you need to be here for them, you don’t. My mother has my father well in hand, and well, my brother picked Lady Yang, so that’s his problem. There’s no reason why you can’t take an afternoon to enjoy yourself.”

“But… she’s going to want to hear my poetry!”

Zhao laughed at her. “Why, Lady Wang,” he put his hands on his hips and leaned forward, “are you being a coward?”

She flushed. “No, but… I don’t have anything to show.”

“Then go to your room, right now, and write some,” he said… almost ordered. “You don’t even have to worry that I’m going to be indolent all day. I’m meeting with Jia Chong, then we’re going to spar, then I’m visiting my father, and I’ll even promise to you I’ll read a chapter of something before bed. You pick.”

“The Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals, where we left off,” she said.

“Deal,” he said.
Jia Chong refilled his companion’s wine. “You seem to have a sudden influx of confidence, my lord.”

“Eh?” Zhao tapped his fingers on the table to thank him for the pour and took a sip. “I guess. Probably just glad that my brother’s surgery went so well.”

“Oh? That is good news.”

“Still. Gotta head up the clan for the time being. Had to fend off some advice from my uncles.” Zhao rolled his eyes. “If I act confident, maybe less people will bother me.”

“It makes a certain amount of sense,” Jia Chong said, refilling his own wine. “This will be a low-pressure time for you to try out the basics of rule.”

“Don’t start with that again,” Zhao groaned. “Have you been talking to Yuanji?”

“No,” said Jia Chong, guessing that Yuanji would not have revealed their conversation to Zhao. “Why?”

“Oh, she’s always going on about rulers in my lessons. Lately it seems like it’s all she wants to talk about.”

“She is very perceptive.”

“I said don’t start.” Zhao huffed and drained the cup. “If you don’t have anything actually interesting to talk about, why don’t we skip ahead to the spar.”

“I think Guanqiu Jian is going to rebel.”

Zhao put down his empty cup. “Now?”

“No time like the present, for him,” Jia Chong said calmly. “He has some certain amount of respect for his successes against the Koreans. He was connected to Xiahou Xuan and Zhang Ji.”

“Whom we killed,” Zhao muttered.

“Whom we killed,” Jia Chong agreed, and refilled Zhao’s wine. “Unfortunately, the time is not yet such that we can take preemptive action against threats. We must wait for him to actually rebel before we can kill him. On a positive note, he will undoubtedly not show his hand until he has more allies. Then we can take them all down at once.”

Zhao touched his cup, but did not drink from it. “My brother will be well by then.”

“So we all hope.” Jia Chong drained his own wine.

________

“Sima Shi! Usurper! Show yourself!” The voice from outside the fortress was like a howl.

Zhuge Dan had alerted them that Guanqiu Jian and Wen Qin were about to rebel in Shouchun, and though his doctor had advised against it, Sima Shi had led the Wei forces personally to put them down. They had only just arrived that evening and had not fully set up their massive camp outside the small fortress when a cavalry raid had swept in. It was dark and the enemy clearly had fighters of talent, and their leader had begun calling for Sima Shi to come out.
Sima Zhao gripped on his brother’s shoulder and forcibly prevented him from sitting up.

“Sima Shi! Come out and face me, coward! Sima Shi! Sima Shi!”

“Let go of me, Zhao,” his brother said, quiet but in command.

“I’m not going to let you take his bait,” Zhao said, not relinquishing his grip. “I can take care of the situation and I will, but you need to promise me you’re going to remain right here, resting, like the doctor instructed.”

“It’s not a matter of taking the bait,” Sima Shi said. His one visible eye stared up at his younger brother’s intently. “That’s not what this is about. If I don’t show myself, our morale will be shaken and theirs will soar. If I didn’t intend to make a show of my presence, I would have stayed in Luoyang.”

“You should have stayed in Luoyang!”

“I seem to remember that I told you to stay in Luoyang,” his brother countered. “Now let me go!”

Zhao was exasperated but he let go. It was not as if wrestling his brother down onto his bed would be any better for his healing eye than allowing him to get up.

His brother fitted his mask over the side of his face. It blocked the ordinary look of the bandages and gave him a sinister, theatrical profile.

Zhao followed Shi to the ramparts, where they looked down at the Wei camp and saw it in turmoil. The man who was shouting was clearly the leader of the raid. He wore shining armour, topped with an extraordinary helmet that had a single horn like a *qilin*, and he weaved his white horse through the chaos with the grace of a dancer. A dancer who was slaying their soldiers left and right even as they watched him.

“Sima Shi!” shouted the rider again.

“Why would the leader of a force of a hundred thousand,” Sima Shi shouted down, “trouble himself with a leader of a dozen?”

It was true, Zhao realized. Despite the chaos, now that he was actually seeing what was happening, this raid had almost no manpower at all. A dozen might be a little low, but surely it was no more than a hundred.

The rider pulled back on his horse and was looking up at the Sima brothers. He was almost directly below them on the battlements, and they could see that his face was young, even younger than theirs. The rider looked over one shoulder, then the other, cursed, and shouted for his comrades to fall back.

Shi turned away from the edge and put a hand to his mask once he was out of sight. “We pursue. You know why.”

Zhao did know why. The enemy leader’s last ditch search of the horizon was a futile look for expected reinforcements that had never come. A pursuit might reveal why. “It could be a trick. I’ll go, but say you will rest while I am hunting them.”

“I have done what I came to do,” Shi said with a sneer. “Stop trying to mother me.”

Zhao had to accept it as all the promise he could get. He called for Jia Chong and the others to ready the pursuit.
“I feel so privileged that you were able to keep our engagement, Lady Wang,” Lady Cai said, pouring tea for her guest. “I know that this has been a difficult time for your… hosts.”

The pause before ‘hosts’, and Lady Cai’s expression, said without directly saying it that Lady Cai was very curious about what was the exact relationship between Lady Wang and the Sima clan. Yuanji took advantage of the cup of tea to consider how to answer.

“Lord Sima Yi, as I told you before, asked my opinion on your poetry before he brought you to Luoyang…” The old woman lifted her own tea to her lips, then smiled. “I have known him, at this point, many years. His service for my lord Cao Cao was impeccable. I know what is said of him, of course… but to me, he is always that very young and family-oriented man I first met.”

Lady Cai was clearly not going to let this one go, yet how could Yuanji answer without causing Zhao to lose face? The only thing she could think of was to blame herself. “My future father-in-law has been very patient with me.”

“How unusual!” Lady Cai smiled at her. “Even now? Your future in-laws, clearly, value you already as a daughter.”

“That is so,” Yuanji could answer honestly, but that ‘even now’ was making her stomach churn. Yes, Lord Sima Yi was probably dying… and if he did die, then Zhao would have to mourn him three years and would not be able to marry all that time… yet nobody had said a word to her, not even Lord Sima Shi, whom she knew was impatient of the charade.

“There are very few families who honour talent in a daughter-in-law as they ought to,” Lady Cai said, and sipped tea again. “That the husband should care only about his wife’s beauty and docility is, I suppose, understandable enough… but I have long thought that any forward-thinking parent should want a woman of intelligence and spirit to nurture their grandchildren. Speaking of intelligence, have you brought me anything new you have written?”

“I feel so embarrassed to share my poor efforts with you, even privately like this,” Yuanji confessed, but she took the paper out of her sleeve and handed it over.

Lady Cai unrolled the paper and read through all the works in silence, which seemed to Yuanji to take an inordinate amount of time. Then she began to read aloud.

Going again, and going again,
the gentleman’s life is endless separation.
Ten thousand li apart,
each on an opposite horizon.
The road is dangerous and long,
when will meeting be possible?
The wild horse longs for the northern wind,
and the bird’s nest is of southern branches.
The day of togetherness is far away.
The belt is looser day by day.
Drifting clouds block the sunlight,
but the traveler does not return.
Thinking of him makes one old.
How late the time has gotten!
Abandoning all thought of saying anymore.
Please take care to eat well.
“This is very fine,” Lady Cai said, and Yuanji blushed.

“I cannot accept such praise.”

Lady Cai ignored this. “The ending, in particular, is subtle. The abrupt shift, from such intimate and individual lament, to such a rote expression of… shall I say submission? The speaker abandons her own voice and takes up the voice she is expected to speak with.”

Yuanji had not realized she was revealing so much of herself in the poem. She had naively thought that the subject of a woman dying with longing for a long absent lover would be unmistakably not her.

“May I keep this?”

“Certainly, but… if you wish to show it to anyone… I am not sure…”

“I won’t reveal your authorship,” Lady Cai said, rolling up the works. “I understand you, my dear. Tell me, when do Lords Sima Shi and Sima Zhao return to Luoyang? I trust the troubles in Shouchun will be quickly sorted, if my lords have gone themselves.”

“I don’t know anything,” Yuanji said.

———

They managed to kill Guanqiu Jian, but Wen Qin and his associates escaped to Wu. The entire thing had taken months longer than Sima Shi had planned, and he was in a foul mood as they arrived in Xuchang for a short night’s rest before going back to Luoyang.

A messenger arrived and was shown in to where Sima Shi and his brother were sharing a room.

“I have a message from the emperor,” the messenger stated as he went to his knee. “He—”

“Do you?” interrupted Sima Shi.

The messenger looked startled. “I… do?”

Sima Shi had been cleaning his sword, and he held it up in the light. “Do you really have a message?”

The messenger swallowed and shrank back. “I…”

“I was asleep. My brother would not let you disturb my rest,” Sima Shi said. “You could not deliver your message tonight. You came back in the morning, around nine, shall we say? And alas, I was already gone.”

“I… I understand…” The messenger kowtowed and quickly left.

Zhao locked the door after him. “What was that about?”

“Cao Mao thinks I’ll just let him order me to stay in Xuchang?” Sima Shi scoffed. “I see that putting a little boy upon the throne means I will have to play games with him.”

“When we’ve just put down a rebellion against his claim to the throne?” Zhao shook his head.

“Oh, I give the boy credit enough to realize that the rebellion was not against him.” Shi undressed. “We had better get to sleep so that we can leave at first light. Our anxiety to see our ill father,
naturally, rushes us.”

“Naturally,” said Sima Zhao, undressing as well. “Father would be proud to know that his illness could serve us so well.”

His brother’s wicked laughter rang in his ears as he extinguished the light.

Chapter End Notes

All translations from classical Chinese are my own. "Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute" is an actual extant work attributed to the historical Cai Wenji. The poem I give as Wang Yuanji’s is 行行重行行 from the "Nineteen Poems", which is an anonymous work.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

what's a timeline ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

there is explicit sexual content in this chapter. hey-oh

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Shi had planned, they went directly to their father when they arrived in Luoyang, without even stopping at home to change, although they did conspicuously hail several people along the way, mentioning that they had rushed back and had so-and-so heard anything about Sima Yi? Nobody had, other than that he was not well, of course. Shi would sigh and shake his head, his half-mask glinting in the sunlight; Zhao used his exhaustion from having been roused at dawn to look convincingly depressed and uncharacteristically silent. In truth, despite his mother’s unnerving conversation some months back, Zhao did not really feel like it was possible for his father to die. A world without Sima Yi? It would be just like his father to carry on “dying” for twenty or thirty years.

When they finally arrived at his door and the guard let them in, they found their father reclining in his bed with his eyes closed, while Yuanji sat at his head, reading aloud to him from a collection of the poetry of Sima Xiangru.

Yuanji stopped reading when they entered, and Sima Yi said without opening his eyes, “Finish the poem, my dear.”

“Your sons are here, my lord,” she said.

“I could tell,” he said, and opened his eyes halfway. “Only Shi and Zhao together sound like that entering a room—Shi’s rapier clanging on the door when Zhao realizes at the last moment that he needs to duck through the doorframe and crowds him. Let them hear from a time when the Sima family produced men of true artistry. Anyway, you were almost done.” He reclosed his eyes.

Shi and Zhao exchanged glances, Shi amused, Zhao sheepish.

Yuanji finished the last few lines:

Then the woman loosened her garments, exposing her xieyi,
presenting her luminous body, frail in frame but full in flesh,
and this time approached me, soft and smooth as fat itself.

Then I kept my blood still, my heart upright in my chest.
I had made a solemn vow, I held onto my will and did not turn back from it.
Holding my head up high at once, I rejected her forever.

Despite the risqué lines of the prose-poem, her face did not colour nor did her voice waver.

“This is the stuff you read to my father?” Zhao spoke without consideration.

He heard Shi snort, and Yuanji looked up from the book with that glance that withered him every time. “It’s art, Zhao.”
“You will have to read the rest of them to me another time, my dear. I do so enjoy our visits.” Sima Yi said, and she got up, bowed and kissed his offered hand, and left, with a smile for Shi and a look for Zhao that said we’ll discuss this later.

Sima Yi gestured for his sons to sit. “I’m surprised at your displeasure, Zhao,” his father said as Shi took Yuanji’s empty seat and Zhao pulled over another chair. “You should be glad that I’m reminding her that some Sima men are actually capable of being faithful.”

“That was a long time ago,” said Shi, and their father laughed.

“You come in your traveling clothes,” he said. “Such haste. For what is my poor health to be an excuse?”

“We did not receive a message that we were to stay in Xuchang.”

“Indeed. Help me sit up.” As Shi helped moved the bolsters and cushions to help his father into more of a sitting position, Sima Yi continued speaking. “Do you think the boy came up with that one on his own, or has someone been advising him so stupidly?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Shi said. “If it is an advisor, he is welcome to keep him.”

“And how do you intend to punish him?”

“You have gotten to turn down the Nine Bestowments twice,” Shi said. “I shall decline them nine times in a row.”

That got both of them doing their horrible laugh. Zhao cringed slightly, wishing he could think of some reason to leave. They were insufferable when they were like this.

“Why don’t you go and change, Zhao?” his father said. Zhao unwillingly looked back at his father’s face, saw the familiar combination of contempt and affection, and felt the familiar weight of both on his back. “Ask Lady Wang to explain to you the political meaning of the poem she was reading to me.”

Zhao stood and bowed. “I’m glad you look so well, father.”

When the door closed behind his younger brother, Shi said, “You do look well, father. Is this all a ruse? I hear you feign deafness and senility to visitors outside our family. It is difficult for me to believe they buy it; you’re not that old.”

“I amuse myself a little there,” Sima Yi admitted. “Although how old do you think I am?”

“No more than fifty, surely.”

“I am past sixty,” Sima Yi said. “Why so surprised?”

Sima Shi was only twenty-four. “I… suppose I thought you were closer in age to mother.”

“No, it took me a long time to find the right wife,” Sima Yi said. “If I had never come across your mother, perhaps I never would have married. A woman of her calibre is rare. I had many brothers and no desire to move up in the world, of course, so there was little pressure on me to marry.”

“You don’t answer me, father. I do actually want to know if you’re well.” His father was somewhat thinner and paler, but that could also be his lack of activity and light. Shi knew very well that his
father had faked illness to avoid going into Cao Cao’s service in the first place.

“I am in agony most of the time,” Sima Yi said matter-of-factly, “which the doctor believes is an infection in my kidneys. It has not, so far, responded in the slightest to any treatment. I could die at any time or I could linger for years and years. I have asked your mother if she will kill me if it goes on too long.” He shrugged.

Shi was taken aback. “What did mother say?”

“She didn’t answer.” Sima Yi looked at the mask on his son’s face. “And your eye? Have you seen a doctor?”

“Yes, before I left Shouchun. I have the situation under control.” In fact, the doctor had told him that if he continued to expose himself to exertion, stress, and violent movement, he would lose the eye at best. But he could not put his ambition on hold; his enemies would not be putting their counter to his plans on hold.

“If you use your brother as a go-between to the boy and the court generally, and only reveal yourself on the ninth refusal,” Sima Yi said, “you will increase their terror of you… their sense of you as the emperor in practice already.”

Shi considered this. Even laying aside the issue of his recuperation, his father’s suggestion to make himself a kind of remote authority who could only be approached through another, even in the face of the emperor’s public pleading for him to take the highest rank in the land, would underscore him as a figure in more demand than the emperor himself. And then when he did reappear in public life for the ninth refusal… oh, he could make a grand show of that. He liked that idea very much indeed.

“Don’t ask mother to kill you anymore,” Shi said. “Selfishly, father, I require your advice.”

Sima Yi laughed again, and made a gesture for his son to leave. “I shall tell my visitors in my deaf and senile way that you are too busy planning your next campaign for the empire to bother with such trifling matters as the emperor himself.”

“And it will even be true,” Shi said, as he bowed.

——-

“Sima Shi must accept the Nine Bestowments,” the boy emperor said, his shoulders pulled uncomfortably high in a futile attempt to make himself look more regal.

Sima Zhao, on his knees, with the entire court behind him, pressed his forehead to the ground again. “Your majesty, I cannot convince him to accept this honour. He continues to say, this is not the time. He must concentrate on uniting all under heaven. Day and night he works on this purpose.”

The beads of the emperor’s veil rattled against each other. “He will not accept it? Then…”

Sima Zhao raised himself back up to a kneel and smiled at the emperor.

“Insist again,” the emperor said and abruptly left, without making the proper dismissals. Zhao and the others bowed anyway.

Afterwards, Zhao found a spot he liked in the imperial gardens and sprawled out on his back. He plucked a weed from the grass and idly twirled it around his fingers, closing his eyes.

A small set of hands were shaking him awake.
“Asleep, really?” Yuanji said. “My lord, anyone could come across you here.”

Zhao blinked up at her lovely face, yawned, and pulled himself up, stretching. “What’s wrong with that? I don’t think I’ll be robbed.”

“It’s hardly befitting your station, my lord.”

Zhao chuckled, rubbing his eyes. “My station? A glorified messenger boy?”

“Not even you think of yourself as that,” Yuanji reproved him. “Are you so tired, my lord? I know you have a great deal of work to do running the state, but if you need the rest, I think you will derive more refreshment to your body napping in the proper place.”

“Well, you’re wrong for once, Yuanji.” He crossed his legs, rested his elbow on his knee, and his chin on his hand. “I’d rather be in a garden then just about anywhere. There’s no bed as nice as grass.”

Unexpectedly, she smiled tenderly, then shook her head. “In the family’s private garden, then, my lord.”

He looked up at her. “What’s the matter with it, anyway? Sure, my brother’s got to seem all aloof and untouchable, but I don’t. I’m the one they touch, touch, touch.” He made a gesture of grabby hands and was pleased when she laughed.

“You must also have the deportment of a ruler, my lord,” she said nevertheless. "And there is also your safety."

Zhao sighed and stood up. “Fine, ruin all my pleasures.”

She took his arm as they walked to the Sima compound, however, which was its own pleasure.

———

“Wen Qin is courting Zhuge Dan,” Jia Chong said without preamble as he let himself into Sima Zhao’s office.

Sima Zhao made a blot on the document he was writing. “What?” He put the brush down. “You received a message from… why didn’t he write my brother directly…?”

Jia Chong sat across from him. “He doesn’t trust you to receive his messages. Remember he saw your brother’s poor condition during the recent campaign in Shouchun with his own eyes. He thinks so well of your brother and his imperial loyalty, that he does not believe that your brother would be so rude to the emperor, refusing his honours three times already without even coming in person. He thinks your brother is at death’s door and that you are using his name for your own ambitions.”

“My ambitions?” Now that deserved a really good laugh, but Zhao could not. “Where did he get that idea?”

Jia Chong smiled. “I may have had some conversations of my own with Zhuge Dan before we left.”

“Jia Chong!” Zhao crossed his arms. “What kind of conversations?!!”

Still smiling, Jia Chong fluttered a hand. “This and that. Asking his opinions on various things. Discussing rumours.”

“Wen Qin may be courting Zhuge Dan,” Zhao said, “but it sounds like it’s what you wanted to
“Zhuge Dan is a fool who only supports an imaginary idol of your brother,” Jia Chong said. “Killing him before he can be disillusioned would be a kindness, as well as the shrewdest choice. But you’re wrong about me wanting him to join up with Wen Qin. That wasn’t what I intended.”

“What did you intend?”

“We will need the emperor to throw his lot in with a fool eventually,” Jia Chong said. “I thought Zhuge Dan would be ideal for this.”

Zhao rubbed his temples.

“I will continue to monitor the situation, now that I am aware of it,” Jia Chong continued. “I do not think Zhuge Dan will rebel without another push. If contact between the emperor and Zhuge Dan occurs, however, we will need to deliver that push immediately.”

Zhao tapped his fingers on the desk. “I could… arrange for him to take a cabinet position. It would be a promotion. If he accepts, he will have to come to Luoyang where we can keep a closer eye on him, and he wouldn’t be able to assist Wen Qin and Wu. Then we wouldn’t have to fight another war for Shouchun. It’s still a mess from the last two.”

“When he rebels as a response to promotion, he will seem ungrateful.” Jia Chong nodded. “That is very shrewd. Do not offer it quite yet, but that is just the kind of push I had in mind. You are developing as a ruler, my lord.”

Sima Zhao ignored the last comment. “He might not rebel.”

“He will. Let’s just make sure he does so at the time of our choosing.”

———

That same afternoon, Yuanji came to his office.

“My lord,” she said, sitting across from him, “Today we begin studying The Book of Lord Shang.”

“No,” said Zhao.

This unprecedented blunt refusal made her jaw drop. “No?”

“No. I hate that guy. He’s worse than Han Fei. All their lies about how the ideal ruler gets to sit around doing nothing. If only that were true.”

She had to bite her cheek briefly again. “My lord. As I have told you many times. We do not read the past to repeat the past. A ruler must—”

“Stop telling me what a ruler does, Yuanji!” Zhao exploded. He pushed his chair back from his desk, got up to the door as if to leave, checked himself, and paused with his hand on the door. “I’m sorry, but I can’t take it today. I’m not a ruler. I’m barely the mouthpiece for a ruler, and that only because of blood. You really think anyone would let me rule them, Yuanji?” He paused, but didn’t turn around. “Would you let me rule you?”

“My lord… I believe that… if you would just apply yourself—”

“Just say no,” he said, bitterly, turning around. “Me, rule you? I can’t even touch you, and I’m supposed to become your husband.”
She met his sad eyes. “You know…”

“Of course I know. Even an idiot like me figured it out the very first week. You know at the age that
I first met you, my brother was already a father several times over? He’s as talented as I am delayed
in women… just like he is in everything…” His hand went up to his hair again, and with a sour
laugh, turned back to the door.

“My lord, shall I tell you what I know?”

He stopped, but he didn’t say anything.

“I know you doubt yourself, but I also know that you are playing a role. You’ve been playing this
role so long that you think it’s all you are.”

He turned back to her, and he had that *I don’t care, don’t bother me* smile on his lips. “What role is
that?”

“The scapegoat.”

He laughed. “You think this is an act? Is my idiocy actually contagious?”

She pushed on. “For the younger son to be too talented—it’s dangerous.” His eyes were narrowing
at her. “At the same time, you need to be useful. You’ve decided that you’re more valuable to your
family as an excuse for when things go wrong. So that’s what you do, but you hate it.”

Yuanji took a deep breath, but he didn’t interrupt her. “You hate all of it. It’s not the life you would
have chosen. To the extent that you actually make mistakes, instead of finesse yourself into the
position of scapegoat for failures already occurring, this is the reason for it. You just want to get
away. You don’t even want to persuade others, let alone command them or have responsibility for
them. But what life you would actually have chosen…” she faltered. “I admit I haven’t figured that
out yet.”

He was still silent, and she took another breath. “Am I wrong?”

“No. And yes.” His eyes no longer looked sad. They were strangely dark, and something about them
made her heart start to thump. “You’ve figured out how I feel about the rest of the world, but not
how I feel about you.”

“How do you feel about me?” she whispered.

“What I feel… what I want… I want to hear your lips say *my lord* and actually mean it.”

She was startled, and she saw the mask settling over him again. He laughed. “Silly, right?”

“Is it silly to want your wife to respect you?”

The mask came off again. “That’s not all I want.”

He approached her and placed his hands on her shoulders, and she became aware, in a very
disconcerting way, just how much taller than her he really was. Obviously it was something she had
known from the day they met, but…

Zhao let go of her shoulders and put his hand up to his hair in his familiar embarrassment gesture.
“I’m frightening you again, right?” he said lightly.

“You are, but don’t let it stop you,” she said softly. “I want to see the real you, even if it scares me.”
Yeah, but what will you do when I show him to you? You might still be scared, but only because of the obvious physical superiority. I’m your inferior in every other way.

When he didn’t say anything aloud, she spoke again. “Do you remember when we had finally escaped from Mt. Xingshi, the journey home?”

“Uh… not really, actually.”

She sighed in resignation. “I rode with the baggage, and you peeked in at me through the window. Your mother got very upset.”

Oh, right. He had been barely able to see her face in the carriage, what with her shortness and the bags partially blocking the window, but she had looked so overwhelmed, it concerned him. When he had ridden over, she was almost in a fetal position, her hands pressed to her face as if to stop from crying. She’d seemed to deal with the bloodshed so well, but she had been so young after all. “I remember now,” he said.

“I think you thought I was feeling overwhelmed by the battle,” she said, looking down at her hands, “and a little bit was from that. But not most of it. I was thinking about riding in the carriage with your mother to Luoyang the day I met you. I had pulled my knees up to my chest the same way, and she thought—at least she claimed to think—I was cold. I wasn’t cold. I was afraid. Afraid of being handed over to a stranger and turned into a wife. Someone with no thoughts, no dreams, no voice, no will. Afraid of… of the tool that he would use to do that.”

Afraid of being fucked by him, in other words. And here he had the temerity to tell her that he wanted her to actually want to be with him. He really was worse than a fool.

She was speaking on, still to her hands. “That day in Xingshi, as I was remembering that, I realized I no longer feared that fate. But thinking about how I felt instead made me even more afraid.”

What did she mean? That she had realized that he was too much of a chickenshit to ever make a move on her, so she was safe from him? But then she wouldn’t have felt afraid. She couldn’t mean that she was afraid of her own desire for him… she couldn’t desire him.

“I… I always thought that I would be made to submit by force. I never dreamed that I would meet someone to whom… to whom I wanted to give myself. That… at that time, that was very frightening.”

He had to swallow to be able to talk. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

She looked up from her hands to his eyes. “I would let you rule me… my lord.”

———

His eyes had that strange darkness about them again, they were darker than ever. “Would you?”

Her mouth was dry and her thumping heartbeat was threatening to leap out of her chest, but she said, “I would.”

Zhao took her shoulders again, and then slowly moved one hand along the shoulder, up her neck to where he cradled her face with his large hand. “May I test that?”

Test that? Test what? This was no time for hesitation. “Yes, my lord.”
He tilted her chin up, bent down, and kissed her lips. Softly at first, so softly. The room was quiet. There was no sound in the world but her heartbeat, and that was deafening.

Suddenly his hands slid down her body and he was picking her up, causing her legs to wrap around his waist as he brought her up to his standing height, never stopping kissing her. And now the kisses were becoming more passionate, more forceful. She felt his tongue probing at her lips and when she parted her own, it actually darted inside.

Then he broke off the kisses, turned, and set her down so that she was right up against his desk. She felt a pang of disappointment that he was stopping, but then he spoke, his voice thick and rough: “I want you to be able to speak.”

Then his hands were moving under her skirt.

———

She was letting him do this, Yuanji was *actually* letting him do this!

He stared intently at her face as his hands worked impatiently at the ties holding up her xieyi. Thank heaven she didn’t go for some kind of complicated knot. The fabric fluttered down between her legs and he glanced at it, fallen. There was a little wet spot on the crotch of the fabric. Oh, *Yuanji*.

He brought his eyes quickly back up to her face as his hand slid across her thigh and onto her pussy itself. She gasped and jerked a little as his fingers traced her clit, her lips, her slit, mentally mapping the terrain for him.

She was already wet for him, dazed and panting, one hand clutching onto his shirt, the other bracing against his desk. “My lord, that’s… that’s…”

*Yuanji,* always so brilliant, who always knew and saw and understood everything, had absolutely no idea how to handle what he was doing to her body. He’d never felt more powerful in his entire life. He bit his own lip as he watched her moan, her eyes fluttering closed and then open again. She was writhing against him already, practically riding his hand, and he hadn’t put a single finger inside her yet.

How would she react when that changed?

———

The feelings coming from in between her legs were absolutely incredible. She wanted them to stop and to never end, to slow down and to get faster, to lessen and to intensify; in short, she was all over the place, and yet she was so very much in one place, with this one man.

His thumb was rubbing something that was like a button on her, while the rest of his fingers had been sliding around and teasing at the actual entrance to her vagina. Suddenly he crooked one finger and it sank into her up to the first knuckle only.

“Oh!” she cried, her eyes opening again, and Zhao’s expression made her head swim even more.

“You’re so, so tight,” he said in a tone that was somewhere between a whisper and a growl, and pushed in to the second knuckle. He went no deeper than that; he simply began to rub that finger back and forth, in tandem with his thumb on her clit. “I can’t wait to be inside you for real.”

Inside her for real… oh heaven, yes, all of this was just a build up to that… to really be taken by him…
The pleasure was going out of control…!

Yuanji was coming, she was actually coming. Let Yuanji enjoy guqin music or poetry or whatever the hell she wanted; these sounds that were coming from her now, they were the most beautiful noises on earth to him.

He could even feel her walls contracting around his single finger. God, how was he going to be able to stand it when he finally took her?

And she had let him do it all… if he tried to take her right here, would she let him do that too?

She probably would, and damn did he want to… but he had a better idea. Harder, but better. More befitting a proper ruler.

He leaned down and whispered into her ear, “I won’t go any further than that until our wedding night. If that’s what you want, tell my father.”

Slowly, Zhao slid his hand away from her, leaving a trail of her slickness on her own inner thigh. She was trembling and still bracing herself against the desk as he bent down, picked up her xieyi from where it had dropped on the floor, put it in his pocket, and left. And left!

The door had closed behind him before she was quite aware of what had just happened.

He had absolutely taken her apart on his fingers and left her shaking in his study with no xieyi!

Her entire world was on its head. She had been sure, for years, that when it came time to… to do that with him, that he would be gentle.

She was no longer sure of that… she didn’t know how to describe what had just happened, but she absolutely could not describe it as gentle.

Zhao had played it all masterfully when leaving Yuanji, but by the time he was in his own chambers, with the door locked and bolted, he was the farthest thing from calm and in control.

He pulled Yuanji’s xieyi out of his pocket and freed his aching erection as fast as possible. He flopped onto the bed, already rubbing himself with the hand that was still sticky from her fluids. He could smell her on the xieyi. It was almost like she was there with him in his room. He closed his eyes, picturing her face, her sweet little cries as she came all over his fingers, and in no time at all he came harder than he had ever come before.

Zhao shuddered in the afterglow of it, still clutching her garment with his other hand.

She had said, she had actually said, that she wanted to give herself to him. To him. And she had let him show her what that would be like.

If she didn’t follow through with wanting to marry him now, he was going to die from wanting her. Not just from wanting her, from loving her. God, how he loved her!
Yuanji managed to make it back to her own rooms without running into anyone. The drafts of air across her sensitive pussy as she hurried made her long for Zhao to come back and tell her that he changed his mind and had to have her right then and there.

She locked and bolted her own door, pulled open the blanket, and flopped onto her bed face down, burying her face in the mattress for a moment, then wrapping herself up tightly in the blanket.

She loved Zhao, she had long known she loved him; she would die for him, she honoured him, and she liked him…

But this… this was something new.

And yet the more she thought about it, the more she realized that it wasn’t entirely new. It was something she had sensed deep down for a long time, but she had been too innocent… or ignorant… to consciously realize what it was on either Zhao’s side or her own.

She wanted Zhao, she wanted him badly. She had to see her father-in-law as soon as possible! If Sima Yi died now, and Zhao kept his word about not going further until their wedding night, she was going to die herself!

Chapter End Notes

As usual, the translation from classical Chinese is my own. The fu (a kind of prose-poem) quoted is "Fu About a Beautiful Person".
Yuanji was shown into Sima Yi’s sickroom and was surprised to see that he had a lap table with congee and tea on it.

“I didn’t mean to disturb your breakfast, my lord,” she said after she bowed low. “It was nothing so urgent.”

“No, I have been dawdling over it,” he answered, beckoning for her to sit. “And you intrigued me. I don’t think you have ever requested to see me like this. You always simply ask when would be next convenient. So you have something more on your mind than finishing reading me that volume of my ancestor’s poetry.”

“My lord… I am ready to marry your son.”

Sima Yi paused with his tea cup against his lips, then pulled it away and set it back down on the tray, a wide smile spreading across his face. “You are ready? And Zhao?”

“I think Zhao has been ready for some time,” she said.

He chuckled. “Is that so? Well, I have long had to accept that you know him better than me.” He reached for her hand, and she let him take it. “Heaven truly favoured our clan when it allowed my wife to find you, my dear.”

Yuanji blushed and looked down. “You praise me too much, my lord.”

Sima Yi shook his head at that. “My dear, I have waited too long to wait any longer to hear you call me father. Lady Zhang and I both count you as a daughter, you know.”

“I know, father.”

He released her hand and picked up his tea cup again. “You had better go and tell my wife immediately. You are doing me no end of favours today. She will forget all about managing my health for me with such a pleasant occupation as planning your wedding banquet to deal with instead. When shall we announce it? I know… when Shi reveals himself. Nobody will dare to stay away then.”

Sima Yi laughed his villain’s laugh, and Yuanji smiled indulgently.

———

“This wound symbolizes my weakness. It can’t be undone, nor can it be forgotten. But it is over. This mask is my vow to move on.”

This was not the intended end of Sima Shi’s speech, but he paused as his younger brother burst into laughter. He smiled a little himself, not offended. He could see that it was a laughter of disbelief, and yet there was admiration in it as well. “Is it that funny, Zhao?”

“No, no,” Zhao said. His smile was so wide and warm. “It suits you. My brother really is a strong man.”
“I am glad I decided to run my speech by you in advance,” Shi said. “While here in private, I enjoy your laughter, you would rather spoil my effect if you laughed at me in court.”

Zhao lifted his hands out dramatically to either side of his head and mock-bowed. “That would be a tragedy.”

“To conclude.” Shi resumed his pose. “I consider that nothing I have done up until now is worthy of such an honour. I cannot possibly accept the Nine Bestowments while so many openly rebel. I beg your gracious pardon, my emperor, for not coming to decline in person myself before now, but I have been all consumed with plans for eliminating the pretenders in Chengdu and Jianye. There can be only one Son of Heaven. Wearing this mask, I will make it so.”

Zhao applauded, and Shi rolled his eyes.

“You won’t have any pertinent advice to make, I see. How about you, Yuanji?”

“You might add a poetic allusion,” Yuanji said, putting her hand to her chin. “If you wish to make the emperor angry and foolish, that will take the trick for sure. You’ve read his poem about the dragon trapped in a well.”

That dimmed Sima Shi’s smile. It was a thinly veiled lament about Cao Mao’s desire to rule in his own right. That he had written it showed that he was not yet properly cowed, and that the poem had spread showed that the Sima clan’s control of power was still viewed by too many as reversible.

“Yes.”

“You could make a dragon reference as well. Not directly, of course. A reference to one of the Songs of Chu about the Lord of the Clouds, perhaps…” Yuanji mused. “Or from the Classic of Poetry… if you describe yourself as unshaken, unmoved, unimpressed, unafraid…”

Sima Shi’s smile returned, brighter than ever before. “Then they will know that I am the one who is like the dragon in his heaven, displaying widely my daring… and the hundred ranks will be united in me.”

———

His brother’s speech made all of Luoyang tremble.

His mother sat like a satisfied cat among the avalanche of acceptances to his wedding.

His father had a wheelchair made to take him to the banquet, which he complained about bitterly. “Now that I have this, fools will expect me to do things and go places. A wheelchair is why Zhuge Liang died so young.”

As for Sima Zhao, his brother’s return to public life did not lessen his workload. Without speaking a single word that was openly seditious, his brother had plainly indicated his intention to seize the imperial throne not merely eventually, but soon. Many, therefore, wanted to express their support for his usurpation… wanted or were afraid not to… and especially for those who were afraid not to, Sima Zhao was considered everywhere to be far less frightening than his brother. Moreover, his upcoming wedding allowed the most cautious to use it as a pretext for talking to the Sima clan at all. This resulted in quite a lot of meetings in which everyone involved was artfully dancing around the real issues.

Zhao could do it, but how he hated it, every second of it.

He had told Yuanji that he wouldn’t go further than making her come on his fingers until their
wedding night. Sticking to that felt important, as maddening as it was… but he hadn’t, at least, penned himself in against letting her relieve him in other ways.

“Oh…” he moaned, clutching onto the arms of his desk chair to avoid grabbing at the beautiful hair of the head that was pressed against his thigh, as she sucked on the head of his cock. He wanted to force it down her throat, but she was so small, even her mouth was small. He couldn’t do that to her. “Hah… Yuanji… can you… can you use your hand…?”

Her inexpert ministrations to his cock were exquisite torture. He groaned again and put his hand over hers, setting the pace he preferred. Her mouth popped off the tip and she looked up at him, unsure.

“This is how I do it,” he told her, moving their hands together on his cock. “Ungh… I think of you. Since that first week. I always… ahn… always think of you.”

“My lord,” she whispered, her face flushed.

“Oh… I want to be in you so bad…” He couldn’t take it. She was so beautiful… perfect… her hand on his cock, held in his… calling him her lord, like that… “Ah… Yuanji… hah…”

With his last available braincells he grabbed at a handkerchief and pressed it to his cock to catch his cum, before it could spurt all over her. As hot as that would be, they could be interrupted at any time…

There was a throat clearing noise.

He let go of her hand. Yuanji sprang up and away from him, and Zhao, his face burning, hastily dropped the dirty cloth beneath his chair and refastened his pants.

“Sorry to interrupt,” drawled Shi as he opened the door, not sounding sorry at all, “but…”

Then Shi saw Yuanji, and he stopped in his tracks. He was clearly surprised.

“Oh,” he said in quite a different voice. “I… thought you were alone, Zhao.” He bowed to Yuanji, and when he returned to standing, he was actually blushing a little himself. “I apologize. Uh…”

Zhao had the rare privilege of seeing his brother at a loss, but it was a little irritating to his own pride that Shi was this shocked.

“You need to speak to your brother, I understand, my lord,” Yuanji said, her voice sounding almost normal despite the flush in her cheeks, and began to go.

“Yuanji, wait… I really am sorry. I never meant to embarrass you.” He smiled at her, almost sheepish. “You should know, I only ever do that to my brother. We’ll forget it happened?”

Yuanji smiled back at him. “It’s forgotten, my lord.”

With that, she left.

“No apology for me, huh?” Zhao said.

“Believe me, Zhao, with as many times as I have been forced to overhear you masturbating to thoughts of Yuanji, you would owe me dozens of apologies in exchange for this one,” Shi said, sitting in the chair across from him. “As I told her, let’s forget it happened. I have some intelligence I need to discuss with you.”

Zhao pulled out wine and cups. “Go ahead.”
“The first thing to say is that my plans are all finalized for our march upon Shu. The army is practically ready as it is. I will leave Luoyang five days after your wedding.” Shi made the tapping gesture of thank you for his cup of wine as Zhao poured.

“Five days?!” Zhao poured himself a cup of wine, downed it with the other hand without letting go of the bottle, and poured another. “Five fucking days?! That’s all the time you’re giving me with Yuanji?!”

“I could be really cruel here, but from the love I bear you I will cut short your highly amusing suffering.” Shi said, and laughed as Zhao made the exact same pulled face with his fingers pushing on his cheeks that he had done when they were boys. “You are not coming. You are remaining in Luoyang, where you can enjoy your bride as often as you choose.”

“Huh? But shouldn’t it be the other way around? I’m the dumb brute you send to do the hacking; you’re the ruler.”

“I feel this will involve less hacking, as you put it, and more diplomacy and strategy. Also, it will show my regained strength, which will frighten adversaries, yet also my willingness to put myself in danger, which will belie my imperial ambitions. Those ambitions are where you most conveniently come in. Your little dog, Jia Chong, was yapping quite a bit in Shouchun, I have discovered.”

Zhao felt a little twist in his stomach when Shi brought up Jia Chong. Up until now, Shi had never mentioned him at all in any way, nor seemed to pay any attention to Jia Chong’s attachment to him. That had to have been too easy to be true, and now here it was proved false. *Your little dog.* What an epithet for Jia Chong! He would need time to figure out what his brother meant by that. In the present he said, hoping he hadn’t left the pause too long, “You mean him and Zhuge Dan?”

“Oh?” Shi took a sip of wine and smiled. “You know about it?”

Zhao’s stomach twisted a little further. “Well, when you were removed from the world, he told me that he thought Wen Qin was trying to get Zhuge Dan on his side. I told you that.”

“But you didn’t tell me that he told you he had encouraged Zhuge Dan to think of you as an ambitious scoundrel who was scheming under benefit of my name.” His brother still smiled.

“I…” He couldn’t lie to his brother’s face believably, which meant he was stuck with the unbelievable truth. “I didn’t want to think about it myself. It’s all such a damn mess. Jia Chong has these ideas, and…”

“Not a trained dog, is he,” Shi said mildly, and sipped again. “And that was when Yuanji brought up the idea of marriage, wasn’t it? No wonder it went out of your mind, with such a more pleasant topic.”

Shi put his cup down, and Zhao took a breath in, remembering vividly how it was just about where that cup was that Yuanji braced herself with her hand while he fingered her for the first time. “Yeah, it was, uh… actually that same day.” Yuanji ‘brought up the idea of marriage’? *That’s how you think it happened? Oh, if only you knew, brother!*

“It doesn’t really matter, I suppose,” said Shi as Zhao picked up the bottle to refill Shi’s nearly empty cup. “The point is that it is, of course, an absurd idea, a trap that only a fool could fall into. Therefore we will catch fools with it. More precisely, you, my scheming, ambitious younger brother, will catch them for me, the noble and selfless devotee of Cao Wei, while I am off adding territory for my empire.”
Sima Shi took a drink of wine at his brother’s wedding banquet and rolled the liquid around his tongue, tasting every nuance of it.

What he tasted was not wine, but something sourer than that. Jealousy.

At his side, his wife was loudly enjoying the flirtatious attentions of the man next to her, but that was not the cause of his jealousy. He knew very well that his wife was only attempting to upset him. He had never really loved her in the first place, and nor had she ever loved him.

Not like Zhao loved Yuanji. Not like Yuanji loved Zhao.

He took another drink of wine and nodded at the blathering man whom he was superficially listening to.

He loved Zhao and Yuanji and he was happy for them, truly… but he could not stop being jealous.

*If father had not arranged your marriage to tie us to the Xiahou,* a dark voice whispered to him, *maybe you could have had Yuanji instead… a talented, intelligent, loyal, loving woman…*

*If you married Yuanji when she was fifteen, you wouldn’t have wasted any time… she would have given you a son by now, surely… she would look at you like she looks at Zhao… she would be a magnificent empress…*

He swallowed the wine and pushed the evil thoughts away, feeling sick. Might-have-beens… they were dangerous temptations to live in an imaginary past. He had to focus on the present and the future. Yuanji was his sister. He loved her as a sister. Only a sister.

His wife’s laughter was so irritating in his ears. When he fucked her tonight, he was going to leave her with bruised thighs afterwards.

Lady Zhang opened the door and pushed her husband’s wheelchair back into his room. “Shall I assist you in getting ready for bed, my lord?”

“I am not so feeble as that,” Sima Yi muttered, standing up.

Lady Zhang closed the door behind her and leaned against it. “There were days when you longed to have me undress you.”

His irritated expression vanished, and he looked at her wide smile. “So there were,” he said, then winced a little, putting a hand to his lower back.

She walked towards him and he made no comment or movement to stop her from starting to unfasten his banquet clothes. “They were good days,” Lady Zhang said softly, stepping away to hang up the outer gown while Sima Yi continued taking off the inner garments.

“How unusually tender of you, Chunhua,” Sima Yi said, trading his inner gown for the shift she brought him to sleep in. “If I had only known it merely took me being on the brink of death to expose your soft side to me.”

“A man as perceptive as my lord,” she said, putting the inner gown into the laundry basket, “must have long known about it.”
Sima Yi chuckled a bit, pulling back the blanket to get into bed. “When I met you, you were like a puzzle to me that I could only half solve. That was why I had to have you. But once I had you, I realized I understood you even less.”

Lady Zhang pulled the blanket over him and sat on the edge of the bed. “Then when did you understand me?”

“When I had my first leave from Lord Cao Cao. I had done well, and wanted to tell you about it; I wanted to impress you. But when I came home, you didn’t come out to greet me. I came inside, and I found you with Shi sleeping in your arms. You said, ‘Ah, my lord, isn’t he beautiful? You have missed so much for our sake.’ You looked up at me, and you were crying with happiness.” He laughed. “I think that was also the first night you used my own whip on me. It really was a good night.”

Lady Zhang chuckled herself, then turned more serious. “My lord, now that Zhao is married, are you thinking of that request you made of me again?”

“I know very well that Shi still needs me,” Sima Yi said, letting his eyes close. “Odious child. It will serve him right if I do die.”

Lady Zhang leaned over and kissed her husband softly. “Sleep well, my lord.”

———

The days leading up to a wedding are long and full enough to tire anyone, and Zhao had statecraft to deal with besides. During the wedding banquet he had looked so exhausted that Yuanji was afraid he might actually fall asleep at some points. She prepared herself not to be disappointed if the two of them simply undressed and collapsed into the marital bed.

She did not have to worry about that.

“God, Yuanji,” he growled the moment the door was shut, sending a thrill up her spine, “tonight I will finally have you.”

She licked her suddenly dry lips, looking up at him with her hands frozen in the process of untying the first tie; Zhao’s face was more awake and intense than she’d seen him in weeks.

He was already pulling off his own clothes recklessly. He let the ornate and expensive outer robe drop in a heap.

“My lord, the clothes—”

“Fuck them,” he said, working just as fast on his inner robes. “My mother can slap me about it tomorrow all she likes.”

She couldn’t help laughing at that, and began carefully untying her own outer robes.

He was down to his loincloth while she was still working on the inner ties of the outer gown. “Let me help.”

“No, please don’t ruin it,” she said, “I know you’ll never willingly wear yours again but I’d like to keep this.”

He groaned, but sighed and was careful in undressing her and even grumpily hung up the outer robe. Zhao turned back to her as she was unpicking the next tie on the inner garment. “What about your
underclothes? Any attachment?”

“I suppose not,” she said, not thinking much of the question, until she glanced over and saw that he was literally coming at her with a knife.

“Zhao!” she gasped. “You’re not thinking—”

He was, and he did. With only a few bold yet precise cuts, everything she was wearing fluttered away from her like moth wings, including her xieyi, which he had cut the strings of. While she was still in shock, Zhao chucked the knife to the ground carelessly, scooped her up, and carried her to the bed.

“You don’t understand, Yuanji,” he said as he climbed on top of her and started to pull off his loincloth. “I’d do anything at this point just to have you five seconds sooner.”

Her cheeks were on fire. Even with all they’d been doing the last few months, that had all involved them being almost entirely clothed. This was her first time being naked before him… no, not before him, under him, which made it feel even more vulnerable… and arousing.

“Don’t hide yourself.” He grabbed the arm she’d been unconsciously shielding her breasts from him with and pinned the wrist above her head, then did likewise with the other hand that was down over her pelvis. His breath caught as his gaze raked over her. “Oh, Yuanji… you are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen…”

She shuddered a bit at the intensity of his look and his words, but he didn’t relinquish his hold on her wrists until she’d stopped moving, and then only to shift her wrists across each other so he could keep them pinned with one large hand. The free hand quickly went to work between her legs.

———

He wished he had more hands. He liked having Yuanji pinned beneath him, on some very primal level he liked it a lot, and the way she was writhing as his other hand played with her, struggling against him and constrained by him, was so hot that he was absolutely not going to let her wrists go; yet watching those beautiful breasts bouncing and heaving…

Oh, but he did have another option, didn’t he?

“My lord!” he heard her moan as he began kissing and licking her breasts. He swirled his tongue around a nipple and took it into his mouth. “Oh… oh…!

She was close, but not there yet. He wanted his cock to be what pushed her to the edge and over it this time, and she was wet enough, slick enough, ready to welcome him in.

Zhao popped off the breast and kissed Yuanji as he pulled his hand away from her pussy as well, grabbing his cock and rubbing it with her juices.

“Are…” she panted, “are you going to…?”

“Yeah,” he said, none too steady himself. “Here I go.”

He pushed into her slowly, watching her face intently for signs of pain, praying to whatever god would listen that there wouldn’t be any, so that he could start fucking her the way he’d long been dreaming of. She felt so fucking good. She fit his cock perfectly, like she was made to surround him like this.
She winced a little when he fully sunk himself in, and he felt her reflexively flutter around him, which made him groan with pleasure. “Yuanji… are you alright? Did I hurt you?”

“You’re in me so deep, it… it does hurt a little bit…” she said.

He shifted his hips up slightly. “Is that better?”

“Yes…” she looked so embarrassed. “I’m sorry, my lord…”

“Don’t apologize, God, you feel incredible,” he said, bending to kiss her cheek. Slowly, he began working his hips up and down, careful not to go in too deeply, as tempting as that was. “Is this okay?”

“Better than okay,” she moaned, and with that encouragement he allowed himself to go faster.

———

Zhao was a much taller and broader than average man, and she was a smaller than average woman. She had mentally prepared herself for a certain amount of discomfort or pain, but once he adjusted to not go quite so deep, not only was there no pain, it felt fantastic. It was different than the intense stimulation to her clit when he touched her with his fingers, but that kept her more in the moment, less overwhelmed and therefore more aware of just how intimate they were being. They were one.

When he sped up, the pleasure sped up also. She wanted to caress him, but he had a firm grip on her wrists. Yuanji lifted her legs instead and rubbed her feet along the firm muscles of his lower back, butt, and thighs. “You feel, ah, so good, my lord.”

He leaned down and kissed at her neck, still thrusting. “Do I? Tell me more.”

This man! She turned her head as if to huff, but it became a moan as he sucked at her pulse point. “M-my lord…”

“How am I making you feel, Yuanji?” he whispered, his breath hot on her ear. “Am I filling you? Am I stretching you?”

“Y-you are…”

He kissed her cheek. “I love you so damn much. Let me kiss you.”

She turned her head back so he could kiss her, and as they kissed, the pleasure began to peak. Involuntarily she cried out against his lips.

He broke the kiss. “Are you coming?” he said, shakily.

Yuanji couldn’t answer, she just cried out again.

“God, you are.” He crushed his lips to hers and as she came, he forgot himself and thrust heavily into her. As her orgasm crested, it was mixed with pain from how deeply his cock reached inside her, but the pain almost made it better.

When they had both finished, he collapsed on top of her, breathing hard, and Yuanji could hardly breathe herself from the weight of him.

“My lord,” she gasped, and he laughed sheepishly and rolled off of her, lying on his back next to her.

“I’m sorry,” Zhao said. “Are you okay? That was dumb of me.”
She gave him one of her classic looks, the look that said *yeah it was dumb of you alright.* “Try not to do that next time.”

He turned onto his side facing her, and despite everything, she found herself blushing again as his gaze crept adoringly over her body. “You’re just… so beautiful… I know, you’re gonna say, ‘you keep saying that,’ but I can’t help it, I keep thinking it.” Then he yawned. “Do you want a nightgown or anything? I bet I could keep you pretty warm.”

She smirked, rolled over to blow out the candles on her side while he did the same on the other side, and then curled up to him as he pulled the blankets over them both. “We can give it a try, if you prefer me naked.”

“I definitely do…” he yawned again. “Wish I didn’t have to sleep…”

“Goodnight, my lord.”

———

When it had been four weeks, she decided it was time to tell him.

“My lord,” she said to him as they got ready for bed, “there is… a possibility I need to discuss.”

“Huh? What is it?” Zhao looked up standing on one leg in the act of trying to take off his pants and nearly lost his balance.

She smiled and shook her head. “Well… you wouldn’t know, of course, but I have always been very regular, and… since we married, I have not…”

Zhao stood there, holding his pants, looking confused. “Regular? Haven’t what?”

Yuanji tapped her fingers together. “My aunt hasn’t come.”

“Your aunt? You have an aunt? I thought other than your grandfather you don’t really like your family.”

Well, she supposed he didn’t really have any sisters or female friends, apart from her. Time to be more direct. “I haven’t bled.”

He stared at her, still holding his pants, then said slowly, “Haven’t bled…” His whole face lit up. “Are you saying you’re… you’re having a baby?”

She smiled. “I think I am.”

He dropped the pants and walked towards her, and she held out her hands to let him take them. “You’re pregnant. You’re having a baby. We’re going to have a baby. You’re going to be a mother. I’m going to be a father! We’re going to have a baby!”

Yuanji was laughing and nodding as he was shaking her hands in his excitement. Then he suddenly let them go and swooped her up into his arms to kiss her, but after kissing her, he froze with her in his arms.

“Did I pick you up too fast?! Is this still okay?”

“I’m pretty sure it is, my lord.” She reached out and affectionately swept his bangs from his forehead. “But you can be extra careful putting me down, if you like.”
He very gently set her down on the bed, then sat next to her. “This is so exciting! Who do we tell first? I want to tell father… but… if I tell father before I tell mother, she’ll murder me.”

“We could tell them both together.”

Zhao shook his head. “That wouldn’t be any good. Mother would take over. Father would get in two and a half sentences.”

Yuanji thought a moment. “How about you meet with your father and I meet with your mother at the same time? Then she can’t be mad that you told your father first, and you’ll still get to tell your father privately.”

“Yeah! That could work! Yuanji, I love you. You’re a genius. My baby’s mother is a genius!”

She laughed and they got more properly into the bed. “My lord, I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but… I did think you’d be pleased, but I also was expecting you to have some apprehension.”

Zhao put his hands behind his head and laughed, not sounding offended. “Yeah, I always try to get out of responsibility, right? I don’t know how to explain it, but it’s different… I don’t know. This was before you came to us, so you wouldn’t know, but when I was a kid, I was mad about dogs and horses. I used to breed them and train them from… I mean, I know a baby isn’t like a puppy or a foal! And obviously, y’know, some things I can’t do, uh, since I don’t have…” He pulled one hand out to gesture vaguely to his chest, and Yuanji chuckled. “But you’ve more than got that part covered.”

He gave her a look, and she rolled her eyes in response.

“But seriously, Yuanji, I don’t feel nervous. Maybe I will sometime, I don’t know. But this isn’t the kind of responsibility that I hate. Ordering people to go somewhere and die… trying to tell if a governor is lying or if the inspector is… reading memorials… deciding who to promote and who to punish…” He groaned. “All of that is awful. I have no idea what appeals to Shi about it. Hey…”

He turned and he actually whispered, even though they were in the privacy of their bed. “Maybe… maybe when Shi is really the emperor in name and there aren’t any threats to his power anymore… we could go away, you know? Just us and our baby. Maybe we’ll have more than one, by then…”

“Go away and do what?” she whispered back.

He shrugged with his top shoulder. “Raise horses, maybe? I bet I could do that.”

“Jia Chong will track you down and kill you,” Yuanji whispered, not sure if she was really joking.

Zhao chuckled as if it were one. “Nah, we’ll just have to make sure it’s someplace really sunny. He won’t be able to visit without bursting into flames.”

———

“Zhao, I told the servant to tell you to go away, and the servant told me you insisted,” Sima Yi said in a foul tone as his younger son entered and knelt at his bedside. “I don’t like this self-confidence that Yuanji has given you when it inconveniences me.”

He let Zhao kiss his hand irritably and then yanked it away. Sima Yi narrowed his eyes as he saw that Zhao wasn’t even having the graciousness to look chastened. “Well? What is it?”

“Yuanji’s given me more than self-confidence,” Zhao began, and as he paused, Sima Yi’s swift mind
immediately grasped the point.

He reached his hand back to take Zhao’s. “How sure is she?”

Zhao grinned widely. “Pretty sure, she says.”

“That’s excellent, that is really excellent,” Sima Yi sighed. He closed his eyes for a moment and imagined what they might be like, this child of Zhao and Yuanji. A wonderful child, no doubt, but very likely too good and too kind for this world of fools. He would have to tell Chunhua to be careful to make sure that their grandchild learned the importance of being shrewd. He squeezed Zhao’s hand lightly and said without opening his eyes, “If she’s pretty sure already, then the baby will come… let’s see… late spring. That’s the best time to have a child… you won’t have to worry about the cold…” Sima Yi opened his eyes. “Wait. If your mother hasn’t yet invaded my room to tell me this…”

“Yuanji is telling her right now.”

“Ah, then we have some time. Your mother is certainly imparting to your wife every single thing that she must do and not do and even think for the next seven months. And probably crying.”

“Mother never cries.”

“Not in front of you,” Sima Yi said, and smiled slyly at his son. “So, out with it.”

“Out with…?”

“What do you want to ask me before your mother tells me what to think about this? You can’t fool me.”

“Now father, mother tells you what to do all the time, I admit, but surely never what to think.”

“Cheek.” Sima Yi winced and let go of Zhao’s hand to press it to his side. “Help me sit up.”

“Will that help?”

“Never has, but there’s always a first time,” he grunted as his son assisted him into a more vertical posture with some bolsters. “At the very least it keeps me more alert. Now. Enough stalling, boy. I have my whip here, somewhere.”

Zhao laughed and scratched at his head sheepishly. “It’s dumb, but… I know Shi always, y’know, put Lady Xiahou… aside… whenever she was pregnant, and just, uh… consoled himself elsewhere… but… I don’t want to do that, but…”

“But you also don’t think you can last eight months,” Sima Yi chuckled. “Very natural. You’re sure you want to ask me? My reference point is your mother.”

“You’re the only man I know who won’t just say ‘sleep with prostitutes, get a mistress, what’s the problem?’”

“I see. Well, I’ll withhold details as I can, but you did ask for it. Doctors, as you probably suspect, say no, none, never. Your mother…” Sima Yi sighed, remembering those long ago years. “…your mother… was absolutely insatiable when she was pregnant.”

“Father…”

Sima Yi indulged in an abbreviated version of his villain’s laugh at his son’s squirming. “You asked!
Not only did we not abstain, she had me more frequently during those months than at any other time. And you both came out fine.” He shrugged, and gave Zhao a sardonic smile. “Or at least, you are not complete imbeciles, as the majority of those in the world are. But then your mother indulged in several activities which the doctors, I feel, would have disdained. She killed her first person during your brother’s gestation, and many more during yours.” He laughed again.

Zhao rubbed at his temple. “I should have known that was the kind of answer I would get.”

“We are a remarkable family, Zhao. It should not surprise you that the stricures of ordinary people do not bind us.”

Zhao let out an amused huff. “You ever tell this to brother?”

“Now you’re not thinking,” he scolded lightly, mockingly. “He would never have asked. Your brother thought he knew everything there was to know about sex and women at the age of fourteen. He figured it all out for himself based on books and, shall we say, independent research.”

“Yeah.” Zhao stretched. “I used to be so jealous of him. You know, I’d never tell him this, but I’m actually sorry for him now.” He stood up and bowed. “That’s really all I wanted to ask, so I’ll let you rest now.”

“Oh? You don’t want my wisdom on fatherhood?”

“Nah,” said Zhao, and then at his father’s look, blanched, raised his hands, and said, “I mean—I’ve already learned so much from your example, and stuff! More than words could express!”

Sima Yi relaxed his expression and threw his head back for a really good laugh. “Thank heaven. I would have been so disappointed if you had really lost all fear of me. Believe me, boy. I have no desire to waste my breath telling you how to be a father. Go on, I know you don’t want to be here when your mother bursts in to tell me the good news.”

Sima Yi chuckled again at his son’s palpable relief as he bowed again and left, then rang the bell to ask a servant for another dose of pain medication.

Chapter End Notes

As always translations from classical Chinese are my own.

*taps mic* Um... no one left a comment on the previous chapter, so, uh... if you're out there anyone... if you could say anything, anything at all, that would be great.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I used Liu Shan's actual surrender letter. Translation from classical Chinese is my own, as usual. I actually am not sure precisely how to translate 虎牙 in the context of Liu Shan's surrender letter; I know both its literal meaning and its figurative meaning as what in English is called "eyeteeth". I tried searching in both English and Chinese and could not discover anyone talking about it. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯ From context I'm guessing it was meant to be praising the general. The translations of the letter in English I have found skip over it entirely so I guess they don't know either.

When Cao Mao had obediently given his seal to the last piece of business Sima Zhao had set before him, he said, “Sima Zhao, you are very happy today.”

Sima Zhao laughed guiltily. “Ah, is it so obvious, your majesty? Just some good news…” He collected all the documents and put them away, then looked at the emperor expectantly.

When Cao Mao didn’t immediately react, Sima Zhao raised an eyebrow.

Cao Mao flushed. “You’re dismissed.”

Sima Zhao backed away bowing, in the proper manner, but it felt all the more like a mockery to the young emperor. Cao Mao was the one who had been dismissed, not the other way around.

Emperor… only in name was he emperor! And yet how could he change that? Twice his kinsmen had attempted to stand up to the Sima family and twice the Sima family had replaced them, and the Sima clan had less support and power then than now.

He had thought he was making some headway in winning people to his side while the Sima brothers were in Shouchun. When he thought of the bright idea of keeping the brothers, one of them recuperating from surgery, quarantined in Xuchang, he had sought more open support by reading his poem about a dragon in a well.

But it had backfired badly. They had refused to receive the messenger, and come to Luoyang anyway. Then Sima Shi had gone into his seclusion. Nine times he was forced to publicly beg Sima Shi to accept the highest honour possible, and only on the ninth had Sima Shi even bothered to come in person to decline it.

These wolves… they really were a pack of wolves, these Sima… and they liked playing with their prey before they ripped it to pieces.

“Good news,” was it? Good news for Sima Zhao could not be good news for Cao Mao. This Sima Zhao… he was the worst of any of them, because he had that false appearance of goodness and humility! And what a ravenous heart was behind that warm smile, those laughing eyes!

Zhuge Dan… Zhuge Dan had managed to write to him, warn him… Cao Mao had so few allies left, he could not squander the opportunity. He had to act fast, whatever this “good news” was. While Sima Shi was in the west, he needed to destroy Sima Zhao in the east… and if he destroyed Sima
Zhao in the east, he would need to make sure that Sima Shi never made it back from the west.

The young emperor got up, thoroughly checked for spies, and then began to write letters.

———

It was a few days after the meeting with the emperor; days that for Sima Zhao had seemed to pass like warm spring breezes, despite the oppressive late summer heat. Jia Chong had requested to meet with him urgently, yet not even that could wreck his good mood. He cheerfully took a seat across from Jia Chong with a merry greeting while grabbing the cup of wine that had already been poured for him.

“Is Lady Wang with child?” Jia Chong inquired, causing Sima Zhao to spray wine from his mouth.

“Jia Chong!” Sima Zhao said, exasperated. “How did you know that?!?”

“At your wedding, I thought I’d never seen you so happy,” Jia Chong said. “Now you look that way all the time. Something’s changed, and I know everything about you outside of your family; therefore…”

Sima Zhao was attempting to clean up the wine spittle he’d blown all over the table. Fortunately they hadn’t had any documents out.

Jia Chong retrieved a cloth to clean what had sprayed onto his clothes without any sign of offence. “So now the question is, will this child undo your progress and make you rest on your laurels? Or will you now have the motivation to become the man you know you could be?”

“Fuck me,” groaned Sima Zhao, “what do you even mean when you say shit like that? You should write opera.”

Jia Chong smiled. “I’m already writing something that will go down the generations.”

“I’m a supporting character in this story, alright? Let’s just keep that perfectly clear. You know my brother is on to you, right?”

Jia Chong’s jaw dropped. Sima Zhao had never seen Jia Chong rattled before, and it was an ominous sight, like seeing a devil flinch. “What do you mean?”

“He knew everything you were doing with Zhuge Dan,” Sima Zhao said. “He called you my little dog and then said you were untrained.”

“When was this?”

“Oh, a while ago. A few weeks before the wedding, I guess.” Sima Zhao sighed. “I didn’t know what the fuck I was supposed to say.”

“You should have told me right away. You told him I told you about Zhuge Dan? You should have pretended you knew nothing about it.”

“Oh no you don’t,” said Sima Zhao savagely. “First you start up some conspiracy I never goddamn asked for, then my brother gets twisty with me about how I never told him what you told me, and now you’re getting bitchy that I didn’t tell you that I told him that you told me after he told me that you told Zhuge Dan—” He ran his hand through his hair. “Fuck! I never wanted to play any of these games!”
“You’re the key piece, Zhao,” Jia Chong said, low and powerful. “You’re like the general. The general can barely move, but he’s the whole game. All the showy pieces, the powerful pieces—they all move for him.”

“But I don’t want to be that! I only help my brother because he needs me. When the day comes he doesn’t need me anymore—I’m done. I’m gone.”

Jia Chong looked at him for a long moment, and then said, “When do you think that day will be?”

“When my brother gets what he wants.”

“Will he have what he wants if you have a son and he has none?”

Zhao’s nostrils flared, but he said nothing.

“For all your brother talks about heaven’s will,” Jia Chong, even more quietly, “heaven hasn’t favoured him in one key area. You are his heir. And after you… your son, when you have one.”

“This one might be a girl,” said Zhao after a beat. “And Lady Yang might still give him a son.”

Jia Chong shrugged and half-smiled. “We’ll see, won’t we? In the meantime… I need to know what your brother said about Zhuge Dan in full. This might explain some things.”

Sima Zhao rubbed his face, but decided to give in. It would be quicker and easier than trying to resist, anyway.

After he explained everything, Jia Chong got up and began to pace.

“Uh… what’s up?” said Sima Zhao.

“You need to tell me everything from now on, immediately,” said Jia Chong, still pacing. “This could have been the end of it all. You have told me just in time to turn it into a triumph. It’s time to offer Zhuge Dan that promotion.”

“Now?” Sima Zhao stared at him. “But there are no open cabinet positions.”

“I know. Which of them do you dislike most? If you have no preference, I suggest Minister of War, for the irony.” [The term for Minister of War in Chinese is Sima, the same as the Sima clan name.]

“But what’s the hurry? What’s going on?”

“I arranged to see you today because we received a request—by bird—for one hundred thousand additional troops for Zhuge Dan. The stated reason is because he believes Wen Qin intends to invade from Wu.”

“You’re saying he intends to use those troops to cooperate with the invasion,” said Sima Zhao.

“Exactly. Wen Qin is playing the long game. He joined with Wu only because he saw no other way to get the strength needed to ‘rescue’, as he sees it, Wei. God knows how he thinks he’s going to somehow throw aside Wu when that happens.”

“But why would Zhuge Dan join him?”

“Obviously because the emperor ordered him to.”

“The emperor…” Sima Zhao said, rather faintly. “Oh God. They’re going to invade Luoyang while
“Not when we force them to break the law. You, my lord, will offer him promotion instead of troops; he will panic and begin to try to purge those under his command that he suspects or knows are loyal to the Sima. As soon as he does so, you can bring an army to ‘inspect’ the situation; his rebellion will immediately become one in name. We will eliminate Zhuge Dan, possibly also Wen Qin, and weaken Wu significantly; and it will become obvious that to conspire with the emperor against you is to write one’s own death warrant. If we are very lucky, we may even get evidence of something that could compel the Dowager Empress to force Cao Mao to abdicate.”

“And replace him with who?” Sima Zhao said.

Jia Chong only smiled. “I was getting ahead of myself, my lord. Let’s focus on the immediate steps first.”

———

Sima Shi picked up the meat bun on his plate and savoured its aroma.

After a mere month’s siege of Hanzhong, it was his. Now they were poised to make a run at Chengdu and with it rid his empire of Shu’s foolishness forever. He wanted them to feel their panic and their helplessness before he moved in, and his army needed a break; therefore he had ordered this furlong.

Just when he was about to take a bite, he heard a nervous throat clearing, and turned to see Xiahou Ba, looking, as usual, like a child dressed in his father’s armour, for all that he was a fully-grown man with hundreds of kills to his name.

“Hey, uh, my lord… could I uh… talk to you?”

“You are talking to me,” said Sima Shi, but he smiled as he said it.

Xiahou Ba glanced at the guards, and Sima Shi added, “I see. Guards, leave and be sure no one approaches the door.”

When they had done so, Xiahou Ba said, “You’re sure this is private, my lord? It’s really, really important that this be private.”

Sima Shi got up. He had chosen this room as his make-shift office for a reason; it had excellent views from the windows in all directions, and a long, long hallway which could be guarded at its very end without the guards themselves being able to hear speech. He checked all of these things thoroughly, then returned to Xiahou Ba. “We are private.”

“I got a letter… uh… maybe you’d better just read it.”

Xiahou Ba handed a sloppily refolded letter to Sima Shi.

The emperor was ordering Xiahou Ba to assassinate Sima Shi; ideally as soon as they finished conquering Shu. The assassination attempt was not to occur within the next month, but if an opportunity presented itself at any time after that, he was to take it, even if the conquest of Chengdu was not finished.

Sima Shi pretended to read it for far longer than it actually took him. If the emperor was moving this decisively, then his family were in mortal danger back in Luoyang. The instruction not to move in the next month meant that the emperor needed at least a little time to prepare to move against Zhao.
Should he try to alert Zhao? If he made any kind of attempt to do so, the emperor would probably find out about it. Maybe he should rather just trust that Zhao, or his father, would figure it out and handle it. But maybe he should let the emperor know that Shi was onto him…

“Do you think it might be Shu, impersonating the emperor?” said Xiahou Ba, but he sounded very uncertain.

“Between us two, Xiahou Ba,” Sima Shi said, meeting the younger man’s eyes, “suppose you knew it was the emperor ordering you to kill me?”

Xiahou Ba swallowed. He didn’t look happy, but his voice, though halting as he searched for the right words, was firm in the belief behind it. “I know it’s treasonous to even think it, but… the closer we get to Shu… the more I see exactly what incompetent rule does… and I keep thinking about what Lord Guo Huai said to me when I tried to make a run for it. Back then, I thought for sure you’d kill me based on my name, but you didn’t. So… so why should I kill you for the emperor? Just because we’re distantly related? Am I loyal to the emperor or the empire? Wei has never been closer to unifying the land than under your command, my lord. I want to be a part of that.”

Sima Shi smiled widely. “When I am emperor,” he said, for the first time allowing himself to speak his ambition aloud outside of his immediate family, “I will make you a duke.”

Xiahou Ba laughed and scratched his hair. “Eh, if you think I’ll live that long, my lord.”

“The emperor may have sent this sort of letter to more than just you,” Sima Shi said. “Be alert for anyone acting strangely. I will need you to watch my back, especially after we eliminate Shu.” He folded the letter properly and put it into his pocket. “I’ll keep this. If you are approached by anyone who seems to have knowledge of the letter, deny knowledge of it and then tell me as soon as possible.”

Xiahou Ba raised his hands to bow. “Yes, my lord.”

———

Wang Yuanji walked across the practice hall and pulled her throwing knives out of the target rather listlessly.

For five months now, Zhao had been away campaigning in the southeast, dealing with unrest in Shouchun that had turned into an actual invasion from Wu, with Zhuge Dan turned traitor and assisting the Wu forces.

Meanwhile, she was in Luoyang, virtually under house arrest in the Sima compound with her in-laws, with an entire squadron assigned by Zhao to guard it. At first Yuanji had just thought that Zhao was overprotective because of her pregnancy. After all, the imperial capital was at no risk of invasion, and had barely any crime.

Then someone attempted to kidnap her mother-in-law, and it became clear that if anything Zhao had underestimated the danger. The kidnappers, after all, had made it inside Lady Zhang’s room while she was sleeping, but their attempt to gag her failed, and she had already killed an opponent with her bare hands by the time the guards rushed to the aid of her screams. But the fact that they had been sent to kidnap her was very ominous. This could only mean that whoever it was wanted to use their mother to force Shi and Zhao to cooperate with them.

Before that event, she had been permitted to go out more or less normally during the day, albeit with a larger guard than before; now her mother-in-law flatly refused, and Yuanji did not want to test her.
Nor was she even allowed to receive guests. Her social circle was now limited to her parents-in-law, whom she loved but who were both extremely intense people, and her sister-in-law, whom she disliked.

She wrote a great deal of poetry, practiced the guqin, listened to her mother-in-law, read her own and other people’s poetry to her father-in-law, and threw her knives. Day after day after day.

Yuanji was a rather introverted person by nature but this extremely limited range of activities and people was constraining even for her. And her belly was beginning to get too large to sit at the proper distance from the guqin; she had to sit back and lean forward in an awkward way.

The door opened, and Sima Yi was there, leaning upon a cane. After the kidnapping attempt, Sima Yi had revived in a big way, at least externally, within the privacy of the Sima compound. Although he remained officially senile and decrepit, he now regularly walked the grounds with a cane, his whip hanging from his belt. Apparently the Sima patriarch was now determined to get better out of sheer spite.

“Good morning father,” said Yuanji.

“Good morning,” he said. “I’ve had a letter from Shi. It includes a copy of Liu Shan’s surrender letter.”

Yuanji breathed a sigh of relief. “Is he coming home soon?”

“Yuanji,” Sima Yi said with mild rebuke, “Don’t you want to know why my son included a copy, rather than simply telling me that Liu Shan surrendered?”

Yuanji smiled. “If you want to tell me, I am eager to hear you, father.”

“Impertinent,” said Sima Yi, but he was smiling as well. “I shall read you the lines in question. ‘When Cao Pi was emperor, he sent his tiger-fanged general Xianyu Fu to extend to me an imperial edict of such warmth and grace, opening his doors to me. His great righteousness was manifest, yet I was without virtue, lost in weakness, greedily clinging to a lost cause, gazing at a worn-out legacy, and did not accept this great instruction.’ I wrote that edict, that this failure so praises. Do you think my son informs me to flatter me or mock me? I cannot myself decide.”

“Are those the only two options?” said Yuanji.

Sima Yi threw back his head and laughed. “And what do you think of it, my dear? Go on, I know you want to.”

“Great righteousness and great instruction; not well phrased,” she said, frowning. “Also, who is this Xianyu Fu?”

“Absolutely no one of any consequence. Who but someone whose life means nothing gets sent to carry a request to surrender? Tiger-fanged general indeed. Do you know, I cannot even remember whether Shu executed him or not.” Sima Yi laughed again. “Yuanji, if we must be caged in this disgraceful way, I am glad that you are here with us. Alas, this cage will continue for the time being. He will only march back when he is ready to bring a good deal of his army; another three or four months, he guesses.”

“The women are being exceptionally uncooperative, my lord. I have been sent because the guards did not wish to lay hands upon them without your express authorization. Lady Zhang Xingcai is
demanding you by name.”

Sima Shi looked at the messenger, looked at the meat bun in his hand, and sighed. He placed the meat bun back onto the tray, said, “Have the cook told to prepare a fresh batch for me when I can return to eat them. Anyone may have these,” to a guard, and followed the messenger.

He bowed in a respectful manner that he was a long way from feeling when he entered the room where the female future hostages had been herded in the wake of Liu Shan’s surrender. “Lady Zhang,” he said, addressing the women as a group, as he didn’t know which one was actually Liu Shan’s wife, “I am told you have words for me?”

A beautiful woman, slightly older than him, perhaps, stepped forward. “I do indeed, my lord. Why have the childless women been separated out in this suspicious way? Why are they now trying to break us apart into smaller groups?”

“I hope you can understand, Lady Zhang, that guarding women like you requires the most virtuous guards we have. By placing all of you together, such righteous guards will not be spread too thin. What’s more, you can chaperone each other,” Sima Shi said calmly. “As they should have told you, they are trying to place you into carriages in three groups of three. When you arrive in Luoyang, you will have been continuously together the entire time and able to verify each other’s safety.”

“But why not simply send us with our husbands and fathers, my lord?” she countered.

“Because, Lady Zhang, not all of your husbands and fathers will be coming to Luoyang.”

Sima Shi saw the despair in the room and let it roll off of him like water on an oilcloth.

Lady Zhang kept her chin high. “My husband will be coming to Luoyang, of course, my lord?”

“He will be,” Sima Shi said, “but I cannot yet say whether you will see him there.”

This vaguely menacing statement made her eyes widen, but she still did not waver in her dignity. “I see. Alright. Lady Fan and Lady Zong will be in my carriage.”

The two named ladies were probably the same two very young ladies who stepped forward slightly at this and clung to their erstwhile empress with frightened eyes. Sima Shi bowed. “I will tell the guards to let you arrange the seating, my lady.”

———

“My lord! Wen Qin’s sons have come offering surrender.”

“Surrender?” said Sima Zhao.

Jia Chong snorted. “I’ll handle this, my lord.”

“Oh no you won’t,” said Zhao, getting up. “You nearly put your axe through Jiang Ban when he came to surrender last month.”

“That is an exaggeration,” said Jia Chong, somewhat petulantly. “It’s not as if it would have been a great loss anyway.”

“Wen Yang would be a great loss,” Zhao said as he left.

The two kneeling men waiting for Sima Zhao looked soul-weary. Zhao looked for a moment from one to the other. The older one had the same armour with the magnificent qilin helmet he had seen
from that battlement the last time Zhao had come to Shouchun to put down a rebellion… had it really been only a year ago? The face within the helmet was still very young looking, maybe eighteen. This was the youth who led the cavalry raid into Sima Shi's camp that nearly sent the entire force into chaos; the only truly exceptional fighter in Guanqiu Jian and Wen Qin's entire army. There was a nasty-looking wound across the left cheek, hastily bandaged. The younger one wore more drab and ordinary armour, to blend in instead of stand out. He looked perhaps fifteen, more scared and sad than his brother, or at least less able to hide these feelings.

Sima Zhao crossed his arms. “How about you start by telling me who you are and why you’re here.”

Wen Yang met his eyes, clearly startled by this unconventionally casual speech. In return, Sima Zhao smiled.

“I am Wen Yang, son of Wen Qin. This is my younger brother, Wen Hu. Zhuge Dan has executed our father. When we learned of this, we decided that the only possible way forward was to climb the city walls and come here to place our heads at your mercy, my lord.”

“Yeah, it would be impossible to get to Wu, right?” said Zhao, still light and casual. “I mean, we’ve got the city surrounded. Hey, hey, don’t look so stricken. I don’t like killing people if I can avoid it, and I’m definitely not the type who torments them before I do it. How old are you two?”

The two brothers looked at each other, bewilderment warring with hope. Wen Yang said, “I’m eighteen, and my brother is fifteen.”

“Roughly what I’d guessed, then,” said Zhao, oddly pleased with this small success. “Obviously, you know that your father is guilty of treason and that his entire family should be exterminated—under the law. That’s never seemed fair, or even rational, to me. I mean, you were seventeen, he was fourteen; what were you supposed to have done, rebel against your father? Doesn’t the law tell children to obey their parents? God knows I’d never be able to go against mine, and I’m twenty-two. As for executing you to punish your father—he’s already dead, so how’s he going to know about it? If I was his ghost I wouldn’t be sticking around here. The law says I should have you both executed. I say that’s stupid and I’m not going to. Stand up.”

The young men stood up.

“You’re both pardoned,” said Sima Zhao. “You’re now my officers. I’m going to give you each a hundred cavalry. Tomorrow, as soon as the light is good, I want you to start circling the city and telling everyone inside that Wen Qin’s sons have been pardoned. Knowing that you two have been pardoned, what ordinary soldier will be afraid to surrender?”

Sima Shi entered Luoyang in triumph, the Shu pretender following him as docile as a lamb, his army encamped in the outskirts of the imperial capital, ostensibly awaiting the imperial order to attack Wu and unite China at last.

And it would be reunited, but it would be done under no one’s name but Sima Shi’s.

Sima Shi went directly to see the emperor, with Xiahou Ba at his side. He smiled at Cao Mao and introduced to him Liu Shan. He told the emperor that it was his philosophy to treat those who accepted their own failure and incompetence and surrendered rather than prolonging the inevitable with mercy.

“Of course, if Lord Liu Shan had resisted me, I would have slain him with my own hand,” said Sima
Shi with a smile that broadened as he saw the emperor quiver. “But as he handed over the bulk of his kingdom without unseemly death struggles, I suggest most humbly, my emperor, that you enfeoff him as a duke, and allow him to live comfortably. Here is a plan I have drawn up for his integration into the empire. Does it meet with your approval, your imperial majesty?”

With great humility of posture he offered the paper to the emperor, who took and read the document which offered a timeline whereby Liu Shan was at first to live in comfortable but vigilantly guarded and monitored rooms, kept away from all of his former Shu subjects, even his wife, until the newly annexed territory of Shu had spent a sufficient amount of time thoroughly docile. Then, the duke was to gradually receive an enlargement of his freedom of movement and his social circle, with the final stage being a life of indolent luxury split, at the duke’s own choosing, between a city house in the capital and a country villa with ample hunting. Of course, until the end of his days, the duke would be monitored; but he would otherwise live a life of pleasure.

The emperor looked up, and Sima Shi knew that Cao Mao knew that this was also the choice being offered to him: powerless comfort, or death. Would he accept that the only way for him not to be killed was to eventually abdicate?

“Yes,” said the emperor, and then, after a moment, said, “Sima Shi, will you now accept the Nine Bestowments?”

Sima Shi smiled but said neither yes nor no.

“And… and the title of… King of Jin?” Cao Mao’s voice quivered.

Sima Shi bowed. “I am overcome with gratitude that you still feel I am worthy. You have offered this to me too many times for me to insult you by continuing to refuse. I will accept.”

Cao Mao moistened his lips. “What is… your next step?”

“I understand my brother is still subduing Shouchun,” said Sima Shi. “I am glad that my brother was here to so serve you, my emperor, while I was away in the west. Any day now, I am sure, we will hear that the traitor Zhuge Dan has died. And Wu will have expended a great deal of its resources supporting this imbecilic attempt at rebellion. I shall have them dealt with very soon. Heaven favours the emperor.”

After seeing Liu Shan handed off into custody and making sure that the rest of the Shu hostages were where they ought to be, he finally went home. He could hardly wait to see the admiration in everyone’s eyes at his triumph. If only Zhao could have been there too.

They were all there and waiting for him; his wife grabbed onto him in a disgusting false show of intimacy as she wept over her gratitude for his safe return, and he was dimly aware that his mother was speaking, but his eyes could only look at one thing.

Yuanji was so great with child… she had smiled, and then blushed and twisted her body as if she was embarrassed by his shock.

Well, of course… he knew she was pregnant, the time added up, the baby must be due at any moment. What had he expected her to look like?

He tore his eyes away and spoke, he hoped cogently, to his mother.

It wasn’t really about Yuanji at all, he realized as he let his mother rescue him from his wife for an invitation to consume Lady Zhang Chunhua’s legendary meat buns, Sima Shi’s favourite version of his favourite food in the entire world. It was that Yuanji’s body had suddenly reminded him about
what another woman had looked and acted like in that condition.

He followed his mother to the dining table. Xiao Hui… Lady Xiahou. She was so short and slight, smaller even than Yuanji; had getting pregnant so young and so often stunted her growth? Sima Shi’s mouth was suddenly dry, even though he was looking down at a platter of meat buns. Six children she had given him… three of them she had suffered to see die in her arms as newborns…

“Aren’t you hungry, my lord?” his current wife was tittering. “Perhaps you just don’t want this. I can try to make you something… or perhaps you just want to rest…? I could rub your back, if you’re tense…”

Unbelievable. Lady Yang thought she could so snidely insult his mother’s cooking—while his mother was standing there!—and then seduce him in the same breath? He had married an imbecile. This was the woman he had thrown Lady Xiahou away like garbage for?

“I want to rest alone,” he said, pushing the tray away and getting up. But when he got to his rooms, he could not rest.

Instead, he sat down to write a letter.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Things continue to be all twisty and dark here. I'm not sure how to warn for triggers so if you have triggers or you're not in the right kind of mood, better safe than sorry and skip this for now. I've updated the content tags on the work; check those.

There was a missing scene when I first uploaded this chapter. It is now fixed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was a bright spring day, one of those with a severe contrast between the warmth in the sun and the cold in the shade. Yuanji was sitting a bench in a garden, reading poetry with her mother-in-law on her left and her father-in-law on her right. The breeze blew flower petals that she had to brush off the pages. Her sister-in-law, Lady Yang, had invited herself to listen, having brought out a stool for herself, but as long as she actually remained silent, Yuanji didn’t mind.

“Does she always read to you from Sima Xiangru, father?” It was Sima Shi, coming into the garden from the western doorway.

“This collection has many poets of that era,” said Sima Yi. “Perhaps you should enlarge your spirit by listening.”

“Perhaps I should,” said Sima Shi. “Is the poetry of Zhuo Wenjun in there, Yuanji?”

“Only her most famous work, I believe, my lord.”

“Please read that one.”

Yuanji read aloud:

“White as the snow on the mountain, bright like the clouds by the moon.
They say my lord’s thoughts are double, our parting therefore must be soon.
Today we drink wine together, at dawn at the gully it ends.
Mince your way over the water, as the current beneath you wends.

Misery and more misery! Must a bride lament when she weds!
May her man be single-hearted, unparted with white-haired heads.
How graceful is the bamboo pole, how frantic the fish on its end!
A man should value the spirit. How dare he use his wealth to rend!”

“You are so right, as usual, father,” said Shi. “That was precisely what I needed to hear today. By the way, mother, I am nearly done with preparations to go visit your granddaughters. If you would like me to carry gifts to them for you, can you have them ready in two days?”

“My granddaughters?” said Lady Zhang. “Then I want… may I come with you, Shi?”

“You’re not thinking, mother. How can you leave now? Yuanji could give birth any day.” Shi smiled indulgently at her.
“Oh, yes, of course,” said Lady Zhang, looking from Yuanji to Shi and back, clearly torn between hope and fear, which was so unusual that it made Yuanji feel almost ill. “I’ll get them gifts… I wish I knew how much they’ve grown… two days in the morning, Shi?”

“I leave in three days, very early in the morning, so if you have them for me in the evening, that will be fine.”

Yuanji finally dared to steal a glance at her sister-in-law to see how she was taking this announcement that Shi was visiting his daughters—and therefore his ex-wife—just after asking her to read a poem that lambasted a man for being unfaithful. And it was a Sima man that the author was writing about, too; Sima Xiangru’s wife, Zhuo Wenjun, had written that poem to rebuke his neglect of her. And it had worked, the legend stated; she regained his favour.

Lady Yang was staring at her husband’s smiling profile with her lips pressed into the thinnest line, all colour drained from her face, a vein prominent on the back of her clenched hand.

“I know it’s short-notice,” he said, “but I will be visiting my daughters only briefly. I want to tell them in person that they’re to become princesses.”

Shi bowed and left via the eastern door, not having once looked at his wife that Yuanji had noticed. After a few moments, Lady Yang got up and left north.

“I think we would find it difficult to concentrate on poetry from here, Yuanji,” said Sima Yi. “Chunhua, please help me back to my room.”

———

Sima Zhao rode in a carriage the last leg of the journey back to Luoyang, with Jia Chong beside him and Zhuge Dan’s severed head in a box across from him.

He wasn’t happy about this, but his brother had written to tell him to bring it to the emperor, in the same letter in which he had informed his brother that he was accepting the Nine Bestowments and the title of King of Jin; by the way, would Sima Zhao prefer to be a prince or a duke?

Sima Zhao would prefer to remain Sima Zhao, but that wasn’t an option, was it.

Zhong Hui was remaining in Shouchun as the new governor there; the Wen brothers were riding behind the carriage. As much as he hated it, Sima Zhao knew he needed more personally loyal officers of talent to protect him and those he most cared about. Wen Yang was exceptionally talented, despite his youth. In the weeks since his surrender, they had gotten to know each other pretty well. Wen Yang felt a life debt to Zhao for sparing him and his brother, and the young man had both a longing to be a hero and the ability to actually play the role. Zhao actually kind of envied Wen Yang for the simplicity and purity of his desires.

At the feast where they celebrated their success in Shouchun before returning to the capital, Sima Zhao had said with deceptive lightness, “Well, at least I know I won’t have anything to worry about on the journey back. I’ll have my brain in my carriage with me and my right and left hands riding behind me. I can sleep the whole trip!”

Wen Yang had beamed; the corners of Jia Chong’s mouth had gone up a tiny amount. Zhao knew how to handle them, alright.

“Does this really have to ride in the carriage with us?” Jia Chong interrupted his thoughts. “It’s starting to smell.”
“We’ve only got a few hours left.”

Jia Chong gave him a look. “But why did you insist on it being in the carriage at all?”

“Because I am going to treat his remains with as much respect as I can while they’re still under my control,” Zhao grumbled.

“Who’s going to find out about it?” Jia Chong said.

“What does that matter? I know about it.”

“Just when I think you’re finally getting over these childish beliefs…” Jia Chong sighed.

In truth, Zhao actually had to force himself to have the box in the carriage with him. He didn’t like that; he didn’t like that he had nearly told Jia Chong to just handle it all, including disposing of the rest of Zhuge Dan’s body.

He didn’t want to be that person. Zhuge Dan was a fool but he had been a comrade once, and he had been pushed into an ignominious death, in order to make the Sima grip on power more secure. Zhao couldn’t let himself treat that flippantly.

“Yuanji might have already had the baby,” Zhao said, to put the topic onto something much happier.

Jia Chong chuckled. “I hope for your sake she has. Waiting during labour even had me on edge. I already know you’ll be an absolute wreck.”

“Oh yeah, I’d forgotten you had a wife. Why do you never bring her around?”

“She has a bad habit of murdering people she’s jealous of,” Jia Chong said calmly. “I wouldn’t put it past her to even make an attempt on you. She thinks I’m simply your officer; if she knew how close our friendship is…”

“Are you serious?”

“When do I joke?”

Zhao sighed. “How is it that I can’t introduce any topic with you without it somehow immediately swinging around to murder?”

———

“My lady,” said a servant, “Lord Sima Zhao is here.”

“I’ll be right there,” Lady Zhang said, putting aside her embroidery and getting up. “Under no circumstances is anyone to awaken Lady Wang or the baby. Understood?”

“Yes, my lady.”

Lady Zhang walked as fast as she could without breaking into an undignified run and was just in time to intercept Zhao, whom, as she had suspected, had taken only the briefest amount of time to realize that his wife hadn’t come to see him and was going to see her.

“They’re asleep,” she called, making him stop. “You just have to wait.”

“They’re… they’re?” Zhao’s face lit up.
She laughed softly, taking his hands as she came up to him. “Yes, you have a son. And they are both doing very well. But he was only born yesterday, and it is extremely tiring, giving birth. You men have no idea what suffering is. And babies are very needy. When the baby sleeps, Yuanji needs to sleep too; otherwise she may never recover, which I’m sure you don’t want?”

“No, of course,” said Zhao, daunted. He frowned, looked down at their joined hands, looked in the direction of his rooms, and said tentatively, “You’re sure I can’t just look in and see them? I wouldn’t wake them up, I swear.”

“Zhao, I know you’re not asking me to put your wife at risk just because you can’t bear to wait a few hours at most,” Chunhua said with her most terrifying smile.

“No, you’re right, of course you’re right mother… I don’t know what I was thinking…”

“You’re tired from the journey,” she said, patting his hands and then letting them go. “What you need, my son, is a good, thorough wash and fresh clothes. Then when your wife wakes up, you won’t look as awful as you do right now.”

Zhao put one newly freed hand to his hair. “I look awful?”

“Shameful,” Chunhua assured him.

“Alright, but… I want to know the moment they wake up, alright?”

———

The baby was crying again. Yuanji let herself be sleepily maneuvered into a propped up sitting position and blinked down as the servants got the baby into the right position to nurse.

“I’ll be right back,” said Lady Zhang. “She looks like she can manage like that for a bit; you all come with me.”

Yuanji, eyes still barely open, only managed a nod. Probably getting more food…

“Yuanji…”

That woke her up. “My lord,” she breathed, fully opening her eyes to see him close the door behind him and take two big strides to the bed. His hair looked damp, as if he had just washed, and he was dressed only in lounge clothes.

He knelt by her bedside and looked at the baby. “Wow… wow… he’s so tiny! He’s going to take after you.”

“I’m told he’s actually bigger than average,” said Yuanji.

“Is he really?!” Zhao put a hand out to hesitantly brush the fine, fluffy hair. He touched the back of a little hand, and it opened; he touched the palm, and it closed on his finger. “Yuanji! Yuanji he’s grabbing my finger!”

Even with how tired she was, Yuanji started laughing. “Yes, I can see that, my lord.”

Zhao ran his other hand through his hair. “Wow. This is crazy! This is wild! That’s our baby!”

Suddenly he turned his face to hers. “Yuanji, are you really okay? You look exhausted. It was really hard, huh? I’m sorry I wasn’t here… not that I could have done anything… but you know…”

Before she could reply he leaned forward and kissed her, softly but passionately.
“I really missed you,” he groaned, laughing a little as he pulled back. “God. An entire month I’ve gotta wait, huh? After being apart from you seven months. No, you don’t have to say anything, it’s my problem to deal with. I’m gonna get a hand cramp.”

“My lord!” she scolded him, but she was laughing, and her heart was full of joy.

“Where’s my brother, anyway?” said Zhao. “When I came in, I asked, and the servants said he left Luoyang a few days ago.”

“He’s gone to see his daughters. He said it wouldn’t be long.”

“His daughters? Now? Why?” Zhao looked as puzzled as she had felt.

“He said he wanted to tell them in person that they’re going to be princesses.”

“That…” Zhao’s expression changed from puzzlement to something more disturbed. “That doesn’t sound like him. At all.”

“I know,” she said. “And he asked me—I had been reading poetry to your parents—he asked me to read Zhuo Wenjun’s famous poem where she rebukes her husband for being faithless. I mean… it seemed almost like he was telling us he was going to be reinstate Lady Xiahou but… he can’t do that, can he? The Yang clan are critical supporters of his, and he’s already killed almost all of Lady Xiahou’s relatives.”

“Did he actually mention Lady Xiahou?”

“No. From what he said, it was all about his daughters only.”

“His daughters…” Zhao rubbed his thumb on the tiny fingers of his son; the pad of his thumb could cover all four fingers at once. “I mean, I know by the time you got here, Lady Xiahou was already falling out of his favour, but even when they were first married and he was… well, I won’t say in love, but pleased with her, at least… he never interacted with his daughters. He wanted them pushed off onto wet nurses and nannies as much as possible, so that he could have Lady Xiahou to himself when he wanted her, and so she could get pregnant again faster. In fact—this is horrible—but if you had asked me yesterday if my brother knew his daughters’ names, I would have said yes, but I actually wouldn’t have bet a tael of silver on it.”

“I’m not sure that I remember their names… It’s been a while and I almost never saw them even when they lived here.”

“I’ll remind you if you like,” he said. “The oldest is Chenlan - chen as in morning, lan as in mist; then Qingyin - qing as in clear, yin as in sound; then the youngest one is Qiujing - qiu as in autumn, jing as in quiet. My father named them all. I guess he’ll name this one, too, by the way. What did he say about the baby?”

“He said the baby’s face looked like a goji berry and then he laughed. I think he was very happy.”

“A goji berry?!”

Yuanji laughed. “Well, when he was just born, his face was very red and wrinkly.”


Goji ignored his father and continued to concentrate on drinking.
Sima Shi stared at Lady Xiahou’s corpse where it had been laid out in her bed.

Somewhere else in the house he could hear children wailing.

The two servants, a husband and wife, were clinging to each other in agitation. The wife had not stopped babbling since he had entered the house. A very common trait among bad liars.

The official story was that Lady Xiahou had poisoned herself out of fear that he was going to take away her daughters. Ridiculous. A rush job by someone who had no talent and no perception.

“Shut up,” said Sima Shi when the noise became too much. “Has the magistrate been informed?”

Zhao was woken up by a screaming argument occurring somewhere in the complex.

When he rushed out to investigate, all the screaming was coming from Lady Yang, and the object of her ire was his mother. “You think I want them here?!”

“Stop thinking you can shriek your way out of answering my question,” Lady Zhang said. “I know you know what’s happened.”

“You are just a—” Lady Yang was yelling, but she checked herself when she saw Zhao. She hissed, “I don’t know anything. He’s your son—you ask him! I won’t be treated like this. Leave me alone!”

With that, she stomped off.

“What’s going on?” Zhao asked.

His mother looked murderous. “Your brother sent me a message that he’s going to be a few days later than planned, and asked me to have rooms prepared for his daughters to live with him. And that’s all. That’s all! I thought that little rat looked too pleased these past few days. She’s done something. And she has the nerve to raise her voice to me. I’ll kill her. I’ll kill her myself.”

“Mother, calm—” Zhao stopped himself from completing the fatal phrase as his mother turned those deadly eyes towards him.

“I am perfectly calm,” she said, and her voice was indeed level as ever. “I am only sorry her histrionics disturbed you. She’ll be dealt with. If your brother won’t do it... she’ll be dealt with.” The expression in her eyes did not change, but she smiled. “Since you’re awake, you can help me.”

“Uh... with the girls’ rooms, you mean?”

His mother stalked off with a crook of her finger to beckon him after, without actually answering him.

Zhao had killed at his mother’s direction before and did not doubt that he would do so again, but he really hoped she wasn’t going to ask him to include his sister-in-law in that tally. Shi’s wife was his business.

“I have two eyes, I have two ears, but only one mouth, isn’t that a shame! If I had two mouths, I’d use one to eat honey, and the other mouth for kissing you!” Yuanji chanted the nursery rhyme to her
son and ended with a kiss on his nose. Goji was awake and alert, staring at her face with his eyes wide while his little mouth moved soundlessly, as if trying to mimic the motions of her lips.

There was quite a lot of commotion going on, so she guessed that her brother-in-law was home at last. But since she was sitting the month, there was nothing she could do but wait. She had once gotten out of bed just to look out the window, and when her mother-in-law came in and found Yuanji standing with the shutter open, exposing her to horrible cold air… well she would not make that mistake again.

“I’m a little hungry,” she said to the servant in the room with her.

“I’ll tell Lady Zhang, my lady,” the servant said.

Hopefully this would at least remind them all that she existed and was dying of curiosity and boredom.

Time passed and passed. Goji spat up a little and Yuanji cleaned it up and took the risk of getting out of bed to drop the dirty cloth in the laundry basket, and then got back into bed. She picked up Goji and offered him her breast. His little eyes fluttered and closed as he nursed, then fell asleep. She carefully freed her nipple from his mouth and readjusted her clothing.

Still no one came.

Finally the door opened. Zhao came in first, with Shi just behind them, then Shi’s three daughters, gently coaxed from behind by Lady Zhang. The girls all had sad and frightened faces, and the youngest was clinging to Lady Zhang’s waist.

“Lady Xiahou has passed away,” Zhao said to Yuanji.

Yuanji swallowed. “Oh. How sudden… please accept my sincere condolences.” She was a little afraid to look at Shi, but when she did, his eyes were all on Goji. He was dressed in the most severe level of mourning clothes, just like the children were. As if Lady Xiahou had died as his wife.

“I will try to restrain my sorrow,” Shi said, “especially in the joy of your good news. And it is good news for me too, isn’t it? Your heir, and mine.”

Zhao came closer, and Yuanji let him take the baby.

“We call him Goji,” Zhao said, bringing him over to Shi. “Would you like to hold him?”

“I would be honoured,” said Shi, taking the sleeping baby carefully. “Hm. Goji, eh? Yuanji, I expected you to be able to stop him.”

“Well, it’s only a milk name, after all, my lord,” Yuanji said, with a hesitant smile.

Shi turned. “Look, girls, but don’t touch. This is your cousin.”

The three girls looked, and the oldest one said, “He’s very cute,” and then reddened and looked at her father anxiously, as if she was not sure if she was allowed to speak.

Her father smiled at her. “Yes, he is.” Shi then walked back over to the bed and gave Goji to Yuanji. “Here. A child belongs with his mother. Zhao, I need to talk with you.”

The men left. Lady Zhang patted her granddaughters and said to Yuanji, “I heard that you are hungry, and I’m already having a meal made up for you. Will you be alright if I take the girls to their
"rooms now? I can wait here until the servants come back, if you prefer."

"Oh, not at all, I’m sure it won’t be long," answered Yuanji.

———

"The subject of Lady Xiahou’s death is not open for discussion," said Shi the moment they were seated in his study. "While I was away I received news that there are already attempts to organize a resistance within Shu. They need to be dealt with promptly. Unfortunately I can’t do it myself as I will need to stay in Luoyang from now until I am the emperor in name. You are ideal for this, anyway; you are likeable and everyone will know you can’t be tempted astray, and you can bring with you your little dog, who is very unlikeable and whom you will direct to act open to corruption. Between the two of you, you can persuade to join, or instigate into open rebellion, just about anyone."

"Of course." Zhao frowned. "But it sounds like a long-term thing?"

"If you mean do I intend to station you down there long-term, I do not. I’m going to want you before too long in the east, anyway. I want you to go there and reassert my authority in a way that Deng Ai simply cannot. The person I need you to focus on is Jiang Wei. I should have killed him, but I wanted to appear exorbitantly merciful at the time. Jia Chong can kill him for you; he will do it nicely. Write to me after you’ve been there a week and let me know how his death has settled or unsettled things; if things go as I hope, you’ll only be gone a month altogether."

"Only a month? I’m not going all the way to Chengdu then?"

"No. I had at least the foresight to move him, and a few likely troublemakers, up to Chencang. A week’s sail each way. Easy."

"Hm." Zhao laughed a little. "Well, ordinarily I’d be whining a lot about how I only just got back, but to be honest maybe it’s a good thing you’ll be getting me away from temptation… you know the doctor told me that because of something or other—I didn’t ask, seemed like the kind of thing I’d be better off not knowing—he’s forbidding sex with Yuanji until six weeks, minimum? I mean, I thought it was going to be hard to hold back just while she was sitting the month, now I gotta keep my hands to myself for another two weeks and maybe even longer… ugh. But obviously her health is more important…” Zhao sighed and scratched his head. "A month, huh? That should bring me back just in time, then."

Shi stared at him oddly, saying nothing.

"Brother?"

Shi started a moment. "I was just thinking of something… not important. Go get yourself ready; I’ll arrange some things for you to reference to guide your actions there. You can study them on the journey."

"Study, study, study." Zhao groaned, getting up. "Nothing I hate more! You’re lucky you’re my brother, you know."

"Safe journey, Zhao," Shi said quietly, and his smile was a little strained.

———

"I don’t like this," said Jia Chong, staring out at the coast of the Yellow River as it drifted by.
When Zhao didn’t make any reply, he looked up at Zhao. “Are you listening, my lord?”

Zhao shook his head. “I don’t want to.”

“You can close your eyes, but not your ears.”

Zhao made a big show of putting his fingers to his ears, and grinned as Jia Chong smirked and rubbed his forehead.

“Even granting that this mission is urgent, it’s not so urgent that waiting a few days for the coronation would have made a difference. That’s the sticking point. My lord, I know you can hear me.”

“I know, I know.” Zhao stopped the futile plugging of his ears and leaned on the ship’s railing. “He’s been just plain odd since we got back from Shouchun. Even before that, from what I hear from Yuanji and my mother.”

“Why does he want you out of Luoyang for his enthronement and acceptance of the Nine Bestowments?”

“The only thing I can think of is that my so-called personal ambitions got hyped up to draw you-know-who out. And now that it’s all sorted, my brother wants to make it clear that I am nobody important and not part of this big next step to power.” Zhao scratched his neck. “It makes sense, but why not just tell me? I hate it, I really hate it. Why does he have to be so damn mysterious? Why can’t he just tell me, for once, what he’s doing and why? Always pushing me here and there and then laughing at me afterwards when I’m confused. Everyone’s always doing that to me.” He shot a glance at Jia Chong with this one.

“Touche, my lord, but I have your best interests at heart.”

“And you think my brother doesn’t?” Suddenly Zhao slapped the railing with an open palm and huffed off without letting Jia Chong answer.

———

Lady Zhang Xingcai was puzzled when Sima Shi came to visit her, wearing mourning dress, no less. “My lord.”

“You may call me that if you wish,” Sima Shi said, “or ‘your majesty’, now. In gratitude for my conquest of your country, the emperor has named me King of Jin, and given me the nine bestowments.”

Xingcai considered this, then stepped forward to drop to her knees and performed a kowtow, pressing her forehead to the floor and then rising into a kneel. “Your majesty, then.”

He looked surprised and pleased when she raised her eyes to his again, and after a moment, took the chair she had been sitting in when he came in, moved it just in front of her, and sat down, so that his knees were only a hands-width from her chest. “I am here to speak with you about matters in Shu.”

“I am not qualified to speak on such matters of state. Humbly, I suggest that your majesty speaks to my husband.”

“Obviously I have,” he said, with some disgruntlement. “I don’t like wasting time. I went there this morning and wasted over an hour. Is he actually stupid, or is it an act to shield him from involvement and consequences?”
“Your majesty cannot expect me to answer that,” Xingcai said coldly.

Sima Shi chuckled. “Are you so offended by truth, Lady Zhang? That must make life very uncomfortable. But now I am the one wasting time. Among all the worthless words he uttered, he did in one case mention your name, in a way that made me think that you had some intelligence.”

“If my lord mentioned my name, it must only be out of missing me.”

“Not at all,” Sima Shi said and smiled. “He made no inquiry into you. But let us not get sidetracked. You have made a mistake, Lady Zhang. You were so eager to let me know that you did not wish to cooperate with me, that you inadvertently revealed to me just how intelligent and perceptive you really are. You will tell me what I want to know eventually. Make it easy on yourself and answer my questions directly. You may trust that I understand and appreciate your resentment.”

Lady Zhang tightened the grip of her hands on her knees and breathed. He was right, damn him. What was the point, anyway? Everything was lost.

When she had finished answering all his questions, told him everything he wanted to know about the various people with Shu, their motivations, their weaknesses, their connections, their potentials, he smiled again. “I am glad to find that you are so rational,” he said. “Is there anything I can do to make your stay here more comfortable, or enjoyable? Your society and your environment must remain limited, but if I can improve them in any way…”

She felt a pang in her heart, thinking how she could not request the thing she most wanted. “Nothing, your majesty.”

“Now I can see that’s not true. You really are a poor liar, aren’t you? What is it? The worst I will say is no.”

“I understand that it is not possible, but what I miss most is exercise… if I could have a training dummy…”

“Only that?” He raised his eyebrows. “What weapon do you use?”

“A sword and buckler.”

“Wooden sword and buckler, easy. And an instructor? Weekly?”

Xingcai hardly dared to believe it. “I would be very grateful, your majesty.”

Sima Shi stood up. “I’ll have it done. You will mention, in your next letters to your loved ones, how benevolent I am, I trust.”

She wanted to slap the mocking smile off his face, despite what generosity he had just shown her. Generosity with a hidden meaning; it couldn’t be otherwise with a man like him. “I certainly will, your majesty. You can let me know if I worded it badly.”

He laughed as he left.

———

On account of her confinement, Yuanji missed Shi’s coronation. Taking a great risk of Lady Zhang’s wrath, her father-in-law, who also missed the coronation on account of his official bad health, smuggled her in a copy of the written music which was the fourth of the nine bestowments. While her brother-in-law was being declared King of Jin, Sima Yi and Yuanji were having a grand time
excoriating the triteness of the lyrics and the blandness of the music. It was the most intellectual stimulation she’d been allowed to have since she’d given birth, and it soothed her soul. When her mother-in-law came in afterwards, she remarked on how well Yuanji looked.

When her confinement was finally over, Yuanji washed herself, while Sima Yi and Lady Zhang together washed Goji, as Zhao would have done had he been there. Then her first order was to have all her books, her writing desk, and her guqin moved back into her bedroom. While the move was in progress, she took Goji into her arms and took a leisurely stroll through the garden with him, enjoying the flowers and the birds.

At the Full Month Party that evening, the guests entered through a red door that was the sixth of the nine bestowments. Sima Yi looked gaunt but triumphant as he announced the baby’s name: Sima Yan, yan meaning flame.

Shi was there, of course, but it was the first time she had seen him since Zhao had left. He had never come again to visit her while she was confined. She had wanted to speak with him, to see if she could get the bottom of all these strange recent occurrences, but there was no opportunity in the crowded party. For two more weeks after that, as her life adjusted to motherhood, she kept on watching for him, hoping to catch him. But he was never around, and she was not sure how she could request him, when Zhao wasn’t there.

———

*The most dangerous factor here remains the Qiāng… we are outsiders here, not even men of Liang, as Jiang Wei was. They will never approach anyone from Wei, they despise us all, and as for the former Shu officers, aside from Jiang Wei, they are also not from Liang. I believe if the governor is moderate and efficient that the Qiāng will at least remain quiet.*

Sima Shi reread the the letter from his brother. His brother was never subtle, and Zhao’s impatience to be allowed to return home was palpable now. It had been nearly a month, after all; Shi had already written him once to tell him to remain and continue monitoring the situation.

What should he write back now? Have him come back, of course… back to his wife and his son. His son…

Shi packed up all the writing materials and pulled out a bottle of wine and a cup instead. He didn’t want to deal with it. He didn’t want to think. No, that wasn’t it. He didn’t want to feel. Because all he felt was jealousy. Jealousy of Zhao! He was a king, he would soon be emperor; how could he feel jealous of any man.

He drank the cup quickly and refilled it.

It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t fair… it shouldn’t be this way…

He drank and he drank.

Had he given up when he’d gotten the tumour? He hadn’t, he hadn’t! He’d turned the weakness into a strength! Shi put a hand to his mask, the metal warm from being on his skin all day.

There had to be a way… he’d always found a way before, so there had to be one…

———

Six weeks after birth, Goji—she still thought of him that way—had already begun cutting teeth. It was apparently uncomfortable for him, and he unfortunately was taking this out on her breasts.
Yuanji didn’t rewrap her gown as she left Goji sleeping in his bed, under the watchful eye of the night nanny. She was a determined woman; Goji needed her milk, therefore she would give it to him. The painful delivery of it wouldn’t change that. Placing fabric over her aching nipples though… what was the point? She just needed to move to her own room, which was attached by a private hall to his. No one would see her.

In her sleep deprived state, it took her a moment to even comprehend when she opened the door that there was a man in there.

“Don’t scream,” he said. She recognized the voice; it was her brother-in-law, and he was staring at her.

Hastily, burning with embarrassment, she rewrapped herself as fast as she could, ignoring her body’s protests. “My lord, I must apologize—“

“Don’t.”

He was moving towards her, past her. He pulled the door shut, then turned towards her, almost close enough to touch her. She could smell wine on him.

“Is something wrong, my lord? Have you gotten a message… about… about Zhao?” She was trying to understand what could be the meaning of him waiting for her in her room, but her blurry mind could barely focus. “I know you said don’t apologize, but I’m not myself right now…”

“I didn’t mean don’t apologize,” he said, and he was taking her into his arms. “I meant don’t cover yourself. You are beautiful, do you know that?”

One arm remained around her while the other was actually attempting to take off her nightgown. “My lord—brother-in-law—stop! This is wrong!” she gasped, struggling to pull out of his grasp.

He let her go, but he had succeeded in pulling off her nightgown. She was down to just her underwear, and she desperately crossed her arms over herself, backing away into the room.

Sima Shi pulled open a curtain, flooding the room with moonlight, and she blinked in the sudden increase in light. His eyes were raking over her body. He had never looked at her this way before.

“I’ll scream,” she warned him, backing towards her end table, with her throwing knives in its drawers.

He laughed. She had heard his sinister laugh hundreds of times before, but it had never been directed at her. “I’m not going to force myself on you.”

“You think I’ll give myself to you willingly?!”

“You are very reasonable,” he said. “I’m not asking for you permanently. Just while Zhao is away. I can keep him away as long as we want, you know.”

“I don’t want you to keep Zhao away!” She was enraged; how could he have gotten such an idea of her character? “I love him—I will never betray him!”

“You’ve already given him a son,” he said. “How can he ask for more than that? I just want one for myself, and Lady Yang will never give one to me.”

“You couldn’t acknowledge a son by me,” she challenged. “The scandal—“
“Oh, I know. I don’t need the world to know that the nephew I name my heir is really my son. I just want to know that he is.”

She pulled open the drawer and reached in. It was empty.

“Such an obvious hiding place,” he said. “It surprised me, really. Just because I don’t intend to rape you doesn’t mean I want you to cut me to ribbons.”

“Get out!”

He made no movement to leave. “I would be very gentle. I know it’s painful for a woman the first time after she’s had a child… almost like being with a virgin…”

“My body belongs to Zhao,” she said.

“Ah, but Zhao belongs to me,” he countered, and started moving towards her.

It was getting hard not to just lose herself in terror. The only defence she had left was to scream, but to do so would mean being discovered naked with her brother-in-law. “Please—please think of the scandal,” she begged. “I don’t want to scream.”

“Then don’t scream,” he said softly.

Tears filled her eyes. “Don’t do this to me, please, brother-in-law. Please just leave. Think of Zhao and go. He trusts us both… we can’t do this to him!”

“He won’t be hurt by it if he doesn’t know. I need to keep him away so that I know it’s mine, but I’ll bring him back to you as soon as you’re pregnant. He’ll never know it isn’t his.”

“My lord, you are drunk!” she said desperately.

“I can still perform,” he said, and to her horror he began undressing himself. “I’ll show you.”

“No!” she screamed. “No! No! No!”

He was startled. There were noises all around; he turned his startled face back to her for only a moment—she was still screaming—and suddenly he was gone, out the door to the main hallway.

Within a minute, the night nanny was knocking at her door. “My lady, are you alright?”

“It was just a nightmare,” she said, her voice almost breathless with real terror. “Please have a maid sent to me—I want company!”

Chapter End Notes

The poem is a real poem, and is my translation. The nursery rhyme is entirely made up. It sounds like it could be real, doesn’t it? Nursery rhymes are weird, man.
It was very early in the morning. The rays of the early summer sun were just shining through the open window. Sima Shi didn’t usually awaken this early. He wasn’t quite sure why he had awakened. He blinked and squinted, wondering why it was so bright. Suddenly he became aware that he was not alone in the room. He was reaching for his hidden dagger instinctively when he heard his brother speak.

“Good morning,” said Zhao. He stepped away from the window he had just opened. “Sleep well, brother?”

Shi sat up warily. “I… yes. How… why are you here, Zhao?”

“How did I get in here?” said Zhao, rephrasing the question to the one that Shi had stopped himself from asking. “Oh, I just told the guards I needed to speak with you urgently. They let me in without another question. It’s nice how everyone knows we trust each other, isn’t it?”

Shi did not know what to say. Clearly Yuanji had told him about his appalling behaviour. Had she written to him to get him to come?

“Do you remember when we were kids, brother? From the earliest I can remember, you were always taking my stuff. You always got the first turn with things, the best horse, and the last helping. Mother would always say, ‘Just give it to him.’ I used to think it was because she loved you more than me. But I was still pretty young when I figured out that actually our mother loves me just as much as you. It’s only that the world loves you more than me, and she wanted me to get used to it. Just because you’re older, you will always get everything first, and you get the best, and the most, and the last. You’re the heir; I’m the spare. Not only that but even the heavens favoured you over me—you were smarter, stronger, better at everything!”

Zhao paused and looked at Shi, but the older brother didn’t speak.

“I’m not ambitious by nature, you know? I’d like to think I’d still be pretty much the same, even if our childhood was different. I always gave you what you asked for. If you broke it, I said nothing. We played whatever game you wanted to play; I was just glad you were letting me be with you, even when you told me how stupid and bad I was at everything. When you told me to go away, I went away. I supported you 100%, and admired you. I’m sure we didn’t always get along, but as younger brothers go, I think I was actually pretty good.”

Zhao sat on the edge of Shi’s bed.

“Do you remember Pengpeng?”

Shi shook his head mutely.
Zhao chuckled. “I’m not surprised. If I tell you Pengpeng was a dog, does that jog any memories?”

Shi shook his head again.

“Aw, man… guess I really do have to tell the whole story… what a bother.” It was such a classic, typical thing to hear Zhao say to him, that in these circumstances it made his brother feel sick inside.

“Whenver you went hunting, you were never careful about the dogs. If you thought you could hit the deer, you would fire. I don’t think you even noticed when you hit the dogs instead. You would even ride over them with your horse. It seemed like we never returned from a trip without at least one dog injured or killed. It didn’t even matter when father scolded you that a good hunting dog was valuable.

“I must have been about ten or eleven… do you remember how much I loved animals then? Horses some, hunting dogs even more. Mother encouraged me because she said it was teaching me responsibility and diligence. I just enjoyed being with them. Pengpeng was my very favourite. I raised it from a puppy. I snuck it into my room to sleep with me, took it out with me everywhere. I spent so many hours training it. Pengpeng did tricks… and it was an amazing tracker. Fast, tough, obedient. It really could do anything, anything you wanted of a dog. But I think I would have loved it even if it were weak and stupid.”

Shi remained silent.

“The day came when Lady Xiahou’s father invited you and father for a hunt. Your were thirteen or so… I remember how excited you were, how eager to be a man with the rest of them. You told me that you needed my best dog. Do you remember that day?”

“What is this?” Shi looked crossly at the ruddy, short haired dog sitting obediently before him.

Zhao looked startled, then defiant. “Xiao Huo is a great hunting dog. It’s very, very tough. It will follow a deer for hundreds of li if you need it to. And it’s very obedient, even in the excitement of the hunt. You can call it away from the kill—”

“I don’t want this one. I want that other one. The one with the brown spot.”

“You can’t have Pengpeng.”

Shi took a few steps towards his brother. Generally this was all that was needed in the rare instances when Zhao protested, but this time, though the younger boy flinched, he didn’t back up.

“Pengpeng is special to me. I won’t let you take it.”

“I want that dog, Zhao.”

“No!”

“I’ll make you give it to me!”

“I’ll fight you!”

And fight they did, perhaps the first true two-sided fight they had had since Zhao was five. The fight began contemptuously on Shi’s side, but as normal blows and holds failed to subdue his rebellious sibling, he began to fight in earnest. Shi was of course superior in age, size, training, and discipline, and dominated the fight from the beginning, yet Zhao never yielded.

Seeing the fight, a maid ran to get her mistress, shrieking, “My lady! My lady!”
Zhang Chunhua turned her cold, imperturbable gaze towards her. “What can possibly be causing all this noise?”

“Oh my lady,” she gasped. “The young masters are fighting, and I’m afraid he will kill him!”

Lady Zhang was not excitable by nature, yet she never dismissed a potential threat to her family. She immediately got up and ran with the maid towards the noise.

She was startled by what she saw. The older boy had the younger pinned against a wall and was attempting to choke him. The younger boy weakly stomped and kicked at the legs and feet of his adversary as his hands attempted to pry the fingers from his neck. “Shi! Zhao! Stop this at once!” she said sharply.

They broke apart instantly. Zhao gasped, rubbing his neck. As Shi turned towards her, she could see that his nose was bloodied.

“What could this possibly be about?” she demanded.

“Mother, I told Zhao I need the best dog in the kennel to go hunting with father, but he won’t give it to me.”

“And this required choking him?!”

Shi faltered, but muttered at the ground, “When he had passed out, I would have let go.”

“Zhao, how could you cause all this fuss over an animal? Give your brother the dog and be done with it!”

Zhao had known she would say that. It was time to be the good second son again and give, give, give. Yet—and surprising himself, because he was more afraid of his mother than anyone else—he could not submit even to her. Not when it would mean Pengpeng hurt or killed.

“Pengpeng is my dog! I raised it from a puppy. It belongs to me, no one else, not even brother! Brother’s never careful when he’s hunting. If I let him use Pengpeng, it’ll be hurt or killed for sure!”

His mother was looking at his face with an odd expression on her own.

Shi, his confidence back now that he was sure that his mother was on his side, said with a grin, “Well, if it’s so important to you, I’ll try not to—”

“Shi.” His mother’s voice stopped him. “Did you know your brother loved this dog?”

She had caught his gaze before he could drop his eyes, and now he was stuck. “Well—yes, but it’s stupid to love a dog! It’s just an animal!”

“Listen to me well. You do not have to understand why he feels this way. But if your brother—or any opponent—truly loves something with his whole heart, he will never stop fighting for it. Even to the point of fighting his own brother.”

She let her words float in the air for a moment, glancing between the two of them.

“Shi, now that I look at you, I am sure you are going to come out in a black eye. I would be ashamed to put you in front of Lord Xiahou Shang looking like this. What would he think of us? Go to your room and remain there until I tell you otherwise. I will tell your father you are sick; he will make your excuses.”
Shi did remember that day, now.

“You wanted my dog, and for the first time in my life, I told you no, and I stuck to it. You beat me up more than you ever did before—at the time I actually thought I might die.” Zhao laughed again.

“Man, I didn’t know what death was really like back then… anyway, instead of taking your side as always, mother actually made you let it go. And I’ve never forgotten what she said about why. That if I loved something with my whole heart, that I could fight for it. That of course I would fight for it and keep fighting for it, even against my own brother.”

Zhao sighed. ‘But, it’s been a long time now, and there’s never been anything else you’ve wanted of me that I denied you. Right? Of course, you were always pushing me to succeed. You covered for all my stupid mistakes, and gave me countless opportunities to improve. I never doubted that you loved me. So, I guess you’ve been a good big brother too, huh?’

There was another long pause.

“I was thinking maybe you would like to say something at this point,” said Zhao pleasantly, but when Shi looked in his eyes, he saw the steel in them.

“Zhao, please believe me. I have listened to you without interrupting because I deserve the humiliation, but if you are thinking you need to warn me away from your wife, you are mistaken. As soon as I had a moment to reflect, even before I was sober, I regretted my actions. They were deplorable. The very next morning, I sought to see her only to apologize and beg her forgiveness, but I cannot blame her for choosing instead to feign illness and barricade herself against me. I could not send my apologies by message because I did not want to expose her to the slightest hint of scandal. I am sure she has spent these last few weeks terrified, and this only adds to the wrong I have done you both. My drunkenness does not excuse this. I cannot explain to you what madness came over me.”

“You’re incorrect for once, brother. You can and you will explain it to me. I understand it’ll probably further humiliate you. Frankly, tough shit.”

This crudity almost provoked a smile from Shi, but the very idea of smiling at a time like this only added to his shame. He took a deep breath. “I assume your wife told you everything I said that night?”

“That you knew that I hadn’t been with her yet because of the childbirth. That you could arrange to keep me away as long as necessary. That you wanted her to bear you a son, and then you could adopt your ‘nephew’ as your own heir. That I would never have to know. That you would give me back to her as soon as she was pregnant—very generous of you, I suppose. You didn’t go into what would happen if the child was a girl. I guess you’d arrange to send me away so you could try again?”

As he had kept eye contact with his mother on that long ago day, Shi kept eye contact with his brother now. “You mentioned that day with the hunting dog, and Lord Xiahou Shang… that was only a few months before I married Lady Xiahou.”

“Don’t change the subject or pretend like she has anything to do with this. You put her away a long time ago.”

“I know. When father arranged the marriage, she was considered a step up for me. Not only was her father a Xiahou, her mother was Lord Cao Cao’s daughter, a princess. Our clan was rising. It was meant to be a simple alliance marriage, and they only married us so young because her father was ill. In hindsight, they never expected me to actually consummate the marriage so soon. They gave us separate rooms on the wedding night, but I was already both interested and motivated… She gave
“I know all this,” Zhao scoffed. “You had your first child when you were both fourteen. And then she got pregnant again and again. All girls. Then you got tired of waiting.”

Shi closed his eyes a moment. “I… actually loved her, but I wanted a son so badly, I always pushed her into getting pregnant again right away. Six pregnancies in seven years. She was not of a strong constitution to begin with, and she… she suffered. The babies were getting weaker as well. The last one was very early and lived only minutes.” He paused. “Even before that, she was becoming afraid of me. She knew my love for her was dying, and not just because of her failure to give me an heir. The climate was completely changed by then. Our father was ascendant; the Cao and the Xiahou must either accept subjugation, or if they dared to challenge us, then death. But the more of them we struck down, the more of them would be inspired to revenge. Could I really drink tea from and sleep in a bed with a woman whose brother and cousins I was killing? I decided to divorce her. Father suggested killing her, and said that mother could raise the girls—”

“What?”

“Are you really shocked? Father didn’t hate her like they hate Lady Yang, but if it were a matter of killing Lady Xiahou to make mother happy, from his perspective it was an easy decision. I couldn’t bring myself to do that… I told myself it wasn’t that I was still attached, it was just that it wasn’t necessary. I could have had our daughters remain here under mother’s care, but I didn’t like that idea either. Children shouldn’t be separated from their mother, it’s wrong. Besides, I just wanted to pretend like that entire episode of my life had never happened. As you knew, I already had my eye on Lady Yang. She was perfect for me, I thought then: strong, ambitious, intelligent. It was politically advantageous as well. So I married her. Then you married Yuan—Lady Wang.”

He had begun to use her name casually, as he had done so many times, but a flash in Zhao’s eyes warned him that those days of liberty were over. He continued. “As you know, Lady Yang has given me no son. No daughter, either. Nothing. And my original attraction to her best qualities almost immediately gave way to repulsion at her worst qualities. It was even worse because they were my own worst qualities. When I came back from Shu and saw Lady Wang carrying your child, I suddenly thought of Lady Xiahou and I was filled with regret. I wondered what my surviving daughters were like now… Lady Yang knew something had changed because I stopped coming to her chambers. Then I made a grave mistake. I taunted Lady Yang by letting her know that I was going to visit Lady Xiahou for the first time since the divorce. I knew I couldn’t undo the divorce, I only wanted to apologize, but I was too proud to do it other than secretly. The letter I wrote to Lady Xiahou was very lofty; it merely said I wished to see the children and perhaps increase her allowance if she had found her expenditures had increased. Her reply I can tell you by heart, it was simply, ‘My lord, you are always master in this house, and may come at any time convenient.’ That was Lady Xiahou to the end. Dignity and elegance. That was why I could not believe it when they told me when I arrived at her home that she had poisoned herself the night before. I believed it even less when I was made to listen to a badly rehearsed maid giving me a hysterical story about how Lady Xiahou was convinced that I was coming there to take her children from her, and that she would rather die than face such a fate. The only question was, had Lady Yang ordered the poisoning herself? Or had her family feared the loss of her influence and done it on their own initiative? In either case, I knew there was absolutely nothing I could do to punish any of them. I still need the Yang clan.

“It took me a little while to make all the arrangements to bring my daughters back to Luoyang. By the time I got back, your son had been born. I already heard he had been born, of course, and I thought I was happy for you. But when I saw the three of you together, I was consumed with jealousy. And when you told me before you left that you were glad that I was sending you away,
because otherwise you weren’t sure if you’d be able to resist touching her before her healing was over… in innocence and trust you watered the vile seeds in my mind.

“The day I got your second letter, it was almost exactly six weeks after your son’s birth. I knew I had no reason not to let you come home, and I didn’t want to admit even to myself why I didn’t want to let you come home. I began to drink. I believe I already was planning it on some level, and wanted to shed all inhibition. The more I drank, the more I cursed fate and how it was tormenting me. That all my ambition, my talent, my intelligence, couldn’t gain me a son for my dynasty. I had thrown away a woman who truly loved me, who had given me child after child and never complained, simply because I was impatient; heaven had punished with me a barren wife with a cruel tongue and a cold touch. You had this beautiful, strong, intelligent woman betrothed to you and yet you took years to actually take her. But then as soon as you do, she gets pregnant and it’s a boy! Why? Why was fate giving you the one thing that I required to make my ambitions matter? And then… I finally let the thought come to the front of my mind. You hadn’t touched her since she’d given birth. If I wanted to, I could keep you away for months…”

He faltered and trailed off. He was used to being looked at in many ways by his younger brother: with admiration, shame, loyalty, respect, concern, fear, love… but never before had he seen loathing from him. “I told you I had no real excuses, Zhao. I must have been mad! I didn’t even consider the impracticalities of it!”

“Oh, certainly,” said Zhao, his voice dripping with sarcasm, and suddenly sounding a lot like their father, “if the impracticalities didn’t occur to you, then never mind. That’s the only reason not to fuck your brother’s wife, because of its impracticalities. Now that they’ve occurred to you, I can relax.”

He got up and began to turn, but his brother grabbed his wrist. “Zhao, please—! I’m sorry!”

Zhao shook his hand loose. “Oh, only now does it occur to you to say ’sorry’, huh? I’m sure you’re sorry. Sorry my wife didn’t want you. Sorry you got caught.”

“No! I swear to you Zhao, I am truly sorry for how I’ve hurt you. I know I was wrong. My wrong actions brought me Lady Yang and killed Lady Xiahou. I’ve finally realized that as I try to wriggle in fate’s grasp, it is squeezing me tighter and tighter.” Shi dropped down to his knees and pressed his forehead to the floor. “Please forgive me Zhao! Please! I swear I will never even think such an evil thought again. I accept my fate. I will be as loyal to you as you have always been to me. Lady Wang is my sister. Your son will be my heir. Please! Don’t tell me I’ve lost you! You are my only friend… my only real friend… the only man I can trust… my brother!”

His voice cracked. Tears were falling down his face; his post-operation eye was aching and burning.

“I can’t forgive you yet,” said Zhao. “You betrayed me. My whole life I thought that no matter what else you did, you really did care about me. The things you took from me, they were just things. When you would mock me and insult me, you wanted me to be stronger. I knew you didn’t understand my lack of ambition compared to you, but I thought you loved me, as I loved you, and wanted me to be happy. Yuanji is my wife. Even if I hated her as you hate yours, to seduce her would be a betrayal. But you know, you know how I feel about her. She’s…. she’s the moon and the stars and the sun to me!”

Shi kept his forehead on the ground. “I know. You are a lucky—”

“Lucky hell!” exploded Zhao. “Fuck your fate bullshit, brother! ‘Oh, I can’t offend the Yangs by divorcing Lady Yang, that would be politically disadvantageous. Heaven forfend I would do anything to harm my grip on the regency! I know, I’ll just fuck my brother’s wife and name his bastard my heir! That could have no repercussions that could matter—after all, Zhao’s an idiot!’”
Shi chuckled faintly.

“Don’t laugh—don’t you dare laugh at me,” said Zhao, quietly, but more harshly than anything he’d said so far.

Shi raised himself up to a kneel, putting a hand to the side of his injury, knowing that he must look truly pathetic. “I’m not… at least I don’t mean to… it’s just… you do have this way of cutting away all my grandeur. You’ve always done it. I’ve often found it very annoying. When you put it that way, it’s all so… mundane and… uncreative.”

Zhao was unmoved. “Yeah. Probably the worst insult I can give you, mundane. For me, I’d much rather be called mundane than ungrateful or unfilial, but I guess you and I are different.”

“We’re not that different Zhao.” Shi remained kneeling, but looked up at his brother’s murderous face. “Somewhere inside me I have the same morals as you… not that I am sure where we got them… was it from mother, do you think?”

Zhao’s lip twitched, but he fought off the smile.

“Mother would kill anyone who threatens her family. And has. It’s a very strange family, to grow up hearing how your mother strangled a maid, isn’t it? And to have it told as a funny story… although I still suspect that father doesn’t think it’s as funny as he pretends to find it. You remember our childhood as one where I would always take all your things. I guess that’s true. But I remember how mother was always scolding me about you. ‘Your brother is young, you must have patience with him. Your brother is slow, you must wait for him. You must be more gentle, Shi—you don’t want to hurt your brother. When your father and I are gone, he’s the only one you’ll have left.’ I listened, Zhao. I never wanted to hurt you. I know I was selfish, but I swear, even at the depth of my depravity, I didn’t think about it hurting you—I convinced myself that if you didn’t know it didn’t matter. And I know it was wrong! Please believe me that I know now it was wrong.”

“You knew it was wrong. You knew all along.”

“I knew it was wrong.”

There was a long beat.

“We are back to where we started Zhao… I have no excuses for myself. I can only beg for your forgiveness. Do you want to punish me? I’ll accept whatever you want to impose on me if I can win back your trust.”

“Well, right now, a big part of me wants to kill you, but then I’d have to deal with Cao Mao, and I really don’t want to. Ugh, why couldn’t you just man up and deal with the Yangs? You know, I had dreams too, and they don’t involve ruling the land. I just want to go away in the country with Yuanji and… I dunno, retire.”

“With a lot of dogs and horses, no doubt.”

“Yeah. It’s a mundane dream, I’m sure, but it’s mine.”

“It’s a good dream for you, Zhao. You would be very happy in that life. I’m sorry that my failures mean you’ll be forced to remain in the intrigues of the palace.”

Zhao sighed and raked his hand through his hair in his familiar gesture of frustration. “It’s really a lot of bother, you know? But don’t change the subject. We’re supposed to be talking about a punishment for you.”
He thought for a few minutes, Shi’s heart thudding in his chest all the while.

Zhao said, “There’s something else. You don’t just need to apologize to me. You need to apologize to Lady Wang as well—in my presence. You’re never going to be alone with her ever again. If I go somewhere, she goes with me. If she can’t come with me, she needs to go somewhere else, far away from you. Or you need to go far away from her.”

Shi nodded. “Of course.”

“You really scared her, do you realize how badly? She told me how you said you weren’t going to rape her. You bastard, didn’t you know it would never have been anything else? She couldn’t tell me everything in her letter, of course, but when I actually saw her in person, she was hysterical, like I’ve never seen her before. She snuck out of the compound to meet me last night and she was worried the entire time that you would catch her. And the worst part is, when she first spoke to me, she begged me to believe her. She was terrified that I wouldn’t believe that she was telling the truth. Because she knew how much I loved and trusted you!” Zhao was getting angrier and angrier as he spoke.

“I am truly sorry,” Shi said. It was all he could say.

Zhao made an agitated noise and began pacing back and forth across the room. Abruptly, he stopped and stated, “It’s no good. How can I possibly punish you? How can you make this up to me? It’s impossible. The only way to fix it is that you have got to let me in—all the way in—from now on. No more mystery, no more brilliant plans that you whip out in front of me at the last second to dazzle me. And then you’ve gotta give me time. Time to trust you again.” Zhao let out a noisy breath. “I really hate that you’re my brother right now.”

On the surface it was an insult, but it gave Shi hope like nothing else. He knew Zhao, he knew him so well. He knew exactly why Zhao would say something like that. Because Zhao was admitting that he still loved Shi, and that it was aggravating to still love someone who had hurt him so badly. It meant that Shi still had a chance to be worthy of that love and to treat his brother as he really deserved for all the loyalty and support he had given Shi over the years.

“I’ll tell you everything,” said Shi. “Thank you, Zhao.”

“You should put medicine on your eye,” Zhao muttered. “It looks gross.” On this fraternal expression of concern, he abruptly left, leaving the door open and Shi still kneeling on the floor.

Shi got up slowly, put medicine on the eye, and got back into bed. He didn’t know if he could sleep, but he was not ready to do anything else.

———

“Zhao! What are you doing here?”

Zhao turned. His mother was standing in the hallway, his three nieces clustered around her like chicks around a mother hen. “Good morning, mother. I just got in. I had to see brother.”

“But he didn’t mention you were coming. What’s happened in Chencang?”

“It was just something I had to handle in person, mother. I’m going to go see Yuanji now.”

“But Zhao… Zhao!”

Zhao didn’t turn back. He kept walking until he got into his wing of the Sima compound. When he tried the door to her bedroom, it was locked. “It’s just me, Yuanji.”
The door quickly opened, and his heart wrenched again. She had been crying again. “Did he admit it?” she asked quietly when he had shut the door behind him.

He bent down and kissed her first, caressing her tear-stained cheeks, before he answered. “Yes. He says he is sorry and has been sorry since just after it happened. He didn’t really try to offer any excuse, other than that he must have been crazy.”

“He’s not crazy,” she said softly.

“Believe me, I didn’t let him get away with it,” Zhao said. “I told him he’d have to apologize to you in my presence, and that I won’t ever let the two of you be in the same place without me again. I’ll never let him hurt you again, Yuanji. I’m sorry I let it happen in the first place.”

“No, I don’t blame you at all,” she said. “I could hardly believe it was happening when it was happening. I would never have expected it.” She looked up at him. “How did he act?”

“We had a long talk first… a lot of stuff from the past, between us, in our family… we were both acting calm, at least on the outside, for all of that… then when it got to the point of why he did what he did, things got pretty hot. Before he ever said he was sorry, he said that he must have been mad not to think of the impracticalities. That made me furious, it was so like him…” Zhao took a deep breath in and out. “I started to walk out, then he apologized. He got down on his knees and started crying when I didn’t believe his first apology. He begged my forgiveness, said some fate bullshit. That made me even angrier.” Zhao laughed, darkly. “Then… I don’t know… he said he did care about me, that he had fooled himself that it wouldn’t hurt me… said he would do whatever I wanted to prove that he was sorry and that he would never do anything like that again. I think… I think he really is sorry… but still… how could he do that in the first place? Hurt you like that, betray me like that…”

Yuanji remained quiet in his arms.

“There was a moment where I really wanted to kill him. I wanted to kill him like I’ve never wanted to kill anyone in my life. And then… just a few moments later… he somehow almost got me to laugh. I hate him. I really hate him.”

“It’s alright that you still love him, my lord,” Yuanji said, looking up at him.

He should have known Yuanji would see right through him. “I don’t want to,” he said. “He hurt you.”

“He’s still your brother,” she said. “Lord Sima Shi… will have to face the consequences of his actions, in the cooling of our relationships with him for quite some time. I know that, on one level, it isn’t enough for what he did. But… from what he said then, and what it sounds like he said to you… I believe that this was all about him feeling like he deserved what you have with me. Now he will have to face that he can’t possibly get it, and that by trying to steal it, he nearly cut off two of the only people he truly trusted in the world. I think he will suffer, and I think he needs to, especially now, when he is poised to become emperor. He needs a reason to rule other than to prove his own perfection.”

“You’re so… understanding…”

“I don’t forgive yet, either,” she said. “But I do understand. It’s because I understand that he still frightens me.”

He kissed her, and she kissed him back, surprising him with her passion as her hands reached up and
hugged him tightly to her.

“Please,” she said when they broke the kiss, “please be with me my lord. Right now.”

“Now?” he said. “Are you sure? I can wait—”

“No,” she interrupted, and she was blushing, that adorable little rosy glow on her cheeks that always so enchanted him. “I… I want it… for myself…” She bit her lip; her cheeks got even redder.

“You do, huh?” he said huskily. “Alright.”

Her simple robe came off in a moment, but he was fully dressed. He thought about simply taking his cock out but rejected that thought immediately. He wanted to be fully naked against her, skin against skin. And the way she was watching him undress…

“You really are eager for me,” he teased.

She looked away and put a hand to her cheek. “My lord is very handsome,” she told a space somewhere to the vague left of where he was standing.

“Then look at your lord,” he said, and watched her breasts heave as she turned her face back to him; drank in the desire in her eyes as he took off his pants and unwound his loincloth.

“I…” she said, backing up on the bed as he approached her, “my body is… somewhat different, still…”

“Huh?” He looked down at her under him. “Oh. You mean here?”

Her stomach was larger, there were what looked like white scars running vertically down it. She said, “Yes… it’s… it’s not very attractive, I know…”

“You grew my child here,” Zhao said incredulously, “of course it attracts me. I did that to you. Those are my marks on you—”

He was exciting himself further as he spoke; he had to have her again, he needed her so badly. He put his hands between her legs to check how wet she was and she gasped. She was wet, but not wet enough. He wanted her dripping.

“You’re so beautiful,” he growled into her ear as he fucked her with his fingers and teased her clit with his thumb. “You’re so fucking sexy, Yuanji. You’re getting so wet for me, you’ve been longing for me. Ask me to fuck you. Beg your lord to put his cock inside you.”

“M-my lord!” she moaned. “I can’t… I can’t say that…”

“You’re already thinking it. You can’t fool me, little Yuanji. Just say it.” He stopped letting his fingers enter her, simply rubbing her entrance very lightly while never letting up on her clit.

“Ah! Please, my lord, please… please fuck me!”

He drew himself up; she’d closed her eyes to manage to get out those naughty words. She was so cute. Zhao grabbed her hand and moved it to his cock, and her eyes opened. “Here,” he said. “Guide me in.”

She positioned his cock at her entrance, their eyes locked with each other. He didn’t lower himself in.
“And?” he coaxed.

“Please put your cock inside me, my lord,” she said, with her eyes open this time.

“Perfect,” he groaned as he thrust inside her, careful not to go in too deep. He wanted this to be amazing for her. “Is this right?”

“F-faster,” she moaned.

“Oh God,” he groaned as he followed her request. “How am I going to keep from exploding inside you, Yuanji? How am I going to stop myself from filling you up? You feel so fucking good around me.”

“I-I won’t take long. You feel so good, my lord, you… your cock is…”

“Yuanji! Yuanji, say it!”

“Your cock is filling me! My lord… my lord’s cock is going to make me… I’m going to…!”

“Yes! Do it! Come around me, Yuanji! I’m making you come! I’m going to come in you!”

She was moaning wordlessly now. She was so beautiful! Her face, her closed eyes, her panting mouth, everything! The way her cunt was squeezing him! He couldn’t take it, it had only been minutes but he just couldn’t take it! He groaned as he began to come. Come inside his wife. His love. His Yuanji.

———

When Sima Shi finally came out for breakfast, he was displeased to see that the dining room of his wing contained his wife, his mother, and his three daughters, all having tea. Outwardly, however, he merely said, “Good morning.”

“Why is Zhao here?” his mother demanded, as he was afraid she might.

“It’s handled, mother,” he said, sitting down. “He woke me up for it and I am not quite myself because of it.”

His mother frowned. “My son needs breakfast,” she said sharply to a servant, then got up. “I’ll see to it myself… nothing is handled as it should be around here…”

There was an awkward pause when she left.

“Well.” Lady Yang broke the silence. “Don’t you young ladies have something to say to your father?”

His daughters looked as puzzled as he felt. Chenlan, his oldest, answered, “What would we say to him?”

“I don’t think you’ve thanked him for bringing you all to Luoyang,” Lady Yang said, “and for hiring you all those tutors and giving you such nice rooms. I’ve been waiting and waiting for you to do it, all these weeks. It really has been too long.”

His daughters looked at him, and he looked at them.

“Thank you, father,” said his second daughter, Qingyin, while almost at the same time, Chenlan banged her cup down on the table.

“Don’t you dare raise your voice to your father,” Lady Yang shouted back.

“What does it matter whether I raise my voice or not! It’s only a matter of time before I upset him enough to kill me too! Might as well get it over with! I can’t stand this!” Chenlan got up and ran from the room; his youngest daughter burst into tears, and his middle daughter hugged her. His mother rushed back into the room.

“I heard shouting,” his mother said, staring at Lady Yang with death in her eyes. “What’s happened?”

“Why are you looking at me?” Lady Yang hissed. “Shi, tell her how disrespectful your daughter was!”

Sima Shi stood up. “Mother, I need to talk to Chenlan myself. Please take care of Qingyin and Qiujing for me.”

When Sima Shi opened the door to his oldest daughter’s room, he was shocked when she immediately threw herself at his feet.

“I’m sorry, father, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she was sobbing. “Please. Please I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die, please.”

His daughter. His eleven-year-old daughter was begging him not to kill her.

Shi dropped down to a crouch. “Chenlan,” he said, as gently as he could, “I won’t hurt you, no matter what you say to me.”

He took her into his arms awkwardly; she was stiff with fear.

“I know I was… cruel to your mother,” he said. “But I didn’t kill her. I never wanted her to die. It is my fault that she’s dead, but I didn’t want her to die, and I’m sorry I didn’t stop it from happening.”

“You… you didn’t?” Chenlan said. “Then… who did?”

How could he answer? Could he really look into this little girl’s face, this little girl who was so afraid of him that she thought that just from standing up to him one time that he would kill her, and tell her, The Yang clan, in some way, but I can’t punish them easily, so I’m going to let them all off; by the way, make sure you’re polite to your stepmother? No. He couldn’t say that.

“I’ll find out,” he promised. “I’ll find out and I’ll make them answer for it.”
Yuanji took comfort in Zhao’s hands on her shoulders as Shi knelt on her bedroom floor, in roughly the same place where he had pulled off her nightgown. He pressed his forehead to the ground.

“I am truly sorry for my reprehensible conduct,” he said. “My intentions were despicable. I know I do not deserve your forgiveness. Nevertheless, I beg for it.”

“Lord Zhao told me I never have to forgive you if I do not wish to,” Yuanji said, “and I know that he does not forgive you yet, and I imagine it will take a long time for him to forgive you. But I am going to forgive you now.”

Shi looked up, startled, and she heard Zhao say, “But… Yuanji, why?”

“This is no time for family drama to be distracting us,” Yuanji said calmly. “Lord Shi knows now that there is no possible way that he can ever come between my husband and me. He will never attempt it again. As for punishment, his loss of our good opinion will remain for sometime… perhaps a very long time… and I believe that nothing will hurt him as much as that.”

Shi looked down, and Yuanji knew she had indeed hit him with that.

“Lord Shi, you are almost at the pinnacle,” she said, “but it is not impossible for you to falter now, and we will all be ruined if you are ruined. We must be as united as ever publicly. I trust and I expect that you will work very hard to regain our love and our trust, so that our unity will not be false for longer than necessary.”

“Thank you.” Shi pressed his forehead to the ground again. “I will do my utmost.”

“Alright,” said Zhao, a bit roughly, “you can get out now.”

“Wait a moment.” Shi rose into a kneel. “You want to know everything that’s on my mind, don’t you? All my plans.”


“There are some that I want to act on today,” he said. “Shall I tell you here or in my office?”

“Tell me here.”

Shi nodded, and briefly went over what had occurred at breakfast, and his promise to his daughter to bring Lady Xiahou’s killer to account.

“I thought you said you needed the Yangs too much.”

“I’ve changed my mind,” said Shi. “That was the same kind of thinking that… that got me into this mess. I can’t be so selfish anymore. My children’s mother was murdered. If I can’t get justice for them, what kind of father am I?”

“You haven’t been any father at all to them,” Zhao said.

Shi nodded. “I know. I took things for granted. How can I rule an empire if I can’t even keep my
own family in order?”

“Pretty words,” said Zhao, still dubious.

“You’re right. Watch me act on them.” Shi got up.

Yuanji said, “What are you planning to do? Go back to Hua and interrogate the servants? They’ve probably already taken the bribes and disappeared.”

“The servants are not a problem. I hid some of Lady Xiahou’s jewelry in my sleeve and then had them all arrested for stealing. But their testimony is nearly worthless. I am sure they’ll name whoever I ask them to as the killer. And they’ll only know the person who gave them the money; that might be anyone. I am almost certain that Lady Yang was involved,” he said. “The question is whether the rest of her clan was involved as well. I think I can get the answer very simply. I’m going to ask her if she did it.” He smiled.

“I have to say it’s not up there with your usual schemes,” said Zhao.

“You know how much Lady Yang aspires to be our mother,” said Shi. “She’s heard the story of how mother killed the maid, and many more. She’s seen my mother up close, and I’ve told her directly that she isn’t equal to mother. There’s nothing she craves more than for me to see her as equal to—no, superior to mother. If I ask her in that way… I feel certain I can entrap her.”

“I think he’s right,” said Yuanji. “Are you going to do it alone?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think you should try it alone,” she said, “but with an accomplice…”

“I can’t believe it took me so long to realize it was you,” Shi said, letting Lady Yang straddle his waist in her bed. “You were so jealous, weren’t you? As if I could go back to a simpering little fool like her after I’d had you. But I have to say, you’ve really impressed me.”

“I can feel how much I have,” she said, rubbing against him. “I should have known if I murdered someone I’d gain your love. You really are just like your father.”

“But did you really do it all by yourself?” he said as she kissed his neck. “Or did you get your clan to do your bidding for you?”

“Ha! Of course I can handle something like this by myself,” she said. “The less people that know about something like that the better, anyway. I rode out there myself the very first night, and gave them the bribe and the poison.”

“So you planned it all? Amazing. I would have thought, with your ability to manipulate people…”

She was practically preening. “Oh, if it was necessary, I would have! But you know, my brother is too cautious. I knew I had to act fast.”

“So you consulted nobody,” Shi said, and caught her wrists in each hand. “You really are an imbecile.”

His smile hadn’t changed. She laughed, with a little fear behind it. “You have such a funny way of speaking, my lord.”
Shi didn’t let go as she attempted to pull her hands free. “I am going to give you one chance, and only one chance, to save your life. If you write a full and complete confession, and claim you are sorry, I will divorce you quietly and use your confession to keep your clan under control. You can live out your days peacefully and alone. But if you refuse, I am going to tie you up and slit open your stomach. Poison is an unpleasant way to die, and if you are going to make my life difficult, I want your death to be worse.”

She didn’t give in right away, of course. She begged, she pleaded, she sobbed, but it didn’t take her long to face the facts. She wasn’t actually stupid.

She sat down at her desk and wrote out the confession. Shi let her word most of it herself, but he told her the closing line she was to write: *I am overwhelmed by my sorrow and remorse and I cannot bear it.*

Then she signed her name.

Sima Shi took the paper, looked it over critically, then walked over to place it carefully on the windowsill to dry. He pulled a scarf from his pocket, walked over to his wife, and swiftly pulled her close with one arm while gagging her with the scarf.

“I’m so glad you chose to bring me into this,” Lady Zhang said as she opened the wardrobe she had been hiding in and stepped out, carrying a rope with a noose on the end of it. “I have been wanting to kill her for months.”

Lady Zhang casually laid the rope down and tied the gag properly while Shi held the struggling woman. Then she looped the noose around the woman’s neck, and stood up on a chair to toss it over a beam in the ceiling.

Shi lifted Lady Yang, still struggling, up in the air while Lady Zhang tied the other end of the rope tightly to a column.

“Does that look about right?” said Lady Zhang when she stepped back.

In her panic, Lady Yang had not yet realized that getting free of Shi’s grip was no longer the path to safety. Therefore, when Sima Shi loosened his grip, she did not attempt to hold onto him.

The drop was only a few inches, nowhere near enough to break her neck. The noose had immediately tightened around her throat, despite her hands clawing at it ineffectually. Her feet struggled, but she was well clear of the ground.

Her husband and mother-in-law watched, the former sober, the latter smiling, as Lady Yang asphyxiated. When she lost consciousness, Shi quickly stepped forward to remove the gag, while Lady Zhang turned the chair on its side as if it had been kicked out of the way, stood back, judged the scene critically, and then slightly adjusted the angle of the fallen chair.

“I think that looks very convincing,” she said. “I suppose you’re going to find her like this in the morning?”

Shi put the confession note back on the writing desk. “Yes. I’ll check if the hall is clear.”

He went to the door to the public hall, opened it, and looked out. With a quick nod to his mother, she went past him and was off and gone.

Shi closed the door, locked it, blew out the candles, and left via the other door to his room. He had not thought this morning that he would sleep so well that night.
“I want to assure you,” Sima Shi said to his former brother-in-law, “that I attach no blame whatsoever to you or your clan for this deed. Your poor sister was clearly overwhelmed by jealousy into temporary madness. If only she had told you of her paranoia, so that you could have talked her out of it!”

Yang Hu was clearly reeling from his sister’s suicide, and Shi was positive that he indeed had not been involved in Lady Xiahou’s murder from the guileless way that he nodded and said, “Yes, I can’t believe she didn’t talk to me—she should have known I would have acted for her, if you truly were neglecting her. She never even hinted that she was unhappy…”

“I will miss her dearly. Her final act proves the sincerity of her remorse,” said Shi. “I beg that you continue to consider me your brother-in-law.”

“You are everything that is tolerant and merciful, as usual, your majesty,” said Yang Hu, bowing. “It has been and will continue to be my honour to serve you. Please, tell me how I can continue to do so.”

“I think you know,” he answered.

Yang Hu bowed deeper still. “Is that day near, that I shall call you something other than my lord?”

“It is a day that cannot be stopped from coming,” said Sima Shi, “no matter what grief I have to bear.”

Sima Zhao strolled into his brother’s office, Wen Yang following behind him with humble dignity.

“Hello Zhao,” said Shi, glancing between the two of them. “Have a seat.”

“Thanks,” said Zhao, already taking one, while Wen Yang took up the position of a bodyguard.

“Couple of things. I’ve decided I want to be a prince.”

“Oh. Of course.”

“And, I’ve already pardoned Wen Yang here, but I want you to make it a full exoneration before the court, and give him his father’s title and lands.”

“Oh, yes,” said Shi, looking at Wen Yang more properly. “I remember now. You called me a usurper and a coward.”

Wen Yang flushed, and looked at Zhao for help.

“We’re letting bygones be bygones though, right?” said Zhao lightly.

“Right,” said Shi, and smiled.

When Sima Shi went into his oldest daughter’s bedroom to say goodnight, he found all three girls in the bed, looking at him with excited faces. “What’s all this?”

“Grandmother told us how you tricked Lady Yang into confessing,” said Chenlan. “And that it’s a secret.”
“We won’t tell!” said Qiujing.

Shi leaned against the door and shook his head. “I see. I wasn’t going to tell you because I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“Oh no, we thought it was great!” said Chenlan, the other two nodding eagerly. “It was even better than how grandmother killed that maid!”

Shi laughed. “I should have known… I suppose I knew that story by your age as well.”

“Do you have any other cool stories like that?” blurted Chenlan, then flushed, and added quickly, “I mean—if you’re not too busy—”

“I have a little time,” he said, sitting on a chair. “Did grandmother tell you about how we overthrew Cao Shuang?”

Three little heads shook no.

“Alright. Well… to begin with, Cao Shuang was an imbecile…”

———

A week later, Lady Zhang came into Yuanji’s room while she was nursing Goji and said abruptly, “Did Shi… make an attempt on your virtue when Zhao was gone?”

It was such a sudden and unexpected attack that Yuanji did not have time to think of how to arrange her face. Her shock, she knew, was alright, but should she deny it? Tell her to ask Shi? Ask her to drop it?

“Oh no,” Lady Zhang breathed, walked over to where she sat, and kissed her forehead. “I am so sorry, my dear.”

“He… he didn’t succeed,” Yuanji managed.

Lady Zhang was surprised. “Oh? Oh… Then it is not as bad as I feared… I am glad.”

When Yuanji considered it, she could understand her surprise. When did Shi ever fail… “Lord Shi… didn’t really want me. What he wanted was a son that he could name his heir.”

“The two of you are more forgiving than I would be, my dear,” said Lady Zhang, sitting next to her with a sigh.

“Lord Zhao… hasn’t forgiven him yet.”

“But he hasn’t killed him,” Lady Zhang said. “Believe me, Shi knows his good fortune. I have never seen him like this. He is a different man. He has finally realized something I have been trying to teach him all these years. Oh, my dear. You have so many years of motherhood ahead of you! I don’t know whether I feel more sorrow for or envy of you.”

———

A few weeks later, Sima Shi visited Lady Zhang Xingcai again.

He was pleased when she immediately kowtowed before him again. Shi had issued an order in his own name that he needed to be kowtowed to only by “his subjects”. On the surface, this meant residents of his vassal state of Jin, meaning that within the imperial capital itself, no one needed to
kowtow to him. In practice, those who wished to show their loyalty to his rule were kowtowing anyway. By doing so, they were declaring that they wanted to be “his subjects”.

The time was almost right to tell Cao Mao to abdicate.

With her secluded existence, of course Xingcai was not aware of this double meaning, but that only made it more delightful to him. He had told her she could simply call him “my lord”, and they always met privately, with guards outside at a distance not to eavesdrop; so her kowtow was like a personal submission to him. It was exciting because he knew that her heart had not submitted to the situation at all. This was a woman who knew how to play the game, but had been wasted all her life among fools. What a pity.

He sat just in front of her again, allowing himself to enjoy her proud and elegant beauty. Now that she was removed from the stress of the conquest, she no longer looked older than him. He had learned they were actually the same age, both a year younger than Liu Shan.

“I have been acting on your information,” he said. “Obviously communication with Chengdu is slow. For the sake of peace, I wish to move to secure a more long-term and benevolent tie between certain former Shu officers and the empire than the undignified use of hostages.”

He saw her eyes flash with disdain at his use of the word benevolent. She was so predictable. Now watch. I will smile, and… aha. There, she is thinking how much she wants to hit me.

Aloud she said, “You mean marriage ties, I suppose, your majesty.”

He nodded. “You understand me. Of course it will be a process. I am not sure enough of either the value or the rationality of all of those whose relatives are our guests here. There are two I would like to start with. I understand both Dong Yun and Fei Yi have unmarried daughters here.”

“Young lord has not received complete information,” Xingcai said evenly. “While they are both unmarried, Lady Fei is betrothed; the marriage would have occurred, were it not for the interruption of the war.”

“I do not think I am mistaken,” said Shi softly. “Think carefully, Lady Zhang. Are you sure that you are not confusing Lady Fei with someone else?”

He saw Xingcai gather her courage. “I am sure. Lady Fei’s partiality for the young man is of long-standing. Your majesty, I am fond of them both and could not possibly be mistaken.”

“What is this young man’s name?”

“Ma Cheng, the son of Ma Chao.”

“I see. The Ma clan has a good reputation in Liang among some, doesn’t it?”

Xingcai tilted her head, considering his words, before answering cautiously, “Among some, it does, your majesty.”

“And this young man also has a partiality for this young lady, doubtless.”

“A strong one, your majesty.”

“He will be very grateful to me if I allow them to marry, then.”

Xingcai regarded him with her clear eyes, then said slowly, “It would be another example of your
benevolence.”

Oh, that was a good one. Full points to her. He laughed as loud as it deserved. “I will see about arranging it. This Ma Cheng might be useful to me. Lady Dong has no prior claimants on her hand?”

“None that I know, your majesty.”

“That is excellent. I have seen her and she is very beautiful.”

Xingcai said nothing, but he saw her eyes look at his mourning garb.

He laughed again. “You are too perceptive for your own good! But I am not seeking a wife for myself, though you are right to observe that I have lost mine recently. I will finish the year and then find the right lady for me. No, I want her for a good officer of mine, sadly lacking in family to help him. A relative of yours, in fact, so you should want to do him a good turn.”

“A relative of mine?” Xingcai said, apparently too startled to remember to add your majesty.

“On your mother’s side. Xiahou Ba, son of Xiahou Yuan.”

Complicated emotions dappled her face, too many and too changing for Sima Shi to read them. When she had refocused herself, she said, “From what little I know, I cannot imagine that any maternal relative of mine would be eager to claim the relation, your majesty.”

“What possible blame can you shoulder for your father’s actions? Zhang Fei is dead, and so are most of the Xiahou. I think those that remain will be eager for as many allies as they can get. And he is younger even than you. He has no bad memories of your mother’s kidnapping.” He got up. “Please have a seat, Lady Zhang. I want to introduce him to you now.”

“Now?” said Xingcai as she stood, but then said, “Of course, your majesty,” as she took a seat—one of the more modest chairs, leaving the best one for him.

Shi retrieved Xiahou Ba. He had told him to dress nicely. Outside of armour, Xiahou Ba actually looked more mature. He still had his round face and his big, timid eyes like a deer’s, but his height now was not far off from what his father’s had been, and his body showed its training must better in the simple silk lines of the hanfu.

Xingcai was pretty high in Shi’s favour, and he unconsciously did her the respect of treating her as the higher ranked as he introduced the two of them to each other. He saw surprise flicker across Xingcai’s face, but he thought it was just from how very young Xiahou Ba still looked, and so he decided to reassure her.

“Master Xiahou Ba is in fact twenty-one years old,” he said, “and has done me meritorious service, including saving my life.”

“Oh, no no no no no,” Xiahou Ba protested, “nothing so grand as that.”

“I consider it saving my life;” said Shi with a smile.

“Aiyaya…” Xiahou Ba fretted, and Lady Zhang smiled as well.

“His majesty tells me we are related,” she said. “My mother was your cousin.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know about it,” Xiahou Ba said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “My father always… wanted to bring you all home.”
Lady Zhang remained smiling, which impressed Shi. She said, “I never met him, but I understand that he was a man of honour. I can tell you my mother gave him a proper burial.”

Xiahou Ba’s face twisted. “It was a hard way to lose him.”

She nodded, her smile gentle and kind. “I am glad that those days are behind us.”

Xiahou Ba managed to smile back. “Yeah, Lord Sima Shi’s the only one who could have managed it!”

“So it seems,” she said, and turned that smile on him.

When he got undressed for bed that evening, Sima Shi realized with some displeasure that he was still thinking of that smile.

I must really be desperate for a woman, he thought. I’ll get a mistress… no, too risky. Prostitutes are safer.

———

At the end of the summer, the emperor summoned both the Sima brothers to the gardens.

They both kept their weapons on as they walked past the guards down the path to a pavilion by the lake, where they could see the emperor sitting alone with his back to them. No one tried to stop them. The insects were singing loudly; Zhao could feel sweat trickling down his back. It was no time to be awake, much less outside.

When they began to kneel, Cao Mao sighed and held up his hand. “I called you here because I’m tired of waiting.”

They kowtowed anyway. Cao Mao ignored them as they did so, pouring a cup of wine for himself and drinking it.

Only when they stood up did he turn to them again. “I know what you are,” he said. “I’ve always known. That’s why Empress Guo picked me, isn’t it? She thought I was the last chance. But I wasn’t good enough. Or maybe it was already too late, no matter what my talents.”

Zhao glanced at Shi, but his brother kept his face solemn and respectful.

“Maybe it is fate, or even justice,” he said. “My grandfather kept Emperor Xian as a puppet until it became clear to everyone just how impotent he really was, and then my uncle took his throne. Now the same thing is happening to me. I want to make a decision while it is still my decision. I don’t want any more of my kin and friends to throw themselves away on a lost cause. I am going to abdicate now. I will not wait for you to tell me to do so.”

“I understand, your majesty,” said Sima Shi slowly. “By choosing your successor based on ability, you shall be remembered in history as like Emperor Yao or Emperor Shun.”

“I suppose that makes you Yu the Great,” Cao Mao said dryly.

Zhao snickered, glancing back and forth from the face behind the jade beads to the face of his brother that was going to take that hat from him. “You know, you two actually do have a lot in common.”

“I think you’re right Zhao,” said Shi. “It is only the emperor’s bad luck that he did not have a
younger brother like mine.”

“Bad luck? I should have thought you would call it the Will of Heaven,” said Cao Mao.

“What is it you want from your retirement, your majesty?” said Shi, sidestepping this.

“By offering you my willing support of your usurpation,” said Cao Mao, “I don’t want to be isolated as Liu Shan is. I need people, I need conversation. I want to write poetry and discuss it. I understand that this is not possible in Luoyang. I want to go to Shenyang.”

Shi laughed. “Will you live with Ruan Ji? I’ve heard the madman of the bamboo grove likes young men like your majesty.”

“Have you heard his music and read his poetry?”

“Oh yes. It is excellent. His lover Ji Kang, too, writes very elegantly. I almost agree with how despicable I am, how vain and disgusting my ambition, when I read their poetry or listen to their music. But all they do is drink wine and put into writing their sedition; they make no attempt to prevent the one they despise from gaining the power to execute them. That is why I call them mad.”

“They are not mad,” said Cao Mao. “They only want to be left alone, without having to live falsely. And that is all I want now, too.”

Shi put his hands together to bow, but only slightly. “I will grant you what you wish. You will not need to refer to yourself as a subject of mine; you can use the imperial ceremonies for your ancestors.”

“I hope I live long enough to see if your dynasty lasts longer than mine,” said Cao Mao. “For the sake of the land, I hope it does.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to apologize to the historical Lady Yang, who shares only a name with the villainess who met her end in this chapter. Since she was a woman, there is very little information recorded about the historical Yang Huiyu, but she what there is makes it seem extremely unlikely that she would ever have done anything like this. Of course, all of the characters in this story are really fictional, but since the gulf between Lady Yang in this story and in history is especially bad, I wanted to make it clear.
Jia Chong returned to Luoyang at last, feeling very unsure of himself.

When Zhao, months earlier, abruptly left Chencang after receiving a letter which he would not let Jia Chong read, he took Wen Yang with him. That had hurt, even though Jia Chong had not been able to admit to himself that it hurt until weeks had passed. Weeks of him cooling his heels in Chencang, without anyone reaching out to him.

When he was reached out to, it was over a month after Zhao’s sudden disappearance, and it was from Sima Shi, telling him to collect a certain Ma Cheng from Chengdu. From Chengdu! Why Jia Chong? Because Sima Shi was willing to let this Ma Cheng marry a certain Lady Fei, apparently his fiancee; but only if it would make this Ma Cheng a loyal servant of his in the west.

What else could he do? Jia Chong went to Chengdu, the mountainous and treacherous journey, with only a small contingent of guards. He met this Ma Cheng, whom he found to be a passionate and besotted young man who went from the pits of despair to utter rapture when Jia Chong informed him that Sima Shi was willing to have him come to Luoyang and marry Lady Fei, and then be stationed in Xiliang.

“For the time being, of course, Lady Fei could not go so far as that,” Jia Chong had said, carefully watching Ma Cheng’s face, “but perhaps she could live in Chang’an, or even Tianshui, and you could make annual visits in the short term… maybe even twice a year… and in the long term, as your value to the emperor becomes clearer…”

Ma Cheng’s enthusiasm had barely been dimmed by this; it was clear he had been sure he had lost the opportunity of having her as his wife forever, and had been moving listlessly forward only so that his bad behaviour might not be used as an excuse to punish those associated with him.

And so Jia Chong had waited for him to prepare, and then they had started the slow journey again, up from Chengdu through the mountains, until they finally reached the Yellow River, which could carry them to Luoyang.

And when he arrived, it was just in time to hear that Cao Mao would abdicate in favour of Sima Shi; that autumn would bring Cao Mao’s abdication, Sima Shi’s coronation and thus a new dynasty; that it was to be called the Jin dynasty.

That the Sima Zhao that he had been so carefully cultivating to rule was the heir to the empire.

Before they left Shouchun, Zhao had called him his brain. Was that what he was? If his purpose was to think, why couldn’t he understand what was happening?

After handing over Ma Cheng and making his presence known, he decided he would go home.

“My lady is visiting her cousin,” the servant told him when he arrived.
“Have a message sent to Lady Guo that I am home,” Jia Chong answered. “I want to wash.”

Huaihuai was there in his bedroom when he came from the bath, lying on his bed, naked. “Welcome home, my love,” she purred.

Jia Chong slid the bolt behind him. “Huaihuai… this is very direct.”

She beckoned him towards her. “I am not ashamed to want you inside me again.”

He laughed a little, but did not move away from the door. “You are not ashamed of anything you feel or do, you vixen. But you have a little fox cub inside you.”

Huaihuai rubbed her round stomach. “So? He can’t see or hear anything. I can’t wait any longer.”

“It makes me uncomfortable,” Jia Chong said.

He saw the suspicion snap into her face. She sat up. “You aren’t eager to have me no matter what? Were you amusing yourself elsewhere while you were away?”

“No. I had no pleasure of any kind when we were apart.” It was honest, and he saw it reassure her, but not enough.

“Come here,” she said, and this time he knew he could not avoid it.

When he got to the bed, he did not tell her to stop as she pulled off his robe. He saw her displeasure that his cock wasn’t hard, and when she took it into her mouth, the eyes that looked up at his were burning with anger. He was in for it now. God help him, that excited him.

Huaihuai kept her eyes on his face the entire time. She could read him like a book when she had him like this. He was her entire universe; she had made it her only purpose in life to please him and gain his adoration in return. Their engagement had been made in childhood, and when they had first met—he was ten, she was eight—he had thought her announcement, you are the love of my life, was cute.

It hadn’t been cute at all. She was many things, but never—he gasped as one of her fingers crept to his asshole. He saw the triumphant glow in her eyes as she waited for him to relax, and once he had, she slid a finger inside him and crooked it.

“Huaihuai!” he cried out, all thought driven out of his mind by the wave of pleasure. The mouth released him, the finger pulled away, and Jia Chong reopened his eyes to see that she was turning on all fours.

“Here,” she said, turning her head to look at him over her shoulder, “you can forget about it when I’m like this, can’t you?”

Indeed, from behind the swell of her gravid belly was not visible, easy to ignore.

“My love!” she moaned as he slid into her. “Yes! Faster, my love! Ah! I can feel your balls slapping against me!”

She wasn’t cute. She was a dream, sometimes a fantasy and sometimes a nightmare, but never cute.

God, she did feel so good around him still…

“Huaihuai,” he growled, “you are fucking impossible.”
He heard the joy in her next moan. She loved it when she drove him to crude language.

When they came together, he fell forward on top of her, panting hard into her shoulder, his damp hair falling into his face. Huaihuai turned them both onto their sides so that his arm was pinned beneath her, spooning her, as his cock slipped loose from her.

“Stay with me, my love,” she sang, snuggling back into him. “Stay with me just like this.”

He looked down at her. Her eyes were closed, so he didn’t have to control his face. He didn’t have to fight to hide the sick feeling inside him when he looked at her belly. Had he just harmed his own child in order to placate her?

There was nothing to be done about it now. Surely, it was better that she was satisfied like this? If he had really refused her… God. It didn’t bear thinking about.

His arm beneath her was falling asleep, but he didn’t attempt to get it free.

———

It was time for the highpoint of Shi’s coronation. The grand kowtow: three kneelings and nine knocks of the head to the ground, performed in unison by the entire court.

Sima Yi remained seated in his wheelchair, Chunhua seated in a chair beside him, as everyone else stood. As the emperor’s parents, even without his ill-health, they had been granted the privilege not to kowtow to, or even bow to, their son.

He gazed up at his son, thinking of how alike they were and yet how different.

At twenty-five, Sima Yi had not wanted to be involved in the war. It seemed like an incredible amount of risk, accrued almost entirely for someone else’s benefit. He had not wanted to marry, either. He hadn’t met Chunhua yet… but then she would have been only eleven years old, wouldn’t she? Incredible to think of it that way…

The music and chanting intoned; everyone else knelt.

No, he had not had ambition for himself… truthfully, he had never had ambition for himself. He wanted to make Chunhua proud… and then he wanted to secure a future for his sons.

As one, the court pressed their foreheads to the ground.

Shi had wanted to succeed for himself, since he was a very little boy. He wanted power. And now he had as much as a man could possibly have, at twenty-five years old. What would he do with it?

The people rose up to a kneel, then pressed their foreheads to the ground again.

The curtain of jade beads, at this distance, hid Shi’s face.

Again, the multitude lifted their heads. Again, they pressed their foreheads to the ground in submission to their new emperor.

Sima Yi let his eyes drift to where he could just see his other son, his daughter-in-law, and his granddaughters rising up to a stand.

———

The ancient words, sacred music, and the appearance of Sima Shi in the most formal religious
garments of the emperor shook Yuanji to her soul. He had made the significant choice to wear a white robe with a black and gold five-clawed dragon; it was sombre but magnificent. *This is the Son of Heaven*, it told her; how many times had she heard that phrase? Yet only now did her eyes truly open to the spiritual dimension of what was occurring here.

She had felt only pity for Cao Mao when he was enthroned, though she remembered the music was very similar and his dress had been even grander. He had been scarcely more than a little boy. Shi was always impressive, of course, but she knew Shi so well; she knew too well that he had his full share of flaws and even ridiculous aspects… and he had, not so long ago, come so close to profaning her. Yet somehow, at least in this moment, her intuition had no complaints. Was it simply the artist in her, that liked the scene? Or something more than that?

She sank elegantly to her knees for the second set of kowtows. Next to her, Zhao was pressing his forehead to the ground just like her.

天子。天下。天命。

*The Son of Heaven. All Under Heaven. The Will of Heaven.*

She rose up to a kneel, and pressed her forehead to the ground again in submission.

Heaven… heaven did have a will, she thought, only expressed in chaos or order, suffering or prosperity, unity or discord. And it was inexorable, unescapable, unstoppable; but it was not that chaos would inevitably give way to order or the reverse, it was not that heaven would propel a result no matter what people did. It was that whatever decisions were made by humans, those decisions would have results.

And there was something more, she thought, as she raised up to a kneel and then lowered her forehead again.

Despite his flaws, despite his faults, despite the fact that he was still a naturally ruthless, even cruel man… Shi was blessed by heaven. Blessed with his talents, his intelligence, his opportunities… blessed with his family. Lord Sima Yi and Lady Zhang Chunhua… Lord Zhao… his daughters… her…

Lord Sima Shi… Emperor Sima Shi… Long had he thought himself uniquely ordained by heaven to this destiny. Did he really know? Had he realized the fullness of it just in time, as her intuition seemed to trust?

*It’s going to be odd, she mused, getting used to keeping a living demi-god on track… but I suppose that is what heaven wills as well…*

———

The ceremony was almost over, and as she stood up for the last set of kowtows, Zhang Xingcai realized that despite being close enough to touch her husband for hours, they were almost certainly going to part from each other without having interacted in any meaningful way.

When she had been told that she and the other hostages would all be there in the court for Sima Shi’s coronation as emperor, it had been almost too many shocks at once. That the Sima clan controlled their emperor had been common knowledge in the Shu court; Xingcai bitterly remembered having felt pride that Lord Liu Shan genuinely commanded his people’s respect and loyalty. Benevolence, the proper relationship between the emperor and his people; that was what made Shu special, that was why Wei would never prevail against them… Lord Liu Shan had inherited this, and the
Mandate, from Lord Liu Bei.

But Lord Liu Shan had willingly handed his authority and his people entirely over to the man before whom he now pressed his forehead to the ground in abject submission.

They had been placed near the front, where the rest of the court could see them easily, second only to Cao Mao. It was an honour that was a degradation.

Lord Liu Shan… the duke of Anle, the duke of peace and pleasure. Another degrading honour. She ought to be glad, she knew, she ought to think of it as humility, not degradation. Her husband valued the peace, unity, prosperity of the land and its people above all other things; that, that and that alone, was why he submitted so quickly. Not from some craven desire to leap at the offer of a quiet life of indolent luxury. No, Lord Liu Shan was willing to put himself at risk of execution; it could not be that!

But he never said anything to me! Her heart was burning with it! Since the day she had been told she would be his wife, over ten years before, she had put all of herself into fulfilling his wishes, supporting his rule… she was his wife… and yet she had learned that he was surrendering only with the rest of the Shu court, as a command that would brook no advice or protest, told that he had already sent his surrender and his seal to Sima Shi’s general Deng Ai, and that he had instructions from them for how to comply with their acceptance of it. Thrust, in an instant, from the empress of China to a defeated pretender’s wife who now had to scramble to arrange what few things she and the other hostages would take with them to Luoyang.

And she had made no protest! As Jiang Wei and the other warhawks had pleaded with Lord Liu Shan in vain, she had submitted, as she was submitting now to press her forehead to the ground before Sima Shi. She had never asked for an explanation… she had never asked for anything… was she wrong to be so bitter that nothing had been offered?

She had hoped, today, here, he would find a way to sneak her a letter… whisper to her some profound thought… at least to look at her, and say something with his eyes. They were so utterly defeated and powerless, there could be no risk in a look!

But when Lord Liu Shan had looked at her as they gathered before processing into the coronation, she saw nothing in his eyes but recognition. The smile that was already on his lips had not changed. He had not opened his mouth, and he had made no attempt to get closer to her. And though she had kept glancing at him all through the ceremony, not once had she caught him looking at her.

Xingcai pressed her forehead to the ground for the ninth time, the end of the grand kowtow to their new emperor. The end, the end, the end.

———

“Your majesty has received a letter from Sun Quan’s chancellor Lu Xun.”

Sima Shi smiled. So. The aged pseudo-emperor of the Southlands had decided to make the first move, eh? “Who does he address it to?”

“To the King of Jin, your majesty.”

“Aha. Wait.”

It took about twenty minutes for Zhao to be fetched, and he looked irritated when he strolled in. “Why can’t this wait, brother? I just started dinner.”
If the minor official who brought the letter was shocked that Lord Sima Zhao still addressed the emperor so casually, he was too well-trained to show it. Shi said, “The King of Jin has received a letter from Sun Quan.”

“So? That’s you, isn’t it? I know I said I want in on your plans, but that doesn’t mean I want to be here for every little thing. That’s the last thing I want, actually.”

“Can I be the emperor and my own vassal king at the same time? I suppose I can, but it seems superfluous. You said you wanted to be a prince; would you settle for being a king? It would mean a potentially bothersome level of responsibility, I grant… your own personal army, your own separate authority, semi-independent of mine… on the other hand, I hear that the land of Jin is one of the best places to raise horses in China.”

That wiped the grumpiness right off of Zhao’s face. “What?”

“Lady Wang would make an excellent queen, as well,” Shi continued.

“She would,” Zhao agreed, and a slow smile spread across his face. “You make a really good point there. Besides, it’s not like I’m getting away from authority anywhere at this point. Alright.” To the servant he said, “Okay, read me my letter.”

The official really was well-trained. Shi made a mental note to make sure this man was paid well. Without a flicker he unrolled the scroll and read the message.

Noticeably avoiding using the word emperor, Lu Xun congratulated “the King of Jin” on his advancement in the world. The real point of the letter was to gauge exactly what this new Jin dynasty might be planning with regard to Wu. The letter strongly asserted Wu’s independence, yet it also noticeably avoided referring to Sun Quan, such that the letter didn’t call him an emperor either.

Reading between the lines, Wu was open to overtures of vassal status, but only with continued internal autonomy that was de facto as well as de jure.

“Hm,” said Shi when the letter was finished.

“Well, I’d certainly rather not invade Wu,” said Zhao. “Emperor Cao Pi tried it four times and never made it across the river.”

“He left father at home to run the capital every time,” Shi pointed out. “Had he been wiser, he would have stayed at home and sent father to invade Wu. But if he had been wiser, many things would be different.” He idly ran his fingers over the imperial seal, like a caress.

“Bring it before the council,” Zhao said with a shrug. “Can I have my cold dinner now, o my emperor?”

Shi shot him a droll look. “I shall pay you back for that one. A spar, tomorrow morning? And then breakfast.”

Zhao made the proper, backwards-walking bow as he exited, but the look on his face nearly made Shi burst out laughing. The emperor pressed the back of his hand to his mouth to compose himself before telling the official to arrange a council meeting.

———

Zhao was surprised when Shi walked with him, not to the imperial practice rooms, but a very different part of the palace.
“Brother, where are we going?”

“I did say I was going to pay you back,” Shi said. “Since Lady Wang is unable to critique your form right now, and I am generally too busy to spar with you myself, I want to introduce you to someone whom I feel sure will not go easy on you.”

Zhao’s eyes widened as the guards let them in to a wing that was clearly set up for the use of women. He heard hushed voices and giggles from just out of sight everywhere as they walked, apparently with a destination in mind.

It turned out to be a space that probably was originally intended as a music room but had been haphazardly converted into a practice space, with a training dummy, pommel horse, and a set of some practice weapons. There was a woman standing there, dressed in a simple white top with loose-legged red pants tied in the front with a big red sash like a bow. Her hair was tied back into a simple bun, tied with a red ribbon and with a relatively modest bronze comb stuck into one side.

“Zhao, may I present Lady Zhang Xingcai, the wife of Liu Shan, the duke of Anle,” said Shi. “Lady Zhang, this is my younger brother Sima Zhao, the King of Jin.”

The woman had already dropped down to kowtow for the emperor, and this gave her pause. Zhao could see the wheels turning in her head as she tried to figure out whether the same kowtows would apply to both, or should she kowtow to Zhao after she kowtowed to Shi?

“One kowtow is enough, I think,” Shi said, apparently have made the same conclusion. “Lady Zhang, I made an error, alas. I should have asked your level in the martial arts before I arranged your instructor. It has been reported to me that it is rather you that should be instructing him.”

Lady Zhang flushed. “Master Wu is far too kind to me, and far too harsh to himself, your majesty. I am entirely out of practice, and I have greatly enjoyed his instruction.”

“Politeness can be such a burden,” Shi said. “Rather than ask you to rate yourself, I think I can rate you and have you be useful to me at the same time. I would like you to spar with my brother. Without, I hardly need to say, holding back.”

“Your majesty is correct. I never hold back in a fight,” said Lady Zhang, her face neutral and her voice flat.

With a sinking feeling, Zhao realized that the wooden practice weapons on the wall had a good copy of his favoured style of broadsword.

The fifth time Zhao landed on his back, Shi actually started laughing.

Zhao groaned as he sat up, rubbing his elbow. Just as she had the previous four times, Lady Zhang had no expression on her face—neither concerned nor gloating. She was simply waiting for him to get back up.

“I can’t believe you actually found someone sterner than my wife,” Zhao complained. “Lady Zhang, I’d fight better if you didn’t unnerve me so much.”

“I am taking the fight seriously, your majesty, because the emperor asked me to.”

“Isn’t she obedient!” said Shi.

Now that made Lady Zhang’s emotionless face show a flash of life. “If a task within my power is set me by someone with authority over me, I will complete it. I see nothing contemptible in that, your
imperial majesty.”

“Contempt? I was complimenting you,” Shi said with a smile.

“I apologize, your imperial majesty,” she said with a deep bow. “I have become too used, I fear, to how some people phrase all their insults in complimentary terms. Perhaps one day I will become as benevolent as the emperor, so that I can understand his words.”

Zhao might as well not have been there. He looked from Shi to Lady Zhang, from Lady Zhang back to Shi.

“Lady Zhang, you must have taken benevolence in with your mother’s milk,” said Shi, and Zhao saw Lady Zhang flinch, as if it were a bad hit. “If one who has soaked in benevolence from their earliest days like you praises me, then it would be madness for me to reject the compliment.”

“Is it possible for one so lowly as I to do other than praise the emperor?”

Zhao knew the look in Shi’s eyes as he continued to banter with Lady Zhang; it was the same look he’d seen him give Lady Xiahou, but also the same look he’d seen him use to assess prostitutes. It was not an open ogle—Shi was more subtle than that. Someone who didn’t know Shi as well as Zhao might not have realized it, but Shi definitely wanted to fuck this woman. Was that what he’d brought Zhao to see?!

On her part, Lady Zhang was all cold and elegantly expressed contempt. She seemed unaware that Shi was undressing her with his eyes; there was certainly no fear there, nor even personal disgust.

“My brother seems loath to continue your match,” said Shi suddenly. “Now that I have had time to observe you as a third party, I wonder if you would do me the honour of sparring against me directly.”

“Going against an opponent whose moves you have studied while they remain in total ignorance of your own; this is certainly the brilliance I have heard so much about,” said Lady Zhang, as Shi got up and readied a practice rapier. “It will be my honour to be handily defeated by the emperor.”

“It will be my honour to defeat you, since you have said you never hold back in a fight.”

Zhao scrambled against the wall as their blades clashed. Unlike Zhao, who had a difficult time going all out against a woman even if it was not Yuanji, Shi had zero qualms. He was a rapid fighter, like her, and he pressed the advantage of his observation of her form without mercy in the first three bouts, each of which ended within seconds with Lady Zhang disarmed.

The fourth bout, however, Lady Zhang held her own for almost a minute. While she was retrieving her weapon from where it had spun away from her, Shi suggested they take a break for breakfast.

Lady Zhang’s face showed slight emotion, which on her seemed very meaningful, though Zhao could not decipher it. Shi, apparently, thought he could. He laughed his villain’s laugh. “I assure you, Lady Zhang, I am not stopping out of cowardice that you have finally cottoned on to my style. Quite the contrary. You fought against Zhao before me, so I was much fresher than you; the gentlemanly thing to do would be to let you rest and refresh yourself a little before we have a bout that truly counts.”

Lady Zhang actually smiled, though it was a sly smile in which one side of her mouth went up minutely and her eyes crinkled just a tad. “The emperor is too gracious.”

“Uh, Yuanji actually asked me to come back for breakfast,” said Zhao.
Shi nodded without looking at him. “Alright. See you at the council meeting, then.”

The main topic of the council meeting, before even the question of Sun Quan could be raised, was the question of the official colour of the new dynasty.

The colour of the dynasty would be a major symbol. Cao Pi had changed the colour from the fire-red of the Han dynasty to the earth-yellow of Cao Wei, earth-yellow being the colour that followed fire-red in the generative elemental cycle. Should Jin take the next colour in the cycle, metal-white? Should it attempt to claim some amount of continuance from either the Han or Wei by returning to fire-red or keeping earth-yellow? Or should it take another colour altogether?

Sima Shi listened, even though he had already decided what he was going to do.

“There has been no war and no conquering in these dynastic changes,” argued one civil official. “With the peaceful and consensual transfer of power, there can be no cause for a change in the cycle. Emperor Xian willingly gave the throne to Emperor Cao Pi; Emperor Cao Mao willingly gave it to Emperor Sima Shi. To change to yellow at all was error. We should return to red.”

“No war and no conquering?” said Zhao, and nothing more; it was ridicule, not argument, but it had a power of its own.

When he felt that everyone had been given enough time to express their opinions, Shi ended the discussion. “Emperor Cao Pi did well to change to earth-yellow. Earth is created from the ashes of fire; so too was Cao Wei from the ashes of Han. Metal forms in the earth; so too did I form in Cao Wei. In the fire of Han, China thrived, but it eventually burned too hot. Now is not the time to try to return to fire. Did heaven not ordain that I would become emperor while wearing the white of mourning? Did heaven not ordain that my ascension would happen in the fall, the season of metal? The colour of my dynasty is metal-white.”

Shi paused, only to allow everyone to realize that no one had any objection, then continued. “And as is only appropriate for metal, I must now deal with a white tiger.”

There was a ripple of amusement among the council. The white tiger was the constellation associated with metal, but the aged ruler of Wu could certainly also be compared to such a beast.

“Heaven ordains this as a time for caution and harvesting, not boldness and spreading. With that in mind, I welcome your opinions.”

On this matter, Shi actually did listen to the various opinions of the council. It was a very complicated matter, with multiple reasonable positions possible on a wide range of issues. It could not be fully discussed in one meeting, and Shi adjourned it knowing that he would need to discuss it many more times before they had a response to give to Sun Quan.

When they had passed into the wing of the palace for the imperial family—the Sima clan, now—Zhao suddenly said to him, “What’s the deal with Lady Zhang?”

Shi frowned. “What do you mean?”

Zhao gave him a side eye. “Don’t play dumb, brother.”

“I’m not,” said Shi, puzzled. “It was just a whim. After I invited you to spar, it occurred to me that it
would be even more amusing to see the two of you interact.”

Zhao glanced back at the guards following them and waved them off; when Shi nodded, they stopped and didn’t follow as they continued.

“Did you want my opinion of her?” Zhao said.

“Not particularly.” Shi couldn’t understand where Zhao was going with this. Was he that paranoid now, that he didn’t accept that Shi could have idle whims with no deeper meaning? “She reminded me a little of Lady Wang.”

“She’s nothing like Yuanji,” Zhao said. “Yuanji is reserved, but she’s never as cold as that.”

“What else could she be but cold? She had a drunken scoundrel for a father, and he married her to a self-satisfied slug.”

“Wow,” laughed Zhao, “is Liu Shan that bad?”

“Oh, from my perspective, he isn’t bad at all. He knew his limits, what he had, and what he wanted. Surrendering was a risk, but he calculated it, and he realized the risk to himself was actually very small; with Wu still extant, we wouldn’t execute him. And what he required to be happy in life, we would provide him. It was all of those loyal to him who would actually face death, deprivation, and disaster. And I believe their suffering does not bother him one particle. Bad? Oh no. He was enormously useful to me, and now he causes me no problems.”

“Ouch,” said Zhao, then added casually, “Why do you want to fuck her?”

Oh. So that’s where Zhao was coming from. Shi had not realized he was being so obvious. “I admit I enjoy looking at her. She’s my type, isn’t she?”

“Hm.” Zhao considered this. “Huh. Never really thought of it before… yeah, I guess that is the connection between Lady Xiahou and Lady Yang…”

Zhao could be so irritating. After his little brother didn’t elaborate, Shi impatiently said, “What is the connection?”

“Oh, only that they both seemed like the kind of women nothing could affect,” Zhao said carelessly, “but you could affect them. You always want to be the exception, don’t you? Well, this is where we part ways. See ya.”

Zhao took the turning towards his rooms; Shi stood for a moment watching him, then slowly went towards his own.

He had not been thinking of Lady Zhang in that way. He had meant that she had the eye shape and the body shape and the grace and the hauteur that he liked…

But you could affect them.

Shi went to his room, took off his hat and his outer robe, sat on his bed.

He had made regular trips to prostitutes since his realization in the summer that he was thinking about Lady Zhang more than he liked, and he thought that had solved the problem of having no outlet for his physical lusts.

But lust wasn’t just physical, was it.
He let himself imagine how Lady Zhang would look when he was inside her, and put his hand to himself.

After he cleaned up, the post-orgasmic clarity had not removed his desire to see that beautiful face in reality.

This would take time… a slow smile spread across his face. Time was what he had in any case; no less than seven months. That should be enough. Yes. More than enough.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Lady Dong (who marries Xiahou Ba) is not intended to be underage by modern standards, rather just *extremely* sheltered and then badly informed. I'm imagining her as actually being eighteen or nineteen. I know she will come across as extraordinarily ignorant, to an extent that not even modern twelve-year-olds are, and so I just wanted to make it clear. Hurray for actual sex ed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lord Jia Chong is here to see you, your majesty.”

“Oh, good,” said Zhao, putting aside the letter.

Jia Chong came in, and started to kneel.

“Hey, when it’s just us, please don’t do that,” said Zhao hurriedly.

Jia Chong got back up and sat in the chair across from him. He was looking around; it was most of the same things that had been in his old study, but the room itself was much bigger and things looked different there.

“First off, you should know I’m sorry that I left without telling you anything and then didn’t get back in touch. It was… it was a family matter.”

“No apology necessary, my lord,” he said tonelessly.

“Are you feeling alright, Jia Chong? You look a little tired.” Zhao got up to get wine and cups.

He gave a wan smile; it definitely wasn’t as confident yet forbidding as his normal smirk. “I haven’t been sleeping well. Nothing serious.”

“You got back a couple weeks ago, right? I didn’t actually know until yesterday. I didn’t even see you at my brother’s coronation. I, uh…” Zhao paused, using the excuse of looking at the various bottles of wine to figure out how to broach the subject. Jia Chong had been his friend for a long time, but he had latched onto Zhao and driven the friendship. Zhao had never had to think about whether he wanted Jia Chong around; it was just the way things were. “I hope you weren’t staying away because you thought I was… displeased with you, or something…”

“Since I did not know how things were between you and your brother, I did not want to get you in trouble,” said Jia Chong.

Zhao turned away from the wine at that. “Oh, nothing like that! Ha. Is that what you thought? Makes sense, I guess. No. Nothing like that.” He turned back to the wine, grabbed a bottle carelessly, and came back to the desk. “Anyway. Now I know you’re here! You can help me out with my new craziness. I’m a king, *Me*. If you want to rub it in my face all those times I told you I’d never be a ruler, go ahead. I deserve it.”

Jia Chong accepted the cup of wine with a tapping of his fingers, and drank. He seemed to revive a
little with the beverage, and sat more comfortably in his chair. “Why would he give you your own kingdom?”

“Hm. A few reasons. Some are personal. The most relevant one is that part of why we were able to push Cao Mao to the point of abdication is that nobody could rescue him. On paper he had control of everything, of course, my brother and I were in between him and all the actual power. When people like Guanqiu Jian and Wen Qin and Zhuge Dan tried to help him, they could only do it by rebelling, wrestling control of armies and lands that belonged to the emperor and therefore were controlled by us, and the emperor couldn’t give his blessing to it. They had no authority in themselves to rescue him, and so every attempt they had to fight just to keep control of their own army.” Zhao sipped his own wine, feeling pleased with himself. “It took me a few days to realize that one. My brother didn’t volunteer it. Had to rap his knuckles about that one.”

Zhao saw Jia Chong’s faint eyebrows furrow at this, and realized he had spoken a bit too loosely about his brother. He took another drink.

“It’s a risk I wouldn’t have thought the emperor would take,” said Jia Chong. “It may make his reign stronger against outside interference, so long as you remain loyal to him, but if you were ever to decide to pursue your own aims, it would be very difficult for him to bring you in line.”

“No risk, no reward,” said Zhao, hoping that would do. He had fucked up. Jia Chong was definitely suspicious about why his brother was granting him such extraordinary autonomy, and Zhao had no answer other than the real answer: his brother wanted to give Zhao the means to make absolutely positive that Yuanji was safe from him, so that Zhao would forgive him and trust him again.

Jia Chong opened his mouth as if to speak again, visibly checked himself, and took another drink of wine.

“Anyway,” Zhao plunged in, “I want you and your family to move to Jin with me, once we settle what’s going on with Wu, and all that other practical stuff.”

Jia Chong coughed. He didn’t spray wine everywhere, like Zhao had done, but he definitely coughed. “What precisely are we counting as Jin nowadays?”

“Bing province, essentially.”

“Who else will you be taking?”

“The Wen brothers, definitely… apart from them…” Zhao rolled his fingers on the desk. “Zhong Hui is in Shouchun, so he’s not an option… Yuanji doesn’t like him much, anyway. Uh… I’d be open to suggestions.”

“I’ll think about it. Will you be at Xiahou Ba’s wedding banquet, my lord?” It was coming up that week.

“Yeah, for sure. Heard the bride is very pretty. My brother’s making him a duke. Oh! I can tell you a secret there. Cao Mao wrote to Xiahou Ba around the same time he wrote to Zhuge Dan, to try to get him to assassinate my brother. But instead Xiahou Ba brought my brother the letter. That’s why they’ve gotten so close since the conquest of Shu.”

Jia Chong did not look as pleased as Zhao had hoped to be given this bit of juicy top secret information, but he nodded. “It makes sense. His only chance was to try to eliminate both of you at once. Of the officers your brother took with him, I can see why he would think Xiahou Ba was a good choice for that… except that Xiahou Ba is too risk-averse to ever try something like that.”
There was an awkward silence.

“How’s your family?” said Zhao, just to fill it.

“Well,” said Jia Chong, then added, “My wife is expecting.”

“Oh? That’s great!” said Zhao, though Jia Chong didn’t seem very excited about it… of course Jia Chong never seemed very excited at even the best of times. “Your… second?”

Jia Chong smiled a little, but it was the way he smiled when Zhao was doing or saying something stupid. “My fourth, technically. I have lost two children.”

Oh God. “My condolences.”

Jia Chong shrugged. “Such things have to be borne. Since you are apparently finally curious about my family, my lord, I will tell you my living child is a daughter, three years old. Her name is Jia Nanfeng; nan, south, feng, wind.”

“Did you choose it? I got lucky there, my father’s still alive.”

“My father was alive when she was born.”

“Oh, right. Well. It’s a nice name,” said Zhao, though he didn’t actually have an opinion. “Well, you’ll have to choose the next one, though. Must be even harder for you to choose a name. You know. Because your surname sounds like false.”

“Not at all,” said Jia Chong, “I fully expect any child of mine to be false.”

*When do I joke?*

Zhao laughed uneasily anyway.

———

Xingcai, dressed again in the loose trousers and simple shirt that she wore to practice, had been waiting for about ten minutes for Master Wu when she decided to go ahead and start going through forms alone.

At one point when she turned, she gasped in surprise because Sima Shi was there, standing in the doorway watching her. He was dressed casually, in a white version of the clothing he had worn when she first met him in Chengdu, with no *mianguan* covering his face.

“Please don’t stop,” he said. “I was observing you.”

She was so shaken that she just remained standing, trying to remember where she was in her forms.

“If you’ve forgotten where you were, how about you start over?” he said, amused.

Xingcai hoped the exertion would cover for any redness in her face. She started over.

It was hard to remain focused as he slowly came closer, moving in a kind of circle around her. Obviously, he might want to see her better, or from different angles, but she didn’t like or trust him, and there was something predatory about the motion.

When she finished the set, he said softly, “Go back into bow stance.”
She obeyed, moving into the crouch with one leg bent at the knee and forward and the other straight behind her.

“You put slightly too much weight on your front foot,” he said. “If you allow just a little more into your back foot, it will improve the power of your attacks.”

Master Wu had never mentioned this to her, but many years ago, Lord Guan Yu had. More than once, even, when he watched her training with Guan Ping. Xingcai swallowed away the memories and adjusted the stance.

“Much better,” he said. “That’s the only critique I have for your forms. Let me see how you do with your weapon.”

“May I ask an impertinent question, your majesty?”

She saw his eyes flare with interest. “Absolutely.”

“Why is your majesty here?” Xingcai tried her best to keep it flat, and hoped she succeeded.

He laughed. Sima Shi had such a disturbing laugh; it always felt like it was traveling her spine. “I thought a great deal about who could replace Master Wu. In the end I decided I wanted to be the one to improve you. Now, I can see another impertinent question, or maybe even two, in your face. Go ahead and ask.”

She had a great deal more than two, but she controlled herself. “As I told your majesty last week, there was nothing insufficient in Master Wu. I dare not waste the imperial time with my meaningless hobby.”

“Now, Lady Zhang, I know you know that I only do things that also benefit me,” said Sima Shi. “Even before I became the emperor, it was difficult for me to find sparring partners who would work with me in earnest. Now that I am the Son of Heaven in name, the problem is compounded tenfold. You, I feel sure, will never go easy on me, and in time I may even get you to tell me what you really think of me. It is a challenge, and I like a challenge.”

“You… your majesty wants to see me every week?”

“If you think you can bear the sight of me so often,” he said.

“The sight of the emperor can only ever be a blessing,” Xingcai said through her teeth.

He laughed at her again, and she thought viciously that at least in a spar she would have an excuse to hit him.

She actually did get a couple of hits in on him. He got more in on her, but she hadn’t been allowed into a real battle since her father’s death. Even though her actual father had permitted it, Lord Liu Bei, now acting as her father, felt it was too dangerous and no longer necessary, now that they had their homebase of Chengdu.

Since she had shortly after lost her brother Zhang Bao and then her cousin Guan Xing to battle wounds, she supposed Lord Liu Bei had a point about the danger.

“Do you like poetry, Lady Zhang?” Sima Shi asked her as he sat down to breakfast with her in her rooms. The way he looked at the platter of meatbuns as it was brought out was unexpectedly funny, almost cute.
“I have very little knowledge of literature and none of music, your majesty,” said Xingcai.

“Poetry is a fondness of mine, though I rate my abilities in creating it rather low. My father drummed it into me from my earliest years that we were descended from Sima Xiangru, the famous poet and musician, and his wife Zhuo Wenjun, who was also a great poet, and therefore had extraordinary artistry in our blood.” Sima Shi selected a meatbun—the biggest—and took a bite.

Xingcai picked up one for herself. “I am afraid I have not heard his poetry that I can recall.”

“Have you not? Now that is too bad! I know some of his works by heart, if you would care to hear.”

“Certainly,” said Xingcai, genuinely curious.

To her surprise, Sima Shi began not to recite, but to sing:

“O lady phoenix! O lady phoenix! Come and perch with me!  
Get progeny by my tail, forever my consort be!  
Making friends with our whole bodies, hearts in harmony.  
Come away with me at midnight, who will see?  
Like a pair of wings that rise together, fly high with me.  
If you feel nothing, my thoughts will teem with misery.”

This unexpectedly earthy song—the second line especially!—turned her face scarlet. She was speechless and did not know how to react internally, much less externally.

Sima Shi took another bite of meatbun, chewed, and swallowed. “The family story is that my ancestor composed it on the spot while playing the guqin for Lady Zhuo’s father. He knew, you see, that Lady Zhuo was watching from another room, and he wanted her, but an ordinary marriage was not possible. She was a widow, and in those years women were not often permitted to remarry. She indeed eloped with him that very night.” He laughed. “I suppose he was so direct because he knew she had been married before… you, on the other hand, Lady Zhang, seem as shocked as a virgin.”

“I’m not a virgin,” said Xingcai with heat, before she could think what she was about.

He raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t actually think you were.”

“Well I’m not,” said Xingcai, realizing that she had pitched herself into a hole and yet stubbornly digging anyway.

“It is so important to you that I know this?” he said politely.

If it had been possible to blush any deeper red than she already was, she would have. As it was, she could not stop herself from more digging. “I know what his majesty must think of my husband and it is not true.”

Sima Shi was eating, and did not immediately answer her, so her own foolish attempt—to what? Defend Liu Shan’s masculinity?—hung in the air between them and made her wish she knew how to fake a faint to get out of this horrible conversation. At last he said, “What I think of your husband, Lady Zhang? He has had you, and yet after many months here he makes no effort to get you in his bed again. He is the worst fool I have ever met.”

Xingcai looked down at her plate and forced herself to take another bite of meatbun, though she could barely taste a thing.

There was a minute or two of silence, then Xingcai said to the plate, “Your majesty has a lovely
“Do you really think so?” she heard him chuckle. “Now that is a flattery I have not heard before. I know very well how my voice is hated everywhere. If I were as cruel as you, my lady, I would accuse you of insulting me through patently false compliments.”

As cruel as me? What kind of nonsense… Aloud she said, “If people scorn your voice, they cannot have heard your majesty sing.”

“Shall I sing before the court, then?” His voice sounded almost pleasant in its amusement, for once. Xingcai allowed herself to look at him again. His face, too, was… almost pleasant. “Now that is a suggestion for gaining influence that I have not received before. See how useful you are being to me, Lady Zhang: you will make me better liked.”

She let out an amused breath, and took a sip of tea.

When the emperor had finished his meatbun, he stood up. “I should be going. I’ll try not to be late next week.”

“It’s fine,” said Xingcai, standing up and bowing deeply. “I am deeply grateful to the emperor for allowing one as humble as me to be of any service to him.”

When he had left, as the servants cleared away the breakfast things, she went over to her bed which was partitioned off from the living and dining area by a screen, and laid down upon it.

She remembered how idiotic she had been in flaring up at his comparison of her to a virgin and pressed her hands to her face.

What was he doing? What was his game?

I know you know that I only do things that benefit me.

Did he just find her amusing? Great men could be odd in their tastes, that was certain. It was also certain that being a… a favourite, in whatever way, of an emperor was an extremely dangerous thing. She had seen that in Lord Liu Shan’s favourite friends and their treatment by the court… and each other, as they jockeyed for his favour.

She herself had not been a favourite. In Shu, everyone had quickly realized that she had no real influence over Lord Liu Shan, despite their marriage… despite that she hadn’t lied when she said she wasn’t a virgin. Lord Liu Shan came to her chambers for that uncomfortable purpose very infrequently, but he did come. It was always such a boring thing, and she’d be sore the next day from all the friction. Even worse, sometimes after he had visited her the entire area would hurt for weeks, especially whenever she urinated. Sometimes it was so bad that when he came to her again she’d actually been so desperate not to do it that she would ask him not to, and he always accepted her rejection with his usual placid smile… so as the years went by, she started telling him no more and more. She still did give in occasionally, simply because she knew she ought to get pregnant. If she had even one son, she was sure she would never agree to have sex again. Sex was so awful, how in the world was any woman supposed to be seduced?

Perhaps her constant rejection was why Lord Liu Shan never tried to get in touch with her now, she thought with a pang of guilt. If she had been a better wife, pleased him more, given him a son…

Pointless, this was pointless. She sat up irritably and realized that with Lady Dong’s mother nowhere near, it would be up to her to prepare the poor girl for what was going to happen to her after her wedding with Lord Xiahou Ba. How truly awful, the fate of women.
His bride had not stopped crying the entire day, Xiahou Ba was pretty sure. For most of it, her face had been hidden behind the red silk of the veil, but it was obvious in the shaking of her shoulders and the sounds coming from behind it that she was never less than weeping, and often outright sobbing.

When they were going from the banquet to his rooms, he managed to get the emperor aside for a moment.

“What do I do?” he whispered in a panic. “I know they’re supposed to cry but I’ve never seen one cry this much!”

The emperor shrugged. “It’s probably the grief of what happened to Shu. You’re one of the conquerors of her country, remember. Just be patient with her. She’ll accept you in time. I’ll keep the nao dongfang short.”

Nao dongfang—“making noise in the bridal chamber”—was a common custom where the groom’s family and friends teased and played games with the new bride and groom in their bedroom. Not every wedding included it—Sima Zhao and Lady Wang Yuanji hadn’t had one, perhaps because they knew each other so well already. It was meant to break the ice between the new couple… but Sima Shi and Sima Zhao both turned their fire almost entirely on Xiahou Ba.

“Not not not not not at all!” Xiahou Ba stammered after yet another ribald question from Sima Shi, while Sima Zhao, extremely drunk, roared with laughter behind him.

Across the room, Lady Wang Yuanji was speaking to his new bride. Lady Dong wasn’t wearing her veil now, and her wedding make-up must have been washed off before she came in. She wasn’t crying anymore, at least. Thank heaven for that.

“In that case,” said Sima Shi, “I think it’s past time for the two of you to get in bed.”

The other guests laughed knowingly. Xiahou Ba knew what was coming too: eighteen pieces of clothing each, as payment to make the guests go away. He’d overdressed for it, he was ready.

“Alright,” said Sima Zhao cheerfully when he and Lady Dong were in the big new bed, well-spaced apart from each other, with the big new blanket up to their necks. “Thirty-six pieces of clothing each, please.”

“Thirty-six? You mean eighteen?” said Xiahou Ba. He glanced at Lady Dong; she was equally dumbfounded.

“I think I would have said eighteen if I meant eighteen,” said Sima Zhao, as the laughter around them increased. “Did I say eighteen, brother?”

“No,” said the emperor, a traitor. “You said thirty-six.”

“Yuanji, you take it from Lady Dong; I’ll take it from Xiahou Ba,” said Sima Zhao, coming around to his side of the bed. “We’re not leaving until we get it!”

“One,” said Lady Wang, counting the hair comb she carefully removed from Lady Dong’s hair, “two, three,” she continued, taking her earrings.

Xiahou Ba knew exactly how many pieces of clothing he had on: twenty, including his loincloth. When, red-faced, he handed over his loincloth, he wanted to sink beneath the blanket as Sima Zhao
waved it in the air like a flag while the guests cheered. “I think twenty is all we’re getting from him, Yuanji. What number are you up to?”

“Thirty-one,” said Lady Wang as she took a sock, then “thirty-two,” as she received another sock.

“Your wife is far better prepared than you,” scolded Sima Shi with a smirk. “I expect more from my officers.”

The guests laughed. Xiahou Ba hardly dared to look as Lady Dong handed over thirty-three and thirty-four—two pieces of liangdang, a kind of camisole that covered both the front and the back, and then thirty-five, a piece of ribbon, and finally thirty-six… a bellyband.

The female guests cheered as the male guests groaned. Lady Dong had worn enough clothing and accessories so as not to have to hand over her xieyi, her actual underwear. She wasn’t naked.

“And now we go,” said Lady Wang firmly to her husband and brother-in-law. They both laughed, and with only a few more jokes, they all left, leaving the new couple alone together: Xiahou Ba totally naked, and Lady Dong surely close to the same, even if she had managed to keep on a few things.

“That was incredibly embarrassing!” Xiahou Ba complained, putting both his hands on top of his head where she could see them in what he hoped was a natural and carefree gesture. He glanced over at Lady Dong. She was gripping the top of the blanket over her shoulders so hard her fingers were white.

She nodded. She was looking at him too, but she didn’t say a word.

“Uh… well… we’re married now,” he said, rather stupidly.

“Yes, my lord,” she agreed timidly.

“It’s uh… it’s been a hard year for you, my lady,” he ventured.

Oh no. She began to cry again. “Y-yes, my lord.”

“Hey, listen,” he said, turning over, and while she didn’t pull away from him or anything, she squeezed her eyes shut as if to prepare for a blow. “Oh, man. Lady Dong… or, I guess, Suli… Suli? I uh… oh man. Sorry, I’m not very good at this.”

She forced her eyes open. “Suli is fine,” she said in a small voice. “I’m… not very good at this either, my lord. I’m sorry too.”

“You cried a lot today,” he said, pointing out the obvious, and then further emphasizing it, added, “and you’re still crying. You, um… when we met before, you didn’t seem so… unhappy about me…”

Suli blushed, or perhaps blushed even more was more accurate. “I didn’t really understand what being married meant.”

Oh. Oh! Xiahou Ba laughed. She was nervous about sex! Was that it? What a relief. “Well, you know, you’re pretty tired… I mean, wow, anyone would be tired after all that crying… I’m pretty tired too, you know, we can just go to sleep now, if you want.”

“What?”
“I mean, we don’t have to, you know, have sex tonight, if you don’t want to,” he said. “We can do it tomorrow, or in a few days… I’ve had sex before, it’s not that big of a deal, honest!”

Her big eyes looked even bigger with how wide they were. “It’s… it’s not?”

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s fun and I like it,” he said, then frowned a little. “I guess the first time it may not be too fun for you… you’ll be the only virgin I’ve ever slept with, so I don’t really know. I’ll be careful, though, I promise; I don’t want it to hurt more than it has to.”

Her hands seemed to ease their grip. “Oh… that’s… very kind of you… my lord…”

“I’m kind of relieved, though, if that’s all you were crying about,” he said. “I was worried you had decided you hate me or something.”

Her fingers were rubbing the edge of the blanket now in a fidget. “No, I… I was just afraid… now I feel like a coward.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m pretty sure I’m naturally a coward, you know.”

“You, my lord?” Suli said incredulously. “You are a great general!”

“Oh, I get on with it, but that’s mostly training. I still want to run away more often than not,” he admitted. Hey, this having a wife business wasn’t so bad, having someone to admit all the shitty parts of himself to.

“You… want to run away but you just do it anyway?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said with a shrug. “Not so heroic, huh?” He laughed at himself. “Man oh man oh man… I’m not doing a very good job at getting you to like me, I bet.”

“You’re doing okay,” she said, with a little smile. Wow, she was cute. “Maybe… maybe I should try to do the same.”

“Huh? Same as what?”

“Just… get on with it.” Her face still looked nervous.

“Uh… right, right...” Truth be told, Xiahou Ba was almost as nervous as she was. Most of his previous experience had been professional women of the night who knew what was what and took charge to get things over with and their money in their hands as fast as possible. Suddenly he was supposed to be the expert. “Well… you know, we can uh… get to know each other a little, even if we don’t actually uh… go all the way.”

Suli nodded.

He scooted closer to her in the bed, and took her into his arms. “How’s this?”

“Nice so far,” she said, and then added, “I… did think you were very handsome.”

“Ahaha, what, me?” He was happy; who wouldn’t be happy to have their cute new wife tell them they were very handsome? “Really? Not too short?”

“Not at all,” she said, then pointed out reasonably, “You’re taller than me anyway.”

“Huh, guess so,” he said, still absurdly pleased, then blurted, “Oh! And of course you’re really pretty!”
“You’re too kind,” she giggled.

He steadied his nerve and moved in for the kiss slowly. She seemed to get the idea because she puckered her lips a little and closed her eyes. He kept his open; seemed more sensible that way, what if he missed the target?

Xiahou Ba pressed his lips against hers with some, but he hoped not too much, firmness; her lips were warm and soft, just like her bare back was soft against his callused fingers. With a little boldness, he moved his kisses along her chin, to her ear, and then to her neck and shoulder, while he moved his hands up her back. By the time he had gotten to her shoulder with his mouth, his hands were up high enough to lift the blanket so he could see where he might go next. Every potential destination in sight looked amazing.

He felt her stiffen a little as the blanket revealed her to him, and him to her. “Relax,” he said, marvelling at what he could see. Dimly, down further under the blanket, she definitely had a xieyi on, but her upper body was uncovered. “You are really pretty,” he said, resorting to emphasis to make up for what he lacked in poetic ways to express himself.

“How… how long do you think it’ll take you?” Suli asked anxiously.

“What, to orgasm? A few minutes, I guess. That’s been my experience, anyway.”

She did relax a little at that. “What, only a few minutes?”

“You, uh, my dad told me if you want the woman to have a good time, you have to do that first, because you’ll be too tired after,” he said, then added, a little anxiously himself, “I uh, I have to admit I’m not super sure how good I am at pleasing women yet.”

She looked uncertain, but didn’t say anything.

“Can I… take off your xieyi?” he asked.

“Okay,” she said softly.

It didn’t sound very okay. “We can still just sleep tonight, it’s fine,” he said. “Really.”

She smiled a little. “No, it would just be the same thing tomorrow or the next day, and then I’ll be worrying about it all day too. Better to just… to know for myself how it is.”

He sat up and pulled the blankets back more. The bed itself was heated, and the fall night was not yet too cold, but he pulled curtains around the bed anyway, leaving a gap by the end table so the lamp light could get in. It would feel cozier that way, right? More private. It might make her feel safer.

She had actually started undoing the knots of her xieyi herself. That was encouraging. He let her pull away the underwear and set it to the side.

“Pull your knees up and apart,” he suggested, hoping his voice sounded more gentle and less eager than he felt.

She did. Slowly, awkwardly, and she pulled her upper body up a little against the headboard to be able to see, but he didn’t mind that.

Xiahou Ba knelt between her legs, a few hands-widths away from her pussy. “So, um…” He reached forward with one hand, not too fast, and as he expected, she braced up before he actually touched her. As he just let his hand rest on her, he continued, “I guess you’re afraid it’s going to hurt,
“I’ve heard it’s very uncomfortable,” she said in a small voice.

“Well, I hope it won’t be that bad,” he said. “I uh, I know if you relax it’ll hurt less. Also, the, uh, hymen doesn’t like, grow back or anything… at least I don’t think so… so hopefully it’ll only hurt the first time, right?”

“The what?”

Xiahou Ba was not actually sure he had the term right. Fortunately or unfortunately for the pair of ignorants, Lady Dong happened to have a septate hymen with a thin band of flesh crossing the opening. He moved a finger down to her entrance and touched it gently. “This,” he said.

Lady Dong bit her lip, then said, “That’s going to break?”

“Seems like it’ll have to… oh, I almost forgot!” He scrambled over to the side table again and got the little bottle of lubricant. “This will help!”

He dripped some onto his hand and spread it over his cock until it was slick from tip to base, then he got into position on top of her. “Should I try to put it in slow and steady, or hard and quick?”

“Quickly, please,” she said, closing her eyes.

He overestimated the pressure it would take to snap through the little flesh barrier and he was almost instantly flush with her pelvis; she let out a little pained gasp that was compounded by how the rest of his body had thudded into her.

“Yiyiyi… sorry, sorry, sorry,” he apologized, stricken. “I thought that would take more effort than it did, are you okay?”

She had her eyes screwed up and her lip between her teeth and didn’t answer. Xiahou Ba felt awful. “I’m really, really sorry,” he repeated. “We’ll just stop it there—”

He started to pull out, but her hand grabbed at his arm, though she didn’t open her eyes. “Just get it over with,” she gritted out.

Xiahou Ba closed his eyes and focused just on the wonderful feeling of her pussy around him. So… this was what it was like to be with a virgin… huh. It didn’t really feel that much different than a prostitute… it felt good, of course it felt good… he began moving his hips, pretending the little gasps and sounds she were making were from pleasure… she felt so good…

After he came, he pulled out and got off of her immediately, and reopened his eyes with a sigh.

“Why did you stop?” she said, and he saw tears forming in her eyes.

“Uh… because I finished?” he answered, bewildered.

Her eyes widened. “It’s… it’s over? That was it?”

“Yeah, that was it.”

“Oh… okay…”

“Did it really hurt a lot? It’ll be better next time, definitely,” he promised.
“It… was different than I thought,” she said cautiously. “I thought it would take a lot longer than that. It… hurt more in the beginning, but after that it actually wasn’t so bad.”

He sighed with relief. “Well, the pain at the beginning won’t be there next time! So it’ll be fine from now on.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you for being so understanding and patient…”

“Ah, no, no, no, really,” he laughed, embarrassed. She looked even prettier smiling. “I did it really badly… well… can I uh… can I kiss you goodnight?”

Unexpectedly, she rolled into his arms and kissed him, then snuggled into his chest and closed her eyes. As Xiahou Ba fumbled to grab the blanket and pull it over them both, he thought proudly to himself that he had gotten through this wedding night business tolerably well.

Chapter End Notes

If I understand correctly, the text we have for the song that Sima Xiangru sang to seduce Zhuo Wenjun is not from him, but rather a much later work composed for opera retelling the story (it was a popular romance). But I might be wrong. At any rate, the translation is my work.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: there is an intense consensual non-consent sex scene with a safeword at the end of this chapter. That is, a sadomasochistic roleplay where no doesn't mean no, only the safeword means no. However, for obvious reasons, reading that sort of thing isn't for everyone. Please take care of yourself.

If you want to skip the sex scene, stop reading at "As harsh on herself as that!" and begin again at "It had felt so good."

Winter came; Sima Shi massed the imperial army at Baidi Castle in the former Shu border with Wu, at Fan Castle in Jing province, and in Hefei in Shouchun. He also sent a cordially-worded response to Lu Xun’s letter. Sima Shi was sympathetic at Sun Quan’s issues at choosing a successor between so many worthy sons.

Sima Yi had laughed uproariously at this. “His only sons of any value at all are dead already. All he has left are puppies fighting over a bone. Are you sure you want two of them here, barking at you and each other?”

Indeed, that was the offer: Sima Shi wanted both Sun He and Sun Ba, Sun Quan’s two oldest surviving sons, as hostages in Luoyang. Sun Quan had previously rejected his treaty with Cao Pi rather than give up his oldest son Sun Deng, but Sima Shi now controlled not only Wei but also Shu.

“He has two other puppies that he can keep at home,” Sima Shi had told his father, referring to the other two living princes. “I’m not being unreasonable."

“He’s going to want you to marry his daughter, you know that, boy.”

“I would sooner marry a literal bitch,” Sima Shi had said brutally. “Fortunately for me, they are both married already and their husbands live.”

“If I were advising his sons-in-law, I would tell them to be very careful of what they eat.”

Sima Yi’s prediction was all too true. As the year was closing, they received a response with a counter-proposal: Sun Quan’s beloved daughter, Princess Sun Luban, recently widowed…

“That poor woman,” said Yuanji.

“Poor nothing,” said Zhao, shaking his head. “From what I’ve heard about her, she may well have done it herself.”

Sima Shi responded by ordering a two-pronged assault on Nanjun.

———

On the second day of the New Year, Yuanji took Zhao and Goji on the three hour carriage ride to visit her clan.
Despite being relatively close in terms of absolute distance, Yuanji had not been back to see them once in the nearly five years since they had signed her over to the Sima clan. She had written infrequently to her grandfather; often these letters were about obtaining some favour or position for some member of the Wang clan. She had always been able to get it, so from her grandfather’s perspective, she imagined the marriage was an unqualified success.

Her uncle and cousin had come to her wedding banquet. She had seen them, but they had not bothered to speak with her directly; they wanted to talk to Shi. Failing in this goal, they accepted talking to Zhao. Zhao had been magnificent with them, she recalled with a little smile as the drab wintry scenery slowly ticked by the window of the carriage; very lofty and quelling.

Goji slept for most of the carriage ride, probably because of the rocking motion. Zhao got to hold him for most of that, which he was openly thrilled about; it was so cute. As soon as he was done having his milk and drifting off, Zhao was practically like a little kid; it’s my turn, Yuanji, right? My turn? Please, you’ve had him for so long, it’s my turn!

As she would have predicted had she bothered to consider the matter, her uncle almost immediately separated Zhao out and pulled him to meet this person and that and discuss “matters”. She sighed, but she didn’t mind. It gave her some time to speak privately with her grandfather, anyway.

“You’ve certainly grown into a proper lady,” he said, as Goji burbled happily in his lap. “I hardly recognize you.”

Yuanji looked down at herself. A proper lady? She’d worn loose hanfu immediately after giving birth, but she had grown impatient with the cumbersome amount of fabric and switched over to tighter fitting, military-inspired clothes again, with a belly band to keep her postpartum stomach under control and structured support for her breasts, with a fastening on the side to allow her to nurse Goji easily. Her unconventional fashion choices had set a fashion for shorter skirts and lowcut tops in Luoyang, which she had not anticipated, and with it a great deal of criticism from older men like her grandfather.

Her grandfather chuckled, as if reading her mind. “I see your husband must indulge you as I did. Still lets you dress as you want, eh?”

“My lord likes how I dress,” she said.

“Does he?” he laughed. “I see. I won’t hesitate to have you get even more for our clan then.”

Yuanji blushed a little. “Of course I do what I can… but my in-laws have many concerns.”

“Your in-law is the emperor. Now that’s a triumph I never expected. He’s already settled on his next bride, of course?”

“The emperor has not mentioned the subject. He still mourns for his wife.” Not for Lady Yang, but for Lady Xiahou; but that was not something she was going to mention.

“Mourning? I’m surprised he bothers, when he still has no sons. He must be very impatient for them now. Unless he really is satisfied with having your son take his throne?”

Yuanji felt extremely uncomfortable at the rapaciousness behind her grandfather’s eyes. She wanted to grab Goji away from him and tell Zhao that it was time to go. “He is very young, still. He has years before such a thing should worry him; after all, his own father was already over thirty when he was born.”

“Still, my girl, you should prepare yourself for the possibility of becoming empress… or empress
dowager... you should think now, if you lost both your husband and your brother-in-law, who would assist you in the regency?"

“That’s a horrible thing to think about,” Yuanji said, letting her voice get frosty.

“Sententious little madam!” her grandfather said, amused. “I thought you might come back to me changed, but I never thought you’d become a prig surrounded by Sima. Have you gained so much morality because they have none?”

“The Sima believe in their principles very strongly. I have learned a great deal from them.”

“Hm! I see you have, indeed. The Sima believe in themselves, and so you believe in them. Well! Make sure you keep their favour, girl. You’ve seen yourself what they do with wives who do not.”

Yuanji took a deep breath and controlled herself. “Grandfather, it has been five years since I’ve seen you. Must we speak of such unpleasant topics?”

“I don’t waste my time when I have so little of it left. You may not want to hear it, but you’d do well to remember my words. For my great-grandson’s sake, if not your own. You’re so surprised this is what I’d want to spend your visit speaking to you about? It’s not as if I can give you this advice in a letter.”

Yuanji ended up claiming to think that she thought Goji looked like he might be getting ill as an excuse to cut out and go home after lunch, rather than staying through dinner as planned.

“What’s really going on?” Zhao asked once the carriage was underway.

“My grandfather wanted to do nothing but pour advice into my ears, advice that he couldn’t give me through letters, he said. The importance of keeping your favour. The importance of keeping your mother’s favour while at the same time the importance of making sure you love me more than her. The importance of keeping you in your brother’s favour. What I should do when your father dies. What I should do if your brother dies. What I should do if you die. He was relentless.”

“Yikes,” said Zhao, and Yuanji laughed and brightened a little.

“I’m so glad you’re you, my lord,” she said, smiling at him. “I would rather die than live the life my grandfather seems to think I live. Never being true with anyone, no place at all for love or trust… and with all of that, he also wanted me to put in a word for a cousin of mine to marry your brother.”

“He was like that?” Zhao looked perplexed. “Sorry, I would have barged in and rescued you if I’d known. I thought he was the only one you got along with. He wasn’t like that with you before my mother, uh… obtained you, then?”

“No,” she said, sighing. “That’s why I was surprised too… before I left with your mother, he just told me that it should be a good match and that he was confident I would know how to behave.”

“Well, the him back then was right,” said Zhao. “So just hold on to that and we’ll forget about today. I wouldn’t be able to remember all the stuff your uncle and everyone were trying to tell me anyway. Kept talking over each other. Man. Glad tomorrow is the third. Let’s take a nap together. You too, Goji, hmm? Wanna take a nap with papa and mama?”


“Da da da,” agreed Yuanji.
Sima Shi strolled into the practice room and found it empty. He frowned, turned, and went to Xingcai’s private rooms. Was she ill? If she was, wouldn’t she have sent him a message?

When he opened the door, he saw her sitting with her back to the door, dressed in nice, if casual, clothes, not her usual practice garb, and writing at a desk. “I don’t need anything, thank you,” she said, without turning.

“Did you lose track of time, Lady Zhang?”

She turned swiftly at that, blinked at him, then hurriedly put down her brush and got up to kowtow. “Your majesty,” she said as she knelt. “I did not expect you because of the holiday.”

“Oh, I see. An unlucky day for visiting, you mean?” It was the third day of the New Year; traditionally a day for staying at home, because visits would turn into quarrels. “But you always quarrel with me, Lady Zhang; it’s what I come for.”

She laughed, and he smiled. “Do you want to wait for me to change, your majesty?”

“Perhaps we shouldn’t push the bad luck too far,” he said. “I’ll just sit with you here; that way when you become furious you won’t have a weapon to beat me with.”

She laughed again as he gestured for her to get up and join him on the couch. Despite his assertion that she always quarrelled with him, he knew that he was growing on her, and that she enjoyed their matches and their conversation afterwards as much as he did.

“Who were you writing to?” he said when they had sat together.

“My mother,” she said, with a wistful tinge to her face. “She hasn’t answered my previous letter yet, and usually she would have by now. I hope she is well.”

“If she were not, I am sure you would be notified,” Shi said. “I myself have heard of nothing amiss.”

“I am sure such a circumstance would be beneath the attention of the emperor.”

“Nothing concerning you is beneath my attention,” he said, and enjoyed her confused blush, before he continued, “after all, you are the former empress of Shu.”

“You really are trying to pick a quarrel,” she said, her smile sad.

“Maybe I shouldn’t qualify it, then,” he said, and waited for her to look up at him before he repeated himself. “Nothing concerning you is beneath my attention.”

The sad smile faded as her eyes searched his face. “You can’t mean what I think you mean.”

“You never seem to know what I mean, Xingcai,” he said, letting himself use her name for the first time. “What do you think I mean this time?”

She didn’t miss that he had used her name, not at all. “Your majesty… cares for me.”

“Such a modest statement,” he said, turning his body to face hers more. “If that is all, why did you say I can’t mean what you think I mean? You think it impossible after all this time that I even care for you?”
“I apologize, I didn’t mean that,” she said, but he wasn’t about to let her pull back into courtesy.

“I don’t want your apology, I want to hear what you really thought I meant,” he said.

“Your majesty… if I have… given you the impression somehow with my behaviour that I would be open to your… I cannot even believe that I would ever garner your interest in me, in any case, but if I have somehow gained your interest, your majesty knows I am a married woman and…”

“You’ll deny me for Liu Shan?” He kept his voice calm, unthreatening, respectful.

She looked up at him gratefully. “Yes, of course.”

“You are very loyal,” he said, “to a man who doesn’t want you in his life.”

The gratitude vanished. “You’re the man who’s keeping us apart!”

“I admit I could force him to take you back,” he countered, “but I am not lying when I say he has never asked for you—never even asked about you. According to the terms I presented him, yours was among the names that he could have visit from the very beginning, and also among the names that he could ask to have moved in with him starting in the new year; in other words, now. He has asked for others, but not for you.”

“My lord is self-sacrificing,” she hissed. “He knows the other women you hold prisoner here need my leadership and guidance.”

“Liu Shan ought to be impressed with your leadership and guidance,” said Sima Shi, “but as far as I know he doesn’t know anything about it. He doesn’t know how many other hostages we have from Shu. For that matter, he doesn’t know whom we have executed. He doesn’t ask, and I don’t volunteer.”

“And yet you volunteer so much to me! You so badly want me to believe I’m worthless to him, don’t you! Do you really think if I did, that would make me revenge myself on him by giving myself to you?”

“I consider the two matters separate,” he said calmly. “Liu Shan doesn’t value you and never has; that is simply a fact. I didn’t cause it and I won’t lie about it. I don’t want you to give yourself to me out of revenge against him, either; that would be very distasteful.”

“Good,” she said, head held high.

“I want to you to give yourself to me because you cannot resist me,” he continued, “because you want me to take you and keep you.”

She froze; he looked carefully for revulsion and disgust, and was more relieved than he expected not to see any. The blush was spreading over her face as she looked back into his eyes; then she broke the gaze, shook herself and got off the couch. “I must ask—your majesty should go.”

Xingcai was looking down at herself, and now he saw disgust, as well as guilt and shame.

“Must, should,” Sima Shi said. “What do you want, my lady?”

“That doesn’t matter,” she said.

He stood up. “It matters to me enormously. I told you, nothing concerning you is beneath my attention.”
“If I am such a shameless woman as to desire your attentions,” she said, not looking at him, “then you degrade yourself to dally with me.”

As harsh on herself as that! Sima Shi studied her face, the complex emotions that she was trying and failing to suppress. “If you actually want me to stop, then stay stop. Exactly that word and only that word—’stop’. I will ignore ‘no,’ ‘don’t,’ and so on.”

She looked up at him, too puzzled by his strange words to remember to hate herself. “What are you talking about?”

He took her by the wrist and led her, firmly but not violently, behind the screen to where her sleeping area was with its modest bed, and efficiently manhandled her into sitting on the edge of the bed. Then he backed up. She was still, more than anything else, bewildered, and her eyes widened as he knelt in front of her. “I am going to kiss you. What do you say if you want me to stop?”

“Stop,” Xingcai said.

“What will I do if you say ‘don’t kiss me’?”

“You’ll… kiss me anyway?”

He leaned in and kissed her, felt the passion and the yearning from her, and knew he was on the right track.

Shi broke off the kiss. “I’m going to kiss you again.”

“Wait… I don’t… you shouldn’t…”

He ignored this. “Did he even kiss you?”

“He… he has in the past…. what are you doing?”

Sima Shi was undoing the belt that tied her wrap skirt on over her dress. He let it drop beneath her hips, then pulled her skirt down to her knees. Her underwear was tied with simple bow knots that pulled off easily. She made a half-hearted attempt to grab for her underwear, but he blocked her hand. “He’s never kissed you here.”

“Kissed me there?! What do you mean—no, you can’t, you can’t—!”

Sima Shi had bent his head down and he was kissing her, licking her, sucking on her.

“No!” she whispered. “What are you—that’s not—you can’t—I’m married! Oh! What is that, what is that! Don’t!”

He chuckled into her cunt as he heard her endless stream of protests that were all noticeably avoiding the word stop. And the volume of her voice—she didn’t want to be overheard. This poor woman. Had she ever felt pleasure like this before? He had used a similar technique to help his first wife learn to allow herself to feel pleasure. He suspected that Xingcai was going to require more extreme measures, and the challenge thrilled him.

“No, no, no,” she cried out when she came. “I’m breaking, I’m breaking, I’m breaking!”

As she shuddered in the aftermath, he pulled her body up further onto the bed and settled heavily atop her, kissing her lips and her cheeks and her forehead. “Have I really broken you?”

There were tears forming in her eyes as he opened her shirt so that he could kiss her breasts. “Why
“Are you doing this to me?”

“Because you deserve pleasure,” he said, pulling his hips up to free his erection from his pants. “And because your pleasure gives me pleasure.”

“Pleasure…” She was staring at his cock as if she’d never looked at one before.

“You are even more beautiful when you orgasm,” he said, putting his cock head to her entrance. “I want to see how you look coming around my cock now.”

“Wait, no… you can’t do this… please don’t…” She started trying to physically struggle with him, but she still didn’t use that one little word, and so he grabbed onto her roughly and began to fuck her hard, watching as the tears spilled from her eyes faster with every stroke. “Don’t do this! Ah! I don’t want this!”

“Your husband surrendered,” he said as her walls caressed his cock, “knowing that this was a possibility. Knowing that you might be raped, given to another man, even many men.”

She was trying to push him off, but she wasn’t as strong as him, and soon her hands were merely clutching feebly at his back as his hips relentlessly thrust again and again. “No! He wanted—ah!—he only wanted peace and—ah! No! It’s too much! You’re… you’re really going to break me!”

He didn’t ease up. Instead he brought his upper body down onto her, and tried to kiss her mouth. When she turned her head so that he couldn’t, he instead growled into her ear, “He’s never bothered to ask if you’d be returned to him. He never once asked if you were safe! He never deserved you, he never deserved to be inside you like this.”

“But he’s my husband,” she wept, “I have to… I should save myself for him…”

“Save yourself? He wouldn’t lift a finger to save you from me,” he said, “You know that, don’t you. I could be fucking you right in front of him and he wouldn’t do anything. I could take my sword out to kill you afterwards, and even if you begged him to save you from death, he’d do absolutely nothing.”

“That’s not true!” she choked out. He grinned and sucked hard on her neck, leaving a big and obvious love bite on her throat.

“I just marked you,” he whispered into her ear, “because I want you and I’m going to keep you. I’m going to make him divorce you and I’m going to have you all for myself. And I’m going to fuck you hard like this every chance I get.”

She was still crying, and he kissed her tears. All her grief, all her anger, all her pain, all her shame, were coming out in her tears. His poor love. “Did they give you a choice about marrying him?”

“No,” she moaned, “but I’m not disobedient!”

“Exactly. That’s why I’m not giving you a choice. You understand, right? That’s why I’m letting you tell me how much you don’t want this. I know. You’re a good—” he snapped his hips down extra hard—“good—” he pulled them up and repeated the motion, despite the pain he heard in her moan—“girl. Aren’t you?”

“I want to be,” she wept. “I want to be!”

“You want to be. So I’m going to force you to let me fuck you, I’m going to force you to be my wife, and I’m going to force you to cum for me. Now. Cum for me, good girl.”
“I can’t… I can’t… no… noooo!”

Xingcai was shuddering beneath him as she came for only the second time in her life, while he whispered, “Good girl, my good, good girl,” in her ear. When the situation got to be too much for his control, he abruptly pulled out, put his hand to himself, and stroked out his orgasm across her chest and stomach.

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It had felt so good. It had felt so disgusting. She couldn’t stop crying, and she was sure, now that he had gotten what he wanted, that he would go, but he didn’t.

Instead he took her into his arms, cradling her tenderly as she sobbed, seemingly unbothered by how his own semen was getting onto his clothes. She had heard him say I’m going to force you to be my wife, but she had heard it as a mockery only, just like she heard his repetition of good girl as a mockery of the unfaithful wife she knew herself to be.

But he was kissing her forehead, and his embrace was so soft yet assured.

Eventually the tears that had seemed like they would never end stopped coming. She breathed in and out slowly.

“Alright now?” she heard him say.

She had to force herself to look up at his face, to meet his eyes. But when she had met them, she was even more confused. He couldn’t actually be feeling the affection she saw on his face. It was not possible.

When she didn’t answer, his lips curled a little. “You look so confused. What is it?”

It’s not fair that he can always tell what I’m feeling! Aloud, she picked a relatively unimportant mystery to ask him about: “Why didn’t you come inside me?”

“Hell if I’m going to repeat Cao Pi’s mistakes,” he said. “I’m not coming inside you until we’re married, so if you do get pregnant quickly, nobody will be able to claim it’s not mine.”

“You mean… you really intend to make me your wife?” It made no sense. Not on any level did it make any sense.

He was playing with the short strands of the hair that framed her face. “You have very little idea of your own value, don’t you.”

She looked down at his chest. “Women only have as much value as men allow them to have,” she said.

“A very neat saying,” he said, “but your existence proves it false, my lady.”

He seemed to be saying he thought she was valuable… well, hell, but he was saying outright that he was going to make her his wife, and she knew that couldn’t be true.

“What else is confusing you?”

Damn it, damn it, damn it! Why was he able to read her so easily? Everyone always said she was cold and that she felt nothing, had no reactions; why could he see through it?

“I… I didn’t know that sex could be… like that…” she said, still towards his chest. She was
betraying Lord Liu Shan, but she’d already let him fuck her; it hardly mattered what else she did now.

“Hn,” he said, and she could hear the smirk in his voice. “I could tell.”

She felt that feeling deep down again as she remembered all the dirty things he’d said to her, all the dirty things he’d done to her… good heavens, she almost felt like she wanted him to do it to her again.

“Why… you were so rough… why didn’t it hurt?”

“It hurt when he fucked you?” he said, and his voice was different; she suddenly realized she had gotten Lord Liu Shan in trouble. So it did matter what else she did now.

“No, it didn’t,” she said quickly, looking up at him.

“Don’t lie,” he said. “You know you’re no good at it.”

“It’s not what you’re thinking!” she pleaded. “He was gentle and slow, it didn’t hurt, exactly, it was just… it took such a long time and it was uncomfortable and there was no… no pleasure.” She muttered that last, towards his chest again. “It was afterwards that it would really hurt… I would feel so sore.”

“It didn’t hurt because of the pleasure I was making you feel,” he said. “That idiot. Someone told him before he wed you, ‘with a wife, you must be gentle and slow’, and he thought that was all there was to it, huh? He forced you to lie there while he very, very, very, slowly got his rocks off, probably rubbing you absolutely raw inside. Tch. At least now it makes sense why he was satisfied with prostitutes and never asked for you. He probably thinks a prostitute is far better than a wife; you don’t have to be gentle and slow with them.”

She went ice cold inside. “He… he… what?” she whispered.

“You didn’t realize? He asks for them regularly; he asked for one the very evening he first arrived, if I remember correctly.”

“And you just… give them to him?” She sat up.

He looked puzzled by her indignation. “Why wouldn’t I? It was an easy request; believe me, I’ve had him indulged with much more difficult things. His taste for spices, for example—”

“An easy request?” she interrupted. “He is married! You…” She was struggling now with her hurt and her guilt; had he set her up for this? Kept them apart so she would be desperate and lonely enough to accept his contemptuous lust? “Why didn’t you give me to him back then?”

“Because he didn’t ask for you, he asked for a prostitute,” he said, maddeningly calm. “At the time, I thought he would ask for you eventually, but from what I knew of his habits in Chengdu, I was not at all surprised that he asked for a prostitute first. I take it you didn’t realize your husband not only went to prostitutes but also had mistresses.”

So there were still new humiliations to experience. She wanted to be numb, she ought to be numb to them by now.

He sat up too, now. “I give Liu Shan a little more credit than before,” he said slowly. “You are not a stupid woman, so he must have both been discreet himself and had good control that the many who knew about it would keep it from you.”
“The many who knew…” She didn’t cry, at least. Probably because she had already cried so much, but still. Best to take what little comfort one could get.

He went to take her into his arms again, and she changed her mind instantly. No. There were some comforts that were better to reject before they could harm you further.

“Why are you still here?” she challenged him.

Now at least he was the one who looked puzzled. “I’ll stay as long as you need me.”

“What’s the benefit to you?”

He tilted his head. “You don’t think I’m serious about marrying you, do you.”

“Don’t insult me,” she said, and felt angry tears springing to her eyes again. Damn it all! Shouldn’t her stupid, traitorous body be out of them by now? “What did I do to deserve this?”

“My lady, I am completely sincere. I am going to divorce you from Liu Shan, I am going to marry you, and I am going to make you my empress.”

“I said don’t insult me! Why? Out of all the women in China, you think I’d believe you’d choose me? I have worse than no name, worse than no family—”

“Because I love you,” he said impatiently, stunning her into silence.

She was so shocked that she didn’t even resist as he pulled her back into his arms. “You love me?”

“I love you beyond reason,” he said. “At first I knew I respected you, then that you amused me, then that I wanted to fuck you, then that you fascinated me, then that I wanted to marry you, and finally, as I have been courting you, I realized you are the one destined for me. But when you ask me why I would choose you, only one answer matters. I love you.”

There were so many things to object to in that paragraph, it was hard to only choose one. “Courting me… what? How long do you think you’ve been courting me?!”

“I made the decision that I would marry you the night you met my brother,” he said.

As long as that! “What, all of our sparring… to you that was courting?!”

“Very successful courting,” he said, smugly. “Look at where we are now, after all. A month ahead of the schedule I set myself.”

Her jaw dropped. He set himself a schedule for seducing her? “What about my feelings?”

“Is something wrong with them?” he said, but he was playing with her hair, as if it were not an important question, or as if he thought he knew the answer.

“You must know I don’t love you.”

“Ah, but a few months ago you would have said you hated me, so we’re making progress,” he said, still playing with her hair. “I want you to grow your hair longer for me.”

“You’re sure I don’t hate you?”

He tilted her chin up to make her eyes meet his, and said with some amusement, “Do you hate me?”
When tears began to fill her eyes again, he chuckled and kissed her.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

My Lady Xiahou, mother of Xingcai and Zhang Bao, bears zero resemblance to the Xiahouji of DW9. If you know of her, put her entirely out of your mind. Picture, instead, someone who looks a lot like Xiahou Dun, Xiahou Yuan, Cao Cao, Cao Pi, Xingcai, and even Zhang Bao, really; and who acts like you would think a lady whose childhood was spent among the Cao and the Xiahou would act, ie, not just another wide-eyed Da Qiao clone. Da Qiao's sheltered and innocent personality makes sense for Da Qiao; it makes no sense for Lady Xiahou. God I hate DW9.

On the sixth day of the new year, Zhang Xingcai’s mother Lady Xiahou finally arrived from Chengdu. She had been supposed to arrive weeks earlier, but the weather in the mountains had been even worse than usual for the time of year.

Sima Shi could not have been more pleased by her timing. Heaven was truly smiling on him. Now he had an excuse to see Xingcai before their next scheduled sparring match.

His future mother-in-law, as he thought of her, looked very much like her daughter, and Shi realized, now that he thought about it, that a great deal of what he found attractive in Xingcai was very much that Cao/Xiahou look that his first wife Xiahou Hui had also had: elegant and sharp. This gave him food for thought as he walked with Xingcai’s mother through the palace.

He had loved his first wife, he knew that now, and that love had kept him from letting her be killed, but it hadn’t stopped him from rejecting her, because he had loved himself and his destiny more. He had adored himself, idolized himself; the scare of the tumour had shaken him so badly because it was an omen that he was not perfect, and what was he if he was not perfect? Worthless, worse than nobody; destined to come so close, to have it in his grasp, and then to let it slip away.

Then he had committed a fault so horrible that even as he was doing it he despised himself for it. Trying to manipulate things to grab the destiny he wanted so desperately without having to admit to previous mistakes... without having to admit to not being perfect. He had nearly killed Zhao and Yuanji’s love for him; as it was, nearly a year later it still had not recovered to where it had been.

Fuck your fate bullshit, brother!

Zhao... he had hurt Zhao, and he regretted that deeply and would always regret it, but Zhao wasn’t right about fate. Shi’s sins had been in attempting to circumvent heaven’s will, attempting to break the true and only natural laws—the patience he owed his first wife, the loyalty he owed his brother, the punishment he owed his second wife for his first’s murder. Now that he had begun to act in accordance with heaven, it was blessing him again.

Xingcai was not Xiao Hui, he wasn’t fooling himself that she was a substitute or a replacement, except in the most technical sense that they would both be his wife. Their personalities were different more than they were similar. But the fact that she was visibly of Xiahou heritage nevertheless did feel like a sign of her divine suitability for him. He had been so blessed with this second chance! He would not waste it.
“I’ll go in to her first to explain your presence,” he said to Lady Xiahou when they reached the anteroom to Xingcai’s chambers. Actually, he wanted an opportunity to speak to Xingcai privately and knew he wouldn’t have such an opportunity after mother and daughter were reunited.

Xingcai was seated at her writing desk, but she was not writing. She turned at the sound of the opening of the door; her melancholy face became only marginally more alert when she saw who it was, and when she rose into her kneel from the kowtow, she was once again bereft in appearance.

“What’s wrong, my lady?” he said, walking over and taking her hand to help her to her feet.

When he started to release her hand, she kept hold of his, and he was surprised, but by no means displeased, when she clasped it in both hands and drew it up to rest her chin on it, thought on her face as she stared into space.

At last she looked at him. “Your majesty is… unlike anyone I have ever met,” she began. “When you… when you were last here, you said that a few months ago I had hated you, but actually I had begun to like you a long time before that. I didn’t want to, but I did. You were so… vital, and… it was impossible for me not to admire you. But I did not think much about what I felt about you. Perhaps… no, it is certain, when it comes to things of this kind, I was naive. But it does not excuse what I have done.”

Her speech excited him as he listened. So her feelings for him had been deeper and higher than he had perceived; this lingering guilt she felt now would surely be swept away soon. Then there would be nothing in between them.

She was continuing. “I have been thinking, since you left, how to explain it to you, when I saw you again. It is like… I liked sparring with you. You were gracious, not only in victory but even in your rare defeats. I could feel your respect for me, when we fought. It is something rare… I do not often encounter people like that. Of those I have, most have passed away. So I cherished it…” Her face reddened a bit as this admission of the depth of her feeling. “But there was no stake to our sparring. It was all idle games. From all I know… from all I have heard and even experienced… when there are stakes, your majesty does not take victory and defeat lightly.”

He couldn’t deny that.

She closed her eyes. “Your majesty has defeated me,” she said, “and I do not believe your love can survive your victory. You… disarmed me, conquered me, within minutes. How could you ever trust me as a wife, knowing that it took so little for me to give myself to another? I implore and beseech his majesty to have mercy on my weakness and end this affair quietly and privately here, when no violence will be necessary.”

She let go his hand, and it was just in the right position to slide up her chin and cradle her face. She was wearing a silk scarf around her neck to hide his love bite, but he knew it was there. “My poor love,” he said. “Does it still have such a hold on you, the order of dead and foolish men? You think I will hate you for letting me pull you free of that feeble shackle?”

Her chin trembled a little in his palm. “They may have been foolish… certainly, they are both now dead… but my marriage was the will of my father and my lord. They would never have given me to Lord Liu Shan if they hadn’t trusted I would fulfill the task they set me. Perhaps their trust in me proves their foolishness, but I knew what I was being asked. Even if my agreement wasn’t asked for, they had it. ‘Faithfulness is the task of humanity, and faithfulness is the virtue of a wife. United with one husband, she will not change her entire life, and upon his death she does not marry again.’”

“Confucius,” he said. “I should have known. Shall I quote him against himself? ‘For the superior
man, the marriage union arises from respect. To abandon respect is to lose the union. Without love, there can be no union. Without respect, there can be no rightness.”

“Lord Liu Shan showed me respect.”

“Empty gestures that cost him nothing only! The entire failure of your Shu benevolence. What you had with Liu Shan was a marriage as much as he was an emperor. No respect, no love…” She was so intelligent, but so naturally modest and so badly educated. How to get through to her? “You, my lady… you were always meant to be married to the Son of Heaven. I am he, and I have found you; the false pretender casts no shadow here.”

Her lips parted to let out a barely audible little oh of a sigh, then she blinked, shook her head, and backed away from him. He kept his hand extended as his fingers slipped off her face.

“When you talk to me with that voice, in the moment, you make me believe anything,” she said, holding up a palm as if to ward him off. “The letter I was writing to my mother when you interrupted me three days ago—I have not written another word in it. How can I write to her as if nothing’s changed? Everything has changed.”

“Perhaps you need to speak with her, rather than write to her,” he said.

“Oh, if I could do that!” she cried out, and tears came to her eyes.

His poor sweet love. He only wished he had thought to bring her mother sooner. “I have gotten her for you. I meant to have her here for the New Year, but the weather would not permit it. I’ll bring her in to you now.”

She was speechless and wide-eyed as he left to fetch Lady Xiahou.

The women wept as they embraced; Sima Shi smiled to watch their reunion, said, “I shall see you for our sparring session at the usual time, my lady,” and left.

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“Mama,” Xingcai said when she could speak, “I’ve done something terrible.”

“So many people have done so many terrible things,” her mother said, firmly guiding her to the couch. “If you wish to tell me, I will hear it, but I know it cannot be as bad as you think.”

“I… I let the emperor… not Lord Liu Shan, but… Sima Shi…” She whispered his name. “I let him… I let him…”

Her mother’s smile held only sympathy. “When I received the summons from Luoyang, I didn’t know what to think. When I was escorted there with such respect and care, I suspected that someone very high up had made you his mistress. And then when I arrived here, I was greeted with such courtesy by the emperor himself! Oh, Xingcai. What’s to condemn? It’s not as if you could have told him no.”

“But I didn’t want to tell him no, mama,” she said, wiping her tears with her fingers. “That’s what’s so horrible. He offered to stop, he would have stopped, except he knew… he saw… the way he spoke…” She couldn’t say such things to her mother, but what did it matter? The point was that she had been willing, in the end. “What do I do, mama? I tried, just now, to reject him, but then he said you were here, and so the conversation ended as you heard, with him saying he will be back in four days.”
Her mother took her hand. “Xingcai… you know I have never spoken to you about how… your father married me. I am sure you have heard at least the most basic elements of the story… probably embellished with lies, but the facts are what they are. I thought at some point you would ask me about it. Your brothers and sister all did eventually, but never you.”

“I was… so close to father. I did not want to hear even what I did hear,” Xingcai said honestly, then sighed. “It made me feel so sick inside to think about it, because I hated the idea of him hurting you.”

“I never loved him, I never forgave him,” her mother said, and Xingcai could not blame her, nor was she surprised to hear voiced what she had long suspected deep down, “but I did what I needed to do to survive. It was hard, very, very hard, especially his drinking. But we were separated more than we were together, and I had your brothers and sister, and then you. Then he died, and I wore white, but inside I was very happy. You probably remember.”

Xingcai nodded sadly. Her mother had not been distastefully obvious in her joy at Zhang Fei’s murder, certainly never rubbing it in the face of those who felt real grief, like Xingcai. But those who knew her best, which also meant Xingcai, could tell how relieved she was.

“The people who surrounded me in Shu, who spoke more than anyone I had ever met about benevolence and righteousness and duty and honour… they all connived at my being put into this impossible position. I think that, more than anything, was why I could never forgive him. My husband’s crime, in the eyes of the world, was only against my father, not against me; it was my father’s permission only that was missing. He treated me, they all treated me, as if I had nothing to really complain of, since he made me his wife and provided for me. My forgiveness was never sought, it was never even thought of. I hated that. I still hate it.” Her mother’s eyes burned. “Men are so quick to put us into these impossible situations and then pile condemnations on us for choosing our own happiness, even our own survival, if it contradicts the choices they made for us. And then they say of some woman that ‘her beauty could ruin a kingdom’. Beauty never ruined anything; men did that!”

Even with her heartache, Xingcai laughed a little at that. Her mother’s acerbic wit had been a constant feature of her childhood. Most of the time it went right over her father’s head; he was not a clever man. When she was young, she had adored her father’s simple and enthusiastic affection, and thought her mother cruel for amusing herself at his expense; her keen battle interest and his nurturing of it only increased how she favoured her father over her mother. It was not until her late teens, when she was taken off the battlefield permanently, that she came to appreciate her mother and everything she was: intelligent, diligent, sensible, calm…

“To these so-called righteous men,” her mother continued, “it wouldn’t even matter if you said no and the emperor took your no and left it alone. You still ought to kill yourself, or disfigure yourself, or maim yourself; and then they would write a poem about you and put up an altar to your chastity. The moment you dared to continue breathing without destroying yourself, they already condemned you. I hate them too. I hate them all. Take what pleasure you can, Xingcai. Heaven knows, A-Dou is certainly taking all the pleasure he can, and yet that is considered quite natural!” Her mother called Lord Liu Shan by his childhood nickname of A-Dou.

“I don’t want to revenge myself on Lord Liu Shan,” said Xingcai.

Her mother’s eyes softened a bit. “Xingcai, I only want to reassure you that I don’t believe you should condemn yourself for what you’ve done. In the long run, anyway, it won’t mean much. The emperor will enjoy you for a time, and then pass on to another. Not even A-Dou will know about it. What significance can it hold as a crime, compared to all the violence and betrayal men have committed in this chaos?”
“Mama, that is what scares me most. He says he will divorce me from Liu Shan and take me as his own wife, as his empress.”

“ Typical seduction promises,” said her mother. “Don’t let it trouble you.”

Xingcai shook her head, feeling both reassured and yet more confused than ever. The emperor had only told her he would marry her when he was… he was already inside her…

Her mother rubbed her back. “Enjoy it, if you can, or endure it, if you cannot, my darling. You are strong: you will live on, I know it. And I am here, now. I will be here.”

She leaned into her mother’s embrace and let herself cry again.

———

When Zhao met privately with his brother on the eighth day of the new year, it seemed to him that the analysis of the latest reports on the invasion of Nanjun was not all that was on his brother’s mind. “What’s with you now? You look so pleased with yourself. Like, more than usual, which for you is really saying something.”

“I enjoy the mandate, Zhao,” he said, spreading his hands with their clawed gloves over the map. “I enjoy it immensely.”

“I still feel like there’s something more,” Zhao insisted. “Remember, you said you were going to let me in.”

“Hm. For everything regarding the realm, I have. Although… I suppose it is a matter of the realm, or will be soon. I am moving to secure my empress.”

“Huh.” Zhao crossed his arms. “Well… I mean I guess you’re right that it’s not just personal, but… huh. Who? It’s not Sun Quan’s daughter.”

Shi snorted and shook his head. “Of course not her. My wife will be Lady Zhang Xingcai.”

Zhao stared at his brother’s happy face. “She’s married.”

“Not for long. Once the new year holiday is over, I’ll take care of it.”

“You’re going to kill him?”

Shi’s face got that familiar look of scorn for Zhao’s idiocy, an old sight that the younger brother had once seen daily, but now hadn’t seen for quite a while. “Don’t be absurd. She would have to mourn him over a year if I killed him, and it would mean no possibility of Sun Quan’s surrender.”

“You don’t think he’ll be put off by your seizing the wife of the previous man to surrender to him?”

“The only wife Sun Quan ever cared for has been dead over ten years,” said Shi. “He has a young wife now, I know. Consort Fan? Consort Pan? Something of the kind. He is welcome to keep her in Jianye with him.”

“Marrying Lady Zhang… I don’t understand. What is it she has to offer you?”

“Herself,” Shi said without hesitation.

Zhao let out a low whistle. That was unexpectedly sincere. “Wow.”
“Anyway, it isn’t as if there is anything I can gain by marriage at this point,” Shi added, looking snigger than ever. “My reign is quite secure.”

Zhao rolled his eyes. That sounded more like his brother. “Alright. Well, congratulations, I guess. Does Liu Shan know he’s divorcing her yet?”

“Hn. That dog will roll over for any treat. I’m not concerned.”

“Does she know she’s getting a divorce yet?”

“When I last saw her, she was not yet convinced of my sincerity, but since her mother finally arrived in Luoyang, I hope she is at least now convinced of my seriousness. I’m not concerned about that either. When the phoenix crown is upon her head, she will be unable to deny my sincerity. And then everything will be as it should be.”

“Well… since you really like her, I’m glad for you,” Zhao said cautiously. “It doesn’t bother you that she doesn’t want to marry you?”

Shi waved that away. “She hasn’t even considered it in that way yet. She does want me. I know she does.” He chuckled and his eyes moved in a way that suggested he was remembering something.

“So he’s already f*cked her. “There’s a big difference between wanting to have sex with someone and wanting to marry them.”

“Zhao, when I need your advice on how to deal with her, I’ll ask for it.”

Zhao raised up his hands in surrender. “Alright, alright. You know I’m here for you.”

His brother’s face softened considerably at that. “I do know, and I am unspeakably grateful.”

Zhao laughed sheepishly and scratched at his hair.

———

When Shi opened the door to the training room, it was once again empty. He went the short distance to Xingcai’s rooms, and when he opened the door, he saw that she was lying on her bed in her nightclothes, which at first excited him; then he smelled vomit.

“Xingcai, are you ill?” he said, crossing to the bed. Why hadn’t anyone checked on her? Why hadn’t she called for someone?

“I was sick on the floor,” she slurred as he got near. “Don’t… step in it.”

He stopped short. “You’re drunk.”

“I know,” she groaned. “But… s’not working.”

“What do you mean?”

“M’father… he hated himself and the things he’d done… s’why… drank so much…” She sat up in bed and winced, clutching at the sheets. “Thought… what the hell, I’m his daughter, right? So… Thought it’d make me feel okay… not care… But I felt just the same… so I drank more… now I feel worse…”

She was getting out of the bed and went onto her knees, pressing her head down onto the ground, but didn’t raise it up again.
“Are you kowtowing?!”

“Have to,” she said into the floor. “Gonna… be sick again…”

She was true to her word, twisting her body to the side as she vomited onto the floor.

“Oh, my poor love,” he murmured. He walked over to her, feeling awful inside but tamping it back to deal with the present exigencies. He took off her soiled nightdress—she didn’t resist—wiped her face with a clean edge of it, and dropped it onto the mess. Then he gingerly lifted her back into the bed and looked around for clean clothes, a basin, water, towels.

When he had cleaned her off and redressed her, he pulled her into a seated position and said, “Drink this, all of it.”

Obediently she did, and then he placed the empty water cup to the side.

“Sorry,” she said. “Should say more… too drunk.”

That made him laugh despite himself. “My sweet girl. Do you really hate yourself so much?”

She had her eyes closed. “Shouldn’t want you. Can’t end well.”

“It won’t end. It’s just beginning.”

She opened her eyes and twisted her head to look at his face. “You scare me,” she blurted.

His heart twisted. “I don’t want to.”

“You can’t help it. You’re really… really a dragon, y’know?” She was still staring at his face. “What’s under your mask?”

“Scars. I had a surgery. The doctor removed a tumor. There was also…” He hesitated, but went on. “I wasn’t careful enough, after the surgery. I had recurring infections. I nearly lost my eye.”

“Oh,” she said.

“I’ll show you when you’re not so drunk,” he said, shifting to lay her down on the bed. “I don’t want you to vomit again.”

“I’ve seen worse,” she said, looking offended. “Who d’you think I am?”

“You are the woman I am going to marry,” he said.

She lost her scornful look in an instant; her face was full of shame again. “You say that, even now…”

“Did you drink like this to repulse me?” he said, his mouth dry.

“No… I just… I thought it would be easier… I don’t want to be responsible…”

That had been exactly the approach he had offered her, hadn’t it? The way he had ‘defeated’ her, as she put it before he reunited her with her mother. He had fucked her while letting her voice out all her objections; a roleplay in which she wasn’t responsible for what was happening. But she had chosen to be fucked by him. She had tried to tell him before that she couldn’t handle the guilt of what she’d done and what she still wanted to do. So she had turned to wine to try to cope.
Xingcai had closed her eyes again; there were tears silently leaking out. He stared at her, trying to decide what to do, what to think. What had he done to her? How could he fix it?

“I’m going to let you rest,” he said finally. “I’ll come to see you tonight. Drink water, or tea, when you wake. I’ll… tell your mother to come and help you.”

He found Lady Xiahou and got her aside.

“Your daughter has had too much to drink,” he said in a low voice. “I suggest you deal with the matter directly, rather than having the servants see her like this.”

Her mother was startled. “I will, your majesty.”

“I assume your daughter has told you of my intentions,” he said. “My intentions remain what I told her.”

That went a long way beyond startling Lady Xiahou. After a moment, she bowed, saying nothing, and left as a person was supposed to leave the emperor, walking backwards.

Lady Xiahou didn’t believe he meant to marry her daughter either, then. What a mess. What a mess…

———

Zhao was having an idyllic afternoon of helping the nearly, but not quite, independently mobile Goji totter around a room while Yuanji practiced her guqin when his brother burst into the room.

When they were private like this, none of them bothered with kowtows, so he merely looked at Shi with concern. “What’s wrong?”

“Remember yesterday when I said if I needed your advice on a certain matter I’d ask for it?”

“Oh man. Yuanji, uh…”

“It’s alright, my lord,” she said, already getting up and holding her arms out to take Goji. “He should nap soon anyway.”

Zhao kissed his son and his wife and then sat down on a couch. His brother sat down next to him.

“I saw her this morning,” Shi began. “She was drunk, vomiting drunk. From trying to cope with her guilt for having accepted my advances.”

Zhao winced. “Ah.”

“I didn’t expect it, I didn’t see it… I don’t understand why it still preys upon her so much… how do I make her see, Zhao?”

“Make her see what?”

“Liu Shan is nothing, he never was anything, not anything real, not anything that bound her,” Shi insisted. “It’s only right and beautiful that she wants me, that she enjoys me. The way she was raised, the things she was taught… she thinks heaven will condemn her. I am the Son of Heaven! How do I make her see it? How?”

“Brother, I love you and I have loved you ever since I can remember, but you are the most selfish, self-centred, entitled fucker I have ever met,” Zhao said brutally. Shi’s head jerked to look at him
head on; Zhao was sitting on his mask side. “You want it, therefore it’s right. Have you ever once in
your life been told no and not found a way around it? And that’s not even getting into just how
fucking rarely anyone tells you no in the first place.”

“But I love her,” said Shi.

“I, I, I,’” mocked Zhao. This would be only the second time he had ever gotten to really rip into his
brother, and if Shi was going to ask for it, then by heaven he was going to get it. “Even how you told
me about it! ‘I didn’t see it. I didn’t expect it. I don’t understand it.’ Are you actually concerned that
she’s in pain? Or are you just upset that you don’t understand her pain, can’t control her pain, can’t
make it go away and stop inconveniencing you?”

Shi took in a sharp breath, and didn’t answer right away, which Zhao actually thought was a good
sign. He could see his brother was really considering his words. “I…” he began, then paused to smile
ruefully at the use, once again, of the first person pronoun, but continued, “I suppose it is both… but
truly, I am concerned that she’s in pain, she deserves happiness, fulfillment… pleasure… I… is it so
self-centred that I wanted to be the one to give those things to her? She could never get any of them
from Liu Shan. And she does want me back, more than ever I know she does. Isn’t it enough? I
could give her everything…”

“You keep saying she wants you,” Zhao pointed out, “but you don’t say that she loves you.”

Shi looked down. “I know that she doesn’t.”

That actually surprised Zhao. He had supposed that Shi was far too vain to handle having his
attachment to a woman surpass her attachment to him. “And that’s okay with you?”

“I thought if she let me love her… then surely in time… She’s a woman of devotion…” Shi
whispered that last phrase, with almost a kind of horror in his tone. He suddenly looked up. “When I
was having sex with her… she kept saying she was breaking… I thought she just couldn’t
comprehend the pleasure but… Zhao, what if I really did break her?”

“That’s a little dramatic, isn’t it?”

“She wasn’t ready,” Shi said, stricken. “I can see that now. I rushed her. She was so vulnerable from
Liu Shan’s neglect, totally unprepared for the possibility of love and devotion being offered to her. I
overwhelmed her—”

Zhao snapped his fingers in Shi’s face to interrupt this dramatic monologue before it could really get
going. “Don’t get carried away. You can apologize, you can listen to what she wants for goddamn
once, and you can actually give her some proof that you are really prepared to marry her. I don’t
blame her for not believing it at all. ‘Don’t worry, baby, I’m gonna marry you’ is the oldest seduction
trick there is. And you better prepare yourself to actually take no for an answer for the first time in
your life, if that’s what she wants.”

“I can’t let her waste her life as Liu Shan’s wife,” Shi objected.

“Oh yes you can,” said Zhao. “It’s her life to waste, it’s not yours.”

Shi’s fingers twitched. “You are more irritating when you are right than at any other time.”

Zhao laughed, and patted Shi’s shoulder. “You should rank how irritating I am at various times for
me. I could use constructive feedback.”
Dinner had been brought for Xingcai and her mother, but Xingcai was not eating any of it. Instead she was pacing like a caged animal, while Lady Xiahou ate spoonfuls of soup with worried eyes.

“He didn’t say anything to you one way or another?” Xingcai asked, for the fourth or fifth time. “I know you said he did not… but there was no hint?”

“I have told you everything he said several times.”

Xingcai stopped for a moment, put her hand to her chin in distress, and then resumed her pacing. “If I could only remember clearly… I think he said he was going to come see me tonight, but I just can’t remember.”

“Xingcai, apply the reason that I know you possess,” her mother said without heat. “Whether he comes to see you tonight or at another time, it will be no longer than a week. In the meantime, you cannot change anything. You should sit down and eat.”

Xingcai forced herself to sit at the table and pick up her spoon. She consumed her cool bowl of soup as a mechanical process, her stomach still protesting its recent ill-treatment.

Lady Xiahou smiled. “I cannot assure you that you will feel better immediately for having done so, but you will be better off in the long run. I never want to eat when I’m upset, either, but it doesn’t help.”

“Mama, I was so stupid,” she groaned, leaning her forehead on her hand. “And gross. I barfed on the floor when I was trying to kowtow!”

“As I have also told you several times,” Lady Xiahou said, “I saw no disgust in his manner, only concern.”

“He can’t possibly still want to marry me, no matter what he told you,” she said. “How could he want to marry me in the first place!”

“A man does not get to his place without being exceptional,” Lady Xiahou mused. “Cao Pi took his first wife from another man, too.”

“I know. The emperor even said he wasn’t going to repeat Cao Pi’s mistakes…” She flushed, and hurried along so she wouldn’t have to tell her mother that this was in the context of why Sima Shi had pulled out and ejaculated onto her chest and stomach rather than inside her. “But Cao Pi had his first wife killed, didn’t he?”

“That was one rumour,” Lady Xiahou said. “I’m not sure if the truth can be known.”

“And the emperor… both of his wives… did not have natural deaths.”

“Be very careful,” her mother said, her tone suddenly very sharp. “Do not ask him about that.”

Xingcai nodded wretchedly, but she already knew that she would need to. She had never given Lord Liu Shan a son, she had never even gotten pregnant by him… maybe she could convince Sima Shi
to break it off with her on those grounds.

They were silent for a few minutes, and then the door opened.

Xingcai dropped into the kowtow without even daring to look up at him, and did not arise. She heard her mother say something, and walk past the emperor and shut the door behind her, but she could not concentrate on what it was. All she could hear was the blood rushing in her ears and all she could see were the elegant white trousers and shoes that stood so still before her.

“How are you feeling? Physically,” he clarified immediately.

“Still a little uncomfortable,” she told his shoes. “I… don’t precisely remember everything from this morning.”

“You didn’t say or do anything wrong,” he said. “Not anything I blame you for, anyway.”

She had been about to object to the first part, but there was nothing she could say to the second. Oh no you don’t, you need to blame me? She couldn’t say that.

The shoes walked closer, and then he extended his hands to help her stand. She swallowed as best she could with her dry mouth, and looked up at him.

“I still love you,” he said, and the simplicity of how he said it and how he looked at her grabbed hold of her heart tightly. “I… I have a tendency to make my plans and carry them out without thinking of others, even something like this. My brother says I am selfish, self-centred, and entitled. He’s right. All my mistakes have come from that. You said I defeated you too easily for me to ever trust you afterwards. I know now that I ambushed you, that I entrapped you. There is truly nothing you have done that you should blame yourself for. I…”

Now it seemed that he was having a difficult time keeping his eyes on hers. He kept glancing away before he finally looked at her again and continued. “If… if my actions have ruined the possibility of your accepting me forever, then… then I will… I will accept your refusal, and I will not persecute you for it. I will…” He closed his eyes and forced it out. “I will make Liu Shan take you to live with him, if you wish it. But if…” He reopened his eyes, and she had never seen him look so unsure before. “If there is a way that you could accept my selfishness and agree to be my wife… I will probably continue to be very selfish and vain, but I will try to make you happy. I truly, truly want you to be happy. Whatever you decide, I promise… I will never intentionally harm or forsake you.”

She breathed in and out. “May I ask your majesty some questions?”

He nodded.

“How did your wives die?”

“I didn’t kill my first wife, but her death was my fault anyway,” he said. “She’s the real reason I’m wearing white. My second wife was worried that I would divorce her and take my first wife back, so she had her poisoned. That’s why I killed my second wife.”

There was no anger in his words at her boldness in asking such a question, but the calmness with which he spoke of killing his second wife nevertheless made her shiver. “Did you force the last Wei emperor to abdicate to you?”

“Technically not, but he knew I was close to being able to force him to do so, and so he bargained with me. I forced the previous Wei emperor into abdicating by murdering most of his friends and allies and then making him admit to a crime so that the dowager empress would depose him.”
Again, utterly calm and without shame. “Have you any regrets about any action you took to become emperor?”

“To become emperor, no,” he said, and now he was not so calm. Sima Shi turned his head, and she could see him thinking. “I… I hurt some people I love through my selfishness. I am too ashamed to tell you about it. I thought I had learned from it, but evidently not enough.”

She decided she would not push him on it. “…How do you keep your mask on?”

That made him laugh. He lifted up the hair out of his face, and she could see delicate strings or wires that ran up into his hair, ordinarily hidden by locks of hair. “My masks are all fitted to my face exactly, and I use a little adhesive also. For battle, I use a helmet that covers that part of my face.”

“You said you would show me when I wasn’t drunk.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I thought you didn’t remember what happened this morning.”

“I said I didn’t remember clearly,” she said. “I do remember some things.”

He shook his head, but he was smiling. “Alright. You’ll have to show me where you keep the soap. I couldn’t find it this morning.”

She showed him, and then watched with interest as he sat at her vanity, tugged off his gloves, and set about deftly removing about a dozen pins from his hair. Then he tied back his hair with a white ribbon that he helped himself to from her drawer, leaned over a basin, and went through an ordeal of pouring water, carefully prying back the edge of the mask, pouring more water, putting a thin washcloth with soap on it beneath the mask, pouring even more water while pulling the mask off, and finally, rubbing the exposed skin with the soapy washcloth, and then rinsing it off. It took at least ten minutes.

He had done it all so that his back was to her and she hadn’t tried to get a good look at his face as he worked. She knew he had a flare for the dramatic, and indeed, he turned to her with the drying towel pressed to the side of his face and then slowly, grandly, took it away.

The skin around his eye and even more so on the side of his face was uneven, thicker, and rather red, although the last could have been from having just been scrubbed. A good portion of where that eyebrow should have been had no hair because of the scar tissue. Xingcai craned her head to see better the actual surgical incision line that ran over his temple, an intensely red line.

“It’s really not that bad,” she said, a little cautiously, because she had a feeling that he might not handle a non-reaction very well. “You know, I bet you could cover most of it with make-up…”

He scoffed. “I’m not going to wear make-up.”

She couldn’t help laughing. “But you had this made? Can I see it?”

“I did tell you I was vain,” he said, picking it up and holding it out to her. “Be very careful, it’s mostly gold and it bends more easily than you might think, and if it does, the jade inlay might pop out and shatter.”

She took it from him. “Yes, I can see how much manlier this is than wearing make-up.”

He chuckled as she turned it in her hands. It really was light, despite the inlay. She held it back out to him.
“Anything else you need to know before you make your decision?” he said as he took it back. His tone was light, but for once Xingcai was not fooled. He was nervous. She had the emperor of China, a vain, ruthless megalomaniac, nervous. On a certain level, that was a real accomplishment, and Xingcai had to admit that she enjoyed it.

But he still was a vain, ruthless, megalomaniac who was the emperor of China. He had admitted to being selfish and entitled; it was an intense, and probably mostly unchangeable aspect of who he was. The allure of commanding the attention of a dangerous man was nice as a fantasy, but she had no illusions that it would be easy sailing as a reality, no matter how well-intentioned he was. And it was not something that she could turn back from, either.

And the alternatives… continuing as she was here, unwanted by her husband; or forced upon him. Lord Liu Shan would be courteous… but how could she stand to live with him, knowing what she knew now? How could she keep from revealing to him how Sima Shi had made her break apart under his mouth and then again with his cock inside her?

Thinking of that made her flush and put a hand to her face.

“I know that I shouldn’t rush you,” he said, when she still hadn’t said anything after a minute, “but the longer I stay here now, the more likely it is that my increased attention to you will draw notice. If you accept me, that will all be alright…” He trailed off.

Staying with Lord Liu Shan, in whatever way, was almost certain unhappiness: dull, quiet, safe unhappiness that stretched out for years, and the guilt of her betrayal and the knowledge that she could have had Sima Shi eating her alive inside. There was a chance that she could get a child out of him, or be permitted to adopt and raise one, but that was the only possible bright spot.

Accepting his imperial majesty… happiness wasn’t certain, either, but passion and excitement were. There was only one question left to ask.

“Lord Liu Shan did not come to my bed frequently, but he did come,” she said.

“I know. You already told me.”

“I have never been pregnant,” she said. “Not even a miscarriage. Your majesty has only daughters.”

“I admit I still want a son,” he said, “but that is not something I can force heaven to give me. I already tried switching wives to get a son, and I know now that I was wrong. Heaven punished me for it. I have an heir in my brother, and my brother has a son already. I will not forsake you.”

“Then… as your majesty still wants me… I will accept you,” she said, and she saw him come at her to kiss her and threw up her hand to keep him back quickly. “Under one additional condition.”

“What is it?” he said impatiently.

“I want to talk to Lord Liu Shan about the end of our marriage privately,” she said, “without you spying on us, directly or indirectly.”

“I can do that,” he said, “but of course I’m also going to speak with him about it.”

“Only after I do,” she insisted, “and without asking him what I told you. I’ll decide how to tell you about it in my own way, when I’m ready.”

“If that’s really all the condition you want to put on it, then I would be an imbecile not to take the
offer; it is entirely in my favour.” She could see him struggling to maintain his usual calm, erudite tone. “May I ask you a question, my lady?”

She nodded.

“Why are you saying yes?”

She wasn’t sure how he would take the truth, but she would say it anyway. “I still don’t love you. I don’t trust you, and I am afraid of you, and I don’t think I can love you until those aspects change. But… I have a chance at happiness with you, much more than without you. Life with you…” She coloured, glanced away, and forced her eyes back. “…won’t lack passion.”

“That’s good enough, that’s all I could ask for;” he said eagerly, taking her into his arms. “Passion, yes, I’ll give you passion—”

He was pulling at her clothes and his own, and she didn’t resist him at all this time.

“The same as before, if you need it,” he said, dropping her belt to the ground. “‘Stop,’ to stop me… oh Xingcai…”

She was awkwardly, hesitantly attempting to undress him. It didn’t feel very sexy to her, but even this slight sign of her desire for him apparently excited him.

“This is destiny,” he said as his coat came off. “You’ve made the right decision. You won’t regret this.”

Impatiently he took over in undoing his inner belt, and so they both began to undress themselves. The chill in the late winter air made her nipples peak and goosebumps rise on her flesh, and instinctively she got onto the kang, the heated bed.

He was wearing a little more clothing than she was, but when he had gotten it all off he followed her, climbing over top her immediately, though he didn’t enter her, merely hovering over her and looking down at her. She was looking at him also; in their previous sexual encounter, he had merely gotten his erection out and otherwise stayed dressed. His body was as fit as she would expect from his discipline and exertion, and surprisingly unscarred for how active she knew him to have been on the battlefield. She had more scars than him on her body, she thought.

When she reached up his hand to touch his face, he flinched as her fingers grazed the scar tissue, and she pulled her hand back immediately. “I’m sorry, I should have realized it might hurt.”

“It doesn’t hurt,” he said. “I’d just… forgotten I wasn’t wearing it.”

“It’s alright if I touch it?”

“I don’t see why you would want to touch it,” he said, with a hint of self-disgust.

She moved her hand back to it, slowly and deliberately. “I told you it isn’t bad,” she said, as she caressed him. “You know I don’t lie very well.”

“I know.” His pupils were so wide, they made his eyes look like coals in his head. “I’m going to touch you now.”

She had a feeling of where he meant, and she was right: his hand was between her legs in an instant. “Ah! Your majesty!” she moaned.
“There’s no one I love hearing that from more than you. I loved it when you said it the first time. I loved it even more when you knelt before me,” he said as his fingers, surprisingly soft, perhaps because he wore gloves so much, stroked her clit insistently. “That’s why I always sat so close to you when you knelt. I was thinking about something I’d like to try with you sometime. But not tonight. Tonight is about you.”

With that, he turned his body to put his mouth to her again, sliding his tongue inside her as his fingers continued to tease at her pearl.

“Ah! Majesty! Majesty!”

His free hand gripped her thigh to keep her writhing from letting her get away from him.

“Majesty! Please! I can’t! I can’t! No! Ah! Oh, that! That, that, that!”

He repeated the motion of the curl of his finger as she forgot herself and began to chant it louder and louder.

“That, that, that… that… that…! Oh! Oh!” She came hard, arching her back over the heat of the bed, her hair coming loose from its ties as she tossed her head to one side and another against the sheets.

When she came out of her high, she gasped as she realized just how loud she had been, and Sima Shi chuckled.

“Everyone will have heard that,” she whispered in horror.

“Let them hear!” he said, and rose up to his knees. “Let all under heaven know what you are for me. My Zhang Xingcai… yes, my star, my rainbow… spread out for me… your master in these arts.” He smiled down at her with that wicked, self-pleased grin.

Xingcai blushed and reflexively pulled herself in and rolled onto her side away from him out of embarrassment at how he had turned her name into such a cheesy, but also disturbingly arousing, pun. Great. Now every time she heard her own name she was going to think about having sex with him…

Suddenly he was behind her, his breath hot on her ear. “In fact, as much as I love to hear ‘majesty’ come from your lips, I think I might like ‘Lord Shi’ even more… let me hear you say it.”

When his hand, which had been resting on her hip, slid down to help his cock find its way into her, and yet didn’t enter her, she said, “Lord Shi,” and immediately bit her lip.

She moaned as his cock stretched her open, slipping slowly inside her from this different angle, touching her inside in new and different ways than how it had felt when he was thrusting into her from on top.

“That’s it,” he murmured into her neck. “Take it just like that for me. Good girl.”

“Lord Shi!” she moaned helplessly. Why did his words thrill her so much?

His dark chuckle raised her goosebumps again despite the warmth of the bed and his skin against her back. “Perfect… say it just like that. So beautiful, taking me inside you.”

His strokes were slow, his arms held her close, he kept kissing her neck and hair. It was so intimate and loving… the sort of love she’d imagined a husband and wife ought to have, but had not really ever seen in real life.
“Lord Shi,” she said again, and she was crying but she didn’t know why.

He slowed to a stop. “Xingcai… are you alright?”

“It feels good,” she wept.

“You’re allowed to feel good,” he said. “My precious girl. Cry all you need to. Should I stop?”

“No, don’t stop,” she said, though the tears didn’t cease. “I don’t know why I’m crying. I never cried so much before I met you, I hardly ever cried at all.”

“You’re allowed to cry, too. I love all of you, do you know that? My destined one. My fate.”

He began moving inside her again, a bit faster now. One hand began to caress her breasts, alternating unpredictably between slow loving caresses and little teases and tweaks of the nipple that made her gasp.

“Majesty—Lord Shi!” Xingcai felt the pleasure building up again, despite the tears.

“Cum quickly,” he said, with a catch in his voice. “I can’t hold out much longer.”

“Lord Shi… Lord Shi!”

As she was orgasming, Shi let out a hiss and pulled out just as he began to cum, the first burst arcing across her butt and lower back, as he put his hand to himself to stroke out the rest of it.

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“Xingcai,” Lord Liu Shan said in his sweet, lilting voice. “What a pleasant surprise to be able to speak with you after so long.”

The servants brought in tea as she sat down, then left. They stared at each other for a moment when the servants were gone, and Xingcai realized that he was waiting for her to make him a cup of tea. Well, of course. She really was out of it; she didn’t care at all about the tea.

“My lord,” she said as she began to prepare his cup, “it has been quite a long time since we have spoken. Have you been well?”

“Oh yes.” He smiled tranquilly. “Everyone has been most kind here in Luoyang. I have everything I could wish for.”

She could not stop herself from turning her head swiftly at that. “Everything, my lord?”

His placid smile wavered, but he did not immediately speak.

Xingcai turned back to the tea. “That is most reassuring. I am glad you have been so happy, so well-treated.”

“And you, Xingcai? You seemed very well when I saw you at his majesty’s coronation.”

“Did I? That is interesting. I was very unhappy.”

“Really? That makes me sad,” he said, but there was no weight to his words at all. “If you are lacking anything, you should inform the emperor. With any reasonable wish, he is all eagerness to please.”
Xingcai finished making the cup of tea, but instead of kneeling before her husband to present it, she merely placed it down on the table in front of him. “The emperor is the reason why I am here.”

Liu Shan’s face, behind the strings of imperial beads that he still wore, looked at the cup in puzzlement, then back at her face.

“The emperor wants you agree to a divorce from me,” she said, watching his face carefully. His eyes widened, but he did not interrupt when she continued, “He wants to marry me himself, when his mourning period is over in April.”

“I see,” said Lord Liu Shan. “I would not have thought it of him… I see. When did he tell you this?”

Xingcai decided to be evasive. “He spoke to me of it yesterday.”

“I see,” Lord Liu Shan said yet again. “And how did you respond?”

“How do you think, my lord?” she said, letting her real bitterness at her first husband’s milquetoast response colour her voice.

“I see.” Lord Liu Shan stood up. “Please wait here a moment.”

Xingcai waited, staring at the single tea cup on the table.

When he came back, he had a small pouch in his hand, which he handed to her. “Please wait a week or two before taking this,” he said. “I gave you all I could spare, since I of course had to make sure I had enough for my own peace of mind, but it should do, since you are a woman and so light.”

Xingcai squeezed her hand around the pouch gently, felt the light, powdery give of the substance inside. Poison. This is poison.

“It’s important that you wait if you can,” he said, “since I do not want him to know you got it from me. But of course I understand that if he makes an attempt on your chastity in the meantime, you may need to take it sooner, and I will not blame you in that case.”

“You want me to kill myself?” she said, as her fingers clenched tighter around the pouch. “That’s your solution to this?”

“It is a shame,” said Lord Liu Shan, shaking his head. “I would not have thought it of him, truly. But I assume he would not take your refusal, so this is the only remaining option.”

He reached for his tea, but she blocked his hand, pulled open the pouch, and swiftly poured the poison into the cup.

“Xingcai,” he said in some distress, “you cannot take that here. What can you be thinking?”

“What can I be thinking?” she said. “I am thinking that since I have prepared your tea for you, I should prepare your poison for you, so that you can take matters into your own hands rather than deal with the humiliation of an unfaithful wife. The emperor and I didn’t just discuss this subject yesterday. He also fucked me, and I let him do it. I enjoyed it. It wasn’t the first time.” She stood up and looked down at him and had the satisfaction of seeing that she had really flabbergasted him.

“That’s all I have to say. I’m sure the emperor will handle the divorce papers with you, if you decide you can bear the shame of continuing to live. Goodbye.”

With that, she left.
Liu Shan put his seal as duke of Anle to the agreement of divorce, below where Xingcai had already affixed hers as duchess of Anle.

“My lover tells me that you have poison here,” Sima Shi said conversationally, as he picked up the document. “I think it would be a good idea if you would show me where you have it hidden.”

The little dog didn’t whimper. He merely got up and walked to another room, Shi following him.

When Liu Shan revealed the false bottom of the little box, Shi took the entire thing.

“I had much better keep this,” he said. “We don’t want any accidents to happen, do we? At least not until I have Sun Quan’s surrender as well.”

“I assure your majesty, I have no reason to use that. I have been quite content… and… and I do hope that will continue.”

“It will. You are all too easy to please; you don’t want anything that isn’t garbage.” Shi’s voice was laden with his contempt. “I don’t think I will ever need to see you again. How pleasant a thought it is.”

For the second time that day, Liu Shan watched a person leave with his little jaw hanging like the dipper that had been his childhood nickname.

Chapter End Notes

Explanation of Sima Shi’s pun:
Zhang Xingcai 張星彩 - zhang = spread; 星星 xingxing = star; 彩虹 caihong = rainbow
Sima Shi 司馬師 - shi = master (in the sense of teacher or expert, not owner)

Lord Shi 師公 sounds a little more intimate in this context in Chinese because the same gong is part of the familiar term for husband, 老公 laogong. So there’s a kind of double meaning also that he’s asking her to call him ”husband Shi”.

And finally Liu Shan’s childhood nickname 阿斗 A-Dou meant ”li’l dipper” like a scoop or ladle.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

"Taishang Emperor", which Sima Shi in this story has titled Sima Yi, is a term first coined by Liu Bang, the founder of the Han dynasty, for his father who was still alive; thus while Liu Bang was the actual emperor, his father also had many of the honours of an emperor, and crucially, he did not have to kowtow to his own son.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yuanji felt a great deal of anxiety on her future sister-in-law’s behalf as the rest of the family awaited Shi’s arrival with her.

Shi’s three daughters all showed different levels of nervousness on their faces, depending on their different maturity levels and personalities. Shi’s oldest, Chenlan, who was quite fiery, looked defiant, and only revealed her true insecurity in how she startled at anything that might have been the door opening; peace-making Qingyin, the middle daughter, kept making mistakes in her embroidery and pulling out the threads to start again; Qiujing, the youngest, was eager to please but quick to despair, and was mimicking her grandmother’s posture and expression with only limited success.

Her mother-in-law was in her fullest protective grandmother mode. Yuanji had the feeling that if this future stepmother so much as looked at the girls wrong, Lady Zhang was going to kill her, no matter what Shi had to say about it.

Lord Sima Yi had apparently decided to play it cagey and was seated in his wheelchair with a vague expression that might or might not imply senility.

As for Zhao, the only one among them to have met this Zhang Xingcai, he was preoccupied with Goji.

“My lord, he will walk when he’s ready,” said Yuanji as Goji stared suspiciously at his father who was attempting to lure him into letting go of the table with a rattle.

“But he is ready, I know he is,” said Zhao. “He just needs to actually try it.”

Sima Yi started to laugh, and Zhao rubbed his hair sheepishly. “Yeah, yeah, I know, I know. I’m getting my own back, father.”

“You didn’t walk until you were nearly eighteen months old,” Sima Yi said when he had finished laughing.

“I know, I know! You told me before.”

“We thought maybe you were stupid,” said Sima Yi, highly amused.

“Pardon me, my lord,” said Zhang Chunhua, “but I always knew, and I told you at the time, that there was nothing the matter with Zhao’s wits. He walked when he had enough motivation.”

“What motivation was that?” said Zhao eagerly.
“You realized if you didn’t learn to walk you couldn’t keep up with your brother, of course,” she said fondly. “My dear boys.”

Perhaps it was lucky that it was at this point, when the mood was relatively lightened, that the emperor was announced.

Shi’s parents of course remained seated, but everyone else got up to kowtow. Even Goji got down on his knees in curious imitation of the adults.

Yuanji looked up to see her future sister-in-law was smiling at Goji’s antics. A good sign.

“Father, mother, everyone,” said Shi when the others had risen, “this is Lady Zhang Xingcai. Xingcai, my father, Taishang Emperor Sima Yi; my mother, Empress Dowager Zhang Chunhua; my daughters, Princess Chenlan, Princess Qingyin, and Princess Qiujing; my sister-in-law, Wang Yuanji, Queen of Jin. My brother, of course, you’ve met.”

“I have long admired your reputation, your majesty,” said Xingcai to Sima Yi, and then more generally to the room, “It is an honour to meet you all.”

Sima Yi smiled a little, but said nothing.

“Your majesty,” Xingcai turned to her future mother-in-law, such that Yuanji had a better angle on her face. Yuanji was impressed to see that Xingcai looked completely at ease. “Your son tells me that you are extremely difficult to impress, but that if I can win you over, the rest of them will fall into line. So, you see, I am determined to make you like me.”

“Oh my,” cooed Zhang Chunhua, “did my own son really make me sound so frightening? I hope you won’t be afraid of me, my dear.”

“It would be foolish of me not to be afraid of someone who can frighten the emperor, don’t you think?”

This woman is good at this, Yuanji thought. If she continues like this, she really will win them over.

Zhang Chunhua appeared to have similar thoughts, although she certainly wasn’t won over yet. She tilted her head. “We are both Zhangs, aren’t we? ‘Five hundred years ago we were the same family,’ isn’t that how the saying goes? You remind me of myself at your age, a little. You are so much more beautiful than I was, but then, I was married with two young children; that ages one.”

That was very tricky; under the guise of a compliment, it was a subtle dig at Xingcai on several levels. How would Xingcai handle it?

She did alright. “You were more fortunate than I was, then, that you were able to meet Lord Sima Yi so much younger.”

“I was the one who was fortunate,” said Sima Yi. So he had decided already not to fake his decline around Xingcai. “But I think it is so often the husband who is the more fortunate… is that not right, Zhao?”

Zhao laughed. “Well, it’s definitely true for me.”

He gave Yuanji an audacious look, which had her pinning her lips together in an attempt to maintain her composure.

“As you admire my reputation, Lady Zhang,” said Sima Yi, “doubtless you know of my unfortunate
deafness. This environment is far too noisy for me to hear you properly. I must plead my prerogative as patriarch and insist you come and speak with me privately in my room. None of the rest of you can object; my time is so much more limited than yours.”

“Certainly,” Xingcai said, bowing without hesitation or a glance to Shi for rescue. “May I assist you with your wheelchair, your majesty?”

“Yes, but watch the floor,” Sima Yi said as she came up behind him. “Go through that door first. Careful over the threshold.”

When the two had left, Shi said, “Mother, did you know he was going to do that?”

“I don’t control what my lord does,” said Lady Zhang, but she was smiling in a way that indicated that whether she had ordered him to do it or not, she approved of it. “Qingyin, you have a missed stitch two rows back.”

“Oh dear,” said Qingyin. “Perhaps I should leave it off today.”

“By no means,” reproved Lady Zhang. “Focusing under emotional pressure is a key skill. This is vital practice for you.”

“Yes, grandmother,” Qingyin said, diligently undoing her work.

“What did you think of your future stepmother, Chenlan?” said Shi.

“She….” Chenlan appeared to be warring with herself about whether to be bold or prudent. Prudence won. “She is very pretty and elegant.”

“So she is,” agreed Shi. “I think you have more thoughts about how she looks.” He paused, but Chenlan merely looked down at her lap. “No? Perhaps you do, Qiujing?”

Qiujing, who had been staring into space, was startled into speaking without thinking: “She looks a lot like mother.”

Qiujing went quite red at this; Qingyin looked up and pricked her finger because of it.

“She does look a lot like your mother,” Shi said calmly. “You see, that is the kind of woman I like. Lady Yang looked a little like your mother too, didn’t she?”

“No,” said all three girls at once, emphatically, and Shi laughed.

“Hm. Well, superficially, Lady Yang did. But the resemblance between your mother and your future stepmother is deeper than that. Her mother is a Xiahou; to be precise, her mother’s grandfather was your mother’s great-grandfather. So she is actually a kind of cousin to you.”

The girls looked at each other. Goji, having lost interest in his father’s dull insistence on shaking a rattle at him, started cruising the other direction around the table, towards his interesting uncle with his shiny greaves and swishy cape.

“I want you to know that I am not intending her as a replacement in your hearts for your mother. No one could ever be that. And you will find that her personality bears little resemblance to your mother. But I expect you all to make the effort to treat her with respect, as I expect her to treat you with kindness.”

“Yes, father,” the three girls said.
“Look at Goji!” Zhao suddenly exclaimed.

They all did. Goji, having discovered that the end of the table was not quite close enough to grab at the interesting swishy cape, had let go of the table and taken a step towards it. He took another step.

“That’s it Goji!” “You can do it!” “He’s walking!” came the excited chorus of Zhao and his nieces, while Shi looked down at his nephew with a fond eye and tugged off his glove to extend a hand.

Goji took one more step, looked around him at everyone’s riveted attention, became overwhelmed by the pressure, dropped down onto his bottom and began to cry.

Yuanji got up to rescue him. “Very well done, you’ll get that cape next time,” she assured him as he sobbed into her shoulder.

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Sima Yi got out of his wheelchair by himself and walked the few steps to a chair. “Have a seat,” he said, indicating the other side. “You really do look like a Xiahou, you know.”

She nodded. Her smile was diplomatic and civil. Time to rattle it.

“My son’s first wife was a Xiahou; and not just a Xiahou, but her mother was Cao Cao’s daughter,” he said. “It was an open secret that Lord Cao Cao’s father was born a Xiahou before the eunuch Cao Teng adopted him, so the intermarriages between his branch of the Caos and the Xiahous after that date are slightly controversial. Some call it incestuous, but I had no qualms about arranging a union with the product of such a marriage.”

Information gathering conversations like this were just like battles. Introducing awkward but not truly relevant topics like this at the beginning confused the opponent. Ideally, the opponent would overthink their responses but then end up blurting something out because of the social pressure of time, which often caused them to reveal more than they wished.

For the moment, Lady Zhang Xingcai appeared sedate. “Your majesty’s son has told me a little of his regrets with regard to her.”

Just how much? wondered Sima Yi. “He may have told you more than me, then. Even when he was quite young, Shi was determined to seek out what he wanted. I noticed you were surprised at the ages of his daughters.”

That rattled her, but she regained her composure and said, “I was, a little. I thought the emperor was about my age.”

“So he is. He fathered his first child when they were both fourteen years old. As you can imagine, that was not in accordance with my own plans for them. I am still not sure how he managed to get Lady Xiahou alone.” Sima Yi shrugged. “That was Chenlan. Qingyin is a little more than a year younger than Chenlan. I admit to you that I do not know how she was conceived either. Qiuqing is a little less than a year younger than Qingyin. By that point, I had ceased to even try to keep them apart.”

Lady Zhang’s composure was gone again. Her eyes were wide, and she clearly didn’t know how to react.

“He consulted me when he divorced her, but only to ask how to break the news to his mother; he didn’t take the other advice I tried to give him. Nor did he consult me about his choice of second wife. And then, a few days ago, he told me about you. My opinion of my son is very high in most
things, but not in his matrimonial choices. Tell me, Lady Zhang, did he make a mistake to choose you?"

“It’s very likely,” she said, and flushed when Sima Yi laughed, loud and long.

“Is this modesty?” he asked when he could speak.

“No need for it under the circumstances,” she said, still a bit heightened in her colour, but getting the words out without difficulty. “I was a married woman, I am already twenty-five, and choosing me can only cause loss of face and difficulty for the emperor.”

“You don’t wish to prevent him making such a mistake, out of your love for him?”

He saw a little flash in her eyes, the look of an opponent who sees the opportunity to break the feint and thrust home. “Your majesty’s son knows I do not love him.”

Sima Yi was taken aback, but he watched himself being taken aback at the same time. Him being taken aback was precisely the reaction she foresaw and wanted; if she was rattled, then she would have him rattled also. She was no pushover, this woman.

“Do you love me, Chunhua?”

They were lying in his bed together; they had been married a week. She was so close to him, he was touching her, he’d just been inside of her; yet she’d never seemed more out of his reach.

“It’s not like you to ask questions you know the answer to,” she’d said, without opening her eyes.

She didn’t love him. Not at first. He had ached for it, for a time despaired of it… but he had learned to please her, learned to become admirable to her, and learned all the more just how amazing she was.

And he had gotten her love.

“In any event, I do admire the emperor,” she continued, when he didn’t speak right away, “and from what I know of him, I do not think these difficulties will be beyond his talents to deal with. Nor do I think him ignorant of what marrying me will mean in terms of practical effects. Although… I cannot say that I think he made it as a practical decision.”

Sima Yi studied her face. “You agreed with reluctance, I think. But if your reluctance was not because you wished to spare him, and your agreement was not because you loved him… can you supply your motives for me, Lady Zhang?”

“I was a married woman; I think your majesty can well understand my reluctance,” she said, clasping her hands together. “My acceptance… I suppose can be explained as selfishness.”

“We have rather a different view in our family of selfishness than perhaps you were raised to believe in Shu,” said Sima Yi. “Do you mean you think my son will make you happy?”

She got a strange smile then; it was sudden in its onset, but widened very slowly, as her eyes moved over things that only she could see. “Yes, I think he will.”

“I do not call that selfish,” huffed Sima Yi. “You are a very principled girl, I think. That will take some getting used to. I suppose they had you read a great deal of Confucius in Shu.”

“Confucius, how to swing a sword, and how to behave at a banquet. Almost nothing else, I’m
ashamed to say.”

“There can be no shame in not having had the opportunity to learn,” he said. “Has Shi read you poetry?”

Oh, that made her turn scarlet. Sima Yi laughed again.

“Never mind, never mind. I did not realize my son could be so romantic,” he said. “I had better let you go back to the rest of them now. Tell them I needed my rest.”

———

When Xingcai went back to the room, only the emperor, his mother, and his daughters were still there. Xingcai bowed. “The Taishang Emperor bade me to tell you he needs his rest.”

She saw the emperor looking at her curiously, and wondered if her cheeks were still red.

“Was he very impertinent with you?” asked the empress dowager in a silky voice as Xingcai sat down.

*I guess my cheeks are still red.* “By accident only,” she said. “He asked if the emperor had read me poetry.”

Oh, that made Lord Shi smile.

“Did you really, Shi? That must have made your father glad. He is forever lamenting to me about how you gave up your interest in poetry and music when you grew up.” To Xingcai she said, “I hope you will able to inspire him to revive his interest.”

“Hardly,” she said. “I have little knowledge of poetry and none of music.”

“But that is even better! There is nothing Shi likes so much as to feel superior. You can let him condescend to you about music and literature, and then you will not have to pretend ignorance in other subjects to satisfy him.”

“Mother,” protested the emperor, but Xingcai laughed.

“My granddaughters are all very fond of music, also; Shi, don’t you think we should have them play? If I am scaring your bride off, their music will surely coax her to remain.”

“I would like to hear my daughters very much,” said Shi. “Go ahead and get your instruments, girls.”

The girls got up obediently, the middle one laying aside her embroidery to do so.

While they were absent, Lord Shi said, “Zhao has some appointment with a friend of his, and Lady Wang has taken her son for his nap.”

“He is a very cute little boy,” said Xingcai sincerely. “He clearly admires his uncle.”

“He does indeed,” said the empress. “While you were with my husband, he took his very first steps trying to reach Shi’s coat. He is just like Zhao, isn’t he, Shi?”

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Zhang Chunhua watched as her son agreed that Goji was very much like his father, with his eyes on this woman and his thoughts clearly on her too. *Shi is really in love with this woman… not like Lady*
Yang… not exactly like Lady Xiahou, either, but I can’t put my finger on how it’s different.

She had already abandoned her initial theory, that this Lady Zhang Xingcai would turn out to be a master seductress. It was tempting to try to come up with a new theory, but she trusted that her husband would have been able to ferret out the truth of her connection to Shi. Her task was to see how this woman would act around her stepdaughters.

“Did you have younger brothers and sisters, Lady Zhang?” she asked.

“No, I was the youngest in my family,” she said.

“Really! I would not have thought it, from how disciplined you are; were you not indulged, as most babies of the family are?”

“My youngest older brother and I were very close in age, raised almost like twins; we did everything together…” She paused and seemed to gather herself a little; this near-twin was dead, then, Chunhua surmised. “I was practically treated like a boy until I married.”

The girls were returning: Chenlan with her end-blown flute, Qingyin with her hand drum and Qiujing with her qin.

Chunhua noticed that this Zhang Xingcai seemed surprised that the youngest girl was carrying a qin. Ha! Wait until she heard her granddaughters play! Though if she was not being modest, she might not even know enough to even appreciate how skilled they were.

Their mother had loved music and been talented at it as well; she must have kept the girls up with it while they were apart…

The girls played a dramatic piece, full of imitations of thunder and storm from the drums and the qin with the noble flute as the imperilled boat upon the waves. Despite how nervous they had been, Chunhua noticed no significant errors in their performance.

This Zhang Xingcai seemed to listen with the apprehensive appreciation of someone who knows their reaction is being gauged in real time. At one point she looked at Shi, possibly for reassurance; his look back said nothing to Chunhua, but the woman blushed a little.

“I enjoyed that very much,” said Shi when the performance was done. “Chenlan, I did not know you played the flute.”

Chunhua saw how that surprised Xingcai.

“I have only just started, father,” she said. “I will need a lot more practice with it to try anything that has a more complicated melody.”

“I think the flute might suit you even more than the pipa,” he said. “I shouldn’t be surprised; you talk so much that it must have increased your lung capacity.”

Chenlan smiled, but nervously; even after a year, the girls had not fully accepted that their father showed affection in these dry semi-insults, of the same kind that he was forever unleashing on his younger brother.

“And what did you think, Lady Zhang?” said Chunhua.

“I am afraid to speak lest I make some ridiculous mistake out of ignorance,” she said. “Princess Chenlan says the piece was simple, but I found her skill in playing it amazing. I cannot imagine
managing such fine and quick movements. I have enough trouble swinging a sword!”

“I feel very sorry for Qingyin, that her sisters gave her the least impressive instrument,” said Shi. “How is she supposed to make an impression on her future stepmother?”

Chenlan leapt to her sister’s defence: “We could not have played well if she didn’t keep us in good time.”

“It is the opposite, your majesty; from my military experience I know the importance of drums more than any other instrument. Indeed, I was impressed,” said Xingcai.

“There were many fine qin players in Shu,” said Shi. “Did you ever hear Zhuge Liang play?”

“Yes, many times.”

“I have heard Zhuge Liang could tell what someone was thinking by hearing them play the qin. Let me see if I possess the same talent… Qiujing… you were thinking, ‘I hope that they are serving turtle soup at dinner tonight.’”

The girls all laughed, and Qiujing said, “No, no, I wasn’t!”

“No?” Shi pulled a face of mock disappointment. “Alas. I should tell the cook not to serve it then.”

The girls laughed even more at this. “I will like it very much, if it's already planned!” said Qiujing.

“I'll let it stand then. I would like very much to hear you all play another piece, but I want to show your future stepmother how her rooms are laid out at the present, so that she has time before the wedding to think of how she would like them altered, and I must do it now because she will be returning to her home immediately after dinner.” Shi stood up, and the woman stood up with him.

“There’s more than an hour until dinner, Shi,” said Chunhua. She had not gotten nearly enough time to evaluate this woman!

“I don’t like to rush, mother,” he said, bowing, but clearly not going to be checked. She nodded and watched them go.

“Put away your instruments and return to your rooms,” she told the girls. “I am going to see if your grandfather needs anything.”

Jia Chong wasn’t where he said he would be at the hour they had appointed; and he had sent no message. Sima Zhao waited about fifteen minutes before he got so unnerved at this unprecedented failure that he decided that he would do something he had never done before: inquire at Jia Chong’s home.

Though he had never been inside it, its location was on the logical path between two of the major gates and the Sima compound as it had been before Shi’s elevation to the emperor, so Zhao had frequently walked or rode with Jia Chong into the city and parted ways just outside his own gate.

The servants recognized him and kowtowed.

“Is your master in?” he said.

Nervous glances. “Er, yes, your majesty. This way.”
The servant who led him knocked at a door.

“Go away,” said Jia Chong’s voice harshly.

“It’s his majesty to see you, my lord,” the servant called.

“Oh, shit.” The words were not very loud, and yet they seemed loud to Zhao; Jia Chong didn’t swear or get upset like that. “Go tell him I’ll be with him in a moment.”

The door opened; Jia Chong, always pale, looked downright ghastly. He reared back in surprise at seeing Zhao; clearly he had not realized that the servant meant that his majesty wanted to see him there.

“Jia Chong, are you sick?” said Zhao.

Jia Chong gave a look like murder to the servant, and the servant actually ran to leave them. Then he looked back at Zhao, his expression blankly hostile; then it crumbled. “I suppose you might as well come all the way in, since you’re in,” he said, and stepped back to let him inside.

Jia Chong’s study looked warmer and brighter than Zhao would have thought.

“I’m not sick but I’m not myself,” Jia Chong said, sitting heavily in a chair. “Our meeting slipped my mind. My son is dying.”

Zhao, who had not yet sat down, stood transfixed. “God… I’m so sorry, Jia Chong. Of course, I excuse you completely. Do you want me to go?”

Jia Chong put his hand to his brow and leaned upon it. “I don’t know. I tell you I’m not myself.”

“I can’t imagine… if it were my son…” Zhao struggled to find the words. “Is there anything I can do? What doctors have seen him?”

“It’s not something a doctor can fix,” said Jia Chong heavily. “I may as well tell you what really happened to your face, before the version my servants are no doubt spreading makes its garbled way to common knowledge. I made a horrible mistake. You know my son was born two months ago. Three days ago, I came home, and I went into the nursery to see my children, and the wet-nurse was holding Limin—my son Limin. And I went up to him and I kissed his face… he was awake and I was transfixed by him. I couldn’t tear myself away; I kept touching him. And the wet nurse spoke to me and I spoke to her about how sweet he was and how dear. I was such a fool! My wife was watching and she got it into her mind that his nurse was my lover. The same night she killed her. And now my son… my son won’t eat. We’ve tried other wetnurses, but he won’t nurse from them. He’s going to die. My son is going to die.”

Zhao said the first thing that popped into his mind. “Yuanji still nurses Goji. Maybe Limin will accept her.”

That made Jia Chong pull his hand away from his face and sit up. “My lord, are you insane? Even you being here will make my wife suspicious. If you bring your wife into it…”

“My God, does that matter? Deal with that later; I know you said Limin hasn’t taken anyone, but how many have you tried? Are you really going to give up on him?” Zhao demanded. “You’re his father!”

Jia Chong stared at him for a long moment. Then, slowly, he brought his hands up and bowed. “You’re very right, my lord,” he said. “I’ll get my son at once, if you’ll escort us to your home.”
“Is Goji still asleep?” Zhao demanded, bursting into the room and nearly making Yuanji fall off her stool in shock. “Oh, sorry, Yuanji.”

“I’m fine,” she said, as her heart slowed back down. “What about Lord Jia Chong?”

“He’s why I’m back so early,” Zhao said, and beckoned to someone out of sight. Jia Chong stepped into the room with them, with a tiny baby asleep in his arms. “Jia Chong’s son’s wetnurse died, and he won’t take anyone else’s breast to nurse, and if that doesn’t change he’ll die too. I thought maybe he’ll take it from you, and I couldn’t not try it.”

Yuanji entirely agreed with this, and reached out her arms; Jia Chong put the baby into them.

“I’ll wait outside,” Jia Chong said in a strained voice and was gone as Yuanji unfastened her dress to free her breast.

“Alright, baby, wake up,” Yuanji said. “Wake up, baby dear.” She unwrapped the bottom of the blanket and tickled his foot. “Get me a cold washcloth, please,” she told Zhao.

Zhao ran for one, brought it back sopping.

“This is too wet,” Yuanji scolded, but when she touched the back of the baby’s head with it, he woke up and began to feebly cry. Yuanji dropped the cloth onto the ground and gently compressed her breast to squirt milk into his mouth.

The baby coughed a little when the milk hit his mouth, but she saw the mouth movements change to rooting ones. Quickly she put his nipple to his mouth and begged heaven that he would accept her.

“Is he nursing?” whispered Zhao.

Yuanji didn’t answer, she was too focused on the baby, whose latch was sloppy and painful and his sucking was slow. He must be so weak and tired…

She pushed onto the top of the breast again, hoping it would help him to drink.

“Yuanji?” Zhao prompted after a few minutes, sounding so anxious.

“I’ve gotten a little milk into him but he is very weak. I think he’s too weak to suck,” she said. “Maybe I can express some milk into a bowl and we can drip it into his mouth with a spoon.”

“You’re brilliant,” said Zhao, off on that task as well, while Yuanji tried to coax the baby to stay awake and nurse a little more.

“Did it really make you blush that much, just to be asked if I read you poetry?” Lord Shi said as he closed the door behind them in what would be her bedroom, apparently.

As soon as he said he wanted to show her the empress’s quarters, Xingcai had a feeling that he intended to put the bed to use immediately, and the desire in his eyes bore that out. “It reminded me of when your majesty sang to me.”

Oh, his smile was so wicked! “Yes, I remember very well how you told me I had a lovely voice.”

“At the time I couldn’t understand your intentions,” she said. “I tried to tell myself that you just enjoyed seeing me squirm.”
“But I do enjoy that,” he said huskily, approaching her.

She closed her eyes and tilted her head up to meet his kiss, but no kiss came, though he was cradling her face in his hands. When she reopened her eyes, he was just looking at her, but the way he was looking at her felt like it could almost stop her heart. He murmured, “Shall I sing for you again?”

“I would like that,” she whispered back.

He kissed her, and began to undress her. “Even you must have studied the Book of Odes.”

“Yes… it’s hardly romantic though, is it?” she said cautiously, picking at ties. “I mean, even the things that seem to be about a man and woman are actually all allegories about wise government—”

“Nonsense,” he cut her off. “I will correct your miseducation.”

And he began to sing, and as he sang, the flashes in his eyes and the caresses of his hands put erotic meaning to every line of the ancient song of a young man going to elope with his beloved.

_Ah, snugly putting the linchpins on the carriage wheels,_
_Ah, thinking of the beautiful young lady I am going to._
_It is not hunger or thirst, but the hum of her quality that draws me._
_Though I bring no friends, we will feast and be merry._

She was naked beneath him on the bed; he was still undressing himself as he sang.

_Supported by the forest of that plain, pheasants gather._
_My lady is well-grown now and has such quality to teach me,_
_We will feast and acclaim: I come to love you, not to hurt you._

It was unfair, it was like cheating; only a man as dramatic as Sima Shi could make such lofty, archaic lines seem like the true and profound expressions of his deepest feelings.

_Though I bring no fine wine, we will drink as if I did._
_Though I bring no delicacies, we will eat as if I did._
_Though my quality is nothing to my lady’s, we will sing and dance._

He was spreading her legs out and looking down at the parts between them as if they really were a great feast. And then he reached out his hand and placed it on her pubic mound.

_When I go upon that high mound, separating its branches,_
_separating its branches, ah, its leaves are glistening!_  
_Deliciously I see you, ah, my heart is full!_  

As his fingers trailed down, parting her outer labia as he sang of separating branches, she could feel how wet she was. His fingers slid between the inner labia, and when he brought the hand away and up, she could see for herself how they shone with her wetness.

_I am stopped before a high mountain, stopped before a wondrous scene._
_Four horses in harness, the six reins like a qin._
_It is seeing you, my bride, that satisfies my heart._

Xingcai had only ever heard the poetry of the _Book of Odes_ sung in the context of state ritual; she felt like she ought to reject this misuse of it as profane. But she could not, even as a misgiving in her mind. Instead, she was overcome by the sense of something sacred occurring here, and now, between them.
Heaven’s will… destiny… fate. There was not much that she felt she understood yet about Sima Shi, but his strong belief in these things, and that he included her as part of them, she did.

*I am divine to him,* she realized, and that was very frightening.

His head tilted. “You are suddenly afraid. What is it?”

“I am really just an ordinary woman,” she said. “You make me feel like I’m being worshipped.”

He smiled. “Ah. You are afraid that I will realize you are not a goddess, and then plunge you into hell, I think.”

She shivered. That was pretty much exactly it.

“Am I not the Son of Heaven?” he said, and when he said it like that, she couldn’t deny it. “It is my responsibility to bring you there with me.”

He moved over her. Lord Shi was inside of her before she could even think to protest; and once he was inside her, she did not want to protest.

———

As he tenderly wiped his semen off of his beloved’s stomach, Sima Shi was glad that there would be only a month until the wedding… maybe starting next week he would just let himself release inside her anyway. There was no guarantee she would even get pregnant by it, and if she did, the birth would still be in the bounds of being early…

“Babies do come early, you know,” she said, as if she was reading his thoughts; or what was better…

He smiled at her as he tossed the cloth aside and lay back down to take her into his arms. “You can’t wait to carry my child, can you?”

She blushed. “Well… I know I don’t have a reputation as very… maternal, or even womanly… but I did always want to be a mother. I grew up in a big family, you know… not just my older brothers and sister, but my cousins… well, I thought of them as cousins, and they were as close as brothers and sisters to me…” Then she looked wistful. “They’re… almost all gone, now. But that is all the more reason why I would love a big family for myself. The daughters you already have included, of course.”

“They’re very good with their cousin. If we are blessed with children, I expect it will be the same.”

He smiled at her. “Go ahead and ask the question you have. Or should I guess?”

“Yes. I’m sure you also observed that I am not very close to them.” He sighed. “I handled everything about my first marriage badly, I realize now. I was very childish myself; my daughters were competition for my wife’s attention, and——” He stopped himself.

“And they were only girls?” she guessed, all too accurately.

“Yes,” he admitted, watching her face for repulsion but seeing none. Perhaps it was just the sort of thing she already expected. “The first one I didn’t mind so much, even the second; but then that the third was a girl…” He sighed. “I felt entitled to a son. There were other factors behind why I divorced her too, I should say. You remember that I murdered Cao Fang’s friends? One of them was
my wife’s brother. A childhood playmate of mine, also.”

“And that is among the things you do not regret?”

“It is,” he said soberly. “He would much rather have died than see me emperor. I only granted his wish.”

Shi knew that such a harsh saying was not likely to endear him to Xingcai, but he also knew that the sooner she came to fully understand how he thought and how he made decisions, the sooner she would truly trust him and realize that she had nothing to fear from him; and that, she had said, was what would open the door to her being able to love him.

“I have tried to close the gap between us since my daughters have come back to me,” he said, to set the conversation on things of the future instead of the past, “but I am not… the way that I speak… I know how to be charming, and I know how to say what I feel and think; I do not know how to do both at the same time.”

She laughed, which reassured him. “I think it is better in the long run that you express yourself naturally to them. I hope that I will also have success in being natural with them. It does give me a little anxiety.”

“If you’re worried they won’t see you as old enough to be their mother, their mother was your age.”

“I know. Your father brought up the subject.”

Shi frowned. “He did?”

“It was a prelude to informing me that while you are excellent in most areas, he thinks you are bad at making decisions about wives, and to inquire if I was going to be your latest mistake.”

Ah, that sounded like his father. “How did you answer him?”

“I said it was very likely… and he laughed, just like you are.”

Indeed, Sima Shi was laughing. “You are too hard on yourself. I should have warned you that my father detests humility.”

“He didn’t seem to dislike me,” she said, with some hesitation. “I would say… reading between the lines, he seemed to disapprove of how I was raised, and to think that I had the potential for better.”

“If you’re right,” said Shi, “then he likes you better than I even hoped he would. I think it all went fairly well… ah, there is one more thing I want to speak to you about today, now that the news of our upcoming marriage will shortly spread throughout Luoyang and then the entire empire. You are about to be utterly besieged with requests for assistance, and before that happens, I want to know whom you actually want me to act for, for you, not because your sense of obligation compels you to.”

“Well… the other ladies from Shu, of course…”

Exactly what he had expected, and why he knew he had to bring it up. “For them, I cannot promise to act at all,” he said. “They are hostages to guarantee behaviour from others; if those others commit offences, and I do not kill them, I will have no threat to dangle over the rest of them and rebellions will be far more likely.”

He saw it daunt her, but she took it better than he had anticipated. Well. Shu may have been fools,
but even they had doubtless held hostages from time to time; she would have been exposed to the concept.

“Well… Zhuge Liang’s wife, Lady Huang Yueying, and her children… I imagine there are many within Wei who may wish to avenge themselves on him through them… ah, and my cousins… Guan Suo and Guan Yinping… the same thing, maybe even more so…”

“What are they the cousins to whom you were as close as a sister?”

She nodded, but her eyes were distracted; she was still thinking.

At last she said, “I can’t think of anyone else… and now I’m just thinking about all the ones who are beyond being acted for.”

“Would you like me to bring the Guan children to Luoyang?”

Her face brightened, but then she hesitated.

“What’s wrong?”

“I… I was just thinking that I have no idea how they’ll react to my divorce… I really have no idea…”

“I’ll look into it,” he said, then regretfully he began untangling himself from her. “We should get ready for dinner.”

Chapter End Notes

The translation from classical Chinese is my own.

The death of Jia Limin in infancy from having his wetnurse murdered by his mother is from history; but of course I’m like “nah man, I can save this bebe.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jia Chong had lost track of how much time he had spent leaning against the wall when he heard the empress dowager say, “Lord Jia Chong, what an unexpected pleasure.”

He looked up; Zhang Chunhua was staring him down with an expression that would brook no nonsense.

He took the time of the kowtow to try to shake his brain into some semblance of order. “Your majesty.”

“My son told me that he was going to see you briefly before dinner, but he did not mention that he was going to bring you back for it,” she said, smiling. “Nor has he given me any explanation for why he and his family are not at dinner, where they should be, right now.” Her eyes narrowed at him. “Why are you still on your knees? What’s happened?”

The door opened, and it was Zhao, looking triumphant and sheepish at the same time in the way that only Zhao could manage. “Sorry I forgot to keep you informed, mother. Jia Chong’s son’s wetnurse died, and they couldn’t find another wetnurse that he would take. So I thought it was worth trying Yuanji, and I was right. She’s amazing.”

Jia Chong swallowed. “He accepted her?”

“Eh, not fully, but she’s getting milk into him anyway,” he said.

“Your majesty… your majesty…” Jia Chong did not know how to say it.

Zhang Chunhua said crisply, “Could you excuse us, Lord Jia Chong? I need to speak with my son.”

“Go ahead in and see them,” Zhao told Jia Chong, and he got up and went in, with Zhao pulling the door shut behind him.

He stopped short as he saw that Yuanji had her breasts out and was leaning over a basin, and hurriedly turned his back. “Your majesty, I apologize.”

“This is no time to be obsessing with pointless modesty,” she said. “Did Zhao tell you my plan?”

“No,” said Jia Chong, without turning around.

“The baby must stay here,” she said, not as a suggestion. “Once he revived a little from getting some milk, he became very averse to being on the breast at all, but he will take milk from a spoon. I have a wet-nurse that I use occasionally with Goji, and I’ll have her assist me in this. For today, we wake him every hour, if he does not wake himself, and do not let him go back to sleep until he has had at least two ge of milk [approx 50ml]. I’m not going to try him with the breast directly again today… something really wrong happened, didn’t it?”

Though he was not facing her, Jia Chong could well-imagine Yuanji’s face. “Zhao told you the wetnurse died. She died… in a violent way… while she was nursing him.”

“I see. That explains it… what is his name, anyway?”
“We call him Limin [commoner],” said Jia Chong.

“He won’t die if I can help it,” she said. “I’ve put him on the kang, there, if you want to see him. I wouldn’t pick him up, though; he’s so weak right now that it’s all he can do just to swallow. He needs rest.”

Jia Chong turned and kept his eyes down on the ground until he got to the raised platform of the kang, the heated bed. Limin was there, wrapped up, sleeping. He didn’t really look any better, but he didn’t look worse, either, and he was still alive. The tiny chest was moving up and down.

There was the sound of the door opening, but Jia Chong did not turn, so he would not see anything. “Man,” came Zhao’s voice, “standing up to my mother never gets any easier.”

“Standing up to her?” Yuanji said. “Was she that unhappy about us needing dinner brought to our rooms? I know we should have told her earlier, but I would think, under the circumstances…”

“It’s the circumstances that she’s angry about,” said Zhao. “She’s not generous, my mother. She doesn’t want Limin here, taking Goji’s milk and Goji’s mother’s time and energy. She wants him out. So I had to put my foot down. Brrr. She was still mad when she left.”

“But that’s ridiculous,” said Yuanji. “I have plenty of milk, Goji hardly even needs it anymore.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Zhao. “If she brings it up again, I’ll handle it again. What a bother…” The voice was getting closer, and then Zhao was beside him. “He looks a little better, I think, Jia Chong. Did Yuanji tell you her plan? Isn’t she great?”

“Yes,” said Jia Chong, in answer to both.

Zhao put a hand on his shoulder, and Jia Chong looked over at him, but Zhao was looking at the baby. “I’ve already arranged for Lady Guo to be arrested for murder. No, don’t say anything, you really shouldn’t. The law is the law. You understand, right?”

Jia Chong did understand. He understood exactly what Zhao wasn’t putting into words: that Zhao knew that Jia Chong couldn’t stand to punish Huaihuai himself or cooperate in having her punished, so Zhao had done this efficient end-run around him so that it would be fait accompli. This way Jia Chong himself wouldn’t have to choose, wouldn’t have to be responsible. Sima Zhao was going to take it all on.

Zhao’s face was tired, there was a trace of sheepishness, a hint of wistfulness. He didn’t look all that different externally than he had a few years ago, but Jia Chong knew he was looking at an entirely different man, the man that he had been sure was there when he first met him.

A ruler.

“Your majesty,” said Jia Chong, and bowed low. “I do understand.”

When he rose back up to standing, Zhao was looking at him, with the wistfulness a little more pronounced. “No kowtowing though, right?”

“I remember.” Jia Chong made himself smile.

“You should probably go home,” Zhao said. “With her mother gone, I’m sure your daughter will need you.”
“I’ve lost control of this family,” Chunhua said to Sima Yi crossly as she snapped the door shut behind him in his room.

Sima Yi knew better than to laugh at Chunhua when she was upset. “My dear, did Shi’s new woman do something at dinner that made you dislike her so? I thought you agreed with my assessment that she would do.”

“Not that one,” Chunhua said as Sima Yi got out of his wheelchair and began to undress. “Although I’ve long known that I have no control anymore of Shi. It’s Zhao this time. He’s brought Jia Chong’s dying brat in and foisted him on Yuanji. Making my daughter act as a wet-nurse to one of his officers, it’s degrading! She is not a servant! And he wouldn’t hear a word from me! He even barred me from going in!”

“The boys you raised so well have become men,” Sima Yi said, and took the nightshift from her hand.

Chunhua did not look as flattered as he expected. “They don’t need me anymore.”

“Now that is not true.” He got into the bed. “We, all of us, can’t do without you.”

She extinguished the lamp without responding, but then said, hesitating by the door that led to her own rooms, “May I stay with you tonight, husband?”

Despite his age and ailments, in the past year he had been able to enjoy her a few times, but always at his own initiation. She still felt desire for him, he was sure, but she put his health above anything. He wondered whether she simply wanted his presence or something more. “Please do.”

She came back a short time later in her own night clothes and got into the bed with him silently, lying on her side with her back to him.

Sima Yi tested the waters by putting his arm over her. She snuggled back into him. So far so good. He decided that as a scouting attempt, her stomach would be intimate but not innately sexual, and moved his hand over it.

Her stomach had a firm swell to it… almost like when she was…

“Chunhua…” he said, surprised.

He felt her stiffen. “I know very well I’ve gained weight,” she said in her frostiest tone. “If you find it so objectionable I can leave.”

“No, it’s not that,” he said. “It’s… Chunhua, I didn’t notice…?”

He moved his hand onto her arm; it was still as thin as ever.

“I wear a bellyband to keep it under control during the day,” she said, “although it’s getting beyond what even that can hide. I can’t control my family or my own body…”

Sima Yi moved his back onto her abdomen. It really did feel like… “Chunhua, are you sure it isn’t…”

“Isn’t what? Pregnancy? Don’t be ridiculous. I’m forty-three years old.”

“That isn’t impossible.”

“After all this time?” she said after a moment, and she no longer sounded contemptuous. “I would
have gladly, in all the years after Zhao… and it isn’t as if I didn’t have you…”

“You certainly did have me,” he murmured into her neck, and she actually laughed.

“I still think it unlikely,” she said. “I’ll see a doctor—to reassure you.”

“Thank you,” he said politely.

She was quiet again for a while, and then said, “How would you feel if I was?”

Sima Yi had been considering exactly that. “I would be happy and sad,” he said. “Happy, because our children are my greatest joy. Sad, because it is so unlikely that I would be able to see a new child grow up.”

She hummed, and put her own arm over his on her stomach.

———

Xiahou Ba tried to tell the itch on his nose to go away. He was standing right beside the emperor, it was not as if he could scratch his nose. Everyone would see.

Sun Quan, obviously daunted by Sima Shi’s invasion of Nanjun, had sent another letter requesting negotiation. It also congratulated Sima Shi on his imminent marriage, and included gifts: gold coins, gold jewelry, and the famous silk brocades of the south.

Sima Shi was examining these offerings with pleasure, running his hand over an intricate embroidery of a white five-clawed dragon with a golden pearl between its front legs. He looked up. “Are they sufficiently humbled, do you think, Zhao?”

“More than I would have thought,” said Sima Zhao. “They haven’t done badly at all in defending Nanjun. Nothing to be ashamed of on their end, certainly.”

“They haven’t done badly, and yet they are going to lose,” said the emperor, leaning back. “I want that dragon brocade made into a robe for myself. I’ll decide about the rest later.”

The treasures were taken away, and the council discussed Sun Quan’s suggestion that his chancellor, Lu Xun, meet with an envoy of the emperor’s choice at New Hefei Castle.

At the end, Sima Shi held up a hand for silence and said, “I’ll go myself to speak with him, in June. That should give us enough time to solidify our control of northern Jing province. I’m not giving that back.”

———

Xingcai knelt, upright and still as the servants carefully unpinned the phoenix crown after the wedding banquet was finally over. “Wait, I want to look at it a moment,” she said as they were about to take it away; obediently they stopped and brought it before her face.

She had been too overwhelmed by everything that was occurring that morning to properly look at it before it was placed onto her head. The primary colour was the brilliant aqua blue that formed the nine phoenixes that encircled it, picked out with edgings of gold and pearls: rubies, sapphires, and emeralds ringed the band. On top of the crown were nine gold dragons, each with a large pearl in its claws.

She had had a phoenix crown as empress for the most formal occasions when she was married to Liu
Shan, and at the time she had thought it was the most magnificent thing she had ever seen, but next to this it would have looked downright shabby, merely gold with a few gems. She internally shook herself. *Merely* gold. She was already getting spoiled.

“I wondered what was keeping you,” she heard the emperor say, and turned her head to see that he was wearing a dressing gown only. “Now I know that you would rather admire your crown than your husband.”

She flushed. “N-no, it only just came off—”

He laughed, and approached her. “I am only teasing you. Take all the time you wish to look at it; it is yours, after all. Does it meet with your approval?”

“I was just wondering what makes the feathers look so blue,” she said. “I thought they were turquoise, but now that I look closer…”

“They really are feathers,” Lord Shi answered. “Kingfisher feathers inlaid into gilded silver. More precious even than jade, I believe. This crown has been reworked from pieces that survived from the Han.”

“I’ve never even seen something like it before,” she said. “I’m finished looking at it.”

“Keep undressing her,” he told the servants, then to her, “Was it very heavy?”

“Yes, it was.” They had taken off her earrings and necklace now, and she stood up so that they could remove the beautiful *diyi* gown with its pattern of paired pheasants.

*Supported by the forest of that plain, pheasants gather… I come to love you, not to hurt you.*

“You wore it like it was a mere cloud upon your hair,” he said.

“If it was a cloud, it was a thundercloud,” she said, and he laughed again.

“When they are gone, I’ll rub your neck and shoulders then,” he said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Xingcai saw the envious incredulity in the eyes of the handmaidens at the emperor’s doting words, but they were silent and well-trained. They took away the magnificent outer coat, removed the more sedate but no less fine silk middle-robes, then bowed as they left her there in her undergarments, standing before the emperor. She shifted, feeling awkward and not knowing what posture to take. To be undressed by others was not a new experience, but to be undressed by others in front of someone…

“Xingcai,” he said, “why so shy? The audience is gone now.”

“But it is Lord Shi who is the audience.”

“Is that so? Then I don’t think the performance is over. We haven’t even begun the final act.” He smiled. “Come and kneel before me.”

Oh, that was exactly the sort of thing that *only* he could say to her… she walked over and knelt on the floor in front of him.

His eyebrows went up, and then he got an intense look in his eyes. “Oh? Hold that thought… I meant kneel the other way.”
She was puzzled, but she turned to have her back to him.

He was actually being serious about rubbing her neck and shoulders, and it really did feel good. She let out a sigh, closed her eyes, and let herself lean back into his hands, against the bed. He had a knee on each side of her shoulders. It felt so domestic and simple, not at all the behaviour of an emperor and empress.

After a few minutes, he shifted forward a little. “Xingcai,” he murmured. “Do you feel that?”

Indeed, she could feel his hardness against her. Though she was tired, she felt herself reviving. “Yes, your majesty.”

“Lord Shi,” he corrected huskily. “From now on, when we’re alone, I want to always be Lord Shi to you.”

She would be the only person under heaven who could address him that way. “Lord Shi.”

“I was going to wait to try this with you,” he said, still rubbing her shoulders lightly, “but when you knelt in front of me like that, you overwhelmed me with wanting to try it now. Turn around, please.”

She did, returning to the initial position, so reminiscent of so many conversations they had together, him in a chair and her kneeling before him, back when she had no idea he was lusting after her.

He opened his robe. Apparently he had already taken off his loincloth before he had even come in. The emperor put a hand out and used it to take her chin. “You know how I kiss and suck on you?”

The cheek he was stroking gently with his fingers was hot. “Yes, Lord Shi.”

“How would you feel about doing something similar for me?”

“Kiss you there?” she said, looking at his cock.

“Not just kiss,” he said. “Take it in your mouth.”

Her eyes went wide. “Oh my God,” she said incredulously, “you mean that’s a real thing?”

Her surprise made him laugh. “Yes, it is. Where did you hear about it that you thought it wasn’t?”

“Well in battle, I wore armour, and people around me didn’t always realize I was female, so I heard lots of things I probably shouldn’t have,” she said, “especially in the way of insults, and I always heard men telling other men to suck their cocks. I thought it was just a ridiculous notion, like how they also said they would have sex with their asses.”

He began to laugh so hard that he actually pulled his hand back from her chin and pressed his hands together against his forehead as he tried to regain control. “Oh Xingcai,” he gasped at last, “one thing at a time, I suppose. One thing at a time.” He breathed in, held it a moment, and let it out. “Ha. What a shame that you will eventually run out of ignorance to delight me. But I suppose you have other delights for me that will never run out.”

His laughter was a little embarrassing, but she had been thinking about it and it did seem fair, or even overdue. He had made her cum with his mouth so many times and never showed any hesitation about it.

“You’ll have to tell me what to do,” she said.

“The most important thing is not to use your teeth,” he said. “Try taking the head into your mouth.
I’ll talk to you as you go.”

Shi had expected a great deal more hesitation, and had even been prepared to accept a refusal, when he first introduced the topic of her giving him oral sex. But she seemed entirely game.

He had only ever let his wives suck his cock; to him it was something that he would only let a woman he trusted not to harm him do. Neither of them had particularly enjoyed doing it, but the fact that they would do it for him anyway was almost a turn-on in itself.

Xingcai frowned at his penis for a moment, as if judging a terrain. Then she suddenly opened her mouth wide and took far more of him into her mouth than he anticipated. She immediately set to a kind of sucking motion, with her tongue repeatedly stroking the underside of the head.

His intended careful coaching of her immediately flew out of his head. “Xingcai oh my God,” he cried out in pleasure, throwing his head back.

She pulled off. “Is that alright?”

“Don’t stop, do it again, do it more.”

She began to do it again, and she had apparently interpreted ‘do it more’ as taking in more of him, because she began moving her head down on him, and before he fully knew what was happening he was in the back of her throat.

“Ah! Xingcai!” His voice sounded high and almost pathetic to his own ears and yet he couldn’t care. “Xingcai, yes! Just like that! Oh God! Xingcai!”

As she kept going, he was reduced to just meaningless sounds. He forced his eyes open and looked down at her, this beautiful and elegant woman with her perfect lips wrapped tightly around the base of his shaft. “Xingcai, God, you’ve got to stop.”

She pulled off him again, looking daunted. “What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing wrong, it’s that it was too good, God,” he said, still shaken. “If you kept going like that I was going to cum in your mouth too quickly. God. You took me totally by surprise, you were amazing…”

“I was? I had no idea what I was doing,” she said.

“You took me all the way. I was inside your throat…” If only it hadn't been so tiring of a day. He'd have cum inside her mouth and then driven her wild with his own mouth and fingers until he was ready to fuck her again.

She was looking at him hard, as if trying to understand his awe. “And that was… good?”

“It didn’t bother you?” he said. “I wasn’t going to ask it of you, and you did it without being asked…”

“It felt fine… I… actually kind of liked the sounds you were making…” Her smile was an adorable mix of sly and shy.

Did she not have a gag reflex?! God. He was going to fuck her throat so often if that was the case…

“You always leave me so flustered,” she continued, her slyness winning out over her shyness. “It felt
nice to do that to you too.”

“It did, huh? So bold…” He shrugged off his robe, took hold of her hands and pulled her up on top of him on the bed, untying her underclothes impatiently. “And you called me your audience, didn’t you. Maybe this time you should give me a show.” He propped himself up slightly on the bolsters of the bed. “Ride me.”

“Ride…?”

“Exactly what you’d think, smart girl.” He pulled her hips over his cock. “Take me inside you and ride me.”

He’d made the request impulsively, solely motivated by the erotic picture in his mind of how she would look on top of him, but as he saw the hesitation and nervousness in her face and her fingers as she awkwardly took his erection and moved it to her entrance, he realized he had inadvertently made a huge emotional request of her.

Up until now he’d always fucked her with him in a position of physical control, and she had always protested at least a little, sometimes a great deal, including physically struggling against his superior force. He enjoyed playing that role for her, being her conqueror, the one who took her to the pleasure she couldn’t otherwise allow herself to have.

If she had the control, she wouldn’t be able to retreat behind that persona of the good girl who isn’t enjoying it at all. She would have to be present… no, more than present, enthusiastic, about making love to him.

And she just wasn’t ready to do that.

Shi felt a pain in his heart. She didn’t love him enough yet, she didn’t trust him enough yet… “We don’t have to do it like this,” he said quickly, “We… we don’t have to do it all, if you’re tired. I should have realized, you must be tired… and here I am trying to make you do all the work for everything… I did tell you I was selfish…”

He was babbling like a fool now.

Xingcai was looking at him, and for once, he wasn’t sure what she was thinking or feeling.

“What if I lie down on top of you,” she said softly, “It might be less tiring for me…”

He didn’t respond immediately, but his face must have, because she took him inside her and laid down atop him, and she kissed him.

Shi kissed her back. He hardly stopped kissing her the whole time she was moving her hips over his, he kept running his hands over her back desperately, trying to tell her with every touch of his lips and his fingers and his cock inside her:

_I love you. I love you. I love you._

_____

When Zhang Chunhua announced to her family that she was expecting a late addition to the family, the first reaction was probably not what she anticipated.

“Wow,” said Zhao, “go father!”
Yuanji covered her face in her hands as his father laughed and his mother said, in her sweetest, deadliest voice, “Excuse me, Zhao?”

“Uhhhhh…” He tried to look at Yuanji for help, but she said with her eyes, oh no, you’re on your own for this one! He did his best. “Wow, I guess I should really say… go mother? Because, uh… you’re still so young and vital for your age…?”

Shi, perhaps, took pity on his brother. “She’s only forty-three, Zhao. Even women a little older than that have children, sometimes. It’s a surprise, but…” He smiled. “Well. You are the best mother I have ever heard of, so I cannot be anything but glad that another child will have the opportunity of experiencing it.”

That was very well-worded, but of course Zhao had to jump in again. “Hey, hey, hey! Do you know what this means? I get to be a big brother!”

“I’m very pleased for you,” said Yuanji, while her mother-in-law cuffed Zhao, “and of course I would be honoured to be there with you at the birth, as you served me.”

“Hm,” said the empress dowager, thinking. “The girls should be there, too… Chenlan is thirteen already, and they’ll probably all be married women within five years.”

Yuanji glanced at Shi. The emperor didn’t look pleased with this statement, but in such a way that it appeared that what was driving his displeasure was not that he disagreed but that it was all too true. Well, of course. To be married to an emperor’s daughter or sister was to receive the rank of fuma, one of the highest ranks possible, receiving an annual salary equal to that of a vassal king; a staggering two thousand tam of food [100,000kg]. The competition to wed Sima Shi’s three daughters would be fierce. And at the same time, to be wed to Sima Shi’s daughter would be a powerful tool to bind officers of talent and their clans to the emperor's reign and the legitimacy of his dynasty.

“And you, Xingcai, should be there too,” the empress dowager continued. “Have you ever been at a birth?”

“I have not.”

Zhang Chunhua sighed, but Yuanji could tell that there was a certain amount of smug pleasure there. “Hm! Well. I shall have to demonstrate to you all exactly how to do things. Then, none of you can have any excuse for making mistakes.”

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Sima Shi put the letter down, got up very deliberately, looked at a shelf, selected a doubtless expensive and precious vase from it, and viciously smashed it against the wall.

His desire for violent destruction thus momentarily sated, he sat back down and picked up the letter again.

It was from Zhong Hui, the governor of Shouchun, and most of it was talking about the arrangements for Sima Shi to come down to Shouchun and meet with Sun Quan’s chancellor Lu Xun along the border with Wu, but that was not what had made Sima Shi so furious.

Zhong Hui wanted Sima Shi to give him his daughter Princess Chenlan in marriage, to bring her with him on this trip, in fact. And not simply that, but the way he asked for her—demanded, practically!—as if Sima Shi owed him his daughter for Zhong Hui’s prior service; as if Zhong Hui was doing the emperor a favour in taking his daughter as a wife!
Shi had known that now that Chenlan was thirteen (the minimum age for marriage according to the law) that overtures were bound to start coming in, that people would start testing the water. That Zhong Hui, whom Sima Shi knew very well to be extremely ambitious, would aspire to gain one of his daughters was not in itself unexpected or even something that Sima Shi would have scorned out of hand. But to write about it like this! The idea that Zhong Hui thought that he, more than any of his other officers, was deserving to be the first to become *fuma*, when in reality he should never have taken it for granted that he could become *fuma* at all... the way he was implying that it was Princess Chenlan who was lucky to gain someone of his genius and talent as a husband... and that he so thought that Sima Shi would be so eager to give him his daughter that he would want to give her up now, when she was barely more than a child!

Sima Shi looked at the shelf, thought better about smashing another valuable object, and instead put the letter down and told a guard that he wanted Xiahou Ba or his brother Zhao found immediately. He wanted to rip Zhong Hui to shreds in someone else's hearing, and he also wanted to beat something, and he thought a spar with one of those two would allow him to do both. Only then would he be calm enough to write a return message. Zhong Hui was still useful to him, so he knew he couldn't be as savage as he would want to. But absolutely this galling insult needed to be called out for what it was. Zhong Hui needed a check to his ego if he was going to continue to be a governor.

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Zhao stood by the gate, looking up at his brother upon his horse.

"I leave everything in your hands," Shi said. "I know I could not leave them in better."

"Hey, father could probably still do it," said Zhao.

Shi smiled. "Our senile, deaf father? Don't make tasteless jokes in public, Zhao."

Zhao raised his hands and smiled back.

"We go," Shi gave the command, and the imperial convoy started off.

Zhao walked back inside the city, his arm slung loosely around Yuanji. "Hey, Wen Yang."

Wen Yang stepped up his pace a bit in order to fall into stride beside, rather than behind, his liege. "Here, your majesty."

Wen Yang brushed up his pace a bit in order to keep up with his liege. "You want to come over this evening? Might have my friend Jia Chong over as well. My nieces will be missing their father, thought I might cheer them up, let 'em show off their music to some new ears." Zhao felt Yuanji stiffen under his arm, and he patted her shoulder.

"Oh!" said Wen Yang. "As... as a guest? A social guest?"

"Yeah, a social guest," laughed Zhao. "What a way to put it. We're friends, aren't we?"

Wen Yang didn't say anything, but his face said it very clearly: *No, we're not. You're my king, I'm your sworn knight.*

"Well, we should be. Man. You make me feel a hundred years old. You know I'm only four years older than you, right?" Zhao rubbed his neck with his free hand. "Hell, bring your brother too, why not."

"I... we would be very honoured," said Wen Yang, bowing low.
“You’ll probably want to change,” Zhao said, looking at Wen Yang’s armour. “Huh. That’ll be interesting. You know, I’m not sure I’ve even seen you out of armour.” He waved Wen Yang off and set down the path towards the palace.

“My lord,” said Yuanji.

“Yes, it’s what you’re thinking. Why not?”

“How do you think your brother would feel about you doing this in his absence?”

“If it’s left up to him, he’ll keep his daughters in the backrooms every day of the year for the next couple of years until he finally can’t put it off anymore, and then he’ll probably engage and marry all three of them off to men they’ve never even seen, as fast as possible so that it’s over with and he can tell himself it’s settled and to stop feeling unhappy,” Zhao said with brutal honesty. “I’m not saying we have to rush things, actually this is the exact opposite. The best way not to rush things and to do right by the girls is let them have low stakes interaction with the men who are actually eligible. Then we’ll be able to make sure they’re given to the right ones.”

Yuanji was not mollified. “And Jia Chong?”

“He’s single, isn’t he?” Zhao was a little taken aback at just how harshly Yuanji was reacting to this. He’d thought he was showing both leadership and initiative, the exact kind of thing she was usually all over him to do more of. “What’s wrong with him?”

Yuanji didn’t reply.

“I thought you liked him,” Zhao said.

“I’m not sure if that’s the right word,” she said quietly. “I trust him with you.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Zhao was slightly offended on his friend’s behalf.

Yuanji gave him a look. “My lord. How would you describe a man who repeatedly watches his wife murder people out of completely unfounded jealousy and does nothing to check her? Something is wrong with him. Part of why he’s served you so well is that something is wrong with him. He is good as an officer, but for Chenlan?”

Zhao sighed. “Does it ever get tiring being right all the time, Yuanji?”

She reached her arm across his lower back. “It does, but my lord revives me.”

Zhao laughed, and they enjoyed the early summer sunshine for a while.

———

If Jia Chong had known that Zhao had described him to his wife as “single, isn’t he?” he would have been staggered.

Technically it was correct, since a few days earlier he had held his wife in his arms as she succumbed to the poison she had taken by official order—the so-called wine with metal fragments.

“Why couldn’t you only look at me, only love me?” she had wept at the beginning, but at the end she said nothing but, “I’m frightened. It hurts.”

“I’m here, Huaihuai,” he had said, unflinching, as she coughed and vomited blood and acid onto his clothes. “I won’t leave until it’s all over.”
He had walked back home afterwards in his filthy clothes, stood in the front hall, and before the bewildered eyes of his servants, he had stripped down to his loincloth, leaving two piles, a small one with his jewelry, a large one with his actual clothes.

“Put that away,” he had said about the small pile, and then about the large pile, “I want all of that burned immediately.”

He’d washed, scrubbing the oil from his hair and the polish from his nails. When he redressed, he put on plain unbleached cotton.

Plain, unbleached cotton clothing was what he was wearing now. He’d gotten used to how his hair, unslicked, constantly fell in his face. If anything, he thought darkly, he looked even more sinister than before. Certainly the expressions of the people he passed in the street seemed to indicate that.

If he had known that Zhao’s purpose in inviting him over was to evaluate him as a potential husband for Princess Chenlan, it is difficult to say how he could possibly react. The idea did not occur as even a wild possibility to his keen and perceptive mind.

If Jia Chong had known that Queen Yuanji had balked at the idea, he would not have been offended. If he had known that she had said the something was wrong with him, he would have agreed, and thought, you don’t know one tenth of it.

“Jia Chong!” said Zhao, with apparent delight, as he received him, but then he scrutinized him. “Oh, wow. Uh. This is going to sound unbelievably stupid, but it didn’t even occur to me that you might not want to be socializing right now.”

“It’s fine.”

“Oh really?”

“No.”

Zhao looked startled.

“That was a joke,” explained Jia Chong.

“But you don’t joke,” said Zhao uneasily.

He shrugged. “I’m thinking of starting.”

Zhao laughed, unnerved, and led him into the hall where others were gathering.

Yuanji was already there, her son on her hip, talking placidly to Wen Yang. Jia Chong was not precisely surprised to see him, but it was his first time seeing the young warrior outside of armour. Without his close-fitting helmet with its horn like a qilin jutting up from it and the shining metal of the suit of armour, he unexpectedly looked older and more impressive. He wore a round-collared pao made of a white silk brocade with a subtle white peony motif, tied with a gold sash. He was even taller than Zhao now. Next to them, listening, was Wen Yang’s younger brother Wen Hu, likewise dressed in casual attire, but not yet having anything close to the figure of his brother to pull it off.

Jia Chong glanced across the room and saw that Sima Shi’s three daughters were gathered together, the bright colours of the gowns giving the effect of a small cluster of wildflowers; attempting not to obviously stare at Wen Yang but mostly failing; the older two whispering in each others’ ears.

Oh… huh. Well, of course. The oldest princess is thirteen now, isn’t she? And the other two are
Zhao’s favour was truly a powerful thing. Had Zhao not interceded at the time, Jia Chong would have had the Wen brothers executed, and it would have been a mistake; Jia Chong was many things, but being too proud to admit his mistakes was not one of his failings. And then Zhao had gone so far as to have Wen Yang get his father’s title and lands, as if the man hadn’t died in open rebellion.

As he was thinking these things, Zhao pulled Jia Chong over to his wife and bodyguard and, without bothering to ascertain what the topic of conversation had been, cheerfully inserted himself into it.

“You two make me feel like I should start wearing white too,” he said, looking from Jia Chong to Wen Yang and back, “just so I don’t stand out.”

“Is it possible for your majesty not to stand out?” said Jia Chong.

“You’re too right,” Zhao complained. “That’s what’s great about keeping Wen Yang around, he’s so tall, people always look at him first.”

“He certainly does attract attention,” said Jia Chong dryly, and glanced significantly at the princesses.

“Ah yes,” said Zhao carelessly, as Wen Yang blanched as he realized that the princesses were indeed looking at him, “hey, girls, I brought guests to hear you play, and you don’t even have your instruments here, what’s the hold up? Don’t tell me none of you inherited your father’s desire to show off, because I won’t believe it.”

The girls laughed, blushed, disclaimed, and hurried off.

The evening went well, Jia Chong thought; Zhao maneuvered him into speaking with the princesses a few times, collectively and individually, but as he only thought this was to evaluate their compatibility with Wen Yang, he did so with ease and even charm. If Zhao gave him a task, he would never fail it, not ever, not even at the lowest ebb of his life like this.

Zhao was munificent as a host, walking them all home, first the Wen brothers, and then Jia Chong.

“How is Limin?” he said when they had left the Wen brothers at their gate.

“Good, I think,” Jia Chong said cautiously. “He still won’t take the wet-nurses’ breast directly, but he drinks from a spoon readily enough. It’s something of a hassle to find wet-nurses that will put up with it, though. But I suppose it won’t be so many months until he won’t need it at all.”

“Bring him by sometime, won’t you? Yuanji admitted to me that she misses him. I think she counts him as almost an honorary son.”

“The queen is too kind for words.”

There was a minute or two of silence. “My mother thinks Chenlan takes after my father,” Zhao said. “What do you think?”

“Physically or in personality?”

“Personality. Physically, she looks like brother, I’d say, but then brother looks like father so I guess it isn’t far off.”
“Perhaps if the Taishang Emperor were more fire than acid, that would be so,” said Jia Chong. “I think the princess is very much her own person, from my limited observation. I didn’t know her mother at all, so I cannot speak to that influence.”

“Her mother was shy and sweet. Qingyin and Qiujing are very much like her, but not Chenlan.”

“Princess Qingyin is a sweet girl,” and then, getting to what he supposed was the only point of this entire visit, “She would suit Wen Yang the best of the three of them, I think. Of course, the princesses are all very young, and may mature into very different women.”

“That’s very true,” Zhao agreed. “Three or four years, right? Then it’ll be a different story.”

“I am sure Wen Yang would be willing to wait many more years than that to become the emperor’s son-in-law,” said Jia Chong. “Any worthy man would accept that.”

Zhao chuckled. “Ha! You sound exactly how my brother sounded ranting about Zhong Hui. That rat-tailed idiot really went so far as to ask my brother to bring Chenlan down with him to marry Zhong Hui now, can you imagine? I knew Zhong Hui was conceited, but I didn’t know he went that far. He must think there’s no single men of his age who can compare.”

Jia Chong stopped, causing Zhao to have to double back.

“What is it?”

“How did your brother respond?” said Jia Chong.

“Oh, he was diplomatic enough to realize he couldn’t rip him to shreds,” said Zhao. “His letter back was fine, I read it before it went out. He slapped Zhong Hui, nothing worse than that.”

“I think you should write your brother to be very careful,” said Jia Chong. “My lord, when will you learn to tell me about these things at the time?”

“What careful about what?!” said Zhao, confused. “I thought this was just a family matter.”

“Becoming fuma is not a family matter,” said Jia Chong. “If Zhong Hui got his plans and assumptions shattered so brutally, just before your brother is going to meet with Wu…”

“What… you’re not saying that you think that Zhong Hui would try to rebel and collaborate with Wu…?”

Jia Chong just looked at him.

“Well, fuck me! What the fuck is it about Shouchun?!” demanded Zhao, and detoured them back towards where urgent messages were sent out.

Chapter End Notes

Was doing some reading and suddenly noticed that Wen Yang was 18 years old by East Asian reckoning at the time of his father's rebellion, meaning he was actually roughly 17 by Western reckoning, so that makes him nineteen in this chapter rather than twenty.

I mean I've compressed the timeline all to hell but I did like the idea of Wen Yang being
so extraordinary so young, so to find out that he was actually *even younger than that* is too appealing to let it go.

Anyway I'm editing all the chapters of the work to reflect this now.
Another sex scene where ordinary expressions of non-consent like "no" don't mean "no" because a safeword is being used instead. Scene begins "Let me go" and ends with "Xingcai had this adorable habit".

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Xingcai walked up next to where Xiahou Ba was leaning on the railing of the boat looking out at the terrain along the Quan River, as they sailed south to Huainan.

“Are you feeling alright, cousin?” she said; though she still felt a bit awkward about it, Sima Shi had asked them to call each other cousin, because it was important to him to demonstrate Xiahou Ba's closeness to the new imperial family, and by doing so reassure otherwise scared or skeptical adherents of the old Cao Wei.

“Ah, it’s a bit embarrassing,” he said, leaning on his hand as his armour clinked. “I was just thinking about my wife.”

Xingcai smiled. “I don’t think that’s embarrassing at all. I think it’s very sweet. I am glad the two of you are getting on so well.”

“It was nice of your mother to offer to stay with her while I’m gone,” he said. “She’s a real nice lady, your mother. I kind of wish Suli—Lady Dong, I mean—knew how to fight, like you do, though. Then she could come with me… although, I guess that still wouldn’t work, since—” He flushed.

“Are congratulations due soon?” Xingcai guessed.

“Ah, ah, she told me not to talk about it, she said it’s bad luck to talk about it early,” said Xiahou Ba. “Forget I said anything, won’t you, cousin?”

“You said nothing at all,” Xingcai promised. “My mother was friendly with Lady Dong’s mother, when she was alive. I am sure my mother is much happier staying with her than being alone. Really, I should be thanking you, for taking her into your home.”

“No trouble, no trouble! Now that I’m a duke I have more money and space than I know what to do with,” Xiahou Ba laughed.

They saw the emperor approaching, and both did a field obeisance bow to him. Doing a kowtow on the uneven, dirty, moving, and often wet deck of the boat was not practical.

“You’re not seasick, are you?” the emperor said to Xiahou Ba.

“Ah, it’s not bad as long as I’m up here on deck,” he answered. “I get used to it though, I’ll be fine by tomorrow, your majesty.”

“I was hoping you could spar with me,” Lord Shi said with dissatisfaction. “I haven’t fought on a boat for some years, and could use the practice.”
“That is an interesting thought!” said Xingcai. “I don’t think I’ve ever fought on a boat… but I didn’t bring my practice weapons.”

“Then let us use our real weapons, and do forms together,” Lord Shi suggested.

“That’s dangerous,” Xingcai objected, “What if a swell made us lose our balance? We might injure each other.”

“You are too right, Xingcai,” said Lord Shi, smiling all the more. “We should do unarmed forms, then.”

Grappling, in other words. Xingcai smiled and nodded, but looking at Lord Shi’s smirk, she was pretty sure she had walked into the trap that he had set from the beginning. The emperor really was too many steps ahead at all times.

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“Yuanji! Yuanji, wake up.”

“Eureunh?” said Yuanji, or something close to it, as her husband shook her awake. “What is it?”

“It just occurred to me, Wen Yang is nineteen! In February he’ll be coming of age! We killed all his other family when his father rebelled, who’s going to do the ceremony?! And that’s not all, if I’m his lord, will I be the guest of honour? Can I be the guest of honour and the host? I don’t want to be the guest of honour! That means a speech. That means I give him his style name!”

“Is February tomorrow?” grumbled Yuanji, and turned over.

“Oh. Oh yeah. I’m sorry.”

Yuanji closed her eyes, but the barely audible sighs and frettings of the king and heir to the empire set her teeth on edge. She turned over again, yawned, and said, “My lord. Why has this so seized your mind?”

“Because it’s so important! I mean, it’s his name…”

“How unexpectedly Confucian of you, my lord,” Yuanji said, rather amused. “I feel somewhat reassured on the value of the many, many hours I drilled you on the classics.”

“If I’m going to come up with a good name I’m going to need seven months,” Sima Zhao said, in a depressed way, “if I can do it at all.”

She kissed him. “You’ll have me to help you, don’t forget.”

He laughed, sheepishly. “Yeah, I know, but, you’re going to help me by making me read stuff and think, right?”

“Absolutely,” she said.

“Mm,” he half-grumbled, and Yuanji turned back over and closed her eyes again.

He wasn’t so noisy this time, yet she still felt like there was tension and anxiety wafting off of him. She turned back over. “Is there something else?”

Zhao sighed. “Too many things… honestly, I think part of the reason why I’m trying to focus on Wen Yang’s style name is because it’s so far away… Yuanji, I’m worried about not having gotten a
response back to my letter to my brother. The messenger left the same night as they did, and the imperial convoy can’t be travelling that fast… It’s been over a week, that’s way more than enough time for us to get a letter back.”

“Something may have gone amiss with the message going or coming back accidentally.”

“Or purposefully.”

“Or purposefully,” admitted Yuanji, “but your brother can more than handle himself. I’d be very surprised if he hasn’t considered the possibility of Zhong Hui rebelling. I told you long ago that I didn’t like him and didn’t think he should be trusted with big responsibilities.”

“I know you did,” groaned Zhao, “and it’s not that I didn’t listen, but he is talented and he has done very well running Shouchun. We’ve lost so many great officers over the last few decades. If I didn’t choose him, who was I supposed to choose?”

“Jia Chong could have done it,” said Yuanji immediately.

“But I knew my brother didn’t entirely trust Jia Chong. Nor did Jia Chong entirely trust him… and that turned out to not exactly be wrong…” Though it was too dark to see his face clearly, Yuanji heard the tension in his voice as he referred to that dark period a year ago where Shi had separated Zhao from her deliberately in order to try to seduce her.

Thinking of that time made Yuanji tense as well. She snuggled herself under Zhao’s arm.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring up all this awful stuff to upset you when you’re trying to sleep… I’m a rotten husband,” he said, stroking her hair.

“I am a bit grumpy about it,” Yuanji admitted, and he chuckled.

“How can I make it up to you?” Zhao’s hand drifted down from her hair under the sheet, past her back and onto her butt.

It was a shame it was too dark for him to really appreciate the look she was giving him. “Really? That would be for you! I’m not even in the mood!”

He sighed, but pulled his hand back up to her back.

After a moment, Yuanji said, with the pout still in her voice, “Well… I guess since we are already awake…”

Zhao’s hand slid back down to her butt.

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“Let me go,” Xingcai kept begging quietly as Shi snapped his hips forward into her again and again. “We—ah!—we can’t do this here—ah! Let me go!”

Her efforts to pull her wrists out of his grip merely gave him more purchase to thrust into her faster as he stood in Zhong Hui’s office, taking her from behind, her bent forward, utterly helpless, unable to even brace herself against the desk. “I’ll never let you go, Xingcai. I’ll take you anywhere I like, whenever I like. And you love it. Don’t you, dear heart?”

She only moaned, which excited him further.

“Don’t you love my cock inside you?” he said, a little louder.
Her dark eyes seemed even darker when her cheeks were flushed like that as she glanced back over her shoulder and pleaded, “Not so loud, please!”

He laughed. “You don’t want anyone to know how I please you, how you please me? How often I fill you with me? How tightly your cunt squeezes me? Oh, my love, you’re massaging my cock with every stroke. You must be close. Do you want to cum, sweet girl? Do you need it even harder?”

“Yes,” and he heard the tears in her voice. “Yes, Lord Shi!”

“You only had to ask,” he said and set a punishing pace, as she began to wail with her orgasm, too overcome to be ashamed or even remember anymore where she was.

She was almost limp in his hands as his own orgasm took hold, and he moved her hands in his to her own hips as he took slow, deep strokes, prolonging the feeling as long as possible. Shi let out a long, shuddery sign as he remained still inside her a moment before pulling out, sliding his hands up her body and pulling her back upright.

Xingcai had this adorable habit of rubbing at her cheeks when she was blushing, as if she could push the blood back into its proper place. This time she was not only doing that but rubbing her face against his shoulder as well.

He curled a strand of her hair that had escaped its bounds around his finger and kissed it.

“Don’t do that,” she said into his shoulder, muffled.

“Do what?”

“Don’t be cute,” she said. He pulled back and looked down, and was delighted to see that she was even redder than before.

“I thought you were worried that he would come back before we finished,” he said, and she immediately sprang into action, grabbing a handkerchief from her pocket and hurriedly wiping between her legs as she looked around.

“Where is it?” she said frantically, and he laughed and pulled her underwear from his own sleeve.

“Let me put it on,” he said, and she bit her lip as she lifted her skirt and let him tie it back on.

Only a few moments after Shi unbolted the door, the door opened and Zhong Hui strolled back in, followed by a subofficer struggling under the weight of a huge stack of bamboo records. “These should be all the records you wanted, your majesty,” he said. “I expect—”

The haughty young officer stopped abruptly, sniffed at the air, got a look of disgust, and said, “Xu Jun, close the window. There’s some sort of animal smell getting in from outside.”

The unlucky Xu Jun hefted the stack awkwardly onto the desk, but Shi said, “No, leave it open. Once a smell like that is inside, you might as well leave the window open so that it passes through.”

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“I apologize, your majesty,” said Zhong Hui he said with a delicate shudder. “Zhuge Dan left this area quite a mess. He spoiled all the officers and the people shamelessly to curry favour for himself. Even after a year, I have only improved it so far, you see—even the governor’s palace suffers from their ill-keeping.”

“No apology necessary, I am entirely of your mind,” said Shi, sitting at the desk and taking the top document from the stack. “Cheap loyalty won through unearned gifts is far inferior to the true loyalty
won through long and competent rule. Unfortunately we mostly must work with stubborn imbeciles, and so patience is required.”

There was a minute of silence, and then Zhong Hui said, “Of course, there is also such a thing as failing to recognize and take advantage of talent. An early investment reaps early rewards.”

“Very true,” said Shi, without looking up. “So, I still haven’t crushed you enough, have I? If I notice that failing in you, I will be certain to inform you.”

About a half a minute this time.

“It is also good to be able to accept criticism from below,” said Zhong Hui, and when Shi looked up this time, added, “I think.”


Xu Jun’s eyes widened. He was much older than his governor, about thirty-five, had served under Zhuge Dan, had gone along with the initial rebellion yet was among the first to defect once Zhuge Dan actively joined with Wen Qin. He swallowed, was silent a moment, but then spoke. “Lord Zhong Hui almost always has an arrogant expression and manner of speaking. His talents and accomplishments make it natural that he should feel arrogant, but to openly express it as he does causes dislike and resentment amongst his officials and the people.”

“Boldly stated. Zhong Hui, you show a good choice in your lieutenant; astute and courageous.” Shi smiled. “And how about the emperor, Xu Jun? You must give me a criticism that is at least as apt as the one you gave to Lord Zhong Hui or I will not be satisfied.”

Xu Jun thought, and his hands flexed in the fingers as if he wanted to fidget. At last he said, “Your majesty, as I have had very limited contact with you, I cannot be supposed to be able to give a criticism of you as accurately.”

“You are perfectly right. This is in a criticism in itself; I should not demand things of my officers that they are not capable of performing. What an apt reminder, Xu Jun. I have failed in this respect many times in the past, and will strive not to do so again.” Shi turned to Zhong Hui and smiled. “And have you any response to the criticism of your arrogant manner, Zhong Hui?”

Zhong Hui smiled as if he was trying to make the smile pleasant, which on his face was far more repellent than the smug grin he usually wore. “I will endeavour to be more humble, your majesty.”

Shi laughed, and he saw Zhong Hui’s smile twitch. “Perhaps you can practice your charm with the empress,” he said, “it will take me some time to go through these records, and I don’t wish her to be bored.”

Zhong Hui bowed. “Of course, your majesty.”

Xingcai gave him a look once Zhong Hui had turned towards the door, and Shi briefly put his hands together in the gratitude gesture so that she would know that he did actually want Zhong Hui distracted. He saw her recognition, and then she left.

“Xu Jun,” said the emperor, “I would be interested in hearing more of your thoughts.”

“Father,” said Lu Kang to Lu Xun, the Wu prime minister, “that can’t possibly be who I think it is,
Lu Xun had already raised his hand for the Wu delegation to halt and prepare for their hopefully peaceable reception by the huge contingent of Jin soldiers approaching. He leaned forward slightly on his horse and saw what his son’s young sharp eyes had seen: one of the Jin officers was wearing the *yuanyou guan*, the travelling crown, and his clothes were exceptionally fine. Could this be Sima Shi, coming out to receive them here?

Indeed it was.

Sima Shi stayed on his horse as Lu Xun dismounted. The Wu prime minister bowed low, but did not kowtow.

“Welcome,” said the man in the royal dress. “I am Sima Shi, the Son of Heaven. For the ease of conversation, however, you may address me as simply ‘your majesty.’” He used a vaguer term that did not necessarily mean an emperor.

They went through the process of the introductions on both sides.

“As a gesture of our unwillingness to encroach upon the internal affairs of your territories,” said Lu Xun, “I have been instructed most graciously to present to you a group of renegades from the fallen land of Shu, who came into our territory seeking assistance to retake it from you. You can then deal with them as you see fit.”

Lu Xun could not read Sima Shi’s reaction to this. Lu Xun had thought it was a bad idea, and advised Sun Quan against it; the likelihood of it impressing Sima Shi enough that it would win his generosity was very small, and it would be much better to use the Shu emigrants as bargaining chips as part of larger negotiations for prisoner exchanges and so on. Moreover, if negotiations with Jin broke down yet again, they would have irreversibly lost the possible support of all the former Shu forces to oppose a Jin invasion.

These were all the practical reasons, and they were enough in themselves. Then there was the morality of it. Lu Xun, as a diplomat, put the intended spin on it before Jin by calling them renegades and saying that they were seeking assistance from Wu to invade the former Shu. But in reality, they were essentially refugees, desperate and possessionless, seeking employ. Did they have animus against the Wei conquerors and wish that Shu could rise again? Undoubtedly, but they had made no demands of that kind, only offered their service in exchange for livelihood. Was it not heartless to treat them like this?

But Sun Quan was stubborn, and as much as he hated to think it, Lu Xun knew it was because four of the prisoners were related by blood or marriage to Guan Yu: his only daughter, his only living son, that son’s wife, and their child. Sun Quan was still, after all these years, bitter about Guan Yu: bitter that Guan Yu had rejected the Wu heir Sun Deng as unworthy of this same daughter, bitter that Guan Yu had never even in dying shown a fraction of the respect for Sun Quan that he had done for Cao Cao, bitter that Guan Yu’s death had caused the disastrous breach with Liu Bei which had left both Wu and Shu permanently weaker against Wei. He would have liked to have put the Guan children to death and thus leave the man without descendants; yet to slaughter them when they had come to his government offering their assistance would have seemed exceptionally small-minded and envious. Better to pass the Guan children along with the rest of their small, pathetic group of Shu loyalists over to Jin. Sima Shi would surely slay the entire group, and then Sun Quan’s petty grudge would pass unnoticed by history.

Lu Xun didn’t like any part of it, but he was loyal to the end, even when that end seemed all too near.
“I would be interested to learn their names,” said Sima Shi.

“I would have to consult a list for all of their names,” said Lu Xun. “They none of them have significant achievements in their own right, but two of them are the son and daughter of Guan Yu; the son has his wife and child, also.”

Sima Shi tilted his head. “I will see and speak with Guan Suo, his sister, and his wife.”

Lu Xun had to exercise careful control not to show his surprise that Sima Shi knew the name of Guan Yu’s only surviving son. The request was not exactly politely worded, but Lu Xun bowed, and went to the wagon bearing that load of prisoners. “Are you going to behave with dignity?” Lu Xun said in a low voice, indicating to a guard to remove the man’s gag.

“Of course,” said Guan Suo icily, as if he hadn’t made a very daring and nearly successful escape attempt during the journey up there which resulted in two dead soldiers, all without having actually freed his hands from their ties. That was the reason why he was so much more trussed up than the others. The other guards had wanted him beaten for it, but Lu Xun had refused; it was only natural for a man to attempt to save his life and his family's lives. It was the guards who had failed in their duties.

“Untie his legs only,” Lu Xun ordered. “The women go with him; the child stays here.”

Guan Suo preceded Lu Xun back to the Jin ruler with his head high, and dropped into a kneel without needing to be forced into it. His wife immediately knelt as well, but his sister took her time, in a more defiant fashion.

“I am glad to meet you,” said Sima Shi. “I have been looking for you a few months, and I don’t like to fail.”

None of them spoke.

“I am not sure to what extent you are aware of how things have gone for your former countrymen who have become my guests in Luoyang,” Sima Shi continued. “I made one of them my wife, someone you knew very well, once. I asked if there was anyone she wished me to intercede for, and she named very few people, but two of them were the Guan children.”

The three still didn’t speak, but now they looked at each other with complicated emotions, confusion chief among them.

“However, as I told her, I will only offer a pardon for those things which have occurred in the past; I will not accept rebellious or foul behaviour in the future. If you feel yourself unable to accept my rule, you had better tell me now. I will make your end quick and bury you with honour, and the others will not suffer from it. But if you persist in defying me after this, I will not be so merciful. Will you swear an oath to support my rule as emperor? If you will, I welcome you to my service.”

After an uneasy pause, Guan Suo said, “All your majesty wants is an oath?”

Sima Shi smiled. “I have had firsthand experience of how seriously the people of Shu take their oaths.”

Guan Suo looked at his sister first. The young woman glanced over her shoulder towards the wagon with the child in it, then nodded at her brother. As for his wife, Guan Suo’s glance at her was cursory only; he clearly expected the immediate nod that he received.

“We will swear it, your majesty,” said Guan Suo.
“You swear to support, by your lives or your deaths, the rule of the Jin emperor and his heirs, and affirm its legitimacy. If you fail in this, may heaven leave you bereft of heirs and may nine generations of your ancestors become hungry ghosts.”

Guan Suo’s wife let out a tiny eep at this, but they all dutifully recited, “We swear to support, by our lives or our deaths, the rule of the Jin emperor and his heirs, and affirm its legitimacy. If we fail in this, may heaven leave us bereft of heirs and may nine generations of our ancestors become hungry ghosts.”

“Excellent,” said Sima Shi, and then to one of his own guards, “Untie them.”

———

Guan Yinping, the daughter of Guan Yu, had only one thought consuming her mind as she squeezed alternately one rope-burned wrist and then the other: who was Sima Shi’s wife?

Before Chengdu had fallen, she had been stationed with her brother at Baidi Castle, at the border with Wu; when they received the order that everyone was to surrender, fleeing east had seemed like the only possible choice. They had not initially gone to Wu openly, deciding to lay low around Nanjun until they understood the new state of things and whether recovery was possible. It became clear from tensions in the area that Wei, or Jin as they now called themselves, were massing in the north and the west, and they had decided to push east again.

In some respects this was a good decision, as within a month of that, Nanjun was under two-pronged attack, but it was winter, and opportunities to get by were few and far between. By spring, they had run out of things to trade or sell, and they went to the Wu government, identified themselves, and offered their abilities. The first official they met was enthusiastic, and they were all sent to Jianye with such high hopes. Then they were all put into prison.

During none of that time had they heard anything about the Jin emperor getting married, much less that it was a Shu prisoner-of-war. Who could she be, that she would care so specifically and passionately for Yinping’s life and her brother’s?

Yinping was not particularly great at remembering names and faces and her intense fear was that she would not recognize or remember her benefactor. What a horrible return for such a miracle.

That ended up not being even slightly the problem.

“Xingcai,” the Jin emperor said as he opened a door in front of them, “I have finally brought you the gifts you asked for.”

Yinping was too stunned to step forward into the room after her brother, and had to get a light kick from her sister-in-law Sanniang to break out of her trance. Xingcai? It can’t be Xingcai. It can’t be Xingcai!

It was Xingcai, looking up from the kowtow she had been making to the emperor at her brother with wide eyes.

“Guan Suo… my god, look at you, you’re so tall,” she was saying to Yinping’s brother when Yinping managed to follow Sanniang inside. “Has it been eight years… Yinping! Yinping!”

Yinping was startled when Xingcai got up and ran to embrace her. It wasn’t that Yinping didn’t adore Xingcai, but rather that Xingcai was always so stern and professional, at best tolerating Yinping’s own enthusiastic affection. To hear your fighting was not bad today and receive a slight smile from Xingcai used to be the highlight of her week. But Yinping was nothing if not keen to
return hugs.

“Oof!” said Xingcai, and Yinping released her with a jump.

“Oh, sorry, I’m sorry, Xingcai!” Yinping fretted, but Xingcai laughed.

“I should have expected you to be even stronger when we next met,” she said.

“Oh not at all,” said Yinping, “I know I lost a lot of muscle in the prison.”

“In the prison?” Xingcai turned her head to look at Sima Shi. The shock of receiving freely offered physical contact from Xingcai had briefly knocked out of her mind the unbelievable idea that Xingcai was married to the Jin emperor.

Xingcai is Sima Shi’s wife? What about Lord Liu Shan?!

“They were prisoners of Wu, given to me as a gesture of their promise not to aid Shu loyalists in causing rebellions,” said Sima Shi. “I have already pardoned them for you. Now, I have much to discuss with this Lu Xun. Perhaps you can find them some better clothing, my dear? And I’ll see you for tea.”

With a slight smile, he brushed past Sanniang with little Kitten in her arms and closed the door behind him.

For a moment, no one spoke, then Yinping, her brother, and Xingcai all spoke at once:

“Xingcai, what happened to—”

“There’s so much—”

“I have to thank—”

They all stopped, and no one spoke for a moment again, and then Sanniang said, impatiently, “Hey, isn’t anyone going to introduce me and Kitten?! Or do I have to do it myself?”

“Xingcai,” her brother said, “this is my wife, Bao Sanniang. I met her on the way back from the Nanzhong campaign, about three years ago. And this is my son, his name is Guan He, he as in crane, but we call him Kitten. He was born in January. Sanniang, you’ve heard me talk about Zhang Xingcai…”

Xingcai held up her hands as Sanniang offered the baby to her. “I’d like to, but better not right now, I think. He looks very grumpy, poor child! I can’t imagine how difficult things have been for you all… Tell me everything. No, wait, come with me first, let’s get you all cleaned, find you better clothes…”

“But I do have to thank you, Xingcai,” her brother said, but he was glancing past her at Yinping. “We owe you our lives.”

He was trying to say something to Yinping with his eyes, she was sure, but Yinping had always struggled so hard with interpreting these kinds of social cues. The only reason she noticed at all was because he was moving his eyebrows and tilting his head, because he knew how obtuse she was. What was he trying to tell her?

“Don’t worry about it, cousin,” said Xingcai. “Really. Nothing Yinping could ask would offend me at all. I know it must be a shock…”
“Is Lord Liu Shan dead?” blurted Yinping, emboldened by this blanket permission.

“I understand it may make you think very badly of me, but he is alive. I don’t think he ever wanted to be emperor, and I believe he considered me as part of that. After we went to Luoyang, he never asked for me to visit him, or even wrote to me. The one time I did see him, he was very distant and didn’t even speak to me. At the same time, the emperor took a liking to me, and then his interest became more serious…” Xingcai half-shrugged in an embarrassed way. “I don’t have any defence to offer, for accepting his proposal. Liu Shan and I divorced, and then I married the emperor, two months ago.”

Sanniang began to laugh, and everyone else looked at her.

“Oh come on, am I the only one who noticed? ‘I understand it may make you think very badly of me, but he is alive.’ Come on, that’s funny! Y’know, like, as if we’re gonna be like, ‘Dang it, why is he alive?! Now I’m gonna think badly of you!’”

Her brother snorted. “If it’s not Yinping’s mouth I have to worry about, then it’s yours.”

“Well, it is funny!” Sanniang insisted. “I know you all thought his father was incredible, but from everything I ever experienced about that Liu Shan, he was just some dope who happened to inherit a whole lot of loyalty. I don’t see why Xingcai needs any defence at all. Honestly, treating your wife like that… probably no love on his side to begin with, is that a marriage? No way. This is why I think nobody should arrange marriages for anyone!” She stopped for a beat, then said anxiously. “Oh, hey, I guess I shouldn’t use the empress’s name, right?”

“Between us I don’t mind,” said Xingcai. “I suppose in public you must say ‘your majesty’, since our relationship isn’t really by blood.”

“I’m not going to judge you,” her brother said. “I don’t think Sanniang will be embarrassed if I acknowledge that she’s… not from any family of name. We’re actually not legally married, either; we just sort of… fell into it, after escaping from Shu.”

“Just fell into it?!” said Sanniang, outraged rather than embarrassed. “I was trying to seduce you for years and you’re going to say we just fell into it? Give me more credit than that!”

“You must have had your work cut out for you taking care of them,” said Xingcai, in an amused way.

“They took care of me too,” said her brother. “It was my idea to approach Wu, and they never complained about how it turned out.”

“Well, it’s not like we had any other options at that point,” sighed Yinping, picking at a dirty patch on her skirt. “We had nothing left to sell.”

Xingcai hastily said, “But really, let’s get you cleaned! When we’re done here, you can come back to Luoyang with me… my mother is there, and some others you might know…”

“Your mother? How is she?”

With small talk about various mutual friends and acquaintances, they had servants take Guan Suo to wash and change, while others took Sanniang and the baby, and finally Xingcai took Yinping to her own rooms, with its private bath.

“This is really nice,” said Yinping. “Boy, it’s really been years and years since we’ve bathed together, hasn’t it? Ooh, let me do your back, like we used to!”
Xingcai laughed and turned so that Yinping could scrub her back. “It really does bring back memories. I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too,” said Yinping. “Your hair looks longer! I thought you didn’t like having to fuss with it.”

“The emperor asked me to grow it out.”

“Oh, I see…” Yinping was daunted, but plunged back in anyway. ”Well, if you need any tips on growing long hair, I’m your girl! I’ll share my secret hair lotion with you… and there’s tricks to how to style your hair when you sleep, to protect it. You should get a bristle brush to spread the oils from the roots to the tips, and avoid combing it too much, because it will weaken it.”

“So even your hair is strong!”

Yinping laughed. “I guess I’m just all about strength!”

Xingcai took the scrubber and Yinping turned around to let Xingcai scrub her.

“While we were apart… I remember hearing at one point that you were to be married, but then nothing more about it,” said Xingcai.

“Ah, I was engaged twice, but they both died, one in battle and the other of illness. I never actually met either in person, though, so I wasn’t especially affected by it, if that’s not too cold to say… Actually, I was engaged a third time and he also died… but I did feel sad about him, because I knew him and actually wanted to marry him. His name was Li Yi, he was killed while we were fighting some bandits when we were escaping Shu,” Yinping said. ”Maybe I’m just bad luck…”

“It’s the times that are bad luck,” Xingcai said in a voice as firm as the scrubber moving in circles on Yinping’s back. “Not you.”

“The times sure have been bad,” said Yinping.

On this gloomy note, conversation died as well for a bit, until they both finished bathing, dried off, and went into Xingcai’s room to dress.

Yinping was a little shorter and stouter than Xingcai, but since Xingcai’s clothing was mostly the short and full wrap skirts and tops that were the current summer fashion in Luoyang, this didn’t really matter. Xingcai chose for her a white top with sea-green trim and short, airy cape sleeves, then tied a sea-green, knee-length skirt. It was embroidered with magnolias, and so she tied it with a white sash to match.

“You look better than me in these,” said Xingcai. “I insist you keep them!”

“Are short skirts like this really in fashion in Luoyang?” said Yinping, turning back and forth in the simple pleasure of new clothing. “I thought it was only shameless military girls like you and I who wore such things.”

“My sister-in-law, Lady Wang, set the trend, I believe,” said Xingcai, “and I’m only too happy to aid it by following it, especially in the summer.”

“This feels so carefree,” sighed Yinping… but somehow saying that reminded her that things were not so carefree. That things were really all wrong. It was never supposed to be like this: the two of them under the power of Wei, or Jin as they now called themselves, and almost everyone they loved gone. Her smile chipped away and then shattered completely, and she looked at the rope marks on
her wrists, still faintly there.

“Oh,” said Xingcai, with pain in her voice, “I’m so stupid… let me get some ointment for your wrists, and bandages.”

“No, I’m sure they’re barely noticeable.” Yinping put her hands behind her back. “Bandages would just draw attention.”

Xingcai was rummaging in a case already, and withdrew a little jar. “Put the ointment on at least. Don’t be proud.”

This scolding was so familiar… Yinping put out her hands.

Xingcai rubbed the waxy ointment over the irritated area, quick and efficient. “There. If you don’t want bandages, then we’ll put a jade bracelet over it. That will protect it, feel soothing, and look nice.”

“I can’t take your jewelry,” Yinping protested, but once again Xingcai ignored her.

“I was going to give you some jewelry anyway. I have far too much, and a lot of it doesn’t even suit me.” Xingcai pulled two thick jade bangles from a jewelry box and slid one over each wrist. “There. Should be easy to find a necklace to match… I suppose I need to get something similar for… what was your sister-in-law’s name again?”

“Bao Sanniang,” she said.

Xingcai snickered, then covered her mouth.

Yinping knew exactly why she was laughing. “Yeah, I know, it’d be hard to come up with a name that sounds more like a peasant girl, right? Sanniang [Third Girl], talk about unimaginative and demeaning…”

“I shouldn’t be laughing,” said Xingcai. “It makes me think about when Guan Ping first came with your father… do you remember how he talked?”

“Oh, God!” laughed Yinping, thinking of when her father had first come back to them, stunning them all by presenting a new adopted son. “Yes, I do.”

“And then you, me, and Guan Suo were the only ones who would help him with his language… and he went too far the other way, and then people would fall over laughing at the flowery words coming out of this lumbering farm boy! Poor Guan Ping… poor Guan Ping…” As she repeated the words, Xingcai’s face became very sad.

Of course Yinping grew sad as well. It was always painful to think about how her father and oldest brother had died all those years ago… and so many others in the years since… probably even more that she didn’t even know about, when Shu was invaded and defeated… “Cousin… between us… Lord Liu Shan is really alright?”

“He is entirely content,” Xingcai said with a sigh. “He has everything he enjoys and wants. I saw him in person only twice, after the surrender and before the divorce, and only the second time, when I was telling him about the divorce, did he actually speak to me. I was never more than an irritating responsibility to him. I am sure that he is much happier not having a wife at all.”

Yinping nodded sadly. “I can believe it. He was always like that, wasn’t he? Even when we were children… If my brother had lived, I truly believe he would have found a way to convince them to
let him have you, and he would have made you happy. He would have adored you.”

Xingcai forced her sad face into a determined smile. “Oh Yinping, what’s the point in wondering about what might have happened? Guan Ping did pass away, and now all of Shu is gone. There’s so little left… that is why I am so, so glad to have you safe with me…”

This time Yinping initiated the hug, but Xingcai still returned it with much more emotion than had been her habit before they were separated.

A knock came at the door.

“We’re dressed,” said Xingcai.

The door opened, and it was the Jin emperor. Xingcai immediately dropped to kowtow, which reminded Yinping to do so.

_Kowtowing to him... this is so wrong and just weird!

Sima Shi’s face looked very cold to Yinping. “I’m ready to have a break for tea before I discuss the preliminary negotiations with my officials.”

“Didn’t it go well, your majesty?” said Xingcai.

He smiled, but the smile was cold too. “It went perfectly. Follow me.”

Chapter End Notes

Hungry ghosts are actually a later concept arising out of Buddhist-influence folk religion, and Buddhism only barely existed in China at this point in history, but you already know I don’t care about accuracy if it’s inconvenient, only if it’s cool.

Modern fusion hanfu with knee-length skirts similar to what I have described exist and were the inspiration for my concept for Yinping’s outfit.
Chapter 18

The tea room was the more traditional style with rush-mat floors and low tables, intended for sitting on the floor, so Xingcai and the others slipped off their shoes before going in.

The sliding door to the outside was wide open, looking out on a lovely garden, birds singing and the faint sound of water from a little stream audible. Xingcai knelt where the emperor indicated for her to do so. He himself should, by custom, have taken the seat farthest from and facing the main door, but it would have left him with his back to the garden, and instead he took a seat one over, putting him side on to the door to the garden. He gestured for Zhong Hui to take the place of honour. Yet the governor did not look pleased about this. However, he sat there without saying anything.

They had been joined along the way to tea by the rest of the Jin officers and also Guan Suo. Guan Suo really had gotten so much taller! His father was so famously tall that it should not have been surprising, and yet the Guan Suo in her memories was delicate, for all that he was so athletic and keen on martial arts. Guan Suo still had a feminine softness to his face and his way of speaking and moving, but he must be as tall as her brother-in-law Sima Zhao now. It was still substantially shorter than Guan Yu had been, but in absolute terms Guan Suo was now definitely a tall man. Unlike Sima Zhao’s breadth, Guan Suo would more accurately be described as wiry now. His sleeveless shirt showed off the tight muscles of his arms.

As the tea things were brought in, Sima Shi started light conversation with a man seated near him, of a kind that seemed to indicate that people were to talk as they would for now.

“We’ll have to get you both flowers from the garden after tea,” Xingcai said to Guan Suo, “for your hair. If you still like to wear flowers in your hair, that is.”

Guan Suo touched his undecorated hair and smiled. “Yes, we still have that habit. Yinping, you should choose.”

“Does the garden have magnolia, do you think?” Yinping said, looking at her brother’s new clothes with speculation. “Some kind of white flower, at least… maybe camellia… Where is Sanniang, anyway?”

“I’ve seen her,” said Guan Suo. “She said she thought that Kitten needed her to stay with him, and I couldn’t disagree. They’re just relaxing I think, maybe taking a nap.”

“Of course, nobody could fault her for that… I should introduce you to a cousin on my mother’s side. Cousin,” Xingcai said, raising her voice slightly to catch Xiahou Ba’s attention at the other nearby table, where he sat with his back to the garden, “these are my dear friends, Guan Suo and Guan Yinping, the children of Lord Guan Yu. This is Lord Xiahou Ba, the son of Lord Xiahou Yuan.”

“Oh, uh, hi,” said Xiahou Ba, putting the tea he’d been about to drink down. “I was uh, there, when they, ah, handed you over.”

Guan Suo and Yinping bowed slightly. Yinping opened her mouth and then immediately shut it when Guan Suo’s elbow seemingly casually tapped into her. Guan Suo sad, “We are honoured to meet you, and look forward to becoming better acquainted.”

“Oh, how clumsy of me,” said Zhong Hui, bending low and off the side away from the emperor to pick something off the floor.
In a sudden and violent motion, Guan Suo picked up the table, turning it vertical and shoving it forward and to the side, between the emperor and the door to the garden. Dishes went flying while a volley of arrows thudded into the raised table.

“Assassins! Assassins!” yelled Xiahou Ba, weapon out and up.

Everyone was on their feet in moments. Yinping ran to the sliding door and pushed it closed so fast that it made an enormous bang. Xingcai, with no weapon and very limited ability in unarmed combat, dropped to the floor and rolled to the wall to get out of the main fray, guessing that she herself would not be a target if she did not insert herself into it, and that by inserting herself into it she would only distract Lord Shi from defending himself.

By the time Xingcai was at the wall and looking from this odd low angle at the chaos, a servant was already twitching on the floor. Lord Shi pulled his rapier from his chest. Guan Suo had dropped the table and was holding his own unarmed against another servant wielding a pair of daggers. The third servant had his hands up pleading for mercy but Xiahou Ba, taking no chances, beheaded him.

Lord Shi stabbed the man fighting Guan Suo through the back and said, “Zhong Hui, drop your weapon and put your hands on your head.”

“What?!” said Zhong Hui, lowering his weapon but not dropping it. “What are you blaming me for, your majesty? This is clearly the work of Wu! Find them! Stop them!”

Lord Shi pulled his sword out of the servant and pointed it, dripping blood, at Zhong Hui. “Why did you duck then?”

“I dropped something!”

“What did you drop?”

Zhong Hui opened his mouth, closed it, opened it, panicked, and lifted his weapon.

The emperor parried his attack, while Xiahou Ba came from behind and slashed the back of his neck, nearly taking his head off. Zhong Hui fell to the ground making an awful sound.

“Guan Suo,” said the emperor, turning his head, “that was an amazingly quick reaction time. You there, take off your coat and use it to bind the duke’s wound.”

Yinping exclaimed and ran over to her brother, whose left arm was dripping blood from a defensive wound just below the elbow.

“I’m not wounded,” said Xiahou Ba, bewildered.

“You are no longer the only duke in the room. Is it not my established custom to make people who save my life into dukes?” The soldiers they had brought with them from Luoyang appeared at the door. “Ah, finally. What took you all?”

“The doors were barred, your majesty, and we had to break them down to get in here when we heard the commotion,” the guard captain said. “Your majesty is safe?”

“Arrows were fired at me from the garden, but the archers are almost certainly gone by now. We’ll need to proceed with caution to discover if Zhong Hui was working with anyone of name.”
The commotion of the failed assassination attempt reached the Wu delegation and put them into a huddle of quiet panic.

Lu Xun had brought his son with him on this for much the same reason that he had named him Kang, resist. He didn’t want his son shielded from danger. Kang needed to see it, needed to know it and understand it. It was an age of chaos and greed and unprecedented bloodshed. Lu Xun and his family were going to stand up to it.

That did not mean that the danger didn’t bother him. Lu Xun knew that the Wu delegation had nothing to do with this attempted assassination… if that was even what it was, and the confused news wasn’t mistaken. But the other possible explanations, as he discussed in a voice scarcely above a whisper with his son and a few select others, were not good. The worst possibility was that this had been a set-up from the beginning, that this “assassination” was entirely staged, and that shortly the entire Wu delegation would be slaughtered and the event used as a pretext for immediate invasion. However, as the minutes passed by without them being seized, this became less likely. The exits were being guarded, but by a token force, and they had not even had their weapons taken.

But remaining possibilities were not much better. If some third party genuinely attempted to kill the Jin emperor, the Wu delegation was nevertheless sure to be a prime suspect of collaboration at least.

A full hour went by before the Jin emperor himself appeared in their hall, seemingly completely uninjured. He swept in, agitated, but very much in a grand manner. The man had real charisma.

“What an embarrassment,” Sima Shi said as the men of Wu bowed. “I am sure you have heard an attempt was made on my life. Fortunately, no one was killed except those behind the attempt. But the identity of the leader is itself the most embarrassing thing! That I am betrayed by my own governor! It is unbearable. This province! It has given my family no end of trouble. I was a fool to decide to host you here, and there is nothing I hate more than being a fool.” He sighed, and looked mournfully at Lu Xun. “How can I negotiate with you like this?”

Internally, Lu Xun was still on high alert, but outwardly he smiled warmly. “I would not press you to do so while your mind is, naturally, disturbed by these events. We can wait, or perhaps you can send an envoy to call upon us in Jianye.”

“No, no, I want this all sorted. I never want to come south for any reason ever again,” said Sima Shi firmly. “I want peace with you, lasting peace; I want Sun Quan as my vassal, and if he will take care of ruling this awful place for me, so much the better. I will negotiate, though I reveal my weaknesses with every word. You had better do your duty by your lord, Lu Xun, and take as much advantage of my disturbed mind as you can.”

Lu Xun did not think that Sima Shi’s mind was one bit disturbed, nor did he think that Sima Shi would be willing to hand over the territory of Shouchun for nothing; but it was still a remarkable opening sally… one that he thought would, symbolically, play very well with his lord. An agreement that gained the symbolic territory of Hefei, even if it cost so much else… that would go a long way towards soothing Sun Quan’s pride.

“If you will negotiate now, your majesty, then I will negotiate in earnest,” Lu Xun said, and bowed.

When he went to his wife’s room that night, it might have been expected that Sima Shi was thinking about the assassination attempt by Zhong Hui, or the tentative agreement with Wu, but something else was foremost on his mind. “What did she mean?”
“What did who mean? About what?” Xingcai said, looking over at the door from her dressing table puzzled.

“Your cousin, when I came to fetch you for tea,” he said tightly. “She said, ‘If only my brother had lived, he would have made you happy, he would have adored you.’ And then you said, ‘There’s no point in wondering what might have been. Guan Ping did die.’”

Xingcai looked indignant. “You were eavesdropping on us?”

“Yes,” he said without shame. “Why not? I told you, I pardoned them for what they have done in the past. That doesn’t mean I fully trust them. Don’t try to turn this around, I’m asking you what she meant and why you didn’t deny it.”

“If this is jealousy—which I cannot understand to begin with—it’s of a man who has been dead for ten years,” Xingcai said. “Yinping’s oldest brother, Guan Ping, the one Lord Guan Yu adopted when he was with Cao Cao. Between when Lord Guan Yu returned and when they went to Fan Castle, we were… we were close.”

“How close?”

“Why are you jealous?! I was married for years, but you’re jealous of Guan Ping?”

“Liu Shan is nothing and never was. You never loved him, not really; you were only ever loyal to him out of loyalty to others. The way you talked about Guan Ping, he was not nothing. I don’t…” He breathed, but made himself say the vulnerable words. “I don’t want to lose you, even to a dead man. Maybe even more with a dead man, because the dead are perfect in a way that the living can never be.”

Xingcai sighed, but she looked less angry now. She turned back to her dressing table and resumed taking off her jewelry and removing her hairpins, speaking towards the mirror. “Guan Ping was… he was from the country, and he wasn’t educated, and when he first came to us, the other boys, including my older brothers, jeered at him and wouldn’t train with him. Guan Xing—who had been the oldest son up until then, of course—resented Guan Ping taking his place, at first. Guan Suo was willing enough but you saw him fight a little. He’s always been so fast, and back then he was a tiny thing who just ran rings around Guan Ping. It was like watching a bear trying to fight a mosquito. Total mismatch in fighting styles. Yinping was really little then; she’s two years younger than me. So that left me. We trained together every chance we had, for hours and hours, day after day. It made them all mock him even more, training with a girl, one who was three years younger too. But he just shrugged it off. He was always… grateful, for everything. Even I was often impatient and harsh with him, and he was never upset or… or anything but kind…” Shi saw her swallow. “Yes, I grew to love him, but even then I knew, and he must have known too, that it was impossible. I was spoken of as intended for Liu Shan since I was about eight years old. So we never spoke about how we felt. We saw each other for the last time when I was about fifteen, and then a year later he died, and almost immediately afterwards my father died too. Then there was the disastrous campaign against Wu, and Lord Liu Bei became ill, and so they decided they had better marry me to Liu Shan right away. I grieved him, but my mind was consumed with other things! It’s not as if I’ve been pining away all these years.”

“You loved him,” said Shi, numbly. Everything she had said other than those words hardly mattered.

Xingcai closed her eyes and leaned her head on her hands on the dressing table and sighed with frustration. “When I was fourteen and fifteen, and we never so much as held hands! Just because I loved him doesn’t mean it’s like the way I love you. He was sweet, and strong, and yes, he was handsome, and he adored me; of course I loved him. Everyone could tell how he felt about me, but I
think very few people realized I was not actually indifferent. Yinping was one of them, and that mostly because we confided in each other... we were as close as sisters, back then..."

She raised her head and looked over her shoulder at Shi, and then said crossly, “What is it now?”

“What did you say?” said Shi, only barely louder than a whisper.

He saw Xingcai running back in her mind what she’d said, and her eyes widened. “Oh.” Her face flushed.

“If I couldn’t tell you said it without thinking, I would have thought you were saying it to get me to drop the subject... and it still might have worked... Xingcai...” He reached for her, and she actually reached back, and pulled herself up from the chair and into his arms. “Tell me, tell me the way you love me.”

“Vain man...” she said with her face turned to the side, but let him gently tilt her chin with one finger to look at him. “I said when I accepted you that I wouldn’t be able to love you until I trusted you and you no longer frightened me. I do trust you now as regards myself, but you still do frighten me... not for what I think you will do to me, but for what you are capable of, and what you are willing to do for your power... I think maybe you will always frighten me. You never shy away from showing me that side of you, either. Weirdly, I think that’s part of why I trust you. When I married you, I expected you to lie to me, I knew that lying meant nothing to you, yet I don’t think you ever have lied to me.”

“I have to tell you the truth about me,” he said, feeling a little unsure about why he needed to explain something he’d thought perfectly obvious. “I want you to love me.”

A puzzle clicked together behind her eyes. “So that’s why you kept going out of your way to tell me all those terrible things...”

All of this was not exactly complimentary, and yet it did not upset him to hear. Fear, awe, reverence, and adoration, he mused, were not necessarily in conflict, perhaps they could even be on the same scale. “I don’t know if you remember this, but that morning you were so drunk, you told me I really was a dragon.”

“I don’t remember it,” she said, looking embarrassed. “Did I really? That’s true, though... Drunk me was right. Even if I trust the dragon not to tear me apart, I still can’t forget that it can and has done so to others... to tens of thousands of others...” She shivered a little in his arms. “Have you... What are you planning to do with the other Shu refugees?”

“Do you want me to spare them?”

“What would you do if I didn’t ask what you did?”

“Kill them, and make sure word gets out that Wu handed them over for their deaths,” he said, with a bittersweet smile. “That part of me, you don’t love at all, do you.”

“I don’t know anymore,” she said, surprising him. “I want to hate it, but the land is coming closer to stability than ever before under your rule. Maybe you are making hard choices that are necessary. But... that it doesn’t bother you at all to make such a choice...”

“Could an emperor be forever wracked with guilt and shame over necessary choices?”

“I’m more concerned that you will make choices that are not necessary, simply because you do not sufficiently value those who bear the cost.”
“Is that not why heaven gave you to me?” he said softly, and she smiled.

“And then you say things like that.” She smiled too, but somewhat ruefully. “You are like a god, how can I judge you? And yet you ask me to, and you are not angry at me when I do. You let me see the vulnerable and human side of you. Things that I have done, and who I am, have changed you… and you have changed me also… you see me, you saw me before I even saw myself, and you showed me myself. Even though at first I didn’t want to see what you saw… you… perhaps you made some mistakes, but you were patient when it mattered most, even when it might have meant giving up your will… which I know very well you love above all things.” She smirked a little at him. “Lord Shi is exasperating and amazing and maddening and enthralling and dangerous and attentive and demanding and… cute. And he needs me, he needs to love me, and I let him have me and I let him love me, and now I love him too.”

“Tell me directly,” he said, still not satisfied.

“I love you,” she said, looking into his eyes, and her smile was indulgent. “I should have realized how much you needed to hear it.”

“I didn’t need to hear it. I could… I was willing to wait…” he said, and swallowed. Now he was the one looking away and feeling heat in his cheeks. “I only wanted to hear it. When did you…?”

“That I realized it? I did not even fully realize how things had changed when I said it, only when you pointed out that I had said it. But I meant it when I said it, too; because I was thinking so much about other things, my mind was able to slip it out without me realizing how new it was to us. And it explains to me entirely why you were so jealous of Guan Ping. He had what you wanted.”

“And you love me more than him, right?” he said, forcing his eyes back on hers, hating that he was pushing his luck, yet unable to stop himself.

She looked a little surprised. “I suppose so… I don’t usually think of love in terms of amounts, like that…”

“But you do love me more?” he pursued.

“It’s not how I think about love. I promise I’m not dodging the question to avoid admitting I love him more,” she said. “My love for him is like a bittersweet memory of a young tree, cut down when none of its buds had yet bloomed. My love for you would be more like… a camphor tree, maybe…”

He laughed. “A camphor?”

“Well, you know…” A little self-consciously, she gestured with her hands to indicate the great sweep of a large camphor.

“I think it should be another tree,” he said, and moved one of his hands from her back to her abdomen. “Pomegranate, perhaps?”

She seemed surprised by this oblique reference to pregnancy. “Why do you think…” She looked down between them.

“The passing of time,” he said.

She looked back up, even more surprised. “Have you been keeping track?”

“Of course I have.”
“Of course you have…” Xingcai put her hand to her temple with a little chagrined shake of her head. “How long…”

When she didn’t finish the sentence and seemed to be thinking how to word it, Shi said, “Long before I even bedded you.”

Her eyebrows went up. “I was trying to ask how far along you thought I was pregnant, or how certain you are… you’ve been paying attention to it for that long?”

“It isn’t as if it required any particular investigation to determine it. Your behaviour and dress when you sparred in that condition…”

She blushed as he smiled. “But that you kept track of it… I don’t even keep track of it! I didn’t even realize it was late… I mean it can be so random… when did I last…?”

“Eight weeks ago,” he said, and her eyes widened.

“Has it really been that long? I guess I was thinking of other things…”

“I thought perhaps you were waiting to tell me until you were more sure, and wanted to let you know that I already knew. It honestly didn’t occur to me that you hadn’t noticed.” He studied her face. “You don’t seem pleased…”

“I’m just confused!” she said, putting her own hand to her abdomen. “It doesn’t seem… I haven’t noticed anything different, I don’t feel any different… and… and…”

“I understand now,” Shi said, and kissed her forehead. “Don’t be afraid, my love. Of course I hope that you are, but nothing will change if you aren’t… or if you are but it doesn’t result in a living child. Now or ever.”

Xingcai sighed as he gathered her closer to himself. “If I am pregnant, I cannot believe that it will have been you who told me that I was. And yet how absolutely typical of you.”

“How typical of you, you mean,” he corrected gently. “You are surprised because this is how much you don’t think about yourself. Indeed, neither of us should be at all surprised about this. I think about your body far more than you do, do I not?”

She rubbed her cheek into his shoulder again, and he indulged in a really good laugh.

“Wait a minute,” she said suddenly. “If you think I’m pregnant, then… then why have you still…”

He didn’t need to look at her face to realize where she was going with this. “Why do I still take you every day?”

“Yes,” she said, somewhat muffled by his clothing.

“Ah,” he said. “Well, before we married, after he had met you… I did something I should have done before I married the first time… I asked my father for some advice.”

———

Yuanji was playing guqin with her niece Qiujing, while in the courtyard they could hear toddlers giggling as Jia Chong and Sima Zhao had, essentially, a play date. The sun had just set, but the summer evening was still as warm as the glow from the lanterns.

Goji and Jia Chong’s daughter Nanfeng were alternately chasing and being chased by Zhao, while
Limin, now six months old, sat on a blanket with his father watching the proceedings and chewing on the silver lock-shaped amulet that had been hung around his neck.

When Qiujing finished the piece, Yuanji let the last note hang for a moment before saying, “Your most critical problem remains that you panic when you make any error. You must release all your anxiety from your mind in the instant that you realize your mistake so that you can continue the piece.”

“But how do I do that,” said Qiujing. “Shouldn’t I be trying not to make any mistakes in the first place?”

“You won’t be able to improve to that level if you are making a dozen mistakes every time you make one out of your anxiety,” Yuanji said. “And it is an important lesson for life, anyway. Sometimes there is no time in the moment to dwell on the mistake, no matter how bad. Push through and reflect only when you are free to do so.”

Qiujing nodded thoughtfully.

“Auntie,” said Qingyin, sitting nearby with her book closed. “May I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

Qingyin glanced out at the courtyard, leaned forward with an attitude and gestured to the guqin as if she was asking a question about it, and said in a low voice, “Uncle never used to have Lord Jia Chong here. Since my father has been gone, he comes over very frequently, which I would not wonder at in itself… except that Uncle keeps contriving to make us come and interact with him. Does he observe us to advise our Uncle? Or… does Uncle intend to let him observe… for himself?”

Qingyin was not usually so bold, so for her to ask such a question, it must have really been weighing on her mind. Yuanji gestured at the same instrument. “I entirely sympathize with your concerns. Your uncle’s first concern is your happiness. He only wishes to make sure that you are married to men you are compatible with, and there is no rush to do so at all.”

“Isn’t there?” said Chenlan. The oldest daughter of Sima Shi made a very deliberate stare at Jia Chong in the courtyard, and he was noticing it. Chenlan smiled coldly at him, and then looked at Yuanji. “I think my sister is mistaken, but not by much. We know our father goes to form an accord with Wu, and Sun Quan has four unmarried sons. Is it possible that any agreement will be reached without at least one of us being given to one of them? The most obvious solution is that one prince will come here as a hostage, and another prince will take one of us as a wife. And because I am the only one yet able to marry, it will be me.”

“Do not be so quick to assume such a thing of your father,” said Yuanji, and Chenlan laughed without humour. “No, really, Chenlan. I know that you do not know him well, but you should know that Lord Zhong Hui asked for you, and your father was absolutely furious.”

“I heard my grandparents discussing it,” said Chenlan, unconvinced. “It injured father’s pride to be asked so arrogantly, nothing more.”

“That was not the core of his anger,” Yuanji insisted. “You are his precious child; he did not realize your worth until much later than he should have, but he has realized it, deep down. He will not give you up lightly, and never to someone who will not cherish you. I would not lie to spare your feelings and give you false comfort.”

“I have yet to be convinced that he loves anything but his power,” said Chenlan, her chin still high.
“If our stepmother has a child, the three of us will married off and out of the way as soon as can be.”

Yuanji shook her head, but let the matter go there. She had said what she needed to say; the bulk of the work to repair their relationship could only be done by Shi anyway. “Qingyin, as to Lord Jia Chong’s own… interest, he grieves his wife very deeply. I am sure he does not consider any of you in that way.”

“He makes me very uneasy,” said Qingyin. “And to be a stepmother to that daughter…”

Yuanji could not fault her for that. Not only must it seem staggering in general to a girl of twelve to face the prospect of becoming stepmother, in a mere one or two years, to a girl who would then be about five years old, but Jia Nanfeng was an indulged and willful child. Even under the direct eye of her father, whom she clearly adored and wished to make happy, she showed signs of a terrible temper.

“You don’t have to worry,” said Chenlan, now sounding rather depressed. “You are going to get Lord Wen Yang and stay here in Luoyang and everything wonderful, while I am in Jianye, probably dying of some tropical disease.”

“Am I ever going to get to finish my lesson?” Qiujing demanded crossly.

“You’re so sympathetic,” Chenlan said to her youngest sister, making a face, and then picked up her embroidery and stabbed the needle in with unnecessary force.

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