Summary

Guan Yinping is captured at the battle of Fan Castle, and Sun Quan's desire for revenge on her family seems insatiable. Lu Xun intervenes. A novel length work that begins with just this simple struggle of one person to save another, but expands as more and more things change, partially thanks to the meddling of a certain mystic.

Or, as my husband put it, "tl;dr Shu and Wu officers get laid, stop being idiots."

Rated M for violent, explicit sexual, and medical content. This is plotty romance; sex to further the plot/develop characters, rather than the plot being for the purpose of getting to the sex. Chapter notes will attempt to identify sex scenes and triggers in advance. This is a dark
and dangerous era with some traumatized characters who definitely hurt each other (both intentionally and not), but there is also a lot of fluff and humour. There is a scene in which a character doesn't know how to communicate withdrawing sexual consent; otherwise no non-con.

Tags added as they apply to chapters. All tagged characters have at least one POV scene. To avoid spoilers, there are untagged pairings.

Notes

My notes were too long for AO3 to accept as notes, so I am forced to do them as a prologue. Feel free to skip to the next chapter and dive right in. There's nothing here that's actually required reading.
Notes from the Author:

Anachronisms: I am sticking to many of the anachronisms of the games. The most important being: monogamy rather than polygamy/concubinage; confusing/compressed/contradictory timelines (eg “shouldn’t this person be a lot older/younger?”); everyone in China (including non-Han!) speaking a mutually intelligible dialect; some of the crazy weapons. Probably more than this. Bitching about these kind of anachronisms will be blasted away with Guo Huai’s arm cannon.

Appearances: Following up on anachronisms, I use the DW8 costumes as a basis for the clothing, but also depict characters as wearing hanfu sometimes, and *cough* using historically accurate underwear, ie a loincloth for men and xiyei for women. A loincloth would have been a lot like Japanese fundoshi, whereas xiyei would have been tied with strings, a bit like a string bikini. Yes, my ancient China has fully automatic crossbows but no elastic. Deal with it. I treat strange eye and hair colours as Japanese mukokuseki style rather than “reality” and thus in my story almost everyone has black hair and brown eyes. I’m doing this partially so that my two big exceptions come across as a bigger deal: 1. Sun Quan’s green eyes and reddish hair. This actually comes from multiple historical/fictional sources, that Sun Quan is described as being 紫髯碧眼 which means something like “purple beard and jade eyes”. People debate about what this means, whether it was meant to be symbolic, exaggeration, or literal. A lot of people who claim it can’t be true do so under an erroneous understanding of genetics and whether Han people can have unusual hair and eye colours. They absolutely can; for one thing, random mutations can cause strange eye and hair colours in people of any ethnicity. 2. Ma Chao’s blond hair. Surprise!! Did you know that Koei didn’t make that one up out of nothing either? Again of course the sources mention it in the context of his beard—he is described as “golden”. Almost certainly this didn’t mean the kind of platinum blond that Koei used in DW6, but Ma Chao is also unusual in that he’s specifically mentioned as being part Han, part Qiang. The Qiang were an ancient people whose relationships to modern ethnic groups are disputed. Most frequently they are conjectured to be closest to Tibetans (because their language seemed to have been Sino-Tibetan), but they have also been conjectured to be Turkic or others. In any event, there absolutely are and have been blond and brown-haired non-Han people in the west and northwest of China; that Ma Chao could have blond hair (or hair that Han perceived as being golden, even if modern people wouldn’t call it blond, such as a bronze brown) is totally possible.

Names: The first time I read ROTK, the novel, back in the early 2000s when internet/computer speed didn’t make it quite so easy, I had a notebook where I wrote down people’s names, style names, nicknames, and descriptions, so that I could doublecheck when I forgot who the hell somebody was. I have to admit that Koei has a point in stripping out the style names for the English speaking audience. Style names have a lot of very complicated rules about who can, who must, and who cannot use them; this is why one person calling another by a style name could mean that they are very close, intimate or respectful; or it could mean that they are being very distant, restrained, or even insulting. So I don’t really want to use them either. At the same time, as a Mandarin speaker, I feel very odd referring to people as a single character name (eg “Xun”) because this is basically not done in Chinese… like, ever. If you have a two syllable name, then people can use that, but if you have a one character name, then people modify it (A-Xun, Xiao Xun, Xun Xun) to make it disyllabic, or they call you by your surname and given name (Lu Xun) even if they’re your good friend, or they may use a nickname. So in Chinese using surname-given name for monosyllabic names feels right, but in English it feels too distant and formal. There’s really no good solution here, so I’ve resorted to using the style name as a spoken name for some characters in some situations, even in some impossible situations (eg a boy under 20—men only received their style names at 20),
TL;dr I know I’m using style names wrong, but I’m doing it on purpose so… IDK. We’ll follow the Weiist mantra that it’s okay to do bad shit if you admit you’re doing bad shit.

**Note to anti-Shuists:** Speaking of Weiists! Those of you that are anti-Shuists should be warned that I will bend over backwards to mention and explain away some of the bastardy of many of the major Shu players (some from the most likely history, some from ROTK and Chinese tradition). This is because my love for manly-sweet, flawed-benevolent and (starting in DW6 but kicking into overdrive in 7 and 8) totally freaking hot DW Liu Bei is only rivalled by my hatred for baby punting bastard traditional Liu Bei. The crazy part is that some of the things that most appal modern people (like the baby punting) were actually fictional stories intended to make them look good—Values Dissonance like whoa. So I liked the challenge of incorporating some of the most appalling incidents in, let’s face it, a totally revisionist way. Wei doesn’t get the same kind of a deal and that’s not fair, and I just wanted to acknowledge that up front. Maybe someday I’ll write a story from their side.

**Characterization:** I mostly try to follow the DW versions of personality, but there are two notable exceptions so far: Liu Shan and Yueying. Without spoiling my version of either one, they are not intended to resemble the DW version except in outward appearance.

**Pairings:** The early/primary pairings of LX/GYP, SQ/LS, and LB/SSX are tagged. There will be other pairings but they are untagged as pairings to avoid spoilers. They will involve characters who are tagged.

**Chapter titles:** Idioms, sayings, and slang from Chinese. Not all of these would have been recognizable in the Three Kingdoms era.

**Spelling:** We’re from the Great White North, right? Like up above the States (the big land mass that the rest of the world hates)? Well we’re like, above that. Fuckin' north, I guess. The big patch of trees where everybody's bored to death. And we're just chilling up here. Sippin' syrup, playin' hockey. Before we learn to walk, we can cross-check properly. Rocking plaid jackets. Chainsaws? We operate 'em, fucking eh right we do bud! We cut our weight in firewood! - B. Rich - "Out for a Rip" (Yeah I put the letter u in things.)
Guan Yinping wondered if it was day or night, and how long it had been that she had been in this cell.

She had been imprisoned once before, but it had been quite a while ago, in the company of her brothers, and a number of other soldiers too. Despite everyone being chained up, it had been almost merry. After all, they knew they had given the bandits a great drubbing before they had been overwhelmed, and she could hear the bandits arguing over how much they should ask for ransom. She never doubted that her father and his sworn brothers would come to rescue them without having to pay anything. The only thing she was even slightly afraid of was the scolding she would receive for having allowed themselves to be captured.

Here there was no talking, no laughter, no bets as to how soon they would be rescued. No one else was there at all.

Occasionally she would see the lights of lanterns and a few guards would come down, two of them pointing crossbows at her while the other one opened the door, put down a tray of meagre food and an empty bucket, took away the empty tray and the used bucket, and relocked the door.

The first time they had come, she had asked where all the other prisoners were. They laughed.

“They were all executed,” stated one of the crossbow wielders. “You’re the only one our lord hasn’t decided what to do with yet.”

That must mean they intended to trade her as a hostage. But if she were a hostage then why keep her here? Every time they had ever kept a hostage in Shu, they had been kept in decent quarters and given sufficient food and medical attention. Not only was it the right thing to do, that way they would fetch the highest return in goods or their own captured officers.

Well, at least if everyone else had been executed, that must mean she was the only one captured of any value. Everyone else must have escaped, or perhaps the battle even ended in failure for Wu, and they had merely taken her with them on their retreat. So either a ransom would be paid, or else her father and brothers would be along soon to rescue her. No other outcome even occurred to her.

Other than a few pieces of cloth wrapped around what would have been open wounds while she was unconscious, she had been given no medical attention at all that she could remember. Having nothing else to do in the darkness, she tried to reconstruct what she remembered of that battle before blacking out, and what her injuries might be.

Her father had not been expecting Wu to betray them when he set up camp. That was why she had been given that particular barracks to lead. Despite her insistence that she could handle herself in combat, he always tried to give her a task like hurling down boulders from a cliff, out of the thick of the fighting. But by the time they knew that Wu was coming, it was too late to switch things around. Her little barracks was the point where the entire Wu army rushed to join the fight. She had been almost immediately overwhelmed. She made the mistake of taking the time to speak a protest against their betrayal instead of immediately rushing them with her maces, as if she could have shamed them into giving up their attack right there, but before she had finished her sentence she was being shot at...
with arrows from a crossbow-wielding lady officer. She remembered one of them hitting her in the shoulder at the very beginning, and while it was in no way a deadly wound, it was one that definitely affected her ability to swing her maces.

Then the enemy commander had engaged her with his pike. She had attempted a feint, but it didn’t fool him. It was really only luck that his stab had managed to get caught in her armour, rather than her flesh—it turned what would surely have been a certain and painful death into merely a very, very painful bruise, and perhaps a cracked rib. He hadn’t quite been able to throw her into the air, but her desperate attempt to keep her footing on the rain-slicked earth led to her tripping on something and going down hard.

She thought perhaps she had hit her head in this fall, as from here her memory was blurry. Someone had quickly pulled her weapon away, and someone else had rolled her face forward into the mud, grabbing her arms behind her and quickly tying them. Someone had stepped on her ankle, the same one that had slipped. That had made her scream, even though none of the other wounds had. Someone shouted orders to someone. Her base had been taken, and the majority of them ran on, simply leaving her there, mud in her gasping mouth. It even hurt to breathe.

An ordinary soldier had pulled her up roughly and shoved her against one of the walls. Her vision had swum. When had she passed out exactly? She remembered partially regaining consciousness as she was loaded onto a wagon or something, and then passing out again.

Then she had woken up here, on a dank mat, in darkness, with no one around, in the same mud-coated, bloodstained clothing she had been fighting in, but no armour.

How much time had passed since then? For that matter, how much time had passed since the last time they had brought her food? Her stomach rumbled in hunger, but that didn’t mean anything. The portions she was served would not have satisfied a typical woman, and she was far from that in her appetite.

However, the lights were appearing again. More lights than usual.

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It was a celebratory banquet, but the mood was not one of celebration. Lu Xun looked around the hall uneasily. What was the mood?

Everyone seemed to be hitting the wine harder than usual, and among the hard drinkers of Wu, that was impressive. Servants were constantly taking away empty bottles and answering calls for more wine. Gan Ning and Ling Tong, and the ones around them, were egging each other on to the brink of unconsciousness. Zhu Ran was playing with a lit candle, and Zhou Tai, who alone seemed unaffected by the amount of wine they had been consuming, was eyeing the flame warily.

Lianshi had withdrawn with the ladies earlier than usual. Ever since she had left, Sun Quan had lost all the cheer he had exhibited in her presence, alternating between draining his cup and glowering at Lu Xun’s place. One might expect such open disfavour from his lord to unsettle Lu Xun, but he knew it wasn’t Lu Xun that Sun Quan was thinking about. It was the one who ought to be sitting in the place of honour as primary contributor to the victory. Lu Meng, who had defeated, and executed, Guan Yu, but had succumbed to his own wounds the same night. Sun Quan’s supply of strategists was dwindling rapidly. Zhou Yu, Lu Su, and Lu Meng. Now the position had passed to Lu Xun. His lord must be wondering how long it would be until he was taken from him as well.

Sun Quan rose unsteadily to his feet. There was a delayed, far from synchronous period as the drink-addled officers of Wu realized their lord had risen, and a lot of murmuring and poking to rouse those
who were staring into space to stand up to listen.

Lu Xun, who had merely drunk his usual amount of wine, had stood up immediately, but his lord waved him back down.

“Men,” he said, with only a slight slurring, “I have been remiss in cheering your effort. First, I invite you all to applaud the pivotal role in our victory played by General Lu Xun.”

There was general cheering and clapping, and the mood brightened. Lu Xun knew he was well-liked by his fellow officers, but their sincere applause could not fail to touch him. Sun Quan continued, “From here on, he is to be known as the General Who Pacifies the Border, and the Marquis of Hua! A toast! To the Marquis of Hua!”

“The Marquis of Hua!” the men roared, and drained their cups with enthusiasm.

Lu Xun was stunned. He had expected a promotion, more due to Lu Meng’s death than anything else, but to find himself given such a dramatic title, not to mention being thrust into the ranks of the nobility… including a fief… he had come from a family of decent name, but not much money, and when his parents died when he was only a small child, he had not really inherited anything. His education and upbringing were all due to the generosity of a grand-uncle, who was himself a rich man, but who had so many legitimate heirs already that no one, least of all Lu Xun, expected that his will would grant Lu Xun so much as a horse. Now in an instant, he had gone from a mere soldier, albeit a fairly high ranking one, to a man of serious property.

(Of course, Lu Xun, this is not enough to convey my personal gratitude to you. You must choose whatever boon you would like for yourself, and if it is in my power, I will grant it to you. Think on it and tell me later. Now, you may rise. We must remember our dead.’’

The lift in spirits evaporated as if it had never happened. Lu Xun felt the atmosphere settling back on them all, tense and electric. What was it? Was it grief? No… it was more dangerous than grief.

Sun Quan began with Lu Meng, of course, but he went on to list many more that they had lost in this campaign. He then went on to list all the deaths from the disaster at Hefei, then other times when they had partnered with Shu. With every name and commemorative drink, the mood darkened, blacker and blacker, hotter and more violent. Was it rage? If it was not rage, it was something very close to it.

Finally Sun Quan sat and said “You may all sit down now.” They sank back into their seats, which must have been a relief to many, especially at Gan Ning’s table.

Lu Xun tried to distract himself by thinking of what boon he might want, but in the oppressive atmosphere he could think nothing but When will it break? What is coming?

Sun Quan was no longer doing anything, not even drinking wine, not that this reassured Lu Xun at all. He had already consumed at least twice his usual generous ration. His lord was stewing over something, deciding something.

Lu Xun was distracted for a moment by the noisy commotion as Zhu Ran had apparently lit some part of his own clothing on fire. When he glanced back at his lord, he was dismissing a servant.

There were three guards with crossbows this time, and another with chains, in addition to the empty handed one who unlocked the door. “Come on. Time to go,”
Yinping thrust her hands and wrists out in front of her, hoping the guard would follow her lead and not force them behind her back to tie them, which she was sure would hurt her shoulder wound terribly. He did so, and as he did she asked “How far will I have to walk?”

“Why do you want to know? Do as you’re told!”

“I think my foot is broken. If it’s a short distance, alright, but I can’t go very fast.”

“It won’t be far, but you’d better keep up. Our lord is expecting us and we don’t want to be the ones to keep him waiting.”

“Not when he’s in this mood!” laughed one of the crossbow-wielders.

They set a normal marching pace. Yinping tried to keep up, but with the pain in every step, and the inability to use her arms for balance, it was a struggle. Once she fell, and the one who had chained her hauled up, and this time kept a firm grasp on her arm, not so much aiding her as dragging her.

“How dare you!” she said. “Can’t you see I’m injured? When I am returned to Shu I will have something to tell them about how Wu treats its hostages. My father is Guan Yu, the God of War! The next time my father fights Wu, you’ll regret you ever thought of betraying us!”

To her surprise, all the guards began to laugh.

“Your great god of war was executed on the battlefield like a dog,” spat one of them. “And you’re not being ransomed. Now, we’re almost there, so walk faster!”

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“Sun Deng!” barked Sun Quan.

Sun Deng? Sun Deng was Sun Quan’s only child. Why, he couldn’t have been more than fifteen—a product of a shameful teenage liaison. Surely the boy couldn’t be here?

He was indeed there. He was so short compared to the grown men at his table that Lu Xun’s eye had passed right over him. He had been mostly gorging on food, but even the small amount of wine he had drunk had turned his baby face bright red. The boy hiccuped. “Here, father!”

Sun Quan gave a “hold” gesture to the servant at the door. “Sun Deng, do you remember when I told you that I was thinking of acquiring Guan Yu’s daughter for you as a wife?”

It was lucky for the boy that it was impossible for him to get any redder. Lu Xun did not like to think how he would have handled such a question at that age. “I do, father. But then you told me it wouldn’t work after all.”

“Yes. But I didn’t tell you why. I never told any of you of the audacity, the arrogance of the reply I had received to my modest query as to whether he might consider giving his daughter to my heir. I will tell you now. A simple refusal I could have handled. After all, perhaps she was already promised to another. Every man has the right to order his own house. But he did not decline with regret. He did not even give a flat no. No, he thought it necessary to inform me that the very idea of his daughter allying himself with my unworthy house was an insult, that the daughter of a tiger could not wed the son of a dog. That there was not a single man in Wu whom he would trust with his horse, much less his precious daughter!” He laughed bitterly. “Well! His horse is mine to give to whom I will, and so is his daughter.”

He nodded to the servant, and they brought her in.
A pathetic creature, hands chained, hobbled into the banquet, blinking in the blazing lights of the hall like some subterranean beast dragged into daylight. Her clothing, hair and flesh were caked with blood and dirt. Lu Xun, who was seated at the table nearest to the back entrance where she had come in, could tell that she stank. Yet for all that she retained a certain amount of dignity in her posture, and even those of them in the room who had not seen her before could tell that she was in reality a beautiful woman, one who had just left girlhood behind, still retaining its freshness.

“Son, I can give her to whomever I choose. Would you like her as a wife now?”

Sun Deng did not look like a teenage boy who had been offered a sexy young wife, but rather a student who had never bothered to read a scroll being suddenly given a test on it. Clearly his whole intention was to give the “right” answer. “I… No, father.” Encouraged by his father’s smirk, he continued on, “She… is not worthy to be my wife!”

“No, she surely is not!” scowled Sun Quan. “But look at her!” The command was unnecessary, because anyone in the room still conscious was already gawking at her, but it actually caused Lu Xun to look around the room and attempt to conjecture how his fellow officers felt about Sun Quan’s display. Most of them, and all of his friends, he was relieved, looked somewhere from uncomfortable to appalled, but there were two whose expressions worried him even more than Sun Quan’s. Mi Fang and Fu Shiren, the former Shu officers whose displeasure with Guan Yu the Wu forces had managed to turn into a battle-shifting betrayal, were nudging each other and whispering, even licking their lips. Sun Quan continued, “I admit she isn’t much to look at, but certainly she can be put to some… use? Who will be first?”

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This was not real. This was some horrible nightmare. She had a fever from her wound, and she was having a fever dream. Her father was not dead… this was not happening…

She had steeled herself to maintain her dignity and honour while waiting to be led into the banquet hall, and had managed, despite the pain in her foot and side and shoulder, to stand like the daughter of the God of War. But it was not dignity or honour that kept her standing like a statue as Sun Quan offered her to his officers. She was frozen in denial.

“My lord!” came a voice she knew, but even at that she did not turn so much as her eyes. The voice was Mi Fang’s, yet it couldn’t be Mi Fang’s. Mi Fang was a sworn officer of her father; he would not be calling Sun Quan his lord. His older sister had been the wife of Liu Bei before her death. She had never liked Mi Fang but it was impossible that the man could have betrayed her father… much less that he could speak the next words the voice spoke. “Let me have her first, my lord!”

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Lu Xun also felt like he was in some kind of nightmare, but he had no wound to give it even a bit of plausibility. He felt sick to his stomach as he realized that there was no Zhou Yu, no Lu Su, not even Lu Meng to provide any check to Sun Quan’s worst qualities. There was no one left but him. But how? How could he dare to correct his lord, who was older than he was, and who had this very night raised him from a nobody to a marquis? When Zhou Yu was alive, this would never have happened in the first place. When Lu Su was alive, he could have checked his lord with a look. Lu Meng would have said nothing openly, but figured out some way to manipulate Sun Quan to change his mind… although he was not always successful. Could Lu Xun even have a small chance of doing so?

Sun Quan had not yet answered Mi Fang. Instead he was looking at his other officers, but his hope that his lord had merely sought to soothe his hurt pride by demonstrating that none of his officers
wanted the daughter of Guan Yu even as a sexual outlet vanished when he realized that what he was really doing was checking to see if an officer who outranked Mi Fang—which would be basically any other officer there—wanted to claim her. He didn’t bother to look at Lu Xun.

“Well,” said Sun Quan finally. “Though you are new to us—“

“No, my lord!” said Lu Xun.

Sun Quan did look at him then. Lu Xun cursed his stupid brain, the wine, the atmosphere of insane rage that was pushing down on him like a poison fog. He could think of no other option. “Give her to me!”

“You want her?” said his lord in disbelief. Lu Xun was the most straight-laced officer in his army. Cracking a smile at someone else’s dirty joke was as risqué as he ever got.

Lu Xun had not expected to have to justify a request that was, prima facie, unjustifiable. There was no time to consider; instinct took over. “You promised me a boon, my lord. Give her to me.”

“I cannot count this as worthy of your boon. I will not let you cheat yourself in your intoxication. However, there is certainly no one here with a higher claim to any of the spoils of your victory. Mi Fang, I fear you must wait until tomorrow.” He turned to the guards. “Take her to the general’s chambers.”

“I’ll go with them,” said Lu Xun, matching his actions to his words with alacrity, so that he wouldn’t have to hear any ribald remarks.

He needn’t have worried. The only remark that was made was that Gan Ning nudged the singed Zhu Ran and said, “Did I drink too much or did something crazy just happen?”

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As soon as they were out of earshot of the hall, Lu Xun halted the march. “This isn’t going to work. What happened to your foot?”

She didn’t answer him, but one of the guards did. “She said it was broken, my lord.”

“Broken? And you made her walk all the way from the women’s quarters on it?”

“She was in the dungeon, my lord, not the women’s quarters.”

“You marched her on a broken foot from the dungeons?!”

The guards looked at each other uneasily. “Lord Sun Quan told us not to waste any time, my lord.”

He sighed. “Alright. I guess I’ll have to carry her.”

That snapped Yinping out of her paralysis. “Don’t touch me!” she snarled.

Oh, great. A natural reaction, but one that he in no way had time for. He could not reassure her here in the hallway, but neither did he want to carry a screaming, struggling, terrified girl over his shoulder all the way to his rooms. He tried to make to make his voice as calm as possible, as if he were trying to free a cat from a trap without being scratched or bitten. “Listen to me. Listen. Whatever is going to happen is going to happen. Your fate is waiting for you in my rooms, whether you walk there or I carry you. All that will happen if you fight me here is that you’ll hurt yourself more and be totally unable to fight later. Don’t answer me. Breathe and think about it.”
He had been prepared to give her a few minutes to break out of the animalistic fight or flight mode and actually consider his words, but it only took about thirty seconds.

“Alright,” she whispered.

He picked her up and was surprised at how light she was. As he carried her down the halls, the guards trailing awkwardly behind, he realized that really she was just as heavy as one would expect for a woman of her size. It was just that anyone who had ever seen her swinging those maces around would expect her to have a skeleton of iron.

Her scent—or rather, her stench—shook him out of this irrelevant reverie. In particular, as a soldier he was keenly attuned to the dreaded scent of an infected wound. He looked over his shoulder at the guards. “I can’t have her in my rooms like this. She needs to be washed. The supplies in my room are not enough. Hot water, lots of it, and soap. Towels.” He thought for a moment. “And clean clothes. Unlock her chain and then go.” He stopped, and they all stopped as well.

The guard with the key obediently stepped forward to undo the chain on her wrists, but the others glanced at each other again. Having had to wait a few minutes with the prisoner in close quarters, they could well understand why the general would want to clean her off before bedding her. But…

“Was my order confusing, or are you all stupid? Why have you not left?”

“But, my lord… where will we find women’s clothes this time of night?”

“You two with the crossbows will find the clothes, and don’t ask me where; that isn’t my problem. You with the eye scar, and you the short one, the hot water. You last two, the soap and towels. Hot water, soap and towels, I will give you twenty minutes. Clothes, one hour. Go!”

“I have to put you down for a moment to unlock the door. Don’t try to run away, alright? You can’t outrun me with a broken foot, and you don’t even know where you are.”

He had the calm, commanding voice of a general. She’d been around warriors using it all her life. She didn’t want to say yes to him, so she said nothing.

He set her down, unlocked the door and opened it, then went in. She could hear him groping around in there. The lights from somewhere within brightened, so he was presumably adding wood to a fire.

She couldn’t believe she was just standing there, obediently waiting for her rapist to finish getting ready. All her life she’d told anyone who would listen that she was the daughter of the god of war. Did she seriously have so little spirit? And yet every word he had said was true. With her current injuries, she would have to wait for a chance to escape. If she injured her foot further now, not only would she fail to escape now, but she might never be able to.

When he finally carried her in (kicking the door shut behind him), there was a sitting room with a low fire in it. He carried her through an inner door into what was obviously a bedroom, where he had built up the fire. In front of the fire was a long wooden bench. He set her down on it, then squatted on the floor next to her. “Lady Guan, I have to talk to you quickly because I don’t know when we will be interrupted. I want to put your mind at ease. I am not going to violate you. I am so sorry that my lord has put you in this position. I can’t explain it. I am sure in the morning when his head is clear he will regret what he has done, and I will be able to intercede for you. I have a reputation for self-control, so I believe, in the light of day, that everyone will believe that I have acted with nothing but honour towards you, so you need not worry that your name will be ruined. I will
make sure that you are treated as a hostage of your rank should be, and I hope that when Shu ransoms you, you will be able to say with truth that the men of Wu are men of honour.”

The words had spilled out in a rush, but Yinping heard and understood every word. Her shoulders, and then her whole body began to shake.

The man looked concerned, but before he could say anything there was a knock at the door. “Your towels and soap, my lord.”

He went to the door, took the items, spoke briefly to the guards, and then returned, laying the items on a table.

“The hot water will be here soon,” he said. “Are you cold? I can add more wood to the fire.”

She had stopped shaking. “No,” she said. “I was just… so relieved.”

He nodded. “I understand. Tension leaving the body can be like that. While we wait for the water, I'm going to remove your boots. Even if your foot is only sprained, the slower I can do it the more comfortable it will be for you.”

He started with the uninjured foot and took the boot off quickly and efficiently. As soon as he touched the injured one, she winced. “Maybe if you have any questions for me, you could ask them to keep your mind off it. But whisper, because the water could be here any moment.”

“Who are you?”

He laughed quietly as he picked at the laces. “I guess I’m not as well known as I think. My name is Lu Xun, style name Boyan.”

“I’ve heard of you,” she whispered hastily, “I just didn’t know that was you. I thought you were a lot older.”

He had finished the laces and was surveying the boot like it was a particularly vexing terrain map. “Do you have any particular attachment to these boots? I think if I cut it off, I can avoid having to handle the ankle. It looks pretty swollen.”

“I don’t care about it—the boot I mean.”

He went back to the main room in the suite. In a few moments he came back with a small, thin knife. With a quick, confident hand, he made a series of straight cuts, and then more or less peeled the boot away. There was another knock at the door.

“Yes?”

“The hot water, my lord.”

He led the guards and some servants into the bedroom. They had a large and obviously very hot cauldron, a rack to set it on, some tongs, mitts, basins, and other accessories. He stopped one of the guards as he was leaving and inquired as to the progress of acquiring clean clothes.

“I don’t know, my lord. That is, I know they were going to see if they could get the guards at the women’s quarters to give them some, but I don’t know what progress they’ve made.”

He went with them to let them out and lock the door, but he didn’t come back for a few minutes. She couldn’t hear him doing anything, and she wondered what was going on.
Lu Xun had not, until that moment, fully grasped what the process of cleaning Lady Guan was going to be. He couldn’t just hand her a washcloth and leave the room; even if he dragged her bench by the cauldron, handling the lid and the tongs and everything was too much to expect her to be able to do safely in her condition. Moreover, he suspected that the infected shoulder had crusted over with dirt inside the wound. He would need to scrub it open for her and then bandage it.

It all came down to this: he was going to have to touch nearly every inch of her body. Just after he had promised he was going to treat her with honour.

Well, then that was what he was going to have to do. He could be professional about it, right? Doctors touched women like that every day without anything untoward happening, right?

Right?

He went back into his room. “Lady Guan, it has occurred to me… that you will need my assistance to undress and to wash.”

“Oh,” she said, but she sounded only mildly surprised. “Yeah, now that I think about it, I guess I can’t really do it myself.”

She seemed remarkably calm about the prospect. He was unsure whether assuring her that his touches would be those of a brother, not a lover would be helpful, or would introduce unimagined fears to her innocent mind. He decided to say nothing for now.

He brought over a chair for himself. It took almost no time to undress her. Unlike the boots, which still had life in them, he had no qualms about using the knife to cut away the clothing. As far as he was concerned, burning was too good for it.

She was left in just her breast binder and xieyi. The xieyi immediately caught his eye. It was a beautiful verdant green, decorated with delicate pink flowers, and tied with silver ribbon. As a young teenager, he had gotten in trouble several times for sneaking within view of the “secret” area of his uncle’s grounds where the women would hang their intimate clothing to dry. Just being that close to them had been fascinating for his boyish self. None of them, he was sure, had been as beautiful as this one… especially since it was actually fulfilling its purpose…

He was brought back to awareness of himself and looked up at Lady Guan’s face. She was blushing hotly. “I understand now why you were worried about washing me,” she said in a low voice. Lu Xun felt intensely guilty that she could see the lust on his face, but then she continued, “You have to see my xieyi. I’m so sorry. I’m sure you must have priests here in Wu that can break the taboo.”

“The taboo?”

“Don’t they teach you about it in Wu? My father taught me that if a man sees a woman’s xieyi, the taboo will curse him. I’ve always been very careful about it.”

Lu Xun decided that the sooner the topic, and this whole washing business, was over, the better. “Washing your shoulder will definitely hurt, so it’ll be the last thing I wash on your body. And when your body is done, I’ll clean your hair. Hopefully by then, there will be clean clothing for you. I’ll let you change your… your undergarments… and then I’ll help you dress the rest of the way. Then you can get some rest.”

She nodded. “Thank you, general.”
The washing of her body actually didn’t go too badly. He silently told himself, over and over, that it was like washing a horse. It would be absolutely ridiculous to have any sexual feelings when washing a horse. When her legs and feet were clean, he paused to wrap the ankle tightly with some of the bandages. For the most part, the rest of her body was only scratched and bruised, although the bruise on her torso was severe, and he too, from the way she jerked when he touched it, wondered if she had cracked a rib.

Then it came time for the shoulder. For that he had to get behind her on the bench, propping her against his body, because he had to apply a certain amount of pressure with the washcloth to rip open the scab and pull out tiny embedded stones. He had cleaned worse wounds on horses before. Just like a horse, just like a horse… he even murmured to her as he cleaned, as he did to the horses. It seemed to have a similar effect on her. She endured the entire thing without a sound.

As he applied medicine and bandaged it, he complimented her stoicism.

“When you have three big brothers, you have to be tough,” she said. “If I know it’s coming, I can usually steel myself to deal with it.”

He gave her towels to cover herself with, then set to work on the hair. There was so much of it. It couldn’t possibly dry quickly, but it couldn’t be left so disgustingly dirty. He picked out the long dead flowers and briefly considered cutting it, but it was as much her glory as the beard had been her father’s. As he washed and the dirt fell away, he marvelled at the strength and silkiness of it, how it shone in the firelight. As he worked on her scalp, the rest of it flowed over his torso, down into his lap and even to his legs.

As he used yet another towel to try to dry her hair, there was finally another knock at the door.

This time he slipped through the door to his bedroom and closed it behind him before answering “Yes?”

“The clothes, my lord.”

He opened the door. The guards looked very pleased with themselves. They held out a gaudily coloured bundle.

He set the bundle on the table and frowned as he picked through it. Yes, it was certainly clean and certainly the clothes of a woman, but what kind of a woman? Certainly neither Lianshi nor any of her ladies would wear this cheap, rough material. As he held it up, it clicked. “Did you get these clothes from a prostitute?”

The guards did their uneasy look again, clearly aware that he was displeased, but unaware why. “We tried to ask the guards of the women’s quarters to let us have some clothes, my lord, but they didn’t believe it was at your command! They said they didn’t believe for a moment that such a perverted command could come from you. When we said you needed them for your mistress, I was sure they were going to beat us up! This was truly the best we could do!”

Lu Xun sighed. Well, at least this proved that he was right that his reputation would protect Lady Guan’s, when this was all over. At least the nightdress was decently soft. He thrust the daytime clothes back at the guard.

“You can keep this. I’ll arrange for something better in the morning. Oh, and wait here one more moment.” He shut the door in their faces, went quickly back to the bedroom, grabbed the filthy clothes and dirty towels, and came back. “Take these away as well. I am not to be disturbed further.” He closed the door and locked it.
He picked up the nightdress and xieyi and brought them into the bedroom, softly closing the door behind him. He held them out to Lady Guan, along with one final warm wet washcloth, and said, “Do you think you could finish cleaning off and dress in this by yourself? If so, I can leave the room until you are dressed.”

“Oh yes! I’m sure I can do that much.”

“Alright. Just call to me when you’re finished.”

While he waited, he thought about where he would sleep. An injured person, who might be infected, required a warm room. He usually kept his rooms rather cool, so he did not think he had enough wood to keep the fire in the sitting room from dying with a proper blaze in the bedroom. Ok. His bedroom floor. He could take down some cushions… there was still one clean towel…

He was still puzzling when she told him to come back in. The sight took his breath away. The soft material, which had seemed like it would do fine in the dim light of the sitting room, in the roaring light of his bedroom fire was nearly translucent. Somehow, her lithe body wreathed in this diaphanous red haze was ten times as sexy as touching her bare flesh directly had been. After all, it was now absolutely impossible to pretend he was looking at a horse. She was definitely not a horse.

He felt himself stirring to attention within his banquet robes and set his jaw. Now he had to lift this vision into his bed… and then lie down on the floor.

He laid a towel across the pillow for her damp head and gently, but as rapidly as possible, while being careful to keep her far away from his waist, lifted her into the bed. He propped up the injured ankle on another pillow, and quickly covered her up to the neck with the blanket. There.

She let out a little moan mixed with a sigh.

“Are you alright?” he said, alarmed.

“Sorry,” she said, with a sleepy grin. “It just feels so amazing to be in a real bed. And yours is really nice. So soft and warm…”

Oh god. She had to stop talking. Right now. “Just get some rest. I’ll sort everything out in the morning.”

He started building his pathetic little bed on the floor. “What are you doing?” she said.

“I’m just making somewhere for me to sleep.”

“But why? This bed is enormous!”

“Lady Guan, I assure you I will be fine. I’ve had far worse places to sleep in my time as a soldier.”

“But we aren’t trying to get to sleep on some rainy cliffside or snowy forest—this is your room and your bed! You must sleep here. I’ll feel terrible if I’ve kicked you out of your bed, after you’ve rescued me and been so kind and gentle!”

“My lady, if I am endeavouring to protect your name from the slander that I have bedded you, it would be against my purpose for me to then share a bed with you, don’t you agree?”

She blushed at that, but shook her head. “I understand, but I trust you, and I promise I won’t tell anyone! It would just be standing on stupid pride to insist on sleeping on a rock hard floor, when there’s this perfectly gigantic bed right here, and I swear I’m not using one quarter of it.”
It was very late, he was very tired, his head was pounding, and the bed did look remarkably large, now that he thought about it.

“Please, my lord.”

Before he could change his mind, he pulled off his boots and jacket, blew out or shut off all the other lanterns and candles, and hopefully before her eyes could adjust, quickly pulled off his remaining clothes and slid under the blanket at the opposite edge, before she could notice or comment on any strange bulges.

If she saw it, she didn’t mention it. “Are you sure you aren’t too close to the edge? I’m worried you might fall off in the night.”

At this point the strategist decided to try a discreet snore.

“Wow, he falls asleep quickly,” muttered Lady Guan. Then, blessed silence at last.

Pretending to be asleep turned out to be a pretty good soporific.
He awoke later than usual, and had the unnerving experience of realizing that he had snuggled up in his sleep to a most alluring young woman. She was still sleeping, at least. The fire had died down quite a bit, and he suddenly realized she was unusually hot.

Lu Xun almost reached out to feel her pulse and temperature, but checked himself immediately. He gingerly slipped out of the bed and quietly changed his clothes. When he was fully dressed, he then reached out to gently shake her awake.

“Lady Guan?”

She blinked her big beautiful eyes at him. “What are you doing in my room?” She looked around, and became more alert. “Oh, I remember now.” She sighed, and her sigh truly sounded miserable.

“Are you alright Lady Guan?”

“Yes, thank you general. I was just thinking of how hard it will be to break the news to my brothers that our father has died. My oldest brother especially. I know he felt responsible for the success of the battle.”

“Lady Guan… I don’t know how to tell you this, but Guan Ping was also killed.”

“What? No!” She began to cry. “Not Da Ge… not Da Ge too!”

He stood awkwardly for a moment, but then at least had the presence of mind to fetch her a clean cloth to wipe her tears with. It was difficult to decide what words of comfort to speak to a lady whose brother your forces have killed.

“How did he die? In the battle?”

“No. When he found out your father had been executed, he also asked for execution during interrogation, and his request was granted.” Instantly, he added mentally. Sun Quan had done it personally, and Lu Xun knew it had been on impulse, not by decision.

“Oh Da Ge,” she sighed. “He was so brave…”

Lu Xun didn’t completely agree, but he didn’t say anything. Taunting your interrogator into killing
you wasn’t brave; it was foolish. But the whole end of that battle, no, the absolute entirety of that battle had turned into a complete mess of stupid decisions. He had agreed with Sun Quan’s decision to attack, because Shu clearly never intended to do anything but use Wu; their refusal to grant Wu anything after the disaster at Hefei could not be tolerated. But he had not realized just how personally insulted Sun Quan felt by Shu. And what had made Lu Meng decide unilaterally to execute Guan Yu in the first place?

“What about my other brothers? Guan Xing and Guan Suo?”

“They escaped with the rest of the forces. Your brother and father were the only major officers killed on your side.”

She appeared to be saying a silent prayer of thanksgiving. He waited a moment, then spoke again. “Lady Guan, I must go speak to my lord and straighten out this mess. I’m going to lock the door from the outside. Since you’re inside, you could unlock it, but I must implore you not to open it for anyone but me. Not even if they claim I sent them. There are a few people here that I do not trust.”

“Lord Lu Xun… that wasn’t Mi Fang’s voice I heard last night, was it?”

“Yes, it was.”

“But… it’s impossible. He… he is a loyal officer of Shu… he swore personal loyalty to my father as governor…”

Lu Xun hesitated, but he supposed the truth of his role in that particular betrayal would come out sooner or later. “When I was on the battlefield, I caught him and Fu Shiren attempting to flee. I was able to convince them that they could give us their knowledge of your father’s forces and join the Wu forces at their current rank, or even perhaps gain a promotion, if their help was valuable enough. They agreed eagerly. I think they believe they have some grudge against your father, and since the dead are beyond their grasp, they want to revenge themselves on you instead.”

“Fu Shiren as well?”

“My lady, I must go.”

“I understand. Oh, is there anything to eat? I’m starving.”

He quickly grabbed her the bowl of oranges from the sitting room, then left, double-checking the lock. He had a feeling that it would not take long for one of those two scoundrels to come and demand his “turn”.

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When he gained audience with his lord, the room was much dimmer than usual, and Sun Quan was leaning his forehead and temple against his hand, in the unmistakable throes of a hangover.

Lu Xun was surprised to see that he had been ushered in while another officer was already meeting with him. He didn’t recognize him, but when the man turned his head, he could see it was Fu Shiren.

“Ah, Lord Lu Xun!” The man gave a respectful bow. Lu Xun could barely force himself to nod in return. “I was here to give Lord Sun Quan some intelligence on the Shu forces, but it seems he doesn’t have quite the head for it this morning!” He gave a barking laugh, and Sun Quan winced behind him. “Never mind! My friend Mi Fang is much the same this morning, so if you’re finished with the Guan girl, I’ll take his turn for him!”
Lu Xun literally bit his tongue to control himself, then said curtly, “I am not finished with her. My lord, I must speak with you privately.”

The former Shu general took the rude dismissal with as much false cheer as he could manage, but Lu Xun could tell he had been added to the man’s no doubt lengthy list of petty grudges.

When the man had left, Lu Xun kneeled to do obeisance in the usual manner but Sun Quan waved it off. “Please, I don’t have patience for that this morning Boyan. Just have a seat and don’t take it personally if I keep my eyes closed. Don’t believe for a moment that Fu Shiren was here about anything that actually matters, by the way. He was pestering me about when he’d get his turn with the prisoner as well. Anyway, I’ve other visitors this morning, early. Much too early, especially with such news.” He scowled, half-opened his eyes, selected a few papers from his desk, and passed them over. “Read those and you’ll know basically all I do.”

It was spy reports from Shu. Of course Lu Xun had not expected Shu to view the battle of Fan Castle (including the temporary alliance with Wei) as the inevitable result of Shu’s failure to hand over the portions of Jing province that they had promised for previous aid. But apparently Liu Bei was not even simply treating it as a ordinary military invasion. No, he was taking it as a personal affront and betrayal… as a murder of his sworn brother by supposed friends. If the reports were true, not even Zhuge Liang could check his rage; he was quickly mobilizing to invade Jing. Choices of exact target were still up in the air.

He looked up. Sun Quan had closed his eyes fully again, but spoke. “Your thoughts?”

“If Shu were our only enemy, my lord, I would say that this was excellent news. To immediately seek to attack a target without considering whether it can be done successfully, to ignore the advice of his strategist—these are all signs of a ruler who is making his decisions based on rage. He is bound to blunder. We would simply fortify the border, await his invasion and obliterate them. But Shu is not our only enemy, or even our most dangerous one. Wei is constantly prowling at our northern border seeking the slightest weakness. If we withdraw any of our forces from any point to fight Shu, they are certain to press the advantage while they can. They will also be bound to take significant northwestern portions of Shu while Shu is busy on its eastern front against us; this means that even if we achieve total victory over Shu, the Shu we conquer will be worth far less. Moreover, if we spread our forces thinly, the stress on the people will erupt into rebellions.”

Sun Quan groaned. “I never thought I would hate to hear my strategist tell me what I already thought. Those Shu bastards! I’d gladly see every single one of them in hell. They’re going to fuck us over even in their defeat.” He rubbed his temple. “Boyan, forgive me, but I do not have the ability to focus this morning. Let me sleep tonight and tomorrow we’ll discuss it again. Are you done with that girl? Please say you are so that you can hand her over to Fu Shiren. Otherwise he’ll be bound to be back here bothering me again. God, if it wasn’t for Lianshi, I’d almost want a turn with her myself. Do to that Shu bitch what they’re all trying to do to Wu.”

Lu Xun was glad his lord’s eyes were closed, as it meant he didn’t have to try to manage his face while he decided how to answer. Alcohol would never have really have been an excuse for his actions, but he had allowed himself to believe that the morning would have somehow turned Sun Quan back into… well, really, back into the young man he was when his brother, or even just Zhou Yu was still alive. That young man had certainly had his faults, especially regarding his insecurity, his temper and his relationships with women, but his love for Lianshi, and the calming influence of Zhou Yu, seemed to be smoothing those faults out. Was it just the quick succession of losses that had undone all that work and turned him into a man totally controlled by his passions? Someone had to say something to him, but how Lu Xun, who two days ago had been merely one of his younger generals, could possibly do it… he had never dared to call him anything but “my lord,” so to come
out and say “Zhongmou, get a grip on yourself…” And then what? He couldn’t even imagine how Sun Ce or Zhou Yu would have said it, let alone say it himself.

As a strategist, he knew better than to waste time wrestling about a choice that wasn’t an option. He abandoned the idea of attempting to correct Sun Quan completely. So his original promise of enabling Guan Yinping to be treated with honour until she could be ransomed back to Shu couldn’t be fulfilled. Alright. What was the least bad of the remaining options? What was the core of what the promise actually was? Obviously, to keep her unmolested. How? He was running out of time. Stall.

“I’m not done with her, my lord.”

Sun Quan actually opened his eyes at that and gave Lu Xun a lascivious look that made him feel sick to his stomach. “Oh? She pleased you that much, huh? Well, how long will it be?”

“I… uh…” What to say? What to say? “She pleased me so much, lord, that…”

“That…”

“…that I want you to give her to me as my wife,” Lu Xun finished, a bit wildly.

Sun Quan’s “you old dog you” look was immediately replaced by one of total bewilderment. “As your wife?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Nothing for it but to stick to it now…

“You want her as a wife?”

“My lord… your feelings of outrage toward Shu are legitimate,” though not proportionate or prudent, he added mentally, “But this lady is of good family, has lived a virtuous life, and fought fairly in her battle against us. Is she not deserving of respectful treatment from us?” It was a last volley. If his lord agreed to this sentiment, he could perhaps risk revealing that he didn’t actually want to marry her at all.

But Sun Quan was shaking his head. “No, Boyan. Whatever you say of her personal virtue… I simply do not care. Guan Yu personally insulted the Sun family, with that bitch as the pretext, and then betrayed our alliance by refusing to give me land that was mine. Even killing him has not satisfied my hatred for him, as his death cannot bring back Lu Meng, nor can I undo the mortal danger Wu now faces from both sides. Now I must try to save Wu and I cannot… I cannot…” He grabbed his head in his hands, and Lu Xun could see that he was trying to keep himself from admitting his fears of his own incompetence. “If he had a hundred daughters who were each as pure as the driven snow, I would not lift a finger to stop a single one from being raped to death!” he finished, with inhuman hatred in his voice.

Lu Xun felt his blood turn to ice. His lord was getting even worse… he could feel the same poisonous atmosphere swirling around. It felt almost demonic. Lu Xun was a man of cause and effect, a strict Confucian, and by no means a mystic, but such depravity almost made him wonder if the sorcerer Gan Ji had not just laid a curse on the older brother, but on the younger as well.

“But I promised you a boon, anything in my power, and I cannot deny that this is in my power. If she is truly what you want, then marry her today.”

“She is, my lord.”

“Alright.” He groaned again. “God, that means I can’t take a nap after all. Have to handle all the arrangements of your stupid wedding… you better be glad I like you, Boyan…” He gave Lu Xun a weak smile, and Lu Xun bowed. “We will call her Madam Lu from now on, and I’ll try to forget
what family she comes from, for your sake.”

“My lord, will you allow me to make one humble suggestion to you?”

“Go ahead.”

“I think you should consult a doctor, my lord. I believe the stress of Lu Meng’s death and the imminent decisions to make about the Shu invasion may be imbalancing you. In order for us to take full advantage of the Shu commander’s imbalanced mind and refusal to listen to his advisors, your own spirit must be completely calm.”

This time at least the tricks of diplomacy worked. Sun Quan was able to keep face by seeing the choice Lu Xun wanted him to make as one that would distinguish him from Liu Bei. “You may be right. This head of mine… alright.”

“I’ll arrange for the doctor, my lord,” said Lu Xun. He needed to order one for Lady Guan as well, so it would be easy to do both. He completed the obeisances of leaving quickly and left, wondering how he was going to tell Lady Guan…

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If you ever have a broken foot and are confined to a bed in a strange place without any ability to call for assistance or know when assistance might come of its own accord, you will find that after eating a bowl of oranges, there is nothing much to do other than stare at the bowl of orange peels, and try not to wish they were oranges again… or noodles… with chicken and peppers…

But even imagining food that she could not eat was better then allowing herself to daydream about how soon she would see her brothers, Zhang Bao, Xingcai, her uncles, and everyone else again. It was a sweet dream, but it was too painful.

So Yinping was relieved at first when the monotony was broken up by the sound of a knock on the door. There had been a few previous knocks at the door. Some of them had just gone away after only a few knocks, while the more persistent gave up after calling “Lord Lu Xun? Are you in your rooms?”

This knocker, however, kept going, for at least a minute and when his voice came, it was one that she knew too well. “Lord Lu Xun! It’s me, your new general, Mi Fang! You must be awake by now, my lord. How was your night, hehe?”

Guan Yinping didn’t make a sound. She pulled the blankets over her head as if the man might somehow be able to see through the door of the sitting room, all the way into the bedroom where she was hiding.

Then she heard Lu Xun’s voice, but it was cold and contemptuous. “What are you doing at my door, Mi Fang?”

“Ah, my lord! Bringing breakfast to your rooms, I see. You needn’t worry about feeding her, my lord—I’ll take her right now!”

“When I visited Lord Sun Quan this morning, Mi Fang, Fu Shiren was already there, and he claimed you were too hungover to have the next turn, so could he have it instead. Our lord agreed. You had better dispute it with General Fu yourself.”

“He said I was hungover?!” She could hear his muttering and cursing quickly fade away, and then the key turning in the lock.
He rearranged the bench to serve as both table and chair for him and started by asking what she wanted to eat. Yinping’s appetite had long been a source of mockery for her brothers, and after over a week not eating a full meal, the first meat bun was more inhaled than eaten. When she noticed he was not eating, but instead staring at the food with a troubled expression, she swallowed and said, “You’re not eating my lord—are you worried there won’t be enough? I’m sorry, I’m just starving! Don’t let it stop you from eating your fill as well.”

“It’s not that,” he said. Although he did pick up a meat bun, he merely turned it over in his hands. “It’s just that I don’t know how to tell you that I cannot keep my promise to you.”

Yinping trembled only for a brief moment. She was strong, a daughter of the god of war. “Do you mean… I’m going to be given…”

“No!” Lu Xun raised his face quickly to look at hers. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you fear that fate. I was able to at least spare you that. But I could not convince my lord to treat you as a prisoner for ransom, as you should be. I… had to use the boon he gave me to convince him to let you be my wife. But I can assure you, it will only be a show marriage. I can control myself; I won’t ever force myself on you. As soon as I can, I’ll find a way to get you back to your family.”

She stared at the half-eaten meat bun in her hands. It was so hard to know what to say. She knew she ought to be grateful… if he had had to go to the length of using a promised boon even to gain her as a wife, then that horrible beast must really have intended to hand her over to officer after officer and heaven knew what fate after that… And yet… she saw the faces of her loved ones evaporating in her mind. He said now that he would find a way to return her to them, but as long as his first loyalty was to Wu, and Shu was at war with them, how soon could that really happen? It could be years… they might die before she could see them again… She held the tears back, but it was a struggle.

“I requested a doctor to come as soon as possible, and I also spoke to Lady Lianshi. I couldn’t tell her everything, but she has a kind heart and she is filled with compassion for you. She will come a few hours before the wedding to help you get ready. I guess that should be sometime in the mid afternoon.”

She jerked out of her meat bun study at that. “The wedding is today?!”

“Well…” he looked surprised. “I guess I thought, since the true purpose of the ‘marriage’ is to keep you safe, the sooner the better.”

He was right. And yet it was all happening too fast—there must be something wrong with it. A thousand things swirled around her brain, and one popped out—“How can I kneel with a broken foot?”

“I didn’t think about that. It’ll have to be a strange wedding anyway… my parents are dead too… I don’t even know what it’ll be like. Oh, and one more thing. My lord told me that for my sake, he was going to try to disregard your past, but in order to do so, everyone was to call you Madam Lu once we marry.”

She blinked, but a tear managed to escape. “So I even lose my name…”

“Guan Yinping, whenever we are alone together, I’ll use your true name. No one can ever really take it from you, you know.”

She wiped the stupid tear away. “I know,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes, then Lu Xun got up. “I must go now,” he said. “I need to
make sure the news of our wedding spreads as quickly as possible, and I have other things to arrange as well. I will have to leave the door unlocked so the doctor can get in, but here.” He took the knife he had used the previous night to slice off her boot and clothing and slid it under the pillow. “If I really thought that someone might attempt to come in and hurt you, I wouldn’t leave, but I figure this will help with the fear that it might happen. Just don’t use it on yourself, alright?” He smiled, but she did not, and the smile disappeared. “Lady Guan, you wouldn’t really use it on yourself, would you? Promise me you will not.”

Countless legends of virtuous women who killed themselves to protect said virtue tumbled confusedly over in her mind. In her own life, she had heard over and over of the noble sacrifice of Lady Mi, who killed herself so that Zhao Yun would cease trying to rescue her and escape with baby Liu Shan. Should she not kill herself rather than marry (at least in appearance) an officer of the army that had just killed her father? And yet… and yet she truly had a spirit that didn’t want to die… “I promise I will not.” There, I said it. It’s not because I’m a coward, afraid to face death… if I didn’t promise, he’d take the knife away and I couldn’t kill myself anyway.

“Alright. I’m trusting your word, Lady Guan.” He pushed the bench over so she could reach the remaining food and drink, and left.

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At the end of the corridor that led to his rooms, he ran into a strange looking old man with very long, very white hair and beard. His dress reminded Lu Xun a bit of a taoist priest, but certainly not belonging to any temple he knew of in Wu. “Are you the doctor here to see Lady G—Lady Guan?” He stumbled over her name, first stopping himself because of his lord’s warning that she was to be known as Madam Lu from now on, and then restarting because she couldn’t be Madam Lu until they were married.

The man tilted his head in a way that was perhaps a nod. “I am Zuo Ci. You seek aid for Lady Guan?”

What a strange way to put it. “Yes, she was wounded in the battle at Fan Castle. An arrow wound in her shoulder—I think it might be infected. A very bad bruise in her ribs, and I think one might have cracked. And I think her foot is broken. I cleaned and dressed the wounds as best I could, but I only know field first aid. I’m sorry to say that… her wounds weren’t treated promptly, as they should have been. I would take you in to see her, but I’m truly already behind with other duties.” He did a brief, mild bow, as a superior officer and lord to a skilled workman, and continued on his way.

Zuo Ci watched him go with narrowed eyes.

———

A group of Wu officers had gathered to eat lunch. For Gan Ning and Ling Tong, it was the first meal of the day. Both were attempting, at the same time, to vie for who had the worst, most excruciating hangover, and who was the most completely unaffected by it.

“And whenever anyone speaks, there’s a noise in my head that’s like two armies screaming as they rush at each other.”

“Well, I guess if you’ve got a low pain tolerance…”

“What?! No, I’m not saying it bothers me or anything! That’s just what it sounds like. Me, I just ignore it.”
“Ah, I wish mine was weak enough to ignore… but then I did drink quite a bit more than you did.”

“Both of you shut up,” growled Ding Feng, dragging his spoon through his congee with distaste. “I’m going to be sick all over the table if I have to listen to you two bickering like old women.”

Han Deng sipped his tea sadly. “Lu Xun told me at the beginning of the banquet last night that he would have lunch with me today. I wonder if he forgot about me…”

Zhu Ran, who subscribed to the theory of the hair of the dog, was limiting himself to one drink, which was not quite enough to explain the pink of his cheeks. In truth, he was stinging with embarrassment. Lu Xun was his rival, but fate had given Lu Xun all the luck of a battle fought in the pouring rain. Now Lu Xun was showered with honours. Zhu Ran was sure he could have done just as well, if it had been a battle where his fire attacks could have worked. The worst part was that he didn’t even really dislike Lu Xun… no, the worst part was that Lu Xun didn’t even seem to know he was his rival…

Only Zhou Tai seemed totally normal, quietly eating his usual food in the usual quantities with the usual, quiet enjoyment.

“I wonder what was wrong with our lord last night,” said Gan Ning, scratching the face he hadn’t bothered to shave.

Ling Tong shot him a look of disgust. “You shouldn’t presume to speak of our lord, Gan Ning.”

“I’m only saying what everyone’s thinking. Am I wrong?” he challenged, looking around. Not even Zhou Tai, Sun Quan’s most personally loyal officer, said anything; his face merely clouded with worry. “It’s not like him to be so… dammit, it’s depraved!”

“It was depraved,” said Zhu Ran. “I couldn’t believe Lu Xun actually went along with it. Those Shu dogs, yeah, but-“

“You better not believe it of Lu Xun!” Han Deng bristled to his defence. “He was just trying to get the girl to safety away from those Shu dogs until our lord could come to his senses. Anyone could see that!”

Ding Feng nodded thoughtfully. “It is the most obvious explanation.”

“How anyone could seriously consider it is beyond me!” growled Gan Ning. “Sure, I like it when a lady puts up a fight, but what’s the fun if they don’t actually want to be caught? Pah!” He spit.

“Oh, Boyan!” said Han Deng. Everyone else looked up to see the new most senior officer in the Wu forces in the door, looking harassed. “You didn’t forget me!”

A flash of a guilty look might have betrayed otherwise, but Lu Xun said firmly, “I must apologize for having to cancel without notice, Han Deng. I just came to tell you all quickly… if you haven’t already heard… I’m getting married today.”

Six faces stared at him in shock. Even Zhou Tai let a piece of meat slip from his chopsticks.

“You don’t mean… you mean Lord Sun Quan…” Han Deng began.

“Han Deng, please,” warned Lu Xun. They stared at each other, and Lu Xun knew he understood. “Our lord granted her to me as my boon.”

“As a boon… so it was that serious,” muttered Ling Tong, not realizing he was speaking out loud.
“My friends, I know this is strange and sudden, but will you all come to the wedding? I will be honoured if you will.”

“Lord Lu Xun,” came Zhou Tai’s slow, gravelly voice. “There is not one of us here who would consider your wedding to be anything other than the union of two young people of unquestionable virtue. It is we who will be honoured to be there.” Such a long speech from such a notoriously taciturn man deserved at least a moment of appreciative silence, but it didn’t get one.

“Yeah!” said Gan Ning, pounding the table and spilling a bit of Ding Feng’s congee. “Just let someone say a word against you or Lady Guan when I’m around. I’ll rearrange their face!”

Lu Xun couldn’t help but smile, but he had to interrupt the rest of them from adding their approvals of this plan to say, “Thank you, Gan Ning, but I must tell you that our lord wishes it to be forgotten among us that she was ever Guan Yu’s daughter. She’s to be addressed strictly as Madam Lu. Now I must go. I know I can trust you all.” He left quickly.

Zhu Ran began, “Why would our lord—”

“Shut up, you young idiot!” said Han Deng. “Didn’t you understand what he meant?”

“We’ve all got to keep our traps shut that it’s not an ordinary wedding,” Ling Tong helpfully added.

Gan Ning smacked him on the back of the head, and within moments they were rolling around in the corner of the room, wrestling like a pair of young brothers.

———

Yinping couldn’t help feeling that there was something very strange about the doctor. She felt like she had seen him before, long ago. And while he did the same thing any doctor she’d ever seen had done—examine her tongue, feel her pulse, and so on—he spoke in such a strange manner.

“Are you sure you’re the doctor?” she said.

He tilted his head at her. He was by her feet, unwrapping Lu Xun’s bandage from her foot. “What do you think I am, child?”

“Well, when you first came in, I thought maybe the general had forgotten to mention that he had arranged for a priest to come to break the taboo.”

“The taboo?” He was digging around in his bag.

“Yes, when he cleaned me last night, of course he couldn’t avoid seeing my xieyi. I told him that I bet a priest could remove any bad effects from seeing it.”

“My dear child.” He smiled at her in a grandfatherly way. “Now, this may feel cold or strange, but let me know if it hurts, because it shouldn’t.” He placed a piece of metal against her foot. “Who told you that there was a taboo against seeing xieyi?”

“My father.” The metal was cold, really cold, and it was somehow getting colder and colder, but it actually felt relieving to feel something cold against the hot, swollen skin.

“Your father lied to you.”

The metal was really cold now, and then gradually all sensation, including pain, disappeared from the ankle and foot, as if it were numb or asleep. “My father wouldn’t lie to me!”
“All parents lie to protect their children. Fathers especially lie to their daughters, if they think it will keep them away from men.”

“My father didn’t need to lie to keep me away from men. He said he would never let me marry, and I was fine with that.”

“And yet today is your wedding day, is it not?”

Yinping realized she could easily say too much. “That’s… complicated.”

He took the metal away from her now completely numb foot and rewrapped it in a much more elaborate brace than the simple one Lu Xun had rigged up. “Unfortunately the foot is indeed broken, and the injury was made much worse by lack of treatment and forced walking. You had some internal bleeding, which could have turned dangerous. I have stopped that, and the injury will heal from here, but I could not undo the damage that was already there. You may always have trouble walking on it. Time will tell. Now, shall I do the rib or shoulder next?”

“The shoulder,” she said. The rib would require taking off the blanket, and although she didn’t suspect him of lustful intentions, it was still embarrassing.

“I can see your future husband did his best,” he said as he examined the shoulder, “But it was already infected. An infected arrow wound is difficult to treat, because the wound is so deep. But fortunately for you, I happen to have just the right treatment.” He began busying himself with jars of powder and ointment and flasks of oils. A beautiful scent, like an orchard in spring, began to permeate the room. She could see him rolling a very large, fat, blunt needle in a mixture, and then he brought it to the surface of the arrow wound. “This will hurt,” he said, and quickly jabbed it in and out.

It did hurt. It was worst than when the original arrow had made the wound. She grimaced a bit, but made no sound.

“You’re very strong,” he said, but it was not exactly said like a compliment. It was a simple statement of fact. “It is sometimes necessary to hide your pain with your strength, but the pain doesn’t go away when you hide it.” He applied more of the sweet ointment and wrapped the wound up in a clean bandage. “This will take care of the infection, but the damage to the muscle is permanent. This arm will never be as strong or flexible as it was. However, I expect it will still be stronger than any girl of your size has a right to be.”

“But how will I fight?”

“You want to fight?”

“I have to fight.”

“Why do you have to fight?” He pulled down the blanket and began to examine her ribs, but she somehow hardly noticed, because she was thinking about what her answer was.

“Because… because the land is in chaos. Because the people I love are in danger.”

“Do you fight to restore the Han?”

“Yes… no… I don’t know. My father said that was the best way to end the chaos. Until the chaos is over, people will keep dying.”

“If everyone stopped fighting, there would be no chaos.”
She shook her head. “Our enemies won’t stop fighting. If they win, they will not rule rightly, and the people will suffer, and rebellions will just continue anyway. Only Lord Liu Bei can be trusted to rule the land with benevolence.”

“Strange words for the wife of the foremost officer of Wu. This might be uncomfortable.”

She tried to gasp, but suddenly she couldn’t breathe at all, because he had placed a fingertip atop one of her ribs. He did not seem to be applying any pressure at all… no… he couldn’t have been, because the pressure was coming from inside of her out, like the reverse of a firm squeeze, and yet it seemed just as hard to breathe as when in one of her sworn Uncle Zhang’s bear hugs. “How long do you think you’ll be able to keep up the charade?” he said drily. “Your honoured father lied to you, but evidently he never thought to teach you the skill of lying.”

He lifted the finger, and air suddenly rushed back into her lungs.

“Now this at least I can give you good news about,” he said. “It was only a very bad bruise, with internal swelling that hurt your lungs. Easily dealt with. That should heal completely with no aftereffects, perhaps in only a few hours, although the bruise and surface tenderness may last a few days. I will make you up some potions to drink to help your recovery.”

He turned his back to her and began mixing things again. She breathed big gulps of air, feeling slightly dizzy, and tried to think what she should do.

“If you’re thinking of attacking me with the knife under your pillow to keep me from revealing your secret,” he said, without turning to look at her, “I can warn you that I’m considerably stronger than I look. And what’s more,” and he looked over his shoulder with a smile for a moment, “I am also on the side of Liu Bei.”

He turned back to the potions. The shock didn’t last long on Yinping this time. “If you’re on the side of Shu, then please help me escape! I don’t know if Lord Lu Xun can go so far as to actually aid us, but he will certainly do all he can to prevent my recapture.”

“If I thought your escape might aid Shu, then I might do that. However, I am growing ever more certain that the best way for you to aid Shu is to remain here and become the wife of Lu Xun.”

“You mean… become a spy on my own husband and aid his enemies like Lady Sun?” she cried.

“I thought you wanted to aid Shu.”

“I do, but… he has risked so much for me. I couldn’t betray him like that.”

“Then your personal sense of honour means more than the good of the land?”

She rubbed her temples. “I don’t know anymore. I was never any good at riddles.”

He chuckled. “In this case, the correct answer is that no good can come to the land at the expense of personal honour. True personal honour, that is. Not petty revenge or rage at injured pride, as too many men take it to mean. But go back a moment. Why do you say that Lady Sun is a spy on her husband?”

“Why… everyone knows she is.”

He was silent for a moment, putting stoppers into bottles. He lined them up on the windowsill, but took one of them over to Yinping. “Drink this.”
Any medicine she had ever been given by a doctor had tasted the same, awful, but this was different. It was spicy and peppery, and warmed her from the inside out.

“This will aid you in absorbing yang from all sources, but you must tell your husband he should give you his yang essence at least once a day. He’s young, he should be able to do it twice. And that he should bring your yin up to its peak before releasing his yang. Take the medicine morning and evening. Just before receiving his yang, when possible.”

Yinping didn’t have any idea what “receiving his yang” meant, but she didn’t want to look any more stupid than she already did, so she just nodded.

“My dear child,” he said, and chuckled again. He packed his things up and prepared to go. “Lady Guan, keep true to your honour and love your husband, and all shall be in balance again.” Then he was gone, leaving only the beautiful scent of the ointment.
A few hours later, there was another knock at the door. “May I come in, my lady?” came a sweet voice. “I am Lianshi.”

“Come in,” Yinping called in reply.

Pulling a cart behind her, a young woman came in dressed in impeccable court dress, the perfect example of feminine modesty… except for her plunging bustline showing off a truly staggering set of breasts. Yinping suddenly realized that this was none other than the officer with the crossbow.

“You’re the one who shot me!” she cried.

Lianshi blushed. “You’re probably right,” she said softly. “It is always so strange, isn’t it, how this time of chaos makes people enemies and then allies and then enemies and then allies… I can only say, my lady, that it was nothing personal, and I hope the wound is better now, and that we can be friends.”

“It’s alright, I was just surprised. I mean, I know your name as Sun Quan’s fiancée… but I didn’t expect you to be at the front line of the battle.”

Lianshi smiled at her. “But you were there yourself?”

“Well, that was different. I wasn’t engaged to anyone. And it wasn’t meant to be the front line…” she trailed off and looked away.

Her new friend was distressed. “I am so sorry. Of course these memories are painful for you. Let us talk of something else.” She looked Yinping up and down with a practiced eye. “I brought several sizes for you, and I think one in particular will work perfectly. Let’s get you out of that cheap tawdry thing.” She wrinkled her nose at it.

The cheap tawdry thing was disposed of with, if anything, even more disgust than Lu Xun had shown towards her rank, filthy fighting clothes. Lianshi floated around like a butterfly, draping this fabric and that over Yinping’s arm to check it against her skin tone, brushing her hair, scrutinizing accessories, and considering the truly difficult problem of what shoes she could wear with one foot wrapped in a brace. Through it all, her voice flowed like water in a calming series of commonplaces about the current weather, how the weather had been, how the weather was likely to be, the kind of weather that she preferred…

“I never expected Sun Quan’s wife to be like you,” Yinping blurted out.

Lianshi looked embarrassed. “I know. I act like a maid, don’t I? I can’t help it. I was a waiting maid, to his sister. That’s all I was ever trained to do. I don’t know why my lord ever even noticed me…”

I bet I could make two big guesses, thought Yinping, but out loud she said. “No, don’t take it the wrong way! I just meant… you’re so kind and gentle.”

Lianshi sighed. “I know he hasn’t been very kind to you, my lady. I don’t understand it myself. If I could only speak to him alone…” She shook her head. “Never mind. My lady, I’m almost done
now.” She looked around Lu Xun’s chambers with another sigh. “If only Lord Lu Xun had a mirror! You’ll just have to trust me that you look magnificent. Even with the brace. And I dare anyone to notice the bandage.”

Yinping saw that she was preparing the bridal headdress. *This is really happening.* “You don’t have to call me ‘my lady.’ If anything, you outrank me.”

“May I call you Yinping, my la—I mean my friend?”

“Please do, Lianshi. I need a friend.”

Lianshi finished pinning in the headdress. “There! Now we just have to wait for them to call us for the ceremony. I have some almond cookies we can snack on in the meantime. Just make sure you brush the crumbs away.”

Their waiting chatter eventually turned to Lady Sun, Lianshi’s dearest friend, whom she spoke of reverently as “the princess.”

“Did you know the princess well? Did you see her much? Was she happy?”

“I really didn’t see her much. I was almost always fighting with my father’s forces. She always stayed in the capital, away from the fighting.”

“Away from the fighting?” Lianshi shook her head and took a dainty nibble of cookie. “She can’t be happy then. Doesn’t Lord Liu Bei know she needs to fight to be happy?”

Yinping hesitated, but decided that sharing something so common knowledge couldn’t be a betrayal, and might aid her in becoming closer to a friend she desperately needed in Wu. “The talk was that it was the command of the chancellor. He… was concerned that she might… perhaps inadvertently… give important military information to her brother.”

Lianshi was not fooled by the way Yinping tried to hedge. “You mean you all think she’s nothing but a spy?”

It would not help her case to reveal that she had always taken the talk at face value. “Well… it’s just what people were saying.”

“I can’t believe the princess is so defamed. She truly loves her lord! I know from her letters. She always tries to write so cheerfully, but she must be all alone and friendless…” She began to cry.

Yinping was left in the awkward position of having to give comfort to the woman who had shot her with a crossbow only a couple weeks ago. Hesitantly, she touched a hand to the sobbing woman’s back. “Hey… it’s not that bad… I know for a fact that she has a whole lot of maids in her quarters. With swords. And crossbows.” *I guess that’s where you learned to fire yours.*

“I know, but none of them know and love the princess as I do.”

There was a knock at the door, and Lu Xun’s voice called, “It’s me.”

“Come in! She’s ready!” said Lianshi, wiping off the tears and resuming her usual serenity.

Yinping could sort of see through the veil on her headdress. Lu Xun was dressed in groom’s clothes, but they were a bit ill-fitting, so he didn’t look as handsome as he normally did. She could tell that he was absolutely overwhelmed. As he looked at her, he seemed to be rendered speechless.
“My lord, as you can see we have a big problem.”

“What? What problem? What’s the problem now?!”

“None of the shoes I brought will fit over the brace!”

“That’s your big problem?! Lianshi, don’t scare me like that. I’ve had more than enough real problems to deal with today. Just… just don’t put on any shoes. I’m going to need to carry her anyway, so what does it matter? There’s nothing wrong with the other foot; it looks fine.” He looked back to Yinping. “My lady, I’m afraid there’s no time to rehearse anything. Have you ever been to a wedding? Do you think you can just muddle along? This won’t be anything like a full wedding—just the important parts. And Lord Sun Quan will be standing in for both our parents.”

The idea of kneeling before Sun Quan made her skin crawl. “How can I kneel with a broken foot?”

Lianshi and Lu Xun looked at each other. “I don’t think our lord will like it if she doesn’t kneel,” said Lianshi.

“That’s an understatement,” muttered Lu Xun. “Yinping, there’s no time. You’ll have to kneel. I know you’re strong enough to beat the pain. I promise I’ll try to get us through the kneeling parts as quickly as possible.”

It wasn’t the pain she was worried about; she was just hoping she could use the pain as an excuse to get out of it. “If it can’t be avoided, I can do it.”

He nodded and lifted her off the bed and into his arms again. “Alright, here we go.”

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Lu Xun wished he had thought to tell Lianshi not to bother with perfumes. He had been telling himself he could keep his focus by looking straight ahead. But the intoxicating floral fragrance wafting up from her kept inviting him to glance down and see her beautiful body in his arms.

They arrived at the largest banquet hall. Lu Xun had thought that such a large space would be overkill, as surely only those whom he had asked as a personal favour would want to attend a sordid forced marriage to a prisoner who was the daughter of an executed enemy. As he looked around the room, filled beyond capacity with guests kneeling attentively, he thought bitterly that he had underestimated people’s capacity for morbid curiosity. This was true, but it was also true that he did not know how popular he truly was.

There was an approving murmur that passed over the crowd like a gentle breeze as they walked him walk with dignity towards his sovereign, carrying his bride in his arms like a delicate treasure. A lot of confused and contradictory reports had arisen about the bride since the battle. Up until the wedding, the dominating reports tended to be along the lines that she was a monstrous woman of unnatural strength who liked to bathe in the blood of children and took ten Shu soldiers into her bed every night. After this wedding, they were to take an abrupt turn: she was a fragile flower whose evil father forced her into harm’s way, until her eyes met Lord Lu Xun’s on the battlefield, whereupon they both realized that here was their fated soulmate. Lord Lu Xun had killed her evil father, the supposed god of war, with a single blow!

The combination of her bare and bandaged feet on slender legs peeping out from beneath the gown as he carried her caught the people’s imagination particularly, and for many years afterwards, men of Wu who wished to compliment their ladies would liken their feet to Yinping’s bare one.

Lu Xun gently assisted her to kneel before Sun Quan, then knelt himself, and the ceremony began.
The ceremony passed for him like a blur or half-remembered dream. There was hand washing, poetry was recited… wine was drunk, and tea… incense burned… it seemed to drag on forever, but it also seemed like it was over at once.

As soon as he could, Lu Xun lifted her out of the kneeling position and back into his arms, while Sun Quan, coldly but correctly, formally introduced them.

The cheering was as loud as a victory cry. He heard someone whistling with his fingers, and wasn’t surprised to see that it was Gan Ning, with Ling Tong next to him clapping and telling him to quit it. All of his friends were there, in fact, although most of their cheering wasn’t as unbridled as Gan Ning’s. After all, they knew this wasn’t an ordinary wedding.

There were only two people in the room who were not even pretending to be happy. Oh sure, they were clapping, because to do otherwise would have been too out of place. But when Lu Xun’s gaze drifted past the rest of the Wu officers to the very lowest place, where Mi Fang and Fu Shiren were, he knew that he had jumped from both of their “petty grudge” lists onto their “sworn enemy” lists. Well, let them try.

There was no single room large enough to serve everyone, so the dinner was served in several rooms, with the smallest room, at Lu Xun’s request, reserved for his lord, his lord’s betrothed, and his actual friends.

In front of their lord, his friends entered into the role of ordinary wedding guest with gusto. It seemed that all of them chiefly thought the job of an ordinary wedding guest was to make as many bawdy jokes as possible.

Lu Xun blushed, shook his head, gave a comeback where he could, and tried to eat quickly. Sometimes Sun Quan was acting like the man he remembered fondly, especially when Lianshi or Zhou Tai managed to draw him out. Both were certainly trying to keep him in good spirits. But sometimes he would get that dark look again, and usually reach for his wine, which only compounded things. As soon as Lu Xun noticed Yinping’s food consumption pause, he nudged her foot with his under the table, hoping she would understand that he wanted her to be ready for something. She instantly laid down her chopsticks and folded her hands in her lap.

“My lord, my lady, my friends,” he said loudly, and they all stopped their myriad conversations and looked at him. “I must thank you, but I believe we must retire early—”

“Ohhhhhhhhh,” groaned Ling Tong and Gan Ning in unison.

Lu Xun attempted to ignore this and continued on, louder. “—retire early as my wife wishes go to bed—”

“Ohoooooooooooh,” they groaned even louder.

He couldn’t help laughing. Well, at least they were convincing.

He knelt briefly before Sun Quan, kowtowed, and said quietly, “My lord, I know this was not what you wished to give me as a boon, but I thank you from my heart.”

Sun Quan looked down at him and for a moment an expression Lu Xun couldn’t read was on his face. Could it be shame? The expression vanished and he readopted the same glower that had accompanied every reach he made for his wine. “Go,” was all he said.

He immediately got up, took Yinping from her seat and left.
As he carried her back to his chambers, she sighed in his arms. “I wish we could have stayed a bit longer. The food was great! I was just getting my second wind when you kicked me.”

“I didn’t kick you, I nudged you.”

“Well, it felt like a kick. You must be stronger than you think. Believe me, I’m used to making the same mistake.” She nuzzled into him and he felt himself stirring again.

When he laid her onto the bed, he reached up to her headdress, and then hesitated.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

“When I take off your headdress,” he said, “That’s what truly makes us husband and wife.”

She didn’t move. Gently, as if unwrapping a precious jade carving, he took out the pins and removed the headdress. Her face, revealed by the veil, was as pink as the flowers in her hair.

“Is that really what makes us husband and wife?” she asked.

He felt that stirring again, but internally screamed at himself to cut it out. “It is for us.”

“Is it for other people?”

He hesitated. He didn’t want to lie, but he wasn’t about to bring up the whole truth to her either. “It’s where it begins, for most couples. For us, it begins and ends there.”

“You mean…” She paused, as if she was trying to think of something. “You’re not going to help me change into my nightdress? I’m not even sure I know how to get out of this thing,” she said, looking down at her bodice for where the tie might be.

“Roll onto your front,” he said. He undid tie after tie, finally pulling everything away until she was down to just her xieyi and breast binding again. He averted his eyes.

“It’s okay,” she said. “The doctor told me there’s no taboo about seeing the xieyi after all. He said my father was lying about it, but I think maybe my father was just mistaken. Maybe that’s why he never remarried after my mother died. You can look at it.”

It took all the self-control he had not to take her up on such an innocent request. He tossed her the nightdress that Lianshi had brought without looking, while his eyes looked for something, anything to bring up as conversation, rather than her underwear and the acceptability of looking at it. His eye lit upon the medicine on the windowsill. “Is that your medicine? There was no time for you to tell me the doctor’s instructions, now that I think of it. Do you need another dose now? Tell me the instructions quickly, before we forget it.”

He had requested that Lianshi provide the longest, most matronly, most shapeless nightdress she could find, and while Lianshi had delivered, it was no match for his mind’s eye, which was maddeningly supplying the rest of his brain with all the details it had drunk in from washing her yesterday, when he had foolishly allowed himself to believe he was successfully thinking of her as a horse.

“Oh, the instructions were very simple! I won’t forget them, but you’re supposed to help me with them, so I had better tell you. I take the medicine in the evening and the morning. Ideally just before you give me your yang essence.”

His hand had been reaching for the medicine and he nearly knocked them all to the floor. “Just
before I what?"

“Give me your yang essence,” she said simply. “At least once a day, and he said that you’re young enough that you should be able to do it twice. Oh, and to bring my yin essence to its peak before releasing your yang. I didn’t really know what it meant, but he seemed to think it was so obvious, I didn’t want to look stupid by asking. I figured you would know what it meant. Do you know what he meant?”

“Yes,” he said, gripping the windowsill and staring at a small crack in the wall as if it was the most interesting thing in all of China. “I know what he meant.”

“Oh, then you can do it then.”

“Lady Guan… the doctor thought we were an ordinary married couple. What he was describing is something that… married couples do.”

He brought her the medicine to her without really looking at her, then busied himself with stoking the fire. She was silent.

He tried the same trick he had done the night before, of extinguishing all the non-firelight as quickly as possible before pulling his clothes off and slipping beneath the blanket, but his wedding costume was not nearly as easy to take off as his usual clothes. His own eyes were fully adjusted by the time he managed to undo all the ties and slip the robes off, leaving him in just his loincloth. He heard a sharp intake of breath, and saw that Lady Guan was staring at the muscles of his torso, the firelight revealing the slow diffusion of the blush across her cheeks.

He slipped into the edge of the bed and pulled the blanket over himself, getting so close to the edge this time that even he was worried he might fall off, with his back to her. “Good night.”

It was actually pretty early, especially considering that they had both slept late that morning. Lu Xun personally felt like he might never sleep again, especially not with the erection that was straining to escape his loincloth and his mind replaying the expression on her face as she had looked at his nearly bare body.

“Lu Xun,” said Yinping tentatively. “I was thinking during the wedding… there were so many people there… they all seemed really pleased, too, just like a real wedding. And… and your friends… they definitely thought it was a real marriage…”

“Don’t worry about my friends. They were just putting it on for our lord.”

“Hmm.” She didn’t sound convinced. “But still… the story is going to spread out there… everyone is going to hear that I’m your wife.”

“It doesn’t matter what people say. The people who matter know that it isn’t a real marriage, or they will eventually.”

She was silent for a few minutes, and Lu Xun prayed to whatever deity would listen that she was falling asleep, but apparently no one in heaven was listening, or maybe they were listening and just enjoying his torment. “But… what if the wrong people find out that it isn’t a real marriage?”

“That won’t happen.”

“That’s not something you can promise,” she said.

He couldn’t refute that, because she was right, so he tried another counter. “What is this all about
anyway? First you say that you’re worried that people are going to think it’s a real marriage, then
you’re worried that they won’t believe it’s a real marriage. What do you imagine can fix both of
those problems?”

He felt a movement in the blankets, and then a near electric shock as she placed her soft hand on his
back.

“We could make it a real marriage,” she said softly. “If you wanted to, I mean.”

He rolled over without, as best he could, actually getting any closer to her. God, she looked beautiful
in the firelight, with her face blushing and her lips parted like that… no. No. “I promised you I
wouldn’t. I promised you I would control myself.”

“But it’s different if I’m asking you to… isn’t it?”

“You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I do know. I know what the doctor meant now. I may be… innocent I guess… but I’m not
completely stupid, I hope.”

“But you don’t really know. It would hurt you.”

“Worse than being shot with a crossbow?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

He had to chuckle at that. “Well… that’s beside the point. I know you’re tough. Ok. Forget the pain
aspect. If we were to consummate the marriage… we would really be married at that point. Bound
permanently in this life to each other. No more annulment possible. If we somehow found a way for
you to escape tomorrow, you would still be my wife, and I would still be your husband.”

“I know that.”

“We might even conceive a child,” he said, sure that would convince her.

“Would that be so bad?”

That left him speechless. He had always taken it for granted that he would one day marry and have
children, and the idea was appealing to him. Unwillingly he imagined what it would be like if it was
with her… if she was there, every day of his life, welcoming him back home…

“You know, I never thought I would have children,” she said, staring up at the ceiling now. “Father
always said that marriage was the worst thing that could happen to a woman and that he would never
let that happen to me. When a boy marries his life continues just the same as it’s always been, and his
wife makes his life better and bears his children, but when a girl marries, she has to go and live with
her husband, and when will she see her parents again? A few times a year? Maybe not even that, if
she marries someone far away… and yet she won’t really be a part of her husband’s family, either.
Sex hurts a woman, childbirth could kill her… no, he wanted me to be safe from all that. I would
stay with him, help him achieve his dream, and then take care of him until he died; that was my
vocation in this life.” She took a breath. “But now he’s dead. He’s dead. I can’t take care of him
anymore. I have no purpose.” She turned her head to look at her nominal husband again. “I want to
have a purpose again.”

“Yinping…” Lu Xun realized too late that he had allowed himself to use her given name. No help
for it now, press on. “You don’t have to exist just for the sake of one man or another. You can find
your own purpose.”
They stared at each other for a long moment. She swallowed and whispered, “I… I liked it when you said my name.”

He felt a shudder within him and despite all his claims of self-control, he couldn’t stop himself. “Yinping…”

“What if…” she said, and she reached out her hand again. It traced his jaw, just beginning to stubble, and slid down his neck to his powerful shoulders. “What if I just want you? Would that be enough to say yes?”

Was there self-control enough between all the people in the world for him to resist that? There certainly wasn’t anything like enough in Lu Xun. He reached out, took her into his arms and kissed her.

She kissed him back, running his hands through his hair and along his back, driving him crazy. He broke the kiss off and she tried to kiss him again, but he stopped her. “Wait. If we do this… I will do this to you… only if you promise to tell me if you want to stop, or if it’s hurting you.”

“You don’t have to stop if it hurts me,” she murmured into his neck. “You said yourself it would hurt, right? I’ll be fine.”

Ah, it was so hard to think when she was doing that… “It doesn’t matter why you want to stop,” he said. “Just promise me if you do want to stop, you’ll tell me.”

“I promise. As long as you promise not to stop just because it’s hurting me.”

“Alright.” He kissed her again, and for a while they just enjoyed being in each others arms. But soon he broke off again.

She laughed and groaned a little at the same time. “What is it now?”

“You should know…” he looked embarrassed. “I’m not really very experienced.”

“That’s ok,” she said.

“I’m not experienced at all, actually,” he muttered.

“Do you mean… I’ll be your first as well?”

He couldn’t bring himself to do more than nod. As a teenager, he would have been more than willing if he could have found a willing partner, but as a basically penniless orphan fed and clothed only by the generosity of a great-uncle, and a late bloomer who had been short and skinny until he was eighteen or nineteen, there had never been an offer from even the least picky serving girl. By the time his figure and personal fortunes had improved enough to make him a more than acceptable client to any of the camp followers that were an inevitable part of life as a soldier, he was a dedicated student of the strictest moral codes, and had matured enough in his self-control to feel nothing but pity for the circumstances that drove them to trade their bodies for rice. “I’m sorry. I may not exactly know how to please you.”

Her eyes were shining. She certainly did not look as if she felt he needed to apologize for his virginity. “So then… how do we know what to do first?”

“I may be inexperienced, but I do have some idea… lie back.”
焉知非福 (...this could be a blessing in disguise.)

Chapter Notes

This chapter is an explicit sex scene. No further warnings apply.

Boyan is Lu Xun's style name.

焉知非福 : ...yan zhi fei fu
...how / know / not / good fortune
“...this could be a blessing in disguise.”

Although he hadn’t ever been with a real woman, he had been a voracious reader who had unsupervised access to his granduncle’s expansive library, and as a horny teenager who couldn’t get any real girl to give him the time of day, he had naturally spent quite a lot of time entranced by a couple of taoist sex manuals. Although the text was actually dry and unarousing, mostly focused on the concept of having sex without orgasming in order to absorb the woman’s qi and somehow live forever (no thanks, Lu Xun had thought even as a teenager), they did have some fascinating diagrams and illustrations. He had used to study the diagrams with the same intensity that he would later study terrain maps while planning a battle, and with a very similar spirit. Alright, we start here… then reinforce here…

First, that nightgown had to go. Fortunately it was tied in the front, so he simply untied it and unwrapped her like the best present he had ever received.

For the first time, he actually allowed himself to look at her. Her body was still marred by minor cuts and bruises and of course the terrible bruise from the pike on her ribs, but she was still indescribably beautiful to him. Very gently, he laid a hand against her breast. “Did the doctor say the rib was cracked?”

“No, he said it was just swelling and that it would be fine. Just bruised and painful on the surface.”

Even so, he couldn’t risk hurting her by touching her anywhere near there, especially with her shoulder still injured too. Regretfully he took his hand off the breast. Well, there would be plenty of time to explore her there in the rest of their lives.

He untied the xieyi and pulled it away, letting it drop to the floor. He also untied his own loincloth and dropped it in the same place. He wasn’t sure how clearly she could see his front, with his back to the fire, but she could definitely see something, because her eyes widened. “Is that going to fit inside me?” she gasped.

“He wasn’t sure how to answer that. “Uh… yes?”

“But why is it so big?” she said, her eyes practically threatening to pop out of their sockets. “I mean, I’ve seen my brothers pee against a wall a lot of times, and theirs aren’t anything like that big.”

“Most of the time it isn’t that big,” he explained with a laugh. “It isn’t that big when we urinate. It only grows to be with a woman.”

“Oh.” She looked very embarrassed.
“You’re not being stupid,” he said quickly. “How would you know that if you hadn’t been told? It isn’t obvious if you don’t have one yourself.”

“I guess not.”

“Do you want to touch it?”

Hesitantly, as if she was reaching out towards a wild animal that she wasn’t sure wanted to nuzzle her or bite her, she reached out her hand and brushed the fingertips against his length, immediately pulling away.

“Ah,” he moaned, and she glanced up at his face with worry.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No… no, it felt good.” He swallowed and opened his eyes. “You can touch it again if you want to. It won’t hurt you either.”

This time she let the fingertips stay, unmoving. She didn’t know what she was expecting… it was soft and hard at the same time, and warm. When she tentatively moved the fingers a little, as if petting the wild animal, the soft skin slid over the hardness beneath, and he groaned again. She pulled her hand back.

“Even that… felt so amazing,” he said, and his voice was sounding strange to her now, thicker somehow. Her heart began to pound faster in her chest and her mouth felt dry as a desert. “May I… touch you now?”

She nodded, not sure if she could form words with her parched tongue.

He started by just placing his hand on her inner thigh. She forced herself not to jump at the sensation… it was just so odd to have anyone else’s hand there… and when he gradually slid it over her womanhood, it got even odder than that.

“How does it feel?” he asked huskily.

“Strange,” she answered honestly. He looked a bit disappointed, so she hastily added. “Not a bad strange! I just… I’ve never felt anything like it…”

He looked down, trying to remember the diagrams that had once captured his imagination and relate them to the actual flesh and blood woman beneath him. It should be somewhere right around—

She jerked beneath his touch and gasped as he rubbed his thumb against a little nub. “Did that hurt you?”

“No,” she said, and this time her voice was almost as husky as his own. “That definitely felt good…”

At this reassurance, he went back to rubbing her gently with his thumb. It felt amazing, and she could feel herself getting wet, so wet that she almost wondered if her monthly bleeding had picked the worst possible time to restart. If that was it, though, she figured he would notice and say something. But then he might stop… and she really, really didn’t want him to stop.
“Kiss me,” she said, and he was more than willing to obey. At first with the same close-mouthed kisses they had shared up until now, but his tongue moved along her lips, and she opened up to him.

As she allowed him to slide his tongue into her mouth, she felt something sliding into her down there as well. She broke the kiss. “Is… is that…”

It pulled out immediately. “No, it’s just my finger. Did you not like it? Do you want me to stop?”

“I don’t want you to stop, I just…”

“You thought it might be… me,” he finished for her. “Don’t worry. I’ll tell you before I really enter you. I want you to have one last chance to change your mind.”

“I won’t change my mind.”

He pressed a finger from his other hand to her lips. “Don’t. Make that decision in that moment, alright?”

“Alright.”

He began again, and soon she was moaning into his kisses, her body writhing almost beyond her control. Then there began a deeper pleasure within her, something coming up like a wave. “Boyan,” she said between kisses, “Oh… this is… so…”

“Come for me,” he said, and though she didn’t yet know what he meant by “come,” there was nothing stopping her body from doing it.

———

“Oh… Boyan… Boyan!” she cried as she climaxed.

He eased off and slowly pulled his hand away. God, he didn’t think he’d ever been harder in his life, and it was excruciating resisting the urge to straddle her right there and then and plunge himself in. But he wanted to give her one last chance to change her mind, after the orgasm had cleared away any fog of lust that might lead her to make a choice she would regret.

She opened her eyes as the last waves drained away from her and looked up at him with awe. “What was that feeling?” she asked.

“That’s called an orgasm,” he said. “It’s what the doctor meant by bringing your yin to its peak.”

“An orgasm,” she repeated. “Does that mean… when you release your yang in me… will it feel that good for you too?”

He had to be honest. “Yes.”

“Boyan, I want you to feel that way too,” she said, reaching up to caress his face.

“Yinping, don’t make that decision because you feel like you owe it to me,” he said. “I can… if it’s necessary I can make myself feel that with my hand.”

“I want to be the one to make you feel that way,” she said. She reached her hand down and brushed against him again. He groaned, but grabbed her wrist gently and pulled it away.

“Yinping, please… believe me, it’s hard enough already not to just enter you… but I need to know, I need to hear that you don’t just want me to do that, that you want everything that comes with it.
Being my wife until one of us dies. Sharing my life with me, and children. There’s no going back if I do this.”

“I understand,” she said. “Make me your wife, Boyan…”

He leaned forward and kissed her roughly as he straddled her, and he could feel her tensing up beneath him. “I know it’s hard, but if you can relax, it won’t hurt as much,” he said.

“I don’t think I can relax,” she said. “But it’s alright. I already told you I don’t care how much it hurts.”

He positioned himself at her entrance, trying to decide whether it would be better to do it fast or slow. It was so hard to think at all. If she truly couldn’t relax, being slow would just drag out the pain. “I’m going to enter you now,” he said, and did, all the way.

They were husband and wife now in a way that no one could undo.

———

It did hurt when he pushed into her. She could feel something that was like a rip inside her, and it was so strange to be stretched and filled in an area of her own body that she hadn’t even really been aware existed. But really, the pain wasn’t so bad.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Well, I can tell you that it hurts a lot more to be hit by a crossbow,” she answered.

He laughed, and she could feel him laughing inside her, which was the strangest feeling yet.

“So… what happens next?” she asked.

“I could almost… ah… come right now, but I want to try to… unh… thrust in and out of you a bit…”

“Ok. I’m ready.”

———

He really was right at the edge already. He breathed, because he didn’t want this to be over already, but he knew it was actually probably for the best if it didn’t take too long. She would be less sore. So once the immediate danger was past, he began moving his hips, without bothering to try to hold off the feeling of imminent orgasm that restarted the moment he felt her walls squeezing him again.

“Boyan,” moaned Yinping, and his style name on her lips again was somehow the thing that pushed him over the edge. The wave came and his hips bucked as he spent himself into her.

The usual male post-coital exhaustion hit him as he pulled out, but he managed to lower himself down by her side, realizing just in time that it would definitely not feel good on her wounded shoulder or bruised torso if he collapsed on top of her.

She snuggled into his chest. She felt energized, and yet there was nothing she wanted to do but just be in his arms. She looked up after a few minutes, and realized that he had already fallen asleep. Smiling, she closed her eyes and waited to do likewise.
有色無膽 (Someone who feels intense lust but doesn't dare to act.)

Chapter Notes

Zhongmou is Sun Quan's style name.

有色無膽：you se wu dan
have / desire / without / gall
“Someone who feels intense lust but doesn’t dare to act on it.”

They were still embracing when Lu Xun woke up in the morning. It was very early, with only the first light of dawn illuminating the room. He looked down at the still sleeping angel in his arms and wondered if he ought to be feeling regret. He could feel nothing but extraordinarily blessed by fate.

Yinping stirred and awoke as well.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning.”

“Last night I asked for a tray to be brought for our breakfast,” he said, “so all we have to do is wait now.”

“We can do more than just wait,” she said, with a saucy little grin. “Don’t you remember, husband, that I am supposed to take my medicine in the morning as well?”

Fortunately by the time the knock for breakfast came, they had not only finished their round two, but had time to wash and get dressed as well. Therefore he felt no embarrassment as he went to answer the knock.

“Who is it?”

“Breakfast, my lord.”

He unlocked the door and the servant brought in the tray, set it down on the table, and prepared to depart.

“Wait,” said Lu Xun.

The servant jumped. Lu Xun’s suspicions instantly tripled. A servant delivering breakfast should not have left without asking about any further requirements to begin with. For one to jump as if someone just cried “stop thief” when merely asked to wait went further still. He took a look at the tray.

“This isn’t what I ordered,” he said. This was a lie; he had been too rushed to make his order any more specific than “breakfast for two”.

“Isn’t it?” said the servant nervously. “There must have been a mix-up in the kitchens, my lord.”

“Really,” Lu Xun said. He didn’t say anything further, and he didn’t say the servant could go. The
most effective tool to get a confession from someone as obviously, nervously guilty as this was silence. Either they would break and confess, or they would lie wildly just to fill the silence, which would probably damn them just as effectively.

“I assure you there’s nothing wrong with the food!” blurted out the servant, indicating that he was choosing the latter path.

“Isn’t there.”

“No indeed, my lord!” The servant laughed without any humour at all. “Good, wholesome food!”

Lu Xun picked up a mantou from the tray, studied it, and then held it out to the servant with a smile. “It certainly looks wholesome. There’s far too much for just the two of us though. Why don’t you have some?”

“Oh! Thank you my lord! I certainly will!” he took the bun, but did not eat it. “I’ll be going now then!”

“I haven’t dismissed you,” said Lu Xun, still smiling. He reached over the man’s shoulder and pushed the door closed. “Have a bite.”

“My lord, it’s very kind, but… but… but I’ve already eaten!”

Still Lu Xun smiled. “You won’t leave until you’ve eaten the whole thing.”

There was another knock at the door. “Breakfast, my lord!”

The servant already in the room panicked and went to reach for a weapon, but within seconds Lu Xun had the man pinned to the floor, arms twisted behind his back. “Come in.”

“Breakfast for you and my lady, my—what on earth—?” The servant nearly tripped over the still struggling man.

“I believe this servant is an attempted assassin,” said Lu Xun. Please take your tray into my room for my wife and then alert the guards that the man must be taken into custody. Then inform Lord Sun Quan that I will need to see him to discuss this assassination attempt and what kind of execution this man should have.”

The servant nodded and skirted well away to take the tray into the bedroom.

“What’s going on out there?” shouted Yinping.

“I have it under control,” he shouted back. “I’ll tell you later.”

He turned back to the assassin and smiled. “What sort of execution do you think it’ll be, friend? Usually our lord beheads people, but I think that kind of death is too quick for a poisoner. Maybe we should discover what poison was in the food by forcing it down your throat!”

“I don’t know that it’s poisoned!” wailed the unhappy wretch.

“But it might be?”

“They said it wasn’t.” The other servant, sans tray, passed by and out to fetch the guards.

“But you had your doubts, enough not even to want a bite of it, hmm? What did they say it was?”
“They said it was a joke! That it would knock you out, and make you miss your meeting with Lord Sun Quan today, and make him angry with you!”

“Making Lord Sun Quan angry with me doesn’t seem like much of a joke. Who were these pranksters?”

“Your new officers, my lord. I don’t know their names.”

Lu Xun took a breath. “The ones from Shu?”

“Yes, my lord. Have mercy! I needed the money!”

What cowards. This kind of assassination attempt fit their craven natures perfectly.

At this point a group of guards burst in. “My lord! Where is the assassin?”

“He is here,” Lu Xun said, letting one of them grab the now sobbing man and bind him. “Take this tray too but do not dispose of the contents—it’s poisoned, but I don’t know with what. A doctor might be able to tell. The quarters of Fu Shiren and Mi Fang are to be searched immediately. They have probably already fled, but if they have not, capture them, alive if possible. You——” he pointed at the one who looked slowest but strongest—“Stand outside the door and guard my wife while I’m gone. The rest of you, go.”

He went back into the bedroom, where Yinping was stuffing her face with mantou. “I’m afraid I can’t stay for breakfast,” he said, grabbing a mantou to take with him.

“I can’t believe you’re going to go off chasing assassins and I’m stuck here with this stupid foot and shoulder,” grumbled Yinping.

He grinned. “Bear with it, my love,” he said, and left.

Yinping was left alone, wondering if this counted as his first confession of love.

———

“So it was a triple cross all along!” roared Sun Quan, pounding his desk. “Those Shu bastards! Trying to kill my strategist in my own palace!”

Lu Xun could see a vein twitching in his lord’s neck and worried that this rage might actually kill him. He said nothing. He wasn’t sure if he would even be heard if he did.

“And this morning I get a letter,” he roughly shoved things aside to grab it, pick it up and shake it at his kneeling officer, “from my sister, my younger sister, whom I gave up to Shu. Ha! Gave up is right! I would have thought she, of all people, would know what her duty is as a woman of the Sun family, but has she sent me even one piece of useful intelligence in all these years? Do you know what she wrote me this time?” He held the letter up to read it. “My lord is dreadfully angry at the loss of his sworn brother, and I am really afraid he may take some rash action that will sever the ties between Shu and Wu permanently. Dear brother, if you will gift the Guan children which you have taken prisoner back to my lord, I believe this might calm his anger and allow the alliance to resume with you retaining Jing province.’ Her lord! In a letter to me she calls him her lord! And don’t say, Boyan, that he is her husband. I know very well he is her husband; I arranged it! She may call him her lord a thousand times a day to his face, but not to me!” He balled the letter up and tossed it into the fire.

Lu Xun waited respectfully, but for the moment his lord seemed to have nothing more to say. “My
lord, I should say that I think that Mi Fang and Fu Shiren were driven by a motive of personal, petty revenge against me, much the same as the reason why they betrayed Guan Yu. I truly do not think this was some grand plot of Shu.”

“You never met Zhuge Liang. That smug fan-waving motherfucker,” snarled Sun Quan. “He’s the only reason Liu Bei is still around.”

A soldier knocked at the door, “My lord, reports!”

“Come in and skip the obeisances,” said Sun Quan. “I don’t have the time.”

The soldier looked highly uncomfortable giving his report without first going through the kowtowing ritual, but he obeyed. “My lord, we have tracked their movements leaving the castle at last. One of their horses threw a shoe about forty li to the west sometime just before dawn. They roused a farmer and forced him to smith a replacement shoe in great haste, claiming they were on a mission from you. When they left, they continued west.”

“My lord, that they have fled with all possible speed, without even bothering to see if their plot succeeded, is all we need to know. They were here only briefly, and cannot have gained any meaningful military intelligence against us. If they go to Wei, there is nothing they can tell him about us that they do not already know. If they go back to Shu, if Liu Bei does not kill them himself, the Guan sons will. They are merely men who allow petty grudges to goad them into life-altering actions without considering the consequences. By all means send word to all the border patrols and fortresses with their description, and if they are caught, execute them; but to do more than that is only to waste resources.”

Sun Quan’s fingernails scratched his palms like he was literally itching to hit something, but he said, “My strategist speaks wisely. Send out the description but otherwise recall the pursuit.”

The soldier did the obeisances of leaving and looked as if he considerably relieved his own feelings by doing so.

As soon as they were alone again, Lu Xun said tentatively, “My lord, did you write back to the princess yet?”

“Right away, before the assassination attempt was even made,” he said. “I told her that the son was already dead and the daughter your wife, so neither was ever going back to Shu. I told her that if the wind continued to blow in the same direction, she had better let it blow her back to Wu before she found Shu getting too hot to hold her.” His jaw worked. “I actually offered to help her come back. I’m a fool. Not that I actually think she’ll do the sensible thing. I wonder if I will ever receive another letter from her or if our spies will inform me of her death. So much for her loyalty to her lord.”

There was a pause. Lu Xun pondered bringing up the Han emperor’s recent forced abdication of the throne fo Cao Pi. It truly was a mad world where this could be considered a topic that would ease tensions, but at the moment he thought anything that would cause his lord to remember that there were other threats than Shu would be a good one. However before he could formulate his sentence, there was another knock at the door. “A doctor was requested,” said an old, reedy voice.

Lu Xun scrambled to his feet. “I’ll go, my lord.”

“We’re not finished. The doctor can wait.”

“Nothing is more important to Wu than your health, my lord. And besides… I haven’t eaten anything but a bun yet today and I’m practically digesting myself.”
Sun Quan smiled fleetingly, then sighed. “Alright. Come in.”

Zuo Ci nodded to Lu Xun as he backed away to let him pass, then came in and strode up to Sun Quan without even bothering to make an approximation of an obeisance.

Although Sun Quan almost invariably balked at any of the trappings of power, including being shown obeisance, he was also neurotically possessive of his right to them. He would angrily and impatiently wave away obeisance, but not to be shown it by a doctor, as if they were equals! “Who do you think you are?” he thundered.

“I am Zuo Ci,” he said. “Who do you think you are?”

The twitching vein that Lu Xun had noted earlier was about ready to vibrate. “You dare challenge me to my face?”

The man was shuffling in his hands an oversized deck of cards. “What you need desperately, young man, is someone to rap your knuckles and say ‘Zhongmou, relax!’” And he actually reached out with the cards and in one swift movement, rapped Sun Quan’s clenched knuckles.

Sun Quan was going to kill him, old man or not, right there in his receiving room, but then one moment his eyes were open, and he was just starting to stand up to end this outrage, and then he blinked, and when he opened his eyes, he was sitting in his old tutor’s room, rubbing his knuckles after a particularly painful blow.

The deliverer wasn’t his tutor, who truth be told could have safely administered a lot more corporal punishment than he dared to the Sun boys without coming close to curbing the spirits of either, but his father.

His father was speaking to him. “So you pretended to be ill to get out of studying. So you lied about it, even when we caught you. Big deal! I remember being young. I’m not saying I wasn’t angry about it at the time, but not as angry as I am now that you’re still stewing about it a month later! You need to quit acting like your every misdeed is proof of your inherent worthlessness. If only you had a little of your brother’s confidence, Zhongmou…”

Sun Quan blinked again, and he was lifting a cup of wine to his lips with his older brother’s arm slung around his shoulder. “You need to find a wife, Zhongmou,” his brother slurred. “I know I said I was going to miss whoring around with you, but my god, what a woman I’ve got now! I know Gongjin’s is her sister, but I can’t imagine she could be as good as mine.”

Zhou Yu, whom Sun Ce had been calling by his style name, simply rolled his eyes. “Why don’t you take Lianshi as your wife? You’re mooning about her enough. Believe me, you won’t regret giving up the beds of a thousand other women if you have the right one in your own!”

“I can’t ask Lianshi to sully herself with me,” Sun Quan found himself muttering, and it was a disorienting experience, because he was both remembering having done this long ago and actually doing it at the same time.

“Sully herself? She’s a maid!” Sun Ce said. “She’s probably digging up her ancestor’s graves right now to kiss their rotting bones to thank them for somehow blessing her with your attention.”

“Brother, don’t be disgusting.”

“Look, you’ve gotta take the younger son’s prerogative bro! I had to marry to suit my family—although I gotta admit I lucked out big time with that one—but you can marry whoever you like.
Don’t waste so much time brooding about it, just do it!”

“I can’t.”

Sun Ce shrugged philosophically. “Oh well, hopefully you’ll get over it before it’s too late. You’re sure you won’t go hunting with me tomorrow?”

He blinked again, and he was turning a die over and over in his hand. Zhou Yu was performing the most formal and correct obeisances to him. “My lord, I am concerned about you. We have won our greatest victory yet, yet your joy did not last for even one day. You are back in that old fog again. Are you missing your brother so much?”

He said nothing. How could he defend himself?

“My lord, how can I rid you of the notion that you are an impostor, a usurper?”

He blinked again, and he was back in the present day, in his own sitting room. He had still not completely risen from his chair.

He sank back into it and regarded the old man, this time with fear. He had not forgotten Gan Ji’s ultimate responsibility for his brother’s death. “Who are you?”

“I have already answered that question, yet you have not answered me. I will tell you who you think yourself to be: a devouring tiger wearing human disguise.”

“Why are you here? Are you here to kill me?”

“I answered that question too, before it was even asked,” Zuo Ci said in a mildly reproving tone. “A doctor was requested. Now, let me feel your pulse.”

As if in a trance, Sun Quan extended his arm.

“Hmm. Pulse floating empty. A low fever just beginning. Worsening as the day goes on, I conjecture. You sweat at night?”

“Yes.”

“Badly?”

He scowled. “The sheets are soaked.”

“But that’s not what wakes you. You don’t have to tell me. Nightmares. Show me your tongue. Hmm! Yellow, dry and cracking. Very bad. Your stool?”

He shifted awkwardly. “Hard to pass sometimes.”

“Hmm.” He narrowed his eyes at him. “Shall I make dietary suggestions? Less meat, more greens in broth. Fresh fruit with every meal. No wine. I could mix up some medicines for you, and that may help with the physical symptoms also. But, until you remove the source of the poison, continuing to supply antidote is only delaying the inevitable.”

“What is my problem?”

“You have one of the worst yin deficiencies I have ever seen,” he said. “But even that is not really the source of the problem. It is merely something that has entered into a symbiotic relationship with your problem. The worse it gets, the worse your yin deficiency gets, and the worse the source gets in
“What is my problem?!”

“You want me to tell you it’s your incompetence, your brutality, your foolishness—in short, your throwback beast spirit. In reality, at present, it is your belief that this is who you are that is the problem. Although I admit that you are already starting to become the monster you fear.” He tilted his head. “I am curious to see that you do not self-medicate with women, as is common in men of your rank who do not have a yin deficiency anything like as severe as yours. Why do you not? You must instinctively know that you crave it.”

His long fingernails twitched in his palms again. “I can’t. I’m engaged.”

“That is a strange answer. You might as well say, ‘doctor, I could not eat when I was starving, because I had a kitchen with food ready to prepare, yet I did not want to prepare it.’”

Sun Quan was silent. His feelings for Lianshi were the only things that were solely his own, the only things that made him feel at all human at times. He was not about to let this sorcerer mercilessly point out the flaws in them.

“Even if she is not a virtuous woman—“

“Lianshi is the most virtuous woman alive!” roared Sun Quan.

Zuo Ci merely tilted his head maddeningly again. “Granted. Let us say then, that if her virtue were only one thousandth what it is, as your wife, it might save you.”

“She can’t save me as I am now. I would only destroy her along with myself.”

“You fear destroying her as your wife, but you can’t bear to let her go fully either. That is why you prolong the engagement, is it not? Do you not see that by teasing your yang with her presence you are only making the problem worse?”

“Go away,” groaned Sun Quan, sinking his head into his hands. “You can’t help me. Nobody can.”

“You have a real problem with listening,” complained Zuo Ci. “I have just told you who can help you, and you immediately state that no one can. However, I admit that nobody can help you if you won’t first humble yourself enough to accept it. I have said what I wished to say.”

When Sun Quan lifted his head, the man was gone, though he had not heard the door open, or even footsteps.

———

Lianshi ran up to the guards at the entrance to Sun Quan’s chambers, gasping and out of breath. “I came as soon as I heard—is he alright?”

The guards exchanged glances, confused.

“The doctor told me our lord needed me urgently. You must let me in to see him at once!”

They were carried away by her anxiety and rushed into their lord’s chamber without even knocking.

“What is this?” said Sun Quan, bewildered, as Lianshi ran up to him and threw herself at his feet, kissing them with her gratitude that he was not at death’s door, as she feared he must have been.
“You can go,” he told the guards, brusque with embarrassment. When they had left, he seized Lianshi’s arms and pulled her to her feet. “Lianshi, stop, please. Why are you acting like I’ve risen from the dead? What’s happened?”

“Oh, my lord… the doctor told me you needed me urgently, I was so afraid that he had discovered some terrible condition… you’re not dying, my lord?”

She was pressing against him, looking up at him with her pure gaze of love that enraptured him and nauseated him at the same time. Nausea because of what the beast within him wanted to do to her trusting, undefiled body. “I’m not dying, Lianshi, but I’m… I’m not well. You had better go.”

“No, don’t, don’t send me away my lord! It has been so long since I’ve been able to talk to you alone like this, and you don’t know how I’ve been longing…” she trailed off.

“We shouldn’t be alone like this anymore, now that we’re engaged, Lianshi. Not until we can be married.”

“My lord, when you asked me to be your wife, it was the happiest day of my life, and you know I have never, never pressed you for when the day would come that you would make me happier still, but… and I know this makes me an ungrateful wretch… but it’s been years…” She wiped a tear away with the back of her hand. “When, my lord? I am too weak to keep waiting like this.”

“Lianshi, I want to give you the wedding day that you deserve, but how can I until I pacify the kingdom? Let me deal with Shu and Wei first.”

“Wedding that I deserve?” said Lianshi in disbelief. “My lord, I never thought of any of that. All I want is to be by your side, to help ease your sorrows and share them… to be held by you…” she blushed, and hesitated, but continued speaking. “My lord, as we are formally betrothed, if you were to… to bed me, it would complete the contract and we would be married. That’s all I want, my lord, is to be married to you. You could take me right now on this desk, and I would be happy, if it meant I was married to you!”

“Do you really mean that?” His voice was strange and husky to even his own ears.

“My lord, I hope you know my love and my devotion-”

“No, no,” he interrupted. “Do you mean you’d really let me take you right here, right now, on this desk?”
早知如此，何必當初 (If you knew from the beginning it would be like this, then why did you do it in the first place?)

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains explicit sex. Consent issues and rough sex.

早知如此，何必當初: zao zhi ru ci, he bi dang chu?

early / know / like / this, why / must / just at / beginning

“If you knew from the beginning how it would be, then why did you do it in the first place?”

Lianshi had actually meant it as a poetic exaggeration, but she correctly interpreted from the look in his eyes how keenly he was interested in her answer. She swallowed, but said, “My lord, I want to be by your side, wherever you want me.”

His hand, with its elegantly manicured, but somehow slightly too long nails, reached out to touch her face as he had permitted himself to do only a few times before. And not on a single one of those occasions had he let the hand then slip down, caressing her neck, until it rested on one of her famous breasts.

She was surprised, but she had to admit, it was a pleasant surprise, especially as he coupled his action by pulling her hips tight against him with his other hand. She knew exactly what the hardness bulging against her was, and she did desire it.

Although by nature, training and choice Lianshi was a chaste woman, she was not an innocent or ignorant one. As a maid, she had been exposed to all varieties of male/female relationships, sometimes performed right before her horrified, averted eyes by those who seemed to consider servants part of the furniture. She had developed early, and when she was still truly a child inside she had had to learn to fend off leering, often drunken men. It was her untrained but effective block of a soldier’s attempt to pinch her butt that had led the princess to claim her for her ranks of martial women, which had been responsible for every good thing in her life, including Sun Quan’s attention.

She had never willingly allowed any man to touch her until now, but how badly she had been longing for his touch…

———

Some distant part of himself was calling out for him to stop, but he was ignoring it. It was like he was on a spooked horse, and had decided to make things worse by dropping the reins, to avoid all moral agency for the outcome.

Taking her on the desk…

From puberty all the way up until he formalized his interest in Lianshi by issuing a contract of betrothal, he had been a voracious consumer of women. There had been the too early, shameful introduction into sex in his affair with the traveling merchant’s wife, the affair which had resulted in his son. After that he had plunged into the more respectable, by the world’s opinion, option of dallying with barmaids and courtesans, neither of which expected anything permanent, like a marriage or a baby, to result from a coupling. When he became an adult, he discovered the pleasures
of whoring. His brother actually had introduced him to it, but while for his brother it was merely an entertaining way to spend an evening with friends and beautiful women on demand, with the evening as likely to end with him passed out in bed with the lady quietly picking his pockets as in actual sex, for Sun Quan it quickly became an addiction. Here was sex reduced to what he thought of as its essentials: a moist hole to spend himself in, without any need to find it, pursue it, persuade it, maintain its interest, or disentangle it. It was always there waiting for him, at a cheap price that took care of both initiation and conclusion, and it came attached to a variety of faces.

As he allowed his interest in Lianshi to develop beyond a mere appreciation from afar of her beauty, to one of her beauty and goodness, to a desire to have her in the only way one could have such a woman, as his wife, he had not stopped visiting brothels. But they had ceased being reliable sources of relief to the shame, guilt, and insecurity that ruled every other waking moment of his life. At first he only felt guilt in that moment of post-orgasmic clarity, but soon it was ruining every moment of the act. He could not even touch a prostitute without thinking about how he dared to use those same hands to hold Lianshi’s hand.

He had replaced his compulsive use of prostitutes with compulsive masturbation. In particular, it became the only way he could get back to sleep after a nightmare, which soon became a nightly occurrence.

In his fantasies, he and Lianshi enjoyed a sexual life of exceptional variety. Sometimes he initiated it, sometimes she did. At first he usually imagined it as sweet and gentle, but as time went on the increasing majority of the fantasies were rough, even violent. Even so, even in his darkest fantasy she was always enjoying it just as much as he was, crying out for him… harder… faster, my lord!

The fantasy of taking her from behind… like a beast… was now his dominant fantasy, and his desk, where he spent far too much of his day, was the most common place for it. It was exactly how he had soothed himself back to sleep the night before, in fact.

Now here she was, his fantasy in the flesh, actually initiating it.

He felt her nipples peaking beneath the dress, and the hand that was pulling her hips to him began pulling up her dress. He pulled his other hand away from her breasts to assist him in untying the strings of her xieyi, The high slits of her dress made it easy, and the underwear fell to the ground within seconds. One hand cupped and squeezed her behind while the other slipped around to the front.

——

Lianshi moaned and tensed as she felt his calloused fingertips with their claw-like nails feeling her.

He kissed her neck and ears, his breath hot as he whispered, “You’re already wet… you really want me to fuck you, don’t you…”

His use of that crude word to her frightened her, but also excited her. She loved him and she did want him… the superior force of his passion attracted her as much as his superiority in size and strength. “Yes, my lord,” she whispered.

His hands pulled away from her body to untie his belt and throw it off. Her heart was just about beating out of her chest as she saw him open his robes beneath to reveal his erection.

“Should I… should I take off my dress now, or do you want to..?”

“No,” he said, and he turned her around. He kissed her neck and despite them both being mostly
dressed, she could feel his erection directly against her bare bottom. “I want to take you exactly as you are…”

Then he pushed her forward. She stumbled a little, but caught herself with her hands on his desk. His hands gripped her hips, and before she could even cry out he was inside her.

———

He had slid into her without her making a sound other than a gasp, but she immediately followed that with the pained cry, “Ah! My lord!”

Oh, hearing those words on her lips never failed to inflame him. She alone actually made him feel like he ought to be called that. As he gripped her hips harder and began thrusting into her, she cried it out again, “My lord! My lord!”

“Lianshi,” he moaned, “Fucking you is even better than I imagined…”

“Ah… my lord…” she groaned.

Sun Quan was not like Lu Xun, whose lack of experience led him to easily climax with only a few strokes. Even when it was his first time with the only woman he had ever truly loved.

———

To Lianshi, it felt like it was forever. Trying not to cry, she tried thinking of things to distract herself, but it was impossible. She felt like she was being ripped apart by his cock and if his nails and hands dug into her any tighter, she would surely fall apart totally…

But she had wanted this. She just hadn’t expected it to hurt so much. At first, despite the pain, she had felt a thrill of pleasure, especially when she heard his voice—the passion in it, the reminder that he was claiming her just as she had long dreamed of, and that it had been his dream as well. But that had quickly disappeared as the sheer intensity of the pain increased. But if this was what he needed then she could endure it… but it was so hard… if only it would stop, even just for a moment…

“My lord,” she begged, with the only words she could muster. “Please…”

———

“P-please,” she moaned, and his months and years of fantasies supplied their own meaning to her words. *Fuck me harder, faster, more!*

He groaned and increased his pace, although he knew he couldn’t last much longer. She was so tight, he’d never felt anything so tight, and so wet, and the way she was crying out now, over and over—“My lord! My lord! Please, m-my lord!”

“Ah, Lianshi,” he grunted, “When you say that… I can’t control myself… I… ahhhh!” He groaned over and over as he climax took him through the last few strokes.

He took his hands off her hips and leaned them onto the desk as he panted, coming back to himself. He looked down at his hands and saw that the nails and fingertips were red with blood. Surprised, he backed up, his cock sliding out of her as he did so.

He looked down and felt as if he was going to vomit. He could clearly see the angry red outlines of his hands on either side of her hips, with little bleeding half-moons where his nails had dug into her. Blood and fluids were dripping from her entrance. And she was… she was sobbing…
明知山有虎，偏向虎山行 (To take a risk even knowing the dangers.)

Chapter Summary

Discussion of abusive childhood.

明知山有虎，偏向虎山行：ming zhi shan you hu, pian xiang hu shan xing
clearly / know / mountain / has / tigers, yet / towards / tiger / mountain / walk
“To know that a mountain has tigers, yet walk towards it anyway; to take a risk despite knowing the dangers.”

“No, no… not Lianshi… not my sweet Lianshi…” He lifted her off the desk, and she turned her tear-stained face to him.

“I’m sorry, my lord,” she said. Her trembling hand tried to wipe away the tears, but he stopped her, wiping them away for her instead with a handkerchief.

“Lianshi, you have nothing to be sorry for,” he said harshly. “I’ve… I’ve brutalized you.”

“It’s alright,” she said, somehow managing to force a smile. “I just… I will be fine. It was worth it, to be with you forever.”

He couldn’t even answer that, the shame was so great. In this beastly act, he had bound her to him in this life. It was too late now to send her far away, as Zuo Ci had implied he would have done if he had truly been thinking of her best interests.

“Let me clean you up,” he said. “Can you… can you walk?”

“I’m sure I can,” she said, and he led her to his bedroom, and helped her lie back on the bed.

He went to his pitcher of water and basin and wet a few washcloths, then came back and gently wiped away the blood from her front. He was inexpressibly relieved that it didn’t seem to be actively flowing… maybe he hadn’t injured her there as badly as he had thought. He took two more washcloths and pressed them to either side of her hips and back, exactly where his hands had been before, but this time his pressure was the absolute minimum amount he thought would assist in stopping the bleeding.

She had sighed when he applied the cloths. “Am I hurting you more? Should I stop?”

“No, the coolness feels nice… my lord… please don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“Lianshi… you are the person in this world I wanted most to save… and I’ve hurt you and let you down worse than anyone else.”

“My lord… will you do something for me?”

“Anything you want.”

“Will you hold me?”
“But… you’re still bleeding from me…”

“I just… I need you to hold me.”

He crawled into the bed with her and took her into his arms.


“My lord?”

“What is it, Lianshi?”

“You don’t… you don’t think less of me now, do you?”

“Lianshi, why would I possibly think less of you?”

“I’ve seen it a lot…” She was staring into space. “A lot of men lose interest in women once they finally sleep together. Sometimes they only care about the hunt. Or, maybe it didn’t turn out the way they thought it would. Sometimes I think it’s because the men don’t really like themselves… so when the woman proves she likes them, they think there must be something wrong with her…”

Sun Quan breathed out sharply, and Lianshi cringed.

“I’m sorry, I’m prattling again. I didn’t mean to imply anything.”

“I know. It just… hit too close to home. Even though I could never lower my opinion of you, Lianshi, I definitely don’t really like myself.”

“Since Lord Zhou Yu died?”

He laughed ruefully. “More like ever since I can remember.”

“But… you were so different before it happened.”

“It’s just that it’s gotten harder and harder to fake it without actually competent people around to tell me what to do or cover up my failings. Let’s change the subject. You seem to know a lot more than I would have thought about men and women, but you’re still so… yesterday I would have said innocent.”

“An innocent person has no idea of what poison is. A person like me has seen what poison can do too much to want to taste it.”

“Maybe you’re more innocent than you think if you didn’t know how poisonous I am.” His voice was bitter and resigned.

She reached up to brush a tendril of hair from his face. “Maybe I just love you enough to want to save you from the poison.”

———

He ordered dinner for two to be brought to his rooms. Lianshi did not want to leave him, and the truth was that he was not at all sure how to announce that she was now his wife.

He did remember to specify no wine, shocking his guards. He knew that if he actually had a bottle, or better two, in his reach, he would not be able to resist the temptation of drinking to blackout point
so that he could experience the sweet relief of feeling absolutely nothing. But he could not trust how he would behave on his way to that point with Lianshi in his rooms.

When the kitchen servants brought the cart he was surprised to see that instead of his usual favourites like peppery spareribs or fish head in chili sauce, the dishes all seemed to be braised or steamed vegetables. There was an already brewed herbal beverage, of a disquieting murky green colour, and strangest of all, a tightly tied package on the lower level of the cart.

The servants launched into an explanation without even being asked for one. “Ah, my lord, when we heard you didn’t want wine, we couldn’t understand it, but your doctor came along himself to give us the full orders, so we understand what to cook for you until your treatment has completed. He prepared the box for you with your medicines.”

They were further surprised by his insistence that they leave the cart with him in the entrance rather than push it into the room, but he was not about to expose Lianshi to them. Her dress slit went up high enough that some of the red marks of his hands were still plainly visible. “I’m tired and I want to go to bed early. I don’t want to be disturbed further tonight for any reason.”

He cut open the box as soon as they had left and studied the contents. It was fortunate that the box had been tightly sealed against curious eyes, because the labels on the medicines were all explicit, and none were actually for him.

*For fingernail wounds, external.*

*For fingernail wounds, internal.*

*For bruises caused by striking or slapping.*

*For vaginal bleeding and soreness.*

*For human bites that break the skin.*

*For a damaged throat from choking.*

There were more. He did not know if he was relieved that most of them were not actually necessary, or humiliated that Zuo Ci had clearly thought him capable of inflicting any or all of these wounds on his love. The mystic claimed that he was not actually a beast, but didn’t this action prove otherwise? How could the sorcerer have sent her to him like a lamb into a tiger’s den, when he expected him to hurt her like this?

He wheeled the cart into his bedroom, and was surprised to see that Lianshi was totally hidden under the blankets. “Lianshi?” He was going to add “It’s just me,” but realized that there was no man alive whom she truly needed to hide from more than him.

She peeked the top of her head out, then visibly relaxed. “Oh, it’s just you my lord… when I heard the wheels, I panicked because I thought servants were coming in.”

“I have food and medicine for you,” he said.

———

The medicine worked remarkably fast, and actually possessed a charming scent. By the time they were finished with dinner, Lianshi felt that the marks on her thighs would pass unnoticed by any but the closest scrutiny.
Sun Quan evidently thought so too, because he was staring at them when he abruptly said, “If you’re done eating, I can show you the secret back exit out of my chambers. It leads outside, but you should easily be able to come up with some reason why you were out there, and go back to your own rooms.”

“But… but, my lord…”

He looked back up at her confused face.

“I’m your wife now… my place is here, in your bed.”

“Most wives have separate rooms from their husbands.”

“That’s not the kind of wife I want to be.”

“You don’t understand, Lianshi. I’m worse at night. Even worse, I guess I should say. I get nightmares and when I wake up I don’t always know right away where I am. I might really hurt you.”

“My lord, I can defend myself.”

“In your sleep? From me?”

“From your sickness.” She hesitated, unsure of how he might take it. “I’ve had to defend myself in my sleep before…”

“What are you talking about? When?”

“Before I came to the palace, I was an attendant to a rich widow. She had three sons. The middle one… I don’t know if you could say he took a fancy to me…” She shivered, still able to exactly picture his pig face with its bulgy little eyes. “He used to always try to sneak up behind me and pinch me, or grope me. I remember even the other servants laughed at it. ‘Boys will be boys,’ you know.”

———

She faltered, and he came up and took her in his arms. He wanted her to know that no matter how this story went, his love for her could not change. She smiled gratefully and continued. “Then one night… I woke up and he was on top of me. It was actually pretty easy that first night to fight him off. I kneed him in the groin as a startle reflex and he ran away crying.” She smiled as if it was still a great memory.

“I thought he would have his mother fire me for that, but he didn’t say a word to anyone. The day passed perfectly without incident, in fact. I thought perhaps I had taught him a lesson and he would leave me alone, but that night I woke up and he was in my room again. I threw a glass at him; it missed, but he left. He was there again the next night, and the night after that. The fourth night I scratched his face up pretty badly. The next day my lady gave me some money to buy something for her, and on my way out of the house, I stumbled across him talking with his older brother about how to… to…” She closed her eyes. “That was when I knew I had to get out of there. I had always heard that the strongest rulers around were the Sun family, and that they treated the people fairly. I wanted to go somewhere where I could find peace, so I used the money to pay a farmer to let me ride on his shipment of grain to your home, and I was hired right away. And… that’s it.” She smiled, and looked up again. “Now you know my whole shameful story, my lord.”

“How old were you?”
“Thirteen, I think?”

“Where were your parents? Are you an orphan?” He had asked her variations of these questions before, when he was not even sure if he was pursuing her, but she had somehow always managed to charmingly turn the subject before he was quite aware what had happened. After only a few of these incidents, he supposed she must have been brought up in an upper, or at least ambitious middle class family in which the training of women in the art of verbal fencing was as critical as actual fencing was to sons. This time, however, she seemed ready to answer anything he wanted.

“They were alive when they sent me away. I think they might have been rich once… maybe that is just a story I made up for myself, that they had lost their money but that somehow they would find it again and come and rescue me…” She shook her head as if to shake off these painful long ago dreams. “They taught me how to read and write, and to speak nicely, but there was never enough food. I understand now that the area I was in kept switching control between various warlords, and every time there was a switch, there were new demands for tribute. We were going to leave, but then my father got sick and he couldn’t go. My mother needed to stay with him. She told my brothers and sisters and me that we needed to go seek work. We tried to stick together at first, but hardly anyone wanted to hire anyone at all. ‘I can give you a position, but just you,’” they would say. I thought I was so lucky when I got that job with the widow… when I sat down to the first bowl of rice that I had earned, I felt proud enough to die.”

“You ever really get to be a child?”

She thought about the question, and as she thought about it and then began to speak, she undid her hair and jewelry, setting them on a table. “I think that first year I was with your sister was like my childhood,” she said. “She had hardly anything for me to actually do for her. Training with her was like playing every day, all day. I was with just her and the other girls most of the time.” She paused to stretch. “And then… my lord, I’m sure I had seen you and you had seen me before this, but there was that one day when I realized that you were looking at me.” She began to undress. He could only watch, hypnotized by her beauty. “I was used to being looked at. But this was different. Your admiration felt so… pure. No, that’s not the right word. What I mean is, every other man who ever looked at me, looked at me like an object. You looked at me like a subject.” She shook her head again. “This isn’t coming out right…”

She yawned, now in nothing but her xiéyi, and climbed into bed. “My lord, I think I must rest now,” she said sleepily. “I think… I think maybe that medicine…” she yawned again.

“Lianshi. Lianshi?” He sat on the side of the bed and tried gently shaking her shoulder. She stirred, but immediately fell back asleep.

He found himself yawning too, and looked at the nearly empty carafe of the herbal brew on the cart. Maybe Zuo Ci had a hand in that and he would sleep the whole night through… it would be the first actual good thing Zuo Ci had done for him.

Too tired to do anything much, he threw another piece of wood into the fire, shrugged off his clothes, and climbed into bed. He looked at Lianshi, and hesitantly pulled her body to his. As his eyes closed, he could only think that it felt so right.
傾國傾城 (A woman whose charms could bring a kingdom to ruin.)

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains explicit sex. No further warnings. The scene is brief, so I didn't want to make it its own chapter. If you want to skip it, scroll from the section beginning "Her folded arms..." down until "Have I ever told you how much."

Meimei is a term of address meaning "little sister." (Since Sun Quan calls Shangxiang "Little Sister" in the English translation, I decided to go with Meimei rather than her name.)

Xiao Ge means "youngest older brother".

Kongming is Zhuge Liang's style name.

Yunchang is Guan Yu's style name.

Yide is Zhang Fei's style name.

傾國傾城：qing guo qing cheng
overturn / kingdom / overturn / city
“A woman whose charms could bring a kingdom to ruin.”

Zhuge Liang had often told his impatient colleagues that one must spend an hour meditating every morning, and if there is no time to meditate for an hour, one must meditate for two hours. It was not a literal truth, of course, but his point was clear: the more frenzied and overwhelming his responsibilities became, the more necessary it was for him to seclude himself from all distraction and not think.

He was deep in nothingness when he heard a voice mere inches from his face. “Sleeping dragon, awaken!”

His eyes snapped open in annoyance, but there was no one there. He got up and turned around, but there was no one in the room at all.

“Identify yourself, spirit,” he said.

“I am yet a man,” said the voice, “Though I admit I have learned the art of transferring my spirit across distances.”

“I want your name.”

“I am Zuo Ci, and I am one who seeks a land ruled with benevolence.”

“I know your name, mystic, and I know of your dealings with my lord. Why do you seek to speak to me?”

“In this time of great chaos, your lord is the one hero I have found who seemed to have the capability to both subdue and rule the land with benevolence, yet he seems to be throwing that away in pursuit of personal vengeance.”

Zhuge Liang sighed. “I know. He won’t listen to me, except to tell him the best strategies for a battle that cannot have good results even in victory. He seems almost insensate at times...”
“You have observed the winds.”

“Yes, this unnatural hot wind from the north. I cannot turn it back, no matter how often I perform the rituals. I have been able to redirect some of it towards Wu, but not enough. I did not know that Wei had such a powerful sorcerer.”

“The wind blows through Wei as well. It has blown Emperor Xian from his throne, and though Cao Pi does not realize it, if fate continues along its current path, he himself is nurturing the ones who eventually end his line. However, do not excuse your lord’s behaviour entirely. The rain may fall and the sun may shine, but if the seeds are not already there, nothing will grow.”

“I know. His greatest strength is also his greatest weakness.”

“It is so for many men. So what have you done to cool his external and internal heat so that he may regain his senses?”

“Why… he sees his doctor of course…”

“Ha! The doctors of rich men. ‘Here is what you want to hear, and my bill.’ That is all that is said by most, unless the malady is bad enough to be evident to the layman’s eye. I should ask the real question. Why, strategist, has it not occurred to you that you must contrive a plan to guide him down the most obvious path for any man to cure yin deficiency?”

“You mean… a woman? It would be difficult… finding a woman skilled in the arts, who would be willing to supply her qi and yin, and then to make her acceptable to him—“

“Kyaahh!” interrupted the mystic. “Why am I constantly speaking to men who look around for the sun at midnight, when if they would look in the proper place they would find that it has been there all along?”

“You mean… Lady Sun?”

“I mean his wife, yes.”

“I would never presume to dictate what my lord does with his person,” said Zhuge Liang stiffly. “I have advised him strongly against letting his guard down around her with regard to matters of the realm.”

“Ha! You think that you could separate your body from your mind—although you have never been called to do it. Well, perhaps you could. But you are truly asleep, dragon, if you think your lord could do it.”

“She is a liability,” Zhuge Liang insisted. “We have been unable despite all our efforts to find out how she is smuggling letters out, but we know she is. We have been able to Intercept most of her brother’s letters in return, and they continually inquire about military secrets and seek her to influence Liu Bei to turn him towards Wu’s interests.”

“And you then pass these letters on to her, without doing anything else.”

“Yes, we don’t want her to know we’re on to her.”

“I see. So in order to avoid a possibility, you subject your lord to a certainty. The wisdom astounds me! Very few strategists, attempting to make their lord reconcile with an ally, would think to ward him off from the wife he married to cement that alliance. Truly, you have a dizzying intellect.”
It was very unsatisfying to glare at empty space. “The two issues are unrelated. He should reconcile—temporarily—with Wu because we do not have the ability yet to make the campaign he desires a success without risking our northern border. He should do so because it is prudent, not because his wife smooth-tongues him into it.”

“I am sure it will be a comfort when you see Shu fall to think that at least your lord died nobly, without undue influence from his wife.”

“What would you have me do instead, conjuror?” It was a challenge, not an actual request for advice, but the voice responded nevertheless.

“There may be a path that even your suspicious nature can permit. Strip this down to its essentials: a man’s wife is receiving secret letters. He doubts her fidelity, but the letters she receives bear no actual proof of wrong-doing. What would you advise? Meditate on that, instead of nothing, sleeping dragon.”

The sunlight in the room flickered, as if a candle being threatened by a breeze, and Zhuge Liang knew the presence was gone.

———

“My lord, the maid is here with another letter from Sun Quan.”

Zhuge Liang accepted the letter and absent-mindedly reached for the tool that he used to temporarily break the seal, then checked himself. “Bring the maid in.”

The maid crept in, looking nervous and guilty. “My lord?”

“You will be paid at the normal rate. When you deliver a letter to your lady, what does she do?”

“She takes it to her rooms, my lord.”

“At once?”

“Oh yes, my lord.”

“Does she have her guards posted during the day?”

“During the day, my lord, only a look out.”

“Can you be the look out this afternoon?”

“Well… I’m sure Zhou Xinyi would be glad to switch with me…”

“Make sure you will be the look-out, then deliver the letter. You will receive triple the normal rate, if you allow Lord Liu Bei by without giving the alarm.”

“Triple?!” The greedy girl eagerly accepted, and departed.

Zhuge Liang followed her out, but he was in search of Liu Bei.

———

Sun Shangxiang drummed her fingers on the table and bit her tongue, trying to think what to write next. She had been harsh, and she knew she needed to end on a conciliatory note, but every time she reread her brother’s letter, it just made her mad again. She picked up her brother’s letter with her left
hand, thought better of rereading it, laid it down, and sighed.

A hand suddenly shot out and grabbed the letter off the desk. She shrieked, dropping her brush and grabbing her chair for an improvised weapon, since she knew she could reach neither her chakrams nor her bow in time. But instead of a sneak attacker, which at least she was confident she could deal with, she was faced with the stormy face of her husband.

“My lord!” she said, at first merely surprised, but then her own passionate nature sprang back with its own storm. “How dare you enter my rooms without asking? What did you do to my guard?”

“Madam,” he said awfully, “How can you speak to me of daring when you have been secretly spying on me for your brother from the first moment of our marriage? I at least have the right to enter any room in my home that I choose.”

He began to read Sun Quan’s letter. For a brief moment Shangxiang considered attempting to beg him not to read the letter, but she realized that even if he did not read it, any love he had once had for her was already dead. Blinking back tears, she turned towards the window.

The letter read as follows:

Meimei:

Even when you wrote your letter, the Guan boy was already dead. He taunted me in his interrogation, and I killed him. He did not have anything useful for me, anyway.

As for the girl, she was requested of me as a wife by one of my officers, and the wedding was last night. I know you have a tender heart behind that fiery front, so I will admit to you that I expect him to treat her with respect. The bride did not even cry during the ceremony.

This hot wind will not stop blowing at us from Shu, and you had better let it blow you back home, my dear, before you discover just how hot things can get. You have written to me before how fond your stepson is of you. Now at last this can be of some use. Use a ruse of our mother being deathly ill to excuse a sudden exit from Chengdu without asking leave. The boy trusts you; you can take him with you without worrying about him raising the alarm. If you can escape with him as a hostage, so much the better, as then we will have a hostage that has the power to make Shu do what we want. But I think it it is more likely that you will be pursued and caught, and when capture seems imminent, you can release the boy like a lizard losing its tail, and continue. They will almost certainly break off pursuit in order to safeguard the boy. Then you at least will be safe.

Write to me only with how I can assist your escape. You can be of no use to the Sun family in Shu anymore.

The letter was unsigned.

“So your time in Chengdu is at an end, madam. You may take yourself and your maids back to the Southlands tonight. You need not fear that I will make any attempt to detain or pursue you.”

He turned to sweep angrily out, but she caught his cloak. He tried to shake her off, but she said, “Wait! At least read the letter I was writing my brother in return before you go. If you still wish it, then I will leave Chengdu as you ask.”

He picked up the letter. The first line was: Xiao Ge, how many times do I have to tell you that my home is with my husband?
He had to read the line several times to even comprehend it. He stole a glance at Shangxiang, but she had turned back to the window. The letter went on:

_I have tried to be sensitive of your feelings, and I don’t know why, because you certainly didn’t consider mine when you arranged this marriage. Perhaps it’s my “tender heart”. But I can see that at this point that attempting to spare your feelings is only keeping you clinging to this idea that this marriage, which you arranged at your command, should be run at your command and now, it seems, ended at your command._

_Let me make it perfectly clear then: I love my husband. I will never betray him. It is true what I have been writing to you before, that from my place in the palace I have never seen or heard any information that would useful to your military campaigns. I put it this way to spare your feelings. What I didn’t tell you is that even if I were to find out something like that, I would not hand it over to you. I am proud to be a member of the Sun family, and I will never by my own actions harm Wu. But while asking me to harm Wu would be like asking me to harm my family, asking me to harm my husband is like asking me to harm myself. It is a degrading request, and you degrade yourself every time you ask it of me. I will not tolerate being asked it anymore._

_Perhaps what you imply is true and my life is in danger here. But I would rather die my husband’s wrongfully accused wife than live as a coward who saved her own neck by placing his innocent child in danger._

Here the letter broke off, with the ink blot and splatter where she had dropped her brush upon becoming aware of his presence.

He looked up again at her back, her strong profile, her dignified stance. He did not know what to say. There was absolutely nothing to say.

He walked up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. She did not shrink from his touch. She merely closed her eyes.

Cautiously, he leaned down and kissed her on the spot just behind her ear, just where he knew she liked it.

Her folded arms unfolded, and she twisted into his embrace. His kisses moved along her jaw to her lips. Her hands were forcing their way into his robes, already loosening, already untying. He undid her top and she momentarily lifted her arms above her head, letting him lift it off and over. He shrugged off his outer garments impatiently as he dropped to his knees, dropping kisses along her breasts and stomach along the way, as he worked to undo her belt, pulling it off and tugging down her skirt and leggings. While he did so, she pulled out the pin from his hair tie, letting his hair flow down like the mane of a horse or a lion.

Now she was basically naked and he was still mostly clothed, which was patently unfair. She pulled him back up to standing before he could take advantage and made quick work of his remaining garments.

Then they were both naked, and equal.

Their bodies, long kept apart, pushed against each other as if they could become one by sheer pressure. They made their way fumbling to the bed by instinct, rotating in space like dancers in a waltz. Perhaps it was sheer chance that when they reached the bed and tumbled into it, she was on top.

She needed no further foreplay. She straddled him and positioned him at her entrance, but then
hesitated.

“Ah, Shangxiang,” her lord gasped, “Please…”

It was all the apology she truly desired. With no further hesitation she sank onto him, and he arched his back beneath her in ecstasy. Their fingers intertwined, and she bent down to give him one more kiss before she began to ride him.

“Tell me if you get too close so we can change position,” she moaned, “I don’t want this over too quickly.”

When he gasped out that he needed to stop, she climbed off of him and took a position on hands and knees. He roughly squeezed his cock and breathed in to resettle himself, but seeing her there, ready for him, presenting herself to him, was not at all calming him down. He took the position as if he was going to take her from behind, but instead simply rubbed against her entrance and clit while his hands ran over her breasts.

“Ah, my lord, don’t tease me… ahhhh,” she groaned, and her moan increased in pitch and volume as she began to orgasm. He couldn’t miss this. Liu Bei quickly pushed his cock into her.

“Shall I tease you like this?” he grunted.

She was screaming. She was always so loud, and he couldn’t help laughing as he pounded her. As her cries gradually subsided, she didn’t miss that he was still thrusting. “Such, ah, stamina, my lord,” she said, and suddenly twisted out of his grip, leaving his cock wet and dripping. “But I think I need to lie down…”

She lay back on the bed and once again he took a break to enjoy her without penetrating her, but his wife would not stop running her hand along his length, slick with her arousal.

“You’re not making this easier for me,” he murmured into her neck.

“No, never,” he said, sliding into her again.

Soon Liu Bei knew he could not keep going much longer. If only he could take her to the edge one more time. “Shangxiang, I can’t hold back much more… you’re too… ahhh…”

“Take me with you!”

As his orgasm began to subside, her own began, keeping his going almost painfully long. He collapsed onto her, and she enjoyed being under his weight as the little aftershocks made her tremble. She kissed him again.

“Have I ever told you how much I love your hair?” she said, coiling a silky strand around her finger.

“I don’t remember you ever doing so,” he said. He touched her own chin-length bob. “Why don’t you ever grow yours out?”

“I like long hair on you, I don’t want to deal with it myself. My mother was always trying to get me to grow it long when I was a kid. It would enrage her when I kept giving myself haircuts with my chakrams. ‘Shangxiang, if you don’t grow your hair long, you will never marry!’” She did a tremulous “old lady” voice complete with shaking her finger.
He grinned. “Well, she was wrong there.”

“Yeah, she had a whole catalogue of those. ‘Shangxiang, if you keep riding that horse, you will break your hymen and never marry!’ Shangxiang, if you don’t eat more, you will have no breasts and never marry! Shangxiang, if you go out in the sun, you will tan and never marry!’ It was her favourite threat to make me do what she wanted, and I don’t think she ever got that it was completely ineffective. It was her worst fear for herself, after all.” She glanced over at her husband. “You met my mother while our wedding was being arranged, right?”

“Yes.”

“And you were surprised, right?”

He coughed. “Well…”

“You don’t have to be diplomatic. She was older than my dad, by a lot. She was a wealthy heiress but her tongue and her… well, face… scared most suitors off. My dad was of the beggars can’t be choosers school of thought at that point, I think. He was always ambitious. She was definitely considered an old maid by the time he married her. I guess that’s why there’s only three of us kids, and fortunately we all took after my dad in the looks department. Although I guess my dad must have had some tender feeling for her somewhere… why else would he keep going after two sons, when by that point no one could reasonably expect her to have a baby at all. Anyway. I guess by the time she got married she already had so much insecurity and neuroticism built up that it couldn’t stop spilling out all over the place. Xiao Ge takes after her a lot…”

Liu Bei laughed, and Shangxiang blushed.

“Forget I said that… even if I’m mad at him, I shouldn’t badmouth him to you. I only let you read that letter because it was an emergency… I really wanted you two to someday get along.” She sighed. “I guess it’s too late…”

The elephant in the room would not be ignored. Liu Bei had resorted to using his body to express his desire for reconciliation. Although his wife had clearly accepted it, he saw now that his words would be necessary as well. “Shangxiang, please forgive me for doubting you and pulling away from you. I should have come to you directly the first time we intercepted a letter from your brother. I was afraid of being taken for a fool, and I let my fear turn me into that fool. I was like… like a man who is living in a place, and knows that it is a good place, where he truly feels alive, and lets people who have never even visited the place tell him that the air and water and food are poisonous. Look how close I came to sending you away. Can you ever trust me again?”

“I never stopped trusting you, my lord. Even in the height of your anger you only wanted to send me away, when you had the power to have me executed. When I asked you to give me one chance to be heard, you gave it to me. There’s not many men who would have done that.”

“I’d feel better if you forgave me, rather than tried to make excuses for my actions. They were inexcusable.”

“Then I forgive you,” she said promptly, and kissed the tip of his nose.

He sighed. “Alright. I still feel like you don’t really understand the magnitude of my betrayal of you. If you ever figure it out, I give you permission in advance to hit me.”

Her eyes glowed wickedly at that. “Who says I need permission to get you?” she said, and pounced.
Zhuge Liang rose and bowed respectfully as his lord was announced to him. “How did it go, my—oh.”

As he had risen out of the bow and actually saw Liu Bei, the happiness practically vibrating off the man made it quite obvious how it had gone. If he had any doubts, the lover’s bite peeking out on his neck more than dealt with them.

“I was wrong,” Liu Bei said cheerfully. “She never betrayed me. The letter I caught her writing to her brother… she never betrayed me, not even to him. She loves me, Kongming.”

Zhuge Liang was uncomfortable at best when receiving or giving displays of emotion, except with his own wife Yueying. With her, at least, he knew he had a duty to get on with it, and her own unique qualities made it a duty that was also a pleasure. But there was no way he wanted to listen to Liu Bei’s rapturous professions of his lady’s no doubt infinite perfections. Hastily, he said, “That is good news, my lord. I am sure your sworn brother will be happy to enter into all of your feelings. For now, our time is limited, and we must discuss the options for invasion point into Jing.”

“About that…”

Zhuge Liang waited respectfully, but his lord didn’t continue. Eventually he prompted, “Have you changed your mind, my lord?”

“Well… you’ve been asking me to, haven’t you?”

Yes, I have been asking you, and backing it up with damn good reasons why as well, for weeks now. All it took to change your mind is your wife saying pretty please with her hand inside your loincloth? Aloud he said, “I have, my lord, and yet…” He paused, remembering Zuo Ci’s warning, but he could not help himself. “And yet I cannot understand why your wife’s words were so much more convincing than my own.”

“My wife?” Liu Bei looked genuinely confused. “What are you talking about?”

“What did she say to you about the invasion?”

“We didn’t talk about the invasion!”

“What did you talk about?”

“Well… mostly it wasn’t talking…” and Liu Bei smiled despite himself. “We talked about her mother a little… I asked her forgiveness… then we… stopped talking again.” His grin got broader, making him look positively boyish.

“She didn’t mention her brother at all?”

Liu Bei thought about it. “Well, she said she had always hoped we could get along, but that it was probably too late now.”

“Nothing more?”

“Kongming, what is this?” Liu Bei suddenly exploded. “How the hell would she know about the invasion anyway? Are you trying to make me suspect her again?”

Zhuge Liang realized that he was letting a feeling he hadn’t even known he had cause him to act totally irrationally, against his own interests. Was this foul wind really powerful enough to make even him act this way? He never liked to eat crow, but his reason insisted that it was the best choice.
“I apologize, my lord. This unnatural wind is affecting even me. I… like to think of myself as your most trusted, infallible advisor. When I suspected that you were choosing to listening to the words of your wife rather than me, it… upset me.”

Liu Bei wasn’t sure exactly how he managed it, but he did not laugh. Zhuge Liang’s metaphorical feathers would surely be ruffled as much as the literal ones on the fan that he waving. “I understand. Although perhaps she did have something to do with it. I feel… calmer now. Able to think about what you said, to see what actually is going on, in the whole picture. You were right, I let my desire to avenge my brother get out of proportion. It wasn’t wrong in itself for me to want to avenge him, but… Yunchang is dead. Should Yide and I have killed ourselves that day to keep the literal meaning of the words of our oath? If that was what the oath required, then it is already broken. I have prided myself on my loyalty… but would it not betray our friendship more if in the quest to avenge him, I destroyed the kingdom?”

“As you seem to be rephrasing words I have already spoken to you, my lord, I agree.”

“Take a compliment! I said you were right. I was merely showing that some part of me was listening.”

“Alright.” Zhuge Liang took a deep breath, gathered up the sheaf of papers with the various maps, pros and cons etc regarding Jing invasion points, and tossed them into the fire. “Now. As you can see, my lord, I have no plans, so should we adjourn this meeting until I can consider how best to reforge the alliance with Wu? Or should I contemplate the problem of the abdication of Emperor Xian and Cao Pi’s declaring himself emperor?”

“What’s difficult about renewing the alliance? We tell them we are willing to pardon their stealing of Jing province and move on.”

“Lord, had you truly forgotten that we had promised to give that portion of Jing province to Wu long ago? Sun Quan is a tiger who bites when he thinks he is no longer being treated as a man. He grew suspicious of our intention to ever hand over the territory, so when he saw the opportunity to take the territory by assisting Wei, he pounced.”

“Oh, I had forgotten about that promise. Why did I forget?”

“I do not believe I mentioned it to you at the time, my lord, but it was not a promise I ever intended to keep. I unfortunately miscalculated my ability to keep the beast of the Southlands pacified with the occasional bone. Guan Yu, honourable though his memory of course is, did not help things when he responded to Sun Quan’s request of his daughter for his son with such unnecessary vehemence. As you say your wife was not giving him information after all, that must have been another boost to his paranoia.”

“But what you’re saying is that his paranoia was justified.”

“Please try to keep up, my lord. Your job is to be benevolent; my job is to do all the dirty work so your benevolence has a hope in hell of actually ruling anything larger than a plot in a graveyard.”

“But how can I put my name to renewing the alliance if I know that we never made it in good faith and plan to betray him as soon as we can? He is my brother-in-law, after all.”

“My lord, you said you were looking at the bigger picture, but clearly you are not. Your grand intention, which I have made my ultimate purpose, was to restore the Han dynasty and ensure that the land is ruled with benevolence, for the benefit of the people. I could not foresee any path to such a result without first controlling both Shu and Wu. Only then would we have a broad enough base of
power to invade and conquer Wei. Of course now the near impossible task of finding a legitimate successor to a Han emperor who has willingly abdicated has changed—wait.’

The fan, which had been bobbing up and down with the rhythm of Zhuge Liang’s testy speech, suddenly became still. Liu Bei knew better than to speak.

“Has changed… has changed… a legitimate successor… your brother-in-law after all… My lord, you must leave while I think on these things. It will not take me long; I have found the sun in the daytime!”

Bewildered by this strange speech, Liu Bei scratched the love bite on his neck as he left.

———

When Zhuge Liang had first told his wife that he had decided to choose Liu Bei as his master, she had taken a moment to respond, as she was performing a long series of calculations upon her abacus. At last she had jotted down a number upon her blueprint, and said, “Is his chance of success so low then, my lord?”

He had been startled and a bit insulted, and she had immediately laughed, amending it with, “I don’t mean his chance of success with you, Kongming. I mean that you would only choose for a master one whose aims, without you, would be completely impossible, and that even with you would be highly difficult. That is the only way that you can fulfill your intellect.”

At first the thrills of constantly overcoming such long odds seemed to him to be an almost divine assurance that he had correctly rated his own skills and picked the perfect master to sufficiently challenge them. But the disaster of Fan Castle had shaken him worse than even he had initially perceived. It was all very well to say that it happened because this person and that person did the wrong thing; but if Zhuge Liang did not predict that they would do the wrong thing, was that not a failure in his vision?

In addition, despite his pose of detachment and reason, he had grown to truly care about Liu Bei and the fulfillment of his dream for its own sake.

In short, he had come to a place in his life where he would gladly trade a shot at eternal fame as a strategist for a easier path where the chance of reaching the destination was certain.

However, until now he had failed to realize that this original destination wasn’t where any of them had thought.

But it was not too late. He had his grand plan. Every line of it was perfect. Everyone’s actions or inactions foreseen, every fork in the road mapped. No matter what occurred after now, as long as his previous data was accurate, ultimate victory was certain. Now he just had to present it to Liu Bei.

He strode into Liu Bei’s council chambers with the papers, ready to present his plan, when a messenger rushed in.

“My lord! A few days ago Cao Pi offered Sun Quan the title of king of Wu and the nine bestowments if he would agree to become his vassal, and Sun Quan has accepted!”

Without a word, Zhuge Liang pitched the papers into the fire again, and strode out.

———

A few days after that, Zhuge Liang was just putting the finishing touches on his new and improved
grand plan. A plan that would turn this devilish wind to their advantage. A plan that might see the whole country reduced to desert, but a united desert, one that would surely eventually reblossom under the benevolent rule of Liu Bei and his heirs.

As he wrote the final stroke, another messenger rushed into see him.

“Chancellor! Our original intelligence was hasty and incorrect. Cao Pi did offer the title and the bestowments to Sun Quan, but Sun Quan rejected the conditions, and declared himself king independently. The stated reason was that Cao Pi clearly lacks the mandate of heaven and thus cannot be a legitimate emperor. These are the facts we have for the time being, my lord.”

“The unstated reason?”

“The intelligence is contradictory, my lord, but most reports agree that the sticking point was the condition that Sun Quan’s only child be taken as a hostage to Luoyang. Some reports say that Sun Quan himself rejected this outright, others that Sun Quan was amenable but was talked out of it by his wife. This is almost all Wei sources, my lord, so much of it may be conjecture on their part.”

“His wife? When did she become that? Is it the same woman who has been engaged to him these past few years?”

“It is the same woman, but the timing is unclear. It appears that the wedding and the coronation may have been combined into one ceremony.”

“This intelligence needs further looking into. Sun Quan’s son is certainly not his wife’s child, and she can reasonably hope to bear him sons and daughters of her own soon. What are her motives? I must know more about her. I had assumed she had no real influence over Sun Quan since she was unable to actually convince him to marry her. There could be several possible… however, we cannot wait until we see such intelligence to act.” He took a deep breath. “I was hasty in destroying my previous plan. It should now work with minor modifications… provided nothing else is incorrect. Inform Lord Liu Bei that I must see him immediately.”
女生外向 (A young woman will leave.)

Chapter Notes

Boyan is Lu Xun's style name.
"Clouds and rain" (雲雨) is a poetic euphemism for sex.
Da Ge means "oldest big brother" and Shangxiang is referring to Sun Ce.

女生外向：nü sheng wai xiang
woman / young / outside / toward
“A young woman will leave (her family for her husband).”

“I really don’t understand what the hell’s goin’ on anymore,” said Gan Ning one day in the sparring grounds. It seemed completely unrelated to anything, but not even Ling Tong bothered to bring this up, and soon it became clear what the pirate had seen. Within seeing but not hearing distance, Lu Xun was walking out with his wife in his arms and a blanket draped over one shoulder.

Madam Lu could already walk with the aid of a cane by now but Lu Xun certainly seemed to grab any excuse to carry her around instead. Not that she appeared to mind.

He carried her up a hill that was topped with trees. Far enough that their figures were only like tiny figurines representing troops on a battle map. The blanket was laid down where the trees further obscured the view from the sparring grounds, but it was still obvious that they both laid down on it together.

“In the middle of the day!” said Han Deng, scandalized, or maybe impressed, it was hard to tell.

“Is anyone else here to train?” said Zhou Tai, contemptuously, but the overwhelming curiosity of everyone else could no longer be suppressed, especially as Sun Quan had ridden out with his new queen on a brief coronation tour to boost the people’s morale, and thus couldn’t be around listening.

“Well, I think they are genuine now,” said Zhu Ran, firing an arrow into its target. “Good for them, I say.”

“I still can’t believe that Boyan could actually seduce the girl!” said Han Deng.

“Ehh, what’s hard to understand about that part?” said Gan Ning, misunderstanding what Han Deng meant by “could.” “He’s been nothing but kind to her and he’s not so bad looking, I guess. It’s natural, right?”

“Well… maybe it’s not so natural… I mean he did kill her father.” It was unclear whether this meant that Zhu Ran had abruptly reversed his opinion, or simply that he didn’t give a damn whether it was natural or not.

“Hey, if Ling Tong could get over it, I don’t see why she shouldn’t. I didn’t trade in a ticket to a dukedom or a personal army or my own private brothel just to bail his ass out either—ow!” He rubbed his ear where Ling Tong had hit it with a pebble.

Han Deng shook his head. “It wasn’t Lu Xun that killed him, that was Lu Meng, remember? You were there! At the battle, at least. I don’t know where you were when they were fighting Guan Yu
Zhu Ran gave Han Deng a dirty look. “Well, what does it matter really whether his was the sword that actually cut off Guan Yu’s head? He was certainly one of the ones who beat him down to the point we could take him prisoner. And yes, for your information, I was on a completely different part of the battlefield during the fight, but I was there at the execution.”

“I heard that he pleaded with Lu Meng not to execute him.”

“Only because he thought it would displease our lord not to be given a chance to try to get Guan Yu to serve us. Not that Guan Yu would have ever agreed to that. Lu Meng did the right thing. Our lord would have been even more enraged if even after defeating him he had been insulted to his face by Guan Yu, when everyone knows Guan Yu submitted to Cao Cao when he was captured by Wei.”

Zhu Ran may have been a hothead, but he did have legitimate strategic instincts. This angle on the matter had not occurred to the rest of them, but now that it had, they all had to admit that it was probably exactly why Lu Meng had done it. To spare his lord one final humiliation that would have surely further stoked the fires of his feelings of incompetence compared to Shu and Wei.

There was a crash. Zhou Tai had relieved his feelings on a mounted practice dummy, completely shattering the wooden frame within. “Bunch of vultures!” he snarled.

He stomped off. Ling Tong adjusted his ponytail nervously.

“I guess we should at least get back to training. C’mon Gan Ning, I’ll take you on.”

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“Guan Yinping, what are you thinking?” her husband murmured into her neck.

She was lying on her back, staring up at the sunlight filtering through the leaves. It was spring, but it felt like summer. Maybe this was just the way it was in these hot southern lands… “Did it rain while I was a prisoner, Boyan?”

That pulled his lips away from her neck. He hated the constant reminders that she was only his because of her imprisonment. When they were alone, he could forget about it, so for her to bring it up seemed especially cruel. Though of course she didn’t mean to hurt him. “I don’t remember, honestly. It was a difficult time for me… not that it compares to what you went through, of course. If I had ever suspected that you were being kept down there—”

She kissed him to stop his apology before it could begin. “Please. Forget I asked. We need to take advantage of our time together before your lord returns.”

They both knew that when he returned, which would only be in a few days now, that he would surely wish to assign his officers to likely defensive or offensive positions, and since Lu Xun would certainly be assigned to the west, there would be no way Sun Quan would allow his Shu wife to accompany him. They had already mutually discussed it and agreed that she would go to his newly granted lands in Yangzhou, and take up the management of the household and land while he was away fighting.

Her words were surely invitation to return to kissing her neck, and he did so, but quickly felt bad that he had cut off her question with his own guilt. “Why did you ask, though?”

“I was just thinking… it seemed at Fan Castle that the rain would never stop, but here in the Southlands, there have only been a few brief periods of drizzle. So I wondered if maybe it had rained
when I was… down there. Is it normal for it to be so dry and hot in the spring here?"

“No, but droughts come to every land eventually. Or perhaps the heavens are showing their displeasure with Cao Pi’s arrogance in seizing the title of emperor. In Wei it has truly become a drought already, and this cloudless wind is blowing from their territory.”

“It’s nice to have so much sun, but it would be nice to see clouds and rain again.”

“We could make our own ‘clouds and rain,’” he said, and shifted his hips over hers.

She giggled. “Someone will see us!”

He glanced up. He could just barely see the tiny figures of the Wu officers sparring. “I don’t think they can see us, and anyway everyone will be going in for lunch soon.”

She peered down at the Wu officers. “It’s funny how even when they’re so tiny, you can still tell exactly who is who by the way they fight. Look at Ling Tong, practically vibrating as he bounces in place waiting for Gan Ning to get back up. He always looks like he really has to pee.”

“Just promise me you’ll never bring that up to him. His fighting style depends on being completely loose. If you make him self-conscious, you’ll ruin him. Let’s get back to the subject.”

He leaned in for a kiss, but she turned her face aside so that he kissed her cheek instead. “You’ve already given me my ‘medicine’ once today. If you do this now, are you sure you’ll have enough left for my evening dose?” she teased, her slim hand rubbing him through his pants.

He blushed, but nevertheless moved his head to recapture her lips and kiss her passionately. As she had recovered from her ordeal, she had turned out to be a natural flirt. He had never thought of himself as clumsy in his speech, but he was never quite sure of how to answer her, if she would find it exciting, or insulting. He usually decided to simply be sincere instead. “I only know I want to fill you with me as often as I can, before you’re beyond my reach.”

“Ah, Boyan… that’s what I want too…” she whispered. She arched her hips so he could pull off her xieyi and sighed as he untied it.

“What’s wrong?”

He laughed a bit guiltily. “I was just hoping you would be wearing your green xieyi. The one I first saw you in, with the pink flowers.”

“That one? I do wear it sometimes… you really like it that much more than the others?”

“The others are just ones that Lianshi gave you… the green one is really yours, isn’t it? There’s just something about it…”

“Boyan, it turns out even you are a bit perverted!” she giggled, and rubbed his red cheek with a laugh. “Would you like to take the green one with you when you go?” she said with a naughty smile.

He didn’t answer her, taking the excuse that he was totally absorbed in the task of removing his boots in order to be able to take his pants off.

“I think you would like it… I’ll hide it in your saddlebags… or maybe I’ll send it to you in my first letter. I’ll write ‘contains his wife’s xieyi’ on the outside of the package, so your troops will know it’s
urgent.”

“One of these days you’re gonna get it,” he warned, climbing back on top of her.

“It seems to me like I’m gonna get it right now…”

———

When Sun Quan returned to his palace a few days later, he was actually in a decent mood, which compared to the standards of the past year would have been considered euphoric in a normal man. Lu Xun had predicted great morale boosts to the people from being introduced by their ruler, now their king, to his beautiful queen, and while he did not doubt that Lianshi would attract admiration wherever she went, he had of course been sure that he was bound to say or do something stupid to betray himself at some point. But it had all gone off very well. In particular the people along the northern borders, who had grown weary of the constant trampling of soldiers across their fields and boats unable to fish because the fishermen had died in battle, seemed to take confidence in Sun Quan’s determination and ability to save them from further disaster. The rainfall might be reduced in the southlands, but it was nothing compared to the rumours of the drought afflicting Wei. Was this not proof that heaven itself favoured Sun Quan’s rule over Cao Pi’s?

In addition, while he was still having nightmares a few times a week, this and his other symptoms were such a marked decrease from the agony he had been suffering for so long prior to marrying Lianshi that it felt like a release from hell into purgatory. He almost didn’t dread the nightmares anymore, since when he awoke with them he was soothed back into sleep not by his own hand, but the sweet embrace of his wife.

He could not forgive himself for the way he had begun their marriage, but some small part of himself was actually starting to believe that she might save him before he could destroy them both and all of Wu.

As their carriage approached the palace, the driver said, “Your majesty, there is a messenger approaching us from the palace.”

“He opened the window and leaned out to see the man kneeling and going through a grotesque series of obeisances. “Your majesty, Lord Lu Xun has received a letter that requires your majesty’s immediate attention. With forehead pressed to the ground, he begs your majesty to summon him as soon as possible.”

_God, this flowery stuff gets even worse when you’re king._ “Alright. I will await him in my chambers.” He shut the window and turned to his wife. “My love, are you tired from the journey? You have your own rooms, if you would like to rest while I speak to Lu Xun.”

Lianshi, who was prone to motion sickness in a carriage, said faintly, “That sounds wonderful… and perhaps some ginger tea…”

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“My lord!” The knock was loud and insistent. “Lord Lu Xun!”

Lord Lu Xun paused in mid-thrust, an interruption which came as an acute disappointment to his lady, who had just begun her ascent. “Maybe if we’re quiet he’ll go away,” she whispered.

“My lord, are you there?! His majesty has returned and has requested you in his chambers
immediately!”

He gave a jagged sigh, cried out in as normal of a voice as he could manage, “I’m coming,” then pulled out regretfully.

Yinping wriggled unhappily. “You mean you’re not coming, and neither am I,” she pouted.

Lu Xun was already dressing, but he paused briefly to drop a kiss on her inner thigh. “Hold that thought, my love. I’m not sure when I’ll be back, but when I am, we won’t be interrupted again even if Zhu Ran sets the place on fire.”

“He won’t make you leave immediately, will he?”

He was dressed now and was splashing some cold water on his face, then quickly combing out his hair. “I have no idea how he is going to react to these letters, but there is no way he could expect me to be ready to ride out anywhere without at least a day or so to prepare.”

“A day or so!”

He hated to see her so unhappy, and tried to take her mind off their probable imminent separation. “How do I look? Alright?”

“Very handsome, as usual,” she said, sadly.

Damn, that hadn’t worked. “I will be back, as soon as I can.”

She rolled over and pulled the blanket over her.

He hesitated, but he really had no time. He grabbed the letters from his secret compartment and darted off, jacket tails flying behind him.

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When Lu Xun entered his king’s chambers, before he could even sink to his knees, Sun Quan was impatiently waving it off. “Lu Xun, is there an honour or something I could bestow on you that you don’t have to do that when we’re alone?”

“I don’t believe so, your majesty, but I won’t tell anyone if you won’t.”

“Make it ‘my lord’ as well.” Sun Quan pushed the taxation records he had been perusing while waiting for Lu Xun aside and said, “Alright, what about this letter?”

Lu Xun held out two scrolls, both with seals unbroken.

“How do you know this is urgent without opening it? Boyan, I gave you my seal and full authority to take care of correspondence in my absence.”

“Because the messenger who brought it said it was a message to the king of Wu from the Emperor of Shu Han, and from his empress to her beloved brother.”

Sun Quan, who had just broken the seal of the larger scroll, paused.

“Even so, I would have opened them myself, had I not already heard from the advance riders that you would be here in two days. Perhaps I acted wrongly, but I could not think of any action I could possibly take with regard to such a letter without your majesty’s consultation in interpreting its contents. Especially the letter from…” The princess? The empress? “…your sister.”
“I’ll read the letter from my sister first myself,” said Sun Quan, setting aside the other scroll. Lu Xun waited respectfully, anxiously scanning his king’s face for signs of its contents.

The letter, in Shangxiang’s own hand, was a good deal less blunt than the one she had been writing when she was interrupted, but it nevertheless expressed the same horrifying (to Sun Quan) principal point: that her first loyalty was to her husband. As this was an official, rather than clandestine correspondence, it of course made no reference to Sun Quan’s continual attempts to get her to betray him, but the unwritten message that these attempts must end was perfectly clear.

Then there was a great deal of joy and congratulations over his marriage to Lianshi, assurances that she would be writing to her new sister directly as soon as possible, and even teasing comments about Shangxiang’s longing to bounce a nephew or niece upon her knee, to the point that Sun Quan must think of her for inspiration if necessary if reluctant to perform his duty. Sun Quan made a disgusted face at the notion of thinking of his sister in any way whatsoever while in bed with his wife, unknowingly increasing Lu Xun’s anxiety as he did so.

The letter ended with a half-tender, half-mocking reminiscence of some incident in childhood wherein Sun Quan and Shangxiang had had a horrible fight over a very grave matter: who would be the true owner of the newest pony. Sun Jian, catching them still at odds weeks later, had almost literally knocked their heads together and said he didn’t give a damn whether either of them were sorry or whether they forgave each other or not; they were brother and sister and that was that.

As I recall, we didn’t listen to him right away, and before we could reconcile, we discovered that Da Ge had not only taken possession of Little Arrow, but ridden the poor thing so hard that it had thrown a splint. We teamed up to beat him up and after that we were friends again. I don’t think we ever did decide who was in the wrong in the original fight, but it didn’t matter. (You were totally the wrong one by the way, but I forgive you now.) Not to compare our beloved brother to a certain sneering man in the north, of course.

I hope to write to you soon with good news, but I will close here for now.

Good news?

Was she pregnant?!

About six months into her marriage, he had written to her suggesting that she bring a certain matter to her husband’s attention “late at night” in order to influence him more easily. A furious reply had come, in which she had said that she never saw Liu Bei late at night, and, so that Sun Quan would be perfectly aware of her meaning, she “never saw him late at night at any time of the day.” In conjunction with the infamy of her personally loyal armed maiden guards, it was clear indeed. And of course, in the years since of their “marriage”, there had never been even a rumour of her pregnancy.

There wasn’t much clear anymore.

He rolled up the scroll absently as he stared into space. A discreet cough from Lu Xun shook him out of his reverie.

“This letter was… of a personal nature. However, I don’t think this one will be.” He held it back out to his general. “You’d better read it aloud to me so we both hear it at the same time.”

“To His Majesty, King of Wu, famed General Who Quells Barbarians; greetings.”

Sun Quan snorted, and Lu Xun paused. “My lord?”
“Nothing. I was just wondering if he forgot that it was really Cao Cao who gave me that title through Emperor Xian. Never mind. Go ahead.”

Lu Xun read on. When stripped of the various poetic and diplomatic flourishes, it came down to this: Liu Bei began by admitting a failure in punctuality in relinquishing Jing province, of course without actually apologizing, but even the admittance was a surprise. More surprises were to come. Without actually mentioning Guan Yu and Guan Ping, the letter suggested that as Shu was accepting some responsibility for provoking the initiation of the battle, it must also accept some responsibility for its results. There was a very diplomatic passage that managed to somehow come across as both a strong condemnation of Wu’s executions of Guan Yu and Guan Ping (again without mentioning either by name) yet at the same time a firm resolution to let such an unpleasant situation remain in the past, for the benefit of the people.

The letter then deftly moved onto a topic on which Shu and Wu would be expected to be much more in agreement: the unfortunate gain of Jing province territory by Wei. From there, it naturally moved onto Wei’s metamorphosis into Cao Wei, and the emperor’s forced abdication in favour of Cao Pi. The letter writer enjoyed flexing his literary muscles here in a very long and allusion-packed condemnation of Cao Pi specifically and usurpers generally. The very land itself, in its drought, cried out for a ruler who would join authority, competence and benevolence in one.

The letter then moved on into effusive (sickening, thought Sun Quan) praise of Sun Quan’s righteous decision to reject Cao Pi’s overtures of vassalage. When the letter finally seemed to be wrapping up that theme (to Sun Quan’s relief), it was actually only switching over to praise of his shrewdness. In particular, it hammered on the folly of accepting a gift that the giver did not actually have the power to bestow, especially when this “gift” required an upfront cost that no man could agree to without humiliating himself.

Sun Quan exhaled at that. “They know Cao Pi demanded Sun Deng.”

“It would appear so.”

“It was not discussed here…”

Lu Xun was glad that Sun Quan seemed to be phrasing that as a statement, not a challenge to Lu Xun’s discretion, but he answered it anyway: “No, sir. I agreed with you about the absolute impossibility of accepting it, so there was no need to consult any of my fellow officers. Moreover, I thought the rejection of vassalage would play off better with the people as something that we did not need in itself, rather than being motivated by any personal drawbacks of the offer.”

“So Shu’s intelligence is from Wei, not here.”

“It would appear so. On their side, such an offer could have only been made after long consultations with many people, and I can conjecture that our refusal would have been equally widely discussed.”

“Continue.”

At this the point the letter got even more interesting.

The letter writer made another interesting paradoxical paragraph in which he both modestly dismissed the importance of Liu Bei’s descent from Emperor Jing, since it in no way made him an obvious heir to Emperor Xian considering the many, many other members of the Liu clan, and yet also insisted that there was something destined about it: a cadet branch that had been allowed to seemingly wither away in obscurity, away from the increasing treachery and indolence of the
imperial court, in order to come and restore the dynasty at the brink of total disaster. His previous efforts to restore Emperor Xian spoke for themselves and no one, whether friend or foe, could accuse Liu Bei of being one who had sought to obtain control of the emperor in order to simply abuse him as a puppet for personal gain, as so many others had.

“Hmm, that’s true at least,” muttered Sun Quan.

But now that Emperor Xian had laid down his throne, it had become clear that if the Han was to rise again, it would not be through him. It was time for a cadet branch to become the main branch. Therefore, he, Liu Bei, would willingly take up the burden of empire, for the sake of the people.

At this point, Lu Xun broke off and shook his head. “The Shu chancellor is really incredible. When you read these words, he actually makes you feel like Liu Bei is doing us all a favour by becoming emperor.”

“Well, you remember how I described him.”

“That smug fan-waving motherfucker?” said Lu Xun with a grin.

Sun Quan couldn’t help grinning back. “Why Lord Lu Xun, has marriage changed you so much? I never would have imagined hearing such a word from you.”

Lu Xun neatly parried this attack. “It seems marriage changes a man for the better, including you, may I say, my lord.”

Sun Quan gave a slight nod which was like a touché. “Continue. I believe we are now coming to either the carrot or the stick.”

In his imperial majesty, Liu Bei could not and would not forget the fraternal bond he had with the king of Wu through his empress. As rightful emperor, he could and did grant, without condition, the title of king of Wu, and the nine bestowments, to Sun Quan.

Lu Xun stopped at the end of the paragraph, at a loss.

“Read it again,” said Sun Quan, clearly similarly flabbergasted.

Lu Xun read it again, and the words remained the same.

“Well, there’s the carrot. Where’s the stick?”

Lu Xun read on. There had never been a better time to attack Wei. The emperor was certain that with Wu’s gracious assistance, they could present a relentless assault across the entire border with Wei. In their inevitable victory, the emperor would of course take up his rightful place of power in Luoyang, while entrusting the king of Wu and his heirs to exert just control over all internal affairs of the Southlands. This paragraph ended with an almost incomprehensible line about what unknown glories might await in the next generation.

“What did he mean by that line?”

“I’m not sure, my lord, but I think what he’s saying with the allusions of the unimaginable glory possible from a union of tiger and dragon here that there is at least a strong possibility that he would choose a son from his union with your sister as his heir.”

“She really must be, then…”
“My lord… may I take it that your sister’s letter indicated that she was pregnant? I apologize for being forced to pry into your family, but it is actually very pertinent information for us.”

“She said she hoped to have good news to share soon. Of course my mind went there immediately, but… I have to admit… I would never have expected… it’s fairly infamous that he hasn’t even attempted to visit her rooms for years.”

Lu Xun’s mind rapidly darted among the possibilities. He could dismiss the idea that Lady Sun might have taken a lover immediately, which was excellent for his lifespan, since it meant he wouldn’t have to bring the possibility up to her brother. A lady might attempt to pass her lover’s child off as her husband’s, but she couldn’t expect to if she wasn’t also coupling with her husband at least occasionally. He had not known Lady Sun personally, having been only just starting to be really recognized for his talent in her brother’s army at the time of her wedding, but her passion and daring was legendary. He had spoken to her only once, the first time he had actually been singled out for commendation, by her brother Sun Ce, not long before the injury that led to his death.

He had been expecting something formal when he was summoned, but Sun Ce merely thumped his back (it knocked the breath out of him) and said “Keep it up! That’s what I like to see!” No one dismissed him, so he had just stuck around listening while Sun Ce and his senior officers discussed strategy for the next battle. He had been surprised at first to see that the others actually were listening to what she had to say, but considering her words on their merits, they really weren’t bad at all. She was no grand strategist, and she was clearly one with a philosophy of always pressing the attack, but her ideas for what to do in individual skirmishes showed familiarity with battle theory, extensive personal experience, and imagination. He had also been dazzled by the way she alternated between serious points and sassy, flirtatious remarks.

As the meeting broke up, she walked over to him. “Lu Xun, right?”

He bowed deeply. “Yes, my lady.”

“You know, you really disappointed me today,” she said. He looked up, startled, as she continued, “When you walked in here, I thought to myself, ‘At last! That worthless brother of mine has found me a girl whose talent in battle approaches my own! Then you opened your mouth. You cut me to the heart!” She grabbed his hand and pressed it to her chest, while her other hand played with the ornaments in his hair and the feathers on his shoulders. “You shouldn’t dress like this. It’s false advertisement!”

It was the first time that he had touched a girl’s chest, but he couldn’t even enjoy it, because all that he would think of was that as soon as one of her brothers noticed that he was groping their baby’s sister’s chest, he would be dead. So much for his bright future.

“C’mon, Meimei,” came the voice of her brother Sun Ce. “It’s not like you to pick on targets that don’t fight back. Shouldn’t you find someone to play with your own age?”

Lu Xun’s panicked eyes darted to the wolf-like man, but Sun Ce was not angry, merely reproachful.

The girl pouted, but dropped Lu Xun’s hand. “Da Ge, you spoilsport! He can’t be that much younger… And besides, I can’t play this game with just anyone. At least this little bird knows I don’t mean it.”

Her brother simply shook his head and left the tent.

She made no attempt to reinitiate the contact with Lu Xun, but did lean in to say lasciviously, “If you are going to keep dressing like that, you should always keep your mouth shut. Just think, if you
hadn’t said anything, I could be taking you to my tents right now... now it’ll be just me and my one hundred maidens... and we get so lonely...”

“Sun Shangxiang!” called out her brother from just outside the tent.

“Alright, alright!” She winked and was gone.

He shook his head to clear away the memory. She was not a lady who did things by halves, and he could not imagine that this would not include welcoming a man into her arms. If she had given herself to her husband, it would be completely.

He took a deep breath. Having become deeply familiar with Sun Quan, he could only be grateful that it was not the younger brother who had caught him with his sister.

“You’d better keep reading,” the man himself said.

Lu Xun’s eyes scanned ahead, and his heart dropped into his stomach, but he forced himself to read it aloud. It was about Yinping.

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Sun Quan could see Lu Xun struggling as he read aloud about Liu Bei’s sworn brotherhood with Guan Yu (this time, names were actually named) and how, in the event of his death, Liu Bei had the honour to consider himself in place of a father to his living children, including his youngest, Guan Yinping.. a girl of… of the sweetest nature… and… and whose… whose innocence…

“Lu Xun, let me read it,” he said.

His officer handed the scroll over, flushed with shame. Sun Quan began reading aloud.

A girl of the sweetest nature and whose innocence could not help but inspire any man with the protective instinct, said the letter, only over about five lines instead of one. Here Sun Quan himself had to pause. He had not actually bothered to examine his conscience on the matter since those uncomfortable twinges during the wedding. He pushed it aside; now was certainly not the time to think about it. The letter went on to state that the emperor had a great desire to ascertain the truth of the conflicting reports of what had occurred to her in her time in Wu and what her current status was. Was it true, as the most credible reports seemed to have it, that she was now living as the wife of the Wu general Lu Xun? The letter professed a perfect willingness to hear the truth of these difficult matters from Wu, as well as to arrange for annulment—

“No!” blurted Lu Xun.

Sun Quan paused again. Marriage certainly had changed Lu Xun. “If you will wait until the end of the sentence, Lu Xun, I think the panic on your face might subside a little.”

“I apologize for my outburst, my lord.”

His king waved this away and then finished the sentence: Shu was willing to arrange annulment or bride price as the case may call for. “There, Lu Xun. Do you feel better? It sounds as if Liu Bei is perfectly willing to take your wealth instead of your wife.” He smiled, but Lu Xun did not return the smile.

Sun Quan went back to reading. If General Lu Xun and Lady Guan would travel to Chengdu—Sun Quan’s eyes narrowed—the matters of Lady Guan’s status, the alliance, and short and long term invasion plans against Wei, could all be settled at once, since Shu was well aware of the strategic
brilliance of the general. Shu would be pleased to welcome both them and whatever amount of bodyguards and retinue Wu deemed necessary.

Sun Quan thought as he read this paragraph that he understood at last what the letter was really about. Shu had seen that chief strategists in the Wu army lasted about as long as the top meatbun in the stack. Now he was down to the last one on the plate. Without Lu Xun, whom did Sun Quan have? Would they poison him? Or would Lady Guan’s treatment be the pretext for an execution, after which the invasion into Jing province, and then the rest of Wu, would proceed unchecked?

The letter was almost finished, however, so he went on. Shu went on a paean here about the all-surpassing importance of the strategist. Sun Quan, detecting the self-congratulatory hand of Zhuge Liang here more strongly than ever, couldn’t help but punctuate the sentences with occasional comments, “oh, bullshit” being one of the more mild. However, this paean did have a purpose. Shu was well aware, alas, of the danger a state faced without its chief strategist. For Shu to ask Wu to send theirs nearly approached the audacity of asking for its crown prince.

“You know about my son, we get it. Why be so cagey?!?” demanded Sun Quan.

“Habit,” suggested Lu Xun, shrugging.

Therefore Shu, wishing for everything to proceed with as much speed as possible while Wei was in such turmoil, intended to send one of their most valuable generals, and the sworn brother of the emperor, Zhang Fei, and his son and daughter, Zhang Bao and Zhang Xingcai, to be the guests of Wu for as long as Lu Xun was needed in Shu. In fact, if the heavens were favourable, they should arrive in Jianye less than a week after this letter did.

There was another long flabbergasted pause here.

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Sun Quan finally said, “The rest is just a long-winded closing. Lu Xun, what do you make of this? You said you received the letters two days ago?”

Lu Xun did not at all know how to answer the first question, so he answered only the second. “Yes, they came in the late afternoon.”

“Then they could be here at any time.” His jaw worked. “What does he mean? Can he possibly be sincere?”

“Liu Bei, or Zhuge Liang?”

Sun Quan laughed bitterly. “Yes, that’s the question, isn’t it. Those two might very well have opposite answers.”

“My lord, I fear to speak so off the cuff, but as we may not have the time for consideration, I will. If Liu Bei has recovered from his rage over the loss of Guan Yu, the plan they offer is a savvy one. Certainly, in the short and even mid-term, it is mutually beneficial. The question of whether they would eventually intend to fully subjugate Wu once they control the rest of the land, or if they would be content with it as a cooperative vassal state—I don’t believe this question is possible to answer. They may not even have planned that far ahead themselves. Certainly, the fact that Liu Bei’s heir could be your nephew could work for or against us. He may think of the Sun family as kin and be unwilling to harm them; on the other hand…” He hesitated. “May I speak freely, my lord?”

“Heaven knows now’s the time for it.”
If you and Lady Lianshi were not to have any sons of your own, I could see the argument being made that Lady Sun’s legitimate son would have a greater birthright to Wu than your illegitimate one.”

To his relief, Sun Quan did not appear offended. “Yes. I can see that. Go back, though. You said ‘if Liu Bei has recovered from his rage’. Does that mean you are not sure that he has?”

“If he hasn’t, I’m at a loss to explain why he would attempt his revenge in a method that would result in the near certain death of his other sworn brother.” He scratched his head. “My lord, regardless, we must prepare a welcome for Zhang Fei and his children. Off hand, I would suggest that while they not be permitted weapons or horses, they be otherwise treated with honour. What are your thoughts?”

“You think they will submit to that?”

“If they do not agree to that, they do not think they are here to be hostages, and the situation is too dangerous to proceed. If I may take this letter away and study it, my lord, we can meet again later this afternoon to discuss it, and I hope I will have a better plan in mind. We will need to bring the matter before a full council—say four-o’clock? You and I could meet at three? In the meantime, in addition to arranging the council, you could arrange the Zhangs’ rooms and so on?”

Sun Quan hesitated, but handed the letter over. “It is a shame there is only one copy, but it is right for you to be the one to study this. I will keep the empress’s—ha. Zhuge Liang even has me convinced. You’d better go.”

———

When Lu Xun wasn’t around, she usually stayed in his rooms. She wasn’t confined there—with Mi Fang and Fu Shiren gone, and her respectability as Lu Xun’s wife firmly established, she believed her husband when he said she had nothing to fear. She was forbidden to ride, ostensibly for her health, but she guessed it was actually an order from Sun Quan in case she tried to escape; however, she was free to walk anywhere on the grounds. It was just too awkward. She felt more lonely going out than she did staying in, the way that most people stared at her and whispered.

Since she had been thrust into the role of mistress of the house at a young age, and she was usually on the move in environments without servants to do things for them, she was proficient in the traditional womanly arts of mending clothes and embroidery. Lu Xun had been more than happy to set up a small sewing area for her in their rooms, and that was where she was now.

It had been quick work to cut a piece of green cloth into the right shape for a xieyi, and now she was just beginning to embroider it. She was using silver thread to make a swallow. Her husband reminded her very much of a bird, in his quick, yet smooth and confident, fighting style, his jacket flaring out like a pair of wings. Yinping smiled to herself as she imagined him seeing it for the first time.

She heard the door open, and quickly hid her project in a bag. He came in holding a scroll, and his face looked pale and unhappy.

“What’s happened?” she cried.

“You had better read this yourself,” he said, handing it to you. “Some of it probably won’t make sense to you, but the end directly concerns us.”

———
He was surprised at first when he could tell she was getting to the section directly concerning them and her face cleared, brightened, and began to wear a disbelieving smile. But it almost immediately occurred to him why she would react that way. Of course she would take the letter’s offer at face value. Taken that way, what was the letter but all her thrown away dreams of return to Shu and reunion with her remaining family come true, and even better, her marriage being regularized and recognized?

“But this is wonderful!” she cried when she had finished. Yinping looked up and could obviously tell from his face that he felt otherwise. “What could be wrong with this, Boyan?”

“If the letter is sincere, Yinping, then nothing.”

“Of course it’s sincere!” Her eyes flashed, and for the first time since she had told him not to touch her in the hall outside that terrible banquet, he got a glimpse of her rarely roused but formidable temper. “My uncle doesn’t tell lies! Not like—” she stopped herself.

“Not like we do in Wu?” he supplied, a little spark of his own anger escaping his self-control.

“I didn’t mean you, I meant— I meant—” she faltered, and he wondered if his face was frightening her. Well, this wasn’t a game of make-believe. Maybe she needed to be a little frightened.

“Despite his faults, Sun Quan is my sworn lord and now my king,” said Lu Xun. “Despite what happened with you—and you know, you ought to know, how deeply I deplore how he acted there—I still believe in him. I believe in his leadership of Wu. And do you really not know that other than approving it and signing his name, Liu Bei had almost nothing to do with writing this letter? From start to finish it is obviously the work of Zhuge Liang, and while I understand that for you in Shu he has been your great strategist, for us in Wu he is the one who has manipulated and lied to us over and over. When we rushed your base at the battle, you said something about our betrayal of our alliance. Our betrayal?! You read the letter—do you understand how humiliating it was for us, how long ago Shu promised us Jing province? We let you string us along for years until we finally got fed up with an alliance where we bail you out and you owe us one. And then Guan Yu—“

“Don’t you dare, don’t you dare say a word against my father.” Her voice trembled.

“Young, you know how he responded to Sun Quan’s request for a perfectly honourable alliance marriage. He did not even have the respect for us to pretend to decline with regret. That is how much value Shu has given to our alliance, that is how little they feared us. Well, we proved them wrong, and I can’t be sorry that I had a role in doing that."

—

Yinping had not felt this angry in a long time. “You’re saying that you think it’s a good thing that my father and brother are dead?”

He didn’t back down. “I’m saying that Wu had no other choice, and that was Shu’s fault. I hate that it had to end that way, and… and I love you, so of course I don’t want you to be in pain, but I won’t lie to you. For me it was just a battle. It was not personal. They were the enemy, so I defeated them. I have no regrets."

He had to be wrong. He had to be. She had no actual counter-evidence for why he was wrong, but it couldn’t be true what he was saying—that Shu were the liars and the betrayers, not Wu. She didn’t have any words at all. So she didn’t say anything. She just stood there, her hands balled into fists.

“Well?” He was breathing fast, too. “We would have had to have faced this sooner or later. Your
loyalty is still to Shu. Well, mine is to Wu. We’re married, so we have to sort this out. If you have to choose, do you choose me or Shu?”

“I choose you of course,” she said immediately.

“You said that too quickly. Don’t you see that you may really have to choose? If we go to Chengdu and Liu Bei listens to our stories and then listens to Zhuge Liang and announces that for my crime against you I must pay with my life, what would you do?”

“He wouldn’t do that! Why would they do that?”

“Because I am now the Wu chief strategist! If they could eliminate me, then their chances of success in invading Wu go up considerably. If Shu is still as bent on revenge for Guan Yu as all our intelligence has told us, I am second only to Sun Quan himself in the list of men they want dead. That is the man that you married, Yinping: Shu’s #2 enemy! Wasn’t that clear to you?!”

It hadn’t occurred to her at all. She had believed in Liu Bei’s dream, not only because it was her father’s as well, but because every aspect of it agreed with her reason and emotion. For that cause she had been willing to go where told and fight (and she enjoyed fighting, although she could not be cured of her habit of saying “sorry!” when she knocked out an opponent), but she had no talent for greater strategy and no interest in the political situation. She rarely thought of Wu at all, but if she did, it was as a sort of little sister state, its relationship with and willingness to be lead by Shu as docile and charming as her own constant chasing after her big brothers. The earlier conflict over Jing province had been just like when she got impatient when her brothers took the last of her favourite dish, but they loved her and she knew that and she would always get over it and love them back. That was what she had believed, right up until the day of that battle, when the messenger told her Wu was coming as enemy reinforcements.

She put her hands to her head and closed her eyes. She needed to think, but there was no time. Would more time even help? She forced herself to say something, anything, aloud. “I can’t… Boyan, I know this doesn’t make sense, but… I don’t believe you would lie to me, but I can’t believe the things that you are saying… that… that my father, my brothers, my uncles, everyone… that they’re just as bad as Wei!”

“I didn’t say Shu is as bad as Wei, and for the record, I don’t think they are,” said Lu Xun. “It would hard for anyone to compare to Cao Cao’s massacre in Xu Province. There is a lot I could criticize about Liu Bei, but he is not merciless. He has a record of betrayals and manipulations, but probably no more than anyone else in this chaotic age, and I can’t recall anything that I would call an atrocity performed at his command.”

This was certainly damning with faint praise. She opened her eyes and stared at him. He had a kind of sad smile on his face as he continued, “You really believe what Liu Bei says about his land of benevolence, huh? Maybe he and the rest of Shu really believe it too. Well, it’s a nice idea, but Sun Quan manages to do pretty well by the people here without having to go on and on about it. I do not have any personal enmity towards Shu. If I try to put my personal bias aside, I can say that Wu has had its share of… let’s say ends-focused behaviour. We do what we need to do to survive and take care of each other. I think we can be proud of that.”

They were silent for a while. He had opened her eyes, and even if she tried to close them now, she couldn’t forget what he had shown her.

———

He was kicking himself for not having realized earlier that their conflicting loyalties would eventually
need to be sorted out. It had actually surprised him that she had immediately said she would pick him over Shu. That she answered the question so quickly proved that her innocence went so deep that she couldn’t even imagine a situation where that choice would actually need to be made. He had had to tear that innocence away from her and show her that not only was this a theoretical possibility, this was something that she might be confronted with now.

The water clock was dripping away maddeningly. He had about two hours until he had to be back in Sun Quan’s rooms with a plan.

She reached out her hands to him, and he took them, not really understanding what she meant by the gesture. She pulled herself into his embrace and sighed deeply.

“I can see now,” she said. “The things that you’re saying… they don’t conflict with what I have experienced, not really. I just never paid attention to the level of things that you’re talking about. I was content just being with the people I loved. I can’t remember any particular thing that anyone said or did, but… it’s vague, and I was very young, but I do remember now the talk back then about giving Jing to Wu at some point. And then, without even noticing the contradiction, everyone was just acting like Jing would be ours forever. How did I not even notice? It just felt… right, for it to be ours. I don’t just mean ours in the sense of Shu’s, I mean that Jing province was my father’s.” She took a deep breath. “I mean, we didn’t even think about your claim on it. But… now that I think of it, that is pretty contemptuous.” She tilted her head up to him. “I guess this was our first fight, huh?”

He smiled. “Well, how did we do? My parents died when I was so young and my granduncle was a widower, so I don’t really know how husbands and wives are supposed to fight.”

She laughed. “Don’t ask me. I was pretty young when she died, but I still remember… My mother would always be the most docile, the most subservient little wife you could imagine… most of the time. But if she really wanted to do something, she would just do it. He would get so mad! She would act totally confused. Within a few days, it was like they had both just decided to pretend nothing had happened. I guess it worked for them, but I can’t imagine being able to live that way.”

He rested his chin on her head. “You understand that we don’t have a lot of time, right? My lord is expecting me at three-o’clock with a proposal. This is the first time I’ve had to make a war plan that concerned me so closely, and I don’t know how to separate my mind and my heart. My mind tells me that the benefits of accepting Shu’s invitation and offer far outweigh the risks. My heart doesn’t want to do anything that has the slightest risk of being torn away from you.”

She sighed. “I’m the reverse. My heart wants so badly to take you to Shu with me, to introduce you to my brothers and friends, and show you my homeland… it’s my mind that’s afraid. I know Shu always does what it thinks is right. I let that sway me into thinking that if Shu did it, it must be right. Now that I know that it isn’t that simple, I’m so afraid that what you said before, about this all being a ruse to aid in the invasion of Wu, might be true. Their oath in the peach garden… they were closer than real brothers, because they were brothers by choice. What you told me before about my Uncle Liu being enraged and insisting on invading Wu—I knew that would be his overwhelming desire.” She shook her head. “I’m so confused! I can’t understand strategy at all, let alone plan it. Boyan, you need to make the decision here. I will follow. Just know—”

She tilted her head up again, and he inclined his head slightly to kiss her. When the kiss broke, she continued, “Know that if what you said really happened—if they were going to execute you—I would do anything I could to stop it. I’d beg for your life, I’d threaten to kill myself, I’d grab my maces and try to take out my own brothers and uncles, rather than let them kill you. Because I’m in love with you, because I’m your wife, you come before anything else in this life for me.” She hesitated, and said shyly, “Do you feel the same way?”
“Yinping, because I’m in love with you, because I’m your husband, you are the person in this world who means more to me than anyone else. I can’t be happy unless I know that you are safe and happy, and if the whole world was against you, I would be against the whole world.”

“Boyan, kiss me again.”

When they finished, Lu Xun only had an hour to redress, make his plan, and get to Sun Quan’s.
乾柴烈火 (Like a fire consuming dry wood)

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains explicit sex. Figuring out how consent works.
Yizhou in Three Kingdoms works is thought to refer to the island of Taiwan.

乾柴烈火：gan chai lie huo
dry / firewood / fierce / fire
“Intense passion like a fire consuming dry kindling.”

Meanwhile, just after Sun Quan had finished dispatching servant after servant on missions of preparing rooms, warning the guards, giving descriptions to the watch, informing the council officers of the meeting, and so on and so on and so on, and was finally sitting down on his bed, wondering if he could possibly get away with just lying down for a while, he heard the special “code knock” he had given Lianshi to use at his secret door.

He got up and unlocked it, and was glad to see that she at least looked happy and refreshed.

“Oh, my lord, I am so glad to be home now. Let’s never travel except on horseback again, please. Maybe an open-air carriage. That closed carriage was horrible! Worse than being on a boat!” She shuddered.

He smiled and teased her, “What kind of southerner doesn’t like being on a boat?”

“This one,” she said emphatically. “I heard you’ve thought of trying to conquer Yizhou, my lord, but you must never do so, because if then we had to do another one of these tours then we would have to visit and I’d have to go on a horrible long boat ride.” She said the mundane words “boat ride” with such over the top dread that Sun Quan couldn’t help but start laughing again. She shook her head at his cruelty and continued, “I would be a skeleton by the time we arrive from vomiting so much!”

He gave a gentle flick to one of her breasts, making her gasp. “You could always secretly jump off as soon as we left the dock. With those things, you’d definitely float back to shore.”

“You… you…!” She wanted to be outraged, but laughing won out.

He sighed. “You make me so happy, Lianshi. I know it’s selfish, but… thank you. Thank you for staying with me.”

“It is truly my pleasure, my lord.” She got into their bed and extended an inviting glance to him, and he could not be more willing to accept her.

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His kisses were soft and tender, close-mouthed. He dropped them on her lips, her eyelids, her cheeks, her neck, her ears, as his hands caressed her breasts as lightly as feathers.

Since their first disastrous time together, she had initiated every sexual act between them, and every one had been like this. She felt sometimes like a goddess that he was worshipping, with the level of reverence he showed her.
The length of time it took him to orgasm remained very long, but she had discovered that those fleeting moments of pleasure in the beginning of their first time weren’t just psychological. He seemed to adore making her climactic. She had been shocked the first time that he dropped kisses from her lips, to her breasts, to her stomach, to… to…

“My lord, you mustn’t—it’s dirty,” she had cried, struggling to sit up.

“Every part of you is clean, Lianshi,” he had said. “You are entirely pure to me.”

Then, still piercing her with his beautiful green eyes, he had lowered his mouth onto her again.

Yes, she had certainly learned how to have pleasure with her husband, and in many ways this sweetness was what she had expected and wanted from him.

And yet…

It had been too much, too fast, too painful, too intense… it hadn’t been right… and yet there was something about their first time that she missed.

His passion… even the roughness… it really had been exciting. She adored being lifted up by him, and she wouldn’t want that to never happen again… but there was something about being pushed down by him too…

———

He noticed that she was blushing, and it puzzled him. “Are you alright, Lianshi?”

“I’m fine,” she said, seeming surprised by his question.

He ran a finger over a hot red cheek. “You’re blushing. What are you thinking about?”

Her blush was almost as red as her dress now. “Nothing important, my lord.”

Sun Quan smiled. “I must know what can make you blush like that.”

“I’m worried… it will upset you, my lord.”

“I won’t be upset with you. Tell me.”

“I was thinking… about our first time…”

It was hard to force himself not to scowl or grimace at that. He had promised not to be upset with her, and it wasn’t her that he was upset with, but he knew that she would interpret it that way.

“My lord, don’t be upset with yourself either,” she said, as if reading his thoughts. “I’m not saying that it was…. pleasant… but… there were some things about it that I enjoyed…”

“What could you have enjoyed?” he said, contempt in his voice. Contempt for himself, and contempt that increased as she stared down at herself in shame.

“Maybe it’s wrong of me, my lord, but… I enjoyed your passion… and… when you spoke to me… that you wanted me so deeply, so… primally… to… to claim me as yours…” She looked up with hesitation into his face, and he wondered what she was seeing there. She continued to falter, but she still continued. “Even though… even though I enjoy… no, enjoy is not a good enough word, I don’t know how to tell you how much I adore the way you love me… and I wouldn’t want you to stop loving me that way… but sometimes… sometimes I want you to… to… to…”
She wasn’t meeting his eyes anymore, but she still seemed unable to continue.

“Tell me,” he said, in a voice of command. “Look in my eyes and tell me what you want.”

She met his gaze, took a breath, and said, “My lord, sometimes, I just want you to fuck me.”

His breath caught like a hiss, and he was glad he had put his hands down on the sheets, because he had grabbed handfuls of them and squeezed tightly. The overwhelming lust her words sparked in him was difficult to form any other thoughts under, but with tremendous effort he managed to beat it back. “Lianshi… you can’t know how much, how often, I have wanted to just… take you, but I can’t. I can’t risk hurting you again like that. Look at what happened the first time. You were crying and screaming in pain and I didn’t even notice…”

The memory of her trembling hand attempting to wipe away her tears stabbed him in the gut.

“We’re both different now, my lord,” she said gently. “I didn’t know how to say it was too much, and I was so worried about you, that I just wanted to give you what you needed, so I thought I had to endure it, but now… now that I know how it’s supposed to feel… my lord, I know it’s strange to say this when what I’m asking you to do is to dominate me—” she smiled a little as she said this, and that sweet smile combined with those naughty words were like a sudden slam against the shattering gate of his self-control again—“but I think I would be able to be less passive, more communicative. That I would actually be able to tell you to stop, if I needed to.”

“But would I be able to stop?”

“I trust you.”

“You shouldn’t.” He took a jagged breath and pulled himself off the bed. Without looking he knew she was watching him with concern as he paced back and forth. Like a tiger in a cage, he thought bitterly. She has managed to cage me, which is a miracle, but I’m still a tiger. If she opens the cage, I’ll tear her apart.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “If it is so upsetting for you, my lord, then please forget I ever said anything about it.”

He stopped the pacing and looked at her. Those beautiful lips, those sweet eyes, those breasts, those hips. He could hear her voice—fuck me, fuck me, I just want you to fuck me.

“I can’t forget,” he said savagely, and he was upon her, kissing her.

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His hands had her arms pinned above her head. Her lips had parted to speak, and he had slid his tongue inside her mouth. His hips were resting on her thighs, and although he was fully dressed, his hardness was unmistakable.

He suddenly released her and climbed off, and she exhaled. She was relieved and disappointed at the same time, but both disappeared as she saw that he wasn’t stopping, merely undressing.

“If you tell me to stop, if you tell me ‘no,’ I will stop—I will try to stop,” he amended, obviously not sure if he could promise success.

He strode back over to her and began taking off her travelling dress. He was fast and thorough, and he took off everything, even her jewelry and hair ties.
When she was completely naked, he climbed on top of her and kissed her while sliding a hand between her folds. “Are you ready for me?” he said harshly. “Because when I fuck you, I’m going to fuck you hard.”

That cold thrill feeling was shooting out from her core, emanating to every part of her. She almost answered no, but realized just in time that this might have given him the wrong idea.

Because she definitely didn’t want him to stop.

“Not yet,” she managed.

“That’s not what I wanted to hear.” He rolled off of her and knelt at the foot of the bed, grabbed her legs, and pulled. She slid over the sheets with a gasp of surprise. Her body stopped with her butt half on, half off the edge of the bed, her head and upper body flat against the mattress, her legs spread on either side of Sun Quan, toes just touching the floor. She lifted her head up just in time to see her husband’s head disappearing between her thighs, and then the feelings that exploded within her made it impossible to do anything but arch her back, clutching at the sheets.

This wasn’t the tender exploring, gradually taking her to a crescendo, that he had done before. It was like he was sucking on her. That was almost too intense, but then he had slid his tongue down to her entrance and actually entered her with his tongue. It felt amazing—so soft, so different from his cock, the way it twisted and bent within her—but it hadn’t been even a minute before she started wishing that it was his cock instead. Filling her. Claiming her.

“I’m ready, my lord!” she moaned.

———

He wiped his face on the sheet and stood up, looking down at her. The bed was a high one, but it was still going to need a little bit more. He grabbed the largest cushion and propped it under her hips, then tested the height of his cock to her entrance. Perfect.

She had jerked a little when his tip touched her. He smiled. “Eager, Lianshi?”

He slid his hands along the outside of her thighs, still not entering her, his smile widening as she moaned and attempted to shift her hips a little as if to capture him.

“Tell me what you want again.”

“I want you, my lord!”

“To do what to you?”

“To fuck me!”

He buried himself in her at that.

———

It was everything she had wanted and couldn’t even imagine. Her clit, rendered agonizingly sensitive by his initial rough treatment of it, made her shudder with ecstasy every time his body slammed into it.

She had never come for him as fast as this, and she felt like she would never come down from the top of the wave, where his passionate, possessing words were doing to her mind what his cock was
doing to her body.

You’re mine, Lianshi. You’re all mine. Only I can fuck you like this, understand? Only I can fill you, only I can claim you. I’ll fuck you until you can’t do anything but beg me to fuck you more.

“Yes… yes… yes…” was all she could moan. Only him, only his…

Ah, this was incredible. To see how fast she came like this made him feel so powerful, so fulfilled. To everyone else, she was beautiful, sweet, refined, and she was that for him as well, but this side of her was only for him. Only his. She chose him, she was letting him do this, was asking him to do this, was loving every moment of it. Even if he hadn’t been inside her he felt like he could have orgasmed himself just from watching her pleasure, from hearing that exquisite, enthusiastic submission to every word he said.

This position was fantastic for the view, yet he also wanted to kiss her mouth and touch her breasts. He had tried letting go of one thigh to stroke one of those peaked, softly bouncing nipples, but had to regrab it immediately because it changed the angle of penetration to be more shallow. He wanted to be in her as deeply as possible.

He grabbed her legs and pushed them over his shoulders so his body would keep them up there and bent over to kiss her. As he began thrusting in this position, she gasped and winced.

“Ah… my lord… that’s too deep…”

He stilled, even though every bit of him wanted to keep going… she hadn’t actually said stop… He forced himself to ask it. “You want me to stop?”

“Not to stop, but… when you’re still like this it’s not so bad, but when you thrust… ah… it’s so deep that it hurts… it… it hits something inside me… you’re so big, my lord…”

Prostitutes had insisted he was too big for them hundreds of times before. Like the rest of their cliches, it tended to dampen, rather than inflame, his pleasure, reminding him of the falsity of the transaction; he had started asking the madams to tell the girls to be silent altogether. But Lianshi was saying it with sincerity. Was he really too big for her this way? He never would have thought that being told he was too big could be a disappointment… he wanted to keep going because it felt so good…

But it didn’t feel good for her…

“What if we backed you up a bit so that you could rest your heels on the edge of the bed? Then I could have my hands free to play with you and I could kiss you when that mouth of yours begs me to do so. That’s what I wanted.”

“I think that could work.” She looked embarrassed. “I haven’t… ruined it for you?”

“Ruined it how?” He returned to a standing position and moved her and the pillow about a hand’s width back—carefully so as not to have to ever withdraw from her. Then he eased each leg down and into a bend, so that the heels were on the edge of the bed, on either side of his hips.

“Broken the mood…”

“If I can’t get back in the mood, while I’m touching these,” he said, taking a breast in each hand and caressing the nipples with his thumbs, “and surrounded by your warmth—“ he began to thrust again,
and was relieved to see that this time she closed her eyes with a moan that sounded much more like pleasure than pain—“then you should dig out that crossbow of yours and finish me off, because I’m already dead inside.”

“You certainly—ah!—feel alive to me—uh—my lord… oh my lord…”
Sun Quan had called a large council like this to announce his decision to enthrone himself king of Wu, but the council’s opinions were not actually being called for, only their acclamation. Today was different.

Once everyone was settled, Sun Quan nodded to Lu Xun to begin. The young general stood up and cleared his throat.

“Lords, generals, advisors, ministers, men of Wu… we face today a decision as momentous as our long ago decision to ally ourselves with Shu and fight Wei at Chibi. We all know the result of the decision we made that day.”

There was an appreciative murmur. Lu Xun pointed to the table that Sun Quan had sliced in half with his sword that fateful day. It was kept in a corner to this day, a testimony to Sun Quan’s ability to be a decisive leader when it counted. “Wei’s army ended up like that table!”

The murmur became actual laughter. Sun Quan couldn’t help but admire Lu Xun’s shrewdness. Though the young man would surely be presenting the issue as if he was neutral, he was setting up their emotional state to sway them towards the resolution he favoured. His general continued. “A few weeks ago, our lord Sun Quan informed us all of Cao Pi’s contemptible offer. This tyrant, who forced the legitimate emperor to abdicate, had the temerity to pretend that he had received the Mandate. What hubris, when the land of Wei itself is revolting against him! Our lord did not need anyone’s advice to reject the offer of vassalage and to decide that the time had come to rule the Southlands not simply as its lord, but as its king. For such a simple matter, our advice would have been superfluous. After all, would not every single one of us have agreed with him?”

It was a slight gambit. Although no one would be expected to say “No, Sun Quan becoming king was a terrible idea” right in front of him, even a bit of nervous muttering or shifting could have stunted Lu Xun’s momentum. However, he seemed to have gauged their attitudes correctly, as Sun Quan saw nothing but nods.

“The matter I have to bring to you today, however, is different. It is not an offer that can be simply dismissed out of hand, but neither is its acceptance obvious. In short, our king will welcome your wise counsel on this matter. As exact interpretation of words is critical, I will begin by reading a letter sent by Liu Bei, under the title of Han Emperor—“

There were confused and surprised exclamations and movements at that, but Lu Xun simply paused and waited for them to die down, before starting again. “Under the title of Han Emperor.” He then read the letter.

When the section about Liu Bei’s unconditional granting of the title King of Wu and the nine bestowments was read, the reaction was that two or three times as disruptive as that which had greeted Liu Bei’s new self-proclaimed title. Lu Xun actually had to raise his hand and say “My lords, there is more,” to calm the din.
Given how badly the section about Guan Yinping had affected him just a few hours ago, Sun Quan was impressed to see how there was not so much as an eyelid’s flicker of difference in his general’s composure as he read that section to the rest of them now. He even managed to pronounce the deadly word _annulment_ perfectly calmly.

Lu Xun clearly anticipated the section about the imminent arrival of Zhang Fei and his children as hostages to spark the greatest reaction yet, as he lifted his hand to call for quiet as he was reading the very first words. Even so, the surprise, joy, confusion, suspicion, and other reactions of the audience could not be quelled.

“That’s enough,” said Sun Quan. He only barely raised his voice, but everyone instantly quieted. Being king truly was an awesome responsibility, in all senses of the word.

———

Lu Xun quickly finished the letter, and wisely did not pause, as that might have allowed someone else to jump in. “You can all see that this letter cannot be compared to the one from Wei. There are dozens of interpretations possible, and dozens of responses possible. To truly study this matter and all of its nuances, we could easily spend weeks. But General Zhang Fei could arrive tomorrow. So his majesty must make his decision now.” He took a quick breath and plunged on. “I will first presume to give my opinion on the matter. It seems to me that there are two interpretations of the situation that have so much a higher possibility of truth than any of the others, that in our time pressured situation we must limit ourselves to them. I will start with the more dangerous possibility.

“All of our intelligence up until now has told us that our magnificent defeat of Guan Yu, ending in the death of this supposed God of War—" he felt a mild twinge of guilt for scoring a rhetorical point at the expense of his wife’s father’s memory, but she wasn’t there, and the chuckle of the audience was worth it—"sent Liu Bei into near apoplexy. His rage at the loss of his sworn brother so robbed him of his reason, in fact, that he was determined to take his entire army and march towards Jing to retake it, and would not stop until every man involved in Guan Yu’s death was dead—not excepting our king. Zhuge Liang has been attempting to sway him, as such a path not only has little chance of success in defeating us, but also lays both Shu and Wu open across the northern borders to opportunistic invasions from Wei, invasions which would doubtless take much territory from both powers.

“If Zhuge Liang truly could not sway his lord from this path, his great mind would immediately turn to how he assure a quick victory against Wu that would sate his lord’s bloodlust, perhaps to the point where he would realize the insanity of his actions. I hope I do not make too much of myself, gentlemen, when I say that the most obvious target would be myself.” He paused and silently counted to make sure he was silent just long enough to give the right effect. No one, even those who harboured doubts about him, would actually stand up at this point and voice those doubts; and the lack of anyone objecting to his self-assessment as the second most important man in Wu would, if only subconsciously, further tilt everyone towards trusting that the path Lu Xun would recommend would be the right one. “Not only was I deeply involved in the retaking of Jing province and thus Guan Yu’s death, I am now Wu's chief strategist. Perhaps my death in itself might be enough to allow the invasion to be called off, and Zhuge Liang would doubtless be so _gracious_ as to offer to take over the strategic planning of both Shu and Wu in a renewed alliance. If the invasion continued —again, I hope I do not rate myself wrongly, but without me, I feel that Wu’s ability to quickly and efficiently resist such an invasion plummets.”

He could see the gloom settling over everyone, and knew he needed to move on fast. “However, this possibility is almost impossible to reconcile with Shu’s willingness to give us Zhang Fei as a hostage. Why, in an attempt to avenge the death of one sworn brother, would they present us with the neck of
the other?” He allowed a good pause after that one. It was truly the only convincing piece of evidence he had for the path he wanted to take, so he had to let it have maximum impact. “No. Though I have not had much time to reflect upon this, I do not think that any amount of time could reconcile such an absurdity. Therefore, let us turn to the other possibility.

“To speak of Shu as being sincere, at this point, is not something that I would ask any of you to do.” He smiled, allowing a tension-lightening chuckle from his listeners. “However, we need not necessarily concern ourselves with whether they truly feel as much loyalty, respect and affection for us as they profess. Considered on its face value, the offer they make is of great mutual benefit to Shu and Wu in the short, medium, and long term. I note the concern that they may turn against us once Wei is defeated, but I believe that is sufficiently long term that it should not enter into our calculations at present.”

He took a breath. What he was about to say was bound to be unpopular. He couldn’t be sure if he had prepared them to consider themselves on his side sufficiently to pull it off, or even if such a thing was even possible. He just had to try. “Who is the emperor now? Who has the legitimacy and the record of good management of the land and the people to be trusted with such a task, in these chaotic times? We all reject Cao Pi’s claim, but who can step into the breach? Despite our recent hostility, I believe Liu Bei has the capacity to do so.”

There was definite displeasure, but not the uproar he feared. A very minor official whose name Lu Xun was not even sure of, sitting very near the back, leapt up. “My lord, if we must have an emperor, let it be our king!”

Obviously such a patriotic suggestion elicited a certain amount of enthusiasm, but Sun Quan handled the situation masterfully. He stood up and squinted a bit. “Fan Kailing?”

The rotund little man’s cheeks reddened like two bright berries. “Fan Lingkai, your majesty.”

“Just so. While your confidence is, of course, a great compliment, let me declare here and now: my duty is to the people and the land of Wu. The rest of China bears no interest to me, except inasmuch as it threatens my people. My word on this is final.”

He sat back down. Sun Quan’s words, his quiet, assured confidence of his ability to safeguard the people of Wu, reset the mood to the most favourable that Lu Xun could hope for. This was it. “I believe Zhuge Liang anticipated our suspicions, and the provision of Zhang Fei without even waiting for us to respond with encouragement towards reconciliation indicates how badly and, yes, sincerely he wishes for our alliance to be renewed. In the grips of their drought, Wei has never been weaker. If we throw away this opportunity to destroy Wei now because we are too afraid to join hands with a state whose desire for the destruction of Wei exceeds even ours, how will history judge our folly? Yes, I believe that Shu is sincere. I am willing, if you all agree, to place my own life into the power of Shu, to renew this alliance.” He turned towards his king, and bowed. “Your majesty, as no man is putting more at risk than I am, I hope you will consider how selfless are my words when I urge you: accept this vassalage! However, I humbly await the opinions of my confreres on this crucial matter. I have said all I have to say.”

———

Lu Xun sat down. Sun Quan, who had been forced to sit through council meetings from boyhood, knew enough to know that he had done it. While there were some pockets of resistance to the idea, many of them seemed to do only in order to posture how great was their hatred for Shu and their ardour for Wu. Those who spoke in favour of Lu Xun’s opinion were both more numerous and more reasoned.
As he knew was more common than not for a council meeting, he had already made his decision before it began. When he sensed the conversation slowing, he rose.

“I have heard enough,” he said. “Either way forward involves risk. However, I agree with Lord Lu Xun that Shu knows that it puts itself in great risk in their offer as well. Moreover, I feel—no, I know—that if Shu dared to double-cross us at this stage, that with the help of all of you, we would put them to a defeat that would make the name of Shu synonymous with humiliation!”

“Yeah!” shouted Gan Ning, Ling Tong cringing in embarrassment next to him.

“I don’t know him,” he muttered to no one in particular.

Sun Quan did not really mind the outburst; if anything it would have pushed more undecideds his way. “Lord Lu Xun, will you accept the responsibility as my chancellor to go to Shu and conduct negotiations with the Emperor on my behalf?”

Lu Xun bowed low. “Your majesty, it is my honour to do as you command.”

“This is my decision. From here, to voice dissent is treason.” He sat down.

“Long live the emperor! Long live the king, the emperor’s brother!” shouted Lu Xun. “Long live the king!”

“Love live the king! Long live the king!” shouted the council.
初生之犢不畏虎 (Young people are fearless.)

Chapter Notes

Shushu = term of address for "Uncle", specifically your father's younger brother.
Tangge = term of address for a paternal male cousin who is older than you; the "tang" part indicates you are of the same clan, the "ge" part means "big brother". Zhang Bao is this for Yinping.
Tangjie = term of address for a paternal female cousin who is older than you; the "tang" part indicates you are of the same clan, the "jie" part means "big sister". Xingcai is this for Yinping.
Er Ge = 2nd oldest big brother. Guan Xing, for Yinping.
Xiao Ge = Youngest big brother. Guan Suo, for Yinping.
Gege = Big brother. Zhang Bao, for Xingcai.
Xiao = "Little". Used for nicknames, often from older people to younger people.
Da Ge = Oldest big brother. Guan Ping, for Yinping.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

初生之犢不畏虎：chu sheng zhi du bu wei hu
beginning / life / [descriptive particle] / calf / not / fear / tiger
“Young people are fearless (both positively and negatively).”

Two days later, Zhang Fei and his two children were sitting down to lunch of dubious quality in a private room of a very low class inn on the outskirts of Jianye. The hot weather would have made cloaks too conspicuous, so they had been forced to dress in grubby, mended clothing and even apply dirt and grease to mask the quality of their weapons. Their saddlebags were under the table, this being the kind of establishment where a bribe to the stablehand would only make him even more keen to examine the contents.

Xingcai dragged her spoon around the soup bowl, eyeing it with almost as much distaste as the undeterred appetites of her father and brother. She pushed the bowl away from her and stood up. “I’m going down to the stables. I didn’t trust the way they were looking at our horses.”

“Those nags? They must really be desperate if they’ll take those,” grunted her father. Seeing that she was determined, he added. “Just be careful.”

“I’m not afraid of anything here,” she said, tossing her head.

“I know, but they won’t know that to look at you, and the last thing we want is to draw attention now.”

She frowned. “Alright. I guess if I think it looks suspicious, I’ll start some conversation about how we are waiting for my uncles and cousins on leave from the navy to meet us there, and that they should be there any moment.”

She departed, and Zhang Fei reached to refill his wine. “You know, son, one thing you’ll discover if you’ve been to as many dives like this as I have, they’ll serve you heaven knows what in the bowls, but they know better than to skimp on what’s in the cups, because that’s what keeps ‘em coming back.” He took a drink, and belched.
Zhang Bao just kept eating, looking grim, and his father looked at him with concern.

“Son, are you still feeling the same way?”

“If you mean about marrying her, yes.” He looked at his father defiantly. “I told you I don’t care what’s happened to her. I’m in love with her, and nothing they did to her can change that. If she’s pregnant, I’ll raise it as mine.”

Zhang Fei hesitated. He knew that his son thought his misgivings were that Yinping’s ordeal had somehow tainted her and made her unworthy of him. Although a talkative man, he was not one that found it easy to explain things, but he knew he had to try to make his son understand where his worries actually were coming from. It was going to be even more difficult to do so without saying anything that would be an obvious tip-off to an eavesdropper. “Son, back when your uncles and I first… first met, we hardly had any name for ourselves. We were trying to get somewhere, but we spent a lot of our time just trying to help the people. Those times were even more chaotic than this, you know… just a lot of warlords who didn’t give a damn about whatever people were currently under their foot, except for whatever taxes and soldiers they could squeeze out. You can bet they never tried to do a thing about sorting out thieves and ruffians, and so organized bands of thugs were everywhere. So we spent a lot of time helping people ward off or recover things from bandits. Their horses, treasures… their daughters…”

He trailed off. Zhang Bao was still stubbornly shoving the weirdly gelatinous soup into his mouth.

“What I remember is, the families would always describe their daughters to us when they were trying to convince us to help them, and the descriptions would always be unique to each girl. They were cheerful, they were quiet, they were musical, they were hard-working… whatever. I hated listening to their descriptions, because if we managed to rescue the girl—and we didn’t always manage to get there in time to find her alive—the girls we found were all the same. Broken.”

He was quiet again. Zhang Bao’s stubborn face hadn’t changed, clearly not intending to listen to a word.

“Maybe with time they healed. I hope they did. We always had to move on. And who knows what happened to Yin—to her in there. And maybe they weren’t so bad to her—god knows I hope that they didn’t do some of the things we heard. I’m just trying to tell you that she may not be the girl you remember, and grabbin’ her hand and sayin’ some sweet things isn’t gonna magically undo everything that happened. It could be bad… really bad. Some of the girls we found dead, the way we found them—“

“Stop,” said Zhang Bao. “You’re just making it harder for me to be able to keep control of myself. Do you think I’m a child, that I didn’t already know what you’re saying? I’m just saying I won’t give up on her, no matter what.”

“You know I backed you with her father to the hilt, right? There was just no convincin’ him.”

“Well, uncle’s dead now, and here we go to smile at his killers,” said Zhang Bao bitterly.

“You know what your uncle—your other uncle said.”

“I know.” Suddenly he too pushed his bowl away. “Everything about this place is disgusting. Let’s just go on to Jianye.”

Within Jianye itself, descriptions had been given to the various watchtowers and gatekeepers, and
while their disguises, combined with the luck of entering the gate with a loud and noisy party of country bumpkins come to the big city for the wedding of a relative, meant that they passed into the city itself unnoticed, it wasn’t long before a sharp-eyed patrolman spotted the group of three and made the connection.

Therefore, when they arrived at the front gate of the palace, they were startled to be picked out of the line of tradesmen, deliveries, workers and others and waved straight in.

They were even more surprised to find that when they rode through the gate and followed the direction of the guard to come off to the side, two people were waiting for them.

One was a handsome young Wu officer none of them recognized, dressed in a smart red jacket with a sword at each hip. The other one they all recognized. It was Guan Yinping, but she was dressed in red and pink now. One hand was holding a cane, while the other was loosely draped in the crook of the man’s arm.

The three Shu officers stared at her in shock. She had brightened as she caught sight of them, opened her mouth, closed her mouth, looked confused, flushed, looked at the Wu officer, down at the ground, then back up, giving them a hesitant smile. “Shushu, Tangge, Tangjie… welcome to Jianye,” she said. “My lord,” Yinping said to the Wu officer, “this is my uncle, Zhang Fei, and my cousins Zhang Bao and Zhang Xingcai.”

The Wu officer gave a correct bow. “Welcome to Jianye,” he said.

They bowed back, as Yinping said “Shushu, Tangge, Tangjie, this is my husband, Lu Xun. The Wu chancellor.”

Zhang Fei heard a sharp intake of breath, and permitted himself one quick glance to make sure that Zhang Bao was not on the verge of forgetting everything that had been drummed into them about their behaviour on this mission and attacking Lu Xun. His son was certainly unhappy, but he was not looking at Lu Xun.

Lu Xun was signalling to someone behind them, and guards came forward and smoothly took the reins of their horses from them. “We want you to be comfortable here,” he said, “so we have already prepared your rooms. You need not worry about unpacking—we will take care of it. And of course your horses will be well-cared for as long as you’re here. You need not make any visits to the stables to check on them.”


“We also have an excellent armoury. If any of your weapons need sharpening or adjustment after your journey, we would be pleased to take them from you now.”

“Oh, I bet they all do, don’t they?” said Zhang Fei. “Weren’t you saying that your flail sword needed a sharpening, son?” He glanced at him again. Would he play his part?

Zhang Bao bowed and gave a very unconvincing smile. “As you say, father.”

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Lu Xun had explained to Yinping that seeing her happy and in good condition would do more than anything else to ease this awkward situation, and by doing so had unintentionally thrown a wrench into his own machinery. Yinping was not someone who found it easy to act while self-conscious. The more she remembered the necessity of appearing at ease, the more awkward she felt. She realized how awkwardly she was acting, and that just made it even worse.
She clung tighter to her husband’s arm, as if she could absorb some of his ease and assurance that way, or at least signal to him how badly she needed his help. He patted her hand and smiled down at her briefly before continuing to speak to their guests/prisoners/hostages. “Now, if you will follow us, I will lead you into the palace, where I know the king and queen want to receive you. We may have to set a slow pace, however. My wife injured her foot during the battle of Fan Castle, and still has some trouble walking.”

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Zhang Bao could not believe the audacity of this villain, who could smile at them and refer with such coolness to the battle where Guan Yu was slain and the woman he was calling his wife was taken prisoner.

“Does it hurt very much, Yinping?” said Xingcai sympathetically.

“Oh, hardly at all now!” said Yinping. “I’m lucky that my husband—“ she looked up at him, and he looked down at her—“was always very careful to make sure I got my medicine as often as necessary.”

As she had spoken, something very strange happened. Her forced smile, and his assured one, had both changed. They were still smiling, but it was an entirely different expression. It was a smile that told of a private joke, a secret understanding.

A lovers’ smile.

“It was nothing,” said Lu Xun, looking back at the Zhangs, his diplomatic smile back in place. “It was—it is—my privilege to take care of her.”

———

As they made their slow journey along, it was Lu Xun and Xingcai that carried the bulk of the conversational duties, with occasional comments from Yinping. Xingcai had somewhat expected this to be the case sooner or later. Her father, though enthusiastic and sincere in whatever role you asked him to play, often spoke without thinking, in particular without thinking of nuances and implications. Her brother wouldn’t normally have been as much of a problem, but although the conversations between her brother and father had all been supposedly carried out away from her ears, she was very much aware that while her father was willing to accept Liu Bei’s command that this mission was for the ultimate fulfillment of the peach garden oath, her brother’s not-as-secret-as-he-thought designs on Yinping could spoil everything. She hated that as a woman, she couldn’t get away from being expected to talk just to fill the silence even when on a mission.

As they talked of unobjectionable subjects—the journey, the unusually dry weather in both Shu and Wu, the reports of the drought in Wei—she puzzled over the exact relationship between her cousin and her supposed husband. Reports—which she had again been supposedly shielded from—were all over the place. Although she never heard the content of the initial report, from everyone’s reactions she knew it had been ghastly. From there, the reports had fortunately gotten a lot better. There had even once been a report that the whole marriage was a sham, manipulated by Lu Xun to ensure favourable treatment of Yinping until the conflict with Shu had resolved one way or another.

Along their journey, they had been surprised to find the common people so approving of Sun Quan and his rule. Lu Xun, the reported husband of Yinping, was also very popular. At one point she had been terrified that they were going to blow the whole mission when they were sitting in an inn and a bard had begun to sing an absurd song about Lord Lu Xun sweeping into battle upon his horse, seeing the beautiful maiden cruelly forced into battle, pulling her swooning into his arms, riding
straight up to her evil father and, without even dismounting, separating his head from his shoulders. Zhang Fei had of course been drinking, and his face had shown all the signs of imminent eruption, while her brother hadn’t been drinking, and if anything had looked even worse. It had been all she could do to hustle them out of there.

When they were within sight of the palace, Yinping suddenly said, “How are my brothers?”

“Physically, well,” said Zhang Bao gruffly, while Xingcai was still considering how to put it. She shot him a look, but he only had eyes for Yinping.

“Your brother got married,” Xingcai cut in hastily.

“Er Ge got married?” said Yinping in shock.

“Not him. Guan Suo.”

“Xiao Ge got married?! My Xiao Ge? Who is she?”

“Her name is Bao Sanniang.” Xingcai was at a loss for what else to say. In truth, she couldn’t stand Bao Sanniang.

“And?? What is she like? Xiao Ge… I mean, he’s a horrible flirt, but he doesn’t even know that’s what he’s doing—he thinks he’s just being a gentleman. If some girl managed to actually attract him… not only attract him, but marry him… and so quickly… she must really be something.”

“Ha!” said Zhang Fei, unable to keep his feelings in entirely. “She’s somethin’, alright!”


It was not Xingcai who answered. “She’s the most irritating, empty-headed, self-obsessed, cutesy, non-stop talking little—“

“Gege!” scolded Xingcai.

“What? Does being diplomatic mean we have to lie about everything? Don’t act like she doesn’t annoy you even more than she does me, because I know the truth.” He turned his eyes back to Yinping again, who was looking at him but looked as if she didn’t at all want to. “Do you want to know the truth, Yinping? Your brothers haven’t been the same since your father and brother died and you were captured.” Yinping flushed and looked at the ground. “Xiao Suo just disappeared, just left. He said he needed to train alone. When he came back a few weeks later, he had this brat with him calling herself his wife. He acts happy with her. Maybe he is. Personally, I’d rather jam sticks into my ears than have to listen to her as much as he does, but I’m not him.”

Lu Xun cleared his throat. “It is an awkward situation. Forced courtesy is better than open hostility, though, wouldn’t you agree?”

There was too long of a pause. “Yeah, sure,” her brother said finally.

“I hope and I believe at one point the air will be cleared,” Lu Xun continued.

The short remainder of the journey into the palace was silent.

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After the official welcome, guards were summoned to escort them to their separate quarters, and Lu Xun made a bland, official goodbye. Zhang Fei hesitated, glancing at his niece’s always smiling
husband, but decided there wasn’t likely to be any better opportunity than this. Certainly he would
not be able to be with her alone, and for all he knew, now that the hostages were there, the two of
them might be departing for Chengdu at once.

“Yinping?” He pulled a small, sealed letter from a pocket. “Your oldest brother gave me this letter
and made me promise I would give it to you as soon as possible, if he were to die. I don’t know what
it’s about, but he seemed to think it was important.” He held it out to her.

Her husband looked as if he would like to take it instead, but did nothing. She let go of his arm for
possibly the first time since they had seen her, stepped forward, and took it. “Thank you, Shushu.”
Suddenly she pounced forward and gave him a big hug, just like she always used to, although it was
definitely softer… weaker.

“We all missed you,” he said, wondering what was bothering his eyes. “You know that, right?”

“I know. I missed you all too. Horribly,” she said softly. She broke off the hug, and went back to her
husband.

“I’m very tired,” she said in a low voice. “Will you carry me?”

Zhang Fei saw his son’s fists clench and unclench as Lu Xun picked her up and walked away. Then
they all said brief goodbyes to each other and allowed the guards to separate and lead them away.

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As they turned the corner away from the Zhangs, his wife sighed. He kissed her forehead. “I know
that was very hard for you, but you did well.”

“It was even harder than I thought,” she said. “The more I wanted to show them how happy I was
with you, the more awkward and unhappy I felt.”

“You never had training in diplomacy or even decorum?”

“No. Father didn’t think I needed it.”

He walked in silence for a minute or so before speaking again. “There was one thing I didn’t
understand… I expected Zhang Fei, with his reputation and his bond with your father, would have
been constantly on the edge of exploding into violence, but…”

“He has a temper, but he’s also always been the most practical of the three of them,” she said
thoughtfully. “And if Lord Liu Bei tells him to do something, that’s that.”

He hesitated, but his curiosity… and perhaps if he was honest his possessiveness… could not resist
continuing. “Why was his son so angry, then?”

As if to confirm his worst suspicions, he saw her blush. “He’s… probably he takes after his father,
but he’s so young that it’s harder for him to control his temper.”

“Is that all?”

“Well… he did ask me to marry him before we left for Jing province.” She looked up at him, and
must have thought him in need of reassurance, because she quickly added, “I didn’t feel the same
way about him! I mean, to me, he was just my cousin! I know we’re not actually blood related, but
we were brought up as if we were. I still remember how he used to throw rocks at my Xiao Ge and
me when he wanted to play with just my Er Ge! When he proposed, I remember thinking at the time
that he was just worried about me having to go to Jing province, when it was likely to be attacked by Wei. Plus, you know, we were constantly on the move, it must have been difficult for him to develop a relationship with a regular girl, but I was always there. Anyway, rather than tell him no, I just told him he needed to ask my father. That was just as good as saying no. He never brought it up again and we just went back to normal, so I assumed he was never really that interested.’

Lu Xun was silent. He could not tell, of course, whether Zhang Bao’s attachment to his wife was of long standing or if her mysterious imprisonment had inflamed dreams of being a knight in shining armour and caused a weak attachment to turn to love in absentia, but the angry young man certainly believed himself deeply in love with her now. Yinping wasn’t the only young Shu officer who had clearly skipped diplomacy.

They arrived back at their rooms. Lu Xun had asked Sun Quan in advance if they could have the rest of the day to rest whenever the Zhangs arrived, including dinner in their rooms, so that they could set out early the following morning, and he was glad he had done that. His wife looked completely done.

“Do you want to nap? Should I leave you alone?”

She held up the letter. “You’re not curious about this?”

“Of course I am, but if it’s what he said it was, then it’s private. I trust you. If you need to show it to me, then you will.”

She seemed torn.

“How about I get us some tea?” he said. “You can sit down, have a rest, and read your letter.”

“Alright. That’s a good idea.”

———

She was going to sit down, but decided she felt so tired that she would lie down in bed to read it. It was folded, not rolled up, and wrapped up in brown paper with an unmarked seal. When she broke the seal, she could tell right away it really was from her brother. Da Ge hadn’t known how to read and write at all when he first came to them, and even after he became an adult, their father had often made them practice penmanship together, which always had their brothers snickering.

She began to read.

My darling Yinping,

I made an oath to our father that meant I could never tell you what I will in this letter, so if you want to burn it without reading the rest of it… I don’t know. Maybe you should. But I said I would keep my oath as long as I lived, and since you’re reading this, I must be dead.

Do you remember when we first met? You were nine, Xiao Suo was ten, Xiao Xing was thirteen, and I was fourteen. I didn’t realize until that day just how seriously our father was taking us being family. When he told my birth father that he would adopt me, I thought it was just symbolic, an assurance that I would be taken care of well, and that once I was actually in his service, I would be like any other common soldier. Believe me, as a war-crazed fourteen-year-old, that was all I had ever dreamed about being. But he not only brought me to your home, he forced you all to move down and give me the place of the eldest at the table and to call me Da Ge. Well. He forced our brothers. He didn’t have to force you. You accepted me from the first moment.
That night before I went to bed, he came into my room and asked me if you weren’t a very beautiful girl.

I said that certainly, my new brothers and sister were all very good-looking, well-behaved, clever… he interrupted me and asked again if I didn’t think that my sister was very beautiful?

I was so confused. There was something about the question and the way he asked it. From the words, obviously he would want me to say yes, right? But I had this horrible feeling that yes was the wrong answer. Even though I sensed that, I didn’t really understand why he might not want me to think you were beautiful. I didn’t really have an interest in girls yet, and the little interest I had wasn’t aimed at nine-year-olds.

Honestly I think my confusion reassured him more than a denial would have. Nevertheless, he cleared away my confusion when he explained that, since he was taking me into his home as his son, that his daughter was my sister, and therefore my actions towards her must never be anything but that of a brother. Even at fourteen, I understood what he meant then, and the wisdom of making it clear to me.

He told me to swear that until I died, I would never treat you as anything but a little sister, and to never even think of marrying you. I swore to it immediately; it sounded so easy at the time. Why did he make me swear what I would do with my thoughts? Since you turned sixteen, Yinping, I don’t think a day has passed that I haven’t broken that part of my oath. I feel so much shame about that, but how can I control my thoughts? The more I tried to control them, the more I couldn’t stop thinking them.

After our initial meeting, Father quickly left with only me. The next time I saw you, you were ten. Again, I was only with you a few days before we parted again. Over the next few years, I only ever saw you for a few days at a time, even though our brothers both joined in traveling with us as they got older. It wasn’t until you were thirteen yourself that I began seeing you regularly.

I was eighteen. I had an interest in girls by then, alright, but I think I can honestly say at that point all I thought was that you were going to be a very beautiful woman one day. I didn’t know how soon that day would come, and how I would come to feel about you.

It makes me sick to think that this may ruin your memory of me. You never did anything to make me feel this way. In fact it was your total ignorance of my passion that made things so hard. The way you used to throw yourself at me to embrace me, the strength that would sometimes knock me over with you on top of me, the way you would bend to pick flowers, the way you’d tease our brothers by saying “Da Ge is my favourite”… you couldn’t know how it all tortured me.

Yinping, of course you are very, very beautiful, but you have a spirit that is more beautiful by far. I know father has said you will never marry and you have accepted it. Part of me wants to be selfish and glad that if I can’t have you, at least no other man can. But I have to tell you, I think father is making a terrible mistake.

You deserve the love of a man, Yinping, someone who will awaken in you what you awoke all unknowing in me, and you deserve it to be a man who can be with you, as I never could be. Even with the pain of it, I am better for having loved you. If fate had been different… but if fate had been different, I would surely never have even met you. No, I can’t wish for a different fate.

Yinping, Yinping, how I have loved you, to the point of madness! Please forgive me for this confession. Believing that you will know how I feel someday is the only way that I can keep the unbroken half of my oath.
Be very happy.

Guan Ping

Her head swam. Her brother! Her brother!

She looked back at her memories of him again. She remembered his kindness, his attention, his gentleness… his control… how he never initiated hugs, and broke them off as soon as possible…

So he had really been in love with her, for at least two years… How sick it was… but how restrained, how he must have suffered in silence, unable to tell anyone, tormenting himself with his inability to keep the mental part of his oath.

And was it so sick? If her father had simply told his birth father, “Sure, I’ll take your boy with me to join the Shu army” instead of adopting him and treating him as a son, wouldn’t his interest have been perfectly natural and honourable?

Could she even have returned it?

Her stomach heaved.

———

When Lu Xun returned with the tea, he came in quietly, just in case she had fallen asleep. Instead, he heard the sound of vomiting from the bedroom. He set the tray down on the table and entered.

His wife was bent over the basin, her arms trembling a little. The letter was on the floor.

“Are you going to vomit more? Do you need me to hold your hair?”

She tried to speak, then just nodded. He rushed over and was just in time to pull her hair back before she vomited again.

After about thirty seconds, she said “I think I’m done now.”

He poured a cup of water for her. “Here, rinse your mouth out.” As she did, he pulled a clean basin from the cabinet. “I’ll get rid of this,” he said of the dirty basin, once she had spit into it.

When he came back, she was in bed, lying on her side with her eyes closed. He took the clean basin and gingerly set it on the bed in front of her, then rubbed her back. “Are you sick?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I feel… ok now. Just really tired. I think maybe it was just the letter… but I’ve never had something like that affect me physically before…”

He glanced down at the letter. “Was it so upsetting? Do you want me to read it?”

“You can read it, but promise me to keep it secret. It… it doesn’t matter anymore… but I’m sure it would hurt my brothers to know it.”

He picked the letter up and read it. When he had finished, he whistled softly. “So your adopted brother was in love with you too? Is there anyone in Shu who isn’t in love with you?”

“It’s not funny,” she said miserably.

“Sorry. It’s just the absurdity of it. I can’t blame their taste I guess.”
She rolled over, and he was glad to see she was smiling, though reluctantly. “I guess it is absurd… I was thinking to myself… what if I had met him some other way than as my brother, could I have returned his feelings? And then my stomach just started heaving…”

“Well, I’m glad that you’re not actually sick at least. It would be terrible if we had to travel with you sick. Would tea help or hurt?”

“Maybe if I had something bland to eat with it… like a bun…”

“Alright. I’ll order congee for your dinner as well.”

She groaned. “You southerners and your rice!”

He grinned. “Well, no matter how awkward our trip to Chengdu is, are you at least looking forward to the food?”

Yinping definitely brightened at that. “Oh, yeah! That’s gonna be awesome! You know, they actually cook pretty well here, but I definitely can’t wait to taste some of my favourite dishes again.”

He turned to leave to get the bun, but Yinping said, “Wait. You can tell me if this is a bad idea… but could we maybe have Zhang Bao come and eat with us tonight? I think if I was able to talk to him one on one, here, I might be able to make him understand, and then I could relax knowing that he’s not constantly on the verge of goading someone into killing him.”

Lu Xun considered it. “Strategically that’s actually not at all bad,” he admitted. “While the king’s temper and self-control have improved greatly lately, I’d still prefer not to test them. But I don’t know what plans for a welcoming dinner have been arranged. Perhaps I can bring him by before or after the meal. I’ll figure it out.”

———

Xingcai wasn’t sure whether to be pleased or disappointed with her room. She had expected something shabby, to remind them of their place, but it was just an unused room in the ladies’ quarters, and had been furnished to the presumed tastes of a court lady… or perhaps courtesan. The cushioned seats, bed and bedding were all very soft and comfortable, but ornate and florid. She preferred something more austere herself. The one disturbing point was that the door had no lock. For a moment, she wondered how they expected her to be able to sleep with no weapon and no lock, but then she realized that lock or not, her survival was almost totally out of her own control. This was still a prison, just a different kind than a dungeon cell.

She opened the window and her eyes brightened as she realized that by turning her head to the right, she could see one end of the sparring ground. Someone was leading some palace guards through some basic movements. How she wanted to be down there practicing! She sighed. At least she might be able to watch some fights this way.

She closed the window to change, wash and dress. Just as she was smoothing out her hair, she heard a faint sound from outside that was like bells. She looked out the window again and could see three Wu officers.

The bells were clearly the enormous ones tied to the belt of a smirking, tattooed man, and because of them she knew exactly who he was: Gan Ning, the famous pirate, who had led a hundred men into a night raid of Wei’s main camp at Ruxukou and committed enough mayhem to cause them to retreat, despite overwhelming numerical advantage. She decided she would try to figure out who the other two were. At least it was something to pass the time.
There was a slim and handsome young man who was waving a three sectioned staff around agitatedly, his exaggerated grimaces leading Xingcai to mentally peg him as a whiner. It was too bad, because when he actually let his face be neutral, he was very attractive.

The third man was wearing full armour including a helmet that was very close around his face, so it was difficult to see what he looked like, other than very tall and powerfully built. He stood there silently for a while, watching the other two bicker, then said something, and suddenly attacked.

It had looked absolutely real for one heart-stopping second, but almost right away she realized it was just 1v1v1 sparring and the weapons were just very realistic practice ones. She watched, totally enthralled, at the constant forging and breaking of alliances that in some cases lasted mere seconds.

As the fight went on, however, it became clear that the determination of Gan Ning and his whiny rival was twofold:

1. Not to lose to each other.
2. Not to be the first to be defeated by the third man.

However, since the first one was definitely more important to both, it meant that both aimed their most powerful attacks at each other. Their determination not to let their rival score a point even went as far as to expend unnecessary energy avoiding small blows they could have absorbed to remain in a strong attacking position.

Therefore she was completely unsurprised when the tall man seized a moment of inattention from Gan Ning (he was crowing over the whiner’s supine fall), to sheath his practice katana, rip the flail from the pirate and pin him to the ground atop the other one.

———

“Fuck, you two are heavy,” groaned Ling Tong.

“Do you yield?” said Zhou Tai.

“No way! I’ll be out of this in no time.” Gan Ning attempted to wiggle, prompting a yelp of complaint from Ling Tong.

Zhou Tai merely chuckled.

“Would you stop wriggling on me? Your flail is all the way across the yard. He’s disarmed you—by the rules, he already beat you at that point! You’re just mad because you know you lost first.”

“Hey, who’s on the bottom here?”

“Yeah, but I still have my staff! I yield to Zhou Tai, though.”

With another chuckle, Zhou Tai pulled himself off.

———

Zhang Bao sat on a chair with his head in his hands, replaying everything.

Sometimes she just seemed so frightened, so fake, that he knew that she had been through something horrible, was going through something even more horrible. Feints had always been her weakest point in training. She was so impulsive, reactive and genuine that she even apologized to dead or unconscious enemies, no matter how much the rest of them teased her about it. He’d kept his eyes on
her the entire time, willing her to give him a sign, a look, anything. If she had given him just one sign
that she needed his help…

…well, he probably would have ruined the whole mission…

But while her rare glances at him had been nervous or ashamed, he couldn’t fool himself that any of
them had held an entreaty for help. And…

That smile…

Why had she smiled at him like that?

And the way he returned that smile… like he knew every part of her… no, worse, like she had given
him every part of her…

But she couldn’t have done that… could she? Lu Xun had killed her father and brother and forced
himself on her. And despite what his father had warned him about, he could tell she wasn’t broken.
She was upset, awkward, anxious, but she was still definitely herself.

If he had known that Yinping had characterized his initial attachment to her as one of convenience,
he would have been offended, but it was more or less the truth. “Yinping, you are a sweet, decently
attractive girl and the only one near my age that I see for longer than a few weeks who isn’t related to
me, and I’m worried you might get hurt without me if you go to Jing province, so would you marry
me?” would have been a more honest proposal than the one he had actually made. However, like it
had done and would do for many young men before and after him, her father’s opposition had
increased the romance of the unexpectedly forbidden attraction, and since her capture, his sense of
himself as a knight who had to remain true and persistent in the face of staggering obstacles to his
suit had only strengthened.

Since he was unaware that he had done this, however, his suffering was genuine.

He heard footsteps outside his door. “There’s no lock, so why not just come in,” he called out as the
person began to knock, contemptuous of all this fake courtesy for the prisoner he knew himself to be.

The door opened, and it was Lu Xun.


“You need to get control of yourself,” the Wu officer said. “If I’m on the verge of resealing the
alliance and getting out of there and it all gets fucked up because you have a death wish, I’ll kick
your ass in hell for eternity.”

Zhang Bao was startled. Lu Xun was definitely not serenely smiling now. “How dare you speak to
me that way?”

“I’ve got swords, you don’t, so just shut up and listen, alright? My wife wants to talk to you.”

“You call her that, but I know—“

“You don’t know anything about me and her.” He took a deep breath. “Look, now you’ve even got
me losing my temper. You try this attitude with the king and he’ll kill you before the week is out.
Will you come and talk to her or not? We’re going to bed early and leaving for Chengdu at first light,
so this is your only chance. If you want to take it, then follow me.”

“Fine, whatever,” he muttered, getting up and following.
After Lu Xun brought Zhang Bao into their room, rather than sitting down in a chair with the other two, the Wu chancellor instead chose to stand leaning back against the wall with his arms crossed. The effect was so reminiscent of a prison guard that Zhang Bao had to shake his head. “Are you ever allowed to go anywhere without your jailer?”

“I’m watching you, not her,” said Lu Xun flatly.

“My lord, if you stay here with us, he will never believe that I’m not speaking under threat,” Yinping appealed to him, pouring her guest a cup of wine. “Please give us just ten minutes.”

Hearing her call him her lord was so hard to bear. So was Lu Xun’s response. “As you wish, my love.”

Yinping offered the wine cup to him, but he did not reach out to take it. When he heard the door to the corridor close, he reached out but placed his hands around hers, rather than taking the cup.

“Yinping,” he said, “please trust me!”

“Of course I trust my cousin,” said Yinping, in a tone that was all the more crushing for its sweetness. “Do you trust me?”

“What? Of course I do.”

“Because I’m a terrible liar, right? I can’t stop my feelings from coming out ever, or consider the implications in advance, or even feint—how many times have you told me I’ll never be a great warrior until I can feint?”

“Right…”

“So you’ll believe what I say?”

This wasn’t going right. His request for her trust was meant to lead to an ardent soliloquy about his determination, in the face of overwhelming odds, to remove her from the palace and speed them both back to Shu territory, where they could convince the emperor to assault and retake Jing province. He had expected to have to shut down objections as to the danger this would place his father and sister in, and since this was indeed an overwhelming challenge, he hadn’t had time to consider that she might have had any other response.

Such as apparently having her own soliloquy to deliver.

“If I tell you the truth, will you believe it?” she said, when he had failed to answer her after several seconds.

“I don’t care what the truth is, I don’t care what’s happened to you. You aren’t stuck with him, Yinping, no matter what. You don’t have to be afraid of where you will go. I’ll be a good husband to you, I promise. You’ll never have cause to complain, I won’t touch you until you’re ready—“

“Tangge, that is gross.”

It was so succinct, so matter-of-fact, that it completely robbed him of the considerable momentum he had built up. He could only stare at her, blinking, and as he blinked, it was as if blinders were coming off internally.
“Number one,” she said, ticking it off on her fingers, “I know we aren’t actually related, but I still just think it’s gross. I feel related to you. Even more than a cousin, you were just like another one of my brothers. I get that apparently it doesn’t make your skin crawl the same way, but even if there wasn’t anyone else involved, I just don’t want to be touched by you romantically. Sorry for not making it clear before, but I didn’t want to hurt your feelings. Number two, I have a good husband, he never gives me cause to complain, and I ask him to touch me. Number three…”

She trailed off and tilted her head. “Hmm. I thought there was a number three, but I can’t think of it. Never mind.”

“You ask him to?!”

“Oh yeah, that was number three,” she said, rolling her eyes as if she had broken another plate or chair or staircase, like the old days. “Number three, ‘what’s happened to you’. I don’t know what you all have heard in Shu. It’s true that I was not… not treated well… during the beginning of my time here, but that was not Lu Xun’s fault. Lu Xun has been good to me from the beginning. I can’t tell you everything that happened, but I don’t care anymore how we got here. He’s my husband and I’m his wife. You have to accept that. I would like you to accept him, maybe even become friends someday, but—”

“You think I could tolerate a man who made a prisoner his wife?”

“Remind me how your parents met?”

Game, set, and match.

In childhood, Zhang Bao had never really been curious about his mother’s identity outside of “mama.” That she never talked about her own childhood or youth never occurred to him; that it was strange that she went by “Madam Zhang,” when most of the other wives went by “Lady Maiden Name”, likewise somehow never bothered him. It had been a rude awakening hearing the taunts of Wei against his father for the first time in a battle. They called his mother “Lady Xiahou”, and “kidnapper” was the most mild epithet they used against Zhang Fei.

Zhang Fei had laughed at the taunts during the battle, but it was a laughter that seemed to be intended to enrage his enemies, rather than a laughter that their taunts were absurd.

After the battle, when he ventured to bring this up, his father had barked “Pack of lies!”

He would have accepted this totally, except that about ten minutes of riding later, his father said “If I had known who she was…”

This was perhaps the most provoking thing he could have said, especially because he said nothing else.

Zhang Bao couldn’t bear to bring it up to his mother. She was more or less happy now, right? It couldn’t have been that bad. His father couldn’t have been that bad… He told himself that he knew it was a lie, and this was why he didn’t ask. Deep down he knew that he didn’t want to take the risk that it might be otherwise.

“You shouldn’t believe Wei’s lies,” he said aloud harshly, as much to himself as to her.

“You mean you don’t know?” she said, surprised. “The first time I heard Wei officers taunting him about it, I asked your sister if it were true, and she said she had asked your mother and—“

“Shut up!” said Zhang Bao, abruptly getting up. His hands had been around Yinping’s and the wine
cup all that time, and the sudden violent movement spilled the wine all over the table. Yinping exclaimed, getting up herself in a hurry just in time to avoid the wine running off the edge into her lap. She grabbed a napkin from the cabinet and cleaned up while Zhang Bao went to the window, trying to regain control. Control… his father didn’t always have control… no. No!

“Tangge… it truly isn’t as bad as the Xiahou think,” he heard her say to his back. “I admit that your father should not have taken silence as consent to him taking her with him, but he has tried in his own way to take care of her since then. She isn’t unhappy—she loves you and your sister…”

There was a long pause. “Silence?”

“Tangjie said she said she was too frightened to say or do anything for weeks. She was gathering wood in the forest alone and he found her there, and… and apparently she looked older than she was… and she didn’t say anything, not a single word, and she just went along with him…”

“So who was she?”

“Xiahou Yuan’s daughter.”

He stared out the window for a few minutes, trying to grab something solid from the whirl of his thoughts. Her hand gently touched the small of his back, and he turned back around. Her face was full of concern. “Tangge, I’m sorry that I brought it up so bluntly. I didn’t realize you didn’t know about it. I thought you were being hypocritical. I couldn’t understand why you wouldn’t be willing to give Lu Xun a chance, when you and your father are so close.”

“I don’t…” he sighed. “It’s going to take me time to know what I think about this, but we don’t have time.”

“I know.”

He looked down at her. She really was herself… her sincere, unable to lie or even hold back self. “But if you’re… happy with him… if that’s the truth, then why were you acting so uncomfortable?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Somehow knowing that I have to act a certain way makes me act so fake! That’s why I wanted to meet with you like this, without being rehearsed or told that I have to express a certain emotion. This way I could just be myself. I don’t know. I can’t be myself and watch myself at the same time. I don’t understand how other people do it.”

He sighed. “You know… when you said that stuff about him touching you…” He flushed. “Maybe you’re right about it being gross. It was almost as bad as if Xingcai was talking about some guy that way…”

Yinping smiled. “Tangge, if it really had been like you thought, it was a very nice thing you wanted to do for me. I’m sure you’ll make some woman very happy soon.”

It wasn’t much of one, but he did smile back.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to note somewhere that ever since I started playing this game, I have been trying to figure out what the hell is going on with Zhang Bao's weapon, and today I
accidentally stumbled upon the fact that the official Japanese website lists characters' weapon types, and so I was able to copy/paste and discover on Chinese wikipedia (there's no English translation of the page, but if you can read Chinese it's here: https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/蛇腹剣) that this weapon is COMPLETELY MADE UP, not based on anything that has ever existed in real life in any era or place.

His weapon has always bugged me so much, so I thought I'd share in case it bugged anyone else. I can't explain why it bugged me when all the crazy weapons the Jin people use don't. (All the other kingdoms should have given up right away, because holy shit, these people have got GUNS and that maniac is attacking with a KITE and she's STRINGING YOU ALL UP LIKE PUPPETS WHAT IS THIS.)
不吐不快 (Can't help speaking what's on your mind.)

Chapter Notes

Ganbei = bottom's up! (Literally "dry cup").
Bobo = Uncle (father's older brother)
Boniang = Auntie (father's older brother's wife)

不吐不快：bu tu bu kuai
not / spit out / not / happy
"Can’t help speaking what’s on your mind.”
(“Tu” can also mean “vomit…”)  

When Xingcai was lead to the banquet, she was surprised at first to see that she was being seated at an entirely different table than her father and brother. Her father had been seated at the main table, with the Wu king, and her brother had been seated at a table full of… what were they exactly? The men were probably minor officials, but those women… if this had been back in Shu, she wouldn’t have cared the way they were hanging all over her brother, but she hoped he remembered the Sun Zi stratagem of the beauty trap. The current Sun clan claimed descent from him, after all.

She was seated between Gan Ning and the whiner, with the tall man seated a few seats clockwise on the round table. Up close, she could tell that he wasn’t nearly as handsome as the other two… but he wasn’t exactly not handsome, either. The scar running down his face added its own sort of dangerous romance. In banquet clothes, he looked ill-at-ease, so he probably would have looked better normally. She wished she could allow her own discomfort to show on her face. Instead she put on her most dignified, yet standoffish smile as she sat down.

“Here, let me get that for ya,” said the pirate, grabbing for her cup and the wine bottle. “We’ve gotta have a toast!”

“The king hasn’t started yet,” growled the whiner. She guessed she had unintentionally given him a bit of a look, because he actually flushed a bit. “Sorry. He just… he really gets on my nerves sometimes.”

“Are you his older brother that you have to correct him?” asked Xingcai with an expression, she hoped, of polite interest.

“Ha!” said Gan Ning. Before the other man could reply however, the Wu king stood up and gave his welcome speech. He wasn’t flowery or long-winded, and he did a decent job, she thought. He briefly mentioned her father’s legendary performance at Changban Bridge, and said that Wu was honoured to have such a warrior as a guest, as well as his talented son and beautiful daughter. Then he invited the company to toast the success of the Wu chancellor in developing a plan of attack against Wei.

They all drank. Knowing the kind of night this was likely to be, Xingcai only took a small drink—enough that the level of the liquid would go down appreciably, so that no one could call her out on not drinking, but no more than that. No one else at the table, not even the women, seemed to feel the same restraint, draining their cups.
“Now you’ll drink with me, Lady Zhang,” crowed the pirate, filling her cup up to the top. “Ganbei!”

“Ganbei,” she said, and drained the cup (since the phrase “ganbei” implied doing so), hoping she wasn’t setting a precedent for everyone else at the table.

“Are you interested in war at all, Lady Zhang?” he said, refilling her cup and his own.

How to answer that? “Yes.”

To her surprise, he then launched into a completely ridiculous anecdote about a battle he had supposedly participated in during his pirate days. Not only was it blatant lies, it wasn’t even impressive as told, because his story emphasized over and over the absurd blunders of the enemy.

Perhaps already emboldened by the wine, at about the three or four minute mark, she seized upon a pause for breath to say, “I don’t mean to embarrass you, Master Gan Ning, but surely rather than making up a story for me, you could recount some of your astounding success at Ruxukou? If the truth is better than fiction, why not try the truth?”

This stilled conversations all around the table, but Gan Ning looked delighted. “Ha! You knew me by sight?”

“By sound, rather,” she said with a smile, glancing down at his ever present bells. Even at a banquet he was wearing them.

He reached around her shoulder to push the shoulder of the whiner. “See? What’d I tell ya? That’s how you become a legend!”

The whiner gave him a dirty look. “Some of us don’t need gimmicks.”

“Oh yeah? Let’s see about that.” He turned back to Xingcai. “Lady Zhang, how about him? Do you know who he is?”

Uh oh. “That’s… hardly fair…” she said, blushing.

“Ha! She doesn’t have any idea who you are. Ling Tong? Any clue at all?”

“You’re embarrassing her and yourself, not me,” said the newly identified Ling Tong. Actually, maybe it wasn’t that fair to call him the whiner. What he had just said was certainly true, and when she glanced over at him, he actually looked concerned about her. Up close she was definitely confirmed in her impression from a distance—he was pretty handsome when he wasn’t whining.

She suddenly had the name click in her brain as she looked at him. “Was it… did you rescue your lord at Hefei?”

Now it was Ling Tong’s turn to look delighted. “Yeah, that was me!”

“Sure, be proud,” chuckled Gan Ning. “Me, she knew right away. You, she had to rack her brains.”

“But a great victory always brings a warrior greater fame when compared to personal magnificence in a great defeat,” said Xingcai. “It is unfair, because I believe perseverance in defeat is what separates the greatest warriors from the rest. But what do you think?”

Both men were speechless, which surprised her a little bit. She had not thought it a particularly advanced or controversial question. Were they just surprised a woman was asking it?

Across the table, the tall man chuckled. “You silenced them. Wonderful!” He raised his cup to her.
“Drink with me. I am Zhou Tai.”

She took a deep drink of her cup, hoping she could show her respect without actually draining it. The name of Zhou Tai was also one she recognized.

———

At a certain point, the queen got up to leave, and most of the rest of the women did as well, so Xingcai also did, grateful that she would be able to escape only mildly intoxicated. She was definitely concerned to see that the… ladies… on either side of her brother made no such movement to leave. She didn’t think there was any information they could get out of him, but she couldn’t be sure.

Gan Ning and Ling Tong were having a whispered argument that was a lot louder than either of them probably thought about which one of them was going to escort her back to her room. While they were preoccupied, Zhou Tai stood up and walked over to her.

“I’ll escort you,” he said simply.

“Oh… thank you,” she said, knowing it would be impossible to say actually, I was hoping for a couple of guards to do that…

She need not have feared any possibility of impropriety from him. He didn’t even offer her his arm, which he could certainly have done in perfect honour. Instead they walked side by side silently.

About halfway there, Zhou Tai said, “I think I agree.”

Xingcai was confused. “You agree?”

“What you said earlier. About defeat.”

“I see.”

She said nothing else. All of her decorum training was screaming at her that she was blowing it, yet somehow with him the silence didn’t feel at all uncomfortable.

About a minute away from her rooms, he spoke again. “Do you fight?”

“I do, but… my weapons are… being adjusted at the armoury, I believe. Probably for some time.”

He nodded.

At the door, he bowed to her, and she bowed back. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

She watched him go, then entered her rooms, and set up a complicated improvised barricade of the door. It wouldn’t actually stop anyone getting in, but at least she wouldn’t be caught unaware. With that assurance, she stripped down and sought sleep in the embrace of the luxurious bed.

———

Yinping felt a bit nauseated in the morning as they ate their breakfast, but she guessed it was just nerves.

She rode in the carriage with the baggage, while Lu Xun rode. They planned to stop fairly frequently
to change horses, but not of course travelling with the haste of a messenger. It was estimated to her that it would take them about two weeks.

Traveling through Jing province brought back many memories. She noticed Lu Xun withdrawing from her a little, not in an alienating way, but as if he wanted her to have space to grieve if she needed it. She did need it. But she also needed him.

He had decided to let her initiate sex while they were on their journey, knowing the stresses of travel and also guessing that she might feel uncomfortable sharing herself with him in inns. They did not make love at all the first few nights, but the first night that they spent in Jing province, she had stopped him as he began to undress, and started to undress herself.

It was interesting having her take a more active role in the bedroom. When she lost herself in the moment, she was passionate, assertive, intense, and eager, but if she recalled herself, she became insecure and apologetic. In particular when she was on top of him, she often stopped if he moaned or even made an intense expression to make sure that she wasn’t going too fast or squeezing his shoulders too tightly. This stop-and-start sex was a kind of exquisite torture all in itself, one that resulted in particularly overwhelming orgasms for him when he finally did manage to climax.

He was concerned about her physical condition. The intermittent nausea was coming back as they got closer to Chengdu, he guessed because the tension was building. She was embarrassed by it, despite him telling her she didn’t need to be. It was fortunate that the carriage motion didn’t seem to exacerbate the nausea, so long as the windows were kept open.

Back in Jianye, Xingcai was more than a little irritated that she was the only one in her family who seemed to recall this was supposed to be a special diplomatic mission, and therefore a time for duty, not enjoyment.

The Wu officers, as a group, were much harder drinkers than the ones in Shu, and her father fit right in with Huang Gai and his fellow veterans. Trading stories from the time of the Yellow Turbans seemed unlikely to lead to any bad consequences in the present at least. As for her brother, she never saw him except in the company of one or the other of the courtesans. She had not been able to actually speak with him about what the hell was going on there, but he did manage to give her an eye roll coupled with a wink that seemed to say that while he wasn’t taking their flirtations (or whatever they were!) as sincere, he nonetheless intended to indulge in them. So much for his unending love for Yinping.

Meanwhile, while she had been legitimately flattered when she discovered a bouquet of flowers with the simple inscription, “For you, from Ling Tong” at her door one morning, the pleasure quickly dissipated when she got a knock at the door while she was arranging them in a vase (of course this room would have vases for admirers’ flowers), and opened it to find Gan Ning with another bouquet and a somewhat lascivious expression.

She had barely accepted them from his hands when he noticed Ling Tong’s flowers. Without even bothering to ask who they were from, let alone attempt to woo her, he exclaimed “I’m gonna kill him!” and stomped off.

Xingcai jammed the second set of flowers into the same vase, no longer caring how they looked. At least the room smelled nice.
To her dismay, over the next few days she discovered that her affections had somehow become the newest prize for the rivals to fight over. If she had had her liberty, she could have told both of them where they could stick their supposed interest, but duty said otherwise.

On the fifth day after the banquet, she had run into Zhou Tai again. She had actually seen him several times over the five days, but they never did anything more than bow pleasantly to each other. Today, however, he spoke.

“What is your weapon?”

“A sword and shield.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “You miss fighting.”

She sighed, despite knowing that she ought to feign serene enjoyment of her life here in Jianye. “It is what it is,” was the best she could manage.

They were silent for a minute. He looked at her. She looked at him.

“I can’t promise anything,” he said at last, and then bowed, as if that were a normal farewell, and walked on.

*What did that mean?* She puzzled over it for a minute, but when she heard bells approaching, quickly made an escape down a side corridor.

———

The day they arrived at Chengdu, Yinping was feeling particularly terrible. She was caught in the same trap that she had been in with the Zhangs back in Jianye. The more she thought about how absolutely terrible it would be for Lu Xun if she arrived looking weak, sick, and unhappy, the weaker, sicker, and unhappier she felt. Adding insult to injury, she knew her vomiting was making him worried about her—when it was just her stupid nerves! She felt so incompetent. If only she had spent more time training her brain, instead of just her body, then her body wouldn’t be betraying her like this. They were all going to hate Lu Xun, and it was her fault.

As they approached the gates, Lu Xun had the carriage halted for a moment so he could speak to her. As he looked in the window at her, it made her stomach do another flip to see how startled and upset he was. How bad did she look?

“Yinping, we’re almost there. I’ll get a doctor for you as soon as I can.”

“I don’t need a doctor. I’m so sorry,” she said, but it came out weakly.

He looked as if he wanted to say something more to her, but merely told the driver to start up again.

———

“I know why we have to wear them, but I really cannot stand these hats,” said Sun Shangxiang as they waited for Lu Xun and Guan Yinping to arrive. Based on the initial reports, they should have been there by now, but perhaps they had paused to discuss strategy one last time before actually coming to the gates of the palace.

Her husband did not reply, but his sly smile was obvious.

“You think I dislike yours because it blocks my view of your handsome face,” she said. “Actually
it’s because it means you can’t see how beautiful I look in this crown. And that means I’m wearing this stupid hot heavy thing for nothing.”

“I prefer how you look without adornment.”

Zhao Yun coughed loudly, embarrassed.

“Master Zhao Yun, you poor innocent! You think we’ve forgotten you’re standing there, when actually we just don’t care. How terrible we are.”

The spear-wielder coughed again, not very convincingly. “Not at all, my lady. Just a bit of a cold.”

Despite himself, Zhuge Liang smiled. During the initial period of romance between Liu Bei and Lady Sun, from about the seven month to one year mark of their marriage, her charming manners towards her lord were in exaggerated contrast to her open (though wittily expressed) contempt for every other person in Shu. At the time, he had interpreted this as he wished to, as further proof of her nefarious purpose as an enemy of Shu, but in hindsight, it was obvious she was simply angry with all of them for having frozen her out for all the time Liu Bei had been away from Chengdu, without so much as letting her know if he was hurt or well. Then at the one year mark, Zhuge Liang had managed to bribe one of her maids into bringing him a letter from Sun Quan. He remembered his triumph, and Liu Bei’s face as he read the letter…

He moved his fan as if to brush the embarrassing memory away. Well. It had been the right move based on the data he had at the time. In the present, since the full reconciliation, she had been very different. She was the woman that the officers of Wu would have recognized very well: arch, charming, exasperating, fierce, shrewd, cheerful, shocking, and always willing to spar, whether with a weapon or verbally—and usually the winner in either kind of skirmish. She took her rare defeats with grace. Although the Shu officers had greeted the announcement that she was being given the title of empress with forced enthusiasm, in even the few weeks since then, for most their acceptance has become genuine.

Liu Bei’s behaviour had been partially responsible as well. While in their original affair he had treated her as his secret treasure, someone he was always pulling himself away from responsibilities to others to indulge in, sparking dismay and jealousy, he was now determined that others should know her goodness, and looked for every opportunity to display her best side to the rest of those he loved.

The strategist was pulled from this thoughts by the entrance of a servant. “Your imperial majesty, they have entered the gates.”

———

Lu Xun dismounted from his horse, swallowing hard. It was not exactly unexpected that the emperor and empress had come personally to welcome him, as well as a large party of VIPs, all of whom would require their own introductions, but it was going to make it hard. His tutor in the Analects had once told him that his understanding of the importance of ceremony was superior to any other student he had ever taught, but at the moment it was hard not to just say “Fuck all this nonsense, my wife needs a doctor!”

However, in life as well as in battle, training took over when thought and even nerve failed. It was a bit of a blur, but he went through it.

He did grab the first possible moment. “Your imperial majesty, I am afraid my wife has taken ill. Perhaps the stress of the journey… if your men could show us to our rooms, and arrange for a doctor
to see her…”

The Wu chancellor’s appearance had been shocking to Liu Bei. He knew he was a young man, but he had not expected him to look that young—more like a teenager than a man. He had been obviously distressed despite performing his role in the long formal welcome without a stammer or hesitation. Liu Bei had thought the high stakes of his responsibility were simply overwhelming to so young and inexperienced a man, but it now became clear. His own brow furrowed behind the curtain of jade. “Of course, but let me welcome her briefly.” He signalled to a servant to go for the doctor, then approached the carriage.

She did look very unwell. She was startled, and he pulled aside the beads of the mianguan so she could see his face clearly.

“Bobo,” she said, then looked even worse. “I'm sorry—I mean—your imperial majesty…”

She attempted to bow, but he reached in and touched her arm. “I am always your uncle, Yinping,” he said. “Don’t worry. You’re safe at home now.”

Yinping looked as if she wanted to say something, but all she could manage was “Excuse me!” Putting her hand to her mouth, she turned away.

He pulled his head out of the carriage and turned to Lu Xun. “It will be faster if you allow one of my men to drive the carriage around closer to the side entrance. Then you can accompany me to the meeting.”

The Wu officer nodded and bowed, and Liu Bei gave the command.

Yinping’s voice came from within the carriage. “No… Lu Xun… don’t leave…”


Her husband did not seek permission. He immediately opened the door and entered the carriage.

By custom, this could have been considered direct disobedience of an order. Had Liu Bei wished to, he could have had it punished by death, but Liu Bei did not at all wish it. “Drive on, quickly,” he said.

Almost all important officers of Shu had been at the main gates to welcome the Wu chancellor, but there were two notable exceptions, who should have been there not only because of their officer status, but because of their close relationship with his wife.

Guan Suo fell back into the cushions, glassy-eyed and exhausted, as his wife discreetly spit his semen into a basin. She climbed into the bed with him, nuzzling his face like a kitten. He could smell himself on her breath.

“Not that I don’t understand your desire to be with me above all others,” she purred, “but I would have been happy to do that for you after welcoming your little sister home, you know! Why did you tell them all you were sick?”

He couldn’t answer. He just wanted to forget all about it. His selfishness, his weakness… how could he face her…
She continued to talk. He let the sound of her voice wash over him, meaningless feminine syllables, and closed his eyes.

Guan Xing was resting against the balcony of the exterior corridor on the second floor, staring into space.

Unlike his younger brother’s feigning of illness, Guan Xing had not made an excuse to get out of attending. As soon as he heard that she was coming back, not as a redeemed hostage, but as the wife of the Wu chancellor, he had sought a private audience with his uncle, now his emperor. He could not endure it. A Wu general who had been one of his father and brother’s murderers, a Wu officer that had raped and forced his sister into “marriage”, for the sake of the land, was going to be received as an honoured guest instead of executed as the villain he was.

“Send me away from Chengdu,” he begged, forehead on the ground. “I cannot order you to change your mind, but I cannot do as you wish if I remain here. If I see that man, I will kill him.”

The emperor had refused to send him away or even allow him to leave the palace, saying that he believed Guan Xing would regret leaving without seeing his sister and would come to accept his decision in time, but had at least given him permission to skip the welcome, since that needed to go off without a hitch.

If only Zhang Bao were here. He was impatient with his cousin’s constant clucking over him like a mother hen, not just in battle, but even when practicing. Despite how annoying that was, he was a real friend, and at least he knew that they were of one mind with regard to this Lu Xun. His younger brother Guan Suo simply refused to discuss it or anything even tangentially related to it. He simply walked around like one dead, only smiling in that bizarre new way of his when cosseted by his strange wife.

He frowned as he saw a carriage being driven to the side entrance. The driver stopped, the door opened, and a man stepped out, carrying a woman in his arms.

For a moment she looked like a total stranger to him, then all at once he knew it was Yinping. She was dressed in a pink that matched the flowers in her hair, but that was the only thing about her that looked fresh or healthy. She clung tightly to the man, who kissed her forehead tenderly as he followed the driver. Within a few moments they had vanished inside.

Guan Xing’s hands gripped the railing as if they were squeezing the life out of something.

Lu Xun had only just laid her down upon the bed and smoothed the hair from her face when a businesslike knock was heard. “Li Kang, the doctor.”

“Come in.”

The man who came in was in his fifties, with keen eyes. He bowed and Lu Xun bowed in return.

“Lady Guan, may I examine you?”

She nodded, and he took her wrist and went through the initial observations briskly. “Please tell me the chief complaint as you experience it.”

Lu Xun began to speak, but the doctor silenced him with a look. “It is better if the patient tells me herself. The internal experience is what I need; the external I can observe.”
Slowly, considering her words, Yinping told of the initial episode of vomiting back in Jianye the day before leaving due to a vague “bad shock”; then continued that at first she had experienced nothing amiss but the usual fatigue of hard travel, until they were about halfway there, when first the nausea, and then the vomiting had returned. On the last day of her journey, she had felt overwhelmed by negative emotions, and she felt as if her body were literally revolting in its constant nausea and exhaustion. There was nothing really wrong with her, she was sure; it was just stupid weakness.

The doctor listened patiently until she had finished. “Any injuries to the abdomen?”

“No. Well. There was one back in the battle… but that was treated.”

“Hmm. These things can sometimes appear healed when not. It will be easier for me to examine you if you undress completely. Of course your husband may remain,” he said, and bowed again.

Yinping obediently undressed herself. To Lu Xun’s eyes, there was no remaining sign of the gruesome rib injury, but to his surprise the doctor immediately gently placed his hand on the place that had been the centre of it. “The wound was here, yes?”

She was obviously startled too as she nodded. Perhaps it wasn’t as healed as they had thought? But the doctor’s next words dismissed that. “It’s healed very well. Barely noticeable, even to me. This is not the problem. I will palpate your abdomen now. If you feel any pain, you must not try to be strong. Cry out or tell me immediately.”

Expertly his hands moved over her abdomen, and though Lu Xun could tell it was very professional, he could not help watch his hands like a hawk as they moved lower. Then the doctor paused. Lu Xun could tell he was looking at her genitalia, though his expression was entirely clinical. What was he doing? Had Liu Bei asked him to look for signs of sexual violence? Now his eyes were wandering over the rest of her body.

“You can redress,” he said finally. “I always carry an anti-nausea tincture with me that should be safe for your symptoms, now that I have ruled out a few possible causes. I’ll mix it up for you so you can drink it before we continue.”

As the man mixed the tincture into some cool water, he continued to speak. “I need to ask your wife some more questions, and in my experience wives are usually more candid when their husbands are not listening. It is your choice, of course, but I feel I will be better able to attend to her health if you leave the room. You may certainly remain nearby—perhaps in the corridor? You would be able to hear a shout there.”

Yinping drank the medicine and made a face, and the doctor laughed. “It doesn’t please you? It’s mostly ginger syrup. I can’t imagine the other ingredients are that terrible.”

Lu Xun was of course torn. At face value, of course, there was nothing that was more important than her health, but to leave her alone with a stranger in this situation was not an easy request. However, if he had nefarious designs, they were almost certainly not of his own initiative. If he was acting by orders, then to refuse would be merely to delay. “I’ll wait in the corridor.” He gave a quick glance to Yinping to make sure she was comfortable with this, but she seemed to be, so he left.

———

The doctor sat back down in the chair. “Tell me, Lady Guan, is your bleeding regular?”

It was a question that carried an obvious implication, and it hit Yinping like cold water to the face. She could have answered the actual words of the question, but she was thinking of the answer to the...
next question that he would ask: she had not bled in the two months that she had been Lu Xun’s wife. And once she was thinking about that, of course she was wondering how the hell it hadn’t occurred to her before.

“Don’t be embarrassed, Lady Guan,” he said gently. “You’re far from the first newlywed woman to have forgotten all about it. And your circumstances, from what I understand, were of the kind that fills the mind with other subjects.”

“So you think… you think I’m..?”

“Pregnant? It’s possible,” he said. “It’s not a dirty word, you know. Unless it wouldn’t be a matter for congratulations?”

She sighed. “This is what is so difficult… I would have thought that if I was actually happy, then acting happy would be easy. But knowing that I have to act happy makes me feel so unhappy… I really am happy, but I can’t show it…” Her eyes filled with tears.

He patted her hand gently. “You are very genuine,” he said. “It is difficult for people like you in this chaos. When did you last bleed?”

“In the… in the first few days after the battle.” She had been about to say in the dungeon, but checked herself.

“And how soon after it stopped was the wedding?”

“I’m not sure… a few days?”

He raised an eyebrow, and she blushed, knowing what he must be thinking of Lu Xun. “And how often do you sleep with your husband?”

“Every day.”

He chuckled. “I think perhaps my euphemism was too vague. How often does your husband enter you?”

That made her blush even more, but he was after all a doctor. “Two or three times?”

“Only two or three times in two months?”

“No, two or three times a day.”

His jaw dropped. “Two or three times a day!”

“Usually two.” She hesitated. “Is that wrong? The Wu doctor suggested it.”

“I bet he did,” the doctor said, and she could tell he was angry. “What was this worthy doctor’s name?”

“Zuo Ci.”

That wiped the anger off his face. “Zuo Ci? That’s not possible. Zuo Ci? Describe him.”

That was easy, since he was so distinctive in his appearance. The doctor shook his head. “I can’t believe it. It certainly sounds like him, but… he told you he was the Wu doctor?”

“Do you know him?”
“I know of him very well.” The doctor shook his head again. “Zuo Ci told you to have sex with a Wu officer twice a day?!”

“He said I needed yang for my health. And it wasn’t… it isn’t… unpleasant…” She blushed even redder.

The doctor laughed. “I guess he is a very handsome young man. Well, Lady Guan, if you haven’t bled for two months and you’ve been having sex two or three times a day… I don’t require any of my medical training to tell you that I think you are definitely pregnant. I won’t even bother explaining the external signs I observed which suggested pregnancy; they seem superfluous in the face of that.”

He stood up and gestured to the tincture bottle on the table. “I’ll leave that with you. You can take it whenever you feel nauseated, or even in anticipation of it, if the nausea strikes at regular times. I’ll draw up a list of foods and activities to increase or avoid. Usually I suggest avoiding sexual intercourse, but… two or three times a day…” He shook his head in disbelief again. “If that is your standard, then completely cutting it out may shock the system. Perhaps reduce it to once a day? Reduce it to once a day… I can’t believe I’m saying that.”

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Lu Xun stopped pacing as the door opened. The doctor regarded him with a look that was difficult to read. It looked… impressed, but that couldn’t be right.

“You can relax,” he told Lu Xun. “I’ll let her tell you more, but the issue is nothing to worry about. The nausea will probably recur, but the tincture should control it. Try to make sure she gets lots of rest, and avoids unnecessary stress. I understand the latter might be difficult.” He bowed.

Lu Xun exhaled and bowed back. “Thank you.”

He went back in the room. Yinping had her hands on her abdomen, but she looked so much better that he felt greatly relieved regardless.

She smiled at him shyly. “Did the doctor tell you?”

“He said you would tell me.” He looked at her hand gently rubbing her stomach, and something clicked. Wait… in all their time together, she had never… how often did women… shouldn’t she have..? “Are you… are we..?” He couldn’t finish his thoughts or his words.

She held her hand out to him, eyes shining. “We are.”

———

Li Kang hummed to himself as he walked to give his report to the emperor. He had been in his service since the Yellow Turban days, so he had plenty of experience of reporting patient prognoses to his lord. He was very fair, never blaming the doctor for losses, even in the early days when Li Kang knew that his lack of experience was probably a contributing factor at times. It was always pleasant to be able to report good news. However, in this case, he was not at all sure whether the news would be received as good or bad.

He was not surprised to see the prime minister there, but he was by the presence of the empress. After the obeisances, he couldn’t help glancing at her.

“You needn’t worry about shocking the empress,” said Liu Bei, as if reading his mind. “Please report in full.”
“While at this stage, I would ordinarily be much more cautious in the diagnosis, I am unusually confident in saying that Lady Guan’s nausea and exhaustion are caused by pregnancy, exacerbated by travel and other stress. With proper rest and diet from now on, she has a high chance of coming to term, I would say.”

The mianguan shielded the emperor’s face, and the prime minister’s face of course never betrayed anything, but the empress broke into a broad grin. So at least one person thought the news was good. He paused in case the emperor wished to say anything, but when he was silent, continued.

“The patient seemed pleased by the news,” he said. “I provided her with a tincture for the nausea and told her I would provide her with more detailed instructions soon. Then I informed the husband that the issue was not serious and that she could tell him more herself. Then I came here.” He took a breath. “I have more to report than that, but it does not directly relate to the pregnancy, so if you have any questions about it, ask them first.”

Zhuge Liang glanced at his lord. From his angle he could see the emperor’s face, and seemed to have gained permission, because he asked “Why do you say ‘unusually confident’?”

“At this stage the external signs are vague. Fatigue, nausea, certain swellings, even slippery pulse—all have multiple causes, and their absence does not disprove pregnancy. The lack of bleeding is a more definite sign, if it has been regular, but even that can temporarily subside in a woman who has undergone great trauma or malnutrition. However, when I see a young woman, who is well-nourished despite recent injury, who has all the classic symptoms, who has not bled since just before her wedding, and who has been having sex with her husband two or three times a day—"

“Two or three times a day?!” demanded the empress. “Is that how you get pregnant?”

A noise like restrained laughter came from behind the mianguan, and even Zhuge Liang moved his fan in front of his face.

Li Kang reddened. He had not actually meant to say it so baldly. His sheer amazement at it just let it slip out.

“Pay her no mind, Li Kang,” said the emperor, the stifled laughter nevertheless still present in his voice. “I see I should have warned you that while you couldn’t shock her, she would likely shock you. Please continue onto the unrelated part of your report.”

“Actually, my lord, now that I think of it, it may not be quite as unrelated as I thought. The frequency made me so incredulous that it was beyond my ability to conceal. She was embarrassed, and volunteered that such a frequency had been suggested by the doctor she saw in Wu.”

The emperor made a sound of disgust, and the doctor hastened to continue. “I admit my reaction was exactly the same, my lord. I demanded the name of this doctor, since I am familiar by reputation at least with the high level physicians of Wu. She answered that it was Zuo Ci.”

The sudden stilling of the crane fan in his peripheral vision lead him to suspect that he was indeed reporting important information. As the strategist did not actually say anything, the doctor continued. “At first I thought it must be a mistake or coincidence, but I asked her to describe him and the description is unmistakable. Lady Guan was confused by my surprise. While you know her better than I do, my lord, from even my brief interaction with her I would find it impossible to believe she was dissembling. She had no idea who he really was.”

“But Zuo Ci is not a doctor…” said the emperor slowly.
“Despite his obvious age, he fights with the ability of the greatest warriors in the land, and his strategies have proven to vie with those of the top strategists,” said Zhuge Liang. “That he would possess extreme skill in medicine does not surprise me.”

“When you say extreme, my lord, you speak rightly,” said the doctor with a bow. “I have never seen anything like it. I could not give either wound a detailed examination without arousing suspicion, but the injury to her foot and her shoulder… my lord, it was as if both wounds had deteriorated to a point that ought to have been completely beyond recovery, and then suddenly the damage was arrested, just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “If, as what she said implies, she saw Zuo Ci only after the wedding was at least seriously contemplated… this is conjecture…”

“Please continue,” said the prime minister.

“I was able to observe the shoulder more easily than the foot,” he said, “and it seemed to me as if a surely fatal blood infection had set in before it was suddenly stopped. I have no explanation for such a thing. I have never seen someone who survived with such marks as she has. Yet she survived. But if she had been treated by him promptly, surely it would never have gotten to such a point, if he had the ability to turn it back just like that? Why, if he was functioning as the Wu doctor, did he not treat her before it got to that point? It goes far beyond my level, I can assure you. I barely have the experience to observe it; to explain it…” He waved his hand vaguely, then bowed again. “I am sorry I cannot be of more use to you, my lord.”

The doctor was dismissed, and as he left, he heard the empress say again, with admiration, “Two or three times… wow!”
騎虎難下 (If you ride a tiger it's hard to dismount.)

Chapter Notes

Xiangqi = "Elephant chess", an ancient Chinese board game which is actually pretty fun, if you've never played it. I like it better than European chess, personally.

騎虎難下：qi hu nan xia
ride / tiger / difficult / down
“If you ride a tiger it is difficult to dismount; something that is impossible to stop once started.”

To have attracted the pursuit of two famous, good-looking, high status officers would not have led most girls to try to think of some way to endure, but Xingcai was not most girls.

Their courtships showed no sign of loss of interest over the first fortnight, and by the calendar the best she could hope for was that Yinping had just arrived in Chengdu. Possibly, if weather or other factors had intervened, she wasn’t even there yet. There was every likelihood of months of captivity ahead of her.

She decided that she was going to turn Gan Ning and Ling Tong’s professed affections to their own benefit. For one thing, in her admittedly limited observation, there was nothing men disliked more than a woman who sought to improve them. If she was able to drive them off while making them think they had tired of her, so much the better. If this primary purpose failed, then perhaps she could actually make both slightly better human beings. Starting with such raw material, she felt that such a result would possibly be a victory of a rank with Zhuge Liang’s in Chibi.

The opportunity to try her tactics on Gan Ning arose first. He had invited her to lunch, and as they sat down, he adopted his usual, slouched posture with legs spread.

“Isn’t such a posture bad for your spine?” she inquired.

He did not look self-conscious, offended, chastened, or any other reaction that she had anticipated. He laughed. “You’re checking me out, huh?”

She felt her face getting hot. How to respond?

“Just go right ahead,” he said. “I didn’t get all these tattoos to look at ‘em in the mirror, you know. Got any questions about them? I know ladies claim to hate them, but secretly you love it, right?”

Xingcai ignored the last sentence. There actually were some things she was curious about… “Why do pirates get tattoos, anyway?”

“Oh, they have magical powers,” he said affably. “This one, for instance—“ He pointed at a dragon and went off at some length on the well-known control of dragons over wind and water. Obviously this was useful to someone who battled at sea. He recounted one occasion in which he had been knocked off his boat on a perfectly calm day while fighting five enemies at once. He had felt his dragon tattoo burn, and a sudden, inexplicable wave had lifted him back onto the boat, stunning his adversaries so much that he was able to kill them all in two strokes. The story was entertaining as far as tall tales go, and lasted long enough for the servant to bring them the food and for her to get most
of the way through her meal. However, since she had actually wanted the real answer, it was rather disappointing.

“I get the feeling you don’t believe me,” he said, his smile unchanging, and drained his cup of wine.

“I wouldn’t accuse you of lying.”

“Wouldn’t accuse a pirate of lying? Do you not accuse the sun of shining either?”

She laughed despite herself, and he looked pleased. “You should do that more! It makes you look great, you know.”

The blush was back again. She tried to look stern. If she had only known how adorable the combination of the blush and the stern look were… Gan Ning’s face softened, and she did see that. “Do you really want to know?” he said, and his voice actually sounded like it might be serious.

“Yes.”

“Who gets tattoos besides pirates?”

“Prisoners.”

“Every pirate ends up a prisoner sooner or later.” He hesitated, then pointed to a spot on his neck.

She had to lean across the table, because at first glance it was just part of a swirling mandala, but now that she was looking at one spot in particular, she could see the character dao, thief.

“If you do it to yourself first,” he said, “then when they do it to you, you won’t care. You won’t even grimace, because you know what to expect. You can laugh as they do it.” He paused. “You know, you’re close enough for me to kiss you.”

She sprang back, her cheeks hotter than ever, and he laughed.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “The first time I kiss you, it’s gonna be your idea. Just the first time, of course.”

Xingcai had never been more glad that a meal was almost over.

———

Ling Tong had invited her for a stroll through the gardens. She had accepted, under the impression that it was going to be a daylight affair, in which a parasol could guarantee a certain bubble of personal space, but was dismayed (though she hid it well) when he said “Great, I’ll come by your room after dinner.”

The sky was stubbornly clear. There would be no excuse to even carry an umbrella.

The sun was setting as they walked out, but the full moon was already rising, so it was sure to be bright.

He was uncharacteristically quiet. Unlike Zhou Tai, he never hesitated to offer her his arm, so hers was resting in his as they slowly walked. He led her towards a bridge over an artificial pond, and they leaned on the railing. He was looking down at the reflection of the moon in the water, which allowed her the opportunity of looking at him.

He really was very attractive, she thought again, in what she told herself was merely an objective
observation. A man who has just a touch of femininity, she thought, calls to something in a woman. His beautiful hair, and the fullness of his lips, were this for Ling Tong. It would be easy to imagine kissing such lips while running one’s fingers through such hair.

She had meant this obviously detached, objective statement to be about some other girl doing the imagining, but as she looked at him, she found herself wondering what it would be like… if they would really be as soft as they appeared… how the hair would fall if the ponytail tie was loosened, and how his eyes…

…his eyes which were looking into hers…

Xingcai started a little and guiltily looked down into the water.

“Were you looking at me?” he said.

Great, another impossible question. It couldn’t be denied, but to say yes… no way!

“You don’t want to admit it, huh?” he said. While Gan Ning would have said this mockingly, even if she hadn’t been looking at him at all, Ling Tong actually sounded sympathetic. “I retract the question, I guess. I was just wondering what you were thinking about, the way you were—sorry, may or may not have been—looking at me.”

Somehow such a gallant withdrawal of his attack made her feel like she had been cowardly in refusing to meet it. “I was thinking about your face,” she said. “But it’s a secret.” There. Oh god. Was her heart actually beating faster?

She heard him laugh, and glanced up to see that he was scratching his head, clearly suffering from some embarrassment himself. “Nothing wrong with it, I hope?”

Xingcai reminded herself of her intention to improve Ling Tong, not actually to flirt with him. “Well, I have been thinking that you look so much more attractive when you’re not whining or complaining about something,” she said.

Now he really looked embarrassed, which made her feel a bit bad. “Do I really whine that much?”

“When you’re with Gan Ning, all the time… and you’re almost always with him.”

He groaned, then looked even more self-conscious. She could tell he was thinking about what she had said, and that he was struggling not to whine about Gan Ning. “It’s just… do you know he killed my father?”

“What? Really?”

“I mean, it wasn’t personal. He wasn’t part of Wu at that time. It was one of my first battles, I guess I was sixteen? My father charged the enemy commander, and Gan Ning shot him with an arrow. A lucky hit, I guess. He’s not even that great of an archer…” He trailed off, perhaps noticing that he was starting to get a bit whiny, because he looked self-conscious again. “Anyway. My father’s killer, you better believe I swore I was gonna kill him, right? But when we won the battle, suddenly he’s defected to our side. Not only do I not to get to kill this guy, but I keep getting paired up with him.”

He sighed. “Over and over and over… he’s saved my life, I’ve saved his… sometimes it’s hard to believe it’s been thirteen years, other times I can’t believe it’s only been thirteen years—“

“Wait, how old are you?”

“Twenty-nine.”
“You can’t be twenty-nine.”

“I’ll put aside whether or not I should know how old I am, and point out that unless something has gone horribly wrong, sixteen plus thirteen is twenty-nine.”

She reddened. “I’m sorry, you just look so much younger than that. I would have guessed early twenties. Twenty-five at most.”

“Uh… is that good or bad?”

“That you look younger or that you’re actually older?”

“Both? Either?” He paused. “I guess I just want to know what you really think about me… but maybe that’s your secret.” He glanced down at her. “How old are you?”

“I’m nineteen.”

“Wow…” he said. “Nineteen and twenty-nine…”

“You thought I was older?”

“You act older.” He wasn’t looking at her now. Had the age difference done it? He wasn’t interested anymore? Oh, wonderful. That was really wonderful… wasn’t it?

“It’s not that big of an age difference, is it?” Xingcai, XINGCAI, what the hell are you saying?! Her mouth ran on regardless. “I mean, Lady Sun was about eighteen when she married my uncle—the emperor, I mean. And he couldn’t have been younger than thirty-five… although I admit he doesn’t look it either.”

He was looking at her now, a shy smile on his face. “So an age difference doesn’t bother you?”

.Retreat, retreat! “Don’t think I’m saying more than I am,” she said hastily. “I just mean I don’t think age is that important, if you really love the person.”

“Right. Of course there would have to be love for it to work.”

Her heart was definitely beating faster now.

“Gan Ning is older than me, by the way. He’s thirty-six at least. Maybe even older than that.”

“That’s about what I’d guessed.”

The conversation died, and they listened to the cicadas for a while. Finally he offered her his arm and said she must be getting tired, and she agreed.

As they walked back, she thought to herself that her mission to improve the bickering officers of Wu was inadvertantly changing herself as much as either of them.

At her door, there was complete darkness within. Ling Tong was holding a lantern, and said “Shall I wait while you light yourself a candle?”

It was a nice gesture, and she took advantage of it. She returned to the doorway when the candle was lit and said sincerely, “Thank you.”
Ling Tong did not think of himself as inexperienced with women. Xingcai was not the first woman he had vied with Gan Ning to win, or even part of the first dozen. It was an arena in which Ling Tong usually won, although it didn’t actually mean that much in terms of score, as Gan Ning never seemed to care that much whether he was fucking one woman or another, and even if Ling Tong managed to snag his first choice, the pirate usually succeeded in dropping the xieyi of his second, third or fourth preference. Gan Ning was much more frustrated at his losing record against Ling Tong in xiangqi.

This woman was different. Of course they hadn’t actually intended it to end with bedding her—at least, Ling Tong hadn’t, and he hoped like hell that Gan Ning didn’t have any such thoughts. Just the thought of Gan Ning touching her like that… he shoved the thought away. Anyway. The unspoken goal, at least as far as he was concerned, was to melt her heart a little and get her to admit a preference.

When she had proved disdainful of his usual charm, he had made the mistake of trying sincerity. And now he couldn’t go back. Didn’t even want to go back.

“It’s my pleasure.” He hesitated. “I really like spending time with you. Even though I’m always fumbling around with what to say and stuff… I hope you’ll let me spend more time with you.”

“Well, I’m going to be here for a few months, so in all likelihood you will,” she replied, crossing her arms.

A very quelling reply. “Lady Zhang, maybe I’m not saying it right. What I’m trying to say is…”

She tilted her head at him. “Well?” she prompted, after he had paused a while.

“Maybe I can show you instead,” he said softly, and took a step forward, then, when she didn’t pull back, another one. He put down the lantern, and put a hand on each one of her shoulders. She still didn’t pull away. Her breath was coming faster.

He leaned in slowly, and just as he closed his eyes to kiss her, she said, “Are you going to run and tell Gan Ning about this as soon as you leave?”

Ling Tong opened his eyes. She was still breathing faster, but he could now it wasn’t attraction; it was annoyance.

He couldn’t think how to reply. A flat denial? Too obvious a fake. Act offended? Too late. Admit it, but say that it was only so Gan Ning would back off? The truth, but would she actually believe it?

Her face was getting angrier and angrier, probably because she could tell he was trying to come up with something. “Next time practice your answer in advance,” she snapped. “Sorry, my first kiss means more to me than to be your prize.”

She went inside and slammed the door in his face. He was left standing there awkwardly. Should he apologize? He’d probably just fuck that up too.

Dejected, he picked up his lantern and trudged off.

———

In the morning, as she was dismantling her barricade, Xingcai discovered that a note had been pushed underneath the door. An apology from Ling Tong? She was still kicking herself that in her anger, she had admitted she had never been kissed. Great. She was sure all that had done was to make her a bigger prize. Not only a virgin, but an un kissed one.
However, the note wasn’t from Ling Tong at all.

_After breakfast, the winter practice room._

_Zhou Tai_

She flipped the note over, and there was a small but sufficiently clear diagram.

———

Zhou Tai released the arrow. It hit the target, but not close enough to the bullseye to satisfy him.

As he pulled out another arrow, the door opened, and Xingcai appeared. He slung the bow over his shoulder and bowed, and she bowed in return. She was wearing a loose, high-necked green dress, this one with a subtle sparkle that somehow suited her name (“star glory”). It was very pretty, but he frowned at it.

“Can you fight in that dress?” he said.

She looked startled. “Fight?”

He gave a small gesture with his head to the corner, and she turned to see the wooden practice sword and shield leaning against the wall next to his own practice katana. Her eyes widened, and she walked over to them eagerly. Her hand reached out, hesitated, pulled back, reached out again, wavered.

“I shouldn’t,” she said. She looked at him, and he didn’t say anything. The girl smiled a little. “I notice you don’t bother asking why not.” She looked back at the weapons and folded her arms, as if she was afraid of her own inability to avoid the temptation, and sighed. “I really want to, but…”

“Then do.”

“It might get you in trouble.”

“I take responsibility.”

The arms unfolded, and she picked up the weapons. She tested the heft of the sword, and made an undercutting motion with the shield, as if knocking out an opponent from beneath the chin. Her eyes were shining, and he smiled, then went to hang up the bow.

“I couldn’t get practice dummies,” he said. “But you can use me as a target.”

He thought she might feel some diplomatic need to protest again at that, and was pleased that she merely nodded. Now that she had a sword in her hand, he could tell that she was a different girl, and he had the feeling that this one was the real Xingcai.

He took up an unarmed defensive stance, and she began.

———

She proceeded with unusual caution and restraint for the first few minutes. It felt so wonderful to have a weapon in her hand again. To repay such a kindness by viciously attacking her benefactor just seemed wrong—not to mention undiplomatic. Surely he expected her to be ladylike in her fighting.

At about the five minute mark, she saw a look cross his face—impatience? Before she could
decipher it, he sidestepped, and as her momentum carried her forward, tripped her. She went down hard, and even though she was falling on a wooden sword and shield, it still smarted.

“Again,” he said, while she was still winded, prone on the dusty floor.

Xingcai had maybe inherited a little bit more of her family temper than she knew. She sprang back up and attacked, and this time didn’t hold back. Her opponent smiled, obviously pleased that she was now trying, and somehow this just infuriated her more. That condescending… she would show him!

As she stepped it up, the smile disappeared, replaced with a look of intense concentration. It would have been hard to say how they would have matched up with real weapons and armour in an actual combat situation. In close quarter sparring like this, his vastly superior size, strength, and ability to absorb blows would have seemed to have give him an insurmountable advantage, but Xingcai was fast, even faster than usual with the light wooden sword and shield.

At first simple fury was carrying her forward, instinct and training enabling her to avoid actual thought, but as the edge of her anger dulled, she was forced to recognize that actually making him tap out would be next to impossible. She simply didn’t have the strength to pin him, unless she first somehow crippled him or knocked him unconscious, neither of which she would want to do in a friendly. Right now, she was holding her own, perhaps even had the advantage, but that couldn’t last. What was the least humiliating way to end the match? Anything would be better than—

She fell for a feint, and he pinned her against a wall.

—than being pinned, she mentally finished.

They were both breathing hard. He had a hand on each wrist, while his body pressed her into the cold stone. He was so much taller than him that her face was staring into his shirt. “I yield,” she said.

Instantly he released her and backed up, and to her surprise he bowed, as if he had been the one defeated. “I enjoyed that,” he said. “Would you like a drink?”

———

Her dismay at being offered wine was palpable, although she graciously murmured her thanks as she reached out to receive it. He laughed. “Water, then.”

She blushed. “I didn’t want to offend you.”

He grunted. What kind of idiot would have been offended by that? But the world was full of blathering idiots. He picked up the empty cup and filled it from the pitcher of water he usually used to rinse his face and hands when he was done practicing, handed it over, then drank from the cup of wine.

They sat quietly together, sipping their respective beverages. It was nice to spend time with someone who didn’t feel the need to chatter incessantly after a sparring match. The Wu officers were on the whole a garrulous bunch, though with variations. Ding Feng would often begin a spontaneous poetry recital, while Lu Xun analyzed aloud his missteps; Han Deng would reminisce; Zhu Ran, Gan Ning, and Ling Tong would launch into babble about totally unrelated topics, cheerfully or resentfully depending on whether they had been victorious or not. Sun Quan wasn’t overly talkative, on the occasions that he was able to spar; but he seemed as unhappy in victory as in defeat. When he won, he gave off the impression that he suspected his opponent was humouring him; when he lost, he brooded. It rendered even Zhou Tai uncomfortable with the silence.

“Shall we fight again?” he said, draining his cup as he noticed she had just finished hers.
“You should fight armed. Unarmed is too much of an advantage for you,” she said.

It was a paradoxical idea, but he immediately saw the truth of it. Of course she couldn’t hope to pin him, even if she had a weapon. From her skill, however, she at least had a chance of disarming him, although his fighting style, where he kept his weapon sheathed much of the time, still put her at a disadvantage. He didn’t bother talking about it, though; he just walked over to get his wooden katana.
Chapter Notes

Da Ge = Oldest big brother. What Yinping calls Guan Ping; what Shangxiang calls Sun Ce.
Er Ge = 2nd oldest big brother. What Yinping calls Guan Xing.
Xiao Ge = Youngest big brother. What Yinping calls Guan Suo; what Shangxiang calls Sun Quan.
Bobo = Uncle (father's older brother). What Yinping calls Liu Bei.
Boniang = Auntie (father's older brother's wife)
Boyan = Lu Xun's style name.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

聽風就是雨 (To eagerly believe scandals.)

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When the messenger knocked at the door, Lu Xun leapt to answer it as Yinping had fallen asleep not long after sharing the happy news, but he was not quite in time, as she stirred before he could get the door open.

“The emperor requests your presence, my lord,” said the messenger with a bow. “The empress cordially inquires if Lady Guan would welcome a visit from her now, or if she would like to rest first.”

Lady Guan yawned and rolled over. “How about two hours,” she said sleepily.

“I shall so inform her imperial majesty,” the messenger said with another bow. “Please follow me, my lord.”

As they walked, Lu Xun continued what he had been doing, which was running through various topics and audiences and how he would have to tailor each topic to each possible combination of listeners. With the stress of the journey and the upheaval of Yinping’s condition, he was naturally off-balance, and the Shu prime minister would probably want to quickly pin Wu down to granting concessions and promising high-risk, low-reward gambits against Wei. In no way did Lu Xun intend to commit Wu to another Hefei disaster. So the point of today would be to stall, until the balance of his mind had been restored.

Of all the combinations of officers he had anticipated encountering, he did not expect to see simply the emperor upon his throne. Even the guards withdrew (taking his swords with them). In fact, as he performed the obeisances, he couldn’t help looking around.

“He’s not hiding behind a screen, if that’s what you’re thinking,” said Liu Bei as Lu Xun rose into a kneel.

Since that was exactly what Lu Xun had been thinking, he flushed.
“I feel that with regard to Lady Guan it would be better for us to speak privately and unofficially to start. Our intelligence has been so contradictory and so extreme that I do not even know the questions to ask. What Zhuge Liang wrote for me about her was true: I cannot imagine how any decent man could fail to want to protect her if she was in his thrall, let alone seek to harm her. Yet great wrong has clearly been done to her. Who wronged her, and who will make it right? This is what I expect you to tell me.”

Although he had not been expecting to justify his wife’s treatment as the first question, nor had he expected the challenge to come from Liu Bei in private, he had expected to have to account for it, so he launched into his planned response. Pressing his forehead to the ground in a posture of abject humiliation, he said, “Forgive me, your imperial majesty. When we captured Lady Guan, although she ought to have been simply kept as a hostage, her beauty enraptured me. I was overwhelmed with desire. My lord promised me a boon because of my successes in the battle, and I begged to be allowed to take her as my wife. Bound by his promise, my lord agreed. However, though my passion carried me to such depravity, I swear that I never touched her except by her own wish. Punish me however you choose, take all my wealth as her bride price—she is worth everything to me, and it is right that I should be punished for the foul way I began our marriage.”

There was a long pause, and then Liu Bei’s voice said, almost pleasantly, “Is it easier to speak such ridiculous nonsense into the ground?”

There was another pause. Lu Xun did not raise his forehead from the ground. Nor could he think of a reply.

“Sun Quan must have really acted monstrously for you to need to make up such an absurd story to exonerate him. I had discounted the report that he himself took her virginity, but you make me wonder.”

Lu Xun sat up at that. “It’s not true!”

“Then tell me the truth.”

“My lord, I cannot.”

“If you wish that nonsense to be the official story, I suppose it works well enough, but you must tell me the truth and you will. Sun Quan is your king, but I am your emperor. Moreover, I am acting as Lady Guan’s father.”

Lu Xun took a breath. Perhaps his mind really was unbalanced, or perhaps the charisma that had taken Liu Bei from a penniless weaver of grass mats to an emperor was overwhelming him. He found himself actually recounting the truth, although he skipped over, lightened or excused Sun Quan’s brutality whenever he could. The confusion and madness which seemed to have overtaken everyone—Guan Yu’s summary execution by Lu Meng, and then Guan Ping’s by Sun Quan—the horrible banquet, and the refusal of Lady Guan as a wife by Sun Deng—Mi Fang and Fu Shiren leaping at the chance to further revenge themselves on their dead commander—Lu Xun’s impulsive act, and the innocent night that followed—Sun Quan’s unabated rage and the renegade Shu officers’ persistence the next day—Lu Xun’s desperate marriage gambit. When it got to the actual wedding night, however, the recitation faltered and stopped. There was a long pause, the first actual pause of any kind. The rest had all come out in a torrent.

“In the official story, you said you swore you never touched her except by her own wish. You are very well-spoken, chancellor, but as a verbal tell, that was fairly obvious. You might as well have said to me, ‘I know I’ve said nothing but lies up until this point, but this part is actually true.’”
“I don’t know if I acted with honour or not, my lord,” said Lu Xun, looking down at the ground. “I can say that I believe we truly became husband and wife that night, and I have never regretted being her husband, no matter what led to it or has arisen from it.”

“Draw the curtain over the night then. And since that night… what?”

From there it was less difficult, because Sun Quan’s trajectory of improvement had begun shortly after the wedding. The assassination attempt and Mi Fang and Fu Shiren’s flight—Sun Quan’s sudden decision to marry Lianshi—the messenger from Wei with the offer of vassalage, and its rejection—the decision to enthroned himself as King of Wu—his leaving with Lianshi on his coronation tour, and the holding pattern the rest of them fell into, waiting for his return to decide how to arrange the officers and the troops. And then instead of news of an invasion from the west, the offer of vassalage.

“Mmm. We get into Zhuge Liang’s territory I see. Let’s go back. Actually, let’s go even further back. You referred to Mi Fang and Fu Shiren as ‘the ones who defected.’ Tell me more about their defection.”

“It was just after we had taken the first base—Lady Guan’s base, my lord. When they saw us, I heard them shouting to one another, and just something they said, or maybe the way they said it—I can’t exactly say what it was, because I was fighting as I listened, but it struck me that they weren’t just fleeing out of fear that they could not win this battle. It was something like ‘Wu is here—Guan Yu is done for, and that bastard will probably blame us for it.’ Whatever it was, I sensed a grudge or animus for their commander. So I cut off their retreat and approached them with the offer of revenge as part of my appeal, my lord, as well as the usual promises of taking equal or higher rank within the Wu army. They both accepted eagerly. They told us—myself and Lady Lianshi—about the side entrance, and said they could get it open for us when we were ready to rush the main camp. We sent a messenger to our commander, but he died without reaching him, we found out too late. That is why Lu Meng charged the main entrance, where he received the wounds from the arbalests which eventually killed him…”

He trailed off because Liu Bei held up a hand, and there was a long silence.

—

Liu Bei could not believe it. Mi Fang and Fu Shiren had been reported missing initially, but they had turned up in Chengdu only about four weeks later. The reports from the battle itself, and the intelligence reports, were so contradictory and often absurd that he had dismissed the reports of some peons that they had seen one or the other commanding the opening of the side gates, since other reports reported that the gate had been opened by panicked soldiers attempting to flee, and blaming a missing or dead officer who could not contradict them was a natural way to avoid responsibility. Both Mi Fang and Fu Shiren’s units had been entirely wiped out, which seemed to indicate that the attack on them had been brutal. Moreover, Wu, with its inferiority complex about its ability to attract and keep alive officers of talent, had been making too much propaganda value from the tale of the officers as craven opportunists for its agreement with the story to be disinterested. Better officers who died loyal than who betrayed their commanders, after all.

The officers had told him that they had falsely agreed to switch sides after being captured, in order to make an opportunistic assassination attempt, but that they had chosen the moment poorly and fled in panic when they realized they were sure to be caught. This rather incompetent account had accorded exactly with his own experience of both. Despite the fact that his sister had been Liu Bei’s second wife, Mi Fang remained a very low level officer for good reason, and Fu Shiren was just as bad. Guan Yu had written in one of the last letters before his death that they had required punishment for
accidentally setting a banquet hall on fire. Their family connections and long service in the service of
the oath brothers was the only reason their punishment was as mild as it was. Liu Bei had accepted
their stories without any doubts and reassigned them to Hanzhong immediately, under the belief at
the time that the northwestern border would remain relatively quiet and that Ma Chao was the best
commander to keep them in line.

And yet… now that he thought about it… was it so surprising that such petty, arrogant incompetence
as they had always exhibited would not realize just how incompetent it was? That instead of being
grateful that accidents of birth and timing left the oath brothers feeling obligated to forgive their
repeated transgressions, that they believed that they were entitled by these relationships to
advancement far beyond what either had achieved? That instead of being chastened by their
punishments, they felt wronged beyond endurance?

He felt the rage building up in him again. Without their betrayal, his brother would surely have
escaped… he closed his eyes and tried to breathe slower, but it didn’t help. When he closed his eyes,
he just saw their sycophantic faces when he had told them he was sending them as sub-officers to Ma
Chao, heard their pleading to take command of their own units to attack Jing instead. At the time he
had been so preoccupied with his hatred of Wu, that he had taken their obvious disappointment to be
going to the quieter north as of the same origin. How clearly it was now that it wasn’t this that
disappointed them. They were upset at not being given their own units, as they had possessed under
Guan Yu. After betraying his brother to his death—after requesting to rape and, when thwarted,
attempting to kill his niece—after having nothing better to offer than a false account that in itself
depicted them as weak, incompetent and foolish—they weren’t content that their deception had
succeeded and that they were not being executed. They had the unmitigated shamelessness to expect
to retake command!

He snapped “Wait as you are,” to Lu Xun, stood up, swept past him, opened the door and called to
the guard. “Summon a messenger, one who is both fast and accurate in his memory. Make
preparations for him to travel to Hanzhong as fast as possible.”

He paced as he waited, although it didn’t take long.

“Your imperial majesty.”

“Travel to Hanzhong. This message is for Ma Chao personally—if he is absolutely unavailable, then
his cousin Ma Dai. No one else. Do not write it down. Mi Fang and Fu Shiren are under arrest for
treason. Bind them hand and foot and send them back to Chengdu at once.”

———

Lu Xun could not believe that Mi Fang and Fu Shiren could have been so brash as to actually
attempt to rejoin Shu. Although they had succeeded as double agents to the point of being able to
open the side entrance without alarm, surely someone who survived the battle on Shu’s side, or
failing that, intelligence from within Wu, would have revealed their true role in Shu’s defeat. Yes,
their role in the assassination attempt would have been equally well-known, but such a pathetic
failure could not possibly have made up for what they had done. Had Shu not received reports of the
truth, or had they disbelieved them? It was a spectacular breakdown in intelligence either way.

As the emperor resettled himself on his throne, he took the risk of speaking out of turn. “My lord,
may I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Were you really unaware of what Mi Fang and Fu Shiren had done, my lord? I never imagined they
would have attempted to flee back to Shu, even though our last reports said they headed west. I assumed they were going to Wei.”

“Zhuge Liang probably wouldn’t want me to tell you,” he replied. “We did hear a version that accords with yours, several times. But we also received other versions, versions which we felt painted those most likely to tell your version in a bad light. Moreover… I was married to Mi Fang’s sister. The connection between us goes back to the Yellow Turbans. He has always been incompetent and difficult to command—both of them have—but I never suspected disloyalty…”

This made sense. Liu Bei had managed to scrabble to where he was from nothing on the sheer force of the forging of bonds of loyalty, bonds that were only possible because of the trust he showed in his men and the trust he inspired in them. Even his betrayal and usurpation of his kinsman Liu Zhang to gain Yi province had been instigated at the urging of others, including Liu Zhang’s own men, and had ended with him conferring title and status upon Liu Zhang’s head, rather than the axe upon his neck.

“When was Lady Guan seen by a doctor?”

Lu Xun was silent again. There was an edge to the question. He remembered the doctor’s eyes scanning his wife’s body, the way he had placed his hand exactly at the site of the rib wound. It would have to be the truth. “The wedding day, my lord.”

“And that was, what… two weeks after the battle?”

“Ten days. I can’t excuse it my lord. I knew she had been captured, but I did not think to check on how she was kept once she was brought to Jianye. I just assumed she was being kept as a hostage for ransom in the usual way. To the extent that I thought of her at all. That whole time period was like a plague of madness was settling on everyone.”

“The northern wind.” The emperor shook his head. “What do you know of Zuo Ci?”

———

Loud knocking at the door awakened Yinping. She groaned as she stretched, attempting to wake herself up. Had she really slept for two hours? She’d assumed she would have awakened from her nap and had time to freshen up before the empress arrived. Well, there was no helping it. She quickly glanced in the mirror to make sure there was nothing horrifically off about her appearance, then went to open the door.

It wasn’t the empress. It was Guan Xing.

“Er Ge! Er Ge, Er Ge!” She threw herself into his arms, crying with joy, and he staggered back a little.

He laughed a little bit, but he sounded so tired. “You still pack a punch, huh?” He ran a hand over her long, sleep-tangled hair. “Did I wake you?”

She broke the embrace and took him by the hands, pulling him into the room with eyes shining, offering him a chair and taking one herself. “Yes, but I don’t care about that. I’ve missed you so much, Er Ge. I’m so glad you’re here in Chengdu. Is Xiao Ge here as well? Were you both there to welcome us? I’m sorry I was so unwell when I came, but—but I’m perfectly alright now!”

———

Her phrasing shook Guan Xing out of his initial, sincere joy at seeing his baby sister looking so alive
and happy. “Welcome us?”

She hesitated. “Well… yes. Lu Xun—my husband—of course… and I… and it turns out…” She smiled shyly, and looked to the side, fidgeting with her hair, as if trying to decide what to say.

If she had been looking at his face, she would have seen the horror and disgust there, but the presence of both in his voice was impossible to ignore. “Are you saying you’re pregnant? Are you sure it’s his, or could it have been one of the others?”

“What do you mean?! Of course it’s my husband’s. I wouldn’t take any others!”

She was resenting the implication hotly, as if she were an ordinary married woman accused of taking lovers. “Wouldn’t take… are you saying… Yinping! The man who killed your father and brother—the man who raped you—you’re taking him willingly?”

“Lu Xun didn’t kill Father or Da Ge, and he didn’t… You don’t understand. In the battle… he’s an officer of Wu, so of course—”

“You don’t know he captured our father and brother? You don’t know he fucked you when their bodies hadn’t even rotted away yet?”

———

For her own brother, her quiet, stoic brother, to describe her wedding night with Lu Xun in such an ugly way robbed her of speech. To take something that was so precious, almost sacred, to her… even trying to form thoughts was difficult, especially because he began shouting at her again.

“Did you even try to resist him?”

“I couldn’t… It wasn’t like that,” she managed somehow. “I didn’t… you make it sound so perverse…”

“You couldn’t resist him? And I make it sound perverse?! My god, Yinping, what did he do to you?” He took her hand, and she saw tears in his eyes.

He was thinking such horrible things about Lu Xun, but he had it all wrong… if only she had the words to make him understand, then surely her brother would love her husband and feel the gratitude that Lu Xun deserved… if only she had the words… she had to try. “Lu Xun never did anything to me that wasn’t best for me… or that I didn’t want him to do. He… he wouldn’t have forced anything on me… except I asked him to…”

It was not coming out right. As she paused to try to think of how to put it, his hand suddenly let go of hers and drew back, and she actually thought he was going to slap her.

———

Guan Xing also thought he was going to slap her. To the bottom of his soul he felt she deserved it, but he couldn’t bring himself to strike her face. Her face was still the face of the baby sister he had loved.

“I understand. So all this time he’s been fucking you, it’s ok, because you were asking for it, huh? God, I knew women could be shameless cock-chasers, but I never thought my sister could be such a whore as that. No, the word whore is too good for what you are, Yinping. Not even the lowest, most pockmarked and disease-ridden slut following the camp would fail to at least try to fight off a man who helped kill her family. You’re telling me that not only did you not try to fight him off, you asked
him to do it!”

_____

If he had physically struck her, it probably would have hurt less.

Her ears began ringing and her head was swimming. He was still shouting at her, but she could no longer even understand what he was saying—only the hatred and the loathing coming out from him like waves. She wasn’t sure how much time passed, but suddenly the door opened and a commanding female voice said, “General Guan, that’s enough.” It somehow cut through the cascade of noise as clear understandable words.

Her brother looked like he would rather roll on a pile of broken glass, but he dropped down to do obeisance to the empress.

“How can you speak to your sister that way?” The famous warrior woman looked like she was in mind to start up a little slapping herself.

“My sister died in Jing province. Your imperial majesty.” He spat the last three words out. “May I go?”

“My husband will hear of this. Get out.”

“If he executes me it won’t remove her shame!” he shouted as he left.

Yinping was left trembling in a chair, aware that she ought to have done obeisance already, but totally unable to so much as stand up.

“If you’re worried about kowtowing to me, don’t even think it. I forbid it! You need to be in bed, sweet girl!”

The empress pulled her from her chair and efficiently placed her back into the bed. It was odd for a woman who was so martial and not really all that much older than Yinping to act so maternally, but since it happened in such immediate contrast to her violent rejection from her own flesh and blood, even ersatz familial spirit felt wonderful.

“Would you like a drink of water, or some tea? What would help you calm down? You know, I know we haven’t really known each other before this, but I am your uncle’s wife, so that makes me your auntie, doesn’t it? If you call him Bobo then I must be Boniang!”

Her brother’s torrent of hatred almost felt unreal, like a bad dream, compared to such cheerful simplicity. “Well… when I tried to bow to him in the carriage, he said he was still my uncle…”

“Of course he did. He doesn’t turn his back on family.” She took a breath. “But never mind! We should speak of other things. This kind of stress isn’t good for your baby.”

“You know about the baby?”

“I was there when the doctor reported to my husband.”

“Does Bobo think that Lu Xun is… is…” She couldn’t use such phrases to refer to Lu Xun even in the context of calling them false.

Lady Sun fussed over her blanket and pillow, in a way that was a bit too obvious of a stall for time to think of how to put it. “One of your uncle’s very best features, Yinping, is that he is willing to give
people a chance and to listen to them. Even when they are accused of the very worst crimes, and even if the evidence seems overwhelming, he will still give that last chance to explain. He is meeting with your husband now, and I know he intends to listen to him. I can tell you that at least the doctor testified to your sincere regard for your husband.”

“I love my husband,” said Yinping softly. “My Er Ge… he seemed to think that made me… I can’t even say what he said it made me…” Her face turned red again.

“I heard him from down the hall, at least the last part of it,” said the empress, with annoyance. “He was writing himself quite the opera of your supposed activities in Wu, wasn’t he?”

“I don’t even know… my ears were ringing and I felt so dizzy, I didn’t even understand what he was saying beyond the first minute or so.”

“You’re better off. I don’t know all the details about what happened to you in Wu but I do know some things, and I know Wu. The things he was saying were ridiculous, completely impossible. I won’t foul your ears with them, if you missed them the first time. I really must insist that we speak of other things. If you can keep a secret, I hope that I have my own little duty to keep unstressed.”

Yinping smiled sincerely at that. “Oh, congratulations… uh, Boniang.”

“Don’t congratulate me yet. I might not be, but I might be. I’m not giving up if I’m not! Today I heard a very surprising tip for getting pregnant, and it sounds like just the kind of thing I’d like to try.” She grinned mischievously. “Almost would make not being pregnant yet worth it.”

“Did you know my husband back in Wu at all?”

“I did not, but he’s even younger than me, isn’t he? It’s been five years since I left Wu… seems even longer sometimes. So much has changed, so many good people gone…”

“Yes…” sighed Yinping.

“We’re sort of like distorted mirrors of each other, aren’t we? The Wu girl to Shu and the Shu girl to Wu… and nobody understands how we feel about our husbands, and somehow we’re damned if we love them and damned if we don’t. Being a woman can be hell, don’t you think? I don’t know why anyone thinks we’re weak. I’d love to see a man endure half as much as we’re expected to.”

“That’s why my father didn’t want me to marry,” said Yinping softly. “But… despite everything… there’s so much I would change, but not if it would cost me my husband.”

“You spoke the words right out of my heart,” agreed Lady Sun. “I think we are going to be great friends. Tell me, you must have gotten to know Lianshi in Wu? I’m sure she loved you.”

Yinping laughed. “I think Lianshi loves everyone she can. I didn’t get to know her as well as I would have liked. She was a great comfort to me on my wedding day.”

“She was to me on mine as well.” The empress sighed.

“I know she misses you terribly. I can still hear her saying—“

“The princess!” They both said simultaneously, and laughed.

———

Lu Xun was pleasantly surprised to hear female giggling and chatter as he approached their room.
Not that he hadn’t thought that Lady Sun would be casual and charming, but it was definitely a relief to hear Yinping sounding back to normal. When he’d seen how weak and sick she looked in the carriage, it had given him the fright of his life.

He knocked on the door. “Yinping, it’s me.”

“Come in!”

He opened the door. Yinping was propped up in bed on a few pillows, and the empress was sitting in her chair. He had seen her before at the gate, of course, but then she had been dressed in the formal attire of an empress. Now she was dressed much more casually, similar to the outfits he’d seen her wear in Wu, although she was wearing the green of her husband’s kingdom now. Was that why Yinping had started wearing so much pink? It was strange to think of her signalling his loyalty to him in that way.

“Boniang, this is my husband, Lu Xun,” Yinping said as he kowtowed.

“Your imperial majesty, thank you for your concern for my wife.”

“Not at all! She’s wonderful. We’ve been having a great time here, we have so much in common… wait a minute…” Her eyes narrowed as she looked at him. “My god, you’re not the one I thought was a girl, are you?!?”

Lu Xun was still on his knees. He blushed as red as his jacket.

“You are! I can’t believe it! My, you certainly turned out well. I knew getting rid of all those feathers would make you look better, but I have to say, getting so much taller was a great decision on your part as well."

He laughed, still embarrassed. “I’m…. I’m surprised you remember it, my lady.”

“Oh, you didn’t hear how my Da Ge read me the riot act that night! Generally, he let me do what I wanted, but he was really mad at me that time. He didn’t want to call me out in front of everyone because that wasn’t his style, but he wouldn’t put up with anyone messing with his troops, not even me. Then I made it worse by laughing at him, because I wasn’t used to him being so responsible, and then he got even angrier, and then my Xiao Ge heard us shouting at each other and came to play referee… and when my Xiao Ge found out that I’d grabbed your hand to my chest—“

“You what?!” interrupted Yinping.

Lady Sun laughed. “Just to tease him! Don’t be jealous, it didn’t mean anything, and my Da Ge knew very well it didn’t, but my Xiao Ge was acting as if I was on the verge of becoming a ‘fallen woman’ or some other kind of melodramatic nonsense—my brother and his sexual hang-ups, my god—and then that made my Da Ge switch from yelling at me to yelling at him. I remember him shouting ‘You moron, do you think if she was looking to get seduced she’d pick some kid whose balls probably haven’t even dropped yet—’“

Lu Xun wasn’t sure exactly how appalled his face must have looked, but if it was enough to stop Lady Sun, it must have been pretty bad.

Yinping asked with confusion, “What do you mean?”

“I guess I’ve been shocking again,” Lady Sun laughed, with just a touch of a blush herself. “You must forgive me! It’s too late to change me now.”
“Not at all, my lady,” said Lu Xun. “May I just ask, however, that you refrain from repeating that story around?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t embarrass you with that old story,” she said, standing up. “When I embarrass you in the future, it’ll be in new and exciting ways.” She winked. “Lord Lu Xun, may I speak with you briefly in the hall before I go?”

In the hall, she lowered her voice and briefly recounted Guan Xing’s overwhelming rage against his sister that she had interrupted. “I will speak to the emperor about it, but in the meantime I thought you should know. I must sincerely apologize that it happened. You are our guests.”

“Was Yinping alright?”

“I’d like to think that I was able to reassure her that he was wrong, but I don’t think it’s the kind of accusation that anyone would forget quickly, and she strikes me as a very sensitive girl.”

———

He took off his boots and jacket and climbed into bed with her when he came back in, but his embrace was comforting, not requesting. “How are you feeling?”

“The empress told you what my brother was saying?” she said in a low voice. It was wonderful to be in his arms like this…

“She didn’t go into detail, but I wouldn’t have wanted her to. It was all lies, Yinping, and you know that it is. The person he described, that isn’t you.”

“I don’t feel as bad as you might think,” she said slowly. “It’s strange. It was so overwhelming at the time, I couldn’t even understand the words after a certain point. It was shocking and ugly. Even if it hadn’t been about me, it would have been hard to listen to. The way he described our wedding night, that I was letting you fuck me when my family’s corpses hadn’t even finished rotting…” She shuddered. “It was disgusting, but it was all wrong. What we did… what we have… what you’ve been for me, Boyan…”

She kissed him briefly and continued. “If he had just been insulting me, I can’t say if I would have been able to dismiss it so completely and easily. He’s my brother… but for him to attack what we have… I don’t even have to think about it. He’s wrong.”

He kissed her again, but groaned and reluctantly pushed her hand away when it attempted to slip down his chest. “Don’t think I don’t want to, my love, but in your condition…”

“No, the doctor said it would be fine! Just that we have to cut back!”

“Cut back how much?”

She made a face. “Once a day…”

He laughed and bopped her scrunched up nose. “God, I’m a lucky man. But maybe we had better save it for tonight anyway. The emperor said he needed to do some other things first, but that he would need to talk with both of us before the welcome banquet, as long as your health permitted it. Who knows when there’ll be a knock at the door for that. I don’t want to be interrupted mid-thrust again.”

Just that word thrust sent a little thrill of excitement through her. She sighed and knew she would have to change the subject. A thought occurred to her. “What did my aunt mean about feathers?”
He blushed and suddenly looked very, very young. “When I was maybe fourteen or so, not even a soldier at that point… just that there was a battle that happened to be near my granduncle’s land, so I answered the call for relief troops… anyway, I was trying to look cool and different, and I put these feathers in my shoulder guards, and tied some in my hair. I was even shorter than you are, I must have looked ridiculous.” He sighed. “The worst part is that isn’t even the worst thing I’ve ever worn. There was a period where I wore this stupid hat everywhere… ugh. Let’s just say there’s a reason I still had my virginity when we met.”

“Well, whatever the reason was, I’m glad you were never anyone’s but mine,” she said.

The kissing that followed from that was leading dangerous places if they were supposed to be avoiding having sex.

———

Liu Bei found Guan Xing where he expected to find him, prostrate before the altar of his father.

He had heard loud, angry sobbing as he approached the room, but the young man must have heard him enter, because though he did not get up or even lift his head, the noises stopped, though his shoulders were still shaking. It was unusual behaviour for someone so notoriously stoic and withdrawn.

As the emperor approached, he stepped on something. Looking down, it was the stems from a bunch of flowers, and they felt slick on his bare foot. He was puzzled for a moment, then as he picked them up, realized that it was just like the flowers Yinping liked to wear in her hair. Looking around, he could see a few other feminine things smashed against the wall. They must have been what her brother had offered on her behalf in her absence, and had now decided were unworthy.

He went forward, completing the ritual with slow deliberation, and finally placing his offering of peaches before the slab engraved with his brother’s name and the somber portrait Ma Dai had painted from memory.

“Guan Xing,” he said to the man who was now lying perfectly still. “We should not have this conversation here.”

Liu Bei got up, and Guan Xing followed him. He led him a short distance away to a small library.

Guan Xing’s initial air of sullen, self-righteous refusal to accept a single word of rebuke, even if it meant being executed, was cast into confusion when Liu Bei opened by saying, “Guan Xing, I must start with an apology.”

The emperor wasn’t wearing his mianguan, so his grave face was fully visible. “You asked me to send you away or let you leave. You told me you weren’t capable of controlling yourself. I denied your request. I had the right to do that, but I also had the responsibility—as your sovereign and as your uncle—to ensure that you were kept in check. For me to leave you adrift and alone led directly to this happening. Therefore I bear ultimate responsibility for the wrong done to Lady Guan.”

Guan Xing scoffed. “She is not—“

“Be silent,” snapped Liu Bei. “Do not force me into an action I don’t want to take, Control yourself.”

There was a moment’s tense silence, but the young man did not attempt to speak.

“You care about honour, as do I. But an honour that does not seek to operate on reality is not honour; it is merely temper or madness. You wronged your sister when you did not give her a
chance to explain.”

“There’s no explaining away what she did.”

“If your enemy wants to hang himself, do you not give him the rope? If you won’t give it to him, isn’t it because you don’t think that’s what he’s going to do with it?”

Guan Xing was silent again.

“Was it that you thought that your sister would overwhelm you with her famous skills in deception?”

The young man flushed. “She told me enough. You think I wanted to hear more about her… her willing degradation, at his hands?”

“According to the empress, you were inventing enough lurid details for yourself about what that degradation involved. And quite loudly as well. Please, share them with me.”

Guan Xing said nothing.

“That was not merely a gesture. I would like to hear you say them to my face.”

He looked down at the ground. “Your imperial majesty…”

“You cannot because what you said was truly unspeakable. I withdraw the request; I made it only to make a point. As you could not speak them to me, I don’t want to hear that you have spoken them to any other person. Is that clear?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I believe when you understand the situation that you will have an apology for your sister. The mending of your relationship is between you and her; I have nothing more to do with that, other than to reiterate that whatever relationship or non-relationship you have, I will not permit you to jeopardize the renewal of the alliance with Wu. However, it has occurred to me that there is a task that you can perform for me that will both remove you from Chengdu and provide an outlet for your legitimate rage. I have learned that we were in error to believe the story that Mi Fang and Fu Shiren told us. They were indeed the ones who opened the side entrance to the main camp and allowed your father to be surprised. They did this not only out of craven opportunism, but because they imagined your father had treated them unfairly, and they hated him. They carried their hatred so far that they asked Sun Quan to be able to take turns raping your sister. It was this request which initially forced Lu Xun to take her under his protection, by the way.”

“Mi Fang and Fu Shiren?! That’s not possible!”

“We can waste time with me telling you how and why I know, but a messenger was dispatched around three hours ago to travel to Hanzhong to tell them to bind them and bring them back here. With your personal motivation, I feel confident that you can make up the time. I give you full authority to take charge of their journey back here—“ He pulled out a scroll from his robes with instructions to that effect—“but in case it isn’t clear, I do expect them to actually be alive when they arrive here. Their condition otherwise I leave to you. I give you permission to skip taking leave of me.”

Guan Xing bowed, but Liu Bei could tell the young man’s mind was far away. He took the scroll and was off.
During the period between leaving Lady Guan and the beginning of the banquet, Lady Sun was a very busy woman. She knew very well that in a place like Chengdu the walls had ears. She hadn’t been able to wait the promised two hours to go to see Lady Guan, but she didn’t know how long Guan Xing had been so loud and profane. She had not seen anyone as she approached the hall, and she had not been accompanied by a servant, but she could not be absolutely sure that he had not at some point been heard. If he had, that story would quickly be pinging around the palace. She had to come up with some competing rumours and fast. Luckily, she had an arsenal to choose from, with the bonus of actually being true.

She was judicious in both who she told and who she allowed to overhear her telling others. She led everywhere with Mi Fang and Fu Shiren’s perfidy. It was salacious and thus likely to spread, and it provided a non-Wu target for malice with regard to Jing province, which, as a Wu partisan, she could not help but promote. She particularly enjoyed discovering, when she was telling Yueying about it, that her husband Zhuge Liang, who was also there, had not yet been told about it. He twitched his fan around and acted as if he had, but she knew. It was difficult to restrain herself from rubbing it in, but she knew his approval of her was still tenuous.

Yinping’s romance and pregnancy she told only to or in the hearing of those she thought would probably repeat the story as she wanted it told. This was very tricky; she could lean on Mi Fang and Fu Shiren’s villainy in making the request to violate her, but Lu Xun’s intercession would not have been necessary unless her brother had been almost as villainous in entertaining the request at all. It was fortunate for her opinion of her brother that Shangxiang was unaware that Mi Fang and Fu Shiren made their requests only in response to an invitation from Sun Quan; as it was, she could barely believe that he had not immediately refused it, no matter how drunk he was. She understood why Lu Xun had wanted to stick to an official story that did not involve the defecting officers at all, but that was going to come out for sure. The only way to spare her brother was to make Lu Xun look imperceptive for fearing that Sun Quan would do something he would never do. But if in Lu Xun’s official story he had been willing to make himself out to be a dishonourable slave to his passions who lacked the foresight to understand the repercussions of demanding Lady Guan, she hoped that he would permit her to paint him as a bit of a fool on behalf of a vulnerable young woman.

Anyone who had followed the empress over that afternoon and evening would have thought she was an inveterate gossip, but they were very wrong, and here is the proof: she did not breathe a word of the juiciest detail of them all, the happy couple’s sexual frequency.

Neither did the doctor breathe a word. He was a man that understood that in his profession, discretion was as important as any of his medical skills. As for Liu Bei, while his empress’s awestruck fascination for this level of stamina had amused him (and perhaps excited him), he really did not like to think of his niece in such a context.

Zhuge Liang, alas, was the one who let it go beyond the imperial chamber, although he could have been excused for doing so. He told only one person, in private, and that was his own other half, Yueying. He knew her to be not only discreet, but what is better, totally uninterested in idle chatter. Even more so, she was not titillated by the news, nor had he expected her to be; he was honestly interested in her opinion on this unusual variant on the taoist idea of sexual congress as power source. Although literal machines were her first love, she had a certain level of interest in anatomy and nature, and she was far less mystical than her husband; she had a desire to get down to the bottom of things, and seemed sure that at the bottom of everything, there would be some mechanism, if only she could get at the gears.

She didn’t offer much of an opinion on the matter at the time, preoccupied with some unsolved behaviour from a model arbaelest, so he dropped the subject, not realizing that her curiosity had indeed been piqued.
Her husband ought to have known that curiosity was at least as powerful and dangerous as lust in its potential for havoc.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I am poking a little bit of fun at the sillier aspects of Lu Xun's DW6 and DW5 outfits. Crop tops, feathers, and that hat, Lu Xun... sooo not a good look for you. Apologies to anyone who actually likes those costumes.
References to sex between a married 16 year old and her 30-something husband.

Since this is Yueying’s first major scene in Clouds and Rain, just wanted to point out that my Huang Yueying shares only a name and a physical likeness with Koei’s version of her; otherwise she is basically OC.

Kongming is Zhuge Liang's style name. It's interesting to note that in the original Japanese script Koei has Yueying and Sun Shangxiang call their husbands by their style names + -sama as a "lord" suffix (Lord Kongming and Lord Xuande), in contrast to say Xiao Qiao and Da Qiao who call their husbands Lord Zhou Yu and Lord Sun Ce. Not sure why they decided to do that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

食色性也：shi se xing ye
food / lust / nature / [emphatic particle]
“The appetites for food and sex are natural.”

Lu Xun would have liked to believe that the eyes that followed them as he entered the banquet hall with his wife on his arm were drawn there for the purpose of admiring a lucky young man who had such a treasure beside him, but he could not. And yet he did see admiration in some of the glances, and he could not at all understand where it was coming from. There had been no admiration from anyone, not even the empress, in his official welcome at the gate, and surely nothing about his wife’s being too unwell to even stick her head out of the carriage could have improved their opinions. Yinping was indeed looking well now, though a bit tired, but they were not just looking at her, he was almost positive.

Even more puzzling, he saw nothing more negative than confusion or speculation. Surely someone ought to be giving him a look of restrained loathing. He had seen plenty of that at the gate, and he recognized some of the same faces.

He glanced at Yinping. She of course knew nearly everyone here, but she was acting as shy as if she knew no one. At least she didn’t look miserable. She was smiling and blushing, occasionally lifting a hand to wave a little at someone. It was charming, and he smiled down at her.

Well, what was the point worrying about what the rest of them thought? He was a lucky man with a treasure beside him. If they weren’t admiring him for that, they should be.

The empress herself, breaking protocol and shocking the servant who was attempting to do it, swanned over to them and beckoned them to follow her to the head table, where the emperor was standing. He looked at the other guests standing by the ten person table to see if he could identify them all. Zhuge Liang, and his wife Huang Yueying; Zhao Yun, and a girl who seemed too young to be his wife but a bit too old to be his daughter—that was going to be awkward, he hoped someone would identify her before he was forced to take a stab; Ma Su and his wife, presumably. Alright, he could handle this. The presence of Zhao Yun at the head table was a bit of a puzzle—not Liao Hua, Fei Yi, or Jian Yong? He saw that these senior officials, and others like them, had been instead set as
subhosts of other tables. So why specifically honour Zhao Yun, who had not even been enfeoffed to his knowledge, in this way? Perhaps his wife/daughter was a friend of Yinping’s? He glanced down at Yinping to see her reaction, but not only was she not regarding the girl with delight, she didn’t even seem to notice her at all.

Liu Bei indicated for Lu Xun to take the seat at his right, and Lu Xun was glad to see that the empress was settling his wife next to him. As he sat, everyone around the banquet hall sat, which was odd for him. He had sort of been the guest of honour at that horrible banquet back in Wu, but that had been a ramshackle affair from the beginning. This was clearly going to be very different. It was even stranger to see the emperor take the serving spoon from the first dish and ladle full his soup bowl. That could only mean he was expected to take the first bite.

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Yinping had always enjoyed banquets, especially if there was entertainment. There didn’t seem to be any space set up here for performers, but she hoped there would be at least music. Her other enjoyment at banquets had of course been the food, and her eyes gleamed at the servants began loading the table. With the elixir having relieved the constant undercurrent of nausea she’d been experiencing the past few days, she could hardly believe how hungry she was, and everything looked amazing. She didn’t even notice that the hand that put soup into her bowl was her uncle’s.

“Please go ahead,” her uncle said, indicating that people could begin serving themselves and others. She looked down and realized she had already been served. Puzzling, but perhaps her husband had done it for her. She looked around for who she could serve, but it seemed like all the bowls were already being filled by others. Maybe she was more out of it than she thought.

She looked anxiously at her uncle for him to take the first bite so she could dig in, but instead she saw that her husband was picking up his spoon. She froze. He always did everything so correctly… he couldn’t possibly…!

Her husband placed the food in his mouth and everyone, including the emperor, began to eat.

Yinping mechanically picked up her own spoon, then put it down because the girl sitting next to Zhao Yun was filling her tea cup. She flushed. That was always what she did at banquet tables… she was always the youngest… but who was this girl? Zhao Yun didn’t have any children that she knew about, and if he had one as old as this, surely she would know about it? Had he been married long ago? She looked almost as old as Yinping.

The girl saw Yinping staring at her, instead of acknowledging the filled cup, and reddened, which made Yinping blush even harder herself. How rude she was being! The last thing she wanted to do was embarrass another girl. “Thank you!” she said hastily. “My thoughts were far away, please excuse me.”

The girl nodded, still clearly flustered, and moved onto pouring tea for the prime minister. Pouring tea for the prime minister after her?! Yinping ate a spoonful of soup, feeling totally lost at sea. She realized she had no idea how to behave in such a circumstance. Her table manners were fine, but surely not up to this standard… there were probably all kinds of etiquette rules that she was going to break without ever suspecting… maybe she had already broken some of them, and everyone was just ignoring it to be kind. Clearly she had already caused that poor girl to lose face. She fought off her panic and had another spoonful of soup.

———

The empress saw that Yinping was suddenly having an attack of nerves. Time to hostess the shit out
“Lady Guan, I believe you had already left when our dear attentive Zhao Yun got married, hadn’t you? Madam Zhao, you must be about Lady Guan’s age. You can be companions for one another.”

Yinping looked very surprised, which Shangxiang couldn’t entirely fault. She wasn’t sure of Zhao Yun’s exact age, but he was probably about thirty-five. For a man to marry someone young enough to be his daughter was generally the province of dirty old men. *Like Liu Bei,* she thought with an internal snicker.

“Congratulations,” her niece said. “Was it recent?”

“About two years ago,” said Zhao Yun, smiling. “Your father never mentioned it?”

“He never mentioned it to me that I remember…” she said. “He never liked me to discuss…” She faltered.

Shangxiang saw that she had inadvertently caused the very awkwardness she was trying to avoid, but her husband somehow rode to the rescue.

“Never liked to talk about weddings and marriage, right Yinping?” he said, his calm smile while pointing out the elephant in the room somehow defusing the situation. “It must be hard for fathers to accept that their daughters are growing up. I know it was difficult for Madam Zhao’s brother to let her go so young.”

“Not every father,” said Lady Huang, unexpectedly. “When my lord accepted my father’s invitation to meet me, my father spent the entire morning on his knees before the family altar, praying I wouldn’t scare him off.”

“You never told me that,” said the Prime Minister, amused.

“It was never relevant,” said his wife, with an impassive shrug. Odd creature. “He also said that I needed to take off my disfiguring make-up or he would do it himself, which he knew I knew was a lie. But it ended up not mattering because you saw through it.”

Ma Su’s wife, Lady Xiang, anxious to make the most of their presence at the head table, immediately began to tell her own anecdote about her father. To her obvious annoyance, her husband, clearly with no interest in these womanly matters, turned back to Zhuge Liang to resume their side conversation without even waiting for her to finish speaking. As soon as Lady Xiang was done, side conversations between people sitting directly next to each other took over everywhere. Her husband was speaking with Lu Xun, which left as the natural pairings her to Zhao Yun, Madam Zhao to Lady Xiang, and Yinping to Lady Huang. Well, that was sure to be awkward, but at least nothing terrible would happen.

———

“Do you remember how well the arbalests were functioning before the last battle?” Yueying opened with, and Yinping was glad she had just swallowed a bite of chicken.

“I don’t, I’m afraid,” she said. “I wasn’t even near that part of the field.”

“Everyone told me they functioned perfectly but I am not convinced,” she said. The inventor seemed to be studying her face as if it were a diagram. “You are upset? I’ve said something upsetting. Is it the topic? A battle. Battles are acceptable topics at banquets, are they not?”
She seemed to be attempting to solve a problem aloud. Yinping had never interacted with the woman much, and never attempted to have a conversation with her, and she was taken aback. “I think the mention of that particular battle at this banquet is awkward because we’re attempting to reform the alliance that was severed there,” she ventured, wondering how such an intelligent woman could possibly fail to see that.

Yueying frowned. “I understand. Well, if you can’t give me any more data, it doesn’t matter anyway. Another topic, then. Health. Your health? Are you well?”

Yueying’s concentrated effort on the task of having a conversation with her was disconcerting, because she had never met anyone who spoke like that before, but it was strangely anxiety-easing as well. Here was someone who was clearly by nature out of her depth at a banquet, yet she was giving it all she had. She felt herself to be in the position of the person who makes it go well, instead of being the person whose fumbles had to be covered by others, and that was refreshing.

Lady Huang apparently already knew of her pregnancy, and she had her own theories about the condition, which she hastened to caution Yinping were almost entirely based on dissections of various animals and eggs, and therefore the parallels to human beings could not be certain. Her major departure from orthodoxy was her hypothesis that the fetus was in fact developing from far earlier than current medical knowledge believed; perhaps even from conception. The limitation, she believed, was in her inability to view things in their smallest states. She wished she could think of some military application for the ability to view very tiny things; then she would actually be able to give the task some attention. As it was, she hadn’t been able to develop her theory on the matter for some years.

It wasn’t anything that Yinping had ever thought about in her life, but it was actually pretty fascinating. “You have interest in medicine as well as machines? Surely medicine has high battlefield importance.”

“Medicine is exasperating,” she said. “You can’t experiment with a person like you can with a machine. If my machines break, I can rebuild them. I can’t do that with a person. It frustrates me.”

“I guess that would be pretty cool,” said Yinping, imagining it. “You could just pick up your arm and screw it back on…”

“That’s not the only thing that’s exasperating. Hardly anyone has written about machines, but at least what they have I can recreate for myself and determine its truth. The medical books I have read and the doctors I have spoken to say the most absurd things, and yet I can’t disprove them.”

“If a treatment works, doesn’t that prove its validity?”

Yueying gave her a look that seemed to indicate that the older woman found her asking this as inexplicably stupid as Yinping had found her lack of understanding that it was unwise to bring up the battle of Fan Castle. “No, how would sequential order prove causation?”

Yinping wasn’t at all sure what that meant. “Well, give me an example of a medical idea that you find ridiculous.”

———

Zhuge Liang always enjoyed talking strategy with Ma Su. The man was intelligent and educated enough to actually fully perceive the sleeping dragon’s genius, yet he continually seized upon only the most obvious aspect of a situation, which allowed Zhuge Liang to feel his superiority. As a conversational partner at a banquet he was near ideal, although he knew he would have to be careful
where he deployed Ma Su. At least he was sure that the man trusted Zhuge Liang’s judgment over his own.

Absorbed in a discussion of the destruction of Shouchun during the Qin conquest of Chu, he was only vaguely aware from their tone that his wife and Lady Guan, after some early awkwardness, seemed to actually be enjoying talking to each other. Usually people spoke only a few sentences with his wife and then found an excuse to talk to someone else, which appeared to suit Yueying down to the ground. It did please him if she was managing to expand her horizons a little into actually enjoying speaking with someone other than him. He never would have expected Lady Guan to have a mind that would interest her.

Ma Su paused to consider how he wished to finish his sentence, and Zhuge Liang clearly heard his wife say, “Well, consider the Wu doctor telling you to have sex twice a day…”

———

Lu Xun jerked his head away from the emperor, but he need not have worried about offending him, because Liu Bei had dropped open his mouth as well.

The entire table had stilled as Lady Huang continued talking. “I understand his explanation was that you would somehow absorb yang and qi and thus recover faster, but I simply cannot accept that some kind of energy transfer occurs. It would be one thing if doctors treated semen as valuable medicine, but if that were the case, then why would semen not be bottled and sold as a treatment? So then it is the act itself; but the idea that male exhaustion after coitus proves loss of energy has always seemed to me to be tenuous at best, and if he does lose energy, how precisely do we know that the woman absorbs it? Why should a man be said to lose energy to the woman in sex but not to his opponent in battle or to the field if he pushes a plough? Simply because the woman seems less exhausted afterwards? Does not the usual passivity of the woman’s position—”

She clearly had a lot more to say on the subject, but her husband’s hand was on her shoulder, and she turned. Zhuge Liang’s face looked rather mild to Lu Xun, but clearly held some completely different message to her. The back of her head was towards him, but he could hear how her voice was faltering as she said, “I was discussing health… I didn’t mention blood or death…”

She looked away from her husband and down, rocked back and forth in her seat for a few seconds, suddenly said “Excuse me,” and was up and off.

The commotion had not escaped nearby tables. Lu Xun couldn’t be sure how many had heard her initial sentence, but he would not have taken a bet at any odds that the number was zero. He quickly looked at Yinping to see how embarrassed she was, and was relieved that she merely looked shocked, rather than personally ashamed… perhaps such a reaction would go some distance towards dismissing the idea that the statement had any actual truth. It would mean throwing the Shu prime minister’s wife to the wolves, but he would gladly have ruined the name of anyone in Shu rather than have Yinping suffer a moment’s embarrassment, and clearly the woman had brought it on herself, for whatever deranged reason.

Madam Zhao, showing great spirit, leaped into the void by saying, “Lord Lu Xun, what do you think of the food in Chengdu?”

———

The handmaidens giggled and batted their eyes at Zhao Yun flirtatiously, tugging on their robes to make them cling tighter as they bowed and withdrew, leaving his wife with her hair still half up.
“Hey—wait!” she protested, but they were already gone. She sighed in frustration. “You know, if they’re so hot for you, that’s fine, but I don’t understand in that case why they run away the moment you come in here.”

“Here, let me,” he said, taking over the task of removing the pins and comb. “I came to tell you you were magnificent at the head table tonight.”

“I thought it went terribly,” she said. “I nearly spilled the Prime Minister’s tea. And I wanted to talk to the empress so much, but every time I got the nerve up to ask her something, someone else was already speaking.”

“You saved the day when you were the only one who sounded close to normal after that incident.”

“That was nothing, I just felt so bad for her,” she said, and sighed. He could well agree, except what she said next was, “Poor Lady Huang…”

“Lady Huang?”

“Well yes!” she said. “I don’t understand why the prime minister doesn’t let her pretend to be ill or something to get out of these kinds of things. How can he predict the actions of armies but not that she will inevitably say something inappropriate?”

“There’s inappropriate and then there’s saying that a table companion is having sex twice a day at doctor’s orders… not to mention the rest of it… Would you have predicted she would say something like that?”

“No,” she admitted. “But I’ve only ever talked with her about military things. Definitely never sex! The empress has said more to me about sex, and I’ve barely ever talked to her.”

He stopped running his hands through her hair. “What did the empress say to you about sex?!”

“She just came to me during the wedding preparations and said that she knew my mother had passed and my brother had no wife, so she wondered if anyone had talked to me about what to expect and if I would like to talk to her about it. It was very kind, really.”

“So… you took her up on it?” he said carefully, not sure if he should be indulging his curiosity. Over the past five years, whenever he was in Chengdu, Zhuge Liang had basically assigned him to keep an eye on Lady Sun. Why the chosen babysitter was him rather than someone else he could not guess—the strategist had calmly stated that he felt that Master Zhao Yun’s impeccable morals would be best to resist such a temptress. He had never been sure if the prime minister was being genuine, or if he suspected him of liking bold women and was mocking him. It didn’t really matter in either case; Lady Sun’s type of bold was not his type. He liked women who kicked ass, but he liked them to be calm and dignified about it. Lady Sun was not calm and dignified while kicking ass or at any other time, including while seducing her husband right in front of Zhao Yun’s cringing, blushing face. And because of Zhuge Liang’s orders, he couldn’t leave unless Liu Bei himself sent him away, which his lord was sometimes distracted from doing until far too late for his comfort level.

On the other hand, he had spent even more time watching her patiently interact with Liu Shan, and so perhaps more than any other officer in Shu he knew how considerate and even maternal she could be. Could she have really spoken in the role of a mother?

“Yes, and I was so relieved, although I don’t think a mother would have put things the way she did!” said his wife, almost as if she knew what he was really curious about, and then, seeing his face, hastened to add, “I don’t mean she said anything that lurid! I mean she just made some teasing
comments to lighten the mood and was very genial. Plus she had some practical advice that I can’t imagine a mother giving.”

“Like what?”

“What comments or what advice?” She had apparently decided he was done with her hair and had begun undressing, which was distracting and unfair.

He turned away and began undressing himself. “Both. Either.”

“Well I remember the first thing she said was something about how a twenty year age gap was perfect because by the time we started losing our looks in a big way our men would be uninterested or unable to chase younger women,” she said with a giggle. “That kind of thing. Made it seem like… like not such a big deal, which meant a lot. The practical advice… well the most useful thing she said was basically that I would just have to see what you were like. She said that back in Wu she was treated more or less like one of the boys, so she heard all kinds of variations in terms of what men liked to do… more or less gentle, patient, eager, passionate, even funny, which I couldn’t understand at the time. And then she said that some men just got it over with or didn’t consider the woman’s feelings, and she hoped that wouldn’t be the case for me. She also said that some men actually like the woman to hate it, and if that turned out to be the case I should feel free to beat you up or tell her and she would beat you up for me. Or to tell my brother if I wanted you to die.”

Zhao Yun, thinking of his wife’s brother, felt that Lady Sun was dead on in her assessment of what his friend’s reaction would have been if his sister had reported any sadism on his part. He hung up the last part of his formal robes and turned back to her. She had her bare back to him for a brief moment before the silk nightdress came down from her shoulders and hid her body from him again. At least for the moment.

He moved swiftly to her side and wrapped his arms around her. She gave a quiet sigh of contentment as she lifted her own arms to embrace his, then lifted his left hand and began kissing his fingertips. It was a gesture that had special erotic meaning to them, because the only scars on his body were there. He had used one of her sewing needles to prick his fingers and mark the sheets on their wedding night, knowing she wasn’t ready to consummate. It was only since he had returned from Mt. Dingjun that they had become lovers.

“That was all?” he murmured, playing with one of the strings of her xieyi with his right hand.

“Oh, just some other practical things… like, try to do it on his side of the bed so he has to sleep in the wet spot instead of you,” she laughed guiltily.

Zhao Yun reddened as the image of Lady Sun scooting away from the emperor after the deed floated unbidden into his mind. “You know, I think I don’t actually want to know about her advice after all.”

———

Zhuge Liang knew he had been correct when he saw the workshop was almost brilliant with light despite the lateness of the hour. He walked in to find his wife feverishly working the beads of an abacus. She was checking and rechecking calculations, he knew. Comforting herself.

“Hello, Yueying,” he said.

The quick movements of her hand didn’t stop. “I know I have shamed you,” she said, “but I don’t know what I did. I’m sorry.”

“I am not angry with you. Long ago, when I was training you on what was and was not appropriate
conversation in public, I clearly neglected to inform you that sexual intercourse is not appropriate. Moreover, when I was discussing the reported advice of Lady Guan’s doctor with you, I should have specifically mentioned not to tell anyone else. I admit it was a blind spot for me, but I should have known not to assume that you would understand that without being explicitly told. I see that up until now your lack of interest in the subject has prevented an incident such as this.”

She frowned. “I don’t lack interest in it.”

“Interest in discussing the subject, then?”

“I don’t think it has ever been a relevant topic to me with anyone other than you.”

“You flatter me.”

She looked at him with puzzlement, and he sighed. It was so difficult to avoid falling into his usual habits of irony, allusion, sarcasm, inference, and so on with her. She didn’t recognize any of it. “I was alluding to being glad that you are sexually attracted only to me,” he spelled it out.

Yueying sighed too, and pushed away the abacus in frustration. “I don’t understand why everyone except me seems to understand when people say things like that.”

“You are who you are, and that is my wife,” he said.

“I’m glad you’re my husband, Kongming,” she said. “I don’t think anyone else could stand me.”

“I enjoy being with you very much,” he said, sincerely, though he knew he could have said it in the most sarcastic drawl he possessed and she would have taken it the same way. “Will you come to bed?”

“Alright,” she said, and began extinguishing the lights. As she worked, she asked, “Did I cause anything terrible to happen?”

He chuckled. “A great deal of embarrassment. However, I believe that I will be able to direct most of the unpleasant consequences onto you. Since I know that you will not experience the effect of public shame as most people would, I do not feel any misgivings about sacrificing you in this way.”

She nodded and put out the last light, casting them into darkness.

———

“Yueying…” her husband said as he closed her bedroom door behind him.

She had been reaching for a jade egg, but pulled her hand back and turned. “Oh, you wanted to join me?”

“If you are willing,” he said, with a polite nod.

“Of course,” she said, and began to undress.

“Yueying. I was curious,” he said, beginning to undress himself as well. “You never gave me a hint that you disliked engaging in the arts with me.”

She looked confused again. “But I didn’t say that.”

“I apologize,” he said. “If I can be precise, you said you did not believe in them, and it is difficult for me to understand how you would enjoy something you thought false. I hope it is not merely to
satisfy me.”

“What we actually do, I enjoy,” she said, frowning in her usual way when she was attempting to communicate feelings. “It is merely the books that irritate me.”

She lay down on the bed in her usual starting position, and he sat down at the foot of the bed and began massaging her feet. “What about them irritates you?”

“Do you read them much, Kongming?”

“Not for some years,” he admitted. “I perhaps prefer the practice to the study now.”

She was silent, and he prompted her, “You do not wish to tell me what bothers you?”

“I don’t like to think about it,” she said, and actually reddened. He was patient, knowing that it could not be prudishness that was the cause, and eventually she said, “All that stuff about men needing many virgins… that to have sex with the same woman too many times has no benefit…”

“Oh,” he said, and smiled.

She saw the smile and turned her head. “It’s not like you to be cruel, my lord.”

“I did not intend to be cruel, Yueying. I have not been taking ‘many virgins,’ as you put it, if that sets your mind at rest. I am surprised, if you believed that to be the case, that you have not been putting your dagger-axe to some other use.”

“I don’t know what wives are supposed to do,” she muttered. “It seems impossible to me… no attachment, no expectations…”

He began stroking up towards the heart. “I have my own thoughts on the matter, since you bring it up. To an individual man of even modest wealth, young women seem to be without limit; therefore they are expendable. One simply harvests until the harvests decline, and then moves on. In my youth, I too followed this idea. But this cannot possibly be permissible from the perspective of the Way. We see that land is limited, and that we depend upon the land, and therefore we nurture the land, so that it will continue to sustain us. Rulers depend on the people as the people depend on the land; when rulers neglect the people, when people neglect the land, destruction follows. This is all yang neglecting yin: if these things lead to upheaval in the state, it must surely be the same between husband and wife.”

She sighed. “This is what you think?”

“It is what I think, and what I feel, and what I have seen, and what I have experienced.”

“You should write a book,” she said, and he chuckled. She smiled and extended a hand, and he slid his hands along her body as he came up and hovered over her to kiss her. Her hand traced his slight shoulders as he parted her lips, running his tongue over hers.

“When I took you the first time,” he murmured, “you were so nervous. Your mouth was dry. You held yourself in, do you remember?”

“I remember,” she whispered.

“It took me so long to gain your trust. Why would you think I would ever risk that?”

She was silent as he began massaging first one arm, and then the other. Her skin was glowing from
his attentions and the soft moonlight. As his hands ministered to her shoulders, she spoke again.
“Why then did you smile, my lord?”

“When?”

“After my complaint. When I thought you were mocking me.”

“Ah,” he said, and skirted her breasts down to her ribs, gaining a little sigh of anticipation from her.
“Because I enjoy being reminded that you love me.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't at all endorse all the Taoist theories of sex (not that it would possible to do so, since they contradict and are very different over the centuries/millennia), but starting every session of sex with an extended full body massage is something I can get behind 100%.

A jade egg is a sexual training device for women; its authenticity as an ancient device is dubious, but whatever, you know Yueying would be all about the sex toys. Probably she invented them. ;)

There is a folktale about Zhao Yun that he died from being poked with his wife's sewing needle, whereupon she committed suicide. I found this melodrama so absurd that I felt I needed to reference it somehow, and thus the more romantic use of a sewing needle seen here!

The identity of Zhao Yun's wife and brother in law will eventually be revealed. In the meantime you may be able to guess from context, especially if you know Three Kingdoms popular culture.
頭昏眼花 (Dizzy with blurred vision.)

Chapter Notes

Xiao Ge = "youngest big brother"; Yinping calls Guan Suo this.
Er Ge = "second oldest big brother"; Yinping calls Guan Xing this.
Kongming = Zhuge Liang’s style name.
Boyan = Lu Xun's style name.
Da Ge = "oldest big brother"; Yinping and Guan Suo call Guan Ping this.
Xiaozhi = Fa Zheng's style name.

An explicit sex scene is present; no further warnings required.

Contains mild Sinocentrism/racism towards non-Han (ie the usual "everyone who is not Han is a barbarian").

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

頭昏眼花：tou hun yan hua
head / dusk / eye / flower
“To be dizzy with blurred vision.”

The dream began with what really happened, though suffused with a dread, guilt, corruption and hatred that hadn’t been at all present in reality.

Guan Suo had been thrilled to be the first one summoned to his father that day, but the first words had knocked it all out of him.

“Son, I know you will find this difficult to accept, but you and your sister will be guarding this base here.”

In the dream the battle map was nothing but a swirling mess, but the young man responded to the pointed spot as if he understood it perfectly. “What?! But that base is meaningless!”

The dream version of Guan Yu was staring at his son with open disgust and loathing, though he spoke the same mild reprimand he had in real life. “No base is unimportant in a battle. We are at a disadvantage to begin with.”

“All the more reason why you need every officer you can helping with the flood attack!” shouted Guan Suo. “Yinping can take care of the base by herself. She isn’t a child—she’s done it alone before!”

“But in this battle if the enemy attacked her it would be difficult for reinforcements to make it in time.”

“All the more reason for us to overwhelm the castle as fast as possible, so Wei never gets that far!”

His father was silent. The swirling miasma of the battle map was licking up his arm, rotting away the flesh, yet the dream Guan Suo didn’t care. He didn’t care about anything but himself and getting to be part of the action. He pressed on. “If Wei makes it to her base as you say, then the battle is already a rout and she’ll have retreated. I know you worry about her, father, but it makes no sense. Put me
with the flood attack!

Guan Yu sighed. The corruption had spread over his torso, and soon it would reach his head. He was already dying, and he didn’t even know it. “Alright. I suppose you’re thinking clearer than I am. We old men, my son, if we don’t get forgetful and reckless, we get sentimental and timid. It loses battles either way. Go tell Yinping to come in next.”

Guan Suo opened the door. It was dark and the rain was pounding, blurring his vision. He took a step and slipped on the slick earth, falling down, down, down. In the distance he could see his sister, surrounded by demons in red, and she was screaming.

“Xiao Ge! Xiao Ge! Where are you? Xiao Ge, help me!”

“Yinping!” he tried to shout, but the rain was filling his mouth. He tried to reach for her, but he couldn’t reach anything. He was drowning and falling and yet he didn’t die. Of all the people who should have died, he did not.

“Xiao Ge! Xiao Ge!” Her maces were knocked out of her arms, and the demons were upon her. He could no longer see her behind the blur of red, yet her screams, now wordless, continued—

“Yinping!” he gasped. He was in his bed in Chengdu, and the strangled gasp had actually come out aloud.

His wife stirred and looked up at him sleepily. “Hmm? Another bad dream?” She stretched, and reached a lazy hand down. “I’ll drive it away for you, my love.”

Her hand grasped him, and his cock responded, despite the feeling that he wanted to vomit. She would make him forget, she could make him forget anything. “Sanniang, don’t…”

Her touch instantly withdrew. “Don’t?” she said, and she sounded completely bewildered. Unsurprising, considering he’d never asked her to so much as slow down before. She was looking up at him, though he wasn’t sure what she could see in the darkness; he couldn’t tell what expression was on her face either. “Don’t stop?” she suggested coyly, with that purr back in her voice again, and her hand began to move towards him again.

He grabbed her wrist. “No,” he said. “I’m… I don’t know why you married me, Sanniang.”

“You beat me,” she said, and the bewilderment was back in her voice.

Blurred memories of their duel flitted in and out of his mind. He had been drunk that morning and half-wishing she would knock him off the bridge into the river below. Drowning was the right death for him.

“I’ve seen you fight since then, Sanniang. I didn’t beat you. You let me win.”

“Well, you could have, if you weren’t so drunk. And I could tell you weren’t really trying. Plus, you were so cute. I just didn’t have the heart to kill you. ‘This is the one, Sanniang!’ I said to myself.” She attempted to twist her arm out of his grip, but he tightened it.

“I don’t want to fuck you right now, Sanniang,” he said harshly, then let her go. “No, I’m lying. I do want to fuck you, but not because I want to be with you. I just want to stop thinking and you happen to be here. That’s all it’s ever been for me. I don’t love you.”

Tears were filling her eyes. “You don’t mean that…” she whispered.
“I’m not going to abandon you or send you away,” he said. “I’m worthless enough to do so, I admit it, but some part of me still wants to pretend I’m not. If you’re smart, you’ll leave now and go back to your bridge and forget all about this. That’s up to you. If you don’t leave, I’ll probably fuck you again in the future—no, I definitely will. I know I will. But I won’t tonight. Tonight, for once, I’m not going to block it out. I’m going to feel exactly how horrible I really am. Don’t worry. My treatment of you is already part of my list of crimes.”

He turned his back to her. She was silent for a minute, then he heard and felt her climbing out of the bed, and presumably getting dressed, before leaving quietly. She took the door that was between their adjoining suites, and he pushed himself away from wondering if she was just going back to her barely used bed for the night. He pushed away the craving to leap up himself and follow her.

Why had she mistaken him for someone to love and trust?

Why had all of them done so?

His father and brother had, and because of it they were dead. And Yinping… Yinping was here somewhere in the palace, sleeping in the arms of a demon and, if the rumour Sanniang had eagerly repeated to him was correct, carrying his child. All because of him, and she didn’t even know.

He got out of bed, lit a candle, and pulled the crumpled note out of the bin. He smoothed it out and reread it, wanting to twist the knife into his gut deeper.

My dear Xiao Ge, I am so sorry to hear that you are still too ill to attend the banquet, though I am glad to know you have your wife with you to take care of you. You may have heard that I was ill when I first arrived, and I just wanted to reassure you that I am much better now, and eager to see you and meet my new sister as soon as possible, so hurry up and get well! Your loving sister Yinping

———

Seven eight, seven eight, seven eight…

Yueying’s mind was refreshingly blank as she stared at the ceiling, a low groan escaping her lips as her eyes drifted down to the top of her husband’s head covering her left breast.

Seven eight nine, nine, nine, nine, nine!

Her ninth orgasm of the night felt like it was coming from two places at once—her breast, where his tongue was swirling around her nipple, and her clitoris, to which his finger was applying steady, indirect pressure.

“Kongming,” she gasped, and then groaned as he began to suck first on one breast and then the other. “Kongming, Kongming!”

The orgasm began to subside, and all at once the sensations on her nipples flipped over from acute pleasure to painful overstimulation. Her hand clutched at his arm and he instantly pulled his mouth and hand off of her. “Alright now?” he said quietly, and she sighed.

“Yes.”

“May I kiss you?”

“Please.”

He lifted himself over her and lowered his mouth to hers. Thought was refilling her mind—an idea
She ran her fingers through it, and he broke the kiss to say, somewhat breathily, “Yueying, you have not tired of touching me yet?”

“No… I want more…” She slid the hand lower, down his back, to his hips, and around to his erection. She never knew how he would bring her to the first nine orgasms, but for the tenth one he always entered her.

He laughed unsteadily as she caressed him. “It has only been eight.”

“Nine.”

“Nine? You had a double? Which?”

“Your tongue inside me.” As she said inside me, she felt a slight shudder in him.

“I was imperceptive…” He said, his voice straining to recover its usual sangfroid. She wished she knew how to tell him that this was her favourite time with him… seeing him flustered by her… but she didn’t know if he would enjoy knowing it. He liked to know everything, to be the one everyone depended on, eternally unsurprised and in control. She enjoyed that about him as well, loved how safe he made her feel, but only when he was like this could she believe all the way down that she really meant something to him.

———

“How do you want me this time, my lord?”

“In my lap,” Zhuge Liang said. “I want to kiss you when I come inside you.”

He could see the surprise on her face. It had been weeks since the last time he had ejaculated with her, and that time had not been intended. In all their years of marriage he had ejaculated inside of her less than a dozen times. “Yes, I want to come inside you tonight Yueying. Is that alright?”

“Of course it’s alright with me, but… why?”

“Because you have become so skilled that you are holding back again. You are afraid of making me lose control, are you not?”

“You… you were so disappointed last time…”

“I know,” he sighed. “I was frustrated about other things, I now feel. I should not have let it show, certainly not to the extent that you could pick up on it… Yueying, I want to experience just how amazing you are again.”

“But you don’t want to ejaculate.”

“A few ejaculations a year will not kill me.” He was going to go on, but then remembered that she apparently didn’t believe in the benefits of retention of jing anyway. Then what was bothering her? Of course. “I will not be unhappy, my love. I promise.”

She let him pull her into his lap, and as she mounted him and put her sweet lips to his again, he thought it was wonderful occasionally to just be an ordinary man with an ordinary woman… but as she began to rhythmically contract internally, in perfect tandem with the rocking of her hips, he
In the morning Guan Suo had gone over to his wife’s room, but it was empty. Her things were there, but she was not, although the bed had been slept in. Where was she? He felt strangely incomplete. Since they had met, had they spent even an hour apart? He had been so cruel to her the previous night… no, he had just finally told her the truth about how cruel he had been all along.

She left drawers open, so he could see which one contained what, and he found himself pawing around in a messy drawer full of hair things. He lifted one of the strings of beads and ran his fingers over them, then slipped it into his pocket.

Had she left him?

She should have… but wouldn’t she have packed something?

But then where had she gone?

Without her around to distract himself with, he was left wondering what he should do.

He wandered out into the halls and walked without knowing where he was going. Breakfast? He couldn’t face everyone… he could flag down a servant and get some sent to his room.

Guan Suo stopped one, but instead of requesting breakfast, he said, “Where is Lady Guan’s room?”

He heard her voice talking brightly to someone as he approached the door, and he nearly lost his nerve. She wasn’t alone… but if he turned back now he might never have the nerve again. He knocked.

“God, tell them to go away,” said a male voice.

“They might hear you!” his sister’s voice giggled, and a chair scraped. “What kind of diplomat says that?”

“One who just wants to eat one meal in peace.”

The door opened and Yinping was standing there, wearing a red dressing gown. Her eyes widened and her face was momentarily suffused with pure joy as she said “Xiao Ge!”

Then suddenly something checked her happiness. He could see her folding back in on herself, and she said hesitantly, “Xiao Ge… how are you feeling? You… are you here to see me?”

There was the noise of another chair moving in the room behind her, and Guan Suo saw a young man standing up from a table laden with a number of breakfast dishes. He was wearing pants but no shirt, and he was obviously athletic and young—about the same age as himself, maybe a little older. It took him a moment to relate this man to the Lu Xun he had seen in the rain and dark in Jing province, who had defeated him and his brothers so handily that only two of them had even managed to escape—the Lu Xun that he now knew had earlier captured his sister, and would later capture his father.

His face didn’t look welcoming as he strode up to the door and put his hands on Yinping’s shoulders, but his mouth said, “Won’t you come in? You must excuse our attire; we had asked to
have breakfast privately.”

His sister’s hand reached up to the man’s on her shoulder and squeezed it, and they backed up, allowing Guan Suo to come in, but he didn’t move.

After a long awkward pause, Yinping said tentatively, “Xiao Ge? Are you sure you should be out of bed?”

“I’m not sick,” he forced himself to say, though he still didn’t move.

“You’re sure about that?” She stepped forward, breaking contact with her husband as she reached up a hand to check his forehead.

He turned his face away. “Yinping, you shouldn’t worry about me…”

“But you’re my brother,” she said.

“You don’t deserve a brother like me,” he said to the floor.

“Get out!” shouted the other man suddenly. “How dare you speak to her that way?”

Guan Suo looked up, startled, to see that Lu Xun was already almost upon him.

“Boyan, don’t—!” said Yinping.

Her brother reacted instinctively to meet a potential attack. In their previous battle they had both been armed; now they were both unarmed, and apparently his opponent didn’t realize that Guan Suo fought almost as well unarmed. It was not a lucky kick. It was exactly the kick he would use every time if rushed upon in that way. It caught Lu Xun under the chin and he was down.

“Boyan!” screamed Yinping, and placed herself between her husband and her brother, who was waiting for his opponent to get back up.

“What the hell did he mean?!” Guan Suo said, loud with adrenaline. “I didn’t say anything against you!”

Lu Xun was clearly dazed, but had not actually lost consciousness. He didn’t say anything, but Yinping said, “What did you mean then?”

“Just what I said! That I’m not worthy to be your brother!”

“No, you said I didn’t deserve a brother like you.”

“You don’t! You didn’t do anything to deserve… but you don’t even know what I did!” He kicked the wall, and the stone cracked a little.

This made Yinping glance worriedly down at her husband again, who still seemed out of it. “Boyan, are you alright? Speak to me!”

Lu Xun groaned. “I’m… not fine exactly, but…”

“Help me bring him in,” Yinping demanded of her brother.

He couldn’t refuse her. So he found himself in the absurd situation of helping bring the demon that had haunted his nightmares, the villain that he had somehow managed to cleanly defeat with a single blow, into the bed that demon shared with his sister. Then he had to stand there awkwardly while
that sister hovered about, clearly beside herself with concern for her… tormentor? That term didn’t seem to fit the way they were acting at all.

“I feel like I’ve been kicked in the head,” he muttered to no one in particular.

Lu Xun had heard it though. “I guess I owe you an apology…” He winced, and pressed the cold wet cloth his wife had fetched him to his jaw. “I thought you were just like your brother… that was some kick by the way.”

“My brother?”

“Er Ge came to see me yesterday,” Yinping said softly. “He… he wasn’t… he said some horrible things to me.”

Guan Suo couldn’t believe it. “Horrible things to you? That’s not possible. He knows—“

“Wait, Xiao Ge,” said Yinping. “Please let me finish, because you know I don’t always say things right the first time. You have to know… I know all kinds of horrible things were said here in Shu about what happened to me in Wu. I don’t know exactly what everyone here has heard, but I know the truth of what really did happen to me, and I can tell you that Lu Xun has been… has been… he has tried…” She faltered, but Guan Suo stayed silent, giving her the time she had asked for. After a moment the words came out in a rush. “He became my husband because he thought it was the only way to rescue me, but since that time he has truly been the best husband I could ever hope for. I love him, and he makes me very happy.”

There was another long pause, while his sister looked fearfully at him. Guan Suo finally said, “Are you finished?”

“Yes..?” said Yinping, cautiously. “You’re not… angry?”

“Why would that make me angry?” said Guan Suo, confused. “Do you think I would prefer that you had been suffering?”

His sister looked down at the ground. “Er Ge seemed to think just that.”

“Yinping… if he truly kept you safe, I can only be grateful that someone was able to rescue you from the consequences of my selfishness,” he said.

Now she was puzzled, but he rushed on. “I was supposed to be in the base with you that day.”

“But Father said—“

“Father saw me first, remember? He told me my responsibility was to keep you safe because if your base was attacked, reinforcements couldn’t arrive in time. I argued back and got him to agree to let me help Ping with the flood attack. I was only thinking of myself. I didn’t want to be stuck away from the fighting.”

She was surprised, but she said, “Well… that’s understandable. You didn’t know Wu was coming…”

“That doesn’t matter! If I had gone with you, you at least might have escaped. As it was, I was worse than useless. I didn’t make any difference with the flood attack. If anything I hindered it when Xing had to abandon Ping to get me out of there.” He glanced at the man in bed, and couldn’t help adding resentfully, “Thanks to your husband. Consider that kick payback for the way you nearly removed that foot.”
“Everything I did that day I did as an officer of Wu, and I have no regrets,” Lu Xun said, pulling the cloth away from his face. “We met that day as enemies. I hope we never do so again.” He winced and brought the cloth back up to his face. “At least not without my swords.”

“Xiao Ge, could you talk to Er Ge?” said Yinping. “He wouldn’t give me a chance... he just seized on my first attempts to explain and turned me into some kind of...” She flushed.

“I can’t believe he would say anything that bad.”

“He said that the word whore was too good for me,” she said bluntly, and her husband breathed in sharply in a way that was clearly unrelated to his sore jaw.

“Er Ge said that?!”

“That’s one of the least crude things he said about my supposed behaviour,” she said. “Don’t make me go over it more.”

“No, of course... it’s just hard to picture Er Ge, of all people, losing his temper... ever, but especially not at you.” He shook his head. “I don’t know how I can talk to him though. He’s pretty disgusted with me as well. He doesn’t know that I begged my way into the flood attack, but he’s made no secret of how he felt about my decision to take off, rather than stick around to help plan the counterattack against Wu.”

Yinping brightened a little. “And you got married, right? Our cousins told me...” She stopped suddenly and the brightness vanished.

Her brother raised an eyebrow. “They told you...?”

“That you were married,” she said hastily, blushing.

“They don’t like her, huh? Don’t try to lie. You’re terrible at it.”

“Well...! If you like her, Xiao Ge, then... what is she like? Is she in your rooms now? Can I meet her?”

“That’s just another thing I’ve messed up,” he sighed. “She’s... she’s another woman I’ve hurt who didn’t deserve it, Yinping. I don’t know what’s going on now with her, to be honest. I told her last night if she was smart she’d leave me, and... and other things. She wasn’t in her room this morning... but her stuff was there... I don’t know.”

“Do you love her?”

“I told her I didn’t,” he muttered at the ground, ashamed to admit how horrible he had been. “I don’t know how I feel. She’s... I don’t understand her... why she would want me... to the extent that she does...”

“Go talk to her!”

“But I don’t know where she is.”

“Then look for her!” She got up and practically started pushing him out the door. “You need to figure it out, and that’s going to involve her. So figure it out and look for her at the same time.”

“Yinping—thank you, but—“

“Just trust me!” she said, and shut the door in his face.
“God, so much for a quiet breakfast,” he heard her husband moan. “My jaw is going to swell up. Do you think I can claim mumps to get out of the meeting today?”

“Mumps last too long,” her voice pointed out.

“Damn…”

Guan Suo slowly walked away, his hand fingering the beads in his pocket, thinking.

———

As he entered his rooms, he could hear noises next door. Drawers being pulled out and closed and furniture sliding.

He opened the door and Sanniang jumped a bit, but said with a forced cheerfulness. “Oh, hello. I was just… just looking for some beads…”

There was an overloaded set of saddlebags on the bed, and a small pile of things in a corner—things she had decided to leave behind, he guessed.

It was superfluous, but he still said it. “So you’re leaving…”

Her smile faltered a bit, and she quickly got down on her hands and knees to look under a cabinet. “Yes, but don’t worry… I told the stables that I was just going for a visit… not that… not that anyone in Chengdu will care much that I don’t come back… but at least there won’t be anything awkward about me leaving.”

Guan Suo’s hand slipped into his pocket. He could just give her the beads and go.

He took his hand out of his pocket. “Do you need any money?”

“I have enough to get me back to my bridge,” she said to the underside of the bed, then sat up on her haunches. “I guess it’s not here. Silly… silly for me to be so upset about it, right? Just… just worthless beads… no value to anyone…”

“I hope you’re not speaking about yourself,” he said. “Just because I didn’t… you can go back to your bridge and I’m sure eventually a man will come along who deserves you, who actually wins you and values you…”

“Oh Guan Suo,” she said, and her eyes filled with tears, “how can a man as handsome as you be so innocent…”

“What do you mean?”

“You never suspected you weren’t the first?”

He was silent as she began fastening the saddlebags.

She had put the false cheerful face back on, but he could see the pain in her eyes. “My family has guarded that bridge for generations, but it was just me and my dad for as long as I can remember. One day I went in to wake him up and he was dead. He hadn’t even been sick or injured… anyway, suddenly it was just me and a lot of cats. People didn’t want to pay the toll when they realized it was just a teenage girl guarding it. That made me pretty mad, you know!”

She picked up her bladed yoyo and toyed with it a little, and for a moment her smile brightened to something genuine. “So I started beating people up! And before I knew it I had a reputation… and
people started saying I was waiting for a man to defeat me and join me in guarding the bridge. It sounded like a romantic fairy tale to me. I felt really cool, like a heroine! I dreamed about what that man would actually be like who would literally sweep me off my feet... and it seemed like one day it came true, but in the morning he wasn’t there, and he didn’t come back. I realized I didn’t even know his name. For the next few weeks I went from worried to terrified... he didn’t come back, but at least my bleeding did... this wasn’t the way the story was supposed to go, right? But I didn’t give up. I tried to improve... on the bridge and in the bedroom... and sometimes I was able to get them to stay a little longer, but none of them... none of them married me, like you did. Although even you... even you I knew deep down would eventually tire of me.”

Guan Suo suddenly realized that while she had been open to an astounding range of sexual acts, including initiating some he had never even imagined, he had never finished inside her in the way that risks conception. “I’m not sending you away because I’m tired of you.”

“You will be soon,” she said in a low voice, dropping her eyes from his face. “I’m... foolish and irritating and I don’t know when to quit. This is how foolish I am... now that I can’t pretend to myself that you love me, I can’t go on...”

“Sanniang, I said I didn’t love you because I don’t know you, not because I don’t respect you or think you’re annoying.”

“You can’t respect me after what I’ve just told you,” she said, still looking down, a simple statement of fact.

“Why not? You were all alone and just trying to catch some lasting happiness. What’s wrong with that? Believe me, I’ve met a lot of people with worse ideas.”

She looked up, smiling at him with wet eyes. “Oh, Guan Suo... it’s because you say things like that that I loved you...”

“If we’re making confessions,” he said, “you thought I was just grieving from my losses. I wasn’t trying to escape grief, I was trying to escape guilt and shame, because I’m the reason Yinping was captured.”

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t say anything, so he continued. “If I had accepted my original orders, I would have been in the base with her when the Wu army arrived. I couldn’t have beaten them, but I could have held them off long enough for her to run. But I manipulated my father into letting me help in a part of the battlefield I thought would be more exciting. And I was a failure there too. Even with both of my brothers, we couldn’t beat Lu Xun. Three on one! He fought like a demon, but I was sure we were going to break him down eventually, but he somehow got me exactly in the wrong place, nearly sliced my foot off... it was bleeding like crazy... my Da Ge ordered my Er Ge to get me out of there. The last thing I saw before I passed out was my Da Ge fighting him and a bunch of Wu soldiers charging at them, and I already knew he was going to lose. And when I regained consciousness the first thing they told me was that my father had been defeated by Lu Xun and executed by Lu Meng, and that my brother and sister had been taken prisoner. You can imagine how I felt when I heard they gave Lu Xun my sister as a prize. I couldn’t handle it, especially because nobody knew how responsible I was... the things people would say to me, thinking they were comforting me... So I just ran away, like a coward. When I met you... being with you was like I could run away wherever I was. You made me forget it all.”

“I just wanted to make you smile,” she said sadly.

“You even did, that was what was so amazing,” he said. “I’m sorry that I was so cruel to you last night. I was angry with myself and I wanted to push you away so that I couldn’t avoid suffering.
“And I thought you’d be better off without me. You were so cheerful when I met you, I thought I’d never met a girl as cheerful as you.”

“Yeah, well...!” Her smile was a little shy, for once. “You know, if you keep smiling, you feel better eventually!”

He found himself smiling back at her. “Maybe you could stay here and we could, like... I don’t know, date? Sort of actually get to know each other?”

She tilted her head in her odd feline manner, and said, “Would we still be having sex?”

“Oh...” he blushed. “Well, it’s not that I don’t want to, but... it shouldn’t be a way for me to escape from my problems and for you to buy my affection. It should be because we actually want to.”

“But y’know, I always feel like I want to,” she said coyly, walking towards him, and he took a step back.

“Sanniang...” he breathed as she reached up into his hair and plucked out a flower.

———

“Ah, Lord Lu Xun, excellent, we were just discussing—Lord Lu Xun, did you injure yourself?”

Lu Xun was only on set two of the kowtows, which put him in the dilemma of whether to respond while kowtowing or wait until the end. He couldn’t help but think that Zhuge Liang had done this on purpose to set him off his ease.

Apparently Liu Bei thought so as well. “Give him a moment, Kongming.”

“My apologies, my lord,” said the strategist smoothly. “I am still somewhat tired.”

“You look it,” said the emperor, with some concern. “Didn’t you sleep well?”

The crane fan swayed. “Is it so noticeable? I must indeed be getting be old. The quality was fine, but the quantity was diminished. But not for an unpleasant reason.”

Lu Xun rose out of the ninth kowtow and took the proffered seat at the table, noticing that there was still one more seat remaining open at the table, and silently roll called those present at the table, partly because it allowed him to avoid making a visible reaction to Zhuge Liang’s innuendo.

The emperor. Zhuge Liang. A very ill looking man, who despite the hot weather, had a cloth wrapped around his shoulders—there was something very sinister about him that went beyond his sunken eyes and pallor, something even more than his unsettling smile. Liao Hua. Ma Su. Fei Yi. Jian Yong, slouching as usual. Wei Yan. Wait, Wei Yan?

“You are as indiscreet as your wife,” said the ill man, pleasantly and yet all the more offensively for that.

Zhuge Liang remained placid, but the flick of his fan betrayed a certain annoyance. “Master Fa Zheng, are you sure you should be out of bed? You are misinterpreting things.”

Fa Zheng rasped a laugh. “I rather thought I was providing an opening for you to apologize to our guest.”

It was an audacious move, and that Zhuge Liang’s face remained serene was a real testament to his self-control. “I had thought to do so privately, since obviously no reasonable person could interpret
my wife’s ridiculous fantasies as having any connection to Lady Guan. Lord Lu Xun’s wife merely had the misfortune of being adjacent to a woman who has been sadly neglected of late, which I admit is my responsibility. Her genius leads her into behaviour that would not be acceptable from an ordinary woman, I admit, but I trust that our lord will excuse her flights of fancy, in light of her contributions to the state.”

Liu Bei looked a bit startled to be put on the spot, but rose to it gamely. “Oh, certainly. We all understand Lady Huang.”

The looks of all the non-Zhuge Liang men around the table made it clear that none of them felt they understood Lady Huang, but were willing to let it go, perhaps in light of her husband’s contributions to the state.

“Since everyone is here now,” said Zhuge Liang, “may I present my humble plan, my lord?”

Liu Bei frowned. “We are still awaiting the empress.”

This time annoyance did show on the strategist’s face, and Lu Xun had to suppress a smile. Lady Sun certainly pushed the prime minister’s buttons.

“The empress?” said Zhuge Liang.

“Of course,” said Liu Bei. “She fought extensively in her brothers’ campaigns against Liu Biao, which is exactly the territory that will be the eastern front against Wei. I would welcome her input on any military matters. She was highly valued for her contributions there in Wu, was she not, Lord Lu Xun?”

The heads turned towards the Wu chancellor, who nodded. “I would not call her a strategist, but she never pretended to be so,” he said. “She was never absent from strategy meetings before her marriage. I know her opinions on officers and formations were considered very insightful. But at that time I was not yet one of my lord’s counsellors.”

The crane fan fluttered, but before the Shu prime minister could speak the empress entered.

Unlike the others, who performed their obeisances at the entrance in the normal way, the empress circled around the table and performed hers at the emperor’s feet directly, the table and a decorative screen hiding her in the actual act of pressing her forehead to the ground from all eyes except the emperor’s, Lu Xun’s, and possibly Zhuge Liang’s, if he hadn’t been assiduously straightening the feathers of his fan.

Lady Sun somehow managed to make the traditional gesture of total submission into something that was more like a personal erotic challenge. Lu Xun wouldn’t have noticed Zhuge Liang’s attention to his fan if he hadn’t been seeking something else to look at.

The emperor held out a hand and assisted her to her feet from the final kowtow and into the chair at his left, with Lu Xun on her other side. “Sorry I’m late,” she said brightly. “There was an unfortunate incident in the crown prince’s riding lesson. Nothing was hurt, except perhaps Master Zhao Yun’s pride.”

Zhuge Liang unfurled a map across the table with a snap before anyone could respond to this. “Well, I admit that I do not intend the Wu-Wei border to be an active battleground in the near term, which should please Lord Lu Xun. But since she is here, she might as well remain.”

Lady Sun smirked at her green fingernails.
“With the drought in the territory controlled by Cao Pi, and the substandard harvests across the rest of the empire, I feel that for ultimate success, we must pacify the southwest. Lord Lu Xun, I understand that your general Ling Tong has experienced unprecedented success in pacifying your southern barbarians through a combination of flashy grandeur and offers of full participation, gaining thousands of warriors for yourselves and putting them to work creating, rather than stealing, food?”

This intelligence was fully accurate and flattering to Wu, so Lu Xun felt no need to hedge. “Yes. Master Ling Tong surprised everyone with how quickly and thoroughly his plan succeeded. Never have the Han in the south known such peace.”

“It is my attention to do something similar in Nanzhong,” said Zhuge Liang, indicating the area on the map. “But it will be a difficult problem requiring an extended military campaign. Your barbarians were more like parasites, only coming down from the mountains for their raids and then retreating back up into them once resistance was encountered. The various peoples of Nanzhong are different. They have their own notion of kings, and a desire to keep the Han out entirely. Nor do our people really desire to live in such a hot, savage place. If we can completely humiliate the tribal kings, and then offer them internal sovereignty in exchange for regular tribute, we will have a rich resource for decades requiring very little to keep it under control.

“I propose that I personally lead a campaign with almost our entire army into the south. With my strategies, and my wife’s inventions, we will dazzle the barbarians. I believe that their leader Meng Huo will be the key. By repeatedly capturing and releasing him, as well as other tribal leaders, we will seem to be like gods toying with them.” Zhuge Liang smiled, obviously well pleased with the idea of being regarded as a god.

“And while the entire army is in the south,” said Fa Zheng with a smile, “what is happening here?” He pointed a thin, pale hand at the recently conquered areas of the north.

“We shall leave Ma Chao and his cousin in command there, but they will obviously appear vulnerable. Cao Pi will be deceived by a false mustering of strength at Guangling to think that Wu is anticipating an assault on Jianye. Instead, Wu will secretly send their forces along the river to Mt. Baidi, where they will wait to provide surprise relief to Wei’s assault on Hanzhong. Then we counterattack and capture Mt. Chencang and finally all of Qin province. From there we can press east and sweep Wei into the ocean.” The crane fan swept from west to east over Cao Wei.

Lu Xun counted to five before he could trust his voice to come out evenly. “And if Wei sees through the false defences at Guangling?”

The crane fan turned over as if to brush away an insect. “Your troops would return—accompanied by our reinforcements of course—and reverse any losses as soon as the situation stabilized in the northwest.”

Lu Xun laughed without humour. “Hmm, Shu borrows something from Wu but they’re definitely going to give it back as soon as possible… I feel like I’ve read this story before…”

Lady Sun snickered, and her look to her husband was only half-apologetic. “Sorry, but you have to admit he has a point.”

"Lord Lu Xun,” said Zhuge Liang without the slightest hint of offence, “the assistance of troops is not like territory, wouldn’t you agree?”

“So less like Jing province and more like Hefei then?” challenged Lu Xun.

Zhuge Liang sighed. “The assault on Hefei need not have failed. If you would like me to plan the
defence of Guangling and Jianye for you, you need not fear any similar calamity.”

Lu Xun was at a complete loss for the words to respond to such a swift and galling double insult—the implication that Hefei and all those who had died had only been lost due to Wu incompetence, and the personal insult on Lu Xun’s ability to strategize compared to Zhuge Liang’s. That smug fan-waving motherfucker!

"Do you have a counter proposal, Lord Lu Xun?" the emperor intervened hastily.

“I came to this meeting eager to hear how Shu was going to demonstrate good faith in restoring the alliance,” said Lu Xun. “Not to have our bringing to heel taken for granted.”

“So you have no alternate plan, then?” said Zhuge Liang, still maddeningly calm.

“I... have… plan…”

Everyone turned to stare at Wei Yan.

The masked man leaned forward and frowned at the map. “Need… better… map…”

The irritation on Zhuge Liang’s face went far beyond even his response to the empress, but it was Fa Zheng who spoke. “Of what area, Wei Yan?”

“Ziwu… Valley…”

Fa Zheng laughed with real amusement. “A sneak attack on Chang’an? Interesting, interesting.”

“Ridiculous,” said Zhuge Liang contemptuously. “It would never work.”

“Certainly it could work,” countered Fa Zheng, looking at Liu Bei. “I am all anticipation for Wei Yan’s no doubt slowly revealed plan. Perhaps we should give him a day to prepare it for presentation?” He looked at the masked man. “Or a few days?”

“Get… map… then… know…”

The crane fan pressed into the table. “Are the rest of us supposed to just sit around and wait for this?”

“Why would we just sit around?” said the empress. “I’m sure it would be to my lord’s benefit to hear plans from everyone, wouldn’t it? Personally I’m pretty intrigued to hear what Master Fa Zheng could come up with.”

Fa Zheng wheezed as he chuckled, and Liu Bei cut in before Zhuge Liang could. “I think that adjourning the meeting would be a good idea. With such a wide open array of possibilities, we would do well to consider many voices.”

“Surely Lord Zhuge Liang’s is the only plan we need consider,” said Ma Su loyally, but this did not seem to please his idol.

Jian Yong stretched. “Well, I didn’t think I would have to come up with anything, but alright.”

Lu Xun stood up and bowed. “I will present a plan at whatever time you require one, my lord. I would hate for your strategists to waste time on plans that cannot be acceptable to the entire empire.”

Liu Bei made a slight gesture of dismissal. Lu Xun left immediately, hoping that Chengdu had a good supply of practice dummies, because he intended to destroy at least a few dozen.
Most of the others also left quickly, Liu Bei pausing only to ask if a servant should be called to push Fa Zheng’s wheelchair.

“That will not be necessary, my lord,” said Zhuge Liang. “I will be pleased to take Xiaozhi wherever he wishes to go.”

When they were alone, Fa Zheng smiled up at Zhuge Liang. “I have no wish to be sent down a set of stairs today.”

“Why are you here, Xiaozhi? You should be resting; you have only just regained full consciousness.”

“Did that disappoint you, Kongming?” He laughed and winced. “It disappointed me terribly. The pain is worse than it ever was.”

“Then I repeat: why are you here?”

“Why, as the empress said, my plans are always so interesting, are they not?”

Zhuge Liang was silent for a moment, and then said, “I do not think that retribution is currently called for.”

“You think that I would encourage our lord to turn back to revenge?” said the ill man. “How little you understand me! I only strike when success is certain. A campaign in Jing would have destroyed us, as you knew very well. Your blind obedience—“

“My obedience was not blind,” said Zhuge Liang very quietly. “I could not do other than that I did. If you had been capable of speech, I would have sought your aid.”

Fa Zheng’s lip curled. “My aid? I had no idea you thought so well of me.”

“I think very ill of you,” said Zhuge Liang, still quietly, “but in this particular case I thought you capable of something I was not.”

“And what was that?”

“Denying our lord.”

Fa Zheng tilted his head. “For once, I do not understand you, Kongming. Is it not my depraved self-interest, my lack of loyalty, that you loathe about me?”

“Yes, but self-interest is easier to predict than honour, and you know how to convince our lord in a way that I do not.”

Fa Zheng’s eyes narrowed. “I never thought I would hear you admit to any weakness.”

Zhuge Liang tucked his fan into his sleeve and placed his hands on the handles of the wheelchair. “Out of curiosity, Xiaozhi, if you had not been ill, what would you have suggested to our lord to turn back his anger from the hopeless campaign against Wu?”

“I will think on it as you take me back to my rooms.”

They traveled silently. Servants were waiting there to lift Fa Zheng into his bed, and supply his medicines. He arranged the foul-smelling concoctions before him on a tray and dismissed the
servants, then looked at Zhuge Liang. “I would have suggested Lady Sun’s head be sent in a box to Sun Quan. A sister for a brother.” He smiled and began to take his potions, as Zhuge Liang stared at him.

“Are you serious?”

“Serious that I would make the suggestion? Absolutely,” he said, and swallowed a tablet with a grimace.

“Our lord would never—“

“Probably not,” he agreed. “But that would have forced him to confront just how far he was and was not willing to go to avenge Guan Yu and hurt Sun Quan. If he could not sacrifice one woman—a woman whose allegiance he was not even sure of—to hurt his enemy, how could he send tens of thousands of loyal men to die?”

“Would that have worked?”

Fa Zheng shrugged slightly. “Difficult to say. Thankfully you somehow called him back from the abyss. How did you do that, by the way?”

Breath left Zhuge Liang’s nostrils in a way that came close to a snort. “Zuo Ci suggested our lord surprise his lady in the act of writing a response.”

“Zuo Ci…” Fa Zheng had gotten down to the last vial, and as he uncorked it, a rather pleasant odour unexpectedly wafted up from it. The ill man tossed it down and gestured for Zhuge Liang to remove the tray. “But why would that make a difference?”

“An yin deficiency, he said.”

Fa Zheng laughed, and this laugh actually came out in his notorious full timbre. “All you taoists think about is sex! You had better get out of here before you have me pawing at the serving maids.”

———

Mi Fang rolled over in his small, uncomfortable bed, cursed, and lit a candle, revealing the tiny quarters he had been assigned. Even his room in Jianye had been better than this. He remembered the rooms he had had in Jing province before the unlucky accident with the fire juggler at the banquet. An accident, that was all it was! Yet simply because a few peasants were burned to death, he had been ordered to sleep in the barracks with his men. His men… even Guan Yu hadn’t taken away his men… Damn Liu Bei. Clearly his bitch of an empress had made him forget all about Mi Fang’s poor sister. If he had had any loyalty to her memory and her sacrifice, he would have made Mi Fang governor of Liang, instead of Ma Chao. It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t fair!

He never should have come back to Shu. Should he consult Fu Shiren and see if he felt the same way? No… Fu Shiren had attempted to cut him out with Lu Xun, making that young fool possessive to the point of actually wanting to wed Guan Yu’s daughter. And hadn’t Fu Shiren suggested killing them after the wedding banquet? Mi Fang skipped over the fact that the colossally stupid poisoned breakfast tray idea was his idea and went straight for the next bad decision after that, which was to head straight for Shu under the assumption that their attack would succeed and that Liu Bei would shower them with honours. It had been a mutual decision, but in his memory it was all Fu Shiren. Why hadn’t they gone to Wei? In Wei, they understood men of ambition and talent, and there were surely some in Wei who remembered his glory days fighting against the Yellow Turbans. Should he go there now, or wait for Wei and Shu to resume hostilities in the northwest, when his information
would have its highest value?

His pondering was interrupted by a key turning in his lock, and Shu soldiers rushing in and binding him.

———

Ma Chao looked at the messenger, at the calendar, and back at the messenger. Then he rustled around in the drawers of his desk, and pulled out a map. “Show me the route you took.”

It was a strange response to such an urgent message from the emperor, but the best way for a peon like him to keep his back unlash was to do whatever the highest ranked man around demanded, so the messenger obediently traced the route from Chengdu to Hanzhong, and answered the governor’s questions about when and where he had changed horses and what difficulties he had encountered.

The governor dismissed the messenger, then stared at the map again frowning. How had Guan Xing managed to beat the messenger by two days? That he could have caught up, with his personal involvement, made sense, but it seemed impossible to cut that much time. The messenger had traced the same route Ma Chao would have taken. There must have been a shortcut somewhere… perhaps a route in the mountains only accessible in high summer?

Chapter End Notes

Re: Taoist sex, I'm using ten as the number of orgasms per session for two reasons, one, it's a symbolic number of completion in Chinese culture, and two, there is a notorious recommendation in a Taoist sex manual that a man should penetrate ten different women in a single night (without ejaculating in any of them). Semen retention was a big deal.

Female orgasm was considered to generate energy which could be "harvested" by the man (often literally by consuming the woman's secretions) without inherently harming the woman (although many texts didn't seem to care whether she was harmed or not, and many of them rated premenstrual virgins [pause to shudder] as the ideal sexual power source).

Re: Fa Zheng. KOEI characterizing him as devious and revenge/retribution obsessed is not entirely inaccurate, since he was criticized even while he was alive both for betraying his original lord Liu Zhang in favour of Liu Bei, and for abusing his position of power to have people executed because of personal grudges. However, he only ever pursued revenge when he could do so without negative consequences, not automatically and at all costs. KOEI simplifies him by making him MR. REVENGE a bit too much. I do see him as ruthless and pragmatic. Historically Zhuge Liang lamented that if Fa Zheng had been alive, he could have prevented the Yiling campaign from ever happening, which I always found fascinating--it's an outright admission by Zhuge Liang that someone else would have been better than him in something of critical strategic importance, and that the Yiling campaign was a bad idea to begin with.
It was an especially hot day, even though they had started before breakfast. After just one bout, they were both dripping in sweat.

Without even thinking about it, as Zhou Tai walked to refresh himself with his usual post-match wine, he had stripped off his sweat-soaked shirt and tossed it to the corner. Everyone in Wu was well-aware of what he looked like, after all, since Sun Quan had forced him to stand up at a banquet, strip down, and publicly recount the story of every scar in order to persuade Zhu Ran to willingly submit to his command.

A gasp informed him that this story had apparently not traveled to Shu. He turned and saw that Xingcai was horrified. “What happened to you?!"

Zhou Tai didn’t mind his scars in themselves, but he didn’t like indulging the ghoulish fascination of others with them, and he didn’t like attention generally. Recounting each incident at Sun Quan’s command had been intensely uncomfortable for him, but at least it had settled the matter and he hadn’t had to speak about any of them since. In hindsight, the trade-off was worth it.

Xingcai’s reaction was different, and it made him feel different, though he had no words for what he was feeling. It was like she was actually concerned for him. As a person, instead of as a freak.

She had already been red from exertion, but her look of horror suddenly changed to one of intense embarrassment. “Forgive me, what a horribly rude question. I should never have said such a thing. Please forget this.” She poured herself a cup of water, staring at the cup between sips.

For once, the silence between them was uncomfortable. This was intolerable. He had to end it… to reassure her…

“Just remnants,” he ventured. “I’m fine.”

“I’m relieved,” she said sincerely.

She had already been wearing a white top that day, and though she didn’t sweat anything like as much as he did, the effect was still rather alluring. He saw her looking at it in annoyance, and as she finished her cup and stood up, she pulled it up and off. The breast binding which had been dimly visible was now all that remained.

A much more talkative man than Zhou Tai could have been excused the slack-jawed reaction she
saw when she looked at him. She tilted her chin defiantly and said, “What? You took yours off. It’s not like you can see that much more than you could already.” She picked up her sword and shield. “Well? Are you ready? To the disarming?”

Automatically he was standing up with his katana.

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She had not yet won a single disarming match against him, though she had succeeded in roughly half of their first touch bouts, where her shield was an advantage. Fighting with her top off, however, was apparently an equivalent advantage to a fire attack in an actual battle. She wanted to be angry about this, and couldn’t quite decide why she wasn’t, and what she was feeling instead. Well, never mind. To worry about it now would be to give up the chance of actually besting him, and she wasn’t going to squander that.

As she pressed her advantage, however, she heard a horrifying, horrible, terrible, awful, horrendous sound.

Bells.

_____

“What the hell is Zhou Tai doing practicing inside on a day like this?” said Ling Tong as they approached the winter practice hall. “It’s gotta be stuffy as shit in there, and outside it’s gorgeous—”

He broke off because he had opened the door and seen Zhou Tai and Xingcai, both holding practice weapons. And both shirtless.

“Wow!” came an appreciative voice from behind his shoulder. “I don’t know, I’d say it’s a lot better looking inside after all!”

“Lady Zhang,” stammered Ling Tong. “What on earth—?”

“Master Zhou Tai has been kind enough to practice with me here,” said Xingcai, somehow managing to have this come out with dignity. She hadn’t rushed for cover, or even tried to use her shield to block their view. “However, the heat today is excessive.”

“I’m feeling pretty hot myself!” agreed Gan Ning. He had pushed past Ling Tong, who was frozen in the doorway, and took a seat by the wall. “It’s freeing not wearing a shirt, am I right? You should follow my example and do it full time!”

“Oh, shut up,” snarled Ling Tong, recovering a bit from his shock. To Zhou Tai he said, “You gave her weapons? You know what the king told us.”

Zhou Tai had his own kind of dignity. “If you want to tell the king, go ahead. They are not real weapons, and it was not Lady Zhang’s idea. The responsibility is mine.”

Was taking her shirt off your idea too?! thought Ling Tong in fury. Aloud he said, “You think I want to get her in trouble? Of course I’m not going to tell him, but doing this in the winter practice room—any idiot could walk in here!”

“Any idiot did walk in here,” said Xingcai.

Gan Ning clapped his hands like a child watching fireworks. “Definitely a hit, Lady Zhang! Amazing! Is your sword as quick as your tongue?”
The Zhang temper was well and truly roused now. “Why don’t you try me?”

“Have pity on an unarmed man! Unless you’d like to grapple?”

“Lady Zhang,” said Zhou Tai, softly.

At this, she visibly checked herself. She took a deep breath and exhaled. “Fine. I guess it was too good to be true anyway.” Suddenly her eyes started to water, but she blinked it back, shaking her head. She walked over to where she had neatly spread out her top, put down the sword and shield, and picked it up.

“I’m not saying this to be cruel—“

“Don’t talk to me,” she snapped at Ling Tong, pulling the top on and briskly fastening the ties behind her back. “I must cancel on your kind invitation tonight, as I fully intend to be sick.” She bowed respectfully to Zhou Tai, who returned it. “Goodbye, Master Zhou Tai. Thank you for everything.”

“Hey, what about me?” complained Gan Ning as she pulled the door open.

“Go to hell,” she said without turning around, and was gone.

Gan Ning grinned. “What a woman! Life with her wouldn’t be dull, huh?”

Ling Tong was fidgeting. He wanted to chase after her right away. He wanted to give her space to calm down. He wanted to forget about her altogether. He wanted to pull off the rest of her clothes and have her right there on the floor, no matter where he caught up with her, or who else was watching, even if the king himself was there, he wouldn’t stop—my god! At a time like this he was thinking that way?! What was she doing to him?

Zhou Tai and Gan Ning watched warily as he unconsciously took his fighting stance, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Of the three of them, he was probably the best at totally unarmed combat, and he was also someone who fought better when angry. But rather than attack either one of them, he suddenly sprang to the door and was gone.

———

“Lady Zhang! Lady Zhang, stop!”

She didn’t stop, but she was walking, and he was running, so he was easily able to swing around her and stretch out his arms to stop her progress.

Her eyes blazed as she halted. “I may be a prisoner, but I am not your prisoner. You can’t force me to speak with you.”

“Can’t you see I’m only thinking of you here?” he shouted at her. “The king doesn’t want any of you having weapons, and if he finds out you’ve been meeting secretly with his bodyguard—topless! —”

“He’ll suspect me of trying something similar to that pair of ladies he’s sicced on my brother?” supplied Xingcai. “Does he trust Master Zhou Tai so little that he thinks I could bat my eyes at him and get him to assassinate…” She trailed off, and her eyes widened. “That pair of ladies… my god! Is that what he assigned you and Gan Ning to do to me?!”

“What? No, of course not!” Fuck, fuck, fuck. Before, she merely hated him; now she hated him and
she thought he was attempting to seduce her solely to spy on her. “Nobody told me to pursue you! Nobody told me to do any of this! I’ve been thinking of nothing but you, for weeks—“ He stopped himself, clenching his hands into fists. The one woman he had ever spoken sweet words to with sincerity, and she took every single one as further proof of his guile. Heaven must be laughing at him.

“Oh, I can believe that last bit,” she said disdainfully. “You hate to lose to Gan Ning over the stupidest things, and I rate myself highly enough to consider that my first kiss isn’t that stupid. Or were you wagering on my virginity?”

She thought that badly of them. He didn’t know how to respond.

Unexpectedly her eyes filled with tears again. “Please just let me past. You’ve ruined the only thing that was good for me here, and you’ve failed in your mission, so just let me go!”

He let out a wordless shout and slammed the wall with his three-section staff as he stepped aside. As she walked by he said, “Why is it the more I try to tell you the truth about how I feel, the more you scorn me as a liar?”

She stopped, and turned her head over her shoulder. “If you were me, would you believe you?”

“No,” he said after a pause. “But I’m not you, and I know how I feel, and it’s horrible.”

She turned back away. “Whether that’s true or not, I’m sorry for you.” Then she kept walking.

———

Ling Tong opened his door in the middle of the night and she was there, dressed in night clothes. “Lady Zhang?”

“Master Ling Tong, I’ve had time to calm down and I couldn’t sleep. I wanted to tell you that I’m not upset with you anymore. I know that you were just trying to look out for me.” She looked down and noticed that he just had a thin dressing gown wrapped around his naked body, not at all enough to do anything about the erection that had sprung up from the sight of her and was getting harder by the second. “Oh…”

“Ah,” he said, stepping back into his room and turning away, “I’m sorry… I didn’t expect it to be you… wearing that…”

“It’s alright,” she said, and when he turned around she had shut the door. “That’s the other reason I couldn’t sleep…”

“Lady Zhang,” he breathed. “I’ve wanted you so much…”

“How much?” she said.

“I want to marry you,” he said, pulling her into his arms. It was almost like being naked directly against her.

“You really do? Even though we’ve only known each other a few weeks?” she said, looking up into his eyes. “You’re not just going to use me and discard me?”

“I could never do that to you. I’m in love with you, Xingcai. I want to be with you tonight and for the rest of my life,” he said, and leaned down to take her first kiss.
She responded with passion, but when he tried to undress her, she shrank back and pulled the thin robe tighter. “No, Master Ling Tong… I have to be a virgin for you on our wedding night…”

Oh, the way the tight fabric was showing every curve of her breasts! “I don’t care about that. Please don’t make me wait… I’ll marry you as soon as possible, but give yourself to me now. I’ll be gentle and I’ll make you enjoy it just as much. Please, do you trust me?”

“I trust you, Gongji… I want you… ahhhh…”

They had tumbled into the bed, he was already inside her. There had not been a flicker of pain upon her perfect face. Every part of her was made for him, made to mould around him just like this, made to take him inside her.

“Gongji, I love you,” she moaned.

“I love you too… this is perfect, you are perfect,” he groaned as he thrust.

“I’m coming,” she cried.

It was so quick. It was too quick. He was coming too… all over the place…

He woke up with a wet mess beneath him, and nothing else.

———

Xingcai had been in Jianye for about a month and had only been to its baths once. That had been the second day, and she went with high hopes, eager to relax after the long journey, but it had been anything but relaxing. The women of Wu were so noisy in the baths, chatting incessantly. And of course because she was new they all wanted to chat with her. The baths had always been where she went to turn off. She made do with sponge baths in her room.

Today however, the baths had one irresistible attraction to them: there wouldn’t be any men there. Not only did she not want to see a few men in particular, she was sick of the whole other half of humanity. Irritating questions about current Chengdu fashions paled in comparison.

She hit the jackpot when she noticed that one of the cooler baths had only one young woman in it, and she had her eyes closed. The other woman opened her eyes briefly when she heard Xingcai entering the water, they smiled and nodded at each other, then the other woman closed her eyes again. Perfect. Xingcai draped her modesty towel over her head so that it hung over her eyes and enjoyed an extended period of actual peace.

Unfortunately, the thin paper walls did absolutely nothing to block out the sound from neighbouring baths. For the first twenty or thirty minutes, it was merely a dull cacophony, as easy to block out as the gurgle of the water flowing, but then a few women apparently entered the pool in a room directly adjacent, and greeted people already there, and they all, at least to Xingcai’s frayed nerves, had incredibly annoying voices.

After the cascade of greetings and rote inquiries, those already there began to interrogate the newcomers.


“I don’t know why I agreed to be the one who plays hard to get this time. I really want to get gotten!” Laughter.
“Well, I’ve seen it.” Gasps, giggles.

“No! Not fair!”

“What was it like?”

“You’re married, you shouldn’t be thinking about other men’s little brothers!”

Xingcai frowned beneath the modesty towel.

“It’s because I’m married that I know how interesting they are!” More giggling.

Xingcai did not have the bantering experiences of Lady Sun, but even she could recognize that there was some kind of euphemism going on here, and she had a good guess what it was.

“Well, it was fine, you know. Good size.”

Yep, that was what it was.

“And did you introduce him to your little sister?” More gasps, more giggling, and some splashing.

The counterpart, obviously.

“No, of course not! Believe me, I have no desire to run into trouble.”

“So what did you do?”

“Mmm, he can console himself.”

Xingcai puzzled over that one, but the laughter of the women in the other room indicated they had no problem understanding it.

“And did he kiss you?”

“Yeah, but he was terrible at it. But he was really determined to make it happen. When he marries his wife had better be very patient, that’s all I can say. Why do they think that just jamming their tongue in is hot?”

“Ugh, so Shu men are no better than Wu ones then.”

Xingcai’s head jerked at that, and her modesty towel slipped into the water. Hastily she pulled it out and began wringing it out on the outside of the pool, muttering an apology to the other girl, who glanced at her and blushed. She was clearly listening to what the women in the other room were saying, and must have been embarrassed that Xingcai was hearing such gossip about her brother.

“But did you act like you liked it?”

“Yeah, just to get it over with. Then I tried asking him some questions but he changed the subject. I’m pretty sure he’s on to us.”

“Oh, he definitely is.”

“For sure, but he’s super cute.”

“Maybe I should stop playing hard to get…”

“I don’t think your hard to get is very convincing anyway.”
“No, it’s too convincing. He’s too clueless to realize you want him to pursue you.”

“Probably figures a lady like me would ask for what she wants.”

“Or maybe has heard!” More laughter and splashing.

“Have you seen Yusheng today?”

“No, why?” Laughter.

“Mmm, I think she has a bit of a crush on our guest…”

“Ooh, I think it’s the other way around!”

“How come everybody but me knows about this?” said one voice while another voice said, “Wow, you don’t seem mad about it?”

“Oh, what I’m doing with him doesn’t mean anything. I’d have no hard feelings if he went after her. It’d be a good match, really. She deserves a nice guy, after sacrificing her life for her father’s work all this time.”

“Your majesty.”

It wasn’t until the girl across the bath started to climb out that Xingcai realized where that last voice had come from.

“Oh, please don’t bother getting out, Lady Lu,” came the dulcet tones of the queen from over Xingcai’s shoulder. When Xingcai looked in that direction, the queen, wrapped in a towel, was pouring herself a cup of warm drinking water, and her entire body was flushed. Clearly she had been bathing in one of the hotter baths earlier. “Ah, Lady Zhang, so you’re here!”

Xingcai nodded awkwardly. “Were you looking for me, your majesty?”

“No, but the king was sending for you when I left him,” she said, and drank down the water. Xingcai started to get out, but the queen waved a hand and put her cup down. “Oh, it’s nothing urgent, I’m sure! Please don’t cut your bath short. If you like, I can show you to him myself when I’m done.”

Xingcai thought that she would rather leave than listen to any more discussion of her brother by the women in the next room, but she realized that the other room had fallen completely silent. Obviously they could hear her room as easily as she could hear theirs. “You are very kind, my lady.”

Lianshi gently eased herself into the pool. Xingcai never thought she would be tempted to stare at another woman’s breasts, but the Wu queen’s were so large that it felt a bit like the first time she had seen an elephant. Especially because in the pool they floated. “Do you like to chat while bathing, Lady Zhang?”

“Ah… well, it wouldn’t be very diplomatic to say no, but… it sounds like you guessed I don’t, my lady.”

“Only because I know that Lady Lu is the same. Have you been introduced?”

Xingcai glanced at the other lady, who was sitting on the edge of the pool awkwardly, as if wishing to leave but not wanting to cause offence. “No, we haven’t.”

“Lady Zhang, this is Lu Yusheng. Her father is Lu Ji, Lord Lu Xun’s cousin. He is a scholar and
adept of the *i ching* and *taixuanjing*. Alas, he is quite ill and she was attending him when we held your welcoming banquet. She records his annotations for him.” She turned to the girl, who had a faint blush on her cheeks. “Lady Lu, of course you know of Lady Zhang quite well. It seems in the weeks she and her family have been here, I hear of little else among you all!”

There was still no noise but that of bathing from the other room. So they were embarrassed at having been overheard gossiping by those they were gossiping about.

Lady Lu smiled slightly. “Oh… I think it is more her brother that excites notice among us, my lady!”

She said it so casually, as if it had no personal import at all. The queen laughed. “Too true! All the gentlemen around here are either taken, or not taken for a reason, wouldn’t you say? I feel sorry for the rest of you, and don’t blame you a bit for getting excited when someone new comes around.”

“You need not feel sorry for me,” Lady Lu said serenely. “When heaven sends me the right one, I will know how to act.”

———

Despite the fact that he had supposedly summoned her, Sun Quan was markedly disappointed to see Lianshi leading Xingcai in. As they performed their obeisance, he sighed, picked up a coil of red jute rope, and dropped it back in its place.

“My lord,” said Lianshi, in a tone of mild rebuke, as she rose from her third kowtow.

He gave her an embarrassed, boyish grin. “My queen, will you await me within?”

“As my lord commands,” she said with a smile, rose, and walked past Sun Quan’s desk to the rooms within, her left hand casually picking up the coil of rope as she walked past it.

The king watched her go, then seemed to shake himself out of some thought. “Lady Zhang, one of my generals met with me this morning. He suggested that it would be a shame not to take advantage of the opportunity to have our officers spar with such a legendary fighter as Zhang Fei. I agreed, of course, and I have heard you and your brother also fight. There can be no objection to you being able to keep in practice with some of our practice weapons while your own are being repaired. We have not set the time exactly, but we would like to have a tournament in a few weeks. Do you think you can be prepared? Your father and brother both said they would be.”

“Certainly, your majesty.” Her heart was swelling. Zhou Tai had come through for her again!

“Feel free to avail yourself of any of our practice facilities. General Ling Tong said he was willing to spar with you at any time.”

“Ling Tong?” she couldn’t stop herself from exclaiming.

He was puzzled. “Yes. It was his idea.”

She had regained control of herself. “I shall have to see him right away, to arrange it then.”

He glanced at the water clock. “I’m not sure where he might be at this hour, but if you don’t find him before then, he usually eats lunch in company with the others.” He started to turn his head towards the inner door again, but stopped, scratching his head. “You may go.”

“Your majesty.”
“I always like facing a new target,” said Gan Ning with a grin, twirling the wooden flail. Generally only Ling Tong and Zhou Tai would agree to spar with him; the pirate made up for the dullness and lack of weight of his practice flail by upping his speed until the morning star could only be perceived as a blur, so being hit by it was more painful than most people wanted to experience in practice.

The young Shu officer, Zhang Bao, claimed he had not found anything like his weapon among the practice weaponry of Wu. At first he had seemed to be reaching for a crescent blade, like that famously used by Guan Yu, but had moved his hand over to the dragon spear next to it at the last moment.

The young man grinned back. “Well, if I lose, it’s only because I’m at a double disadvantage.” He did a rather showy spin, causing a chorus of sighs from his fangirl gallery. “I haven’t fought for a while at all, and it’s been even longer since I fought with a spear.”

“A triple disadvantage,” said Gan Ning, jerking his thumb towards his chest. “You’re facing Gan Ning!”

He heard Ling Tong’s exasperated sigh. “Are you two just going to shake your weapons at each other all day or are you going to use them?”

“Well, I’m going to show you how to use a spear,” said Gan Ning, his bells sounding as he charged Zhang Bao.

Gan Ning liked killing things—he always had. The “things staying dead after you kill them” part didn’t necessarily appeal to him, nor was he a sadist who enjoyed causing pain or suffering for their own sake, but fucking shit up beyond repair made his blood sing. Both from the spectacular sight of the carnage, and from the sense of surfing on the wave of it all, in control and out of control at the same time. The flail was his favourite weapon. It was unpredictable, dangerous to everyone within range, and when it connected—pow! Of course, if it didn’t connect, momentum meant that it could just as easily continue on its arc and right back to its wielder’s head, but that was all part of the thrill.

This was supposed to be a disarming match, but Gan Ning almost never actually disarmed his opponents. Making them tap out—that was as close as a spar ever got to the glory of real combat. A little symbolic death. Disarming an opponent—that was just the prelude to wiping them out. Ending it there was like stopping sex just before orgasm. Tapping out meant “you have me at your mercy.” That they yield. He loved to make them yield!

Unfortunately this particular match turned out more like premature ejaculation. Right from the beginning it was clear that Zhang Bao wasn’t sure how to get his spear in close to Gan Ning without the flail wrapping around it. He was doing a good job at blocking the head of the flail from connecting with him, but after only a few minutes a particularly vicious blow from Gan Ning resulted in the shaft of the spear cracking.

As Gan Ning recoiled the flail, Zhang Bao bowed to signal defeat. “Good match.”

“Aw, c’mon, that doesn’t count,” said Gan Ning. “That was the weapon, not you.”

“You would have had me eventually. I’ve gotta see about getting a practice version of my weapon made. Then it would be a fair fight.”

“Why didn’t you use a snake lance, like Father does?”

Everyone turned. Xingcai was standing by the entrance back to the palace. “I’ve seen you fight with it before. You do much better with it. You make a lousy Zhao Yun.”
Well, it was correct to say that everyone turned, but not everyone turned towards her. Ling Tong, at least, who had been sitting leaning against the wall, had bent his body slightly forward and away and was absorbed in attempting to find the right angle to reinsert his hair sticks into his ponytail.

“Here, Master Ling Tong,” said Xingcai, walking towards him, “Let me help you with that.”

He silently gave up the hair sticks, and with confident precision, she slid the ponytail and band in her hands for a quick tightening, then fastened with the sticks. “There. It’s much easier to get it straight if you’re looking at it from the right angle.”

“Uh… right…” he said, cautiously, looking up at her. “Thanks?”

She had her back to Gan Ning, so he couldn’t see her expression, but she held out her hand to Ling Tong. He took it to stand up, but instead of simply helping him up, she shocked the man (and everyone else) by giving him a brief, closed-mouth kiss on his way.

“There,” she said, turning towards Gan Ning without a hint of shame. “Master Ling Tong won, ok, Master Gan Ning? Now you can both quit playing silly games with me and we can all be friends.”

This woman had some spirit! “Fine by me lady—I mean my lady,” cackled Gan Ning. “I’d much rather be your friend than your enemy, for sure! How about that grappling match?”

“Hey!” said Zhang Bao. The young man had been looking nearly as shellshocked as Ling Tong at Xingcai’s kiss, but men making unwanted insinuating remarks at his little sister seemed to be a threat he was much more equipped to deal with.

“Well, I’ve never done a brother and sister at the same time, but ok,” said Gan Ning, looking from one to the other speculatively.

“Oh, grow up,” said Ling Tong, recovering himself. “Don’t you remember that there are other people wanting a turn?”

“The king said you’d be willing to spar with me,” Xingcai said, quickly rearresting his attention. Gan Ning laughed, wondering if Ling Tong knew how completely obvious he was. “First touch?”

“Not fair, he’s already had that!” Gan Ning said, and Ling Tong and Xingcai had to wait for their own match, because Zhangbao was attacking the pirate with a broken spear.

———

Liu Bei had not really thought much of it when his wife abruptly stopped appearing in his chambers for a few days. A long time ago, when they were new lovers, she had made overtures to him while having her bleeding, but he had been so obviously disgusted at the idea that she had backed off and never brought it up again.

That he did not see her around the palace would have concerned him more ordinarily, but his days were quite busy just now. Lu Xun had managed to score a critical victory in insisting that no plan of attack of Wei could be considered until Wu was certain that its rights, responsibilities, and borders as a vassal state were made crystal-clear. It had been a critical slog, because Lu Xun was adamant: they would have the entirety of Jing province, and they wanted Yu province and Huainan as well. It took almost two weeks, but they finally hammered out a border that no one was happy with: success.

Then it was back to the question of how to attack Wei, and slog was too festive a word to describe how it was going.
As emperor, he was required to both be there and pay attention. None of the combatants really appealed to him for input, but he was honestly attempting to try to understand their positions and evaluate which he thought was best, and he constantly had to call one genius or another back from the brink of tearing at each others’ throats. He had a talent for attracting personal loyalty, even from men like Fa Zheng—he could tell that even Lu Xun, who had a strong conflicting connection and quite obviously didn’t want to, felt the pull. But this did not extend to making them get along with each other and never had. Most of the tempests swirled around the others’ hostility to Zhuge Liang, and Zhuge Liang often seemed to be purposefully antagonizing them; perhaps to put them off balance, or perhaps just to show that he could.

Then there were Zhuge Liang’s own reflexive vulnerabilities with regard to the empress and Wei Yan. When he received a note from his wife saying that she would be skipping the next few meetings without giving a reason, he had actually felt somewhat relieved, because her impish spirit could not resist fanning the flames that sprang up whenever Zhuge Liang had to listen to Wei Yan talk. Fa Zheng was doing quite enough of that already.

Mentally, it was all so exhausting. He tried to get in as much training as he could outside of these meetings, both because the physical effort came as a relief in contrast, and because he knew he wasn’t getting any younger.

So he was truly tired and planning on an early bedtime when he heard one of his guards announce at his door one evening, “Your imperial majesty, the empress’s lieutenant requests to see you urgently.” If that final word had been missing, he would have refused.

As it was, he sighed, redid his clothing, and said “Bring her in.”

Zhou Xinyi technically performed a field messenger’s quick obeisance rather than the correct one for the circumstance, but Liu Bei just wanted to get to bed himself so he let it slide. “Your imperial majesty, do you know that the empress has not left her room for four days?”

“No left her room? Is she sick? Has a doctor seen her?”

“She commanded us all the first day not to call a doctor, my lord. And she has repeated that command every morning. Other than that, she doesn’t even see us. She eats, but less than usual. Our lady is… we’re all so concerned…” She hesitated. “We would never disobey the empress, my lord, but you are the emperor—if you were to order us to let you the doctor in, you have that right.”

Liu Bei came close to simply giving that order and going to bed, but he could not. If his wife had been so emphatic in a refusal to see a doctor, she was not the type who would simply take “your imperial husband so commands” and submit. A doctor who fled in fear for his life within a minute was no better than no doctor. He sighed. “I’ll see the empress myself first.”

She was startled. “But… but my lord…”

“What? I can order you to let the doctor in, but not myself?”

She bowed. “Forgive me, my lord. I wasn’t thinking.”

When the door opened, he dimly saw the figure of his wife lying in her bed with her back to the door.

“Go away,” she said, and he could tell she had been crying. “I said I don’t want anything.”
He dismissed Zhou Xinyi with a gesture, and the door closed behind him. Obviously she thought that the room was empty now, because she didn’t say anything more, simply sighed. In a moment, she rolled over and then she saw him.

“Hello,” he said. He had a flash of a memory of the day he had finally taken her virginity; he had opened with that smooth line on that occasion as well.

“Lord Liu Bei,” she whispered. “They let you in?!”

He had never seen her looking so terrible, heard her sounding so defeated. His own tiredness evaporated; she needed him right now.

“Shangxiang, what’s the matter?” he said, approaching her bed.

“Don’t touch me, my lord—I’m unclean. I’ve failed you again,” she said bitterly, and rolled back over.

He sat on the edge of the bed. She had made a lot of flirtatious remarks over the years about how she would like to have a child by him—usually in the context of seducing him—but she had never acted serious about it, let alone given any sign that she thought he was impatient. She had joked, even, after Lady Guan’s news, that if she wasn’t pregnant soon, he should know that his duty would be increasing. “You’re that disappointed? You told me yourself that you would not be… you laughed…”

He trailed off, because she was clearly far from laughing now. When confronted with incontrovertible evidence of non-pregnancy, apparently the joke had no longer seemed amusing to her. “My lady, you’re still so young…”

“We’re been married five years,” she said, half-muffled by the pillow. “You can divorce me for being barren, you know.”

“Divorce you?!” Was this really affecting her to that level? Had he been blind not to notice, or had she been hiding it so well? “Shangxiang, our wedding may have been five years ago, but between the war and my own foolishness… I haven’t enjoyed you anything like as much as you deserved…”

“That’s what I tried to tell myself, but… there have been times when we were able to be together for at least a few months, and nothing. Never anything. I always fail again…”

“Do you think you need to have children for my sake? My lady, I know you would be a wonderful mother—you are, already, to A-Dou—but if you’re thinking you’re failing me…” He hesitated. He should tell her now, but somehow he couldn’t. Maybe he could convince her without actually having to tell her his worst shame… “I already have an heir. I don’t want you to provide me with more children—I want you for you. No one could replace what you are for me.”

She shook her head and said miserably, “Now I’ve made you lie. ’Brothers are like limbs, wives are like clothing… torn clothing is easily replaced…”’ She didn’t finish the line, but he knew very well how it ended, because he had been the one who had said it. But who can replace a missing limb?

“Who told you I said that?”

“People who wanted me to remember my place.”

It was tempting to demand actual names, but he knew the anger was misaimed. “Did they tell you I said it a long time ago, as a single man?”
“As a man who had already lost two wives.”

“Lost them and wanted to pretend the loss didn’t hurt.”

“I know you, my lord… you are a traditional man… a man of honour… my failure must be killing you…”

“Shangxiang, you think I’m lying when I tell you that I just want you?”

She couldn’t help laugh a little at that. “No… the part of you that’s just a man definitely—“

“Part hell!” he said, surprising her into actually turning back over and looking at him. “I love you, Shangxiang.”

His wife was smiling at him, and he could tell she believed him with her mind, but perhaps not fully her heart. His words could not be enough to convince her that he honestly only wanted her to have children for her own sake—at least unless he were to confess to her… no. If he told her that, then she would probably want to divorce him. He pushed that guilty thought away. The least he could do, if he couldn’t be fully honest with his words, was demonstrate with his body how much he loved her.

He stood up and began to undress. She just watched him do it in bewilderment. Her belief in his disgust at the idea of touching her while she was bleeding was apparently so strong that it wasn’t until he lifted the blankets, climbed in and began to undress her that she even considered that his getting naked might involve her.

“My lord!” she gasped, as he massaged one small perfect breast, and the pleasure in her voice was unmistakable, but then she tried to suppress it in her next words. “Stop—you don’t want to do this.”

“I do, Shangxiang,” he said. “Do you want me?”

“I do, but… but you don’t have to do this for me.”

“I have to prove to you, so that every part of you believes it, how important you are to me,” he said. “You’ve suffered so much because of me. This… this will not be suffering.”

He was not exactly lying when he said that making love to her while she bled would not be suffering, but it would be difficult to explain simply just how deeply the idea of making love to a bleeding woman appalled him. He knew menstrual blood was one of the most polluting substances there was, as bad as feces—that the mere presence of a menstruating woman in a temple blocks the access of everyone there to the gods. When he had married the first time, his father had long been dead, and his mother had only had two pieces of advice: be gentle with her, and remember to control yourself if she’s bleeding—you don’t want to get sick.

He fully expected this to make him sick, in fact, but how could that compare with all she had already experienced because of him? For the suffering that she would so willingly endure if she did become pregnant?

She took off her xiéyi, and he carefully avoided looking down. Usually he used his own hand to guide himself into her, but this time she gently blocked his hand and said, “Let me,” with a smile.

Entering her really felt just the same… he usually closed his eyes when they had sex, but this time he kept his eyes open to focus on her beautiful face. The physical sensations and the male talent for single-mindedness soon pushed away conscious thought, and his eyes closed again as he fell into the familiar pattern.
Usually she was loud… sometimes very, very loud… but this time she did nothing but whisper into his ear, “My lord, my lord.” Just that and her hands moving over his back. It was hot in a very different way than their usual intense encounters.

———

“Shangxiang,” her husband panted over her, “are you close?”

She wasn’t, but she had been trying not to be. Yes, it felt good, but the physical sensation of orgasm… she could get that from him easily another time. And when she was peaking, or even just on the way up, she was way out in the clouds. She didn’t want to be anywhere else but right here, looking at him. He really loved her, he loved her this much. “Come in me, my lord,” she whispered, and kissed his ear. “Come in me. Come in me.”

She felt him twitching within her as he continued to thrust and then the slippery sensation of his ejaculation filling her up. When they hadn’t been together for a while like this it was always so much…

He slowed and collapsed on her, breathing hard. She kept kissing his face. “Thank you.”

“Shangxiang… but you didn’t..?”

“I didn’t want to this time,” she said. “Honestly. I didn’t want anything to distract me from watching you. It was wonderful. I felt… I already knew you loved me, but…”

He smiled, but he looked very tired, even more tired than he usually did after they made love. “Do you believe it now?”

“Yes, my lord.” She kissed his cheek.

“So no more divorce talk alright,” he mumbled, eyes closed.

She giggled. “My lord, are you going to fall asleep inside me?!”

He groaned, but shifted off her partially. “Ugh… I don’t want to get up…”

“You don’t have to,” she said with a smile, “Strange to think this will be your first night sleeping in my room… you just stay here while I clean up a little.”

She eased out from beneath his shoulder and collected her xīeyī from where it had dropped on the floor, took out the pins, and placed the dirty laundry in the bin. She pulled out a clean cloth and pinned it into place in a fresh xīeyī, then fastened it on. She couldn’t see exactly where her husband had tossed her nightdress, but never mind. She felt like putting on a new one anyway.

Redressed, she took one dry and one dampened cloth and went back to the bed, lifting the blanket to see if the mess was that bad. She was pretty light flow by this point, and while there was a bit of a stain, it was definitely more semen than blood. She suppressed a chuckle. She would have to make sure she washed this herself by hand… the last thing she wanted to do in return for this kindness was to have it cause him to lose face.

The lifting of the blanket had caused him to stir and open his eyes, so she spoke. “Let me just clean you off, my lord, and you can go back to sleep.”

He looked down, which she knew he had been avoiding strictly up until now. “That… that’s not as bad as I thought…”
She giggled as she cleaned him up, and he asked a bit self-consciously, “What’s so funny?”

“My lord, there is absolutely nothing inadequate about you and I hope you know how satisfied I am with its performance,” she said with a lascivious smile, “but with all the respect in the world, when they’re soft they’re incredibly funny!” She gently poked it, spurring a mild protest, and added, “Look at it, it’s like a little sea cucumber!”

“Great, now I’m never going to be able to eat sea cucumber again,” he groaned, and pulled her into the bed. “You’d better stop playing if you ever want him to ‘perform’ again.”

Light was streaming into his face as he slowly returned to consciousness. He could smell breakfast.

“Huh?” he blinked. This wasn’t his room… or even a tent…

“Good morning,” his wife said. She was fully dressed, and sitting at her table, an empty plate in front of her, sipping a cup of tea. “I was amazed you didn’t wake up when the food was brought in. Almost as amazed as the handmaiden was to see you sleeping there—which I don’t at all understand, because why else did she think she was bringing in breakfast for two? But don’t worry. Fortunately for us, my bleeding is over, so I was able to make a great show of sending away all the dirty laundry with her. No one has to know it stopped this morning instead of last night.”

“But the sheets…”

“If you’ll get up and eat,” she said, “I can spot clean them. I always had to take care of all of that myself when I was fighting.”

He sat up. He didn’t feel anything abnormal, in fact he could tell he had his usual morning wood, but he still felt a bit apprehensive as he lifted off the blanket. Everything looked fine.

Liu Bei looked at Shangxiang, and she was smiling at her teacup in a way that indicated that she would have dearly loved to have made some audacious remark, but was controlling herself. His clothing was in a pile by the edge of her bed, so he began redressing.

He ate in silence, watching her efficiently dealing with the cleaning. “I’m sorry you have to do that,” he ventured.

“Like I said, it’s not a problem,” she said cheerfully. “It’s been nostalgic, even. Washing this stuff used to be like my own private spy mission… sneaking out to a river or something without being seen… haha. It’s where I learned my best stealth tricks! I’m lucky that I don’t actually bleed that often, I guess.” She sighed. “Even if it means I’m always getting my hopes up.”

“Why won’t you see Li Kang? He is very discreet and experienced.”

With the cheerfulness now forced, she said, “If the imperial doctor officially reports that the empress is barren, the people would expect the emperor to take official action. Wouldn’t you say?”

“I can order him not to tell me. Not to tell anyone.”

She was silent, simply continuing to scrub.

“If you are, I don’t want to know. It doesn’t matter to me. I don’t want any wife but you. No matter what. You believe me, right?”
“I believe you,” she said softly. “I guess after what you did for me last night, it would be pretty ungrateful for me to refuse to see the doctor. Alright.”

“I’ll arrange it. Don’t… don’t let me neglect you from now on, my lady. I know that I’m busy right now, but I need to be with you to remember who I am.”

She finished her task, critically examined the sheet and was apparently satisfied. After draping it over a chair, she went over to a drawer and pulled out a comb and brush. “Can I do your hair?”

He chuckled. “And apparently who I am is your doll…”

Chapter End Notes

The line about brothers vs. wives is a recorded saying of the historical Liu Bei, noted douche (although for what it’s worth, this is a case of values dissonance between notoriously misogynistic traditional Chinese culture and modern culture). Whatever, historical revisionism FTW.

Lu Yusheng is a real person who was the daughter of Lu Ji the fortune telling specialist and cousin of Lu Xun, and her name is recorded is history solely because she was a 13-year-old widow who refused to remarry. Traditional Chinese culture has an obsession with widows not remarrying that borders on the fetishistic. Anyway, my Lu Yusheng is 18 and has never been married. Take that, Chinese culture!
早生貴子 (May you have a son right away!)

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: mention of past sexual abuse (in the writer and contemporary society's opinion though not the victim's, you'll see what I mean). There is also a brief sex scene (actual sex is skipped over, but there is an explicit mention of its, uh, consequences).

Characters briefly discuss a brutal death by torture.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

早生貴子: zao sheng gui zi
early / give birth to / valuable / son
“May you have a son right away!” (A traditional set phrase which in Chinese culture is spoken to congratulate newlyweds, even today—more than one person, without irony, said it to me when I got married.)

“Lianshi?”

“Hmm?” She stirred, rolled over, opened her eyes, and tried to focus on her husband. “You don’t look like you’ve had a nightmare…”

“I haven’t.” She was confused, and Sun Quan hesitated. She never complained when he woke her up, either accidentally while he was awakening from a nightmare or intentionally to request comfort when he had one. He was so selfish…

“What’s wrong, my lord?” She curled into his side, pulling his arm around her. “I’m here for you.”

He kissed her forehead and brushed her loose hair from her face. “I love you so much, Lianshi.”

She smiled. “And I love you, my lord, and I always will. Did you just need reassurance of that?”

“Lianshi… has it occurred to you that it’s been a while since you bled?”

He wasn’t sure what reaction he was expecting. She sleepily chuckled. “Hmm… maybe…” she said, and it was… coy?

“Are you?” he said, not sure what answer he wanted.

“It’s very early, my lord,” she yawned. “In both senses. It’s not impossible, but it is not certain. Does that satisfy you?”

“No,” he said honestly, and she chuckled again. “I don’t like not knowing what’s happening.”

“It worries you so much that you can’t sleep?” She reached up and traced a finger over his whiskery sideburns. “It will not make the morning or the answer come any faster, you know.”

“I think… it’s because I love the idea, but it also terrifies me. You being pregnant… me being a father…” She tilted her head, and he sighed. “I know I’m already a father, but he is more like my
brother than my son in terms of how we relate to each other. My mother has raised him almost completely without consulting me.”

She frowned. “We should probably change that… not that I don’t respect your mother, but he is your son.” She paused. “What happened to Sun Deng’s mother, anyway?”

“What do you know about her?” he said, embarrassed.

“I don’t know how much of what I heard was the truth,” she said. “You don’t want to tell me, my lord? If I could disregard your later behaviour, I can’t imagine there is anything about your relationship with her that would make me reject you now.”

There was a lightly teasing quality to her remarks, but the fact that there were so many possible shameful actions that could come under the heading of “your later behaviour” made Sun Quan sigh with self-disgust. Still, he could not deny her the truth if she was asking for it. He could not deny her anything. “I seduced another man’s wife. He was a travelling merchant and gone most of the time, and we thought if it resulted in anything, he would never suspect it wasn’t his. But it had my hair… and there were enough in his clan who suspected, that when they saw the child…” He sighed. “She was the mother of the man’s heir, and I guess he intervened for her, because other than putting her into house arrest, they didn’t punish her. That’s what I was told, anyway. I never saw her again; I actually hadn’t seen her for some time before she gave birth. My family disapproved too, and to separate us my father brought me to observe him in the campaign against Liu Biao—”

“Wait a minute,” she interrupted. “How old were you?”

“Twelve.”

She was staring at him. “Twelve? And she was old enough to have an adult son?”

He reddened. “I know, it was reprehensible of me.”

“Reprehensible of you?” she said. “You were a child!”

“I didn’t act like a child.” He couldn’t meet her eyes anymore. She was openly horrified.

“It doesn’t matter how you acted,” she said. “You were a child.”

“I’m telling you I wanted it,” he snarled. “It was my idea… I was already insatiable…”

She touched his face, but he continued to stare at the ceiling. “My lord, look at me.”

He looked down at her slowly. “It’s like you think I was some kind of victim. She was the victim, not me.“

“Would you think a twelve-year-old girl capable of seducing an adult man?”

“That isn’t the same at all. Men are not victims!”

“You were—“

“Stop saying that I was a child!” He suddenly pulled away from her and sat up on the edge of the bed, pressing his nails into his palms.

“I’m sorry,” she told his back. “I shouldn’t have pushed you when I can see you’re not ready to talk about it.”
“There’s nothing to talk about. You have the wrong idea.” He felt her hands on his arms and couldn’t bring himself to shrug them off.

“When... if you ever want to talk about it, my lord, I will be here. I am always, always by your side.” Her face was resting on the back of his shoulder as her arms slipped around him and held him.

“In this life and in whatever lives there are to come.”

He was silent for a few moments, and then said, “What is there to love about me, Lianshi?”

“You try so hard. You care so much. You are handsome. You are strong. You recognize talent. You forgive. You are humble. You are loyal. You keep your word. You are generous. You are grateful. You appreciate beauty. You never forget. You inspire people. You take your responsibilities seriously. You are protective. You have the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen.”

She stopped only because he was twisting in her embrace and his jade-coloured eyes were staring into hers. She had not hesitated once in her litany.

“How can you see so much good in me?” he whispered.

“I can’t help seeing it, my lord,” she said. “We all do, you know. That is why we never give up on you and we never will.”

He let her pull him on top of her, his body responding as she slid her hands down his back.

"This is where you belong,” she said huskily, “and this is who you are, and if you ever need to return to the past, I will go with you, and whoever you become in the future, I will—“

She couldn’t speak anymore because his mouth wouldn’t let her.

———

Li Kang couldn’t help but be a bit nervous as he walked into the empress’s quarters, and it wasn’t just because of the gauntlet of heavily armed women. In all her years in Chengdu, she had never even had a mild cough, let alone something serious enough to draw his professional attention. He had followed the common opinion in Shu: that she was a licentious, bloodthirsty, conniving vixen, who couldn’t be gotten rid of because of the alliance with Wu, but who constantly had to be monitored and kept in check to make sure she didn’t ensnare their lord.

Although Lady Sun’s rehabilitation had taken hold relatively quickly among the officer class, and she had always been surprisingly popular with the servants, among the civil officials—a more hidebound lot on the whole—the needle had barely budged. They were willing enough to toe whatever line Liu Bei drew in terms of formal respect, and unlike the officers they had always been nearly unanimous in wanting to uphold the alliance with Wu, but approval of Sun Shangxiang, the person, (as opposed to Lady Sun, political wife,) was out of the question, even if none of them were foolhardy enough to voice a criticism.

It was an extra strange situation because Liu Bei had met him privately, ordered him to visit the empress, without telling him for what cause, and then ordered him not to report his observations. This last point had never occurred before and it was beyond him what Liu Bei could mean by it.

When he was shown into the empress’s chambers, it was just the empress and a single armed maiden, this one wielding a short spear, and looking even more martial than any of the others. She was looking at her mistress, rather than him, but the eager look in her eyes was unnerving, and the empress’s first words when he had finished his obeisances were not reassuring.
“Ruan Feifei is deaf and is here to assure any suspicious parties that we didn’t get up to anything,” she said with a smirk. “She very rarely actually gets to do anything exciting so I had to tell her that if I gave her the signal she could stab you in the legs.”

“Ah… your imperial majesty… what would this signal be?”

“Well, if I make it, then she’ll start stabbing you in the legs and I think my lord will be displeased,” she said.

“Is it at least a fairly unmistakable signal?” said the doctor, nervously.

She giggled. “I made it as ridiculous as the idea that either I would want to do anything with you when I have the emperor, or that I couldn’t stop you from doing something I didn’t want without assistance. The emperor agreed that it’s ridiculous, but he seemed to think a chaperone was necessary for my reputation.” She shrugged.

“I see… well… this is rather unusual, my lady. For one thing, I don’t know why I’m here.”

She flushed, looked away, looked back, and said a bit louder than necessary, as if forcing herself, “I want to give my lord a child.”

“That is natural,” he said, attempting to have it come out neutral.

She flushed even more. “You sound surprised.”

Apparently he hadn’t fooled her. “As you have been married five years, my lady, and I was never consulted, I assumed the status quo was for one reason or another desired.”

She took a deep breath. “The emperor trusts your discretion, and thus I will as well. There was a period of about three months when we enjoyed each other often. Then for about four years it was sometimes frequent, but more often absent. And now for these last three months, I have given myself to my husband as often as possible. My bleeding… my bleeding never comes often, so I always start to hope… but I have never seen any other sign in myself, and it always comes eventually.”

His eyes narrowed. “How often does it come?”

“Once a season, usually… sometimes longer.”

He refrained from asking her if she knew that wasn’t normal. People worried about their fertility were some of the most vulnerable patients to anything even hinting at shame or defect. He moved into the basic exam, but only because he knew she would expect it. The first step was already clear.

———

After the examination was over, Shangxiang waited expectantly for the doctor to launch into a lot of complicated talk about meridians, qi, stagnation, heat, damp, and so on and so on. For once she was actually looking forward to being told to drink and eat a lot of nasty stuff—it would be far sweeter than being told there was nothing to be done.

Instead, the doctor said, “My lady, you need to eat more.”

She stared at him, but apparently that was all he had to say. “That’s it?”

“Basically. I could go into everything I’ve observed, and I’m not saying that for sure it will solve the problem totally, but there’s no point trying anything else without a suitable… lining, so to speak.
And it’s possible that a little more weight would take care of the problem all by itself. You’re not that tall, so I don’t think it would take that much of a gain to make a difference. Perhaps as little as five jin.”

“Are you saying my mother was right about something?”

He laughed. “When it comes to this subject, my lady, mothers often know more than doctors. To the honour of mothers and the shame of doctors.”

“Eat more… that’s it? Eat more?”

“If you’ve gained ten jin and still haven’t either regularized your bleeding or gotten pregnant, at that point I would attempt to analyze things more closely. But there is no rush. You’re no more than twenty-four, aren’t you? That’s still quite young—too young to worry so much about this.”

“My god, first my mother was right and now my husband. What a humiliating series of good news.”

This cheeky bit of self-deprecation was oddly charming, and Li Kang found himself smiling.

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“I want to die.”

Xu Shu sighed. The first time his mother had said this, when she was first alone with him after he had defected to Wei to rescue her at, he thought, her request, he had been stunned and numb. The next time, and the next few dozen times, it had hurt so badly that the pain had actually become physical—in his chest, in his head, in his stomach.

But after over a decade his reaction had long gone back to numbness.

“You don’t want your tea, mother?” he said evenly, still kneeling by her bedside with the tea.

Xu Shu’s mother, Lady Xun, reached out a hand, and he tried to place the cup in her hand, but she took it and flung it against the wall, then grabbed his wrist.

“Wu… yi… yu… shi…” she said, slowly, each syllable perfectly enunciated. Not good for anything.

His mouth went dry. When he had first come to her, she had demanded to know, in excruciating detail, just how he had been fooled into thinking her so weak as to to demand his betrayal of his lord, including, again and again, the exact words he had spoken when he told Liu Bei he had to leave.

Jin yi shi lao ma, fang cun luan yi, wu yi yu shi. Qing cong ci bie, he had told Liu Bei. Now that I’ve lost my mother, my mind is in disorder, not good for anything. I must ask that from here we part.

Not good for anything.

“Mother,” he whispered, “I know… I know…”

“My son,” she said. “Listen to your mother. Your mother says, ‘Wu yi yu shi. Qing cong ci bie.’”

“Mother, I know that I’ve failed you—“

“Do not fail me, listen to me. Wu yi yu shi, qing cong ci bie.”
Leave so they will kill me, in other words. As they should have done in the first place.

“Why do you keep asking me to do this? I am not capable, you said it yourself, I am not capable.”

“I want to die!” she shouted. “I am your mother! Wu yi yu shi—”

His hand was shaking as he pulled it from her weak grip and fled the room.

———

Cao Pi brought his hand up to knock on the empress’s inner door, but hesitated when he heard his son’s voice.

“Mother, you’re so beautiful!”

She laughed. “Don’t brush so hard, Ruirui! You must be careful with mother’s hair.”

“I’m sorry, is this better?”

“Yes, that’s perfect darling.” There was a brief pause. “Ruirui…”

“Yes, mother?”

“Mother may have to leave you soon…”

“When will you come back?”

“Ruirui, if mother has to leave for a long time, you will be a good, strong boy, right? You will take care of little Dongxiang and help her learn to be a good girl too?”

“Mother!” He could hear his son start to cry. “Who will teach me to be a good, strong boy if you’re gone?”

“You will still have your father… and he might get you a new mother, darling.”

“No one else could ever be my mother!”

“Ah darling, mother is very selfish, so it makes her heart happy to hear you say that. But if you ever have a new mother, you must be very respectful to her, do you understand? You must call her mother and do exactly as she asks.”

“But why? If father tells me he’s getting me a new mother, I’ll tell him I hate her.”

“No, Ruirui. You must be a clever boy now. If mother’s not around, you need to make sure everyone likes you, to keep you safe. Especially a stepmother. Please remember my words when you are older.”

“I’ll remember, mother.”

“My dear Ruirui, give mother a kiss.” A short pause. “Now you must go back to your rooms and have nanny put you to bed. It’s getting late.”

“Alright mother. Mother, when you leave… will nanny leave me too?”

“No, darling, I’m sure nanny will stay with you.”

“And will I see grandma Bian?”
“I’m sure you will see her soon.”

“That’s good… if nanny and grandma are still around, I’m sure I can wait until you come back.”

“Ruirui! Give mother one more kiss.”

A few moments later, the door opened and Zhenji gasped and shrunk back as she saw her husband and emperor there.

“Father!” said Cao Rui joyfully, hugging his legs. “Have you come to Ye to see us?”

“It’s time for you to go to bed, Ruirui. I must talk with mother.”

“You won’t leave without saying goodbye, this time, will you?”

“Ruirui, go.” The boy sighed, knowing that tone of voice, and ran off down the hall.

Zhenji looked at her husband for a moment, then slowly sank to her knees and did the obeisances to an emperor. Without lifting her head from the final kowtow, she said, “You can put it on the desk, your imperial majesty.”

Cao Pi put the vial of poison on the indicated table. “You can get up, Zhenji.”

She got up and went back to her night table, and resumed putting on her lotions.

“You seem to be taking this very calmly.”

“Could I change your mind if I cried and begged? I’ve been told it was my complaining that killed your love for me, but you never seemed to mind so much before you met Lady Guo. Is she pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“I see. You don’t wish the child to be a bastard, I suppose. It makes sense; I seem to recall it was similar motives that caused you to kill Yuan Xi and marry me. So what point is there in me crying? Anyway, I wish to ask a favour of you.”

“What is it?”

“Take Ruirui and Dongxiang back with you to Luoyang. After you’ve left, I’ll drink it. I don’t want them to see me that way.”

“Alright.”

He waited a moment, but could think of nothing else to say. He had imagined a big, dramatic, fiery scene, which he knew she was well capable of. That would have permitted him to tell her exactly why Lady Guo was her superior in every way—especially since the children she would bear would be unquestionably his own to everyone, since he had kept her as his mistress so openly. He knew that Cao Rui was his, but the fact that he had been conceived while her first husband still lived had resulted in persistent whispers that he was actually Yuan Xi’s. To a man of his pride this was intolerable.

But there was to be no final satisfying end. This was all the end there would be, between him and her.

He left, and Zhenji blew out the candles.
Liu Bei rubbed at his temple. Wei Yan was attempting to present his plan for a surprise strike on Chang’an—five thousand fighters and five thousand supply and support workers through the Ziwu valley, to hit without warning and drive infamous moron Xiahou Mao into a panic. He had been speaking for about five minutes, and was nowhere near done, because his halting speech had only managed to get out about one minute of content. Even for Liu Bei, who liked the man, this was getting difficult to bear.

Twenty minutes later, Wei Yan seemed to be wrapping up, but that did not promise an end to the torment, as the objections of Zhuge Liang, by now surely at boiling point, would doubtless explode and cause the kind of in-fighting that he specifically wanted to avoid.

Twenty minutes after that, he decided that a good Zhuge Liang laser blast to his own face would be preferable to this.

Zhuge Liang did not actually blast anyone apart with lasers, but he did rip the 45 minute presentation to shreds in one paragraph. “Literally the only way this plan will work is if Xiahou Mao forgets that he possesses gates. Even assuming that the strike makes it to Chang’an without intelligence of it reaching the city in advance, it would be impossible for siege weapons to be carried through the Ziwu valley at sufficient speed, so all he has to do is close his gates. I admit the man is incompetent, but I cannot believe that even his incompetence would carry him that far. A messenger—human or avian—would surely be able to request reinforcements, and even if he has less than a thousand men, he can withstand the siege until they arrive, and at that point all they have to do is circle behind and block the pass and there is no retreat. A complete slaughter would ensue…” Zhuge Liang trailed off as if struggling to contain himself from saying that a complete slaughter that included Wei Yan might be worth it.

“Oh come now, Kongming,” drawled Fa Zheng. The man’s body did not appear to have improved at all, but his voice was almost back to normal. “I admit it possesses flaws, but they are not insurmountable.”

“In the best case scenario it ends in a complete bloodbath!”

“Well, surely the true best case scenario of Xiahou Mao panicking and abandoning the city should be considered, however unlikely,” said Lu Xun reluctantly. “But I admit that in that case I fail to see how the city could be held for long, with troops advancing from both Luoyang and Tianshui to retake it.”

“If it could be held,” said Fa Zheng, “what you see as a prime place for a pincer attack, I see as an opportunity to cut off Wei’s west from its east at one stroke.”

“How can you speak of holding it when it could never, ever be taken? This is a waste of everyone’s time!” The crane fan hardly made a noise as it hit the table, but it was a violent gesture for its bearer.

“Oh, because a natural traitor like myself is always thinking of other ways of gaining a city!” laughed Fa Zheng.

That stopped Zhuge Liang. “You are thinking of the drought and the morale of the troops and people?”

“And even the officers. Alas, Xiahou Mao is far too small-minded and entranced with his own familial relationship to Cao Pi to be able to be convinced to defect. However, I believe he can easily be swindled into aiding us into convincing some more competent allies that he should be killed rather
than rescued. Do you not see possibilities among the likely reinforcements?"

“Who would they be in the west, do you think?” said Lu Xun, with genuine interest.

“Guo Huai and Wang Yi present no chance, I think. Li Dian is also quite unlikely; he had his entire extended clan, some three thousand people, relocated to Wei. Yue Jin, perhaps—“

“Li Dian and Yue Jin are in the east, I think,” said Lu Xun.

“Does our intelligence conflict on this point? It would be interesting to see who is right. Besides them, we have the beautiful Zhang He. He shrewdly defected to Cao Cao from Yuan Shao; I believe he could be made to do so again, although that is far from certain. Then there is Ma Zun, who is another Xiahou Mao type. Now, I cannot help feeling that I am forgetting someone… who could it be… can you think of anyone, Kongming?”

Throughout Fa Zheng’s speculation, the Crouching Dragon had a dreamy, far-off stare, as if he was seeing something in the distance that pleased him very much. “Jiang Wei…”

“What a pity that you have already stated your intention to lead the force to the south,” said Fa Zheng.

Zhuge Liang blinked. “It is still impossible!”

“I think it bears consideration,” said Jian Yong, not bothering to cover his yawn. “If we follow the principle to make a noise in the east and strike in the west, Wu could make a big show of preparing an invasion into Huainan, Ru’nan or Nanyang, thus causing Wei to scramble to fortify against such an invasion. But the invasion would never come, which would please our tigery friends, I assume. This would mean the available reinforcements for Xiahou Mao would be rather meagre, and thus more likely to be either vanquished or convinced to defect.”

“At this point I think we would welcome the opportunity to shake our swords while another force uses theirs,” said Lu Xun dryly.

“But if the attack did succeed—either by force or by trickery—then Wei would be in turmoil and Wu could sweep in and likely make significant gains,” said Liao Hua.

Ma Su couldn’t take it. “If Lord Zhuge Liang says it is impossible, then I am sure the emperor will never be distracted by this empty talk from the rest of you!”

They all looked at Liu Bei, who was caught mid-temple rub. He was very, very glad that he was wearing his mianguan. The face-obscuring beads were the single most useful thing about being emperor.

“My lord,” said Fa Zheng, “I think there is no need to make a decision yet. Several of us have yet to present a plan, and I recall that Lord Lu Xun said he was happy to present one at any time.” He smiled at the young strategist, who to his credit smiled back tranquilly.

“I think we will all require some time to digest Master Wei Yan and Master Fa Zheng’s remarks,” said Lu Xun. “To pile my own on top of that would be to eat a meal after a banquet.”

Liu Bei had never agreed with the young man more. “I think adjourning for the day is an excellent idea, Lord Lu Xun.” He signalled that a servant who had been waiting respectfully could approach as the others took their leave, and unsealed the note that was presented to him.

Our favourite place?
Nothing else, and it was unsigned, but he knew exactly where he was going. The only question was, did she have the supplies, or did she expect him to get them?

He urged the horse from the stable along the north road, and saw her from a long way off, mounted on her own mare without any guards or company other than her own weapons.

“Hello,” she said when he came close enough to hear, with a wink, and before he could think what to reply, her horse was off the road and into the forest. To any other eyes but hers and Liu Bei’s, there was no path.

Since Hexmark’s death he had not developed that kind of deep connection with any other horse. He had never ridden this one along this route, and thus he had to navigate every jump and every twist as if for the first time, whereas his wife’s mare barely needed her rider at all to tell her what to do. She was escaping him, but because he knew their destination, he simply allowed himself the thrill of the chase.

When she dismounted, she waited for him to come in sight before doing a flip, laughing and running off towards the spring, pausing to turn back every so often to give him the most tantalizing look of longing, and then dodging and sprinting off again just when he thought he’d caught her.

When he finally did catch her when she stumbled a bit coming down the slope towards the hidden hot spring, he was far too turned on to bother with going back to the horses for the blanket. He had to have her right there, now.

“My lord!” she protested with surprise as he pulled her to the ground and pushed her skirt up and leggings down just past her knees.

His eyes raked over her as he undid his belt. “When you look at me over and over with those eyes that say ‘fuck me’, and then when I catch you, you look so innocent and surprised that I want to fuck you, it makes me want to fuck you even more.”

Usually they liked to go as long as they could, but he was in no mood to hold back. Fortunately she wasn’t either. So it wasn’t long before they were lying side by side in the grass, while their breathing and heart rates gradually slowed.

Liu Bei sat up and looked down at Shangxiang. She had been as loud as ever, and perhaps emboldened by a rare instance of vulgar language from him, had gotten very naughty indeed. And now here she was, blushing and averting her eyes from him again, a sweet smile playing upon her lips as if she’d never even been kissed, while he could see his cum glistening at her entrance. “You vixen,” he said, his voice full of admiration.

She turned her eyes back to his at that and she was all boldness again. “Kiss me.”

He kissed her passionately, then broke it off and got up. “Go ahead and undress and get in the spring if you want,” he said. “I’ll get the picnic things and towels.”

Shangxiang sighed with pleasure and sank completely under the mineral waters of the hot spring. It was maybe a little hot to be doing this, but it seemed like the right place to tell him. She resurfaced and sat on a large stone so that she was only submerged from her belly button down, letting the evaporating water on her upper half keep her just a little bit cooler.
He was carrying more than usual. He must have brought a picnic as well; there would be way too much food. Exactly the reverse of their first time, when they’d had to split a picnic for one.

“What is making you smile like that?” Liu Bei said as he undressed.

“Mmm, I was just remembering when you used to be a gentleman and at least carried me to a blanket before ravishing me.”

He dropped into the spring next to her and submerged himself. and let out a sigh that was even more heartfelt than her own had been. Her lord was working himself too hard… not that she really made things easier on him in the energy expenditure department. “We could go again on the blanket later, if you want.”

She laughed. “Oh really? I haven’t tired you out?”

He waded over and sat next to her. “You have, but you inspire me,” he said, and kissed her cheek. “And we certainly have enough food to stay here for hours.”

“Hm… since you mention food…” She picked at a cuticle, suddenly a bit embarrassed. “In a strange way, that’s actually related to what I brought you here to talk about.”

“Did Li Kang put you on some kind of bizarre diet?” When she didn’t answer, he added in a more serious tone, “You know you don’t have to tell me anything about it unless you want to.”

“Promise not to laugh or say I told you so.”

“Only if you promise not to call it a sea cucumber ever again.” He smirked, and she laughed. “You drive a hard bargain, but it’s a deal.” She sighed. “He said I’m too thin and I need to eat more.”

“You’re sure this was Li Kang and not your mother?”

“That’s basically what I said!” She suddenly felt a bit shy. “It doesn’t bother you?”

“Well, if you get pregnant, you’re going to get fat anyway—”

She splashed him. “I’m not going to get fat!”

“I didn’t say it would be permanent!” He raised his hands in mock surrender. “Was that it?”

Shangxiang sighed. “He also said I was too young to worry about this.”

He tried, she could tell that he tried, and he did not actually say “I told you so,” but apparently the mirth was too strong and too deeply felt to keep inside. He turned his face away as he laughed, anticipating her splash.

“You broke your promise! You jerk! Sea cucumber, sea cucumber, sea cucumber!”

———

“Boyan?”

He had never found it this difficult to come up with a strategy before, and that fact itself was making it even more difficult to concentrate. He had spent the past five years fighting against people’s expectations—his youth, his inexperience, his poverty, his clan’s conflict with the Sun clan, his height. At least the height had resolved itself… damn it, he was getting distracted again. Point was,
he had dealt with hostility and skepticism before, so why did the thought of that crane fan fluttering against that smug mouth make it so difficult to focus? It was like the man was born to torment Wu. After Lord Zhou Yu died, a rumour had sprang up that when he was in the last stages of dying from his wound, he kept muttering, “Why did Zhuge Liang need to exist at the same time as me?”

What a fucking way to go… he hoped that wasn’t true… instead of thinking about a rival at a time like that, you should be thinking about your family… your friends… your wife…

“Boyan?”

He jerked out of this morbid reverie. “Oh, sorry, Yinping.” He pushed his chair back and turned. “I’m not getting anywhere here, so if you’d like to talk, or do something…”

“Do you want the baby to be a boy?”

He smiled. “I don’t think they come to order that way.”

She smiled back, but pressed on. “You know what I mean. If it’s a girl will you be disappointed?”

“I don’t intend to stop at one in either case.” He crossed over to the bed, intending to kiss her.

“Don’t avoid the question, my lord.”

He sat down at the foot of the bed, un Kissed. The one time that he actually tried to flirt back instead of being sincere and she wasn’t flirting at all. Had he completely lost his strategic perception?

“Well… I don’t think I’d be disappointed, exactly, no matter what. I think whatever it is, I’m just going to be overwhelmed with happiness that you’ve given me such a gift.”

She was looking down at her stomach, which was only just showing the slightest bit of a bump.

“Well… a boy would be able to inherit the marquisate. A boy will continue your clan’s name, and not only would he burn incense for us when we die, but his sons and his sons’ sons and their families will continue to remember us. If it’s a girl, in less than twenty years we would have to give her up to some other clan. No matter how talented she was, it wouldn’t benefit us. So a boy is better, right?”

Lu Xun had a similar feeling to that of going into an obvious ambush. Was she trying to pick a fight with him? She still wasn’t looking at him, but her fingers were fidgeting with the edges of her skirt. No, that wasn’t it. Was it something to do with her complicated feelings about her own value as a woman? Maybe… but she hadn’t been raised as if she had less value than her brothers, not like most girls were. Her value as a Guan? That seemed more likely, but he was not sure how to word his reply in that case. Time to take the coward’s way out. “What do you think?”

She didn’t answer for a moment, then said, “Do you know my Er Ge is back?”

Yes, Guan Xing had returned with Mi Fang and Fu Shiren. There had been quite a commotion about them being brought in—they were tied, naked, like animals for slaughter, and neither man had fingers or toes, not to mention their other injuries, although their heads were left untouched. Lu Xun had seen enough and left, but the more morbid had attended Liu Bei’s pro forma interrogation. They were completely broken, and all they could do was blame each other, damning each other as they admitted to everything, but claiming it was all the other’s idea. Liu Bei had handed them back to Guan Xing for execution, which apparently had involved cutting out their tongues and disemboweling them on Guan Yu’s altar.

“Boyan?”

“Yes, I know.”
“I’m not sorry they’re dead, but the way he killed them was like an animal…”

“Only human beings do that kind of thing,” he said quietly.

She sighed. “That’s too true. Xiao Ge was there for all of it, apparently, and he told me about it. He said that Er Ge was perfectly calm the entire time. Apparently the altar smells like an abattoir now. And that got me thinking about how I haven’t visited it even once… I’ve been too ashamed…”

“Because of what Guan Xing said?”

“No… because what have I done for his ghost since he died? I haven’t done a damn thing…” To hear even a mild expletive come from Yinping’s lips was shocking. “The day after I found out he was dead, I was dressed in red to get married. And no, I don’t regret that, because it was fate. But part of me… whenever I think of even crying for him, I feel like he must be so disgusted with me for abandoning him… it makes me feel like to have a daughter is really worse than useless…”

“From everything that I have heard, and not just what you have told me yourself, when he was alive, you made your father very happy,” he said gently.

“But it wasn’t hard to make him happy…” Suddenly she laughed. “I was just thinking of the look my brothers would have given me if they had heard me say that…” Then she sobered. “But now one is dead and another thinks I’m worse than dead.”

He didn’t want to get sidetracked back to Guan Xing. “But don’t you think your father would want you to continue to be happy? I think… I hope that is what I would feel, about our daughter, if we have one. We don’t… or at least we shouldn’t… have children just for what they can do for us. Have you read the Analects?”

“Sort of,” she confessed. “I wasn’t a good student, remember.”

“Well… obviously filial piety is important, but it’s not the only virtue… it’s not even one of the Five Constants, and of the Five Constants, the most important is probably… I’ll give you a hint, your uncle never shuts up about it.”

She laughed. “Benevolence!”

“You got it,” he grinned. “Well, this is complicated, but…” He paused, trying to think of how to make this simple but not condescending. “To have benevolence is to love others. And what is the most natural love? You might think from reading that it’s the love of the child for the parents, but I think that’s wrong. The parts of filial piety that the masters talk about the most are the parts that people fail at the most. They don’t need to tell parents to love their children. In fact, Mencius said that anyone, not even a sage or a gentleman, but anyone, who saw an unrelated child about to fall into a well would feel anxiety. Children are just… loveable, right?”

She smiled. “Yes.”

“So… whether it’s a boy or a girl… if we’re thinking about it in terms of doing something for us… I think that’s all backwards. To be filial to our children is to love them as much as we can and do everything for their sake. Every other kind of benevolence is supposed to be inspired by the self-sacrifice we live for our children. So… I really think I don’t care whether it’s a boy or a girl. Because he or she deserves the same kind of love no matter what.”

Yinping kissed him sweetly. “I’m glad fate tied me to you, Boyan.”

He had actually come up with the right answer! Lu Xun felt a surge of confidence as he kissed her
back. “Alright, I should get back to work now.”

“What are you working on, anyway?”

“Oh, nothing big. Just a plan to reunite China.”

Chapter End Notes

BENEVOLENCE!!!!

The scene between Xu Shu and his mother contains direct quotes (in pinyin) from the San Guo Zhi (the history book, although it should still be considered to have its own agenda). The translation is my own.

"To make a noise in the east and strike in the west" is a paraphrase from The Art of War.

My short story "Honey on a Lion's Mane" (also on AO3) covers Liu Bei and Sun Shangxiang's first time at the hot spring.

Zhou Yu repeating "Why did Zhuge Liang need to exist at the same time as me?" on his death bed is from Romance of the Three Kingdoms (San Guo Yanyi) (the novel), in which Zhuge Liang basically humiliates Zhou Yu to death.

I can't remember whether Guan Xing disemboweling Fu Shiren and Mi Fang on Guan Yu's altar is from SGZ or SGYY but I didn't come up with it. Guan Xing is one cold mofo.
樂不思蜀 (Too happy to miss Shu)

Chapter Notes

I write Liu Shan according to one of the common historical/cultural interpretations, which is that he actually had some kind of mental or developmental issue, rather than the Dynasty Warriors depiction. So you could say he's intentionally OOC.

Da Ge = oldest big brother, Shangxiang calls Sun Ce this
Xiao Ge = little big brother, Shangxiang calls Sun Quan this

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

樂不思蜀: le bu si Shu
happy / not / think of / Shu
“I am happy and don’t think of Shu at all; too happy to be homesick.” The famous response of Liu Shan to Sima Zhao when Liu Shan was a pampered prisoner after the conquest of Shu by Jin.

“Heyyyyyy Lady Zhang…”

Xingcai quickly pulled her hand back from the door to the winter practice room. “Master Zhu Ran,” she said with a small, formal bow.

He didn’t bow. Instead he made some kind of strange pointing gesture with his thumbs up and pointer fingers extended and a weird clicking noise with his mouth. Her brow furrowed; she was all too familiar with this condition. “Master Zhu Ran, it is not even breakfast time.”

“I’m thinking of trying a new fighting style,” he said, and hiccuped. “You’ve heard of drunken fist… this will be drunken flame bow!”

“Master Zhu Ran, I come to this practice room to practice alone. If you wish to spar with me, I will do so with you at another time, and not while you are intoxicated.”

He pouted. “But I’m so bored,” he whined. “I was thinking of throwing myself into the ranks of your suitors! It wouldn’t be a love triangle, it would be a love… a love…” Zhu Ran twisted his head, trying to come up with the words. “A love four-angle!”

“You mean a square?” She said, laughing despite herself.

“Yeah, that’s it!” He made the gesture and clicking noise again. “Gan Ning and Ling Tong’ll never know what hit ‘em! I’m a better match for you than either of them—they’re way too old for you. Let’s burn them with the passion of our youth. Love triangle in flames!” He made an explosion gesture and sound effect.

She couldn’t help laughing again, although she was annoyed to be reminded that neither the pirate nor the whiner had abandoned their ridiculous pursuit of her, although both had changed tactics. Ling Tong had doubled down on the ludicrous idea that he was serious about her to the point of actually proposing marriage (it was just after a sparring match in which he had obviously let her win, so she was already in a bad mood, and she threw her water in his face, told him to stop treating her like an easily fooled child, and stormed out). In contrast, Gan Ning had abandoned any pretense of
seriousness and was more or less straight up propositioning her whenever they met, no matter who was around. Well, “straight up” was an outright lie—that man probably never did anything straight in his life. He and her brother had come close to serious physical injury a few times at each other’s hands because of this, and heaven only knew what would happen if her father ever got wind of it. She had sworn her brother to secrecy, and he had agreed only because he was determined to settle the pirate himself.

What a waste of her first kiss. It hadn’t changed anything for the better.

Except that she did know now that his lips really were as soft as they appeared…

“Listen, Master Zhu Ran,” she said suddenly, forcing herself away from this unwelcome memory. “I’m really serious about only practicing in the winter practice room alone, alright? It’s where I go to meditate and… and do tai chi,” she said, guessing that the slowness of the traditional practice movements of tai chi would be boring to the young hothead, and from his face it seemed she guessed right. “If you really want to enter into the competition for my hand, wouldn’t your time be better spent eliminating the competition?”

His face lit up. “Yeah! Ok Lady Zhang, I’ll bring you… I’ll bring you… I’ll bring you Ling Tong’s pony tail as a sign of my love!”

“Not attached to his head, I hope!” she called after his receding back, slightly alarmed by how well he had taken the bait. Xingcai sighed and opened the door.

“I don’t know tai chi,” said Zhou Tai, with a smile.

“Wow, did you actually make a joke?” she demanded, closing the door behind her.

The massive warrior shrugged. “You didn’t laugh.”

“Only because I’m too stunned.” She picked up her practice weapons. “Let’s do first touch today, I’m too irritated to handle losing another disarmament match.”

He unsheathed his katana and nodded. For first touch bouts he kept it out all the time for blocking. It became an interesting match when he managed to disarm her of her sword, but not her shield. The sword had clattered to the side, and she was trying to get to it, but he kept getting in between, forcing her to retreat. She was torn between wishing that he would do the gentlemanly thing and let her pick it up, and being glad that he wasn’t going easy on her. But it did mean that this was going to be prolonged.

“Are you playing with me?” she said, frustrated, as she blocked another strike with her shield.

He smiled. “Maybe.”

Strike, block, strike, block, strike, block.

She growled as he kicked the sword to the wall just as she was about to close her fingers on it. Xingcai knew she wouldn’t be able to get to it now without actually putting her back to him, which was as good as meaning she was beaten.

His smile broadened as they circled each other. “Do you yield?”

“No,” she blurted out of vexation before she could consider what that meant. He shrugged and she could see him switching tactics. Oh, now he’s going to try to pin me!
She couldn’t push the panic away so she subsumed it with anger. How dare he play with her as if he was a cat and she was his little mouse? She was nobody’s toy!

Walls were the enemy, speed and agility her allies. If she could tire him, she could make a sudden sprint for the sword and get it before he could strike her vulnerable back. Having her sword in her hand again would almost be victory enough.

He kept up the pressure, attempting again and again to force her back, rather than sideways. If he could get her to a wall or pillar then it was all over, and they both knew it.

“If we were outside, you wouldn’t find this so damn laughable,” she spat as she unwillingly stepped back under the onslaught of one of his flurries.

“You’re not leaving me enough breath to laugh,” he said as she managed once again to twist out of the way and back into the open, and he did indeed sound as if he was going all out. Well, at least that was a slight consolation.

An idea struck her suddenly, one that was high risk, but oh so high reward. He sheathed his sword before doing a flurry attack. If she could accurately predict that brief moment, she could strike his chin with her shield, and that ought to count as first touch. Of course, there were so many ways that could go wrong, but it would have the element of surprise. At least it would show a certain amount of daring and determination; she wouldn’t be ashamed of herself for losing that way.

Xingcai kept up as if she was still trying to get a break to run for the sword. If he suspected her of changing tactics, he might not be so willing to put himself into even a momentarily vulnerable position.

As soon as he began to turn the sword to put it back into his belt she pushed forward and had the thrill of seeing that she had really surprised him. She got so close! But he had her shield in his hands and wrested it away from her with hardly any effort.

Xingcai sighed and bowed as she stepped back. “I yield,” she told the floor.

“Why?” he said, and she looked up to see that he was picking up his curved sword from the floor. “You won.”

“You dropped your sword?” she said, blinking.

“You surprised me,” he said, and smiled and bowed. “A good fight.”

“That doesn’t really count as disarming,” she said.

He didn’t reply, which pleased her. When she disarmed him for the first time, she wanted it to be clean and unmistakable with nothing tricky about it (we’ll just forget about that time without the shirt, she told herself guiltily). He was respecting that. She was sparring with other officers now publicly, but those matches just weren’t the same; they fought to flirt or be noticed or to gossip or who knows what reason, not, you know, to fight. The worst part was that she had to fight down to their level for the sake of being diplomatic. No wonder she was keeping her matches with Zhou Tai as secret as if they were actual trysts. If word got out about it, she’d have an audience, or even worse, people demanding their own “private sessions” with her.

Still. She had to admit that her sessions with Zhou Tai were turning into some of the most fun she’d ever had in her life. Xingcai had to admit that when she went back to Shu, she was actually going to miss this.
After their usual water and wine, he said, “We may not have time to go again. My first heat is at 8:30.”

“Your heat?” It suddenly struck her what day it was; the alcohol scent emanating from Zhu Ran had been realgar wine. “You’re racing in a dragon boat?”

He nodded and refilled his wine.

She laughed. “Aren’t you worried about being too tired?”

He tossed the wine back. “No.”

“Well, maybe I should get changed into something more festive then,” she said, standing up. “How will I know which boat is yours?”

He cracked a smile as he refilled his cup again. “The one that wins.”

———

“Get away from my hair!” Ling Tong shouted at Zhu Ran, swatting the younger man away like a troublesome insect. “Fuck is wrong with you today! If you don’t stop it you’re off the team. Oh, hell! You’re smashed too?!”

This last question was directed at Gan Ning, and it was unnecessary, because the pirate was swigging realgar wine directly from a bottle. He slammed the empty bottle down to the dock with a ululating war cry, gaining answering cries from some of his personal men (identifiable by their bells and goose feathers).

“Fuck, we are going to lose!” groaned Ling Tong.

“We won’t lose,” said Zhou Tai quietly.

“Very reassuring,” said Ling Tong bitterly. “You’re as drunk as the rest of them. Everyone here but me is drunk!”

“You’re the one that’s acting weird, Ling Tong,” said Gan Ning and belched. “We won last year and you were so drunk we had to turn the paddle around in your hands.”

“I was barely buzzed!”

“Damn, you were so drunk you don’t even remember do you!” laughed Han Deng, then suddenly sighed. “I guess no one remembers it was one of my best races ever…”

“So which one of you is the sweep?” came a familiar feminine voice, and they all turned to see Xingcai, dressed in unlined summer *hanfu*, ivory with a swirling floral pattern of pink, jade, gold, purple, dark green, and aqua, and a crimson trim and belt. It was much more colourful and eye-catching than her usual attire.

“Wow, you look like an actual lady, Lady Zhang!” said Gan Ning. “I’m surprised you’re not stripped down and demanding a paddle for yourself!”

She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like boats much.”

“Not like boats?” He gasped and staggered back dramatically. “That’s it, we’re through!”

“I’m heartbroken,” she said, rolling her eyes. “No one’s going to answer my question?”
“Ling Tong is being modest,” said Zhou Tai. “Uncharacteristically.”

Ling Tong flushed. “It’s not like it’s an honour or something.”

“We had to put him on steering this year because his skinny arms can’t paddle worth a damn,” chimed in Gan Ning.

“Shut up,” snarled Ling Tong. “I can paddle as well as any man here. It’s just that I’m the only one of you who bothered to remain sober enough not to steer us straight into the shore.”

The wind changed, and Xingcai wrinkled her nose again. “My god, you all reek of realgar!”

“Well, what do you expect? It’s the festival of yang! Time for doing men stuff in the sun while completely hammered!” Gan Ning did his ululation again and several others joined in.

“Adding literal poison to alcohol, sunburn and heat stroke, sounds like male idiocy alright,” she said acidly.

“You gotta drink realgar wine on Duanwu, Lady Zhang!” said Zhu Ran, and hiccuped. “Otherwise you’ll get sick!”

“I’ve already had a small, symbolic amount, thank you,” she said with a brief bow.

“What’s going on, little sis?” Zhang Bao walked up. “You heard I was racing?”

“No, I hadn’t,” she said, and Ling Tong saw Zhang Bao’s face grow suspicious, looking from her to Gan Ning. “Well, I had better walk to the finish line before the race starts, so that I can be there when you all win.”

“How about a good luck kiss for us all first?” leered Gan Ning.

Xingcai held up a hand and gave her brother an I’ll handle this look before saying, “If you’re far gone enough to think I’m going to kiss twenty-five sweaty drunks, you’re probably going to fall into the river and get eaten by the dragon.”

“You don’t have to kiss all of us! We just need a little bit of luck. C’mon, you know you’d be sad if I really drowned,” he said, suddenly giving a big, sweet smile. Xingcai actually smiled back, and Ling Tong wondered if he could push the pirate off the dock and make it look like an accident.

“All right Master Gan Ning, I admit I would be sad for about five minutes,” she said dryly. “I wouldn’t like to think that you could have been saved by a kiss from me. But I’m only going to kiss one of you.”

She looked at Ling Tong, and his mouth went suddenly dry. Her previous kiss, he had been too startled to realize it was happening until it was over—

Xingcai swept her gaze over the rest of them, then suddenly leaned over and pecked her brother on the cheek. “There! Now your team has been kissed.”

There were a few groans. “Why does he get the kiss, Lady Zhang?” whined Zhu Ran. “Your brother doesn’t count! And Ling Tong’s already been kissed by you, it’s only fair you spread the love around a little bit.”

“Well, my brother or Ling Tong can pass it on to the rest of you if they feel it necessary,” she said with a wicked smile, and wiggled her fingers in farewell as she departed.
“Oh my, we really are living by the customs of the sea today,” said Gan Ning with a suggestive smile, openly appraising Zhang Bao and Ling Tong in turn, and his fellow former pirates guffawed—even Zhou Tai cracked a smile. Zhang Bao’s eyes narrowed, then widened as he realized what the innuendo meant, and would have attacked but Ling Tong quickly and efficiently grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back for an armlock.

“Don’t take the bait,” Ling Tong said as Jiang Qin laughed and clapped Gan Ning on the back, infuriating the Shu officer even more. “If you want to try to kick his ass again, do it after the final race. Fuck, you people make me crazy.”

———

Ordinarily the mighty Yangtze River would be crowded with barges and ships, some even coming from the ocean, sailing Wu’s greatest trade route all the way to Jing province, but today the only boats that could be seen had no cargo but boisterous men and ornately carved dragons upon their prows. Flags and banners drew the eye up while everyone’s finest summer wear boasted Jianye’s prosperity and relative peace under the Sun clan. Hawkers did a brisk business in fans, parasols, fresh fruit and of course, zongzi and realgar wine.

The king and queen of this prosperity had the relative privacy of a covered pavilion on a peninsula opposite the official finish line and dock. In the case of a disputed finish, it would be the king who would proclaim who the real winner was of a race, so an unobstructed view was important. The last of the junior matches had just finished, and it was almost time for the real races to begin.

Lianshi saw Sun Quan’s eyes tracking something, and turned to see that it was a couple walking along the shore, the man holding a parasol over the woman, who was heavily pregnant. She sidled up to him. “Are you admiring such a sweet scene, my lord?”

He put his arms around her and lowered his lips to her ear in a gesture that, from the outside, was practically as sweet and innocent, but his whispered words had a very different effect. “I was thinking that I can’t wait to see you like that, carrying my child, so that the whole world knows that I’ve taken you and you belong to me.”

She couldn’t help a slight shiver as arousal pooled in her belly at his possessive words, but struggled to maintain a proper composure as queen at such a public event. “I think everyone knows I adore you, my lord,” she murmured, and looked up to see that he had an unusually wicked smile on his face.

“God, Lianshi, I love making you blush like that… how soon do you think we can get out of here?”

“My lord,” she said, her breath catching a bit, “surely you must stay through all the races?”

He sighed. “I suppose I must. Even though the officers are going to win as always… ah, good morning Lady Zhang. Come to cheer your brother? No need to kowtow; we are very informal today. I don’t want to have to execute anyone for being drunk.”

“Good, because if you did the alliance with Shu is over for sure,” said Xingcai, frowning at a pavilion some distance away, where her father and some other older officers could be seen pounding back wine, realgar and otherwise.

“There isn’t much suspense about it,” said Lianshi. “The naval officers’ team always wins.”

“Is it the naval officers’ team?” Xingcai said, surprised. “I’m surprised they let my brother join them, then. He’s plenty strong, but we all have very little naval experience.”
“Well, since last year, they’re several men short,” said Sun Quan, suddenly distant.

She knew he was thinking particularly of Lu Meng, who had been the sweep in previous years.

“What is the Dragon Boat Festival like in Chengdu, Lady Zhang?” Lianshi asked to dispel this topic.

“I’ve never been in Chengdu during it,” she replied. “I’ve never stayed in one place for very long…”

The Shu officer trailed off, obviously aware that Liu Bei’s volatile cycle of conquering, ruling, fleeing, and then conquering again was no less dangerous a topic. “You seem to be very… passionate about it, here in Wu.”

“Southerners love a party,” said Lianshi with a smile. “Just wait until the victory banquet starts.”

“How long does it take them all to lose consciousness?” Xingcai said, then her face dropped. “Oh, great.”

Lianshi was confused, and then she saw that Ding Feng was approaching them, which confused her even more. Ding Feng might be scary to look at, but surely Lady Zhang was perceptive enough to realize that he was a kind and gentle man?

The kind and gentle man made a respectful bow to Sun Quan and Lianshi, and then, eyes on Xingcai, began to recite a poem about the stars on a summer night, with obvious allusions to the Shu officer who was smiling a very strained smile.

He paused to take a breath at the end of a stanza, and Xingcai burst into applause.

Ding Feng looked crestfallen. “That wasn’t the end, Lady Zhang.”

“Oh, wasn’t it?” she said innocently. “I am so sorry! I just can’t appreciate poetry!”

“Can’t appreciate poetry?” he said in dismay.

“Tone deaf to it,” she said firmly.

“Ah,” he said, looking sad. “Well… have a good festival…”

“You too, Master Ding Feng,” said Xingcai, and then sighed with relief when he had trundled away.

“Not very diplomatic, Lady Zhang,” said Sun Quan dryly, but his face was amused.

Their guest sighed. “Ling Tong and Gan Ning I can handle, but Zhu Ran told me this morning that he was joining the race for my hand and I just thought, my god, if Ding Feng is thinking he’s got to get in on this too, I am seriously going to lose it!”

“If they’re bothering you, Lady Zhang,” said Lianshi firmly, “I can make them all stop. Taking care of the women of the court is my job, and the men know very well I won’t put up with any nonsense.”

Xingcai looked as if she was surprised to see Lianshi so fierce and determined, but smiled. “Thank you, your majesty, but I’ve been handling Ling Tong and Gan Ning long enough that to get someone else to make them stop at this point would be a bit like quitting, which is something I don’t do.” She frowned. “Maybe you could speak to Zhu Ran though. He said something about cutting off Ling Tong’s hair for me and I really don’t want to start your officers fighting amongst themselves—Gan Ning and Ling Tong I don’t count because I certainly didn’t start their rivalry. I am not interesting in being a second Diao Chan.”
Xu Shu folded his arms over his knees and rested his head on them, watching the boats moving along the confluence of the Yu, Si and Xiang rivers.

Wang Yi was handing out zongzi to the people, her version of a friendly smile somehow more frightening than any other expression she made. It kept the crowd of people waiting for the handout from becoming a riot, which was impressive.

His own stomach growled a bit, but he could not bring himself to join the crowd, nor did he want to go back inside the castle to avail himself of the food provided to the officers. He sighed, and changed to a cross-legged position.

A zongzi dropped into his lap, and he looked up to see a man in an outfit almost identical to his own, only it was yellow instead of blue. Despite the heat, the large hood was drawn up covering the upper half of the face. “Ah... thank you…”

The stranger was unpicking the knot of the red string on another zongzi with fingers that were old but nimble and strong. “It is a day for celebration, is it not?” said a reedy voice.

Xu Shu was startled. This man…

The face turned down towards him, a smile beneath a truly impressive moustache. “You recognize me? I am impressed.”

“I know that I know you, or perhaps know of you,” said Xu Shu slowly. “But I cannot name you.”

“Even if you knew a name, you cannot name me,” said the mystic. “Will you not eat?”

Xu Shu slit the string with his sword. Following stupid commands was all he did now anyway, why not follow this one.

“Why were you assigned to Fan Castle?”

Xu Shu shrugged, unwrapping the bamboo leaf and taking a bite of the sticky rice within. After chewing and swallowing, he said, “Beats me. Sometimes I think the universe is just enjoying torturing me at this point. I had my happiest and my unhappiest moments in Jing province. I’m tormented by memories…” He trailed off, and stared at the zongzi with suspicion. Why was he revealing this? He was sure he had intended to make a bland non-answer that he followed orders.

The stranger looked northeast and waved a hand towards Xinye. “Yes, in that direction, you met your master, your dearest friends, and finally your lord…” He turned south, towards Changban. “And in that direction, you abandoned that lord.” He turned back. “And here you are, under another master, sitting and waiting.”

“At least here, when the conflict comes, it’ll probably be with Wu. The one who kills me probably won’t be someone I know,” he said, again not really understanding why he was speaking. “Sun Quan hasn’t given up on having all of Jing province. I don’t know what it is about this stupid province.”

“And you are a strategist?” A lightly mocking tone.

Xu Shu sighed. “Not much of one.”

“Not lately, I have observed,” agreed the stranger. “When Wu kills you, it won’t be much of a loss to
Wei, will it?"

“It won’t be a loss to anyone.”

“Not even your dear mother?”

Xu Shu closed his eyes. “At least she’ll be free of my shame.”

“A very interesting woman, your mother,” he said. “She has intriguing ideas about suicide.”

“At this point… even if I were to do as she wants… what would be the point? Where would I go? I’m not good for anything. Just as she says.”

“You think she means you when she says that?”

“What do you mean?” Xu Shu opened his eyes at that. “She’s throwing my words back in my face. *Wu yi yu shi, qing cong ci bie.*”

“She’s speaking to you as you spoke to your lord. Is it impossible that she is telling you what you told your lord?”

That *she* was useless to the world and to him? “You’re wrong… she knows… she knows what I am… if you were right… then she would say…”

“What would she say? Remember she is a woman who will not take up the knife herself.”

“I can’t let her be harmed,” he said vehemently. “I’ve given up everything for that.”

A subdued cheer went up as another race finished. “Isn’t it unfortunate how plague follows famine?” said the stranger, pleasantly, conversationally.

Xu Shu went cold. “What do you mean?”

“I mean there was a reason why you were unable to say goodbye to your mother before leaving Luoyang.”

“But I’ve received…” He trailed off, and the stranger laughed.

“Yes, you’ve received a letter. Her characteristic handwriting! How convenient a proof of identity it is!”

Xu Shu’s mouth was dry. “She’s dead?”

“What are you if she is? Free?” He paused, but Xu Shu said nothing. “Have you heard what the rumours say of you? ‘His body is with the Caos, but his heart is with the Han.’”

Xu Shu still said nothing, thinking of his fellow Wei officers back in Luoyang laughing and mocking Liu Bei the grass weaver for his pretensions at being Han emperor. The Han dynasty was over, over, over—

An empty *zongzi* wrapper dropped briefly into his lap, then the hot wind blew it away. He looked up to see that the stranger was gone.

———

“Westerners can’t paddle for shit,” said Lady Sun, wiping the sweat off her brow grumpily. This
stupid crown!

“My lady,” said her husband, leaning on the word heavily.

“What? Am I supposed to pretend they can? This is the worst race yet,” she huffed.

“Your language, Shangxiang, as you know very well I’m referring to.”

“No one can hear us,” she said, and when her husband gestured to the servants around them, she said crossly, “Well! They don’t count. They like me, right guys?”

Despite their training, the handmaidens and serving boys could not resist smiling.

She drained her cup. “More fruit juice, please. I’m gonna die,” she groaned. “And another thing, why are you having this race in the hottest part of the day? Back in Wu we have it early in the morning and everyone’s passed out by noon.”

“Just another day in the Southlands,” said Liu Bei dryly. “It won’t be much longer.”

“Also, you celebrate the wrong guy,” she said. Shangxiang was hot, grumpy, and the last cup of fruit juice hadn’t even been cold. She was trying her best to eat more, but the heat made all the food look appalling. How she was longing for Wu, where people knew how to eat and dress in the summer! “The Dragon Boat Festival is about Wu Zixu, not this Qu Yuan loser.”

“You sound like Sun Ce,” he said, “No respect for magic or gods.”

“Wu Zixu is a god,” she huffed. “The god of waves. He’s important out east, you know.” Then she abruptly said, “I hate thinking about how my Da Ge died.”

“I’m sorry,” he said in a different tone. “I didn’t mean—”

“I know. I’m just out of sorts today.” She bit her lip and nodded at the servant who had brought another cup of fruit juice. They said it was taoist sorcery that killed him, but it certainly looked like a physical injury. His wound had been so gruesome, the stench of the infection horrific; she had still been very young, and she had had to force herself to stay in the room when he was giving her his final goodbye, telling herself that she would regret it forever if she succumbed to her weakness and fled, and she had been right. There hadn’t been any big import to what he had said—that he loved her, that he was sorry he had to leave her, that he shouldn’t be too hard on Xiao Ge, to be a friend to her sister-in-law Lady Qiao, to be a good aunt to his daughter, and to listen to Zhou Yu, because he would find a plan that would make everything alright for everyone—“Who knows, Shangxiang, maybe he’ll even manage to find you a husband that can put up with you. He’s a damn miracle worker.” She had laughed and scolded him through her tears.

As soon as she had left the room she had puked everything in her stomach and then some.

Xiao Ge wiping her face for her, carrying her to her room and putting her to bed, ignoring her protests that she was fine… Lianshi curling up with her in the bed, reading aloud from the *Classic of Mountain and Seas* until she drifted off… Zhou Yu telling her in the morning that her brother was dead, and that he knew he couldn’t replace Sun Ce, but that he would do his best to guide Xiao Ge in leading their family…

“If you’re unwell,” said her husband with concern, “you need not stay. Heat exhaustion can get to anyone.”

“Do you remember when we met?” she said.
“Before the battle of Chibi? I certainly do,” he said with a smile.

“We met a lot earlier than that,” she said. “You don’t remember at all?”

His confused face said that he didn’t. “When?”

“At Shouchun.”

“You can’t have been there,” he said, staring at her. Well, presumably. That damned mianguan!

“Weren’t you twelve?”

“Well, that’s my Da Ge for you,” she shrugged. “I wasn’t actually supposed to fight…” She trailed off and grinned. “That ambush unit didn’t know what hit them!” Now that was a pleasant memory. “You haven’t seen tears until you’ve seen a grown man who just had his ass handed to him by a little girl. Plus, my mother never said another word about my fighting skills being a waste. Shutting up my mother has got to be one of my best battle outcomes ever.”

“And you’re saying I met you?”

“You spoke to me! Twice! Before the battle, I called Cao Cao a creepy old man and my Xiao Ge basically tried to smother me, and you said I probably should watch my mouth or something like that, which was the same thing that he was telling me, only somehow you made it charming. You’re still telling me to watch my mouth and somehow making it charming, come to think of it.”

“And the second time?”

“It was when you were leaving. You and my Da Ge were chatting, and then we were walking away, and you called out to me. Oh you put butterflies in my stomach! Then you said a bunch of crap about how my brother was like a burning flame and light shining before all and that I was lucky to be taken care of by such a strong man. Then you just said goodbye and walked off! I was so mad! I immediately decided you weren’t that cute after all.”

A handmaiden unconvincingly turned a laugh into a cough.

He laughed. “Why would that make you mad?”

“Because I thought you wanted to talk to me about me!”

“You were twelve, I was thirty, and I was married,” he pointed out. “And I would like to say for the record that the first reason is enough in itself.”

“Oh yeah. I guess that would have been a bit gross.” She sighed. “I did think at least you would remember it. I felt pretty grown up at the time. You know, I’d already killed people.” She sipped at her fruit juice, not bothering to look over, since the mianguan wouldn’t have told her anything anyway.

“You thought I was cute?”

She didn’t have to look at him to know what expression accompanied that voice. “Well, you were pretty young then,” she teased. “You hadn’t really matured, you know. I prefer an older type, myself. Personally, I like my men to be late thirties, early forties.”

“Mm.”

“And what kind of lady does my lord prefer?”
“One who watches her mouth,” he said. “Charmingly.”

She picked up her fan and fanned herself. “My lord.”

*I wonder if Zhou Yu foresaw that this match would work out like this... somehow I don’t think he did. Xiao Ge certainly didn’t. Lianshi... she always expects the best, though. Who else could put up with Xiao Ge...*

“Mama!”

“A-dou!” Shangxiang said, sincerely pleased to see her stepson Liu Shan. “How are you? Are you enjoying the festival?”

The boy’s usually vacant, moonlike face was more animated than usual as he darted up to them, his arms full of *zongzi*. “Very much! The rowing is so exciting!”

“Paddling, A-dou, not rowing; paddling!” Shangxiang scolded, but with a broad smile. “Goodness, Westerners really don’t know anything about dragon boats. Did you bring me a snack?”

The youth nodded rapidly. “I didn’t know what you like, so I brought one of each kind…” He looked down, and his face fell. “I don’t remember which is which!”

Shangxiang laughed. “Lucky for you I like everything! And if I don’t like it, I’ll just give it to your father, shall I?”

The simple youth still looked crushed, his planned treat obviously not having gone according to his modest plan. Shangxiang walked up to him and patted his shoulder. “It really is alright, A-dou! You’re so sweet to think of me. Please smile for me!”

Automatically he smiled, his eagerness to please and obey sweeping aside his disappointment, and within a few moments the false smile became real as his stepmother selected a *zongzi*, picked the string open dextrously, unwrapped it, and took a bite.

“Mm, taro! Delicious!” she declared, and the boy brightened further.

“I’ll just leave the rest here,” Liu Shan said, dumping them onto the table and nearly knocking over her half-empty juice cup and his father’s cup of realgar wine. “Father, you will have one too, won’t you?”

Shangxiang glanced at her husband, who had his head at an angle that she could actually see his face. He was smiling at his son, but it was an unsure smile. It broke her heart sometimes how uncomfortable Liu Bei was with Liu Shan, but she didn’t know how to fix it. She knew her husband loved his son, but it was obvious that he felt deeply ashamed by his heir’s simple-mindedness. She had learned not to try to tell him that it was nothing to blame himself about, that no one understood why some children became like this, because it just seemed to make his shame worse. “I will certainly have some. Thank you.”

Liu Shan bowed, then said, “Oh! I see Zhao Yun was in the boat that just won! I must go and congratulate him! Yes, I must, I definitely must.” And off he went, without saying goodbye.

“Would you like this one, my lord?” said Shangxiang, holding out the taro *zongzi*. “It was a lie in a good cause but I don’t actually like sweet *zongzi* that much. Yet another thing that we do better in the south. I don’t suppose any of those are char siu pork?”

He chuckled as he untied one of the little bundles, but it was a weak chuckle. His face was obscured
from her again. “If I find one, you’re welcome to it… Shangxiang, you’re so good with him.”

“He’s a darling boy, as I keep telling you,” she said lightly. “Who could do other than be kind to him?”

She heard him sigh, and wished that stupid mianguan wasn’t shielding his face from her.

Chapter End Notes

Xingcai's hard-to-describe festival outfit is from the DW8 Famitsu DLC costume, although I'm assuming she doesn't have that DLC's fox ears and tail or someone would have noticed. ^_^

In DW7, before and after Shouchun, there are hilarious cutscenes between Sun Shangxiang and Liu Bei in which she is obviously crushing on him and he is totally oblivious (also Sun Quan and Shangxiang tussling after she calls Cao Cao a creepy old man). DW ignores aging, but if you aren't ignoring aging, then it totally makes sense that he's ignoring this prepubescent girl.

In Chinese there is no distinction between paddling and rowing, but in English there is, and the dragon boat paddlers I know go absolutely bonkers if you call it rowing. It's a pet peeve for them.

You can learn more about zongzi, realgar wine and other Dragon Boat Festival traditions from your friendly neighbourhood Wikipedia.
話中有話 (Words within the words.)

Chapter Notes

Kongming is Zhuge Liang's style name.
Er Ge means "second oldest big brother" and is what Guan Suo and Guan Yinping call Guan Xing.
Xiao Suo just means "little Suo". (Xiao is a common component of nicknames, especially from an elder to a younger person.)
Da Ge means "eldest big brother" and is what Guan Ping's siblings call him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

話中有話：hua zhong you hua
words / within / have / words
“There are words within the words (such as hidden meanings, subtext, innuendo or double-speak.)”

There was little joy in Luoyang, but Zhang He was not one to let a frown mar his features… unless the occasion called for a chilling look of scorn, all the better to highlight his ephemeral beauty. But without an audience—and he did not count guards and servants as a worthy one—it was better to keep one’s face perfectly neutral. One only had so many smiles and so many frowns to give before wrinkles would form, no matter what lotions and potions he and Zhenji had conspired to invent.

The thought of Zhenji made the corners of his mouth go up ever so slightly, despite his control. The deadly beauty had gracefully declined the imperial invitation to Luoyang, citing a preference for a quiet life, and Cao Pi had gone himself to convince her. What a winsome thing was marital devotion! The imperial carriage train had arrived, and he could hardly wait to dance to the lively tones of her flute. Cai Wenji played nothing but laments, lately. Not that the laments were not individually exquisite, but beauty required variety.

“My emperor!” he sang out, performing an elegant bow as the carriage door opened. Zhang He never kowtowed if he could avoid it. The kowtow was such a dull, conventional maneuver, not at all worth getting ones knees and forehead dirty for. “My empress!”

Instead, it was his prince and his princess who alighted from the carriage with the help of servants. “It’s the fairy man!” said the three year old princess, eyes wide. “Are you going to dance, fairy man?”

“She remembers me!” said Zhang He, not at all insulted by this epithet. “My very life is a dance, princess.”

He twirled, and the princess, mesmerized, attempted a similar twirl. Zhang He smiled and extended his hands, and when the young girl reached for them Zhang He suddenly lifted the girl into the air for a twirl in the opposite direction. She shrieked with delight, and he shook his head and put her down.

“Shrieks are not beautiful,” he said solemnly, and she looked abashed. “Princess Dongxiang, you must contrive to be as cool and elegant in your every movement as your mother.” He tickled her chin. “A tinkling laugh, like a bell, is acceptable.”

The little girl gave a light and definitely lovely little giggle while Zhang He looked up as the second
carriage door opened, eager to see the woman of whom he had spoken, but Cao Pi stepped out alone, and the door was shut behind him. “Zhang He,” the emperor said, with a nod. “Is something the matter?”

“I merely wished to see the empress,” said Zhang He. “It has been such a long time since I have had the pleasure of witnessing one of her performances! The empress is a magnificent flower, who blooms on or off the battlefield!”

“Unfortunately the bloom is off the rose,” said Cao Pi with a twist to his smile. “Apparently her refusal to come to Luoyang was because she was unwell. I have brought the children back with me so they do not disturb her recovery.”

“Unwell?” cried Zhang He, staggered at the thought of her splendid beauty tarnished by illness. “It cannot be! Why did she not say so in her letter?”

For all his outer foolishness, Zhang He was not actually a fool, and he did not miss the shadow of suspicion that passed over Cao Pi’s face, although the dancer did not vary his distraught posture a bit. It was a particularly heart-touching pose of his, and he had not had the chance to display it since Xiahou Yuan’s death.

“Pride,” said Cao Pi curtly. “Come, Ruirui, Dongxiang.”

He was going to leave without another word? “Ah, my emperor, I believe Master Sima Yi wishes to see you to consult on where to place me!”

Lady Guo was half-visible in the shade of the hallway, and Cao Pi was not responding to him.

“Your imperial majesty?”

“Whatever he wants,” said Cao Pi distractedly. “He has my seal.”

Zhang He dropped out of his distraught posture slowly, uneasily aware that he had no audience. Cao Pi was presenting his children to his mistress, and she was cooing at them.

What sort of performance was this?

Zhang He was not sure, but he knew he did not like being shoved off the stage without even a proper exit line. Not one bit.

———

Zhuge Liang raised his hand to knock on the door, but halted as he heard a female voice pleading, “I’m just not sure if you’re strong enough for this… I don’t want anything to—”

“Hold that thought,” came Fa Zheng’s familiar drawl. “I will resume this seduction after whoever is at the door has identified himself.”

“I can come back later,” said Zhuge Liang stiffly.

“Ah,” said Fa Zheng. “Go to the baths, my dear, won’t you? I want you thoroughly clean before I debauch you.”

A few moments later, the door opened and Zhuge Liang barely caught a glimpse of a red-faced woman as she dashed past him and away. From her dress, she was at least not a servant.

Zhuge Liang closed the door behind him. “It is unwise to engage in sexual intercourse before you
have fully recovered,” he said calmly. “The woman is quite right.”

Fa Zheng brushed his thick bangs out of his face and smiled. “But didn’t you just warn us all mere weeks ago about the dangers of an unsatisfied woman, Kongming? They are prone to blurring out all kinds of things, are they not? A husband has certain duties.”

The dragon bowed slightly to acknowledge the hit. “May I sit down?”

“Please. To what do I owe the honour of this cockblock?”

“I have received a letter which I wish to discuss with you before bringing it before the full council.”

Fa Zheng raised his eyebrows. “You flatter me,” he said with real surprise.

“Do you know the name Xu Shu?”

“The Wei officer?”

“Yes.”

“That and the name is the limit of my knowledge, inasmuch as I have never heard of him doing anything significant.”

“He was our lord’s first strategist,” said Zhuge Liang, “and before that, he was my friend and a fellow student of my master Sima Hui. During the debacle at Changban Slope, his mother was captured by Wei and he defected to assure her safety. However, as you say, he has done nothing significant for Wei since then.”

“Ah. Loyal in his heart to another?” said Fa Zheng. “How touching.”

“The scene between him and our lord when they parted was very touching indeed,” said Zhuge Liang, not giving any indication that it at all moved him emotionally. “It was Xu Shu who instructed our lord to recruit either the Crouching Dragon or the Fledgling Phoenix if at all possible, to the point that our lord humbled himself into visiting me personally, rather than requesting me to visit him, which I would have refused. At the time, I imagined that I would devote my life to study of the Way.”

“Indeed. Does that pay well?” A sardonic smile.

“Better than this,” mused Zhuge Liang quietly, knowing that the other man would not be able to understand his meaning, and was proven right when Fa Zheng gave a rare puzzled frown. “But to return to the present. The letter.” He withdrew it from his sleeve. “I shall read it to you.

‘Peacock,’ In our younger days Pang Tong occasionally mocked my style name by calling me this.

‘You knew the truth on the day our lord cut down the trees.’ The touching departure scene, as I said. Our lord ordered some trees felled so he could watch Xu Shu’s departing figure for longer.

‘I am free at last to live that truth but I do not know how to do so.

‘If you asked for my help, I would give you the reply of our master.’ Our Taoist master, Sima Hui, was notorious for saying ‘yes’ or ‘good’ to everything.

‘I think I can receive a reply here with little hindrance,’ and here he gives a woman’s name and the address of what appears to be a brothel. He may have changed more than I expected.”
“Not at all,” chuckled Fa Zheng. “Very useful places. Any man can go, at almost any time, and spend an hour in a private room, without anyone questioning what he has done there, and you can believe that if he does not touch the girl, she is only the better pleased for it and the more eager to keep silent.”

“I know. I am still surprised. The Xu Shu I knew was…” Zhuge Liang shrugged. “That is beside the point. I am satisfied that the letter comes from him.”

“And why do you bring it to me?”

“It is in the area of your expertise, is it not?”

“Ah.” Fa Zheng’s eyes glowed. “Betrayal from within. Certainly it has potential. But would reinforcements to Chang’an come from Fan Castle? Surely they would rather come from Chen Cang or Tian Shui?”

“That could be finessed,” said Zhuge Liang. “If we make the pretext of a full northern campaign—perhaps even act as if the Chang’an campaign is a ruse—they will want to maintain their strength along that border. If Wu appears docile, at least along the Jing border, it would not be an impossible place from which to draw reinforcements—travel up the Dan River and through the Qing Ni pass. Remember that they would not assume the need to rush to lift the siege, as Wei Yan’s plan has no real hope of success.”

“I thought it was a stupid plan?”

“Without someone on the inside, it was,” said Zhuge Liang, with a bit more heat than he intended to allow to be seen.

“Let me consider this further,” said the trickster, closing his eyes. “As you said, it is the area of my expertise and I have several glorious possibilities flitting through my head. Can you postpone the day’s meeting?”

“Easily.”

“Excellent. Now, you should leave me if you want me to have time to consider this before my wife returns. I warn you that I won’t be postponing that.”

Zhuge Liang stood up, but hesitated. “Are you truly so recovered?”

“It’s been over six months,” said Fa Zheng with a smirk. “Despite my reputation, I do have some human desires. One cannot always make the wisest decision.”

———

Guan Xing knelt before the grim portrait of his father again.

He was still upset that someone had the nerve to clean the bloodstains away. Didn’t they understand that this was the God of War? It was only right that the blood of his enemies should cover the altar and floor. It was a far more fitting offering than fruit, incense or flowers.

Killing them was supposed to sate Guan Xing. His father’s spirit was supposed to be appeased. But as he looked around at the room, it looked just the same as it had when it was first set up. And his heart felt just as empty as it had that first day.

No, emptier. Because there was one major difference. There were no offerings on behalf of Yinping
now. He had lost his father, his brother, and his sister completely, and as for Guan Suo—

As if his thoughts had somehow summoned him, he heard Guan Suo’s voice at the door. “Er Ge, this needs to stop.”

“What does?” He didn’t turn.

“You barely leave this place,” his younger brother said. “You’re losing weight and your eyes look like a raccoon dog’s.”

“We can’t all be beautiful like you,” said Guan Xing dryly.

Guan Suo snorted. “Well, at least you’re cracking jokes again. Is that a good sign?”

“Everything is a damned joke,” said Guan Xing. “You say I barely leave this place? Of course I don’t. Nobody else but me gives enough of a fuck to come here.”

“Could that be because everyone’s afraid you’re going to flip out and disembowel some more people?”

“They deserved it.”

“You are not generally giving off the aura of a well-balanced individual right now.”

“I’m sorry if I can’t just forget him like the rest of you,” he said. He wanted to snarl it, growl it, howl it, but he was unable to make it anything but flat.

“We haven’t forgotten him. I haven’t forgotten him. Our uncles haven’t forgotten him. Yinping—”

“Yinping is dead.”

“Okay. A dead woman sat across from me at breakfast this morning. She stole my youtiao and when I protested, she said—”

Guan Suo paused, and unwillingly Guan Xing’s mind filled in the blank: ‘It didn’t look like you were going to eat that!’

“’It didn’t look like you were going to eat that,’” said Guan Suo.

There was a long pause, during which Guan Xing even more unwillingly pictured Yinping at various ages, taking their oranges, their sweets, the last dumplings, staring with those big innocent eyes that melted away even the feeling of irritation.

“Yinping did nothing wrong,” said Guan Suo. “If you want to blame somebody—”

“It is far better to die with honour than to live in dishonour,” said Guan Xing. “Our father taught his children that.”

“Yinping is blameless,” Guan Suo insisted. “She faced a horrible fate with her head held high—a fate much worse than a quick beheading, let me point out. But she was spared that fate thanks to a good man.”

“You call him a good man?!”

“Our father would have too. You should remember, better even than me, how Father treated enemies on the battlefield, and how he acted when in the service of Cao Cao. His loyalty to our uncles did not
stop him from respecting Zhang Liao and Xu Huang. I think he would have felt the same about Lu Xun. He is a benevolent man, smart, a strong warrior, diligent and dutiful. Everything our father valued, in fact."

“So he’s won you over as well?” sneered Guan Xing.

“Unlike you, I gave them the chance to explain,” Guan Suo said quietly. “Who knows if they did everything with perfect virtue, as if that is even possible. They both did a hell of a lot better than me, I can tell you that. I tell you he’s a good man. He makes our sister happy, and he’s the father of her child. Our father’s grandchild. Our niece or nephew.”

There was another long pause.

“She’s still our beautiful little sister;” Guan Suo continued in the same soft voice. “Still accidentally breaking furniture and then apologizing to it… still doing that little head tilt when she giggles… still clenching her fist and nodding to show that she’s determined, thinking it makes her look fierce, when actually… actually…”

“…actually it just makes her look adorable,” finished Guan Xing. “I know. I know she looks the same.”

“She is the same, Er Ge. She’s the same! She could be dead, or a broken violated husk—my god, is that what you would have preferred her fate to be?! She’s the same, she’s alive, she’s happy, she’s going to be a mother, and she has a husband that adores her and who also happens to be a powerful and honoured man, who rescued her at great risk to himself. You’re down on your knees before our father’s image every day—you should be begging him to continue to watch over her. You can’t possibly believe that our father would ever want anything bad to happen to Yinping! Even if she did wrong—which I don’t believe—can you imagine him refusing to forgive her? Can you imagine anything killing his love for her?”

Guan Xing took a breath, exhaled, then slowly turned to face his younger brother, without rising from his knees. “No.”

“Then what gives you the right to do otherwise? How could you hurt her like you did?”

“She… she…” For the second time, Guan Xing was at a loss to explain his tirade. All the justice of it, the righteous anger, the shame, the loss of face—he couldn’t put any of it into words. He tried to grab hold of these emotions but they fled from him, leaving only the dim memory of Yinping’s stunned face, her frightened eyes, her trembling hands—the way she flinched back from him when he and she both thought he was about to slap her.

His baby sister.

“You want to know what’s amazing about Yinping?” said Guan Suo. “I bet you don’t even need to apologize to reconcile with her. She’ll probably just be so happy that she’ll sweep it all away and pretend it never happened, just to be loved by you again. Because to her, you never stopped being her precious brother. That’s amazing, isn’t it? A heart like that. Personally, it makes me want to guard it and shield it from those who would smash it. But maybe you and I are different.”

He turned to go, but paused. “Although I have to say that even if you apologized on your knees, it’ll probably take a while for her husband to get past it. He wants to guard and shield it too, but he’s not as easygoing as I am.”

“No one’s as easygoing as you are,” said Guan Xing.
Guan Suo snorted again but left without saying anything.

The following day, Yinping was returning to the Chengdu stables after another exhilarating ride with Madam Zhao. Yinping had always considered herself a pretty good rider—she had once managed to stay on Red Hare for almost ten minutes, better than any of her brothers, which had been a claim for bragging that lasted for years. (Their huffs that it was simply because she was so light that Red Hare didn’t at first realize she was up there she dismissed as sour grapes.)

She had realized within minutes on their very first ride that Madam Zhao—or Lulu, as she asked Yinping to call her—was in another class altogether. The younger girl and her gelding were practically a single entity. She waved off compliments from Yinping, saying that everyone in Xiliang knew how to ride horses. “My brother likes to say that a man of Xiliang on the ground is a match for any man, but on a horse he has the worth of ten!”

Yinping had nodded awkwardly, wondering if she was supposed to know who her brother was already.

She liked Lulu. The girl was earnest and enthusiastic, and treated Yinping like a big sister, which was a novel experience. She had never been in a real battle and was pinning all her hopes on being able to accompany her husband in the next campaign. Her more immediate hope was to be able to spar with the empress. Madam Zhao always spoke of her idol in hushed tones with stars in her eyes. Apparently when actually in the empress’s presence, Lulu could never sum up the courage to impose herself.

On this particular late morning, Lulu practically floated off the horse when they reached the stables, because it had suddenly occurred to Yinping that since Lady Sun was her aunt, she had a familial relationship to draw on to approach her (rather than waiting to be approached), and of course she offered to invite both Lady Sun and Madam Zhao for tea or something similar and, as hostess, swing the topic onto sparring.

“I could come tomorrow—but not the day after tomorrow—but I could come the day after that!” Lulu said in a rush as a servant bowed and approached them.

“Lady Guan, I have a note for you,” he said, holding it out with both hands, back inclined low.

“I’m having lunch with Lady Huang. Just let me know when to come for tea!” said Madam Zhao. “Goodbye!”

“Goodbye!” said Yinping distractedly. Was this Er Ge’s handwriting? The note was indeed signed with her brother’s name and asked if she could meet him now, and if so he would be at the altar.

“Yes, I can,” she said, and the servant bowed and would have left, but she quickly added, “Wait a moment.”

The servant obediently stopped. Yinping frowned and stared at a grey mare as if the whorls of her coat might hold divinatory answers.

It was horrible to have this doubt even occur to her, but would she be safe alone with her brother?

Before his tirade, he had at least had the impulse to strike her. She would never forget that sudden intense shock as she realized that her body was reflexively pulling back from a blow. The blow
hadn’t actually come, but she had looked into his eyes and she knew that her reflexes were not being oversensitive.

The terrible thought that he had slaughtered Mi Fang and Fu Shiren on that altar to appease their father’s ghost… that the last words she had heard him speak were that, to him, she was already dead…

Her mind swam with a terrifying vision of her brother holding her down on the altar and gutting her alive, and she gripped her elbows with her arms pressed to the small bump on her abdomen.

She forced the disturbing image away. Her brother wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t do that.

But she could not possibly talk with him there without thinking about it.

“Tell him I’ll wait for him in the gardens,” she said. “By… I don’t know the name… there’s a little lake with a zig-zag bridge that leads to a brown pagoda, and there are scholar trees and lotuses…”

“I know the place you mean, my lady.”

“Actually, don’t tell him quite yet,” she said. “I’ll need to change first. Please tell him in one hour?”

“As you wish, my lady.”

———

Guan Xing stopped on the path. He had expected Yinping to be inside the pagoda, but she was sitting on a bench in the shade of a scholar tree. There was a basket in her lap of apricots, and she was eating the fruit and throwing the pits into the pond.

This childish action, combined with what she was wearing, did funny things to his chest. Objectively there was nothing particularly childish about her summer hanfu, red with silver birds darting among green leaves, but… how old had she been, the last time he had seen her wearing something like that? Their lifestyle of camps and battles and constant travel had left very little time for quiet moments in pretty dresses. Training clothing or battle clothing—that was what Yinping wore…

Xinye… it must have been when they were living in Xinye… so Yinping… Yinping couldn’t have been more than twelve…

He hadn’t gone to the dragon boat regatta. He wondered if Yinping had worn this to go… if she had once again attempted the yearly ritual of trying to make an egg stand up at noon, inevitably quitting in frustration after she somehow smashed every single egg.

“Why can I never get any luck?” she would cry.

“You can have some of my luck, Yinping,” Da Ge would tease, balancing another egg.

“My children should make their own luck,” Father would say, half-teasing and half-serious.

And Guan Xing… he would be rolling his eyes, but in hindsight… what happy moments they were. Yinping always managed to make them all smile like that.

He walked up slowly, but tried to be a bit noisier than usual, so that she would hear him coming. She looked at him and smiled, but it wasn’t a real smile.

“Did you manage to balance an egg this year?” he said.
“An egg?” she said, blinking. “Oh, you mean at the festival… actually I was napping by noon…” She laughed awkwardly. “It was really hot that day. I never get the egg to balance anyway, so, probably no harm done. Do you want to sit down?”

He had stopped a short distance away, but he approached and took the seat.

“Would you like an apricot?”

“No thank you.”

A brief silence.

“Xiao Suo came to speak to me yesterday,” he said. “About you. And the situation.”

She was staring down at the three little apricots left in the basket.

“It seemed like…” he began, staring at the lotuses, “when I came to see you before… I had an idea of what had happened, and everyone, even those who had instilled in me the very conscience that was telling me how I had to act, was telling me that I just had to get over what happened for the sake of peace. Those who had the power to avenge Father, avenge Da Ge, rescue you… they told me to do nothing… I wasn’t even allowed to feel… Zhang Bao was sent away… Xiao Suo was there but he wasn’t really there… when I saw him carrying you from that carriage and you looked like you were dying, I knew I was going to kill him.”

She looked up, startled and afraid. “You still…?”

He looked away from her face, back out towards the pond. “I couldn’t handle it when you were saying that you… chose him. It wasn’t something that I would ever have expected. It seemed… like depravity beyond measure… and for it to be from my sister… my sister…” He took a deep breath and exhaled. “I felt like I broke apart… everything in the world had collapsed, there was no honour, no duty, no loyalty… to have the final knife wound delivered by the one person left I thought understood how evil things had gotten, the person whom I thought to have been suffering even worse than me, whom I longed to save… to have that person take that evil to a depth I never could have imagined…”

“Am I really so terrible to you?” she said in a low voice.

“Apparently I wronged you…” His hands gripped the edge of the bench. “I feel like I don’t know up from down anymore, let alone right from wrong, but Xiao Suo said one thing that I couldn’t deny, and that was asking me if I could imagine Father ever ceasing to love you. I couldn’t.”

Tears were falling on the basket. “Er Ge, I miss him so much.”

“I miss him too,” he choked out. “I feel so alone, Yinping. I don’t know what to do. It’s all wrong… he wasn’t supposed to die like this… be forgotten like this!”

“He won’t be forgotten, ever!”

Guan Xing looked back at her, and his own tears began to fall as he saw that she had her fist up in her familiar gesture of determination.

“His mighty deeds will live on and be retold in every generation!” she declared with certainty. Her tear-stained face only looked the more beautiful for that. “A thousand years and ten thousand years from now! His oath in the peach garden, his unmatched skill in battle, his cool perseverance during his surgery, his…” she paused, then pressed on, “his magnificent beard!”
Guan Xing laughed despite himself. “His beard, really? You think that’s going to be what future
generations remember about him?”

Yinping blushed, but feebly protested, “Hey, even Master Zhuge Liang called him ‘the Incomparable
Beard’, right?”

“I guess that makes you ‘the Incomparable Hair’ then, Yinping,” he teased, and she blushed even
more, playing with the ends of her hip length hair.

“Er Ge…” She looked up at him. “Can’t it be like this from now on? I don’t want to lose anyone
else… I may be sort of grown up, but I still need my big brothers to love me and watch out for me.”

His smile twisted. “You have a husband to do that now, right?”

“It isn’t the same.” Hesitantly, she reached out and rested her hand on his forearm. “I’m very…
greedy and selfish, right? I always want it all, the second helping, the last piece. I have his love, but I
still want my brothers’ too.”

He placed his other hand on top of hers. Her hands had always been so deceptive, appearing so
weak, yet able to do such crazy things. But there was no deception in her nervous touch now.

“That’s not greedy. We could none of us ever love you enough.”

“Then please love me all together.”

His heart was still full of tumult, but he squeezed her hand. He couldn’t figure anything out, couldn’t
even really apologize, but Xiao Suo had been right that Yinping wouldn’t ask him to. Xiao Suo had
also spoken rightly of his father, and it was true of him as well. Nothing could kill his love for
Yinping. If he held on to that, eventually maybe he could claw his way back to something that made
sense.

———

Zhang Bao stretched and resettled into the perfect position in the wide branch of the tree in the palace
garden. Life was pretty dull lately. His two professional admirers had apparently been called off, as
he hadn’t even seen them for a while. Not that it was that big of a loss—the fact that it took him a
couple of days to realize they weren’t around proved that—but it was at least something to do during
the long hot days. The tournament was next week, but he couldn’t bring himself to do more than
train in the early morning.

It wasn’t even going to be that much fun. “Do well, but not too well,” Xingcai had told him sternly.
She knew more than him about all this diplomacy stuff, so he guessed she was right and that was
what he was going to have to do, but what did that even mean? Throw the last few matches? He
absolutely didn’t want to do that. Especially not if he was facing that lewd pirate.

“Ah, I’ve finally caught you!” came the queen’s voice. Zhang Bao was startled, but he looked down
and realized he wasn’t speaking to him, but rather to that young hothead—Zhu Ran, was it? The
queen must have come out of that pavilion over there and startled Zhu Ran on the path.

“Ah, your majesty!” The young officer looked around wildly, as if for escape. “Always… always
great to see you! I’m—oh right.” The kowtow was performed as fast as possible. “Sorry about that.
Just—in a rush, right? Gotta get to practice—wanna do well in the tournament!”

“But Master Zhu Ran, it’s far too hot to practice right now,” Lianshi pointed out. “You’ll regret it if
you make yourself heat sick. You should sit here with me! I have something to discuss with you.”
She indicated a bench, and the two of them sat down on it. “Now, Master Zhu Ran,” said Lianshi smoothly, “I wish you had come to me first about your wish to get married.”

Zhu Ran’s mouth hung open, and the queen placed a motherly hand on his shoulder.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” she soothed. “It’s only natural for a man of your age to start thinking of it, and since you’re the leader of your clan at such a young age, you may not know exactly how to go about it properly. Your pursuit of Lady Zhang is so charming!” She laughed indulgently, and Zhang Bao gritted his teeth. Great, another puppy to scare off.

“Lady Zh-zhang—marry—b-but—” stammered the Wu officer.

Lianshi put on an expression of wide-eyed confusion. “But of course! You wouldn’t play games and pursue such a woman without marriage in mind, right?” On that final word, her wide eyes had suddenly narrowed to an expression that was downright frightening.

“Right, absolutely!” The kid was terrified. Zhang Bao no longer felt an urge to grit his teeth, but rather to laugh. Apparently Lianshi was going to scare the kid off in her own fashion, and he had to admit it was probably going to be more effective than anything a big brother could do.

Lianshi’s face was soothing and maternal again. She patted the younger man’s shoulder. “I can understand the attraction to such a fine woman, but it is my understanding that her father and uncle intend her for the crown prince.” Zhang Bao raised his eyebrows at that. Xingcai, marrying Liu Shan? That wouldn’t be much of a marriage… although he had to admit his sister would be a very effective empress. “But never fear! I have another girl in mind for you.”

The Wu officer couldn’t even reply, and Zhang Bao had to bite his cheek to keep back the laugh.

“Do you know Lu Ji’s daughter, Lu Yusheng?”

Lu Yusheng? A true lady like her, paired with this twitchy pyromaniac? No way!

“I… well, I’ve met her… she’s, uh… she’s very pretty…” Oh dammit, was he actually sounding interested?

“Oh, master Zhu Ran, she’s much more than simply pretty!” said Lianshi, with a light reprimand in her tone. “Now she doesn’t want it widely known, but I can trust you to keep a secret, can’t I?”

“Oh, absolutely!”

“She does much more than simply care for her father and record his dictation. She is actually his co-author, however she keeps her contributions secret so that the work will be taken seriously. Her philosophical and divinatory skills go far beyond her years. She is a prodigy.”

“Wow,” said Zhu Ran. “So she’s smart.”

Zhang Bao scowled. So she’s smart, what a moron. She went a long way beyond smart; that had been obvious from the first conversation he had had with her. Lady Lu had wisdom and insight that were practically palpable—

“Indeed,” said Lianshi, as if Zhu Ran’s response had been in any way adequate. “Moreover, her filial devotion to her father is most definitely not a secret. Everyone admires her for that. She would certainly be as devoted and passionate in her attachment to her husband and her family with him.”

“Yeah…” Zhu Ran was liking the sound of this more and more, and Zhang Bao less and less.
“She is already eighteen, however her father has somewhat selfishly neglected to even consider assisting her to find a match because of her value to him and his work. Now he has realized suddenly that he has very little time left in this world, and the urgency of finding her a husband before he passes led him to seek my assistance. I must ask you to cooperate quickly if you are interested, Master Zhu Ran. It would be a terrible tragedy if she were forced to go three years without marrying due to mourning her father, don’t you think? So you must think about this seriously and give me your answer as soon as you can. Of course, Lady Lu will have final veto. I would never countenance anything else.”

“Yeah… I mean, wow, there’s a lot to consider, right… I mean like… the birth dates, and the balance of our names and stuff… she and her old man are probably super into that, right?”

“Indeed. So you are interested, Master Zhu Ran? That is really wonderful.” Another shoulder pat. “Of course, if Lady Lu doesn’t work out, I am sure I can connect you with the right lady! But as I said we must quickly see if Lady Lu and you are joined by the red string or not. I need to approach other leads for her as well—”

“Oh, don’t do that, my lady!” Zhu Ran was standing up now. “I’ll get all the information about my birthdate and my name and everything you need as soon as I can! I bet I can have it for you by tomorrow! Promise you’ll not try to get someone else until you check me out!”

Lianshi smiled up at him. “Well, I can’t promise that I would rebuff anyone who wished to pursue her, but I will say that you are the first that I have approached. Isn’t it fortunate that Lady Zhang mentioned to me that you were ready for love!”

“Yeah, she’s great! Wow. Empress Xingcai, that’ll be pretty rad.” Zhu Ran tilted his head, obviously picturing it. “Ha! It’s going to be ten times as fun watching Ling Tong and Gan Ning making idiots of themselves now that I know it’s over the future empress! Talk about out of their league and they don’t even know! Meanwhile I’ll walk off with the best catch… ha, just wait until they figure it out! It’s gonna burn them up!” He made some kind of weird gesture and clicking noise at the queen, and she laughed. “Thanks a million, your majesty! You just wait, I’m definitely going to be the one!”

*We’ll just see about that!* thought the Shu officer in the tree viciously.

———

Zhu Ran dashed off, and the queen shook her head indulgently and laughed again. “Almost too easy,” she said quietly. It felt great to be so efficient. Zhu Ran wouldn’t bother Lady Zhang anymore, and she could practically feel the jealousy coming off of Zhang Bao’s tree in waves. It was so hard to resist taking another look at him.

Now the only question was, would Zhang Bao come to the queen, or approach Lady Lu directly? She hoped it would be the latter. Lianshi was a romantic, after all.

She got up and hummed a folk song about the romance between the cowherd and the weaver girl as she walked back to the palace, hoping that by the time the Qixi Festival came around in a month and a half, Lady Lu would have an avowed lover in mind when she burned her offerings.

Chapter End Notes

Liu Bei ordering trees cut down so he can watch Xu Shu for a little bit longer ;_; is a
story from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Guan Yu's surgery actually appears in the mostly historical *San Guo Zhi*, in which he is stated to have drunk wine and chatted with friends like it ain't no thang while having his arm cut to the bone to remove poison. ROTK further expanded the story by having him play go (the board game) with the other arm!

Zhuge Liang calls Guan Yu "The Incomparable Beard" (髯之絕倫) in a letter recorded in the SGZ. Everybody loves the beard, Guan Xing.

In traditional Chinese culture the beginning of every matchmaking is checking the horoscopes and other similar things for compatibility.
不打不相识 (No friendship without fighting.)

Chapter Notes

Contains an explicit sexual scene, I don't think any further warnings apply.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

不打不相识：bu da bu xiang shi
not / hit / not / each other / recognize
“No friendship without fighting.” (See also Gan Ning and Ling Tong.)

“Hands off my man, bitch! He’s too nice to tell you he’s not interested, so I will: he is not interested.” The squeaky voice of Bao Sanniang could be heard clearly even over the sound of the gears of the juggernaut in Yueying’s workshop.

Madam Zhao and Yinping exchanged confused looks, and then went to the window to see what was going on. Yueying remained frowning at the gears, as if she hadn’t heard.

On the garden path, Yinping’s sister-in-law was staring aggressively at a girl of about the same age, and upon seeing her, Lulu gasped. “What is Lady Wang doing, wearing that?”

The rival was wearing a pair of booty shorts and a bikini top, and she had her hair done up in a bun with flowers in it. Apparently Sanniang was thinking the same thing, because she said, “And by the way, bitch, I wore it better.” As the girl stalked off, still without saying a word, Sanniang called after her, “And tell your sister the same thing! Neither of you can fight your way out of a paper bag, so don’t think I won’t wipe the floor with both of you at the same time!” She huffed, but looked pleased with herself at the same time, turned, and saw that she was being watched. “Oh, hello! Ready to spar?”

“Spar?” asked Yinping, but Lulu was saying, “Hang on, I’ll ask Lady Huang.”

Yueying made a sound of annoyance, so apparently she wasn’t as unaware as she had appeared. “Yes, I’m not making any progress here anyway.” She turned the juggernaut off and walked to get a wooden dagger axe from the wall.

“Spar?” repeated Yinping. “Who’s sparring?”

“Well, all of us, I hope,” said Lulu. “I’ve heard you’re a fantastic fighter, Yinping!”

“Wang Yue wanted to horn herself in,” said Sanniang, tossing her head. “As if! Ugh, if I could only get my husband to tell her and her stupid sister off!”

Yinping could have told her not to get any hopes up about Guan Suo ever giving anyone even a hint of rejection, but she was focused on something else. “I don’t…. I mean, I was never fantastic…”

“The wooden maces shouldn’t be heavy enough to strain anything, if that’s what you’re worried about,” said Lady Huang, and Yinping turned to see that she was holding out a dual headed mace.

She took the weapon hesitantly. She hadn’t touched a weapon since hers slipped from her hands at Fan Castle. It shouldn’t feel this right to hold one again… her shoulder was permanently messed up,
and she was pregnant. Fighting days, over; no more obsessing about muscle.

Yinping looked up. None of the other women seemed to have even noticed her discomfort, so she tried to swallow it down before any of them could. A friendly sparring match was harmless, right?

“Are you okay with this?” whispered Lulu as they left the workshop. “Sorry, I should have thought about that in advance, that you might not want to spar when you’re pregnant! You don’t need to worry that the rest of us will do anything dangerous, but of course if you’d rather not I understand. I feel a bit stupid; I asked Lady Bao to come because I thought we would need a fourth.”

Yinping smiled. “No, I’m sure there’s nothing dangerous about it.”

“I think Lady Guan should only fight with Lulu or me,” said Lady Huang abruptly. “That yo-yo thing is too unpredictable. And only disarming matches or practicing forms—avoid the torso entirely.”

“Man, what a pain being pregnant sounds,” said Sanniang with a shrug. “I heard you barf a lot too?”

“Not too much now that I have medicine for it,” said Yinping quickly.

“Lady Huang, do you think,” said Lulu, blushing and hesitant, which wasn’t exactly like her, “do you think that… that someone who… who might be pregnant should avoid the torso too?”

“Ohhhhh my gooooood!” squealed Sanniang, apparently disregarding the idea that being pregnant was a pain. “Does Zhao Yun knooooow?”

“Well… I didn’t want to say anything because it isn’t certain,” said Lulu, looking somewhat miserable at the kittenish woman hugging her energetically.

“Since Lady Guan needs to spar in that fashion anyway, perhaps you should be partners with her, and I’ll fight Lady Bao,” said Yueying reasonably. “Then it won’t matter either way.”

“Ugh, Lady Huang, you gotta call me Sanniang!” She stopped bouncing up and down to give the older woman a look. “I’m sooooo not old enough for all this Lady Bao business!”

“Well, if you are, then congratulations,” said Yinping with a smile. “Do you mind if we start by just practicing stances? I haven’t fought for such a long time, and you practice every day, right?”

“Well, I guess you could say it’s my passion,” said Lulu, fetching her short spear. “I’ve never gotten to fight in a real battle though. My brother wouldn’t let me… although I guess I was pretty young… and well, I was hoping that if my husband got sent out to a battle I could ask to go with him this time…” Her face suddenly fell. “But if I am pregnant, then I guess I never will…”

Sanniang was doing a split to warm up. “They’re definitely going to get posted soon! You should keep it a secret if you are—none of us will tell, will we ladies? There’s just nothing like fighting by your man’s side! Super thrilling! Am I right, Lady Huang? Plus you don’t have to worry about any other girl trying to make a move on him when you’re not around.”

“I admit that I prefer to be with my husband,” said Yueying, “but I would never deceive him to do so.”

“Well, if her husband loves her, then he’ll want her to have the chance to chase her dream!” said Sanniang as she somehow bounced from the split into a handstand. “Anyway, let’s get fighting! I gotta make sure I’m in practice in case those Wang sisters try anything funny.”

Without warning Yueying launched an attack with her dagger-axe, but Bao Sanniang merely
laughed and did another flip out of the way. “Surprise attack! Not bad! But how about this?” She swung her yoyo at the inventor’s feet, but Yueying was almost as nimble in jumping to avoid it.

The ferocity of their attacks made Guan Yinping feel a bit awkward as she and Lulu went through a number of forms together, calling out their attacks so that the other would know how to counter. The short spear was an interesting weapon, at least as used by Madam Zhao; she used a graceful, flowing style, full of feints and misdirection, and the scarves tied to the shaft at the top and bottom fooled the eye further.

“Ready to try something a little more freeform?” said Lulu. “How about… first to touch the arms or legs wins? And obviously we pull our blows.”

“Alright,” said Yinping, fervently hoping that she wouldn’t have another one of her oops, I don’t know my own strength! moments.

As they fought, she had a feeling the other girl was using her rusty, hesitant opponent as an excuse to go for showy, impractical moves that one would avoid in real combat. It felt almost as if she was watching an acrobat at a banquet.

“Shua huaqiang, yi ge houkongfan, yaoshen genzhe zhuan, mabu zha de wendang! Shua huaqiang, bi shei dou piaoliang, jiezhi chang yi duan ‘Yu Ji he Bawang’,” someone sang in a loud voice, apparently also feeling that the young woman was similar to an actress. (“Wielding a short spear, doing a backflip, her body twists to follow, landing in a perfect horse stance! Wielding a short spear, more beautiful than anyone, and then she sings the song of the Conqueror and Consort Yu.”)

“Cousin!” cried Lulu, dropping her spear and running to tackle a grinning young man.

“Hey, if you knock me over I might lose my hat,” he said, grabbing it with both hands as she threw her arms around his waist. “This one is my favourite.”

“You say that about every hat,” she said. “Is my brother with you?”

“No, he couldn’t get away unfortunately, but I have a letter and presents for you from him,” he said. “Uh… maybe you should introduce me to your friends, Lulu? Not Lady Huang, of course, we’ve met a lot. Nice to see you, of course, Lady Huang!”

“Master Ma Dai,” said Yueying with a bow. “I’m glad to see that you are well.”

“Ah…” Lulu looked from the other ladies to Ma Dai in a panic, and Yinping guessed that she was trying to figure out who was superior to who, so as not to flub the order of introductions, but Sanniang of course didn’t have the patience for that.

“Hi!” she said cheerfully. “I’m Bao Sanniang, and I’m the wife of Guan Suo, the Flower of the Battlefield!”

“The Flower of the Battlefield, really,” said Ma Dai, his grin twitching a little, and Yinping saw Lulu poke at his chest, probably in a reminder to behave.

Probably the best way to save everyone’s face was to self-introduce as well. “I’m Guan Yinping,” she said with a little bow. “I am…” She had been about to declare herself the daughter of the God of War, as was her invariable battlefield custom, but she realized suddenly that in the eyes of the world her relationship with another man now took precedence. “…the wife of Lord Lu Xun, the Wu prime minister.”

“Does he have a cool nickname too?” grinned Ma Dai. “Oh, and the name’s Ma Dai, obviously. It’s
“You know, he’s right! We really should get him a nickname! I mean, Lady Huang’s is the Crouching Dragon, and Lulu’s is the Little Dragon… too many dragons, now that I think about it… anyway, a cool nickname is like, insta-respect!” Sanniang tapped her finger against her lips as she concentrated. “Does he have any special interests?”

Lu Xun’s passion for her xieyi flitted absurdly into her head but she pushed that away in a hurry. No way was she going to reveal that to anyone! “Uh… well… he kind of reminds me of a bird, sometimes…”

“That’s not very intimidating,” said Sanniang.

“Your husband’s nickname is Flower and you want to talk about being intimidating?” pointed out Lulu.

“Guan Suo doesn’t need to be intimidating,” said Sanniang, crossing her arms and tossing her head. “While his enemies are busy underestimating him, he’s breaking their stupid necks!”

“Well, I hope a nickname isn’t absolutely required,” said Ma Dai. “I don’t have one either. All my life it’s been Ma Chao, the Splendid, and Ma Dai, the Guy Who Hangs Out With Him.” He shook his head and made an exaggerated mournful expression. “Really hurts my chances with the ladies.”

“Oh, I can’t believe that a cute guy like you has any trouble there,” said Sanniang. “Hey, how do you feel about really annoying girls who are somewhat hot but definitely not as hot as me? If you could attract the Wang sisters, I’d really be grateful!”

“You don’t exactly make them sound that enticing.”

“Well, if they would quit chasing my husband, I wouldn’t have a problem with them,” huffed Sanniang. “They’ve gotten it into their heads that our marriage isn’t legal. Like I care either way! Point is that Guan Suo is all mine!”

“Will you be staying long?” said Lulu eagerly.

“Probably not,” said Ma Dai regretfully. “The Prime Minister summoned me to give me instructions for the upcoming campaigns personally. Seems like things are going to start moving soon.”

As the long-awaited morning of the tournament dawned, Xingcai was already awake, having requested a wake-up knock from the night guard.

She stared out the window at the gradually lightening sky as she cracked a few walnuts for her breakfast, then slowly peeled and ate a banana. It was going to be a single elimination knockout tournament; disarm or submission, with the judges able to call a winner after ten minutes, to prevent even matches from going too far. She didn’t know whom she would be facing and when or where it would be announced, so she was considering which opponents she would need to throw the match against.

An archery tournament would be going on at the same time, and she assumed the queen and Zhu Ran, at least, would be participating in that.

She hoped she wouldn’t draw Gan Ning. The pirate had only sparred with her once, and she understood immediately why only Ling Tong and Zhou Tai would fight with him. She had said, “I
yield,” testily after the first blow connected on her thigh; it had blossomed into a painful bruise that had her hobbling around a few days. Gan Ning had surprised her by acting sheepish—“Sorry Lady Zhang, to me that was pulling the punch!” He made this apology with a suspicious series of three-section-staff shaped marks on his own body, but she had the feeling that no beating (especially not from Ling Tong) could have forced him into an apology he didn’t want to make, so she had accepted it.

Ling Tong she wouldn’t mind facing; with him it was the opposite problem, he always threw their matches. His fighting style reminded her of Guan Suo. She often relied on her speed in combat, so to face an opponent who was just as fast was a welcome challenge—if he would actually bother to fight! In the tournament he would have to try, right?

Of course against her brother and father she would hold nothing back and they wouldn’t expect her to. Zhou Tai was the same, although she hoped she wouldn’t draw him anyway, lest their obvious familiarity with each others’ fighting style lead the shrewd to question how.

Against anyone else, especially anyone she didn’t recognize, it would probably be safer to avoid winning. The ignominy of being beaten by a woman could have dire repercussions diplomatically. She sighed and ate the last walnut.

Woman, woman, woman, woman… can I ever forget for even one moment that I am a woman…

———

Ling Tong faced the woman he loved.

His friends liked to mock him because he went easy on her in practice. They didn’t realize—and he wasn’t about to tell them—that he wasn’t consciously trying to let her win. It was half that he didn’t want to hurt her, and half that he just couldn’t stop fucking thinking when he was around her. He didn’t think during battle—not that kind of thought.

She despised him for going easy on her. She had said as much and thrown a cup of water in his face, last time.

Usually their fights ended with her pulling his weapon out of his hands, and this time was no different.

“Do you yield?” she said flatly.

“Yes,” he said, bringing his hands up to bow.

She had his wrists in her hands and she was pushing him and he was falling down and he was pinned, pinned on a bed.

Because he was dreaming, this didn’t seem strange.

“Do you yield?”

“Yes.”

Her nails were digging into his wrists, but there was no pain, only pressure. Then she released him suddenly. She had a knee on either side of his thighs and she was popping the lower frogs of his jacket, just enough to shove the jacket up; loosening the ties on his pants beneath, just enough to pull them down—
“Lady Zhang, what are you—”

“Do you yield?”

He could only gasp in response as she roughly yanked off the loincloth. His penis was only half-hard, but as she wrapped her fingers around it that didn’t last long.

“Do you yield?”

“Yes,” he breathed.

She gave one experimental stroke up, her eyes narrow with intent, staring only at his vulnerable hardness. Her thumb briefly massaged its head before stroking down again, retracting the foreskin. Her mouth lowered… she wasn’t going to…

Ling Tong’s hands raked the sheets as he moaned. Xingcai had actually taken him into her mouth, between those perfect, gorgeous lips. She was running her tongue along the slit, no, she was actually pressing it into his opening, swirling around it, licking off the essence oozing from it. Oh fuck.

That glorious moist heat abandoned him. He could have wept as he reopened his eyes.

“Do you yield?” She was still dressed as she straddled him, so he could see nothing but the front of her skirt, but he could feel she was naked beneath, her pussy wet as it brushed against him.

“Yes, yes, yes,” he moaned. “Oh yes!” The last was screamed as she sheathed him inside her with one stroke.

She had taken him in to the hilt but she didn’t move. He was utterly surrounded by her, squeezed by her, why wouldn’t she move, he was going to lose his fucking mind!

“Do you yield?” Her eyes, her expression… she didn’t look loving or lustful, she looked so calm, so cold, so unlike the slick heat that was driving him wild. How could she look like that and feel like that at the same time?

“I yield, Xingcai, please, what do you want, please,” he begged. “Please ride me, I want it so bad, please!”

She still didn’t move.

He groaned, the sheets twisting in his hands. “What are you doing to me? What do you want from me?”

“Do you yield?” So distant, so fucking cold!

All at once he released his hold on the sheets and grabbed her hips. He saw her eyes widen before his own closed in the ecstasy of forcing her up and down, of milking his cock with her tightness. She was so light, he could move her sweet little cunt at whatever pace he wanted.

“Xingcai,” he moaned, his eyes reopening, drinking in the sight of him fucking her. Her head was thrown back and from this angle he could see nothing of her eyes and expression. “Xingcai, is this what you want? Is this it?”

She didn’t respond. Her hands were resting on top of his as he continued to bounce her on his cock, but that was all they were doing—not grasping him, not caressing him, not attempting to pull him off…
Xingcai, look at me. Please look at me! Can’t you even look at me when I’m fucking you!"

He jerked awake. Someone was pounding at the door.

Ling Tong stretched in his bed with a groan, hating every slightest touch of the sheets against his erection. “Yeah, I’m awake, what is it?”

“Master Ling Tong, you asked to be awoken for the tournament.”

He pressed his elbow against the bridge of his nose to block out the dim light of dawn. “Alright. Thanks.”

———

The tournament grounds were a pretty chaotic place. The sparring tournament was a ladder of thirty-two, with eight matches going on at a time for the first two rounds, then four matches at a time for the group of eight, and from there every match would be run individually. Moreover, there would be first a crossbow, and then a bow and arrow tournament at the same time. A long break was planned for lunch and the hottest part of the day, and a grand outdoor party to run late into the night after the winners had been proclaimed for melee, crossbow, and bow.

People were milling about, going from one match to another, chatting, cheering, booing. It was almost as loud as a real battle, which made Gan Ning grin a bit.

He’d drawn Ding Feng as his first match, and he was glad for it. The gentle giant always politely declined to spar with him, which was a shame, because with his enormous size and enormous weapon, he seemed like a great challenge.

At first the match seemed to be going great—Gan Ning could hardly wait until he had beaten his opponent down enough to be pinned—but suddenly his flail ended up wrapping around the blade and he had no choice of attack other than to yank back and pull it out of Ding Feng’s hands, ending the match. Damn.

“Good match,” said Ding Feng, a bit slurred with his swollen lip.

“Good match,” said Gan Ning, trying not to sound disappointed.

He waved off the attractive woman trying to offer him refreshment and wandered over to see who was fighting nearby. It turned out to be Zhou Tai and Ling Tong, and the pirate grinned, knowing that this would likely be a better match, since the two sparred often and knew each others’ moves pretty well.

As he carelessly shoved his way into a good viewing position, Zhou Tai seemed to have the upper hand for the time being, pressing the attack again and again, while Ling Tong was fighting almost as if he was bored, ignoring openings and choosing only to block. His face was lazy and unconcerned.

Gan Ning grinned even wider.

After a few minutes, Zhou Tai’s eyes narrowed. Gan Ning knew that time was running out and if the match went to time, Zhou Tai would absolutely win on points, because he had connected a few times and Ling Tong hadn’t connected once. So Zhou Tai was confused and trying to figure out what Ling Tong’s game was.

That game turned out to be neat and somewhat underwhelming. A strike, much like dozens of strikes before, was blocked by the three-section staff held in one hand, but this time a foot suddenly kicked
up and connected powerfully with the wrist holding the sword. Zhou Tai grunted as the weapon spun out of his grip.

“Unlike you,” said Zhou Tai with a smile. “Good match.”

“Yeah, I knew who I was facing,” said Ling Tong casually. “Good match.”

“It was a stupid match,” called Gan Ning, causing both opponents to look at him. Ling Tong rolled his eyes. “I thought you were gearing up to do something awesome.”

“I’m saving awesome for the final,” said Ling Tong, rocking on his heels briefly as he stretched. “Any matches still going?”

“Lady Zhang is still fighting Lord Xu Sheng,” someone called out.

The three Wu officers quickly moved. Quite a large crowd had gathered to watch the Shu warrior’s match, but Gan Ning’s bells, reputation, and willingness to get handsy cleared a path right to the front in no time.

Xu Sheng had chosen a spear as his weapon, and he wasn’t bad as a commander of soldiers, but his skills in melee combat were mediocre, and his fellow Wu officers knew it. Lady Zhang had obviously figured it out too. She was frowning, and her fighting movements were off. Clearly she didn’t intend to win, but didn’t want to make throwing the match too obvious. Probably thought Xu Sheng’s ego wouldn’t be able to take it. Probably she was right.

Well, the hell with Xu Sheng’s ego. Gan Ning would rather see it take a hit than see Lady Zhang out in the first round. “Stop playing around with him Lady Zhang! You could have had him a dozen times in the last minute!”

Both fighters glanced at Gan Ning, Lady Zhang’s expression irritated, Xu Sheng’s shocked and then murderous.

“Don’t mock me, pirate,” he snarled, pressing the attack wildly.

“Mocking? Mocking would be pointing out that your only hope is that she’s blinded by the reflection off your bald spot,” taunted Gan Ning.

“Master Gan Ning, please, I’m trying to concentrate,” said Lady Zhang, but as if she was trying to keep laughter out of her voice.

“End it, Lady Zhang!” said Zhou Tai firmly.

Her eyes darted to them again, she sighed, and suddenly she leapt up and struck down, knocking his spear from his hands in such a way that he was knocked off balance and fell on his face.

There was loud laughter all around, and Lady Zhang reddened and bowed deeply before the man even moved. “Good match, my lord.”

Xu Sheng got to his feet, trembling with humiliation. “Good match,” he hissed with a brief hint of a tilt forward, then stalked off, to more laughter.

“You forgot to say, ‘my lady!’” yelled Gan Ning, causing even more catcalls and laughter. He turned to Lady Zhang, who was regarding them all with exasperation. “Sheesh, Lady Zhang, the king’s gonna have to throw you a banquet like he did Zhou Tai here to get Mr. High and Mighty to show you respect. It’s too bad you don’t—hey!”
Ling Tong had whacked him across the back of the head. “Do you think before you speak ever?”

Oh yeah. Saying that he knew she didn’t have scars under her clothes would be to admit publicly that he’d seen under her clothes, a far bigger potential scandal than her beating a Wu officer with more pride than talent. Whoops.

“Shall we go see who we’re matched with next?” said Lady Zhang.

A middle-aged man, looking harassed, was handling the task of moving wooden plaques with the names of the contestants around an enormous board, while being barked orders from an elderly man who was taking the reports of runners and officially recording results on a scroll.

“I’m going to get some refreshment,” said Lady Zhang and was gone while Gan Ning was still reading the names.

“Ling Tong, looks like you got her brother. Wonder what weapon he’ll use this time?” said the pirate, and continued scanning the names. “Oh, jackpot! I got Lady Zhang! Ha!”

“You better not fuck her up like you did last time,” growled Ling Tong. “It’s supposed to be sparring, not mutilating.”

“That was an accident!”

“I’m just saying if you do anything like it again you’re going to have an ‘accident’,” snapped his rival, unrelieved.

“I don’t think Ling Tong will be the only one displeased,” said Zhou Tai softly.

While Gan Ning had taken Ling Tong’s threats in stride, Zhou Tai’s ambiguous statement somehow seemed a lot more dangerous. He glanced up at the tall man, but his expression was incalculable.

Gan Ning laughed, not wanting to betray that he was a little unnerved. “C’mon! You can’t believe I’d actually intend to hurt her!”

The two others stared at him.

“Well, I don’t ok? Sheesh. You people have no faith in me at all, do you?”

“No,” they said together.

“Hey, I am not—hey, hey!” Gan Ning was distracted by movement on the board again. Gan Ning’s name had been advanced to the next round. “What the fuck’s going on there?”

He pushed back the other two and stomped up to the elderly man writing in his book.

“What’s going on? The second round hasn’t started yet.”

The man looked up with a supercilious frown, opened his mouth, suddenly closed it, and looked down at the belt of bells around Gan Ning’s waist. When he raised his face again, he had a much more respectful attitude. “Master Gan Ning, you have won by forfeit, sir.”

“Forfeit? What do you mean, forfeit?”

“Forfeit means that the opponent withdraws—”

“I know what forfeit means!” roared Gan Ning, causing all nearby conversation to come to an abrupt
halt. “Who started the rumour that I’m an idiot?! I’ll kill him!”

“I-I a-pologize, s-sir!” stammered the elderly man. “N-no offense m-m-meant!”

Gan Ning banged his fist on the desk. “Lady Zhang would never forfeit! Someone lied!”

“B-but—”

“Undo it!”

“B-but!”

“You!” Gan Ning pointed at the middle-aged man, who toppled off his ladder. “Get back up there and fix it!”

“Lady Zh-zhang forfeited p-p-personally!” said the elderly man desperately.

———

Xingcai was not aware that her little spot on the hill had once been used for a tryst by Lu Xun and Guan Yinping, but she probably would still have been picked it for her private picnic even if she did know. It really did have a nice view of the portion of the practice grounds that was currently set up for the crossbow tournament. The trees provided excellent shade, the grass was lush, and the trunk of the tree was just right for leaning against.

She had snagged a pair of zongzi and a bottle of cooling herbal tea after forfeiting, and had to stop herself from drinking more than half the bottle at one go, it tasted so refreshing. Then there was the impatient business of picking open the string tying the zongzi. If only she could carry a real weapon.

The knot finally succumbed to her nails and her mouth watered as she unwrapped the still gently steaming package, inhaling the scent of the sticky rice and the hint of shellfish, mushrooms and peanuts within. She took a big bite and closed her eyes, wondering if it was just hunger making this taste so incredible.

Jingle jingle jingle.

She opened her eyes and swallowed with irritation. Was there some kind of law in Jianye that stated “Zhang Xingcai is not allowed to have even fifteen minutes of peace before someone comes along to mess it up”?! At least the zongzi still tasted good. She continued to eat her snack and looked as neutrally as she could at the pirate striding up the hill. He waved, looking a bit embarrassed, which was unusual for him. She narrowed her eyes. Xingcai was not in the mood for figuring out unusual.

However, diplomacy (and Xingcai was wishing that the concept and all those responsible for its continuation in the world be condemned to the mountain of knives in one of the lower levels of hell) meant that her moods didn’t mean anything. “Hello, Master Gan Ning. Looking for a place to take a break? It is indeed very quiet and tranquil up here.” And if you won’t do quiet or tranquil, kindly leave, she thought, but didn’t say.

He stopped and squatted nearby. “Lady Zhang, is there anything I can say to change your mind about forfeiting? You know I really didn’t mean to hurt you last time, right? I’d be more careful, I promise.” His smile, by his standards, was almost shy.

It made her own smile a bit more genuine. “I know, Master Gan Ning, and as I said before, I
accepted your apology. I don’t think it’s your nature to be able to really pull your blows, though, don’t you think? Even if you could, you’d be going against your instinct and habits so much that it would put you at a severe disadvantage. I wouldn’t want to win that way. Besides, the incident with Lord Xu Sheng would likely have recurred in another round, and even if it didn’t, it would be… suboptimal… if I were to win the tournament or even pass the semi-finals. I think this is for the best, truly. No one will fault me for forfeiting against the mighty Gan Ning, will they?”

He scowled. “Suboptimal, hmph. The best person should win.”

Her smile became more genuine still. “I’m flattered that you think I would have a chance to be that.”

His usual cocky smirk returned all at once. “Nah, you’d still have no chance against me.”

She laughed. “Well, then, forfeiting just saves us both some energy.”

“I’d still like to fight you sometime, though.” He sighed. “You ever change your mind, just name the day, my lady!”

“Zongzi?” she offered, suddenly realizing he had no refreshment of his own.

He glanced down at the unopened treat. “You only got two because that’s how much you want for yourself, right? I can get my own. Sorry, I probably shouldn’t have interrupted your meal.”

She waved it off. “Would you mind cutting it open for me? I hate having to pick open the knot.”

He quickly did so while she finished off the previous zongzi and took another swig of tea. A distant roar made her peer down at the tournament. “Her majesty is really doing well, I think.”

Gan Ning handed over the wrapped but untied zongzi, and looked down at the field himself. “Yeah, she used to train with Lady Sun herself, you know. Talk about a woman who knew how to handle a bow.” He whistled appreciatively. “Hope she’s still keeping in form out in Chengdu.”

He glanced at Xingcai, who did not quite know what to say as she didn’t really know the empress at all, much less her archery habits. “Ah.”

He got that almost shy look again. “So… really no hard feelings about the whole… me making you limp thing?”

She laughed again, which seemed to relieve him. “Really no hard feelings, Master Gan Ning. I’ll prove it.”

Was it heat and exercise induced madness that made her think that she could give him a sweet little peck like she did to Ling Tong and that it would have the same platonic result? Whatever the cause, that is what she thought and what she did, but it had a very different effect on the pirate.

At first it seemed the same—in the brief period that her lips were on his, nothing happened but that his eyes went wide—but the immediate aftermath couldn’t have been more different.

She pulled back to nonchalantly lean against the tree again, as if he would stand up and walk away, instead of surging forward to press his mouth against hers. And this was not a sweet little peck. This was a very masculine, almost bruising demand, a slick tongue running around her lips seeking entrance, while one large calloused hand caressed her face and another one was entwining with her fingers on the ground.

Xingcai froze, staring at his closed eyes and smelling his somehow very attractively sweaty scent,
remembering with sudden horrible clarity that long ago lunch. *The first time I kiss you, it’s gonna be your idea. Just the first time, of course.*

*Just the first time! So he thinks me kissing him means—*

All at once his eyes opened, his hands released hers, and his face pulled away, although still closer than it was when they were just talking. “Heh. I didn’t mean to turn you into a statue,” he said, and when she didn’t move or reply after a moment, actually snapped his fingers in her face. “You in there, Lady Zhang?”

She flinched and blushed, and he laughed, which made her turn even redder.

“Still can’t talk, huh? It’s not an uncommon reaction to kissing a man of my quality,” he smirked. “I think I may need to give you some time to get used to the idea before we do this again, as enjoyable as it was. It’ll be your idea again first next time, Lady Zhang, but now you’ll know I’m not kidding when I say that I have *great* ideas to share in return.” He winked and stood up.

When he was halfway down the hill, he stopped briefly, turned and called up, “Ling Tong is gonna love this, by the way!”

“You—Master Gan Ning!” she sputtered as he laughed and strutted off, quickly disappearing into the crowds.

———

Zhang Bao awoke feeling even worse than he had on the morning after his ill-advised idea to try to prove his adult status by matching his father drink for drink. The headache was about the same, but at least that time his mouth and tongue didn’t hurt as well. His eyes opened, but the room was very dim.

He tried to say “What the hell is going on,” but didn’t get very far with it because his tongue and jaw protested the idea of speech very strongly.

“So he’s awake again,” grunted a man, not sounding thrilled.

“Shhh,” said a soothing feminine voice, and a cool hand took his own. “Try to remain calm, Master Zhang Bao. Don’t try to get up. I’m not sure how much you remember, but you were injured in the tournament.”

He blinked, trying to see the woman’s face.

“Your mouth must really be hurting now. You were spitting blood and not talking well before too. Don’t try to talk anymore, please. If you’re thirsty, squeeze my hand.”

He did, and the hand let his go. “Master Pan, will you help me give him a drink please?”

Another grunt, but Zhang Bao found himself shortly being propped up. When his female carer returned, he could see that it was Lady Lu.

“This is an herbal tonic, but I’ve put quite a bit of sweetener in it, so hopefully it won’t be too unpleasant. It might sting a bit on your mouth injury though. Apparently you bit your tongue, but the injury isn’t serious, even though it bled a lot. You didn’t sever anything.”

The tonic had the appalling taste of all such things where inherent grossness is attempted to be covered over by sheer sugar content, a bit like lighting an incense stick next to a pile of dung. He
was lowered back onto the bed and his hand was taken again.

“Do you remember what happened? Two squeezes if you do.”

He didn’t.

“Would you like me to tell you?”

Two squeezes.

“You were fighting in the second round. Your opponent did a high strike, and I’m afraid I’m not exactly sure how to describe it—I am not a fighter myself—but from what people were saying, you moved strangely and for whatever reason you somehow put your head in the path of it. I suppose since you don’t remember it we’ll never know exactly what you were trying to do… anyway. You went down and you lost consciousness briefly… less than a minute. When you woke up you were very, very confused and acting strangely. You seemed…” She paused for a while. “You became agitated if people tried to separate us, which is why I’m here.” she said.

There was a snort from the male.

“Master Pan says it isn’t that bad and that you should be fine very soon, but in the meantime try to keep as quiet and still as you can, and sleep if possible. We’ve taken you to this quiet, dark room because he says noise and light might make your head hurt worse.”

Worse than it hurt already? Great.

“Would you like me to stay with you?”

Two squeezes.

“Don’t know what came over the damn boy,” Zhang Fei grunted, reaching for the bottle. “Hey, who drank all the wine?”

His daughter shot him a dark glance but said nothing.

“Xingcai, get me another bottle will ya?”

She pursed her lips. “Haven’t you had enough, Father? We need to discuss what we’re going to do.”

“What’s to discuss? Doctor said he’ll be fine, he’ll be fine. Nothing to do but wait for it.” He grunted and rolled the cup around in his hand as if it might somehow coalesce some drinkable wine.

“I mean about what he did when he regained consciousness after the injury.”

“Spat blood, acted a bit crazy, talked a bit crazy, then let himself be led away. Nothing to it!”

“Everyone is saying he groped Lady Lu,” she said, eyes flashing. “Is that true?”

“What do you know about it? You weren’t there.”

“I just told you, it’s what people are saying. People are saying he was acting like he thought they were in bed together! If he embarrassed her like that, even if it was because he was confused, he needs to make it right! We can’t just swan off back to Shu and leave her with a tarnished reputation like that. Either he needs to marry her or he needs to make it absolutely crystal clear that he wasn’t as
familiar with her as he gave off—if you think he can get anyone to believe that!”

“I was there and it wasn’t anything that bad,” he grunted. “He grabbed onto her a little tightly, maybe. Pretty girl—dazed man—could happen to anyone!”

“Well I wasn’t there,” snapped Xingcai. “Most people in Jianye weren’t there, and it’s what they are saying that matters. I’ve heard what they’re saying already and the rumours are only going to get more lewd. Also, I have a strong suspicion that he wants to marry her.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Let’s just say that the attraction between them has been getting a lot of attention for a while,” she said. “It’s probably part of the reason why the rumour has gotten so lurid. Anyway, it’ll be a good match, diplomatically speaking. She’s Lu Xun’s cousin.”

Zhang Fei scowled at the empty cup. “Damn boy. You know I had to forfeit my next match just to come here and wait for him to be able to be visited?” His mouth twitched. “I want more wine.”

His daughter moved from her chair to sit beside him on the bench. “I’m worried about him too, Father.”

He put his arm around her and sighed.

———

“You’ve got a shit-eating grin,” said Ling Tong. “Out with it.”

“I look this handsome all the time.” Gan Ning fluttered his eyelashes.

Ling Tong scowled. “You’ve come up with something really nasty to say to me during our fight, am I right? You think you can throw me off with one of your stupid jokes?”

“Ooh, this one isn’t a joke. You’re gonna love it.”

“Is it going to embarrass Lady Zhang?”

Gan Ning’s smile got wider and wider. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“You son of a bitch!”

Gan Ning side-stepped the attack and said, “Hey, hey, don’t worry! I won’t use her name, ok? Only you and me will know it’s about her. Save your attacks for the fight; it’s only about ten minutes away at this point, right? See ya.”

“Gan Ning!” Ling Tong would have pursued the pirate, but Sun Quan was approaching and he had to do obeisance.

“Field obeisance is fine,” said Sun Quan, sparing his warrior the kowtows. “Just wanted to let you know that Zhang Bao is doing well.”

Ling Tong nodded, flushed and not sure if he could trust his voice to come out evenly.

“I know that the injury with Zhang Bao was an accident,” the king continued, “but I just wanted to warn you to be careful with the final match. I know tempers can get high between you and Gan Ning, and if either of you take it out of the range of sparring, I won’t be pleased. But especially you, Ling Tong. If you seriously injure another competitor again, it might make it more difficult for Shu to
accept that it was a fluke. Either they’ll say it was deliberate or that you fight recklessly enough that you shouldn’t have been allowed to compete. You understand the difficulty that would place me in?"

“Yes, your majesty.”

“Obviously I’ll be speaking to Gan Ning about this too. Fight well in the final match.” The king nodded at him and left.

———

Zhu Ran sullenly slouched in his prime seat by the final match. Even the prospect of Ling Tong and Gan Ning beating each other up wasn’t cheering him up much.

To come in second in the archery contest for such a stupid reason—that he had accidentally grabbed his usual flame arrow instead of a regular arrow and set one of the targets on fire, and the judges had ruled that that shot counted as a miss. A miss?! It absolutely hit the bullseye! Just because it subsequently incinerated the bullseye, and the target, and the stand, and a small area of grass around the stand, and caused a minor panic, shouldn’t mean shit.

And speaking of shit, everyone was talking it about Lady Lu, the girl he wanted to marry. Apparently the way that Zhang Bao had both grabbed and spoken to her after his injury had everyone speculating that they were longstanding secret lovers. Zhu Ran ground his teeth. He knew from the battlefield that people could do and say crazy things after getting hit in the head and not even remember it later, but these stupid civilians were acting like it was proof of something.

Lady Lianshi hadn’t gotten back to him about the horoscopes but he didn’t care. He was going to go to Lady Lu’s father tomorrow and make it clear that he didn’t care about horoscopes or name balancing or rumours or stupid Shu officers and their fragile skulls. He wanted Lady Lu and the sooner the better.

Ruminating on this cheered him up a little, and so when Sun Quan announced the start of the final match and Ling Tong and Gan Ning bowed stiffly to one another, he was able to sit forward a little, eager to see a long, and hopefully bloody battle.

It was fast and intense, a lot of switching of who seemed to have the advantage, until Gan Ning opened his mouth.

“So, I know you got the first kiss, but—”

He didn’t get any further than that because Ling Tong, in a sudden demonstration of his preternatural agility, had done a flip and was standing on Gan Ning’s shoulders with his head pinned between his feet, saying “Did you really think I’d let you get away with that?” as without pausing he somehow spun the pirate and slammed him into the ground.

Pinned. The crowd roared.

“Tap out or black out, up to you,” taunted Ling Tong. “Told you I was saving awesome for the final match.”

Chapter End Notes

In the Hua Guan Suo Zhuan which is the primary source for the legend of Guan Suo, in
addition to Bao Sanniang, he had three other wives, of which two were the Wang sisters, so I was making a sly reference to that. (The fourth wife, Princess Huaman, daughter of Meng Huo, may make an appearance later!)

Ma Dai is singing the beginning of the chorus of Coco Lee's song "Dao Ma Dan", which is decidedly not an ancient text. You can watch the hilariously dated music video here. This may or may not be my karaoke song of choice when I'm drunk.

Bao Sanniang is conflating Zhuge Liang's Taoist cognomen with Zhao Yun's style name and both with nicknames but whatever, she does everything wrong, let's laugh at her.

Xu Sheng was a real guy who (along with Zhu Ran) didn't want to be placed under Zhou Tai's command because they came from rich backgrounds and he came from a poor background; because of this Sun Quan threw the banquet at which he forced Zhou Tai to strip and talk about all the scars he had gotten in the service of Wu, whereupon Sun Quan presented him with a parasol. (It... it was cooler to get a parasol back then, I guess?)
固天所以隔南北也 (Heaven divides north and south.)

Chapter Notes

Water Mirror is the Taoist cognomen of Sima Hui, who in real life was the master of Zhuge Liang and Xu Shu, among others.
Black Horn is the Taoist cognomen of Zuo Ci.
Transcendant Duke is the Taoist cognomen of Ge Xuan, another Taoist mystic who has some neat stories about him and Sun Quan. He and Sima Hui probably won't appear again in this fic though.

This chapter contains a sex scene, starting at "shall I let you sleep" and ending at "she nuzzled his chest." No further warnings apply.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

固天所以隔南北也：gu tian suo yi ge nan bei ye
surely / heaven / that which / thereby / separate / south / north / [emphatic particle]
“It is surely heaven that divides the south from the north!” - Cao Pi, after a failed invasion of Wu

Zhu Ran really did intend to go visit Lu Ji the following day, but then he found out that Jianye’s premier fletcher was having an inventory sale to clear out excess that didn’t sell to people coming into Jianye for the tournament. Sure, as an officer of Wu he could get arrows that way, but this particular fletcher often experimented with new and unusual arrows (such as his own flame bow) and he was eager to see if he would have anything exciting in the sale. So that was that day.

Then the next day at breakfast, he heard Ling Tong getting just a little too cocky about his performance in the tournament. Ok, sure, he won and all, but since people who participated in the archery contest couldn’t join in, that hardly proved anything, did it?

Losing one on one to Ling Tong didn’t prove anything either. He wasn’t expecting him to call him out right then and there and he was pretty sure that breakfast hadn’t agreed with him and also the sun was in his eyes and the ground was definitely uneven. Otherwise he wouldn’t have tripped like that and gotten pinned. No way.

Then his ankle was swelling a bit, making him walk a bit off. He didn’t want to present himself to his future father-in-law limping, so he didn’t go the next day, or the day after that.

So… it was five days before he actually went.

Lu Ji received him in his sick room with a puzzled but friendly air. “Ah, hello young man,” he said. “You are… Zhu Zhi’s son, correct? A great man, that.”

Zhu Ran bowed to acknowledge the compliment and would have spoken, but the man was going on.

His face cleared of the confusion. “Oh, of course! You have come to congratulate me on behalf of your clan! I must admit, I hadn’t expected you to come yourself, in person, and so soon too! Why, I only agreed to it myself two days ago! Well, I suppose speed is necessary, since the wedding will be so soon. Well! I thank you very much for your congratulations, young man!” His face suddenly looked a little sad. “Congratulations seem more like condolences to me… I truly don’t know what I’ll
do when she’s gone… but she must be married and soon, and I suppose this match is a good one…” He let out a deep sigh. “Well! This was a pleasant visit, wasn’t it? I’m afraid I’m being terribly rude, but I must cut the visit short because I can see that my medicine is here—” Zhu Ran looked in the same direction as the older man to see that a servant was standing there with a tray—“and after I take it I always fall asleep. Thank you again very much for your kind visit!”

Zhu Ran left without having said a single word.

———

Lady Sun sank her teeth into the crisp, refreshing flesh of the pear with a satisfying crunch. She had intended this snack of fruit to serve as refreshment for after her bout with Madam Zhao, but the girl was late and the delicious pears just looked so tempting that she couldn’t resist.

With her usual enthusiasm, she had originally overdone her doctor’s instruction to “eat more” and succeeded mostly at making herself a bit sick and gaining some odd looks, neither of which she wanted. She quickly settled on the relatively modest increase of an additional bowl of rice at lunch and dinner—something she could easily do without attracting any notice—and developing a new habit for snacking. Sure, usually all that she could deal with in this hot weather was cooling foods like fruits, but every bite counted, right? And autumn, with its thick hearty dishes, was only a few months away.

A servant announced Madam Zhao. “Your imperial majesty,” the girl said, making her obeisance with a red face, “I’m so terribly sorry. I had to change my clothes… I had…” Her voice dropped away, and she suddenly looked very young. “…female troubles…”

“Oh dear! How embarrassing!” said Lady Sun with real sympathy, noting that the girl was wearing a regular summer hanfu instead of anything practical for fighting. “Were they your only sparring clothes?”

“No, but…” The girl looked even more miserable. “I don’t think… I wouldn’t be a good match today… I’m so sorry to have wasted your time like this, my lady…”

“Don’t worry about that!” said Lady Sun quickly. While the empress was lucky enough to have almost no physical symptoms during her period, living among a group of armed maidens, all of whom seemed to get theirs at the same time, had taught her that she was in a lucky minority in this respect. “Why don’t you just sit down and have a snack with me and we can chat?”

The younger lady sat down, still red and miserable.

Shangxiang began cutting up a peach. “There’s no need to be so embarrassed! I may be the empress, but I’m still a woman, you know! I’m not shocked!” She gave an encouraging smile.

“It isn’t that… it’s that… well, it’s a few different things.” Madam Zhao was a bit taken aback when she looked over at the empress and saw that the warrior maiden was offering her a slice of peach, but of course she took it. “Thank you.”

“Don’t be so formal.” Shangxiang popped a peach slice into her mouth, chewed it down, and gave her a cheeky grin as she rubbed the peach juice off her chin. “Hard to be formal when you’re eating fruit like this anyway. What’s the problem?”

Madam Zhao was wiping juice off her own chin. “Well… partly it’s that I’ve been looking forward to sparring with you for so long…”

“What, really?!” Lady Sun paused to eat another slice of peach. “Man! I wish I had known that. Do
you know how bored I get fighting the same people over and over?”

Lulu’s eyes lit up. “I would definitely like to spar with you again, then! And, you know, there’s Lady Huang and Lady Bao, if you haven’t sparred with them!”

“Do you only spar with other ladies?”

“It’s easier, isn’t it? I mean… by easier I mean, they actually try, and they don’t get upset if they lose despite trying.”

Lady Sun huffed. “Are the men of Shu like that? I’ve fought your husband a few times, and it didn’t seem like he was humouring me. He better not have been!”

Madam Zhao was anxious not to get Zhao Yun on the empress’s bad side. “Oh no! I’m sure, if the emperor told him to spar, that he sparred with perfect honour!”

“Not so much the emperor as me telling him that if he wanted to keep up this charade of shadowing me around everywhere ‘for my protection,’ he needed to prove that I wasn’t more likely to need to rescue him. I admit he fights exceptionally well. All of our fights have been very close. Of course sparring’s only a shadow of the real thing.”

Having these two subjects—her husband and “the real thing”—put together so closely reminded Madam Zhao of the other part of what was making her look so miserable, and Lady Sun’s keen eyes could not have missed the way her face fell.

“So what else is bothering you?”

She traced the outline of a leaf in the fabric on her lap fretfully as she said, “I’m not pregnant.”

Shangxiang’s face for a moment flashed with her own pain on this particular subject, but fortunately Madam Zhao wasn’t looking at her and she was able to quickly regain her composure and say calmly, “I see. That is certainly upsetting.”

“No, that’s just it! I’m relieved that I’m not pregnant! Isn’t that terrible?” She worried at a flower petal now, biting her lip.

“I don’t think it’s necessarily terrible,” said Lady Sun. “Why are you relieved? Are you afraid of the pain and the danger?”

“No… well, yes, I suppose, in some ways, but considering how much I want to fight like you do, it would be silly of me to be afraid of pain and danger!”

“You want to go to war?”

“More than anything!” She looked up at Lady Sun at that, and the older woman was reminded strongly of herself as a young teenager, scheming to get out on the battlefield so skillfully and persistently that her father and brothers quickly became accustomed to planning a role for her.

The empress smiled. “Well, does Zhao Yun know that?”

“No… my brother would always shut me down if I even tried to speak of it, but of course I was much younger then. I guess I was waiting for the right time, some time when he would have orders to go to war, and then I could say that I wanted to go along.”

“If you truly want to go to war, you need to start talking to him now, for one very important reason.
If you want to go to war, and you want to not be pregnant, then there’s something you need to stop doing, if you know what I mean!”

Madam Zhao blushed. “But I can’t turn him down for that!”

Lady Sun accidentally crushed a grape as her face turned livid. “Is he like that? I thought I told you to come to me if he needed to be beaten up!”

The girl waved her hands frantically. “No, no, I didn’t mean I can’t turn him down, I meant that I can’t turn him down, if you know what I mean…”

Shangxiang flicked the crushed grape off of her fingers, appeased. “Oh, that’s different. Well, you need to decide what’s most important to you then. Which means talking it out with him. Oh, here comes the tea.”

Lulu frowned down at the floral pattern on her lap for a moment, then made a light, casual remark about the weather.

———

Lady Zhang Chunhua stroked the soft hair of her younger son as he suckled at her breast, her other arm gently cuddling him. She was so glad she wasn’t pregnant again yet. Her first sign of her second pregnancy had been her older son’s rejection of the breast, and she just wasn’t ready to give that up again.


The toddler in her lap instantly delatched and stared wide-eyed at the white cabbage moth straining and fluttering within the net, then leapt out and after it. “Want!”

“No, A-Zhao, it’s mine.” The older boy, tall for his age, was easily able to move the net out of his little brother’s reach.

“Want, Da Ge!” Sima Zhao began to cry. “Want! Want!”

Sima Shi smirked. “Crybaby! Fine. I bet you kill it.”

This prediction came true almost immediately. The toddler stared for a moment, horrified, at the crumpled white mess that had oozed out of the netting and into his hand, and then began to wail.

“A-Zhao!” his mother said sharply, and the toddler managed to choke his wail down to a sniffle. “It’s just an insect, and it’s a pest. It kills cabbages, so it’s good that you killed it. A-Shi, take your brother and find nanny to get him cleaned up.”

“Yes Mama.” The older boy led the younger away by the hand while Lady Zhang readjusted her clothing and rose.

Though only barely not a teenager anymore, she walked the halls of the palace with as much self-assurance as a member of the imperial family. Lady Zhang traveled down the familiar route to her husband’s study and entered without knocking.

As Sima Yi looked up at his wife’s entry, the inkstick in his hands skidded across the inkstone and onto the table. He was obviously flustered, and then just as obviously displeased that he was flustered. He made as if to put the inkstick down, then changed his mind and went back to making ink determinedly. “What is it, my dear? I’m very busy.”
“Is everything going to plan, my lord?”

“Of course it is,” he snapped.

“Ahh.” His wife walked over behind his chair and placed a hand on each of his shoulders, gently massaging them. A loving gesture, yet the recipient stiffened rather than relaxed. “Perhaps then it is the plan that requires adjustment?”

He stiffened further for a moment, “Chunhua, I know what I’m—”

“Oh my!” she interrupted. “Your ink has gotten too thick, hasn’t it?”

He blinked down at his still moving hand. The hand stopped. “Chunhua, I know—”

“I really can’t stay long, my lord. I have so much to do looking after our boys. I am sure that you will make whatever adjustments are required.” She walked to the door, but paused briefly and looked back over her shoulder. “I am grieved to feel you so tense. Perhaps I should come to you tonight to work it out of you?”

Sima Yi blinked again, and his wife smiled as he took a ragged breath. “I…” He composed himself, and said rigidly, “That would be fine.”

The corners of her wide mouth stretched even wider. “I thought it would be.”

———

Lu Xun turned the key in the lock as quietly as he could, lifting on the door handle to reduce the noise as it opened. Not that Yinping was that light of a sleeper, but he generally believed in better safe than sorry.

He crept into the bedroom and smiled down at her sleeping body. In the past week she had started building more or less a nest out of pillows for her naps. It was almost unbearably adorable. Her beautiful hair had been braided and twisted up, bound in a scarf to keep it off her body, which itself was only clad in a xieyi and a backless tank which was only loosely tied. A breeze fluttered from the window towards him, bringing with it the scent of the ginger and cinnamon bark tucked into the belly pocket of her tank top. Not that these warming herbs could really be all that necessary in such hot weather.

He stripped down to his own loincloth, suppressing a sigh of relief as he did so, and gently eased himself onto the unoccupied portion of the bed. Maybe he would just close his eyes for a moment as well…

Lu Xun woke up to the most pleasant alarm of the soft weight of a female body straddling his hips.

“Good afternoon, husband,” Yinping said, coyly running her hands over his chest.

He blinked at her. She had taken the scarf off but left the hair in its thick braid. It spilled down her shoulder and onto his abdomen. “Good afternoon, wife.”

“Shall I let you sleep?” She tilted her head flirtatiously. “Were you having any interesting dreams?”

“No dream compares to this reality,” he said, sitting up and embracing her for a moment, and then immediately setting to work on the strings of her top.

“Are you trying to sweet talk me out of my clothes, Boyan?”
“I could use my mouth for other things.” He kissed her, and her own hands tugged at his loincloth, loosening it. Soon their underclothes were completely untied but still crumpled between them, partially blocking his access, teasing him with hints of her hair and her slickness, and quickly getting him erect.

His attempts to pull the cloth away and take her just like that were stopped by Yinping breaking their kiss and running a finger along his lips. “Ah ah, you did suggest using your mouth for other things…”

There had been a banquet a few weeks prior, which Yinping had been able to plead tiredness to skip out on, where enforced toasts had Lu Xun in a state of both extreme intoxication and extreme arousal when he stumbled back to his room. Much to his dismay and embarrassment, although his wife had eagerly responded to his caresses, his penis had remained stubbornly flacid. He had channelled his interest in her enjoyment into his fingers, and in a fit of drunken inspiration, tried an experimental lick.

Yinping’s response had been very enthusiastic.

She climbed off of him and lay back on the bed, partially propped up on the pillows. He gently parted her lips with his thumbs and began with a slow slide of his tongue from her entrance to her clit. Yinping let out a sweet sigh and then moaned as he swirled the tip of his tongue around her pearl.

When he slid back down and entered her with his tongue, the moan deepened, and when one of his thumbs began massaging the neglected clit, the moans got louder.

“Nnnh… Boyan… that’s so good… I can’t… ah…”

He switched suddenly, taking the clit in his mouth and sucking gently while two fingers reached inside her and pumped.

“Ah!” she shrieked, and as she came, he switched again, enjoying the minute sensations of her walls moving against his tongue and the heady taste of her fluids while his hands kept the hips that wanted to buck in place.

When her movements subsided, he crawled up her body and kissed her again, his cock already prodding at her absolutely drenched folds.

“It’s such an interesting taste,” she murmured somewhat breathlessly.

He brought up the fingers that had been inside of her and licked them. “I like it.”

She reached between them and touched his length, which was all the encouragement he needed to slide into her.

“Is this still okay,” he panted, restraining himself to a slow pace while he waited for her answer.

“More than okay,” she moaned, lifting her legs up and curling them around his back, urging him into a faster pace.

He obliged. “Just, you know, we can do it differently if it hurts or—”

“Boyan!” She gave a funny little half moan, half laugh. “Shut up about that! Say I’m—ah—beautiful or something sweet like that!”
“You’re beautiful,” he told her aloud, and then again with his kisses on her mouth, cheeks, eyes, and forehead.

For a while she was satisfied, but then her legs impatiently pushed on him again. “More.”

“You’re also bossy,” he said, but he began to thrust even faster, squeezing his eyes shut. “I won’t last like this much longer.”

“Neither—ah!—will I—kiss me.”

Her heels dug into his back as they came together. Just like their first time, he dropped onto the bed to the side of her rather than on top of her as they finished, but this time he lifted her up and pulled her on top of him.

She nuzzled his chest. “A very good afternoon.”

He chuckled, and then said, “Oh, I need to talk to you. Important news. We finalized the plans for the campaign against Wei. We’ve already sent the advance message off, and our own party will leave as soon as possible. Tomorrow, if we can.”

Lu Xun searched his wife’s face to see the effect of this news on her. It was good news, because it meant the alliance was back on in a more definite way, but he expected her to experience some amount of sadness at leaving Shu, and perhaps fear at being separated from him in Wu, with her left at an estate that even he had never visited and him campaigning and in danger of death.

“Will I have to go to our lands right away?” she asked quietly. “I’d rather not be separated from you until the last possible moment.”

He stroked her back. “Not until the last possible second.”

———

Lianshi’s pregnancy had thrilled Sun Quan. His first son had been angrily dumped more or less at his mother’s doorstep by his mistress’s husband’s family some seven months after Sun Jian cut off the relationship by taking his son along to Yuan Shu’s territory for training. He wasn’t even aware of the child until he received the letter from his mother (in her restrained but terrifying way) informing him of “our new responsibility”. When he saw the baby the first time, it was three or so months old, large for its age and with a reddish tinge to its hair just like his, though it didn’t have his green eyes. He had briefly held the infant as it screamed its little head off, thinking only don’t break it… don’t break it… and then he had gone away with his brother again. Lady Wu had basically raised Sun Deng; he felt more like a younger brother than a son.

So fatherhood had never quite seemed real to him. But the subtle, increasing curve of Lianshi’s belly… that was real. That was very, very real. He had done that. She had let him claim her, and now she was carrying his child.

Once the pregnancy was confirmed, the doctors had sung him the old song, that he must not touch her until at least a month after the birth, but she had only slept in the empress quarters a few days before he went to her himself in the middle of the night, unable to get back to sleep after a nightmare. He had told himself that he would merely let her hold him, but once in her arms, he was overcome with desire for her, and she had responded.

The growing curves of her belly and hips were the most sensual thing he could imagine. Even her breasts were getting bigger, which he could not have imagined was possible. She was back in his bed the next night and every night after that.
His wife’s worst pregnancy symptom was the fatigue—she went to bed early and took naps, yet still frequently looked tired. He avoided waking her for his now rare nightmares whenever possible. Usually merely looking at her serene sleeping face was enough to convince him that all was right in the world.

The summer was almost over, but although his reports indicated that harvests in the south should be normal, the dryness and heat lingered around Jianye. He had originally intended to spar with Ling Tong, but had changed his invitation to a game of go when the heat was already foreboding mid-morning.

Ling Tong was usually a good opponent, but this morning he seemed ill-at-ease, glancing around and shifting in his seat. Nothing like his usual lethargic slouch.

At one point, after Ling Tong set down a stone with an irritated sigh, Lianshi, who was writing a letter in the same room, said mischievously, “You don’t need to be so concerned. She will only give her heart to the right one.”

Sun Quan was startled. “Who?”

He was looking at Ling Tong, who was frowning at his stones as if they were the cause of his troubles, but Lianshi was the one who answered. “Lady Zhang.”

“You are pursuing her?”

His general visibly forced himself into a respectful, “I am, your majesty.”

Sun Quan set down his stone with a clack. “If you conduct the affair with honour, the alliance could be a good one. I have no objection, certainly. What’s to be concerned about?”

Ling Tong ground out, “Gan Ning.”

“Hm… well, despite your tensions, I have to say from my perspective, I wouldn’t oppose that alliance either. Lianshi, do you think—”

Before he could complete the question, a messenger entered. After his obeisances, he announced, “Your majesty, a brief note has arrived from Lord Lu Xun. The battle plan has been agreed upon, and he will have departed Shu by now. He intends to send another message once he has entered Wu territory.”

———

Two white haired men bowed with great humility to each other, moving with surprising grace, although that was not the most surprising thing about them. Their location on a map—in the remote heights of the Jing Mountain, at the three-way border between Shu, Wei and Wu—was probably more surprising.

That they were both levitating was definitely more surprising.

“Water Mirror,” said Zuo Ci, with a broad smile. “How are you?”

“Ah ah,” said Sima Hui, his eyes crinkling with his own smile. “Good, good, Black Horn.”

“Are you observing your students?”

“They are also good.” Sima Hui nodded in satisfaction.
“I heard your wife died. My condolences.”

“Good, good.” Sima Hui tilted his head, and a third man popped into existence nearby. “Ah, Transcendant Duke. It is good that you are late.”

The third man, Ge Xuan, was much younger in appearance than the other two, bowed. “I was at sea, improving my breath.”

The wind blowing from the north picked up, ruffling the hair of the three men.

“Alas! It is surely heaven that divides the south from the north!” said Zuo Ci.

Sima Hui tilted his head the other direction. “But that is what we are here to prevent, is it not?”

Ge Xuan rolled and tucked his sleeves. “We will force it, and thus we will prevent it.”

Sima Hui hummed, pleased, as qi began to flow between the three men, and the wind began to die down, and then to surge against itself. The air was charging with electricity and the sky began to blacken. “Good, good,” he said, but it could not be heard over the thunder.

———

A very loud, sudden crack of thunder made the door guard drop his spear as he nearly jumped out of his skin. Wang Yi paused in her report to give him a look.

“Thunder?” said Cao Ren with a frown. “Excuse me a moment.” The burly commander got up from his seat and went to the southern window, just in time to see lightning streaking over the mountains to the southwest.

“Quite a storm,” said Jiang Wei, frowning. “Maybe it'll come north? Heaven knows we could use the rain.”

“It won’t,” said Li Dian, not bothering to turn to look, and Yue Jin, beside him, sighed.

Xu Shu smiled and said nothing, thinking to himself, heaven knows indeed.

Chapter End Notes

There have been a number of different styles of underclothing for the torso that could more or less be described as "backless tank tops" in Chinese history, and I'm afraid my research failed to uncover exactly which kind and what term was in use during the later Han, so I'm just calling it a "backless tank". My historical underwear research has let me down. ﹏;
Zhou Tai knew something significant was up when a servant delivered a note from Lady Zhang. Their friendship had been conducted entirely privately. He always delivered her notes personally and covertly; she never wrote to him at all. He was relatively certain that other than Gan Ning and Ling Tong, who were keeping the secret, no one knew they ever interacted, much less to the extent that they did.

Zhou Tai:

Lord Lu Xun and Lady Guan have completed their mission with the emperor and your king has received a message by bird sent from the western edge of Wu territory indicating their safe passage that far, so he is willing for us to depart now. My father wishes to go back to Shu as soon as possible, perhaps even tomorrow. I very much wish to see you before we go. Could you meet me at the practice room now? If you cannot, please reply with when and where we can meet.

Zhang Xingcai

“No reply,” Zhou Tai said to dismiss the servant.

When he opened the door to the practice room, she was staring out the window at the rain, in profile. The sound was quite loud, and she didn’t appear to have heard him come in. For a moment he just looked at her. She was in a jade and white outfit he’d seen her in before, but she had on shoulder, arm and leg guards, and in her hands were gleaming, real weapons.

“You look right with those,” he said, a bit loudly for him, in order to be heard over the storm.

She didn’t startle, but she turned, and smiled at him. “I feel better like this.” She bowed, and he bowed back. “I just wanted you to see the real me before I left.”

“May I?”

He set down the practice weapons—he had brought them, not sure if she wanted to spar one last time. She held her sword and shield out, and he examined first the sword, and then the shield. They were of excellent construction. The sword was deceptively light, yet clearly strong, and wickedly sharp. The shield, on the other hand, was heavier than he expected—not heavy for its size, but even having fought with her, he still found it hard to believe a person of her size could manipulate a shield like this.

He noticed that she was looking down at his curved sword, though she didn’t ask if she could see it. He handed her weapons back, backed up, unsheathed it, and offered it.
She expertly leaned hers against the wall and reverently accepted the weapon. “It’s heavier than I thought,” she said. “You pull it out so fast.”

“You’ve only seen me with the wooden sword…” he said slowly, confused.

She blushed a little. “I can see the real practice yard from my room,” she said. “I’ve watched you with the real one before. It’s… amazing, really. I already thought that it was amazing, but now that I’ve held this…” Xingcai held it back out. “Thank you. I only hope that I can make it look so easy someday.”

“You have a decade to get there,” he said.

———

This blunt reminder of their age difference… she suddenly thought of Ling Tong’s shy smile when she told him that she thought age difference shouldn’t stop a marriage, if there was real love. Why was she thinking about that? Zhou Tai wasn’t pursuing her. It was a friendship, a mentorship even; nothing more than that.

“I’m glad you brought the practice weapons,” she said. “I didn’t think to ask you about them, but I really would like to spar with you one last time. All this time, and I still have never managed to disarm you. I probably won’t this time either, but…” She smiled. “I don’t like to give up on something.”

———

He was distracted as they fought, but it seemed like she was as well, because there were at least two mistakes he made that she failed to capitalize on. On the other hand, he hadn’t noticed any mistakes on her side at all. Was that because she wasn’t making them, or was he so off that he wasn’t even seeing them? She was fighting with unusual caution, but he had enough experience to know that uncharacteristic caution does not necessarily decrease mistakes.

This was it, their last time.

Of course he was attracted to her. She was such a fascinating combination of deceptive delicacy and inner steel; high class elegance and refinement, and yet a gritty fighting spirit that reminded him of the women and girls of his poor hometown. She had a high all-around level of education and training, with a particularly keen insight into military matters, and yet she still had charming moments of naïveté. So he was attracted, but she was so far out of his league that being around her didn’t even feel like temptation. It was like… no matter how awesome it would be to fly through the air like a bird, it could never happen, so visiting a beautiful mountaintop vista is not a temptation to jump. One simply admires the beauty. Thoughts just remain thoughts. No effect on outer behaviour at all.

He saw an opening and took it aggressively. It was a feint—she was already sidestepping. He twisted to avoid her getting a blow to his sword arm from the back. She saw the vulnerability in his balance, and instead of attempting to disarm, she used all her strength to knock his legs out from under him with her shield, the twisting he was already doing aiding her.

He fell backwards, and she was on top of him.

———

Instinct had led her to follow him down to pin him. She was lying on top of him, pressing into his shoulders, a hand tightly gripping the wrist of his weapon hand. He was lying as still as if she had pinned him, except that it was absolutely absurd, and she knew that it was absurd. He still had the
katana in his hand, and he could have brushed her off like a leaf. Yet he didn’t move.

She looked down into his face. Xingcai had never been so close to it before—he was so much taller than her, that even when he had pinned her before, she usually just got a faceful of cloth. He was looking up at her, and his eyes were so dark, so strange, the way they were looking at her—what was he thinking?

Time seemed to stand still.

There was another crack of thunder. She swallowed. He still didn’t move.

“Are you playing with me?” She tried to say it, but it came out as a whisper. Was it even audible to him through the storm?

Suddenly he released the katana and sat up. Just as she had thought, her position on top of him made absolutely no difference. She simply slid down his torso and into his lap, a leg on either side of his hips, while her hands released her own weapons to grab onto his shoulders, as if he was a cliff she was afraid of losing her grip on.

Xingcai felt his arousal bulging against her, and it made her gasp—both from the shock of being forced to realize that this is what he was thinking, and from the shock of realizing that her own body was responding.

In some ways it was a reversal of her “pin” on him. He had his arms down by his sides. There was absolutely nothing preventing her from getting off of him. Yet she didn’t move.

Her chest was pressed against his, and she could feel her nipples peaking beneath her clothes. To her they felt so acutely obvious, even with the breast binding and the clothes between them—had he noticed?

———

God, her nipples against him were impossible to ignore. Was this a dream? It seemed so real. Certainly, he couldn’t recall any sexual dream before where his cock straining against his waistband had been almost painful like this.

He leaned his head down and she tilted her chin up to meet his kiss. Her kiss was as fantastically high-contrast as the rest of her. Unsure, yet passionate. She seemed to yield, then pushed back, then seemed to yield again. She began pushing her hands beneath his practice robes, running them over the skin of his back, pulling him to her, clinging to him. The amazing sight of her in just her breast binding filled his mind. He was not really thinking at this point; he only knew he wanted to see that again, and so much more.

As he undressed her, she attempted to do the same to him, but it was complicated by the fact that he was sitting on part of his clothing. The last thing he wanted to do was have her get off him for even a moment. He managed to shrug off the robes with her assistance, so that it pooled around them, while he simply tossed her armour and clothes aside, his usual care and precision abandoned.

He placed his hand on the fastening of her breast binding, then hesitated. Before the misgiving could actually become a thought, she undid it herself and tossed it away. At that point, thinking was completely out of the question.

———

Although Zhou Tai was experiencing an exquisite lack of thought, Xingcai was completely the
I’m in love with him.

How long have I felt this way?

Someone might catch us here.

I can’t stop, I need to be with him while I still can.

I’m in love with him…

She needed to get up, so they could finish undressing, but she worried that somehow if she did, it might break the spell. He had never before this shown any interest in her. Maybe any moment he would realize he wasn’t actually interested in her, or want to stop for some other reason. If she got up, he might even think it was a rejection from her. She had to let him know just how much she desired him. Desired this.

Xingcai slid her hand down the scarred skin of his chest, past his abdomen, and stopped just at the waistband, so that her hand was just touching his tip. She locked eyes with him, telling him without words that she knew exactly what she was touching. Then she used the few words she needed. “I want you.”

After she said that, she got up, and immediately began taking off her boots. How would he respond?

He didn’t get up, but he began taking off his boots as well. He stood up to take off his pants and unwind his loincloth. Since he was more simply dressed, he was completely naked while she was still finishing taking off her leg guards, never mind her skirt or leggings.

Xingcai sometimes sarcastically referred to her decorum classes as “wife lessons”. The useful parts about navigating court and camp intrigue weren’t after all really intended for her benefit, but rather for her future husband’s. The sexually-related classes were perhaps the most frustrating of all. Men, apparently, were impossible to please. Wives were supposed to be innocent, so she wasn’t actually taught anything, other than that it was apparently incredibly easy to displease a husband, and that if she did it would absolutely be her fault. Showing too much desire, or not enough; being frightened; not being frightened; staying still; moving around; being serious; laughing. Why she might feel desire or fear, wish to freeze or to move, to frown or to laugh—she didn’t bother to ask her teacher. It would only shock her.

The question of size was apparently a specifically important pitfall to avoid, so important that her teacher had gone so far as to whisper the word penis so as to make it crystal clear.

“You must never say or even hint that your husband’s—” sudden drop to a whisper—“penis—” back to a normal voice—“is in any way small or unsatisfying. No matter what size it is, Xingcai, you must insist that it is enormous and that it hurts you.”

“That it hurts me? But that sounds… really unsatisfying.”

“Xingcai!” the tutor had said reprovingly.

“What?”

Seeing that her student was legitimately confused, the tutor had sighed. “If it was actually enormous, then it would be horribly painful, so you have to insist that it’s painful so he thinks you believe it’s enormous.”
“But why would he want it to be enormous if it’s painful? I thought he wanted it to be satisfying?”

“Xingcai, this kind of topic is not something for young ladies to think about. He is not going to actually be enormous. Just remember to lie about it.”

In the present moment, as she looked at his naked body, she wondered if her tutor had been telling the truth about an enormous penis being “horribly painful”. Although it was the first erect one she had ever seen, she could not imagine it being described any other way than “enormous”. It was in proportion to the rest of the man, but that didn’t make the prospect any less frightening.

———

Zhou Tai did not miss the fear in her face as she looked at him or the sudden way that she had stopped undressing. Over the years his size, in all senses, had probably repelled more women than it had attracted. He usually stumbled into, rather than pursued, a relationship with a woman, so his number of past partners was on the low side for a Wu officer of his age, and he could remember at least a few cases in which a curious woman had been bold in pursuing him, but recoiled to the point of refusal when he was actually revealed to her—though his scars being revealed at the same time probably didn’t help. It was another way in which he felt freakish. Men’s jokes aside, if women actually craved large men, very few had shown him that. And while he couldn’t deny that he pursued such opportunities when they arose, somehow being lusted after for being a freak (and nothing else) felt almost worse than rejection.

But he wanted her so badly, it pushed aside any self-consciousness. He had never wanted anyone so much. All he could think was that he had to show her that he could be gentle, that he would be thinking about her, that he wanted her to enjoy this just as much.

“Let me,” he said, and she didn’t retreat as he approached.

He knelt before her. Even kneeling, the top of his head was about level with her chin.

She had just undone the fastening of her skirt when she had noticed him. His hands caressed her hips, then he hooked his thumbs into the waistband and slid it down. Rather than simply letting it drop, his hands ran slowly along the outside of her legs. As he reached her ankles, he was relieved when she stepped gingerly out of the skirt. At least she wasn’t frozen in terror.

———

He rose back up to kneeling after taking off each legging in the same slow, deliberate way. Her panic had subsided enough to allow a little bit of reason or perspective to calm her further. Ok. He was on an extreme end in size, and this extended to his… she felt like kicking her tutor as she mentally dropped it down to a whisper… penis. Alright. But he was not a monster. He was not even the tallest man she had ever met; her uncle Guan Yu had been even taller, and he had managed to have three children by a woman who was much shorter than Xingcai. Clearly the physical compatibility was not impossible.

And what other resemblance did Zhou Tai bear to the tutor’s “good husband” that all the training was designed to please? That “good husband” was an over-sensitive, whiny, jealous, selfish jerk; a man who took what he wanted and blamed the wife if it wasn’t good enough, without ever considering her feelings; a man who wanted her to be in pain, even, just to stroke his ego. He was not a man that she would have willingly had a conversation with, let alone fallen in love with.

He placed a hand on each tie of her xiéyì, but he didn’t undo them. It was odd to be looking down into his eyes this way.
“May I?”

“I trust you,” she said. *Even though I’m afraid was left unsaid, but she knew he saw it.*

It was still daytime, but the window over his shoulder was dark as evening. He untied her xieyi and was looking at nothing but her, but she was looking around the practice room. Nothing but bare wooden floor.

“So… where exactly can we..?”

____

Gan Ning was just putting the finishing touches on an unusually refined outfit (at least by his loose standards) when he heard a knock at the door. He pulled it open, surprising the knocker, which turned out to be Ling Tong.

“Hey, don’t you even ask who it is? Do you want to get assassinated?”

“Nah, this way I’m always taking them by surprise,” said Gan Ning cheerfully. “So what’s up?” He looked his comrade up and down, noting that he too was dressed with particular care. “I see you’re thinking of saying goodbye to Lady Zhang as well. Well, don’t expect too much! You maybe look a bit better than usual, but the advantage of mostly looking scruffy is that when you clean up, the ladies really appreciate it.” He grinned.

“That’s what I came to talk to you about, but I guess I was wasting my time,” he muttered, and turned to go.

Gan Ning chased after him, “Hey, what’s your deal?”

Ling Tong was silent for a minute or so, despite Gan Ning’s keeping up with him every step of the way, then he stopped. “Don’t… don’t make fun of me, alright?”

“About what?”

He sighed. “I can’t believe I’m actually at the point of humiliating myself to you like this. Look, I know that for you this is just a game, but I… I really like Lady Zhang, ok?”

Ling Tong paused, but Gan Ning didn’t say anything, so he pressed on. “So I was hoping… that if I asked you… that you might lay off.” He looked down at the ground.

“Sure.”

Ling Tong looked back up, startled. “What?”

“Of course. I mean, we’re friends, right? What kind of friend wouldn’t do that? You should have just told me earlier, ya know! I’m not saying I wouldn’t have made fun of you just a little…”

____

Ling Tong didn’t know what to say. Desperation in the face of being parted from Lady Zhang forever; knowledge that with Gan Ning’s ridiculous pursuit still in play, she would continue to believe that Ling Tong was only motivated by a desire to beat him; this had driven him to Gan Ning’s door, but the sight of his smirking face had made it all seem impossible. He wasn’t sure what reply he had been expecting, but it certainly hadn’t been this flippant acquiescence.

“How about I help you find Lady Zhang, huh? Then I’ll just tell her that it was nice flirting with her
and everything but I’m a free spirit and take off, leaving you to sweep her up into your skinny arms.”

Ling Tong rolled his eyes. “Alright, where do you think she might be?”

———

The winter training room was the first place they tried. The rain in this part of the palace was particularly loud. Even Ling Tong, walking right next to him, could barely hear Gan Ning’s bells.

The door was half open. Gan Ning slipped by him to go in first, stopped almost immediately, and held up a hand as if to warn Ling Tong back, but that just made him more curious, so he stepped in to see for himself.

Zhou Tai and Lady Zhang were there, fucking.

Fucking was really the only way to put it. No one would describe what they were doing against the wall as *making love*.

If she had opened her eyes, Lady Zhang would have been looking directly at them, but she did not open her eyes, nor did she look likely to. Her head was tilted back, face flushed, mouth parted slightly, as her pale arms and legs clung for dear life onto the broad, scarred back and hips of her lover.

Neither one was making a sound, not so much as a grunt or moan. The only sound, audible only barely in the pounding rain, was the rhythmic thumping into the wall as he pressed into her over and over.

Gan Ning grabbed Ling Tong’s shoulder, breaking him out of his trance, and they both backed out, quietly closing the door behind them.

Somehow, Ling Tong wasn’t exactly sure how—it passed in a blur—he and Gan Ning were in his own room, and he was sitting on a chair, while Gan Ning rummaged around in his cabinets for wine and two cups.

“Here,” the pirate said gruffly when he had completed this errand, handing him some wine, and sitting down with his own cup, the open bottle (and a few spares) within easy reach.

Ling Tong drained the cup, shuddered, and reached for a refill.

“Kind of… kind of a shock for you, I guess,” muttered Gan Ning.

“Zhou Tai…” said Ling Tong, shaking his head. “The worst part is… it makes sense.”

“Look on the bright side. At least she still doesn’t know your feelings were sincere. It’s better that way.”

Ling Tong laughed bitterly. “Yeah, much better for her to reject me because she doesn’t think I’m serious, rather than to reject me because she likes Zhou Tai better.”

“Hey, that doesn’t mean anything. If you’re not her type, there’s nothing you can do about that. You can’t change who you are completely to get someone to love you… It’s nobody’s fault, not even hers.”

Ling Tong finished the second cup of wine and refilled again. He was going to need reinforcement with alcohol if he was going to have a talk with Gan fucking Ning about feelings. “Maybe *that’s* the
worst part… if she’s my type, where am I going to find another girl like that? I’ve never met anyone remotely like her before.”

“You’ll just have to go out and find another one. One that likes you just as much. One that actually makes sounds when you fuck her.”

Ling Tong shuddered again. “That part was creepy,” he admitted. “Well, at least she'll be leaving tomorrow.”

“She and Zhou Tai are fucking. I doubt she’ll be leaving tomorrow. Doesn’t strike me as that kind of girl, though I could be wrong. Plus you know Zhou Tai’s hung like a horse. She probably won’t even be able to walk tomorrow.”

“Why would you even bring that up?!?” moaned Ling Tong.

“Sorry. Anyway. Point is, she might be around for a long time. They might even marry. Not to kick you when you’re already down, but you should face that in advance.”

Groaning, Ling Tong put the cup down and put his head in his hands. “Don’t try to kid me. You love kicking me when I’m down.”

“Not when you can’t fight back. Then it’s just sad.”

Ling Tong didn’t open his eyes, but he heard Gan Ning stand up and begin rummaging around in his cabinets and drawers again. As he did he continued, “I know it sucks when the person you want doesn’t feel the same way about you. You’ll drink too much, pick some fights, beat the shit out of Zhou Tai on the sparring grounds, and eventually you’ll accept it. Maybe you and her can even be friends at some point.”

“Being just friends sounds like living hell.”

“It does right now because it’s still raw, sure. But you might be surprised. How about some xiangqi? Best of five?”

Ling Tong lifted his head. The board was on the table, and Gan Ning was dragging the other chair so that it faced his. Unwillingly, he cracked a smile. “You just want to play me now because you know it’s the only way you have a chance to win a series.”

“Well, we don’t have to, if you’re afraid of getting your ass kicked five in a row,” he said carelessly, setting up the board.

Ling Tong sighed. “When did you ever experience unrequited love anyway?”

“Win three and find out. It’s a way sadder story than yours, though, I’m just warning you. You’ll probably feel pretty shit about yourself in comparison.”

His friend rolled his eyes and made the first move.

———

“Ah…” groaned Xingcai. It was the first sound she had made since the moan she had made when he had slid her onto his cock at the beginning. “Ahhh…”

He felt her contracting around him and knew she was coming. Shifting his grip on her thighs, he increased his speed slightly and exhaled, releasing his control and letting his own orgasm take over.
Zhou Tai leaned against her and the wall as he came back to reality. Even after having held her for that long, she still felt so delicate and light in his arms, so different from the steel and the fire in her that had first attracted, and now intoxicated him, in a way that even the best wine never had. When he had fantasized what it would be like to be with her, he had never even imagined her surrendering herself to him like this, giving him all of the power, letting him control everything. Such trust…

Suddenly he felt ashamed.

He gently lifted her off and down. “I’m sorry.”

———

His expression was as unreadable as usual. She felt him dripping out of her and felt like her heart was slipping away from her as well. “Sorry?”

He didn’t say anything, just began collecting her clothing from the various places on the floor it had been tossed. She usually loved his silence, but now for once she wanted him to speak. “Was it… was it bad for you?”

He turned at that. “It was bad for you.”

“It was the most amazing thing I’ve ever felt.”

“That’s not what I meant.” He sighed, and continued in his slow, deep voice. “I shouldn’t have done that. We can’t be together.” He held out her clothing.

She ignored it. “Why not?”

“I can’t follow you to Shu.”

She had nothing to say to that at first. She hadn’t even known she was in love with him until he kissed her, after all. Xingcai accepted the clothing, but didn’t dress. She just watched him as he picked up his loincloth and pants.

———

“So you’re just going to let me go? You don’t want me?”

He pulled his pants on and looked at her. She was still naked, and so, so beautiful. Rather than answer her, he walked over, took her in his arms again, and kissed her.

“You do want me,” she whispered when they finally broke the kiss. “You can’t let me go.”

He knew he ought to deny this, but instead he found his embrace tightening. Why couldn’t he resist her? Why was she pretending not to understand why this was a bad idea?

“If you can’t let me go… then shouldn’t I stay?”

“In Wu?”

“Wherever you are. Wu is a part of the empire now, isn’t it? Why can’t I serve the emperor here?”

“Your father… I’m not… the kind of man he would want…”

Xingcai rolled her eyes. “My father wouldn’t want anybody but Liu Shan.”
Zhou Tai’s mouth felt dry. Liu Shan, the future emperor? He’d known as a former pirate of no name or wealth, he couldn’t possibly be an acceptable son-in-law to Zhang Fei, but knowing that his rival for her hand was Liu Shan…

She laughed a little, apparently actually able to guess his thoughts this time. “The worst part is you don’t understand exactly why it appeals to him so much,” she said. “Obviously there’s the whole future empress part, but that isn’t everything. I can’t explain it to you fully, but let’s just say that if I had ‘married’ Liu Shan I probably would have died a virgin. From my father’s perspective, the perfect marriage for his baby girl.” She sighed. “That’s not important. What I mean is, I realized and accepted a while ago that if I ever did fall in love with someone, it would probably not meet with his approval at first. The positive side is, he always eventually lets me do what I want. He wasn’t thrilled about me becoming a fighter at first either, until he realized how much it meant to me.” She paused. “You’re the only man who ever accepted me as a fighter without making me prove myself first. The only one who doesn’t seem to think that I can’t be a fighter and a woman at the same time.”

“You came to say goodbye. I took your virginity.”

“You took it because I gave it to you. And I’m glad I did. I didn’t know I was in love with you when I asked you to come say goodbye, but now I do. I am. I have been for weeks.”

He released his hold on her, backed up a step and grimaced. “Love isn’t enough. I can’t… take care of you. No matter how I feel.”

She stepped forward and traced a finger along one scar and another. Even having just been with her, it was arousing. “I never thought I’d hear you speak nonsense. I can’t imagine feeling safer than being by your side.”

“You know what I mean.”

“You’re in love with me, the real me,” she challenged. “An estate, a title, servants, dressing up in fancy clothes, attending palace events, and smiling at everyone—do you know how much I’ve hated knowing that it was probably my fate? My god, you think that would be taking care of me?”

Unwillingly, his arms were wrapping around her again, and she rested her head on his chest. He wished, for the first time in his life, that he was talented with words. She wasn’t backing down, and he had run out of objections.

“Do you yield?” she murmured sweetly.

He leaned down to kiss her again. “I yield.”
衣錦還鄉 (Going to one's hometown in triumph).

Adding "阿 A-" to the beginning of a name is an affectionate diminutive, similar to adding the -y sound to the end of English names (John - Johnny). It is pronounced "ah" like the "a" in "father".

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

衣錦還鄉 yi jin huan xiang
clothing / brocade / return to / village
“Going back to one's hometown in triumph”

Gan Ning was the same as always at breakfast, cracking jokes with his fellow officers and eating with gusto. There were two late arrivals, although the first totally eclipsed the second, to the point that no one but Gan Ning even remembered he was late.

Zhou Tai had attracted attention from the beginning, because he was dressed nicely (which he never was, unless the occasion absolutely required it), and he was nervous (which he never was, at any time). Almost as strange, rather than take a seat with his friends, he took one at an empty table. He ordered food, but picked at it.

About halfway through the meal, the cause of this strangeness became clear: Lady Zhang and her father arrived, and she led him to Zhou Tai’s table.

The effect on everyone else eating was electric. People who had been about to leave hastily refilled their dishes and cups. Conversations continued, but only because people didn’t want to be absolutely obvious in their eavesdropping, so the conversations were bizarre and disjointed.

This confused environment, and Lady Zhang and Zhou Tai’s naturally restrained voices, made it difficult for the vultures of Wu to catch every bit of meat off the bone, but there was more than enough to spark a feeding frenzy. Lady Zhang was trying to convince her father to accept Zhou Tai as a potential husband for her!

That two such obviously secretive lovers would choose to have a conversation like that in front of everyone was impossible to understand at first, but as the conversation went on, it became clear that while Lady Zhang didn’t like airing her business to everyone, she liked the possibility of her father snapping and attacking her lover even less.

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Zhang Fei was probably restrained as much by his astonishment as by the presence of dozens of Wu officers and officials. He’d seen Gan Ning and Ling Tong’s pursuit of his daughter, and while it had infuriated him, and he knew they were each the kind of dangerous man whom otherwise decent girls could be fooled by, he was proud at how nimbly (as far as he could see) his daughter thwarted their efforts. He had not even known she noticed this… this nobody. Far too old, unattractive, no charisma, no rank, no wealth, no family, no ambition—what did she see in him?! How could she throw herself away like this on this Wu thug, when she knew that her uncle had no objection to her marrying the crown prince once he came of age?
He looked at his daughter, his princess, and pictured her wearing the phoenix crown, pampered, safe, admired by everyone…

She caught his eyes with her own, and her delicate hand touched his burly paw, and then squeezed it.

Delicate?

She was speaking, but he wasn’t actually listening to the words. He felt the fire in her hand. The vision of her as empress wavered and vanished like a mirage, and he was seeing the daughter he actually had instead. A girl who was a great deal too much like himself, despite her physical resemblance to her mother. A warrior.

He looked over at the man she had told him that she would marry, still not listening to the meaning of the words she was saying out loud. He was a warrior too, huh? The way he was looking at his daughter… it wasn’t lustful or predatory or even worshipful. There was desire, but that wasn’t what dominated. It was respect.

Ling Tong came in very subdued and hungover, about ten minutes after the Zhangs. He’d been hoping to slip in when most others had finished and gone, so he was surprised to see the place was still packed, until he saw the group at the centre of attention. He flushed and slunk over to his usual seat, but no one hailed him or even noticed him except Gan Ning.

“Hey! You’re not too late for the end of the show,” the pirate said, pushing a platter of boiled eggs at him. “Seems unlikely now but I haven’t given up on some fireworks. I’d love to see if someone can kill someone else with chopsticks.”

So it had all happened. Not just that she let him fuck her… let him fuck her like that… but it wasn’t some one time thing. Maybe it wasn’t even the first time for them. No, of course it wasn’t… fucking against a wall to lose your virginity, ridiculous… how could he have been such a fool as not to notice that she was in love with Zhou Tai? To still think he had a chance, and that Gan Ning was his only rival…

And now here they were, making it official. He couldn’t imagine Zhou Tai leaving Sun Quan, so she must be planning to stay here. He would have to see her all the time, just like Gan Ning had said last night.

At the focal table, Zhang Fei actually seemed to be somehow coming around to the idea that his daughter had made her choice, and that when he left Wu that day, it would be with only one child.

Ling Tong didn’t think he could eat much to begin with, and trying to get anymore down while this was going on was impossible. He stood up. “Let’s go for a walk,” he said to Gan Ning.

“Aw, now? Fine, I guess it’s all fizzling out here anyway.”

They walked out into the gardens, and somehow ended up at the bridge over the water where he had stood and talked with Lady Zhang that evening when he first realized that he was actually beginning to fall in love with her. He cringed, thinking of the failed kiss attempt at her door.

“Bad memories?” said Gan Ning.

“Yeah… I took her on a walk here once. That was when I found she was only nineteen and she found out I was twenty-nine… hard to say which one of us was more surprised.”
Gan Ning laughed. “Yeah, you definitely don’t look it.”

“I thought, wow, she’s too young for me to just play around with like this… and then she said that there are lots of couples that marry with bigger age differences, and that it didn’t matter if there was real love… I felt so embarrassed, because I hadn’t even thought of anything so serious as marriage… but when she brought it up…” He sighed and shook his head. “Can’t believe I’m giving you more arrows to shoot at me, but I feel like I gotta talk about it to someone.”

“Go ahead, I don’t care.”

“I tried to kiss her that night, and it went… badly…” He trailed off. “It all just seemed like a sick joke, you know? Maybe to a certain extent she was right that being rejected by her was what made me want her so much. It just drove me crazy how every single thing I did to try to convince her I was sincere made her more convinced that I wasn’t. But… I don’t think it was just that. I really did like her. The way she would look stern and blush at the same time…” He groaned.

“Ohhhh yeah, that would have to be my favourite as well,” laughed Gan Ning. “The way she’d screw her lips up and stare directly into your eyes, as if she could will you not to notice those adorable red cheeks.”

“God, I know.” He leaned on the railing and rubbed his temples. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Like what?”

“Do you really have a sad unrequited love story?”

“You didn’t win three in a row,” said Gan Ning flippantly. “You passed out in the middle of the third game, in fact. Do you even remember that you won the first two? I’ve heard of drunken fist, but drunken xiangqi is something else. You’ll just have to let it drive you insane until the end of your days.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m going to be thinking about when I’m bleeding out in a field some where.” Ling Tong rolled his eyes.

They were silent for a minute, and then Gan Ning said, “I’ll tell you this, it could be worse than seeing the one you love happy with someone else. A lot worse.”

“Yeah, yeah, all the starving children in China or whatever,” scoffed Ling Tong.

Gan Ning gave him a serious look. “How about loving someone and only realizing when she’s dying that you’ve been putting her through hell?”

Ling Tong could only stare at his, and Gan Ning gave a short bark of bitter laughter. “Is your mother still alive?”

“No.”

“Good,” said Gan Ning. “When you find your like-Xingcai-except-not-freakily-silent-during-sex girl, you don’t have to worry about following my mistake at least. Well, my worst mistake. I made too many with her.”

“With your mother?”

He laughed even harder, but no more merrier. “God no. My wife. I bet my mother still doesn’t think she did anything wrong. I send her money, but I don’t see her. It’s a good thing she’s illiterate,
otherwise I’d have to deal with letters from her reaming me out for being unfilial. She’s got too much pride to dictate it to someone, so I can pretend she’s dead, at least.”

“They didn’t get along?”

“Oh, y’know. Usual mother-in-law stuff. Slapping my wife across the face for crying when she was bleeding to death from a stillbirth. Nothing big.”

“Wow… that’s…”

“Yeah. When I got there, my mother told me that right to my face. Because she didn’t think there was anything wrong with it—she said my wife was making a fuss about nothing. God, but she was jealous! And it took me that fucking long to see it. Whenever my wife tried to complain to me—whenever I was actually there—I shut her down. I didn’t listen, I told her it couldn’t be that bad and to deal with it. What a fucking idiot I am.”

Ling Tong wasn’t sure what to say. “And then?”

“Oh, she was dead by the end of the week,” he said. “And a few years later the daughter we’d had was gone too. I went a bit nuts then. We had our little dancing incident, if you remember.”

The command from Sun Quan not to make any attempt to revenge himself on Gan Ning. The victory banquet. Ling Tong performing the sword dance, Gan Ning suddenly standing up and claiming to be proficient at dancing with polearms. Lu Meng just as suddenly claiming to be better than both of them, using his body to separate them in the fight/dance that followed. Kneeling before Sun Quan, who scolded him while humiliated tears streamed down Ling Tong’s face. “So… you were actually trying to provoke me into killing you?”

“Seemed like a good idea at the time,” he said. “Fuckin’ old man. Never minded his fucking business.”

“You got me in such deep shit with that!” exclaimed Ling Tong. “Our lord yelled at me until I started crying! If I had killed you, he would have killed me himself!”

“Yeah, and then what would have happened to him at Hefei, right? Our poor king. Dependent on a bunch of morons.”

“God, I know.”

They stared out at the garden, united in pity for their sovereign.

———

Sun Quan was surprised to be told that Zhou Tai was requesting a meeting with him. That meant he had something to say… and Zhou Tai never had anything to say. He just went where told and did what he was asked perfectly.

“Your majesty.”

“Come sit down, Zhou Tai,” he said, gesturing to the seat with the cup of wine already poured across his table.

He accepted both the seat and the wine, and they both drank, which comforted them both in its familiarity.
“My lord, I want to marry,” said Zhou Tai.

Sun Quan was surprised, but then wondered why he was. Zhou Tai was slightly older than he was, after all, and most men wed earlier than Sun Quan had, especially in an uncertain age like this where a man wanted children as soon as possible. Of course Zhou Tai would want a family… but he didn’t have any title or lands… Sun Quan suddenly felt horribly ashamed. After all Zhou Tai had done for him. He had given him the title of general, command of men, and more than sufficient income to maintain his austere existence, but he had not even thought to enoble him or give him a life outside of the military. He had just seemed like such a purely military creature to him.

“Of course,” he said. “Congratulations… I mean if you’ve got one in mind already… if you haven’t I can ask Lianshi… I’m sorry that I haven’t… would you like to be a marquis? I need to figure out what’s available…” He got up to find the maps, not knowing off-hand what territory he had to give out as a fief.

“She actually said she didn’t want that, my lord,” said Zhou Tai to his back.

That knocked Sun Quan out of the confused jumble of his thoughts. He turned back around. “You already have the girl in mind and she said she didn’t want to be a marchioness?”

“She’s… unique, my lord.”

Sun Quan smiled back. “Well, I guess she would have to be…” He flushed. “I didn’t mean… who is she?”

“Lady Zhang.”

“Lady Zhang? Zhang Xingcai?! She accepted you?” He couldn’t stop the words from coming out, no matter how insulting they were.

Zhou Tai did not look at all offended, fortunately. “I know, my lord. We have already gained her father’s consent, but we need your assistance to perform the wedding.”

“The wedding? Today? Oh god. Her father and brother are leaving today… this is worse than Lu Xun… why do my generals do this to me!” All other considerations vanished as Sun Quan was once again confronted with the momentous task of arranging a wedding in a few hours. And unlike Lu Xun, who had no in-laws to consider at the time of the wedding, for Zhou Tai he would have to arrange one that would not inflame the notorious temper of Zhang Fei.

Zhou Tai attempted to take his leave, but Sun Quan wasn’t having it. “Oh no, you don’t! You’ll take the title and the fief and like it. You’ve given me more than enough to do, I’ll be damned if I’m negotiating the bride price with Zhang Fei.” He pulled out the maps and seized on the first unoccupied fief he saw. “Marquis of Lingyang. Congratulations.” He shoved the map and documents associated with his new territory into the hands of his startled general.

“But…”

“I could not give less of a fuck whether she wants the title or not, Zhou Tai,” said Sun Quan, pulling various bell ropes to summon servants. “Where is your family?”

“Xiacai, my lord.”

“Where the hell is that?”

“…Chao Lake.”
“Too far away then. You’ll want to take her to meet your parents. Take a week there, immediately. Lu Xun should be back by then and we’ll need to get going.”

“But…”

The first set of servants appeared. “Go.”

Zhou Tai, still clutching his new lands, wandered out of the royal chambers looking almost as overwhelmed as his lord.

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As weddings went, it was perhaps not a shining success. Sun Quan and Lianshi had met the challenge, and there was nothing to critique in the ritual, the attire of bride and groom, the food… the wine… either in quality or quantity…

It all started when Ling Tong, who had solo-drunk himself into a fairly advanced state of intoxication to be able to attend the wedding at all, had actually drunk himself into unconsciousness before even all the dishes had been served. Gan Ning had been keeping his usual wedding “humour” in check out of respect for his friend’s secret feelings, but with the man actually laying his head down on the table and snoring, he could not resist one very mild and restrained remark.

Someone had unwisely brought up that the couple planned to make the trip the next day to Zhou Tai’s family on horseback rather than in a carriage, and Gan Ning had begun to laugh and ridicule the idea that the bride would be able to ride a horse, after having been ridden by a man the size of one the night before.

Zhang Fei apparently did not appreciate how mild and restrained this was.

Before all this had happened, Sun Quan had pled a headache and left with Lianshi at the earliest possible moment, so the highest ranking person left in the room was actually the enraged man. Only his son and daughter had any ability to try to keep him under control. Xingcai was the more effective; even in his rage, Zhang Fei did not want to hurt his daughter or even touch her, so by continuously getting in his way she was able to keep him from charging. She could not prevent him from launching whatever projectiles he could, though.

Ling Tong had woken up with a yelp when his face was splashed with wine and broken porcelain to see that the bride’s father had apparently decided to reenact the events of Changban Bridge, although in this case he was calling for one specific person to face him rather than all takers. The wine bottle, which had narrowly missed actually hitting his face, had actually been intended for his friend.

Without Sun Quan there to stop the fight by command, reason was being attempted on both parties, and with a similar lack of success. Ling Tong could not hear what his son and daughter were attempting to say to Zhang Fei, but Gan Ning was speaking to Han Deng and Zhu Ran loud and clear.

“There’s absolutely nothing wrong with what I said! What does he think they’re gonna do tonight, play go?!”

“Will you shut the fuck up for once?” Ling Tong stood up, none too steadily. “Let’s get out of here.”

———

The wedding night was awkward, far more awkward than she thought it would be, given that she wasn’t actually a virgin.
Being taken against a wall by him had been intense, but actually not that painful. To the extent that it was, it was painful in the way that a good training session was painful—she had felt a bit sore, both inside her and across her back, but even the soreness had been in its own way satisfying.

Since they actually had a bed, she had taken up what she assumed was the normal position for sex, only to discover that it didn’t work at all. When he straddled her, she was staring into his chest. As far as chests go, she liked his very much, but in this position it felt somehow intimidating to be staring at it so close.

When he had thrust into her, she had actually screamed, which she had never done in any of their battles. He immediately pulled out. “Are you alright?”

“That… that was…” she winced. “I felt like you were going to punch a hole straight into my uterus.”

He looked so embarrassed, she wondered if she should have been so blunt. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said quickly. “You weren’t being too rough or anything. You’re just… my decorum teacher told me that whenever I got married I would have to lie to my husband and tell him he was enormous. I don’t have to lie to you: you are enormous.”

“I know.” He didn’t look pleased about it.

“It wasn’t uncomfortable for me against the wall,” she said. “It was… really great, actually. Maybe we could just do that? I don’t know what else to suggest. ‘Tell him he’s enormous’ was the extent of my sexual education.”

He sighed, and pulled her up so that her head was just under his chin, and kissed her hair. “Maybe we should sleep. I don’t want you to hurt tomorrow.”

She was torn. She really wanted to be with him again, this time as his wife… but even after one thrust, she felt sore already…

That idiot Gan Ning had actually had a point for once.

“Ok,” she said, but she didn’t bother to hide her disappointment.

“We will learn,” he said. “You’re my wife now.”

His arm tightened around her, and she smiled.

———

Chao Lake was not really that far from Jianye. If they left at dawn and rode hard, switching horses, they could easily be in the small town of Xiacai for dinner. Since they needed to be back so quickly, this was the plan. Neither of them minded packing light or traveling hard.

Such hard travel hadn’t actually left a lot of time for talking about what her new in-laws were like. Zhou Tai was never talkative, and during their brief breaks for meals and switching horses she had learned the following: his father was dead, his mother was alive, he had two older brothers and two younger brothers, and two younger sisters. Only the youngest brother was unmarried. His third brother was also a Wu soldier and wouldn’t be there, though his wife and child would be; his sisters would not be there at first, but since they lived in nearby towns, they might come to visit before they went back to Jianye. In addition, he had nodded when she asked if they fished for a living.

“They have some land now too,” he said.
Because of you, she guessed, but didn’t say it.

“Do you like sweet potatoes?”

“Uh… sure. Why?”

“That’s what they grow…” He looked embarrassed again.

“Is your mother a good cook?” she asked, guessing that this would cheer him up, and she was right.

He smiled widely. “The best.”

“Maybe she can teach me.”

He swallowed the last bite of rice, then stood up. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

Xiacai was a small fishing village that had mostly avoided notice during fighting, despite being along the border between Wu and Wei. As they entered the village, it was full of cooking smells, which made Xingcai even hungrier. Perhaps it had the same effect on Zhou Tai, because he spurred his horse to go faster.

It was easy to guess that the Zhou household was the most prominent in the village now. The compound was new and extensive, built with a lovely view of the water and its own dock with a new, well-made fishing boat, and she could see the fields extending out behind it.

There were three children attempting to catch crabs off the dock, but when they saw the horses riding up they completely forgot about it.

“Uncle! Uncle, it’s Uncle!” they began to shout, jumping up and down and waving and running towards him.

Zhou Tai dismounted and was almost immediately swarmed by the children. The commotion attracted notice from within the house, or perhaps houses was the better word. Doors were opening and people were pouring out.

Back a short distance, Xingcai dismounted herself, feeling very awkward. Everyone was shouting at Zhou Tai, and the mood was very merry, but she didn’t know if she had even been noticed.

“Would you all shut up?” came a commanding woman’s voice from the doorway of the main building. An unusually tall woman in her fifties was standing there. “How is my only good child supposed to be heard over your racket?”

The woman smiled at her son, and then actually looked past him and noticed Xingcai, self-consciously holding onto the reins of her horse. “Well! Who have you brought to meet us, A-Tai?”

“Mama, this is my wife, Zhang Xingcai. Xingcai—“

The reverse introduction could not be made, because now the joyful moving noise was swarming her instead.

_____
Zhou Tai could imagine himself braving all sorts of enemies if ever Xingcai was in danger, but he found himself watching her helplessly under attack from all sides by his family.

They had both been swept into the house. The simple dinners that had been in progress were absolutely not good enough, they were told; most of the women and some of the men went out to prepare more dishes, kill chickens, pull food from the store room or garden, etc, while those that remained pushed dishes of peanuts, melon seeds and fruit at them.

They were both hungry and thus they both ate. It would have been impossible to respond to the stream of questions from his family regardless; it was almost impossible to even understand them as they were all speaking over each other.

To a certain extent Zhou Tai was used to this, but it was much worse than usual tonight. He watched her with concern. She was smiling and nodding constantly. To see her smiling so much unnerved him. Even at the most tense banquets and situations in Jianye she had allowed herself to wear her neutral expression at least some of the time. He remembered how frequently she had specifically named smiling as something she hated having to do. She must be miserable.

His mother, having finished directing battle preparations, returned to the room where far too many people were crammed and stopped in the doorway. “What is all this?” she demanded, once again instantly silencing everyone. “Can’t you see A-Tai picked a girl just like him? You come with me, my dear. And just her,” she warned.

Xingcai, still smiling, got up obediently and followed her. She did catch his eyes for a moment, and for just that moment he thought he saw the smile actually seem genuine, but it was back to the forced smile afterwards, and he couldn’t be sure.

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She followed her mother-in-law into a kitchen, where three other women were working and chatting—her new sisters-in-law. They were all slightly taller than her, just like their mother-in-law. In fact the entire Zhou household seemed to consist of tall people, though none to the extent of Zhou Tai. Xingcai didn’t think she had ever been the shortest in a group of all women once she had achieved her adult height before now. She was often the tallest.

Her oldest sister-in-law, who obviously thought of herself as a second in command, had immediately said after introductions, “You can do the shrimp, if you like.”

“I can’t because I don’t know how,” replied Xingcai. “I can’t cook at all.”

This momentarily stilled all the women. “You must be a fine lady from Jianye…” hesitantly suggested her youngest sister-in-law.

“I was part of a diplomatic mission from Chengdu. I am an officer,” Xingcai said, hoping that her irritation at being mistaken for an ordinary court lady was not making its way into her voice.

“Just like I told the others,” said her mother-in-law, gently steering her to a windowsill where she could sit down and watch the rest of them work, “Tai picked a woman like himself. No wonder it took him so long.”

Her second sister-in-law laughed. “My husband told me the women in Jianye were afraid of him.”

“Mine told me they were too short for him,” giggled the youngest.

“I’m not that short,” Xingcai couldn’t resist saying, but regretted it as soon as it was out. ‘Girl talk’
was even worse than forced smiling. She never knew how to enter into banter; she was always taking jokes seriously and casual remarks personally.

Fortunately they didn’t seem to be offended. “No, but it’s hard enough being with one of the Zhou men even if you’re tall for a woman.”

“Especially when they’re hard,” said the youngest. The others, even her mother-in-law, all laughed; Xingcai blushed.

“Oh come on now,” said the oldest, noticing her blush. “If you’re already married, you know what we’re talking about. No need to be embarrassed!”

“We were just married yesterday…”

“Yesterday… and you rode all the way from Jianye today?!” The cooking preparations had stilled again; the women were all glancing at each other, appalled.

“I’ll get her a cushion,” said the youngest sister-in-law, setting down the knife.

“I’m perfectly fine,” insisted Xingcai, blushing even redder.

The middle one looked at her skeptically. “It wasn’t painful the first time?”

They were all looking at her expectantly for an answer. Xingcai wished she was back in the overwhelming din. “Well… when we tried the normal way… that didn’t work…”

The women laughed, and then laughed some more when Xingcai was obviously unable to continue.

“And then you tried an abnormal way, is that it?” teased the middle one.

“Don’t make her feel guilty about it,” scolded her mother-in-law.

The oldest one nodded. “We laugh, but it’s really the only way to make it work with them. Did you lie on your sides?”

Lie on your sides? Xingcai tried to picture it. “Like… facing each other?”

“I guess that’s not what you did, but yes. Or you can face the same direction and he can enter you from behind,” said her youngest sister-in-law helpfully.

“So you must have done it with you on top of him then?” said the middle one.

Xingcai could not believe these women—his sisters-in-law, in front of his mother!—were discussing her having sex with him so openly and matter-of-factly. They had just met her less than an hour ago!

But at the same time she had to admit she was really interested in their information. Lying on our sides… me on top of him…

Her lack of response was accepted as its own answer. “Not on top of him either? Then what did you do? You didn’t give up, did you?”

She decided to gloss over the order in which the wedding and their first time had actually happened. “He… picked me up and… we used the wall to steady ourselves…”

“Against a wall as your first time?” said the oldest one, fanning herself.
“Wow,” said the middle one enviously, “it must be nice for him to be so strong.”

“Try lying down from behind next time,” said the youngest one, again in a tone of eagerness to help. “That’s my favourite, personally.”

Zhou Tai ate as fast as he could. He knew that Xingcai usually didn’t eat too much, and he didn’t want her to be left having to carry all the conversation.

Fortunately that conversation seemed to be mostly consisting of everyone else trying to get her to eat more. Annoying, but it could have been worse.

“It’s absolutely delicious, I just never eat very much,” she protested as her bowl of rice was heaped up again and even more choice morsels were dropped onto her plate.

“You’re too thin!”

“You’re far too thin.”

“Spin the shrimp over here so I can give her some.”

“You haven’t tried the chicken—you’ll have just one bite, won’t you, sister-in-law? I made it!”

Xingcai was eating the “just one bite” when another voice said, “You need to eat more meat if you want to have a boy.”

Then she began choking on the just one bite.

She was not actually in danger, and apparently there was a big feud between his youngest and oldest sister-in-law as to the correct way to slice the chicken for the stir-fry, and a guest choking on a piece could not be ignored as new evidence. All the other women, and some of the men, began adding their opinions to the matter.

They’d never spoken about children…

“A-Tai, show your wife to your room,” said his mother. “She obviously needs her rest.”

She followed her husband silently down halls and through doors, into what was apparently the oldest part of the compound, perhaps the original house, and then up a set of creaky stairs and down to the room at the end. As he closed the door behind her, she took a look around the tiny room. “I don’t think this is going to work.”

“Xingcai…”

The pain in his voice made her quickly turn to him. He looked devastated. She was startled a moment, then realized what he thought she meant. “I mean the bed. The bed! Not us!”

He still looked embarrassed. Oh man. Now she was flustered.

“I mean, could even just you fit on this?”

“Not very well,” he admitted. “It was mine before I left the first time. I just… never complained.”
“That I believe,” she said. She looked around. “I’m not even sure that a larger bed would fit in here.”

He sighed. “Do you want to leave?”

She was frowning into middle space, and didn’t answer. “I could pretend to be cold, and then we could use the extra blankets to rig up a sort of camp bed on the floor—”

There was a knock on the door, and Zhou Tai’s mother’s voice said, “May I come in?”

Zhou Tai wordlessly opened the door, and his mother stepped forward, arms full of blankets, and suddenly stopped. “My god! A-Tai, that’s the same bed you had when you were fourteen! Have you been—all this time—!” She stared at him aghast for a moment, then suddenly shook her head and laughed. “Daughter-in-law, I’m horribly embarrassed. You see, A-Tai is too good! He always leaves his room spotless, better than a maid! So I’ve just gotten used to not bothering to come in here. I don’t think I’ve stepped in this room for years. I rarely even come into the old house at all anymore… A-Tai has given us so much…”

Suddenly the older woman’s eyes were filling with tears, and Xingcai was biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing at her husband’s palpable embarrassment as his mother clung to his side, the blankets thrown onto the tiny bed in disarray. “Could any mother ask for a better son?” she wailed.

“Mama…” he said. Oh, he was actually blushing now. Despite the pain in her cheek, the corners of Xingcai’s mouth were twitching, but fortunately neither mother nor son were looking at her.

Fortunately Mama Zhou recovered relatively quickly, wiping her eyes and saying cheerfully, “Well! It’s quite simple. You come into my room—I’ll sleep in Xiao Wei’s room—and Xiao Wei can sleep here. Don’t protest! Things wash out!”

This pragmatic, earthy rationalization effectively robbed both her son and daughter-in-law of the power of speech, long enough for her to collect up the abandoned blankets and sweep out to give orders.

Xingcai recovered first. “The women in your family sure are direct,” she said, laughing. “And your sisters-in-law…” She trailed off. Zhou Tai was still blushing, still looking at the floor, but suddenly instead of adorable, it looked so sad. “Zhou Tai… please don’t be ashamed… I think they’re wonderful.”

He slowly raised his eyes to hers, took in a breath and exhaled. He didn’t need to speak. She knew he saw that she was telling the truth.

Zhou Tai took his wife into his arms and they enjoyed the silence for a while.

———

His mother’s bed was as large and fancy as the one in his room had been tiny and plain, with an intricately decorated canopy frame.

The sparse contents of their saddlebags had been laid neatly atop a table, and as Zhou Tai lit a lantern, he watched Xingcai pick up a nightdress, and suddenly fervently hoped that the fact that this was his mother’s bed was not bothering her. It bothered him, but not anything like enough to lessen his desire.

She laid the nightdress on the bed and began to undress, and he found that he was already undressing himself. “Xingcai… will you… let me try again?”
Her smile, her beautiful smile. His fingers quickened at their task.

She was nude before him this time, having taken off her armour when they first entered the house, and to his growing excitement, she did not put on the nightdress, merely climbed into the bed and set it on the night table. He climbed into the bed with her and kissed her, taking his time sliding his hands down the smooth, soft curves of her back. Xingcai was so flawless… he barely skimmed his hands on her, feeling as if even the calluses on his fingers would hurt her, and she let out a low giggle, wiggling slightly. “That tickles…”

He hadn’t meant it to tickle, but the way her body had felt as she squirmed against him was an unexpected pleasure. Still, he let his hands rest at the top of her hips. “I know last time didn’t work… if you are open to it, we could try another way.”

To his surprise, she said, “Like, me on top of you?”

“Yes…” Well, it was kind of an obvious reversal, he supposed.

“Is… is that what you’ve liked in the past?” she said, hesitantly. “Or another way?”

He was unsure how to answer her, both because he wasn’t totally sure why she was asking, and because he didn’t know how much he should reveal about his history with women. “I… usually followed whatever the woman desired,” he said, carefully. “But… they tended to be…” He was at a loss.

“I understand if it was prostitutes,” she said, calmly, and flustered him even more.

“Oh… camp followers avoid me,” he said, with a small embarrassed laugh, and he could tell by her flush that she understood exactly why. Best just to be blunt. “My past lovers… my size was all they wanted. So… not like you.”

Suddenly her face was getting a bit red. “Well… I’ve heard…” she said, awkwardly, “I’ve heard… somewhere… that we can do it just like this. On our sides.”

Heard? Heard where? “I’ve… never done that…”

She bit her lip. “Oh. Well… I never have either, but… could I try?”

The blind having sex with the blind. “Alright.”

Xingcai had been the recipient of quite a whirlwind of practical advice during her time in the kitchen, and the importance of being relaxed and wet was stressed. She slipped a hand down to touch herself, and found that she was definitely getting there.

He began to breathe more quickly, and she glanced up to see that he was watching her fingers with those same strangely dark eyes that had held her spellbound in the practice room. “Would you like to do it?”

His hand left her lower back and reverently slid between her legs, rubbing along her slit. “Xingcai,” he groaned.

His touch was so arousing. She leaned forward and kissed him as he played with her, until she felt ready to try the next step.
She broke the kiss and touched his wrist. Instantly he pulled his hand away, but as he did so, she brought it up to her lips and kissed the wet fingers, staring directly into his eyes as she did so.

“You are beautiful,” he said. “I don’t deserve to touch you.”

His love… no, his adoration… was almost overwhelming to her. She never liked to think about herself at all; the expectations in others that her beauty and gender invoked were her chains. But Zhou Tai… he loved all of her, including her femininity, without attempting to cut any part of her away. “If my beauty gives you pleasure,” she said, “then I am happy.”

“You please me intensely,” he said. “I only wish I could please you as much.”

“We will learn,” she said, echoing his words from the day before. “I am your wife now.” She slipped down the sheets a bit until their hips were level with each other. Once again she was staring into his chest, but in this position it was less intimidating, more comforting. A wall she could grab onto for support, instead of a plank that seemed likely to crush her.

He had handled guiding himself into her the first time, and the second time had simply entered her before she was sure what was happening, so this was actually her first time touching it with her hand. It was less stiff, more alive, than she had expected. Part of him. Human.

She guided it so that the head was at her entrance and let go, putting her top leg over his hip. “It’s there,” she whispered to the scars on his chest.

“Tell me if I hurt you,” he said, and pressed into her, both of them shifting their hips into each other.

“I’m alright,” she said unsteadily when they stopped. “How is it?”

“I am inside you,” he said fervently. “Xingcai, I can’t describe it.”

“Then don’t try…”

He began moving his hips, and she leaned her forehead on his chest and panted as she worked her hips as well. It was a shallow penetration, but that didn’t affect his girth, and she felt stretched almost to the limit. In their first coupling against the wall, the adrenaline of the experience—the danger of getting caught, the passion of the position, the novelty of actually wanting to yield to someone, the sense that time was running out, and the voice in her head screaming that this was love, love, love—had distracted her from observing the actual experience of being filled by him.

There were no distractions here, only the feeling of his hands caressing her, still so gently, as if he thought she was made of porcelain.

Neither of them was setting a steady rhythm, and when they happened to both thrust fully at the same time, she felt his tip just brushing up against her cervix, and she gasped a little, arching her back.

With his own body curved forward, this actually put them within range to kiss each other, but he didn’t kiss her. Instead he stopped. “I’m hurting you again…” he said, his face wrenched with guilt.

“No,” she said shakily, “it’s alright. It isn’t pain, it’s…” She closed her eyes. “Zhou Tai, you fill me.”

Before she could open her eyes, his mouth was on hers and his hips were working again, and this time there was no mistaking that he was setting a rhythm. Although he couldn’t go as fast as he had against the wall, he was able to pull out of her more, so the sensation of him sliding through her entrance and against a secret, sensitive spot was just as intense. She felt the tide of orgasm rising within her, and this time her moan was swallowed up by his kiss. The pleasure was unendurable and
she wanted it to go on forever.

All too soon the tide was crashing against the shore and receding. He slowed and stopped, and she broke off the kiss and rested her head against his chest again, breathing hard and feeling her heart and his start to slow down. She realized he was still hard, still filling her. Why had he stopped?

Zhou Tai caressed her face, brushing the short, loose strands behind her ear. “Xingcai… have you thought about children?”

It was a bit sudden, but not surprising, and she had to admit it was connected to what they were doing. It was a bit humiliating to admit that she hadn’t thought about it at all until she nearly spat her chicken all over the table at the suggestion that she up her meat intake to conceive a son. But she wasn’t stupid enough not to realize that it was a possible consequence of what they’d already done. She just… really didn’t see herself as a mother. Well, it wasn’t that being a mother itself would be so bad, just what it would cost to be a mother. As in, everything she cared about in life.

Well, except for Zhou Tai, now.

She knew her silence was accurately communicating that she wasn’t exactly thrilled with the idea, but she still needed to say something. “You want them, right?”

“Yes.”

She looked at him, but that was obviously all he was going to say. Well, of course it was. That was his style. “It isn’t that I don’t want them…” she said slowly. It was very strange, trying to have a serious conversation with an erect penis inside her, immediately after an orgasm. “I just sort of… assumed I wouldn’t ever have them… and this… you and I, I mean… it happened very suddenly. That day in the practice room… I wasn’t thinking about consequences.”

“Neither was I,” he said. “I wasn’t thinking at all. Only wanting.”

She laughed a little. “Yes…” She bit her lip. “Why did you stop to ask now?”

“If you don’t want them… I can’t finish inside you.”

Understanding dawned on her. What she’d felt dripping out of her… that was his seed, wasn’t it. So the question was even more relevant than she’d first thought. She had to make a real decision now.

“Maybe because I never thought I’d have them,” she said slowly, “I always used to tell myself that it was for the best. That I would never have to give up fighting. And fighting has always been what I lived for.”

He sighed. “I don’t want you to give up anything for me.”

He was still inside her, still filling her. She bit her lip and stared at his scars in the dim light, thinking of what it would be like to be really filled, filled with a child. To give birth to a child that was half her and half Zhou Tai. She imagined herself, teaching her daughter to swing a sword; Zhou Tai, carrying their son on his broad shoulders.

She imagined herself hugging her children at Zhou Tai’s funeral. She imagined him hugging them at hers.

She imagined them both, old and grey and bent, fluffing the hair of great-grandchildren.

“If it’s with you,” she said softly, “I think I want them. Because it’s you. Because they would be you
“Xingcai…” he whispered, and she looked up into his dark, dark eyes. “I want you to know that even if you give this gift to me, I will never use it to control you. You will always decide what you’re capable of.”

“You mean… you would still let me fight? Even if I was pregnant?”

“I trust you,” he said softly. “I would sooner think I could order around the stars in the sky than my Xingcai.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm truly honoured that, with more than a year's hiatus from this fic, I still get comments asking if I will continue.

I can't promise how timely I will be, but I really appreciate the support and I do want to finish this fic. I have a clear plot in mind, I just need my muses to speak to me more regularly in this fandom. Hopefully the new DW9 release will help with that! I am hyped!!!
魚死網破 (Both sides fighting to the death.)

Chapter Notes

Happy Chinese New Year 2019! After a long period of writer's block, I was suddenly seized with inspiration and went into a whirl of activity, writing thousands of words in just one week. I now feel like I see my way through to the end, without getting bogged down by perfectionism, which was hindering my creativity.

(I also never bought DW9 for various reasons, mostly the lack of local two player, but also that they made Lu Xun wear that stupid hat again.)

Content warnings: Some Sinocentrism/bigotry against non-Han.

There is a brief explicit scene in a brothel (so obviously the consent issues of sex for payment in such an era), running from “Cao Pi gritted” to “He redressed”.

There is a mention of children having died.

魚死網破: yu si wang po
fish / die / net / break
“Either the fish will die or the net will break or both; a fight to the death with risk of mutual destruction.”

“Lady Huang acts with my authority on this mission,” said Zhuge Liang serenely, addressing the outwardly respectful engineering corps. They were mostly new recruits, and therefore had not yet been exposed to his wife’s brilliance. Once they were, her own authority would suffice, but for the sake of time he needed to make sure they obeyed her like that now. “Follow her instructions and her schemata exactly. Do not attempt to alter or improve her designs.”

“My lord, what if we find a mistake?” said a recruit on the end of the front row.

“Captain.”

The captain of the corps stood up a tad straighter. “Yes, my lord?”

“That one is to be put on the crew for the maintenance of the toilet pits.”

“Yes, my lord.”

The crane fan swayed with a trifle more vigour than usual, though perhaps it was because of the increased southern heat. “Does anyone else have difficulty following instructions?”

No one said a thing. Zhuge Liang smiled and dismissed them.

“You have too much confidence in my designs,” his wife said. “There may be unforeseen environmental influences in the Nanman regions. I was operating on very limited data about the humidity, in particular.”

“My dear, they are ingenious. And remember, they do not need to work for long. Only long enough
to spook those savages.”

Yueying wound the mechanism on the prototype in her hand tightly and held it while she lit the fuse.

———

Guan Yinping clapped her hands with delight as the small pod of river dolphins surfaced again.

Her husband grinned at her. “Surely you’ve seen them before?”

“Yes but I think they’re cute every time. Oh, look! That one has a little spot on his back!”

“My lord.” Lu Xun turned to face the sailor. “We’ll be at the dock in about ten minutes, or a little less, if you wish to make any preparations for disembarking.”

“Everything is already prepared.”

The sailor bowed and went back to his work.

Lu Xun looked back at his wife, who was still watching the river dolphins, but with a wistfulness now to her face.

“Can you really only stay one night?”

“Yes, and there’s worse news,” he said solemnly. When she turned, startled, he continued, “I will have to get some sleep.”

Yinping furrowed her brow a moment, grasped his meaning, and gasped. “Boyan!”

He laughed, and drew her into his arms to kiss her forehead. “I just wanted to warn you, in case you thought you could ‘stock up on your medicine’…”

“You are being so mean,” she told his chest with a pout. “If you think it will stop me from missing you, forget it!”

“I’ll write when I can. And I’ll be spending every day working with all my might to bring the chaos to an end so that we need not be separated anymore.”

She nodded against him but didn’t speak.

———

Sima Yi scowled at the reports on his table. The rain spell of a few months back he had dismissed as a fluke, or even as a snapback from the force of his power; but the rain in Wu and Shu was continuing, nearly to normal levels.

He had redoubled his spells and his sacrifices, but all that seemed to occur was for the situation in the north alone to worsen, and worsen even more by comparison to the recovery outside Wei’s borders.

Who was blocking him? Zhuge Liang? It had to be so; yet how had the man found him out now?

The door flew open with no knocking, and there was only one man who dared to do so to Sima Yi. He hurriedly fell into the kowtows due an emperor.

“Where is my plan for Jing province?” Cao Pi demanded without even waiting for him to finish. He cast a contemptuous look over the papers on Sima Yi’s desk. “What is all this weather nonsense?”
“My emperor,” Sima Yi said without a quail, “Think of all the critical roles flood attacks have played in Jing province so far! I must contemplate—”

“We have to strike fast,” Cao Pi growled. “Shu is preoccupied with their south and Wu is massing in the east. There will never be a better time to divide Shu from Wu. We must take the rest of Jing province now, while it is so meagerly defended and cannot receive aid from Shu. Wu must learn its folly in forgetting who it was that gave them even a piece of Jing. If you haven’t got a plan, I’m wasting my time here. I want one tomorrow!”

And with that he left.

Sima Yi’s tongue tapped against his teeth. He stood up and picked among his sheets for the information about Jing province. A volatile region in so many ways. The weather had been at its craziest there. And as the focal point for so many battles, so much traffic of troops over fields, the anticipated yields of the harvests were poor indeed.

Jing would not be a valuable resource… Wu may not even miss it, with the bounty in the east, and could Shu possibly be so foolhardy as not to reinforce Wu at this critical juncture in their alliance? What would Zhuge Liang do?

Sima Yi cackled aloud. He had been so blind, worrying only about his spell, that he had forgotten the other principles of strategy. He had nearly, but only nearly, been an imbecile.

Zhuge Liang would reinforce Wu just enough to cause Wei terrible losses and reassure Wu of their commitment, yet allow Wei to take the useless province in the end. What did it matter to Zhuge Liang whether it was in the hands of Wu or Wei? But it would matter very much to Wu, who would be doubly committed to their alliance with Shu. Meanwhile, wedged between Shu and Wu, Jing province would be a never ending drain on Wei’s army, repelling pincer attacks. And giving what in return? Hardly anything. No… this had Zhuge Liang trap all over it. It would be a victory worse than a loss.

No… now was the time to move boldly and take Guangling and control of that entire peninsula, with a goal of taking control of vital portions of the Yangtze. And depending on how massive a success it was, they would be then primed to make a run on Jianye, the Wu capital. Now that would be a prize worth taking!

Yes… they could easily cow Sun Quan into accepting an even lower position than that originally offered by Cao Pi… and then when Zhuge Liang came back from his little southern expedition… he would find the landscape quite different to his expectations!

Lulu stabbed at the coconut with her spear, digging out a hole, from which she greedily sucked out the liquid. She tossed the remnants down into the stagnant water around her boots and steadied her nerves as she stepped over the corpses of both friend and enemy.

Some of them she had killed herself. She had been fighting for a week now, but still wasn’t sure how she felt about that. She wasn’t stupid, and she had known she would either need to kill or be killed, but she had prepared herself to feel some amount of guilt or sadness. Perhaps all the time she had spent as a child in her brother’s company seeing the aftermath of battles had hardened her in advance.

There was no time to worry about it now. The charge of some panicked elephants had driven her and a few common soldiers off a cliff, and they had been following along the gully and trying to rejoin
Shu, but had only come in contact with pockets of enemy fighters instead. Now she was the only Shu soldier left alive. Night would fall soon, and then she would really be in a jam. She just needed to—

There were a series of explosions in the distance. She flinched back for a moment, but then went against her instinct and listened to her reason: run towards the explosions. Explosions probably mean Lady Huang.

She was proven correct when she slashed open some vines and revealed that she was on a short cliff near a battlefield, or to be more precise, a scene of pandemonium.

Lady Huang's little mechanical wasps were spooking not only the Nanman elephants and tigers but also the soldiers as they buzzed around wildly and then exploded. They didn't actually damage much beyond perhaps a minor burn or ringing in the ears if they were very close to the skin. Elephants couldn't be expected to understand their lack of danger, but the human beings certainly should have.

She could see a little group of Shu soldiers on one side of the cliff. It looked like Lord Zhuge Liang had managed to capture the enemy king yet again. Lulu fervently hoped he wouldn't just let the enemy go this time. How many times would that be? Six? Seven?

"Lulu! Lulu!"

By the time she was able to hear his cry, Zhao Yun had already expertly weaved most of the way through the chaotic battlefield on his horse.

"Can you climb down?" Zhao Yun called up to her.

"Of course," she said, nearly laughing in relief that he was there. "I could probably even jump down, it's not that far."

"Please don't try."

As it turned out, her climb down became a fall anyway as she lost her grip when there was a sudden mass explosion in the field, but her husband caught her. He swung her down into the saddle with him and rode back to the Shu forces.

"Sorry," said Lady Huang when she dismounted. "I threw the kill switch for all the remaining wasps without having noticed you were climbing down."

“Where is Lord Zhuge Liang?” Lulu said, wishing to get the subject off of herself.

“Oh, did he go that quickly?” Lady Huang looked around, seemingly unperturbed at the disappearance of her husband. “I suppose he must really have gotten that Meng Huo to surrender for good this time. He'll be back off north, then.”

———

“Well! This could have gone worse, eh?”

Wei Yan could be forgiven for only responding with a grunt to Ma Dai, because his mouth was full of noodles. The surprise appearance of the Shu forces out of the Ziwu Pass had indeed panicked Xiahou Mao out of his senses. He had fled with some, but not enough, of his forces into the inner city and raised all the defenses without even bothering to make sure that all the regular city fortifications were in place. Having been clearly abandoned by their superiors, it was no wonder that the forces left in the main city quickly surrendered, especially because the Shu officers negotiating
the surrender were far more competent and principled than the shiftless Xiahou Mao. And with that surrender had come not only troops and armaments but Chang’an’s storehouses of food.

The Shu forces were under no illusion that this easy situation would last, but they were enjoying the bounty for the time being with a great feast, one open to the common people of Chang’an as well.

“Young Master!” Ma Dai called out to his cousin. “Surely you’ve solved enough problems for one day?”

Unlike the rest of them, Ma Chao still had on his armour, even his helmet. He had been receiving reports, complaints, and requests from the troops and commoners of Chang’an since the battle ceased, without a break, yet he waved Ma Dai back. “I’m fine. You play host.”

“Hey, hey! Isn’t the role of the host to make sure no guest goes unfed?” Ma Dai grabbed a piece of bread off the table and balanced it on top of a cup of wine, then moved, mostly steadily, over to his cousin and pushed the snack into the hand that wasn’t holding the brush. “Here, I’m being the host!”

Ma Chao flicked his brush at Ma Dai, making the younger man exclaim, but he did take a bite of the bread.

"Watery ink," Ma Dai said. "You shame me!"

———

“I have a bad feeling about this…”

Yue Jin groaned. “Li Dian, you have had nothing but bad feelings for months now. I don’t want to hear it.”

The shorter man’s heart sank into his stomach when he saw that Li Dian wasn’t even listening. He was staring into space… no, he was looking at something. The men? You didn’t need Li Dian’s intuition to tell that their troop morale was at a nadir. Rations had been cut and cut again; even the officers had cut their rations, to show solidarity. Wang Yi was leading them through a routine. The lady officer turned and caught Li Dian’s eye.

“What are you looking at?” growled Wang Yi.

Li Dian startled. “Sorry, I was staring into space,” he explained, rubbing his curly hair awkwardly.

Wang Yi clearly wasn’t buying it. “You and your damn hunches!” she scoffed. “Master Guo Jia may be dead, and Master Jia Xu and Master Sima Yi with the emperor, but Master Jiang Wei has the same potential. We’ll be there in time to rescue Master Xiahou Mao and lift the siege on Chang’an. More than that—we’ll destroy whatever officers they’ve sent. Do you know who is leading this attack? Wei Yan and **Ma Chao.**” She could not say that name except with utter loathing. “They have no strategist—Zhuge Liang is leading the attack to the southwest, and Wu has withdrawn their strategist. It’s obvious that they are running blind, because why else would they have attempted a siege with no siege weapons? With Master Jiang Wei and Master Xu Shu, we will crush them.”

Yue Jin glanced at Xu Shu, who was sitting with his hood hiding his face. That Xu Shu had once been a brilliant strategist was famous, but he had done nothing beyond mediocrity since joining Wei. His heart, people whispered, was still with Shu; only the fact that his mother was being held hostage kept him in perfunctory service to the Cao clan.

“You need not fear the outcome of this battle, Master Li Dian,” said Xu Shu quietly.
“I don’t fear it, exactly…” said Li Dian. “I don’t know. It isn’t going to be pleasant, whatever’s coming.”

“As long as we do our duty as officers of Wei,” came the impassioned voice of Jiang Wei suddenly, “as long as we act as men of honour, we can never fail, even if we lose our lives!”

Wang Yi did not look impressed by this speech, but said nothing, turning back with a bark of dismissal to the men.

———

Xu Shu employed a subterfuge from his long ago days as a vigilante to slip away from his squadron. He undid a pinned up lining to his cloak, turned it inside out, and pulled it close around his body. Not the most advanced of disguises, but sufficient.

He wondered, as he moved quickly and silently away from the Wei reinforcements’ encampment by the Wei River and towards Chang’an, if he would be able to recognize any of the Shu officers.

He certainly did not expect to be greeted by an officer he knew better than any other.

“Am I early, or are you late, my friend?”

Xu Shu could hardly believe it. Zhuge Liang, the Sleeping Dragon, there in the flesh, with the same crane fan that he had been inseparable from all those years ago when they were both students of the same Taoist master. There were a few others there in Shu colours whom he did not recognize, although he supposed the one in the grand cavalry armour had to be Ma Chao.

He swallowed, but managed to speak. “I’m late… I was almost too late…”

Zhuge Liang’s lips curled. “My dear Xu Shu, how I have missed your earnestness. In these years without you my company has dwindled to sycophants and sarcastics. It will be a blessing to me to have your principled sincerity to react against.” He leaned back in his chair. “But please be seated while I rephrase my question. I had expected that by the time I managed to get away from the southwest, the Wei reinforcements would have been here for weeks. My success in the Nanman lands was, I may say, beyond even my own expectations, but even so, I did not think I would beat you to Chang’an. What has happened?”

“My subterfuges worked a little too well. The emper-I mean Cao Pi and his strategists, were in disarray about what your real purpose is. They don’t believe for a moment that we really intend to capture Chang’an. But the argument was about whether your real target was the west or Jing province. I was worried for a time that they may have attempted to leave both fronts along and bring reinforcements from even farther, under the belief that Chang’an castle can withstand a long siege. But fortunately Xiahou Mao’s blunders with losing the supplies forced their hand. Guo Huai, and Ma Zun are keeping their forces in the west, except for lending Jiang Wei. Cao Ren is remaining in Jing, and sent Li Dian, Yue Jin, Wang Yi, myself, and about twenty thousand troops.”

“All from Jing?”

“Yes, but the intent is to sweep back after, they suppose, crushing Shu and push all the way past Fan Castle and take Jing back from Wu. They think you do not intend to come to Wu’s assistance in any meaningful way.”

“If Lu Xun is the man I think he is, I won’t need to.” Zhuge Liang frowned a moment. “I suppose that means that Jing will be entirely Wu territory. Ah, well, it will still be a part of the empire. But back to the matter at hand, since we don’t want you missed. What is the plan?”
“Just after midnight, while the main army brings a large assault from the northeast, Jiang Wei will attempt to sneak in with a small strike force from the northwest. Once inside, Jiang Wei is to unofficially take over command from Xiahou Mao. Wang Yi will guard Xiahou Mao and the inner castle while the rest of us deal with recapturing the rest of Chang’an.”

Zhuge Liang sighed. “How many troops? Their mood?”

“About twenty thousand altogether. And terrible.”

“Your officers—which are popular?”

“All pretty popular, I would say… well, Wang Yi isn’t exactly popular… Respected, but… It’s not that her conduct is…” Xu Shu tried to think how to phrase it. “If she were a man…”

“I imagine I can fill in the gaps there.”

“Even if she were a man, she’s got eyes like a snake,” said a man sitting behind the others.

The armoured man looked back, which meant that Xu Shu could not see his face. “Ma Dai, please.”

“Ma Dai has an artistic intuition that may be useful,” Zhuge Liang said. “My dear Xu Shu, I wish for you to describe to him as exactly as you can Jiang Wei’s appearance and dress. Am I right in thinking the man himself is not well known to the Jing troops?”

“Yes, they’ve only seen him at a distance; he doesn’t usually work with the troops directly.”


“Yes, my lord?”

“This man is Xu Shu, who will beat you… hmm, I suppose it will have to be about the face to have visual impact, if the sun is up by then. I apologize for that and hope that any scarring will be minimal.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Good. We will have Chang’an and Jiang Wei in… five days.”

Xu Shu stared. “Five days?”

“Yes, I am giving a generous estimate so that I can have the pleasure of being early again,” Zhuge Liang said serenely.

———

Cao Pi gritted his teeth as the girl riding him moaned out her orgasm, then roughly shoved her off of him and beckoned to the next. This one was new to the brothel, and her hesitation and awkwardness as she climbed on top of him annoyed him.

He attacked her clitoris with his thumb viciously while guiding her pace with the other hand.

“Ah!” she squealed, “Too much—”

“Don’t fight me,” he commanded. “You will come for me.”

Soon she too was huddled with the other women in post-orgasmic dissociation. Cao Pi let out a long,
hissing breath from between his teeth. He felt revived from taking so much jing, but what did it matter? It wasn’t his own talent and ability he doubted—it was everyone else’s.

He redressed and left the room. His other officers were long since done and ready to go. They all looked sleepy and satisfied.

Fools.

He fell into step with his kinsman Xiahou Ba as they left the establishment. The boy was only about sixteen, and had never fought as an officer on his own, rather than a subofficer to his father, who had died last year in the loss of Hanzhong.

He didn’t know the boy very well, and that needed to change. He would need young officers like Xiahou Ba to back him for decades and decades of his imperial reign.

“Are you ready for your first time in command?”

The youth’s ruddy cheeks were even redder than usual, with a total face flush that indicated some level of intoxication. “Ah, well, ready, I’m not—” he hiccupped—“not sure about ready, but I’m certainly eager, your imperial majesty! I’ll do my best!”

“The cooperation of the Xiahou and Cao clans in our father’s generation is what has brought Wei to glory. My father knew he could depend on Xiahou Dun, Xiahou Yuan, and Cao Ren. Now the years are coming when I will depend on you and your brothers and cousins.”

“I’ll be glad to learn from Cao Ren how to live up to my father’s—” hiccup—“name.”

“You’ll have to tell me all about it when we all come back to Luoyang in triumph. Once our forces humiliate them in the west, you’ll have quite a momentum behind you to retake Jing province, no matter how they scramble. I’ll be seeing to things personally in the east. Get a good night’s rest! Lots of travel ahead!”

———

Wang Yi said only one sentence to Xu Shu as he tied her chains. “You fool, your mother will die by inches!”

“My mother is already dead,” he said calmly. “I’m free.”

She felt no hatred for him; that he would want to betray Wei as soon as his mother was out of their power to harm was obvious. It would have been hypocritical for her not to understand his desire for revenge. She uttered a curse, but it was towards the foolishness of her masters, who had thought they could continue to string him along, and had not even bothered to inform the rest of them that his leash had snapped.

Wang Yi walked with as much dignity as was possible when being led on a chain like a dog by a former comrade. Obviously she was being led to the demon, or to his beastly comrade. She had failed, but she would die spitting in their faces.

The demon and the beast were there, with Li Dian and Yue Jin already kneeling in chains before them, but there were two other men standing there that she had not expected to see. Zhuge Liang, the Shu prime minister, and Jiang Wei. A standing Jiang Wei, unbound, wearing his weapon.

She stopped suddenly, and Xu Shu did not force her forward. “Jiang Wei, you dog! You swine!” she raged. “You call yourself a man of honour—I am a thousand times the man you are!” She looked at
her fellow prisoners. “You kneel—you think the demon of Xiliang will show you mercy? Thank whatever gods exist your wives and children are in Luoyang, so you don’t have to see what his mercy is like—“

“Silence her,” said Ma Chao.

Xu Shu used the butt end of his sword to give a swift hit to the back of her skull, and she sank limply to the ground, looking grotesquely like a discarded puppet in the chains. Ma Chao looked a question at him, and Xu Shu said quietly, “I’ve been around her long enough, that’s the only way she’d shut up around you.” He took a short breath, trying to think how to say what he needed to say.

“She… liar… Shu… treat… well…” said Wei Yan to Yue Jin and Li Dian.

Li Dian started to laugh, but cut it off with a wince. He had gotten a bad wound to his ribs, and it must have hurt. “Sorry,” he said, as if excusing himself for spilling wine at a party. “It’s just funny, because I know…”

He trailed off, looking directly at Ma Chao, who was looking back at him with a strange expression. Xu Shu took another breath. “Master Ma Chao, I have something to report.”

Ma Chao was finding it difficult to take his eyes away from Li Dian’s smiling face and completely unsmiling, accusing eyes. *I know what you did*, the eyes said. *And you, too, know what you did.*

“Master Ma Chao?”

Li Dian lowered his eyes, and Ma Chao was able to turn his face to Xu Shu. “Yes, Master Xu Shu?”

“I found out why the plan didn’t work… why she didn’t come out…”

The plan had been to lure Wang Yi into abandoning her duty and attacking Ma Chao under the impression that Xu Shu had crippled Ma Chao to the point of fleeing, badly wounded, for his life, and to make it convincing, Xu Shu had actually been one of the ones to first encounter Ma Chao and had actually given Ma Chao a serious blow, and Ma Chao had allowed Xu Shu to hook and claim his spear. But Wang Yi hadn’t come out, and Xu Shu had gone to find out why.

“Your cousin did not follow his part of the plan…”

“Are you here to rape me?”

Ma Chao was taken aback. He had interrogated a lot of captured enemy officers and commanders before, but none of them had opened that way. Of course, none of them had been a woman, either.

She did not look afraid of him. She did look defeated, but the main expression on her face was still what he had always seen from her, ever since that day. A hatred as cold as ice.

“No, I’m not,” he said. “I’m here to interrogate you.”

She laughed bitterly. “You want to pretend this isn’t personal?!”

“Justice demands from me that—“
“Justice!” She literally spat the word out—he felt the spittle hitting his face. “Oh yes, I’ve heard of your justice! You hypocrite, you snake, you demon, using that word with me, when I saw your spear eviscerate my husband, heard my daughter scream as your archers shot her, my baby taken from my arms and dashed onto the stone—“

“I didn’t mean for the women and children—”

She hadn’t stopped speaking, merely raised her voice to drown his out. “They thought I was dead already, you all thought I was dead, but I wasn’t. I was still alive and I saw everything. Everything. My husband, my children, our entire clan—you killed them all. You killed them all and I swore I’d kill you, and now I’ve failed. I’ve failed forever.” She laughed again, and it was a terrible sound. “At least I was able to take your cousin from you. Did you enjoy how artistically I left his body? I couldn’t kill him as slowly as I would have liked, but he suffered plenty. I only wish you could have heard his screams.”

“You’re not going to make me lose control,” he said, though the way he was gripping his spear may not have supported his words very well.

She didn’t miss it either. “You’re going to kill me,” she said. “It’s just a question of when, and how much more you try to make me suffer first. You want my information, but I won’t give it to you. Are you purposefully being stupid? You can’t get it from me from asking me, so you’ll need to torture me. Do you want me to pretend I don’t know how men torture women? Or do you just enjoy lies for their own sake, demon?”

“I’m not going to rape you.”

“Such restraint,” she mocked. “You’ve already violated me beyond redemption, but your cock is too good to touch me, huh? Or is it small? Worried I won’t even feel it go in? Is that why you carry such a big spear?”

He left without another word.

———

“Da Ge!” roared Zhang Fei the moment he had finished his sloppy kowtows. Liu Bei laughed as the burly man took him in a big hug that knocked his mianguan askew. “Glad to be back! Just tell me where to point my spear! Am I going to Nanman?”

“No, that’s already settled.”

“Eh? The north then.”

“That’s settled as well, for the time being.”

“Ehhhh?” Zhang Fei stepped back, blinked, but then brightened again. He roared a laugh and clapped his arm around Liu Bei’s shoulders. “A drink then!”

As the oath brothers walked off with this happy purpose, the empress smiled indulgently as they passed, then spoke to the other arrivals. “Welcome to Chengdu. I hope your journey went well?”

“Er, not too bad, Lady Sun, er, I mean, your imperial majesty—” began Zhang Bao.

“Oh please, I am your aunt, call me Boniang!”

“Ah… Boniang, uh, may I present my wife, Lu Yusheng?”
“Lu Yusheng! Oh, of course. Lianshi wrote to me about you! Won’t it be nice to have another Wu girl in the capital. And you must call me Boniang as well!” She turned her face to Zhang Bao. “I suppose you’ll be taking Lady Lu to your mother?”

“Father’s written to her to come to Chengdu. He was nervous about how far west the fighting might come.”

“Mm.” Shangxiang appraised Lu Yusheng, then said mournfully, “I suppose you don’t fight?”

“No, Boniang.”

“Damn,” the empress cursed lightly. “All my usual partners are gone. Do you know how difficult it is to get the emperor to make time to spar? I tell him it’s to keep him in form, but I think he’s beginning to suspect something. And all the campaigns are going so well—too well! When am I going to get to fight again, come on!”

———

Sun Quan, Ling Tong and Zhou Tai stood atop the grand battlement of the largest fortification, drinking wine. Their postures were meant to indicate total confidence and relaxation, but there were hidden meanings as well. Sun Quan was visible to the eyes of the Wei scouts, but his body always had Ling Tong’s or Zhou Tai’s between it and a possible surprise arrow.

And despite their casual postures, their words were anything but.

“They definitely don’t buy it,” said Ling Tong cheerfully. He had his back to the others, sitting on the outer wall itself and regarding the newest batch of scouts.

“If we needed reinforcements from Jianye,” said Sun Quan, then paused to take a drink, “How long would it take?”

“Already sent for,” said Zhou Tai, “but I think Ling Tong is right.”

“How long?” repeated Sun Quan dully.

“Two days from now, but it’s probably too late,” said Ling Tong, with a laugh. He raised his cup at the Wei scouts, who seemed to take fright at this acknowledgement and rode away.

Sun Quan looked into his empty cup. “Do you think Zhuge Liang anticipated this?”

Zhou Tai shrugged, and Ling Tong swung around and hopped back onto the battlement. “Won’t make us any more fucked if he did.” He was still smiling, even though they were no longer under surveillance. The three began to walk back inside. From the front, it was a grand fortification, but behind that front, there was absolutely nothing. No great stockpiles, no grand weapons, and most importantly, a mere skeleton crew of troops.

“If they attack,” said Sun Quan, “We’ll have to hit with everything to keep them back, scare them off if possible. If they reach inside the fake fortifications and realize the sham, the morale boost will be insurmountable.”

“You should leave tonight, my lord,” Zhou Tai said.

“I would be condemning you all to death,” Sun Quan said.

There was a long silence. Zhou Tai and Ling Tong exchanged speaking glances while their king
busied himself with a snack of dried persimmons. They couldn’t deny the truth of Sun Quan’s words. It was likely that only Sun Quan’s frequent demonstration of his presence was enabling their bluff to succeed. If Wei knew, or even suspected, that Sun Quan had fled, the game would be up. And a full retreat would be impossible because they would surely get bottlenecked against the Yangtze—if they weren’t caught and massacred long before that.

Both men had come close to death for their king before, and were more than willing to die for him for good; but Zhou Tai had a new little wrinkle in its life, which shortly introduced herself into the room.

Xingcai performed the obeisances to a king professionally, despite Sun Quan’s seeming indifference. “Your majesty, I was told you’d received a letter in code.”

Sun Quan pulled the letter from the top of a pile and held it out for her.

“May I sit, your majesty?”

“Go ahead.”

Xingcai studied the letter while Ling Tong and Zhou Tai studied her and Sun Quan studied the dried persimmon he was eating with extreme slowness. Her lips moved silently as she worked out which characters were represented by which symbols.

“This is definitely a Shu code,” she said at last. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t understand what it says?”

“No, your majesty, I mean I don’t understand why this would need to be encoded,” she said. “It’s full of nothing but good news.”

“Good news for who, though,” Ling Tong said with just a hint of sarcasm—enough to raise Xingcai’s hackles, but not anything like concrete enough for her to be able to form an objection.

“Xingcai,” Zhou Tai interceded, “would you please translate it?”

Xingcai’s offence evaporated under her husband’s warm focus. “This kind of code, I unfortunately have quite a bit of experience with it, because my father was always rubbish at it,” she said. “But it’s not something that translates as sentences. I’ll try to summarize. The Nanman tribes have agreed to a system of tribute, including troops, with the officers from the families of their rulers… so also hostages, I suppose. The capture of Chang’an has succeeded, few losses. Fan Castle liable to fall at any moment—Shu reinforcements sent to join Wu. When Shu finishes in the West, the forces can march on Luoyang from Chang’an and Jing province.” She looked back up. “Why would Shu not want that to fall into enemy hands?”

Sun Quan said, “Ling Tong, when Wei is aware that Shu has not only succeeded against them directly in Chang’an but also settled the matter in the southwest, what will they do?”

“Strike in the east,” Ling Tong replied without hesitation. “With everything they’ve got. Reconsolidate power there and move their capital out of danger.”

Sun Quan chuckled. “We’re fucked.”
火燒眉毛 (The fire's up to your eyebrows)

Chapter Notes

Apparently in Dynasty Warriors 9, Xu Sheng is a playable character. I started this work before that game came out so my version of the character—a minor officer and snob—is unrelated to DW9's.

Warnings: Opening scene involves some femdom that may not precisely be 100% safe/sane/consensual.

There is another brief mention of camp prostitution here.

火燒眉毛： huo shao mei mao
fire / burn / brow / hair
“Even one’s eyebrows are on fire - a need for urgency as if the fire has reached one’s face.”

Sima Yi was in his office, sorting through the intelligence reports from the Chang'an disaster. He could hear birds singing outside. It was yet another bright crisp fall day without a cloud in the sky. Even he was finding it difficult to concentrate. Perhaps if he took a ride. He ordered his servant to bring his whip and have his horse readied.

Hands held a whip for him, but when he absent-mindedly grabbed it, they did not release it. He looked up and paled as he saw Zhang Chunhua smiling beatifically at him.

“Chun-Chunhua!” he stammered.

“My lord, is it not time for you to put an end to this wind? It has been a long time since the abdication. The land is suffering from the lack of rain.”

Sima Yi straightened his shoulders, hoping the gesture looked confident and not anxious. “What do I care about the land? My wind has succeeded beyond my wildest predictions! Not only in Wei, but my reports indicate very favourable results in Wu and Shu as well… however lately they seem to be resisting the effects. If the wind keeps up, however, they will succumb again! And so much more is possible…”

“Husband, did you not tell me that the purpose of this wind was to put Cao Pi into power? He is in power; be satisfied. Or have you come to regard even him as an imbecile?”

“No, but… but I have come to realize that I am capable of so much more… I am no longer that man who did not want to become involved, that you told… you told…” He trailed off, remembering her ultimatum to him all those years ago. He had been feigning sickness to avoid being press-ganged into Cao Cao’s service, and a maid had discovered the ruse. Then his wife, who had been about sixteen, had discovered the maid.

While blood was still dripping from her hands from cutting the maid’s throat, she had demanded that he cease acting a fool and choose a lord to showcase his talents, and he had obeyed out of equal parts fear of and ardour for her. He could not think of any way to spin this reminiscence in his favour. He tried to move on. “What will you think of me when I make you empress?”
She did not look impressed; her expression did not change at all. “Do you think I would enjoy being empress of a vast desert?”

He opened his mouth and shut it.

“Husband, has this wind affected your brain as well? Do I need to beat it out of you?” She gently traced the horsehair down his back, her beatific smile never changing.

“Ah… Chunhua…”

———

Chunhua smiled proudly at the welts raising up on the bare back of her husband as he muttered and chanted, burning powders and breaking strange, foul little statues which screamed and bled as they were destroyed.

The sky darkened as he worked, and she got up to look out the window.

As he completed the last part of the ritual and sighed, he looked over at her. She was still naked, and if there was anyone outside they would be able to see her from the waist up at least.

“Come away from the window!” he snapped.

She smiled, and closed and latched the window as a loud peel of thunder was heard. “Jealous, my lord? You don’t know that it’s only you that I punish?” The last line was practically purred, and Sima Yi knew his own naked body was betraying him, even though they had just finished.

She let his whip drop to the ground and came up behind him, embracing him gently and kissing the marks of the whip. With equal gentleness she pulled him back to the bed, and this time actually pulled him on top of her.

“Chunhua, you’re…” He was aroused and suspicious at the same time. “You’re not usually like this…”

“Maybe the weather is affecting me now,” she murmured. “Clouds and rain…”

———

Zhu Ran pulled an eye from a snakehead fish with his chopsticks and popped it into his mouth grumpily. Why was he the only one at the officers’ table? Where were they all?

Only the officers even had a table in this ramshackle camp… at least there was plenty of food, although with the uncertainty of when battle would begin, the stewards were keeping a strict hand on the wine.

Everyone stood up in respect as the king finally entered, but he waved them off.

Sun Quan, Ling Tong, Zhou Tai… what the hell, even Lady Zhang was with the king?

“The troops are in good order, Zhu Ran?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

Sun Quan waved that off too. “‘My lord’ is good enough.”

Sun Quan’s informality thawed Zhu Ran a little. “Sorry I started eating, my lord. Didn’t know when
you all would get here and the men were hungry.”

The king nodded as a server filled his bowl with duck blood soup. “It’s important we keep their spirits up… especially now…”

Ling Tong had taken the seat between Zhu Ran and the king and was eating with the tunneled focus of a rat in a sack of rice. Usually he was a slow eater and a gregarious table companion, especially if Gan Ning wasn’t around. But he was silent.

Zhou Tai, sitting on the other side of the king, was always silent, and was eating at his usual dignified pace. His wife—and wasn’t that a weird way to think about Lady Zhang, who could have been empress!—had always been a ladylike conversationalist in Zhu Ran’s prior dealings with her, but she too did nothing but quietly eat her food.

When Zhou Tai added meat to Lady Zhang’s dish, she gave him a tender smile that had even Zhu Ran feeling a bit jealous. Well, that explained Ling Tong’s disinclination to look at anything but his dish.

“So…” Zhu Ran hoped he kept the testiness out of his voice. “Anything discussed that I should know about?”

Ling Tong looked at Sun Quan, and the king nodded. “Well… we got a coded letter from Shu.”

“Oh?” Zhu Ran leaned back in his chair, glancing from his lord to his comrades as his mind ran rapidly through the probabilities and certainties. “Oh… well, good for them, then. No reason we can’t do just as good.”

Lady Zhang blinked in surprise, and Ling Tong snorted, but Sun Quan said heavily, “No… I’m glad your morale is high, Zhu Ran. We’ll need you to uplift the spirits of the rest of us.”

Zhu Ran said, “Well, what’s the plan?”

The others looked at each other.

“C’mon, don’t tell me you forgot to consult with your strategist… yes, hello, me, I’m also a strategist!… my lord.”

Sun Quan chuckled. “I’m sorry to laugh, Zhu Ran, but I didn’t think there was anything to make a plan with.”

“Tch! My lord! You gotta be kidding me… seriously?”

Lady Zhang said, gently, “I can’t think of any angle for a fire attack here, Master Zhu Ran.”

“What, you guys think the only plan I can come up with is a fire attack?”

They all looked at him.

Zhu Ran crossed his arms. “I can’t believe this.”

“Let’s hear your plan,” said Zhou Tai.

“Hey, don’t put me on the spot that quickly. I only just found out that Shu cleaned house in all their campaigns, you should give me a little more time.”

“Zhu Ran!” Ling Tong went to shush him.
“Don’t be an idiot,” Zhu Ran blocked Ling Tong neatly. “If there was a traitor here we’d already be dead. In fact… huh. I think a traitor is exactly what we need.”

As he read, Jia Xu reached absently with his left hand to the bowl of dried meat, only to touch nothing but porcelain. The Wei strategist sighed irritably and dropped the sheaf of papers, pushing back his chair and getting up to stretch. It wasn’t as if reading through them again would force them to make sense at this point. Too much contradiction… maybe they should just take the gamble and attack…

“Master Jia Xu,” trilled the unmistakable voice of Zhang He, “we have a most urgent matter for your attention. An Wu officer claims he wishes to defect.”

“Oh? I’ll take the letter at once.”

“No, but he is here!” Zhang He struck a dramatic gesture. “Even now he is here!”

“He came himself, directly, without trying to talk to us… who is it, Master Zhang He?”

“His name is Zhu Ran.”

Jia Xu’s shrewd mind ran over his knowledge of the officer. Zhu Ran… a young man from a very noble family, high class, equal in rank with the Sun clan before the Sun’s rapid climb to royalty. He was one of the aristocrats who had bristled at being expected to work with the peasants and brigands that the Sun clan had allowed to advance in the ranks. Wei had heard, and mocked, how Sun Quan had stripped his officer Zhou Tai bare at a party in order to show off his wounds and gain the acceptance of the noble officers. How carnal, how earthy, how very southern.

The reports from their collaboration at Jing province had also made it clear that Zhu Ran was a hothead and blatantly jealous of his comrade Lu Xun. The two had known each other a long time, but while Lu Xun had a good family name and education, he was well-known to be poor. Yet Lu Xun had ended that campaign drenched in honours and was now the Wu chancellor.

And how far up was Zhu Ran? Not very far at all, considering his advantages of birth, education, wealth, connection… but certainly far enough up that his defection would do a lot of damage.

This was very plausible… but that made it all the more dangerous. Anyone could see an obvious trap. It was the hidden ones that did the damage. But so too would they be fools not to take advantage of such an offer if it were genuine.

“I’ll see him immediately,” Jia Xu said, having only needed a few moments to think this through. “Has the emperor been informed?”

“Ah… I thought perhaps… it might be better to avoid burdening our dear emperor with the task of direct interrogation…”

“Oh?” That was a good point. Cao Pi was obsessively hands-on lately. “Alright, but he won’t be kept waiting longer than the first interrogation.”

Zhu Ran paced around the room under the watchful eyes of his guards. They had placed him pretty far back in their camp, so there was a good chance the officers’ quarters were—
Zhang He swanned back in, bringing with him another man, this one a shorter and mustachioed, with a somewhat aged appearance but very sharp eyes that looked keenly at him through the light of the single candle on the table. “Master Zhu Ran? I am Jia Xu.”

Zhu Ran bowed with hands clasped. “Master Jia Xu, of course I am familiar with your tactics. I am glad to be handled by you. I believe you may understand my motivations.”

Jia Xu smirked. “I’m more interested in your information than your motivation.”

“My information is very simple to convey. Wu has massively blundered.” It had felt odd at first to fall into the formal cadence he hadn’t bothered to use since his school days, but once in the pattern it flowed smoothly. “Once again, Zhuge Liang has made a fool of us. He and our chancellor agreed on a plan for Shu to preoccupy Wei in the west while we make a big show of gathering strength for an invasion in the east, while all the real strength of the Wu armies and navies get ready to strike in Jing and Yang province. But you’re not setting up to defend against us, you’re setting up to invade us, so Guangling is done for. Especially because you could hear any moment that Shu captured Chang’an.”

Zhang He and Jia Xu laughed. “I’m sorry—that Shu what?”

“Shu finished the capture of Chang’an,” Zhu Ran said. “We just received word of it today, encoded so that it wouldn’t fall into your hands. They’re hoping to keep it from you as long as possible, because once the emperor learns he’s lost Chang’an, he’ll realize he’s got to consolidate his power in the east.”

“Shu captured Chang’an—how?”

Zhu Ran faltered a bit. “Uh… they didn’t tell me about that part. I mean, I guess Shu could’ve been lying to impress us, but the king and the rest certainly think it’s the truth.”

Zhang He tilted his head. “So why is Guangling’s loss such a certainty, that you wish to leave them?”

“The castle? It’s just a front. Only the outer walls are finished, and there’s barely three thousand troops. The fleet likewise—the front of the ‘blockade’ is all there is. The boats in the back you can barely see from your end are dummy boats. Right now, the only thing keeping up the bluff is that Sun Quan has been making a big show of his presence, inspecting the ‘preparations’ for our supposed invasion and so on. But pretty soon they’re going to decide that he has to get away. There’s no way we can get a full retreat across the Yangtze before you catch us, so Sun Quan will flee alone, leaving the rest of us to get slaughtered slowly enough to let his stupid tiger ass escape once again.” Zhu Ran was getting revved up at this opportunity to vent all his darkest and most seditious thoughts. “I’m through with this! It’s just one shitshow after another in Wu, ever since Shu came around. Sun Quan made a big mistake throwing in with them instead of with Wei, and I don’t want to get killed to let him keep making mistakes. Wei actually knows how to treat its officers.”

Jia Xu’s face was serious. “And who are your officers?”

“Sun Quan, Ling Tong, Zhou Tai, and Zhang Xingcai—Zhang Fei’s daughter. Xu Sheng and Gan Ning are on the fleet.”

The Wei officers peppered Zhu Ran for another hour on details of this or that before Zhu Ran blurted, his own natural impatience making it sound genuine: “Hey, you know, when the sun comes up, it’s gonna be noticed that I’m gone and they’ll suspect I’ve come here. You’ll lose your chance to kill Sun Quan!”
Jia Xu remained calm. “I think we had better speak to the emperor. For the time being, I see no reason for you to be bound, so long as you stay quietly in this tent, Master Zhu Ran.”

Zhu Ran brought his hands up in a salute. “Maybe I’m pushing my luck, but could I get something to nap on?”

“But of course,” said Zhang He before Jia Xu could consider this request. “Sleep is essential to beauty!”

The troops finished their forms by rearranging themselves into an anti-cavalry formation and letting out a loud shout. Ling Tong grinned and raised his hand.

“How perfect work,” he said. “Let’s have breakfast.”

That got a shout just as loud. Ling Tong laughed, turned to a steward, and said, “I’ll take breakfast in to the officers. They’re working hard on their strategy and privacy is extremely important.”

“Yes of course,” said the steward, “but it’s a lot to carry, my lord.”

“Too much food deadens the intellect,” Ling Tong said, improvising the kind of bullshit that Lu Meng used to say back in the day. “I’ll just bring tea in.”

The steward accepted this, but gave him a tray with a large pot of tea, five cups, and a plate of shrimp dumplings.

Despite his lazy expression, Ling Tong checked his surroundings carefully to make sure that when he opened the door he would be unobserved.

After all, it was critical that no one else realized the room was empty.

Ling Tong sat in a chair, poured five cups of tea, and dumped four out onto the unfinished, packed dirt floor. Then he took a sip of tea.

Well, with every passing minute that no alarm of Wei attack was raised, the odds of Sun Quan, Zhou Tai, and Lady Zhang making it across the Yangtze went up. If they didn’t attack until tomorrow, Ling Tong could even surrender with an easy conscience, and guarantee the safety of his men. And who knows? Maybe he’d be traded for a Wei hostage…

That was assuming that Gan Ning didn’t fuck the surrender up, of course. That had been one unanswerable wrinkle in Zhu Ran’s plan. There was no way to get a message to the fleet. The navy was being hung out to dry and they didn’t even know it. That sat uncomfortably, but he also knew that if Gan Ning or Xu Sheng could have been told everything, they would have agreed that their lord’s safe escape was paramount.

To Ling Tong, as much as he hated to admit it to himself, Zhou Tai and Lady Zhang getting away was just as important. He wanted so much for her to live and be happy, and Zhou Tai made her happy.

It really had been love. Fuck. He laughed at himself.

He chewed a shrimp dumpling thoughtfully. So far, none of his men had twigged on that four out of their five officers had slipped away in the night with only the clothes on their backs. His main task now was to make sure that this continued.
Well, at least he’d be well-fed on possibly his last day in this world…

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If the supposed defector’s information was accurate, with every moment they waited, they were throwing away a chance to kill Sun Quan. His only possible successor was a callow, illegitimate youth of 13 or 14 years of age. A succession crisis would be inevitable, and Wei could easily take advantage of the confusion to wipe Wu out for good. Perhaps they would even surrender without a fight. Shu, he knew, would never surrender, but with the southlands under Wei’s control, they wouldn’t take long to wipe out either. So a chance to kill Sun Quan was a chance to put the unity of the land within his imminent grasp.

But if it was a ruse, the purpose of the ruse was clearly to get them to attack in haste. And then… what? What might be waiting for them? Wu’s passion for fire, Jia Xu had pointed out, was particularly notoriously linked to this Zhu Ran.

Cao Pi had been there at Chibi as their fleet burned around them, due to just such a false surrender ruse.

He had to agree with Jia Xu. The best response was to wait and attempt, cautiously, to verify the information. If Zhu Ran was being truthful, it might mean losing Sun Quan, but it would still mean gaining Guangling and with it, the entire peninsula and a solid base to launch an invasion into Jianye. And if Zhu Ran was lying, it would keep them from falling into a trap.

The most puzzling bit of it all was Zhu Ran’s insistence that Shu had told them that Chang’an had already fallen. Why would he come up with such a ridiculous lie? Even granted that Shu could somehow defeat them, which Cao Pi would have scoffed at on the face of it, there was no possibly way that even his idiot cousin Xiahou Mao could collapse that quickly. Not with reinforcements on the way and Shu’s lack of siege weapons. Jia Xu and Zhang He both agreed. But they also agreed that the lie was itself disturbing. It was not the sort of thing the Wu officer would make up if this whole thing was a charade to get them to attack urgently, because it was so patently false. But then whose idea was it?

Maybe it wasn’t even a scheme… maybe it was just idiocy…

Cao Pi threw his empty cup to the ground in disgust. How could one be expected to fight fools? There was no predicting what imbeciles would do.

----

Gan Ning crowed with delight. The enemy scout was falling out of his saddle, clawing at the blood bubbling out of his throat from Gan Ning’s arrow.

Next to him, Xu Sheng let fly another arrow that hit the last scout’s horse and spooked it into throwing its rider and riding off.

“Good shot!” Gan Ning said. “I’ll take care of this!”

He dropped his bow carelessly and leapt down to the deck and across from bound boat to bound boat until he reached shore, where he charged towards the injured and dying enemy scouts with his flail swinging around him.

When he climbed back onto the flagship, cheerful and splattered with blood, Xu Sheng regarded him with open disgust. “Aren’t you even going to wash?”
“What, this?” Gan Ning ran a thumb through the blood on his arm and licked it off, as the common soldiers around him snickered. “Goes with the tattoos, doesn’t it?”

Xu Sheng’s lip curled. “Maybe it does.”

Gan Ning laughed. “I thought the king pulled the stick out of your ass when he threw that party for Zhou Tai.”

“At least Master Zhou Tai behaves with dignity, despite his unfortunate origins.”

Gan Ning was still smiling. “Well, I don’t give a fuck whether you like me or not. Maybe when this is all over we can have a little chat and sort it out. But for the time being, we’re up against it. Our lord—” he pointed in the direction of the false fortifications—“is there, and if they figure out that this—” he jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the understaffed and dummy boats behind them—“is all a sham, he’s fucked. So for the time being, forget about how much you don’t like me and be glad I’m good at killing people.”

Xu Sheng breathed in and out sharply through his nostrils. Tightly, he said, “You’re correct.”

Gan Ning clapped him on the shoulder with his bloodier hand. “Glad we could work this out!”

“More scouts coming!” cried a lookout.

“Great!” Gan Ning shouted back. “Ready for some more fun?”

The men cheered, and Xu Sheng readied his bow.

———

Zhang He entered the tent where Zhu Ran was being held. The Wu officer was picking apart his straw mattress dejectedly.

“My dear sir,” Zhang He said. “While I was most willing to obtain that for your use, I doubt Master Jia Xu will allow me to replace it.”

“Oh,” Zhu Ran said. “But I thought… I mean, surely you’ll have made a decision before tonight? Haven’t you figured out I’m telling the truth?”

“So far, the enemy has repelled our attempts to get closer and verify your information, but it is only a matter of time. I hope, for your sake, you were being accurate. If you have any new information, of course, I am here to listen to it.”

“Scouts won’t get that information for you,” Zhu Ran muttered. “Wu knows that it’s the whole game. What time is it? Sun Quan’s probably boarding a boat to cross the Yangtze by now. Man! This was supposed to be my ticket straight to the top!”

Zhang He regarded him. Craven disloyalty of this kind was so… ugly. Still, “If you have told the truth, it will still gain us Guangling.”

“But you would have gotten Guangling eventually anyway,” Zhu Ran picked at the matress again despondently. “I’m not such a moron to think I’ll get any credit for it. Ah, well, at least I’m on the winning side.” The young man perked up quite a bit at that. “And I won’t even have to fight this time, since you don’t trust me yet!”

“Hm.” Zhang He did not bother to take his leave as he made his exit. The man was unworthy of his
In the darkest hours before dawn, sudden shouting woke Jia Xu.

He sat up, grabbing for his sickle when the tent flap flew up. “The emperor wants you immediately!”

Jia Xu tugged on his boots and ran. There was unrest all over the camp, yet there did not seem to be any enemy attack.

When he got to Cao Pi, the emperor had overturned a table. The emperor was already half in his armour. He faced Jia Xu with fire in his eyes and ice in his voice. “He was telling the truth.”

Jia Xu quickly threw up a field salute, since now did not seem to be the time for kowtows. “About the fortifications? Why is that a cause for—”

“No.” Cao Pi thrust a message at him.

Jia Xu read it over quickly. Chang’an had fallen. Jiang Wei and Xu Shu had defected. No loyal officer had escaped. This, Sima Yi wrote without any hint of panic on his part, was sadly all confirmed. For the time being, communication with the west was uncertain, but Sima Yi was confident in the abilities and loyalties of the officers holding those points. Jing province was under siege, and without reinforcements from the now captured Chang’an, could not possibly be held. Sima Yi courteously reminded the emperor that Sima Yi had said that Jing province was no great loss, and had, on the emperor’s behalf, already commanded an orderly retreat from the Wu forces there.

These setbacks, Sima Yi cordially wrote, were disappointing, but Sima Yi was relieved that the emperor had taken his advice and led a force into Guangling. With a slight shift to the east, the empire could rebuild…

“I could have had Sun Quan’s head at my feet,” the emperor said quietly while Jia Xu was still reading. “History will remember this folly. We’re attacking at once.”

“Your imperial majesty, will you not wait until dawn? I have no plans prepared for a night attack. Fighting in the dark in enemy territory is—”

“I told you I have been a fool!” Cao Pi snarled, snapping his gauntlet on. “I won’t be a fool for a moment longer.”

The clamour also awoke Zhu Ran from his fitful sleep on the cold ground, since he had more or less completely torn apart his sleeping mat.

He got up, pulling on his boots and grabbed for the lone candle. The only guard inside the tent with him was sleeping, still. Should he go out? Help himself to the guard’s sword? He didn’t want to blow his cover too early. While he never liked to wait around, he decided to sit tight.

Within only ten or fifteen minutes, however, a messenger came in, looking bleary-eyed himself. “His imperial majesty has—wake up, Lao Chen—” the messenger paused to shake away the slumbering guard, and get his dazed attention—“his imperial majesty has learned the truth of your claims, Master Zhu Ran, and is attacking without delay. Owing to the urgency of the situation, he commands you to join as an officer with attacking the fleet.” Aside, he added, “You’d better go back, Lao Chen.”
The guard lumbered out, having been asleep in his boots.

“Wait for me outside a moment,” said Zhu Ran, “I need a piss.”

The messenger was taken aback, but Zhu Ran was an officer and from the south to boot, which should be double explanation for any oddness, so he bowed and obeyed.

The fleet hadn’t been informed of Zhu Ran’s fake defection. There was no way Zhu Ran intended to face Gan Ning as an actual enemy. That was not the way he wanted to die. If he was going to go out…

“Oh, new plan: back to the old plan,” he muttered, cracking a smile to himself.

Zhu Ran dropped the lit candle in the centre of the tent and watched to make sure the straw remnants caught fire. Then he walked to the exit, careful to make sure there was straw that would catch fire between the little flame and where he stopped, and undid the little opening in his boots so that a little line of black powder shook out.

“All set,” he said cheerfully as he exited the tent. “Take me to the emperor!”

The escort kept a good pace. He was careful to walk through flammable material as much as he could, not giving a damn that the messenger was more and more puzzled by him.

The messenger dropped to kowtow as they approached but the emperor dismissed him before he could begin. “Get to your place.”

“Your imperial majesty, I’m glad you found out everything’s a front,” Zhu Ran said, “but what’s the rush? Like I told…”

“Don’t remind me that we’ve lost Sun Quan,” barked Cao Pi. “It is the other part of your information that I have learned the truth of, Zhu Ran. I want to move as fast as possible.”

Zhu Ran looked at Jia Xu for help, and the other strategist delivered.

“You cannot expect someone so new to us to challenge you, your imperial majesty,” Jia Xu said heavily, “but he is clearly of my opinion. A few hours will mean nothing in what we gain when we win, but everything for how easily we win, when our knowledge of the terrain is so poor.”

“If I may speak, your imperial majesty…”

Cao Pi wasn’t happy about it, but he nodded.

“Master Jia Xu is right,” Zhu Ran said. “There’s no way we can gain the advantage of a sneak attack, because all their energy right now is set on making sure they’re not snuck up on, round the clock. And keep in mind, the Wu navy is full of former pirates. They’re experts at fighting in darkness. And if you wait until the morning and let them see you’re coming at them with everything, you’ll gain the morale advantage big time. Why don’t you let Master Jia Xu show me what you’re working with, and I can tell him the best places to deploy everything?”

Cao Pi looked at Jia Xu, and the elder strategist nodded. “Fine. But do it quickly. Get all prepared. We are to march at first light.”

The two strategists bowed, and left.

“Could we start by going wherever you’ve got my weapon?” Zhu Ran said, pressing his luck. “I feel
a lot better with it on, know what I mean?”

“You majesty! Your majesty!”

The knocking at the locked door of the officers’ room roused Ling Tong from where he’d fallen asleep in the chair.

He got up and opened the door only a crack. “What is it? His majesty needs his rest.”

“There’s fire in the north, my lord!”

Ling Tong looked over his shoulder. “I’ll investigate this, your majesty,” he told the empty room, then rapidly passed through the door, slamming it shut and locking it behind him.

When he got up to the top of the walls, he gave a low whistle. Since the sun hadn’t come up yet, the red light dancing across the sky was like a demonic northern sunset. The wind was blowing west from the sea, so the smell was only faint.

For the first time since this whole mess began, Ling Tong broke into a broad, genuine smile.

You just couldn’t help yourself, huh Zhu Ran?

“Master Gan Ning, Master Xu Sheng! The fleet! The fleet is arriving! Reinforcements from Jianye!” The message boy’s shoulders were shaking with relief and held back tears.

Gan Ning let out a whoop that startled Xu Sheng into hitting his head on the low ceiling of the boat. “Ha! I fucking knew it!”

The pirate clambered to deck and south, leaping from deck to deck like a monkey.

“You call this a blockade, you shitty pirate?” came the familiar voice of Jiang Qin. “Letting us come right up behind you?”

“Oh, don’t act that way, Jiang Qin, I know you’ve been longing to take me from behind.”

Jiang Qin threw his head back and laughed, and his own old pirate and punishment tattoos peeked out of his military dress. “I’ve been wanting to fight by your side again, for sure, Gan Ning! It’s been too long!”

“Sure as hell has.” Gan Ning grinned, turning back to the dummy fleet, where the few sailors he possessed were coming out looking rejuvenated and ready to kill. “It is a shitty blockade. Let’s get the fuck off of it, and go tell the king we’re ready to march north and get some better digs.”

He had been showing the former Wu officer the armoury. Jia Xu had turned his back on the younger man for only a moment.

Now he was waking up with a pounding ache in his head and the acrid smell of smoke in his nose. He touched the back of his head and his fingers came back with congealing blood on them. But he was alive.
Next step: do not burn to death.

He got unsteadily to his feet. The whole camp was in an uproar, from the sounds of it, but at least they were not the sounds of battle. The camp had been set far back from the river, lest the Wu navy attack that way. But this would certainly put a damper on any fire fighting efforts.

As he walked, or stumbled, forward around a bend, he came across Zhang He, directing a bucket brigade with efficient panache.

“Master Jia Xu! You are injured?” Zhang He strode over to him. “The Wu officer is…?”

“Take a wild guess,” Jia Xu said, looking at the chaos. He peered at the sky as best he could through the smoke. “Is it dawn?”

“Some time ago, yes. So he got the jump on you? He fooled us all!” Zhang He laughed, with apparently no ill-feeling. “But what an exquisite performance!”

“You don’t seem too distraught,” Jia Xu said. “The fires aren’t serious?”

“Only inasmuch as they have driven our emperor’s mood to a state I have never witnessed,” Zhang He said with a delicate shiver. “I thought you were with him.”

They both looked at each other, and their eyes mutually widened as they considered the possibility of an assassination attempt.

But when they breathlessly burst into his quarters, their emperor was very much alive and very much preoccupied with a camp follower.

“What the hell are you thinking, coming in here?!”

“We crave your glorious pardon, my emperor! We merely feared for your safety—the Wu officer—it turns out—” Zhang He stumbled on his words, most ungracefully. It seemed even he was unsure of what his lines were.

Cao Pi threw the prostitute off him and stood up with his dick still hanging out. “The Wu officer set the fires? This was all a trick?”

He strode over to where the letter from Sima Yi lay and snatched it up.

Then distant shouts began.

“Attack!”

“Enemy attack!”

“We’re under attack!”

———

“It’s not a trick?” Sun Quan stared at the advance messenger. “You were there yourself?”

The messenger, a boy of fourteen, who had not expected to actually talk to the king, nodded vigorously while his adam’s apple bobbed in his throat.

Sun Quan sank back in his throne, overwhelmed. He had taken it for granted that the men he had left behind would all be slain. The only good news he had hoped for was that at least some were able to
He took a breath and steadied himself. This was a great relief, but Wu had been very close to the edge. And as the message said, Zhu Ran had been hurt in his escape and was being sent back to Jianye to recover. Ling Tong was holding Guangling and had a list of requests for actually making it into the fearsome defence it appeared to be. He had a lot of administration to do.

First thing had to be first. He dismissed the messenger and called for medical assistance to be readied for Zhu Ran as soon as his boat reached Jianye.

———

“Our king sent me personally as he could not come himself. There was too much to do with arranging for the fortifications in Guangling, since winter is coming so soon, but he wished me to tell you how deeply grateful he is to your brilliance and your efforts.”

Zhu Ran was in a great deal of pain from his burns, currently being properly treated, and slightly addled from all the herbal medicine he had already been forced to quaff. He attempted to make a finger gun gesture at her with his bandaged hand. “Was nothing, your maj—ow.”

“Your marquisate shall, of course, be expanded,” the queen said.

“Oh? Didn’t think of that… nice…”

The door slid open, and Lady Zhang entered.

“Wow, war heroes really do get the chicks,” Zhu Ran giggled, and then winced. “Ow! Are you scraping the skin off?”

“It’s infected,” the doctor said testily.

“I heard you were back, Master Zhu Ran, and I came to express my admiration for your strategy… although I must say I am saddened to see how you are suffering from it. Would you appreciate a visit, or would you prefer to rest alone?”

“This?” He tried to scoff, but his lungs were still tender from smoke inhalation and it came out as coughing. “This is nothing. You should have seen me as a kid. Burned all the time!”

Lady Zhang took this odd boast as an invitation, and sat next to the queen. “Perhaps you should play with fire a little less often in future, my lord.”

“Hey, I wouldn’t have gotten burned at all, except that I had to do everything improvised. I’ll stop using fire attacks when they stop working!”

———

Cao Pi hated the security necessity of keeping himself in a carriage for the time being. It would be so much easier to ride out this tension on a horse. Then he might be able to actually think.

He had to get to Luoyang, he had to talk to Sima Yi directly, and find out what the situation really was. The letter had been a fake, but it had been so perfectly convincing. Every stroke a perfect imitation of Sima Yi’s handwriting, every turn of phrase natural to him, every little detail of their internal affairs flawless, such that Cao Pi had actually been swindled into thinking such a ridiculous lie as Chang’an having fallen was true.
But for an enemy to have such information about his forces, and to be able to infiltrate his communications… no letter could be trusted until the matter was sorted out.

Well, it was a retreat from Guangling, but at least it was not a rout. The fire attack had not done the damage they must have planned it would. All his officers had escaped and were riding back to Luoyang with him.

He dwelled upon this point with pleasure, to rebuild his confidence. Yes, Wu had made their plans well indeed, but it had all come to nothing. The tiger had leapt and come away with claws empty!

It had been a disappointment and an embarrassment, but he was still alive, and he would come back with a proper invasion force next time to meet what was clearly a formidable base.

He just had to get to Luoyang first.
**歲寒知松柏 (Winter makes known the evergreen)**

Chapter Notes

Lady Qiao, Sun Ce's wife, calls Sun Quan "Xiao Shu (husband's young brother)" and Sun Shangxiang "Xiao Gu (husband's younger sister)".

Sun Quan and Sun Shangxiang call Lady Qiao "Saosao (older brother's wife)".

Content warnings: An execution is described in this chapter. There is some body horror in a nightmare context. There is a long and fairly graphic childbirth scene.

**歲寒知松柏：sui han zhi song bai**
year / cold / know / pine / cypress

"Winter makes known the evergreen; times of adversity reveal excellence."

Heavy snow fell earlier than usual in the north of Jing province that year. Lu Xun added an extra log to his fire, and in so doing, remembered how he had built a blaze for Yinping on their first innocent night together.

He went to a secret drawer and unlocked it. There was the **xiéyì** that he had discovered Yinping had somehow stashed into his things when they had to part. He coiled a string around his finger and let out a ragged sigh. She had made it herself, especially for him. Beautiful emerald green silk, decorated with a pair of silver swallows, gold threads in their beaks. Building a nest…

She could be having their baby at any time in the next few weeks. How he wished he could go to her, how his heart leapt into his throat every time he received a letter from her, or even more, from his steward.

Giving birth was dangerous, there was just no way around it. And she had no mother, no sisters, not even cousins or friends to stay with her and encourage her.

There was a knock at the door. “Reports, my lord,” came Zhang Bao’s voice.

Lu Xun quickly locked the drawer and went to let the Shu officer in. “You’re working late, Master Zhang Bao.”

Zhang Bao gave a friendly bow and Lu Xun returned it. The two had gotten over their frosty terms when they had parted back in Jianye all those months ago after having worked together to seize the rest of Jing province from Wei.

“I was having dinner with him and my mother,” Zhang Bao said, referring to Xiahou Ba, one of the two major captures they had made, the other being Cao Ren, who had unfortunately succumbed to an injury. Xiahou Ba was the youngest child of Xiahou Yuan, and since Zhang Bao’s mother was Xiahou Yuan’s oldest child, that made them brother and sister, although his mother had been abducted before Xiahou Ba was even born. “I really think I’m making progress generally, but there were a few little things he let slip that I thought I should tell you about right away.”

“Oh?” Lu Xun gestured for him to take a seat, and got out wine for his guest.
“They’ve been talking a lot about my… my grandfather… it meant a lot to Xiahou Ba for my mother to be able to tell him that he was buried with honour and has a shrine in Hanzhong. But he was telling us some stories about when my grandfather was fighting in Liang province and some of them involved details that might be helpful for a Western campaign. Thanks.”

The last word was for the cup of wine. Lu Xun poured himself one as well and went to get maps and writing material.

——

Zhang He felt absolutely no pleasure about his upcoming performance, but it needed to be done.

He walked out into the square. It was bitterly cold, which might explain why the crowd that gathered for the spectacle of an execution was much smaller than usual. Or it might be that the crowd sympathized too much with the condemned, who had lead a rebellion in an attempt to not only stop the tax collectors from taking the ordained share of their meagre harvests, but also to seize the storehouses.

“The emperor does not take your grain by whim, or for fancy,” he said in a loud, theatrical voice, which easily carried to every ear. “He takes it by right, at the will of Heaven. The storehouses are for the benefit of the people in the event that they are needed, and must be controlled and distributed strictly and fairly. This year may be a year of leanness. But such years always come. It is our emperor’s ability to maintain order in such years that shows he possesses the mandate. And he will maintain order! Those who attempt to disturb that order are agents of chaos, and will get what they deserve!”

He gave the signal for the executioner.

The swift movement of the blade, the spray of blood, the head dropping to the ground—these things, too, had a kind of beauty to them, and he did not find them difficult to watch.

It was a more noble and more elegant end than the one he saw forecasted in some of the faces of the common people in the crowd. Malnutrition, hunger, and disease were worse deaths by far.

It would be a very lean winter.

——

There was loud, but muffled by the stone, commotion coming closer, and Zhao Yun quickly swallowed down the mouthful of his breakfast noodles.

The door was flung open, revealing the empress, who was saying crossly, “I’m not going to have this conversation with you right now.”

Zhao Yun dropped to do kowtows but he needn’t have bothered because he noticed neither by her nor by the emperor who followed in after her saying, just as mad, “Don’t walk away from me! We are having this conversation right now!”

“Well it was my mistake for thinking it would make you happy.” Sun Shangxiang sat down at the breakfast table and blocked the attempt of a servant to fill her plate, reaching for the serving implements herself. “I’m hungry and I’m going to eat.”

The emperor signalled the servants and guards out, and Zhao Yun would have eagerly done likewise, but at this point he unfortunately was noticed. Liu Bei, benevolently, indicated Zhao Yun's mostly full bowl. Oh no.
His lord, aware now of his audience, attempted a more reasonable tone. “Of course, I’m—I’m happy, I was happy, but I can’t remain happy when you are insisting on putting yourself into danger!”

“You’ve never objected to me fighting before. Do you think I’m an idiot that would put myself at unnecessary risk? I am still worth far more here than back in Chengdu.”

“It’s too dangerous!”

“Oh, I’ve never been on a battlefield before, I had no idea it was dangerous.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m not talking about going on the front lines!”

“But you can never predict where the front lines of a battle might turn! And the stakes are not the same. A minor injury or illness that would mean nothing to you normally, in your condition… my lady, after how long you’ve been yearning for this child it baffles me that you are treating this so casually!”

The empress did not say anything but drank her tea with a straight back and stony face.

“Zhao Yun, say something!”

Zhao Yun dropped his chopsticks. “What, me, my lord?!”

“Would you fight while carrying a baby?” Liu Bei demanded, then immediately blanched, because as everyone in the room knew, Zhao Yun had fought with a baby in one arm, when they were escaping from Changban Slope.

“Oh, my lord… I may be the wrong person to consult on this…” Zhao Yun hemmed.

“Ha!” Sun Shangxiang gave only that single bark of a laugh.

Liu Bei looked at her and said nothing. There was pleading in his face.

“Oh come on, I’ll say your next line for you: ‘but that was different!’” she challenged, but there was doubt behind the sass.

“It wasn’t different. My wife died in Changban! And Liu Shan… Liu Shan…” Liu Bei faltered.

Despite how desperately he had not wanted to get involved in this, seeing his lord plunging into that old heartbreak immediately snapped Zhao Yun into protect Liu Bei at all costs mode. “My lady,” he said, “you must have compassion for our lord’s feelings. How can he concentrate on leading the land while he is concerned for the safety of your child? Your military service is already legendary, but our lord has many officers willing to serve him on the battlefield. This service is one that can be done only by you.”

The empress stared at the table, biting her lip.

“My lord, I had better leave this to be handled by you,” Zhao Yun said, and received the dismissal with gratitude.

———

The end result of Yinping’s labour was four destroyed pieces of furniture, three servants who fled in terror never to return, two hours of screaming while pushing no matter how the midwife tried to protest that screaming during labour could attract evil spirits, and one, very small but very healthy,
baby girl.

It was the winter solstice and the baby was bundled up such that only her tiny pink face could be seen. Jade and gold were tied round her mittens and sewn into her clothes.

Yinping, propped up next to her in bed, had been equally wrapped up against the slightest dangers of cold, as the traditions of "sitting the month" after childbirth in confinement dictated. She called for the yuezi saosao, a sort of hired substitute sister whose profession was assisting women with no relations in sitting the month, to take away her empty bowl and bring her another serving of warming trotters soup.

When the servant came back, there was another servant with her.

"Your husband has sent a reply to the report of the birth, my lady," he said, holding up the letter. Yinping eagerly reached out for it, but he stepped back.

"My lady, you cannot read while you sit the month! I just wanted to put your mind at ease that he had received it. When the steward comes back in two days, he can tell you what it says."

"Put my mind at ease! You expect my mind to be at ease waiting for two days? Give that letter to me right now, or so help me…"

The servant looked at the yuezi saosao for help in insisting that this was inappropriate behaviour in a new mother, but the yuezi saosao merely shook her head and gestured significantly to a massive crack in the floor.

The letter-bearing servant, cowed, surrendered the letter and left.

Yinping broke the seal and began to read. My darling, my strong, my beloved, my amazing Guan Yinping…

———

When Lianshi first looked unmistakably pregnant, Sun Quan thought that, if anything, the new curves of her silhouette looked even more elegant than before.

As the months went on, however, her belly just kept getting bigger. And bigger.

The doctors told him it was twins, with many words of praise to his virility.

Her belly got bigger still.

Around the eighth month, his sister-in-law, the elder Lady Qiao, and his sister, the empress, had come to be with her at her time, whenever it came. For the empress to come was unusual for many reasons, but the emperor had written a private letter to his brother-in-law begging for his assistance.

I cannot get Shangxiang to see reason, it read in part. I have told her she cannot fight in her condition, and while she is acquiescing, she is still so upset that I am worried that this in itself will hurt the child. And she is stubbornly insisting that there is no reason for her to leave for Chengdu when battle will not likely resume until the spring anyway. If you were to have your wife write to her for company, however…

Shangxiang had arrived in Jianye much changed in appearance from the sister he had sent off six years ago. There was no longer anything girlish about her; she was completely a woman. He knew
she was very early in pregnancy, but he could not tell she was pregnant at all in her loose, flowing robes. She looked every inch an empress.

She had laughed as she saw his shock, and her laugh, at least, was the same. “My lord asked me to dress like this, and I am not a disobedient wife—provided that I don’t mind obeying, that is!” She winked. “Are you worried he sent you an impostor? No one could imitate me!”

It was also the first time in many years that he had seen Lady Qiao. Initially she had lived with her younger sister and her husband Zhou Yu, but when he too died, both sisters had withdrawn, with Sun Quan’s permission and protection, to the Qiao lands of their childhood. In their infrequent letters, both seemed content with the quiet life they found there. The report was that both women continued to wear white, long after even the most conservative three year period of mourning, to signal to any potential suitors that they were not interested.

The woman who got out of the carriage, however, looked exactly the same as he remembered. Even her bright red coat with gold trim was the same.

She too noticed that he seemed to be noticing her clothing more than her, but her reaction was not at all Shangxiang’s confident laughter. She blushed and looked at the ground. “It’s strange for me to be wearing this again too,” she said softly. “But I thought I could not come to assist my sister-in-law wearing mourning clothes… seemed like a bad omen…”

Lady Qiao had looked up, and must have seen his feelings in his face, because she quickly said, “Xiao Shu, your wife is a very strong woman. I am sure everything will be fine.”

“Do you know it’s twins?”

“Twins!” she said, surprised. “Well! Congratulations!”

Everyone kept saying congratulations, but he could not feel that it was a matter for congratulations. He had been able to ignore the risks of childbirth for Lianshi when he had assumed it was just a single child. She was a very strong woman, and he knew that. But twins… the way her body just kept getting bigger and bigger, as if she was going to split open…

He began having nightmares again, as he had not had since those few days when they had slept apart.

In the worst dream, he would hear her screaming and turn to see her writhing on the floor a certain distance away—the end of a corridor, usually. He would run towards her, but he didn’t seem to get any closer, until he would suddenly drop to all fours—then he was upon her almost instantly.

But it was always just too late. With one final scream, she was literally ripped apart from the inside out, and he was left staring in horror at her mangled corpse, with two monstrous, half-human, half-tiger creatures huddled atop her, licking blood off their faces.

Sometimes he attacked them, sometimes they attacked him. On one particularly horrible night, as they had pinned him to the ground, he had shouted “What are you?!”

“We’re you,” said one.

“We’re the evil you planted inside her,” said the other. And they had laughed…

Not even she could have soothed him back to sleep after such horror. He became adept at slipping out of the bed without her noticing, and drinking himself back to sleep instead.
He had been present, although not really attending, at a meeting with civil officials discussing taxation policies in Jiao province, investigating potential embezzlement, blah, blah… a messenger had come in.

“Your majesty, the royal doctor congratulates you that the queen’s progress has begun. The midwives have arrived.”

Sun Quan had gotten up and started to leave, when one of his senior advisers said in a confused voice, “Your majesty, where are you going?”

“I want to see my wife.”

The men around the table, all fathers many times over, laughed indulgently. The first one to speak continued, with a smile, “My lord, a woman having her first could take hours and hours! Your children might not even arrive until tomorrow. There’s nothing you would want to see there now!”

But I want to see my wife! he snarled mentally. But now that the initial impulse had been checked, he knew he could not do anything but wait. He sank back into his chair, completely unable to attend now.

Lianshi had been present—though generally in a fetch and carry capacity—at several births, and Lady Qiao had been very reassuring and patient with her questions, but no woman really understands what her time will be like until she is there.

She spent most of her time on her hands and knees on the bed, panting. Lady Qiao, with her surprisingly strong hands, placed her thumbs near the base of her spine and applied counterpressure. Shangxiang, who had never given birth or even been present at one, limited herself to wiping her friend’s face with a cloth, providing sips of herbal potions, and murmuring encouragement.

It did drag on for hours and hours. The midwives had to cajole and bully Shangxiang and Lianshi to eat. When Lianshi saw that her dear friend did not want to eat, she submitted to eating, so that Shangxiang would eat as well.

“Even in agony, you’re only thinking of others,” said Shangxiang, ashamed. “You are too good, Lianshi!”

At a certain point, Sun Quan became aware that everyone was staring at him expectantly.

“Uh… meeting adjourned?” he tried.

Apparently that wasn’t a germane response, but after exchanging glances, they all obediently left.

Sun Quan flagged down a servant and ordered dinner and three bottles of wine sent to his room as soon as possible. When he got there, he passed the time waiting by finishing off an open leftover half bottle.

When the knock at the door came for the food, it was not a servant pulling a cart, but Zhou Tai.

He was surprised, but as soon as he saw him he knew how badly he wanted company, and there was
no better drinking companion than Zhou Tai.

They ate together in silence, Sun Quan occasionally forcing a smile or toast with regard to this supposedly happy event. Zhou Tai drank to the health of mother and children with a grave nod.

As the food was disappearing, Sun Quan reached for the bottle to refill his cup, but Zhou Tai had already picked it up to refill his own. The king thought nothing of it, until he reached for it again when his bodyguard had put it down, only for the taller man to deliberately pull it out of his reach.

Their eyes met. Sun Quan had every right to order Zhou Tai out, even to punish him, but he couldn’t say a word.

“My lord,” said Zhou Tai slowly, “if a messenger came to say that the queen was dying and wished to see you before she passed, and you could not be roused in time, how would you feel the next day? How would you feel the rest of your life?”

Sun Quan did not answer. His heart was in his mouth. Nor did he move as Zhou Tai efficiently collected not only the open bottle and the unopened bottle, but also the few more unopened bottles that were his nightmare stash, took them to the window, opened it, and dropped them all out. There was a faint crash as they smashed on the stone path below.

Zhou Tai closed the window but did not turn around. “You must punish me for this act, but I will endure it. I swore to never let you come to harm, my lord, and I will endure anything for that end—even of your own infliction.”

“I’m tired,” said Sun Quan. “You should go.”

He bowed deeply. “My lord.”

“Zhou Tai—” he said when the man was just in the doorway, “Thank you.”

He nodded and left.

———

The labour had seemed to slow for a while. Lianshi had even managed to grab a few periods of fitful sleep. Towards dawn, however, things picked up again. Her water broke, and even Shangxiang could tell that it wouldn’t be long now.

“I want to push,” gasped Lianshi.

“Wait just a moment, my lady,” said the midwife. “Let me check that the baby is in a good position. Pant to hold it back.”

Lianshi panted for what was only a few seconds but felt like forever.

“It’s perfect,” said the midwife. “Go ahead and move into a squat, my lady, but try not to scream.”

It was a near impossible request. Her grip on her sisters-in-laws’ hands was so tight that she was afraid she was going to break their fingers, but not even she could care at this point.

“The head is coming. Just a few more pushes, my lady. When the head is done, the rest of the body just slides out.”

Lianshi could not hold back a groan this time. There was a sudden lightening of the intensity and the strange feeling of solid and liquid rushing out of her. And she heard a baby crying.
“An ugly girl,” said the midwife, the relief in her voice belying the ritual need to insist that the baby was not worth stealing away, for any evil spirits that might be prowling.

“Worthless and dark,” agreed the other midwife happily, placing a jade necklace around the tiny girl’s neck.

“Let me see her,” cried Lianshi, leaning back into Shangxiang as her friend kissed her forehead.

“You have more work to do, my lady,” said the first midwife firmly. “One more baby, and the afterbirth. Get back on your hands and knees for now.”

“Please… just let me see her…”

As Lady Qiao assisted the weakened woman back onto her hands and knees, Shangxiang went to the midwife holding the baby and relieved her of the tiny bundle before the woman quite knew what had happened. She brought her around to Lianshi’s head.

“Here she is, new mama!”

Lianshi smiled at her daughter’s quiet, exquisite face. The baby’s blinks slowed as Shangxiang gently rocked her.

“You’ll hold her for me for now?”

“Of course I will, if that’s what you want. You’ll be alright with just Lady Qiao?”

“Ah!” groaned Lianshi, wincing as another wave overtook her.

“Granny, it’s breech,” said the younger midwife to the more experienced one.

The older one pulled back her assistant before she could reach out a hand. “You never touch a breech,” she reprimanded. “My lady, stay on your hands and knees and push again when you feel ready.”

“Can’t we turn it?” said the younger midwife.

“It’s too late for that, look. You can already tell it’s a boy.”

“Leading with his dick first, sounds like a Sun boy.”

“Xiao Gu!” said Lady Qiao, aghast, but for Lianshi, who was used to the princess’s constant ribald remarks in long ago days, it actually lightened the mood. She even laughed, though weakly, and it turned into another moan as she pushed again.

The water clock dripped away the time. Shangxiang kissed her niece’s sleeping face as her brother made his descent.

“Now it’s just the head to go, my lady. You’re almost there. It’s all going just fine.”

Almost there… the pain had almost dulled itself away by this point. She closed her eyes and pushed again, longing to hear another cry.

The midwife caught the boy as he dropped, and within a few moments she heard that sweet terrible sound again.

“You did it, Lianshi!” said Lady Qiao, helping her lie down.
“Two babies in one go! The Wu queen is a warrior,” laughed Shangxiang. “Would you like to hold your princess now?”

Lianshi reached out her hands eagerly, but this time the midwives would not be gainsaid. “Not until she delivers the afterbirth. The doctor needs to see the babies anyway, to report to the king. You must be patient, my lady! It should only be about twenty minutes for the afterbirth to come out completely. You must remain calm in your mind, so that you don’t bleed too much. Now get up so we can wrap you to assist in expelling it and recovering.”

Lianshi submitted to the belly wrapping as the bloody bed coverings were stripped and replaced with fresh ones. She had the feeling that if she had reached for her daughter again, Shangxiang would have given her to her, traditions be damned, but she had enough docility and patience to wait. At least she could see her children in the loving arms of their aunts.

———

The chief physician bustled in, feeling very pleased with himself, as if he had had anything to do with what had occurred.

He glanced briefly at the princess, not even bothering to take her from the empress’s arms, let alone unwrap and examine her. “She looks fine.”

The prince, on the other hand, was taken from Lady Qiao, laid upon a blanket, and examined minutely and anxiously for any birth defect. “Perfect, absolutely perfect,” he said.

“Master Pan,” reproved the elder midwife for thus tempting fate.

“Oh, don’t be such an old woman,” he said to the old woman. “He’s wrapped in tiger skin, isn’t he?”

He rewrapped the baby in the lucky binding as he said this, and then before the rest of them were quite aware what was happening, he was leaving with the baby.

Shangxiang recovered first, and even holding the princess, quickly moved between him and the door. “Where are you going?”

“The king will want to see this,” he said pompously, and sidestepped her and was off.

The warrior empress could not attack him when they were both holding such precious cargo, so she watched him go in helpless rage.

“What’s happening?” Lianshi cried. “Where is he taking my son?”

“To the king, he says,” Shangxiang said through gritted teeth. “Never mind, Lianshi! I’m sure the king will make him sorry he ever tried such a thing.”

———

Sun Quan had been sure he would not be able to sleep, so he was surprised to be awakened by knocking. He was still in his clothes, slumped in a chair, and the early morning sun was streaming in the window. At least he was not hungover.

“Your majesty, I bring you great news,” said the voice of the doctor. And that other noise… a baby crying?!

He leapt to his feet fully awake at that and ran to the door. When he pulled it open, the doctor was
beaming at him, a tiny infant in his arms screaming its head off.

“Your majesty, I have the honour to present to you your new prince,” said the pompous man. “I have examined him thoroughly, and there is not the slightest defect.”

He looked down at the red-faced, screaming thing. His son. What an unbelievable idea. Without really knowing what he was doing, he reached out and took him into his arms. The baby was so light, so delicate. His pathetic little screams for his mother touched Sun Quan’s heart.

His mother! “What about the queen? What about the other baby?”

“The other baby was just a girl, your majesty.”

“What about the queen?!” hissed Sun Quan.

“She’s fine of course.” The man actually had the gall to sound annoyed that Sun Quan was asking him silly questions. “I would have said something if she wasn’t fine, your majesty.”

This idiot! Clearly Lianshi could be bleeding to death and he probably wouldn’t even have noticed. Shifting his son into only one arm for a moment, he pushed the man out of the way with perhaps a bit more force than necessary, heading for his wife.

“Your majesty, I must take the baby back to be fed,” panted the chubby little man, chasing after him.

“I’ll take him back myself.”

“You can’t!” cried the doctor, forgetting, in the face of this challenge to tradition, exactly who he was talking to.

The king stopped for a moment and turned around, and the doctor knew how deeply he had just fucked up. He dropped into prostration before his enraged monarch.

“You dare rebuke the king? You’re lucky that not even I would order an execution on a day like today,” snarled Sun Quan. “Get out of Jianye, and go straight to hell as far as I care.”

He turned on his heel and left, leaving the doctor still crumpled on the floor in terror.

———

Sun Quan met with a similar emotional reaction from the guards, but none of them were foolish enough to try to correct or stop him. The younger midwife did look beseechingly at Lady Qiao, trusting that this woman at least would be thinking of propriety and purity, but Lady Qiao did not notice. She was dabbing at her eyes, thinking of how the king’s elder brother had forced his way into her delivery room after the birth of their daughter…

Sun Quan was not really aware of any of the rest of them. He only had eyes for his wife, who was looking very pale and tired, certainly, but no worse than that. Better than that, actually, because, having succeeded in delivering the afterbirth while the doctor was gallivanting around the palace with her son, she had been rewarded by being allowed to nurse her daughter.

“My lady, now that the prince is back and so hungry, you should take off the princess so he can feed,” said the younger midwife.

“Nonsense!” said the old woman. “Why do you think we have two, huh?”

Having seen a lot to shock her in her many years, this had by no means been the only young
husband who was besotted enough to insist on seeing his wife’s safety for himself. With a mere
“You’ll excuse me, your majesty,” she briskly removed his son from his arms and demonstrated to
the queen how to position the babies upon the cushions so that she could nurse one on each breast
while lying back.

“You see my lord,” said Lianshi with one of her rare sly smiles, “they also have another function.”

He grinned, but he nonetheless raised an eyebrow over his shoulder at his sister, who was giving full
vent to her delight. “Shangxiang, you’ve only been here two weeks, and see how you’ve corrupted
my queen.”

“Oh no!” she said, waving her finger at him. “She was never like this before I left, brother! I think
being exposed to and in such close contact with a dangerous character like yourself—"

“Lianshi, if you have no more need of me for now, may I go to my rooms? I’m very tired,” said
Lady Qiao, interrupting this Sun family innuendo fest before it could get going much farther. It was
bringing back too many memories… some part of her was just waiting for Sun Ce to chime in with
some statement that would enrage both his younger siblings for opposite reasons.

“Thank you for staying with me,” said Lianshi sincerely. “Having the support of a woman who has
been in my position before meant so much.”

“Yes, thank you, Saosao,” added Sun Quan. “You may stay as our guest in Jianye as long as you
wish, of course, but if you wish to get back to your sister and daughter, do not worry about offending
us.”

Lady Qiao bowed and left, remembering with smiles and tears happier days gone far too soon.

———

Sun Quan gingerly sat on the edge of the bed, not sure what to do with his hands.

“Go ahead and touch her, silly! You put her through a lot of trouble, you know!” teased his sister,
crossing her arms.

“My lady!” laughed Lianshi, but Sun Quan looked chagrined.

“I know,” he said.

“Oh man,” said Shangxiang, hands on hips now, “didn’t she help you get over that whole
confidence hang-up already? You’re not going to make her start over every time she gives you a kid,
are you?”

Sun Quan groaned. “Am I seriously going to have to put up with her being here all the time for a
month longer? How am I supposed to talk with you like this?”

“Why don’t you man up or king up or whatever a little and just tell me to get out, then?” challenged
his sister.

“First good idea you’ve had. All of you get out.”

His sister gave an exaggerated bow. “See how obedient I am?” she said saucily, pulling the
midwives along with her as she left before they could form any protest.

———
Da Qiao heard the bells, but she had been out of the battle world for so long that they no longer held that very specific meaning any more. She had always hated fighting. Unlike her sister, who attempted to hide even pregnancy to stay by Zhou Yu’s side longer, she was practically the girl who cried wolf. The only person she ever had a desire to hurt was the sorcerer Gan Ji, but she had never had that chance.

So while the bells puzzled her, they didn’t jolt her into fleeing, or even stop her tears.

“Hey, what’s all this about?” she heard a rather gruff voice say. “This is no place to be crying. A pretty lady like you shouldn’t be crying anyway…” The voice wasn’t Sun Ce’s, of course. She knew very well it was Gan Ning’s. But something about its carefree masculinity only shone the spotlight brighter on the jagged hole in her heart that his loss had left.

The voice trailed off, and suddenly said, with an unexpected tenderness, “Hey, are you alright, Lady Qiao? You look completely wiped out.”

Brashness and gentleness… oh god. She couldn’t even speak.

He crouched down and looked into her face with concern, and that actually made it easier. She focused on his face. It wasn’t Sun Ce. It wasn’t anything like Sun Ce. He was speaking again. “It isn’t… it isn’t the queen, is it?”

That she could answer. “No, the queen is fine. Safely delivered of both babies. A healthy boy and girl.”

The pirate sighed with what sounded like genuine relief, and then, with a hint of self-consciousness, went back to gruff and said, “Great! If anything bad had happened, the king probably would have gone bananas and declared a war on babies or sex or god knows what. I wouldn’t want to have to deal with that.”

She smiled, though she couldn’t quite laugh. Or speak, again, it seemed.

“Something’s really wrong,” he said. “If even an idiot like me can tell, then I know it’s serious.”

She did laugh at that, and he brightened.

“Hey, so, it’s not so bad, huh? Wait, if you were up all night helping her with the birth, you must be exhausted! That’s it, huh?”

She nodded, glad to have so innocuous and even true an explanation. “I just… sat here to rest…”

“Well, where are your rooms? You lean on me, Lady Qiao! I’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

He helped her up gently, and she found herself actually leaning on him. “I’m staying in the women’s quarters,” she said.

They walked there in silence, apart from the sound of the bells, which constantly drew her eye to his abdomen and hips. It was so strange to be so close to a man like this, after such a long time.

He would have left her at the door, but she said, “Why don’t you come in and I’ll make you tea?”

The man looked surprised, then flirtatious, then embarrassed, which she found endearing. “Aw, that’s nice of you to offer, but you don’t have to. I’m sure you just want to get to bed.”

“I do, but I want some company,” she said, then turned red at her own unintentional innuendo. “You
know what I mean! Just... just a few minutes to have tea. I make it very well...”

He hesitated, then came in. “Well, alright, though I admit I’m not super into tea...”

“I kind of fucked one of the king’s relatives.”

Ling Tong, who had arrived from Guangling late the previous night and was never at his best in the mornings at any time, snapped fully awake at that. “What? What?! Gan Ning, oh god, oh no, don’t tell me you fucked the empress!”

“What? Hell, no! Besides, if I ever made it off with Lady Sun I’m pretty sure it would be more accurate to say that she'd fuck me, than that I'd fuck her. I would enjoy being fucked by her, don’t get me wrong, but—”

Ling Tong was frantically waving his hands trying to get the pirate to shut up, looking left and right down the thankfully deserted hallway where his most irritating friend had hailed him. “I can’t believe we’re even talking about fucking anyone Sun Quan is related to, much less that you actually did it!”

Ling Tong groaned. “But since you’ve apparently thought with the wrong head again, just limit yourself to telling me about whoever you did mess with.”

“Lady Qiao.”

Ling Tong stared. “I don’t believe it!”

“Well, believe it,” he said flatly. “Do you know she looks exactly the same as I remember? I’d swear she was still nineteen.”

“She’s not your type!”

“I wouldn’t have thought so,” he admitted, and a smile was twitching on his lips. “I would have thought she’d be the kind who’d just lie there praying for it to be over, which isn’t what I like at all, but it turns out—“

“Gan Ning! You can’t kiss and tell with a lady like that!”

“Ah, come on,” Gan Ning whined, “If I’m going to be executed, I at least want to be remembered in history. ‘Gan Ning, led a night raid of one hundred men into the enemy camp at Ruxukou and brought them all out with no losses, and also came all over Lady Qiao’s—’”

“I do not want to know that!” interrupted Ling Tong, aghast. “She was our lord’s wife!”

“Ah, what the hell, Sun Ce’s been dead for years. He can take it up with me in hell if he wants to. I was just following her lead, so I’m pretty sure he taught her about it. It’s really his fault, when you think of it that way.”

“You can’t tell me stuff like this! You’ve gotta think about her feelings, here.”

Gan Ning actually looked a little ashamed. It was such a strange expression to see on his face that at first Ling Tong didn’t really recognize it. “You’re probably right, but... but there is one thing about her that’s kind of relevant...” The shame flickered away and the arrogant smile was fighting to break out. “She’s louder than I would have thought... which I guess was fine when she had her own wing with her husband, but I’m guessing in her rooms in the women’s quarters, we were probably overheard... If not the first round, then definitely the second...”
Ling Tong stared at him, finally speechless.

“So you can see why I’m in trouble!” he said. “Do I tell the king now and hope that he’s too happy about nobody dying yesterday to make somebody die today? I could just go back to being a pirate, I guess. I mean, hell, he’ll catch me eventually, but I’ll just remember today and die happy.”
A teenager has her marriage arranged in this chapter, although I'm guessing you're fine with reading about that if you've made it this far.

The "jade wine" that Sun Quan drinks is a lactic acid fermented alcoholic beverage that would have been creamy white (like some kinds of jade) and relatively low alcohol (~7%, similar to strong beer).

Some very explicit and frank talk about sex between Gan Ning and Lady Qiao, and a child's death is mentioned.

There is a sex scene that starts with "He took Yinping to his own room straight after dinner while Little Mouse was napping" and runs basically to the end of that scene.

万事如意：wan shi ru yi
十 thousand / things / according to / intention
"May everything go as you wish (an auspicious phrase)."

As Ling Tong pressed his forehead to the ground in Sun Quan’s throne room, it occurred to him that he had spent a decade of his life yearning for Sun Quan to give him permission to kill Gan Ning. Now he finally had information that might get it for him, and all he could think about was how to make sure Sun Quan never found out.

“You’re earlier than I expected,” Sun Quan said. “Didn’t the snow make the travel hard?”

Ling Tong tried to make his face look as casual as usual and smiled. “Rivers’ still flowing, my lord.”

“Get some good jade wine,” the king called to a servant, and bade Ling Tong to follow him away from the formal grandeur into a more comfortable office, where the two could sit together.

“I suppose you’ve heard the good news.”

“Yes, congratulations,” Ling Tong said, bringing his hands up for a small bow. “Everyone’s talking about it, of course.”

“Hm. Two at one time. She’s certainly amazing.”

“Yeah, you picked a good queen for sure, my lord.”

“And with Zhu Ran recovered enough to take command in Guangling, I feel comfortable sending you to Jing province to act as governor, so that Lu Xun can come back to Jianye.”

“Yeah, I don’t mind at—wait, as governor?” Ling Tong forgot all about Gan Ning for the moment, blinking at his king. “I didn’t—I thought—”

“I know, initially I told you that I just wanted you to relieve Lu Xun so that he can meet his child and
perform the ceremonies for the full month, but this slow communication with Lu Xun via letter is no good. I need him here, where I can consult him daily about the plans for the entire kingdom. And since Jing province will be Wu’s permanently… it needs a governor, not just a general. And I haven’t forgotten your performance with the Shanyue. You’re not just an excellent officer, you’re a shrewd and responsible administrator, and Jing province will need both. I need a loyal and honest man there, whom I can trust to get the job done. And that’s you.”

The wine arrived and the servant poured for them.

“Wow…” Ling Tong stared into the milky white colour of the wine blankly, as if he didn’t know what it was. “That’s… an enormous honour…”

“But do you accept?”

“Yeah…” Ling Tong looked over and grinned. “If you think I can do it, then I guess I have to.”

Sun Quan clapped him on the back and the two of them emptied their cups, which were refilled immediately. “And going along with that, there’s another responsibility, another honour, which I want to help you with. You know my sister-in-law is visiting, Lady Qiao?”

“Lady Qiao?” It came out too high-pitched, and Ling Tong coughed and cleared his throat. “I don’t know anything about Lady Qiao. I mean, I know she exists. We’ve met. I did meet her. Fighting. When your brother was alive. Nothing since then. I mean, unless I’ve forgotten something! Could have forgotten something. Should I know something?!”

Sun Quan stared at him, nonplussed, as this torrent of words came flooding out. He blinked. “Right… well, Lady Qiao has only the one child by my brother, my niece, Princess Jingshi. During his illness they adopted one of Zhou Yu’s sons to be my brother’s heir, as well, but my niece is his only natural child. Obviously, she is very precious to the Sun family.”

Ling Tong remembered, exceptionally vaguely, hearing that Lord Sun Ce’s wife had given birth right around the time that they were all fighting against Huang Zu, during his very first campaign. His eyes widened as he foresaw where his king was going with this.

“I understand that you’ve been disappointed in your hopes with Lady Zhang,” he said, “but you do have to think about taking a wife.”

“A wife… my lord, you want me to marry your niece?”

“Between you and me, my sister-in-law had hoped to get Lu Xun for her.” Sun Quan sighed. “That would have been a great match, I won’t deny it, but as it turns out, Lu Xun’s love match has turned out to bring its own benefits to the kingdom. If you had a woman in mind, I wouldn’t stand in your way, but since you don’t…”

“A woman… but…”

“Speak your objections, I won’t be angry.”

“Lord Sun Ce’s daughter… must be very young…?” Even with the invitation to give offence, Ling Tong was as restrained as he could manage.

“She’ll be fifteen this spring festival.”

Ling Tong looked away and rubbed at his face, trying to hide his horrified expression.
Sun Quan laughed. “I told you I won’t be angry,” he said to Ling Tong’s ponytail. “It’s even to your credit. I know you’re not that kind of man. But a betrothal isn’t a wedding, and even a wedding doesn’t necessarily mean… you know… anyway. I won’t even pin you down for a betrothal, yet. But if you don’t find a truly worthy woman in the next year or so… why not ally yourself with my clan?”

Ling Tong couldn’t speak. He wasn’t stupid. He even knew that Sun Quan meant what he said, and thought he was really giving his officer an offer with no strings, but the horrible thing was, it didn’t matter. Even if Ling Tong met the perfect woman now, when he went to Sun Quan and said, this is who I’m marrying, it would mean, I’d rather marry this woman than a woman from your clan. And not just a woman from the extended Sun clan. A princess of the main house! Lord Sun Ce’s only child!

There was no way that choosing any ordinary woman, after having been offered the Sun family’s princess, wouldn’t be an insult to Sun Quan.

And on top of that, every single element of his reason said: this is a good match, in fact an excellent match, hell, you had no right to even dream of such a match. Your children will be cousins to the royal family.

It was only his emotions that were screaming at the idea of getting engaged to some girl he’d never even met who was currently fourteen, fourteen!

“I don’t think… I’ll have much time to look for women…” he told the cup of wine. “If we got engaged… she could just stay with her mother…” For the next ten years.

“Good, I’ll tell Lady Qiao. I have to talk to her anyway, unfortunately.” Sun Quan sighed heavily. “Somebody fucked some woman in Lady Qiao’s room, while she was assisting my wife. They probably didn’t realize the room was being used, but it was most disrespectful to her. I hardly know how I will explain such a thing to such a refined and gently-raised woman.”

“Ah-ah-ahh?” Ling Tong made a kind of strangled noise, in a feeble attempt to react neutrally.

“Are you feeling alright, Ling Tong? I know that I’ve laid some major news upon you, but you don’t seem to have quite your usual spirit. Travel in the winter can be very hazardous to your health. You know what, make sure that when you travel to Jing province, you stay in the cabin or the carriage as much as possible, and bundle up to keep warm.”

———

Lady Qiao knocked at Gan Ning’s door.

“It’s open,” came a grunt from within.

Lady Qiao gave one last look around the corridor and then let herself in, shutting the door quickly behind her.

“What are you doing?” she said, staring at the chaos of the room. There were cases and boxes and belongings strewn about, seemingly at random.

“Well I was thinking about, uh, y’know, taking a little jaunt. A little sail.”

Lady Qiao frowned. “You were running away?”

“Not running away, not running, sailing, different thing. And y’know. Just until, uh. I get the word
from a friend about, uh. Reactions.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about my brother-in-law’s reaction.” She smiled, with a hint of smugness. “He came to apologize to me. I was overheard, but nobody believes it could possibly be me. Thank heaven that you’re the quiet type. They’re blaming some young officer that I’ve never even heard of, but it doesn’t seem like anything too terrible will happen to him, so I’ve let that go.”

He sighed with relief. “Well, it’s a bad time of year to sail anyway.”

Lady Qiao leaned against the closed door.

“Uh, as much as you’re prettying up the room,” Gan Ning said, scratching his head, “I dunno if it’s a good idea for you to be here. We got away once, but…”

“I also talked with my brother-in-law about marriage.” She gave him a most proper stare. The pirate’s jaw dropped. “You’re joking!”

She let the proper stare break into a laugh. “I am and I’m not,” she said. “I did talk with him about marriage, but your name never came up. Sun Quan, acting as her father, will be betrothing my daughter to one of his officers.”

Gan Ning, openly relieved, laughed a little too, but then sobered up again when she continued.

“But… I did ask him what he thought of me marrying again. I can’t say the idea pleased him… but after talking with him, I don’t think it angers him, either. The king is a man of deep feeling, when it is roused. He always wishes happiness, for those he loves. And when I said that I thought I had another chance at happiness… he gave me his blessing to pursue it.”

She stepped slowly forward from the door.

Gan Ning didn’t back up, but he raised his hands as if to hold her at bay. “Lady Qiao, there ain’t a lot about myself that I know, but I know I’m not a guy who should get married.”

“You were married before.”

“I know, that’s how I know it’s a bad idea,” he said. “I was a terrible husband. When I was with her I was cruel, and I wasn’t usually with her, but that just meant she was with my mother, which was even worse for her. And I was actually trying to be a good husband. You do not want to marry me.”

“I think I do.”

“Listen, I don’t want to go into details, Lady Qiao, but I was a bad husband. Please just trust me and give up the idea.”

She crossed her arms. “I notice you’re trying to get me to change my mind, rather than saying you don’t want to marry me.”

“Yeah because if I married you then I would get to keep fucking you,” he blurted. “I’m not gonna lie, it was pretty amazing. Way better than I would have thought.”

“Way better than you would have—you expected it to be bad?” she sputtered.

His hands waved in a calming gesture. “Not bad, exactly! I don’t think I’ve ever had sex and thought ‘well, that was bad’ at the end. Just… I wouldn’t have expected you to be so… uh… enthusiastic.”
She reddened. “Well, it had been a long time for me.”

“I don’t just mean that, I mean what you wanted me to do. Uh… believe me, I don’t want to make you feel guilty, and obviously you and Lord Sun Ce had a great time together, but if you weren’t aware, not all women have that kind of love life. I would have expected you to be one of those ones who just lies there like a corpse.”

“So you enjoyed it?”

“Hell yeah I did,” he said frankly. “Best lay I’ve had in a long time. If you just wanted someone to make your eyes roll back in your head, I’d be down for that anytime you wanted, but you don’t want me as a husband.”

“What was so bad about you as a husband?”

He seemed to be considering which, among a long list of reasons, might scare her off the fastest. “I fucked other people a lot,” he said.

“I think my lord might have done the same thing when he was at battle, although I can’t be sure,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m not saying I was happy about it if he was. I’d prefer if you would be faithful to me, of course. Do you mean camp followers, or did you actually keep a mistress?”

He hesitated. “Camp followers occasionally, but to frank, they’re mostly the corpse type, which is all most of their customers really want. For me it was mostly… not a mistress, exactly…”

She tilted her head. “Then…”

“A friend of mine.”

She stared. “Do you mean a man?”

“Yeah, I do,” he said.

“Wow,” she said, her eyes bugging out, “so it really is true what they say about sailors… So was this someone specific, or…”

“Well, when I was married, yeah. He’s been dead for a while, though, so you don’t have to worry about him specifically. And I haven’t had a regular lover of either sex since he died, to be honest. There’s one in particular I wouldn’t mind at all, but he’s never given me a sign he’d be receptive. If he ever did give me a sign though, I’d go for it in a heartbeat, no matter who else I was fucking. I’m impulsive.”

“But you like women too?”

He sighed. “God, explaining this… I like getting my dick sucked, and I honestly enjoy sucking dick too, but there’s nothing I like better than fucking a cunt. But most of the women I’ve fucked have been just a cunt to me. All the men I’ve fucked or wanted to fuck, I’ve actually cared about.”

She noticed that throughout the conversation he seemed to be increasingly using harsh and dirty language, and wondered if it was another attempt to scare her off, or if he had noticed she didn’t flinch at it and resorted to his normal pattern of speech. “Have you never cared about any woman? What about your wife?”

“I loved her like crazy!” He threw up his hands. “I can’t explain it to you. Since the day I met her, every single choice I made, I made because of her. She’s the whole reason I gave up being a pirate.”
and joined Huang Zu and then Wu. Ever since she and our daughter died I’ve just been coasting. Lord Sun Quan tells me to go somewhere and kill people, and that suits me down to the ground. I like to kill people. I’m really a brute, you know?”

Lady Qiao was only half listening. She had suddenly vividly remembered making a courtesy visit to Gan Ning upon hearing of his daughter’s injury. She had come upon him crumpled against a wall in grief, having only just learned himself that his child had succumbed to her injuries. “Oh yes… she fell out of a tree…”

Gan Ning suddenly flushed, obviously only just remembering that encounter between the two of them as well. “Yeah, she was too much like me,” she said hoarsely, and cleared his throat. “I… I never thanked you for being discreet about that day, Lady Qiao.”

“I could see you were experiencing a grief that was even beyond my own,” she said. “Losing my husband was horrible. I can’t imagine how I would have gone on if I lost our child too.”

“Yeah, well, I never deserved either of them,” he muttered. “Anyway. Don’t interrogate me anymore about all the horrible stuff I did when I was married. There’s a reason why you don’t want to marry me that you can’t just deflect, because it’s on you. When I was fucking you, you were pretending I was him, weren’t you?”

She hadn’t been ashamed of anything that had happened, but now she did feel guilt. “It was that obvious?”

“Choosing only positions where you didn’t have to look at my face, or keeping your eyes closed… I admit you didn’t cry out his name, but ‘my lord’ was practically the same thing. I’m not your lord. You really thought I didn’t realize that was what was going on? I’m not usually that quiet. I just didn’t want to break the fantasy for you.”

“You’re a lot like him,” she told his abdomen, not able to meet his eyes. “Even… even your cock felt like his…”

“But I’m not him,” he said. “For a one off fantasy fulfillment, ok, but we can’t go through an entire marriage with you pretending I’m him every night. I couldn’t be satisfied with that, and you may not think it now, but you would start to hate it eventually too. Then we really would be stuck.”

“Then make love to me right now,” she said, raising her face to his. “Look me in the eyes and make love to me.”

He was speechless. After giving him a minute to say something, she took his hands and attempted to put them on her waist, but he resisted and pulled them back. “Lady Qiao, you don’t want me.”

“No,” she insisted. “I do, and… and I don’t want to go back to being alone…”

“You wouldn’t have to be,” he said. “My god, if word were to get out that a Qiao sister was back on the market—”

“I don’t want to be on the market,” she said hotly.

“Ok, poor phrasing, but—“

“You don’t understand. I want someone who can fuck me and still respect me. I happened to luck out with Lord Sun Ce, but from all I can see, men who can do both of those things to the same woman seem to be pretty rare. The men who are attracted to me—the me that they think they see—you think they would feel the same after a night with me?”
“They’d be fools not to,” he said, and he meant it.

“I know you said you weren’t a good husband, but tell me about the sex you had. Was it rough?”

“Uh… well, yeah. Usually. Uh… rougher than what you and I did, to be honest, most of the time.” He hesitated. “Mentally rougher. I told you I’m not usually quiet.”

“And did you still respect her?”

“Absolutely,” he said without hesitation. “That was part of what made it so hot for me. Knowing… knowing that someone so dignified, so strong, gave me that control… that she couldn’t resist me…” His voice was cracking a little, and he turned away.

Lady Qiao saw his pain, and withdrew a little, feeling selfish for forcing him to relive his loss. “Do I… remind you of her at all?”

He laughed a little. “I wouldn’t have said so two days ago,” he admitted. “She was a lot taller than you, and if I’m being honest, her beauty couldn’t hold a candle to yours, at least that’s what anyone would say. She wasn’t raised fancy, like you were, and she also didn’t have anything like your confidence. She was a survivor because she was tenacious, not because she thought she was worth anything.” He shook his head. “Listen to me, I sound like some kind of fucking intellectual here.”

She was silent, and after a moment he said, “But… maybe in some ways… you sort of make me think of the person she might have been if she had had better luck… a father who gave a damn, and real friends… a better husband…” He sighed. “So we’re coming back around again to the same thing: you shouldn’t marry me.”

“So I’m your type as well, then.”

“God, you’re stubborn. Yeah, turns out you are, but like I’ve been saying over and over a hundred different ways, that doesn’t matter!”

“I think we could get along fine,” she persisted. “And love would follow.”

“Love wouldn’t follow if your brother-in-law beheads me for touching his brother’s wife!” he blurted. “I know you said he blessed your chance at chasing happiness, but he might not feel the same way if he knows that you’re talking about Gan Ning.”

She considered this and had to admit he had a point. She and Sun Quan had always gotten along well, but she knew, as Shangxiang had been fond of teasing him about, he was just a tad sexually neurotic. Well, look at the woman he had married. He obviously never got up to anything dirty with Lianshi. Sun Quan would never be able to understand her attraction to Gan Ning. This was going to be difficult. She sighed. “Ok, I’ll talk to him again.”

Lady Qiao turned for the door, but Gan Ning sidestepped and blocked her. “Hey, if you’re going to get me killed, how about that lovemaking session first? Plus, you know, you may decide it ain’t that great and want to go back to Lujiang without me after all. Better make sure.”

“Hmm, sounds prudent,” she said, and this time he put his hands on her waist of his own accord. “Do you remember the first time we met, on the battlefield at Xiakou? You said you didn’t know if you should kill me or kiss me.”

He did one of the two.

As they lay together afterwards, he played with her hair. “So I’m gonna be a stepfather, huh? That’s
gonna be weird. Who’d you get to marry her, anyway?”

“Ling Tong. I haven’t seen him for years, but I remember him being a very sweet young man… what’s so funny?”

“You may be a widow again before you even marry when I tell Ling Tong I’m going to be his father-in-law!”

———

“Gan Ning?”

Lady Qiao nodded to Sun Quan, simply.

“Gan Ning? Gan Ning. Gan Ning?”

“I think you broke him, Saosao,” said Shangxiang, sitting across them at the dinner table, and experimentally launched a chopstick at him as if it was a javelin.

Her brother caught it, so his reflexes at least were not impaired. “Shangxiang, stay out of this. Gan Ning? But he’s…”

“Yes?” said Lady Qiao, taking a sip of wine.

“He’s Gan Ning!” said Sun Quan.

“Give me back my chopstick,” said Shangxiang, reaching across the table. “I just did that to knock you out of your coma.”

“Finders keepers,” said Sun Quan, holding it out of her reach as his big brother instincts took over.

She stuck her tongue out at him and grabbed one of his chopsticks, quickly pulling back before he could grab it back from her. “Your mom is a chopstick.”

“We have the same mother!”

“You two!” Lady Qiao laughed. “The king of Wu and the empress of China, but you haven’t changed at all! Xiao Shu, of the three of us, don’t you think I’m the most mature and able to manage my affairs?”

Sun Quan smiled like a boy who has been caught but knows he won’t be punished. “I know. It’s arrogant of me to think I can arrange it for you, but… I feel protective of you on my brother’s behalf. I thought I had come to terms with you wanting to marry but… Gan Ning…”

“You trust him, don’t you?”

“As an officer, with my life! But as a man, with a woman…! It’s hard to explain to you.”

“I know how to manage wild men,” she said with a smile. “Wait and see. He’ll be a better officer than ever.”

He sighed. “Can you at least let me arrange the wedding on a normal schedule? You’ll want to go back home, and I’ll need him for the fighting.”

“About that… I’m a bit out of practice, but…”
Lady Qiao frequently said that there were two women who ran the Qiao family lands: the elder Lady Qiao, and her daughter Sun Jingshi.

She wasn’t actually saying this to flatter Princess Jingshi, but rather to scold Lady Qiao’s younger sister, whom everyone called Xiao Qiao. The younger Qiao sister, widow of the famous Zhou Yu, and mother of four, wasn’t intentionally irresponsible, but she was flighty at best, distractible, prone to pouting, and not always the sharpest sword in the armoury.

When her mother left to assist the Wu queen as she approached confinement, it was supposed to be about a month’s absence, maybe six weeks. Instead, within a few weeks, they received a message containing not only the hoped for news that the queen had delivered her babies safely, but that her mother was getting married, to a man named Gan Ning.

The name meant nothing to Jingshi, but it apparently meant a lot to her aunt. “Wow! And I thought Lord Sun Ce was the bad boy type!” she laughed.

Her aunt was happy by the idea of her sister marrying again, but when a second message came, that Lady Qiao was going to accompany her new husband to the border with Wei in Jing province, and thus their visit would simply be a quick stop on the way, that made Xiao Qiao absolutely furious. “Oh, no way does she get to go and fight and leave me here with you!” she fumed. “She doesn’t even like fighting!”

So when her mother, her new stepfather, and her new stepfather’s friend had turned up, it was not the relaxed new family introduction that her mother had planned. Instead, Xiao Qiao and Lady Qiao spent almost the entire evening fighting about whether they could really leave Jingshi in charge of everything. Xiao Qiao’s blithe assertion that Jingshi had been basically running things anyway almost robbed her mother of the ability to speak.

Jingshi said she was perfectly willing to take it over, and pointed out, very reasonably, that the stewards didn’t actually require that much input anyway. Her new stepfather had laughed, ruffled her hair, and said he was only surprised that she wasn’t vying to come along herself.

“You look a lot like your dad!” Gan Ning said. “Doesn’t she, Ling Tong?”

“Yeah,” said Ling Tong. Her stepfather’s friend was extremely handsome and extremely quiet. Sometimes he would stare at her, and other times he seemed to be trying to look at literally anything else.

“Got your mom’s nose, though,” Gan Ning added, booping it and making her exclaim. “Good thing, too, because Lord Sun Ce’s was crooked.”

“Because it broke and healed crooked, idiot,” Ling Tong said.

“I don’t remember him… I wasn’t much more than a baby when… You both fought with him?”

“Sure did! Not long enough though. I didn’t join up until you were a baby, and Ling Tong was practically a baby himself.”

“I was fifteen when I joined the army. I was far from a baby,” Ling Tong corrected with another dirty look.

Gan Ning laughed and gave Ling Tong a meaningful look. “Oh, so fifteen’s all grown up now?”
Ling Tong flushed, glanced at Jingshi, looked sick, and excused himself.

One of her guests leaving to go outside pulled Lady Qiao out of her fight with her sister. “It’s not my choice whom the king sends to fight where. I’m through arguing about this with you. If you want to go, write him yourself.”

“Fine! I will!” Xiao Qiao flounced away herself.

Lady Qiao hurried over to Jingshi and her stepfather. “Where did Master Ling Tong go?”

Her stepfather looked sheepish. “Sorry. I said something I shouldn’t have… I saw a sore spot and couldn’t help poking it.”

Her mother crossed her arms. “What did you do?”

“It was about whether a fifteen year old is more like an adult or a baby.”

Lady Qiao sighed. “When I hadn’t even…! Well, I suppose it’s for the best to be able to tell you in private, Jingshi. Your uncle has chosen a husband for you, with my approval. Master Ling Tong.”

“Him?” Jingshi blushed herself. “Oh!”

She was not shocked at the idea; her mother had been preparing her for an arranged marriage all her life.

“He’s not marrying you right away. He’ll marry you when you’re eighteen. As Confucius said, that is the ideal age for a woman to marry, after all. But in the meantime, perhaps you can write letters to each other? He’ll be the governor of Jing province, so as his wife, you too will have many official duties. You’ll have a lot to learn, about how to manage things, in the next three years. But you’re so good at it already, that I know you can do it.” Her mother smiled kindly at her.

Jingshi pressed a hand to her cheek. It felt as hot as fire. She didn’t feel like a dignified governor’s wife. All that she could think was that Ling Tong was so handsome!

“He’s a good guy, you just gotta give him time to get used to the idea,” said her stepfather, not unkindly, but it dashed cold water over her rapture.

She bit her lip and looked down. Of course… it must have been a disappointment… meeting me and realizing that I’m not a beauty like my mother…

They all left the next day. The next night, Xiao Qiao snuck out of the house and followed after them, not bothering to wait for a reply to her letter.

And so Jingshi was left in charge after all.

———

Ling Tong leaned back in his chair in his new office.

Governor. What a ridiculous idea.

Lu Xun had hardly been able to contain his desire to leave, so the handoff had been rather rushed. But Lu Xun had prepared meticulous notes for him, and that was what he was going through now.

He stretched, and then set back to it again.
The next set of notes was about the prisoners of war. Names, circumstances of capture, incidents since capture, communication received from Wei regarding ransoms or trades, and so on.

The most prominent soldier was one named Xiahou Ba, the son of Xiahou Yuan. On the eastern fronts, Ling Tong had never personally encountered him, but the man was still famous for his valour, his career, and his end at Shu’s hands. Lu Xun had made the young Shu officer Zhang Bao in charge of his interrogation, with an aim of securing his defection, rather than simply his information or a ransom. That was very interesting. Ling Tong decided he would like to meet this young man himself.

Xiahou Ba still had a certain boyish look to his face, and his term in captivity had perhaps exacerbated, rather than lessened it. He hadn’t been deprived of food, after all, but he had been deprived of activity. He was nervous as he regarded Ling Tong.

Ling Tong sat in the chair in his cell. “I don’t know if they told you, but I’m the new one in charge around here.”

Xiahou Ba looked at him warily. “You’re another Wu general.”

“Yeah, Jing province belongs to Wu.” Ling Tong smiled.

“What happened to Lu Xun?”

“His wife had a baby.”


“No, they’re still here. I just wanted to talk to you myself. From what I’ve been told, you’re in a bit of a conflict with yourself.”

“It’s not…” Xiahou Ba ran his hand through his messy hair. “Things in Wei have been pretty bad lately, I’m not going to lie. But how can I work with the people who killed my father?”

Ling Tong laughed quietly, and when Xiahou Ba looked up with anger, he raised his hands. “Sorry, it’s just… I may understand where you’re coming from. Can I tell you about it?”

———

Lu Xun tested the temperature of the pomelo leaf water again, anxiously. It was warm, but was it too warm? Or might it be too cold? The air was still frosty and cold, after all.

He quickly unwrapped his daughter and gently eased her into the little tub, speaking reassuringly both to her and to himself. “Here we go… into the tub… your first bath… does it feel good? Feels different, doesn’t it? You’re so cute.”

The baby wiggled her little arms and feet. She wasn’t crying, at least.

“You’re so cute!” Lu Xun repeated, laughing. “One month old… time to get clean at last, huh? I’m glad you’re enjoying it… I know Mama is enjoying her bath…”

He gently massaged the baby’s scalp, getting all the little bits of cradle cap out of it. “I’m sorry we had to shave off all your hair, but it’ll grow back, I promise. Your hair is going to look so pretty… you’ll have your mama’s beautiful hair, I know it. Lucky girl. What shall I write with the brushes we make from your hair, hmm? It will have to be something beautiful like you. Pretty Little Mouse.”

Yinping had given her the nickname Little Mouse, because she was so small and quiet. The
midwives had approved of this humble milk name, which surely wouldn’t attract any jealous attention from the spirits. He had two more months to pick her proper name, and as a Confucian, the task was very high in his thoughts. A good name was extremely important.

The full month celebration had no guests, since the few relatives they had were all kept away by distance and war, but that suited Lu Xun down to the ground. He only had a short amount of time before he would have to leave to Jianye, and he didn’t want to have to share his wife and daughter with anyone else.

He took Yinping to his own room straight after dinner while Little Mouse was napping. Before he could decide how to ask his wife if she was ready to have sex again, she was practically ripping at his clothes.

“Hey, these clothes are new,” he laughed, assisting her so she wouldn’t damage them.

“I’ll fix them.”

He breathed in her scent as he untied her own clothes. “You smell really good.”

“You wouldn’t have thought that three days ago. I waited for you to give Little Mouse her first bath because I knew it was important to you, but I just couldn’t wait any longer to wash.”

Undressed, they fell embracing into the bed. “I don’t blame you,” he said, running his hands through her hair. “You’re so beautiful…”

She ran a hand over her belly, still much softer and fuller than before, and said shyly, “You still think so?”

“You are exquisite,” he said reverently, and kissed her fingers. “And more than that, you are my beloved.”

Yinping caressed his face. “I missed you so much.”

He moved a hand between her legs, carefully. “You’re sure you’re all healed down here?”

“I think so. Everything definitely still works… I know because, well, while thinking of you…”

He rubbed her clit gently. “Did you touch yourself like this? Wishing it was me?”

“Yes, Boyan,” she moaned. “I really missed you!”

“What else did you do? Tell me.”

“Put a finger in… inside…”

Still rubbing with his thumb, he slipped his middle finger just inside her entrance. “Like this?”

“Yeah, but… your fingers feel so much better than mine… thicker and rougher…”

She was getting really wet now.

“I touched myself thinking about you too,” he whispered. “I used to look at your xieyi while I made myself cum. You naughty girl, sneaking in it my bag.”

He pulled his hand away suddenly and laid down on his back, pulling her on top of him so that she slid across his cock. “You on top this time,” he said, “so I don’t have to worry about hurting you.”
She rode him in the dim firelight, her beautiful hair cascading over her breasts and brushing against his chest when she leaned forward to kiss him, her fingers entwined with his to help keep her balance.

He came first, but finished her off with his fingers quickly afterwards.

“Will we ever be able to be together like this all the time?” she said as they cuddled.

“I’ll find a way,” he promised. “The end of the chaos is very near, I can feel it.”

———

The fireworks and firecrackers of the New Year were loud enough to reach even the prison cells of Chang’an. The nightly food tray had a slice of fish on top of the noodles, so it was probably New Year’s Eve.

Li Dian ate this imitation of festivity silently, wondering about his family and the rest of his clan back in Wei. How were they being treated while he was a prisoner? Were they being provided with money? Did they have enough to eat? Were they healthy?

He wanted to believe they were, but he had a bad feeling about it. And his intuition was usually right.

The sound of the door unlocking surprised him, and he was surprised even more to see the Shu governor, Ma Chao, enter.

“Congratulations and become prosperous,” said Ma Chao, with a small bow.

Li Dian blinked, then laughed at the absurdity of the traditional new year greeting. “That’s a good one.” He put down his chopsticks to bow as well, though he didn’t bother to get up.

“Congratulations and become prosperous. You’re here? I would have thought you’d all be celebrating.”

“I have no one to celebrate with.”

“Oh yes, we all know you’ve lost your entire clan to Wei.” Li Dian picked up his chopsticks again.

“That’s not what I mean,” he said. “I mean my fellow officers have all left. They’re marching on Tong Gate.”

The chopsticks clattered back into the bowl.

“You can’t be serious… that’s crazy, that’s literally crazy. It’s not even spring yet, the Yellow River is frozen.”

“No, I don’t think they’ll be expecting us either.”

Li Dian put his head in his hands. It was insane. It was ridiculous. But his intuition, his awful intuition, was telling him that Ma Chao was telling the truth.

“I wanted to get you used to the idea now,” Ma Chao continued, “because I think it will soon become clear to you that it will be better for your clan to be under the protection of those who will soon conquer the land.” He walked back to the door. “May your whole family be happy.”

It was another auspicious phrase. Li Dian replied in kind, weakly. “May the wishes of your heart become realized.”
“Just so,” said Ma Chao, and the door closed and locked.

Chapter End Notes

Historically, Lu Xun did marry Sun Ce's daughter; her given name is unknown. Lu Xun was also actually older than Ling Tong historically. So it's pretty likely that the age difference between Lu Xun and his wife was about the same as what I'm depicting between Ling Tong and Sun Jingshi here.

Why am I so cruel to Ling Tong? Because I'm terrible and must be stopped. (I cannot be stopped.)

If you're interested in learning more about Gan Ning's backstory and you enjoy dark fic, my story "Covering Your Ears to Steal a Bell" goes into it in depth.

The originals of the phrases Ma Chao and Li Dian use with each other are 恭喜發財、闔家幸福、心想事成。
I'm indulging myself a little more with style names as we approach the end.

Lu Xun's style name is Boyan.
Fa Zheng's is Xiaozhi.
Xu Shu's is Yuanzhi.
Zhuge Liang's is Kongming.

(In all cases, there will also be context of their "regular" names, so hopefully you won't get too lost, regardless.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

開門見山 (Come directly to the point)

In these dark and chaotic times, it was held unwise for women of any age to travel alone anywhere, and for a trip between cities or towns of any length, even a single male companion was believed to be an invitation to robbery or worse. However, no one bothered the man and woman who traveled on foot along the last dozen 里 (~5km) before Tong Gate.

Perhaps it was their clothes, worn and dusty as if they had been travelling by foot for a long time, and their lack of significant baggage. The woman, too, was too old and ugly to fetch a price at a brothel, what with the hump on her back and her jaundiced face and crooked nose. She had a dagger-axe, but appeared to be using it primarily as a walking stick. The man had been handsome once, but it must have been some twenty years back, and moreover appeared to be only recently recovered from illness.

Whatever it was, no one approached them. If they had, they might not have been able to understand what they were saying anyway, as they were discussing Wei Boyang, an alchemist from about a hundred and fifty years prior, who claimed in his writings that he once died for three days but, when revived, had the ability to fly. The woman suggested that perhaps this was a coma followed by hallucination caused by mushroom poisoning; the man stated that the simplest answer was that the author was a liar.

There were many other travellers on the road, despite the bitter cold, for the new year would begin tomorrow. The main entrance to Tong Gate itself was barely able to be seen through a thick throng of people waiting to be waved through, and under such pressure, the check was perfunctory.

“He cannot be entirely a liar, because I have replicated some of his claims,” the woman was saying to the man as they waited.

“You in the black cloak,” barked a guard. “Purpose?”

“We are part of the Ding family.”
They were waved through. When they walked for a certain amount of time, they suddenly came to a stop against a wall. The woman turned to the man and said, “Why the Ding family?”

Fa Zheng shrugged. “I was cheated once by a Ding. Never liked the name.”

His companion, Huang Yueying, frowned, and opened her mouth to speak, but there was a sudden man’s scream not far away.

“You bastard! You’ll pay for taking Xiao Ling away from me!”

It was the signal. Before the first man’s scream was done, Yueying was already unhooking the “hump” from beneath her cloak and passed it quickly to Fa Zheng, then walked briskly down along an alley.

“If you want the slut, take her back, she’s starting to bore me anyway,” the target of his rage taunted in return.

A young woman, presumably the one in dispute, gasped. “But what about the baby?”

Fa Zheng lodged the device into the fault that Yueying’s critical eye had observed in an earlier scouting trip.

“You villain!”

The first man, who had been carrying a large water jar, hurled it at the other man, and as it made a loud crash against the stone, Fa Zheng struck the firesteel to light the tinder, got up, and walked, with no particular sense of urgency, in the same direction as Yueying.

No one observed the strange behaviour of the shabby duo. Everyone was far too busy enjoying the racy little drama in the public streets. The girlfriend thief, having dodged the thrown jar, made an obscene gesture at his enraged attacker and took off at a run. Xiao Ling and her champion immediately gave chase, and all of them were pursued by a couple of guards, shouting something about public order.

The people left behind laughed and gave their opinions to one another.

All returned back to normal.

Then came the explosion.

The smoke rising into the gray winter sky could be seen from far away. Seeing it, Zhuge Liang raised his fan. “Beat the drum for advance.”

The Shu forces roared as the drummers beat a staccato. Though they had been marching some way and had barely had time to rest, their morale was very high.

———

That same night, the forces of Shu were celebrating the capture of Tong Pass as well as the New Year.

“Why did he have to be the villain?” Guan Suo demanded of Fa Zheng. “Do you know how hard it was for me not to catch him? He’s way too slow!”

“You would have been totally unbelievable in that role,” Fa Zheng said calmly, taking a sip of spicy sichuan peppercorn wine.
“I’m not sure how I feel about the idea that I’m believable as a villain,” Guan Xing mused.

Fa Zheng’s rich laugh rippled across the hall. “Don’t lose heart, young master. I’m proof that even a born villain can serve the cause of benevolence.”

“But it was great, you know!” Bao Sanniang, who had already shoved her chair right up against Guan Suo’s, decided even that was not close enough for her and wiggled her way into the young man’s lap. “You defended my name and fought for my love. You were my hero!”

Across the hall, Jiang Wei and Xu Shu were listening to Zhuge Liang expound upon the lessons of the day’s victory, but the prime minister stopped at once when his wife approached them.

“What is it, my dear?”

“I used more than I thought was necessary in case the wall was more resistant than it appeared,” she said, without prelude, “but it turned out to be far too much. I understand it is New Year’s Eve, but if we don’t reinforce the remaining wall as soon as possible, the temporary stopgap will not hold.”

“You’ll excuse me, gentlemen.” He stood up and followed her, already saying, “How many men do you need?”

“The prime minister is truly amazing,” Jiang Wei said with a sigh. “I have learned more at his side these few months than in all my years before that.”

“He enjoys teaching,” Xu Shu said guardedly, once he had finished chewing a slice of sausage. “You see no flaw in him?”

“Only his indulgence of his wife, but that, alas, is a fault shared by many men.”

Xu Shu blinked. “Indulgence?”

“Giving her tasks so clearly beyond a woman’s capabilities, only has not ended in disaster because of the genius of his instructions,” Jiang Wei said as if it were obvious. “Despite her age, he still is obviously besotted with her. You can see it in how he looks at her.”

“On your second point I would agree,” Xu Shu said, “but you have clearly not interacted with her enough. Do you not know that this entire scheme was devised from discussion between Lady Huang and Master Fa Zheng? Kongming and I merely gave our opinions on it; from just the two of them, it was largely conceived as it was then carried out.”

“You use the prime minister’s style name?” Jiang Wei said, missing the point entirely.

“We were students together.”

“You knew the prime minister in his youth!” Jiang Wei, stars in his eyes, had clearly wiped aside the topic of Lady Huang.

Xu Shu sighed, remembering those years. “Yes. I acted as his brother at his wedding, as his own was far away and his father was already dead.”

“What an honour!”

Xu Shu thought of how all of them—Kongming, Yueying, and himself—had been back then. Naive children playing at grand games, those shadows seemed to him now. He thought of the twists of the Way that had pulled him apart from them, and now brought them back together. A smile played on
his lips. “So it was.”

———

The third day after the New Year is held to be inauspicious for visiting or even speaking; it is the day of the Crimson Dog, God of Blazing Wrath. But circumstances did not permit silence in the court of Cao Pi.

They had received, in rapid order, a message reporting an explosion at Tong Gate, a message reporting a siege at Tong Gate and requesting reinforcements, and a message reporting that the internal disorder of the Wei forces had left Master Xu Huang fearing that his own subofficers would defect and betray him. After that, ominous nothing.

“Your imperial highness,” Sima Yi said with his forehead almost touching the ground. This posture of extreme humility made it easier for him to control his face. “We must move the capital east as soon as possible, and your sacred person especially must get to safety.”

“To give up Luoyang to Shu is to lose,” Jia Xu said bluntly from beside him. He was kneeling too, of course, but remained upright.

“Of course I am not saying we abandon Luoyang,” Sima Yi said testily. “I can remain here and defend it. It is merely the risk to the imperial person that I fear.”

“But where can the emperor go, that there is safety?” Zhang He said from further down. His voice was not as strong and lilting as usual, because he had been injured in the chest successfully suppressing another peasant rebellion in Shouchun. He had ceded command of the area to Cao Pi’s cousin Cao Xiu and come to Luoyang specifically to recuperate in a more stable area.

Another official began to speak, but the emperor waved them all silent. “Sima Yi, I appreciate your concern for my safety, but this panic is ridiculous. You speak of moving east as if Wu is not a threat in itself. We were nearly drawn into a trap at Guangling last time. Shu has managed some kind of flashy attack that dazzled the troops into disorder. Presumably the traitors Jiang Wei and Xu Shu used their influence to gain more defectors to themselves. But we know their force cannot be large. Easily gained is easily lost. In deference to your concerns, however, I will remain here in Luoyang, rather than lead the attack myself. Jia Xu will take command.”

Jia Xu bowed. “I do as the emperor commands.”

While Sima Yi was considering how to word his protests, Cao Pi dismissed them all.

———

Zhou Tai let his horse slow to a stop beside a plum tree and took a moment considering its branches, bare of leaves but bursting with delicate red blossoms. Their crimson hues caught his eye even in the dim light when the sun had not quite risen above the horizon.

Slash.

He caught his intended prize from among the branches that fell, severed by his sword, and tucked the long end of it carefully into the back of his belt. Then he turned his horse to amble back to the palace.

When he unlocked the door to his suite and passed silently into his bedroom, holding the plum branch shyly like a young boy experiencing attraction for the first time, he found his wife still asleep in their bed. She had rolled onto his side of the bed in his absence.
He filled a vase from the water pitcher, and the sound of the water splashing into the ceramic must have awoken her. Zhou Tai placed the branch into the vase and brought it to the nightstand nearest her as she yawned and stretched.

“You can sleep, if you wish.”

“No, it’s morning, isn’t it.” She blinked with a sleepy smile at him, then focused on the plum branch. “Oh, how pretty.”

“I thought of you.”

Xingcai smiled, running a fingertip along a silky blossom. “Did you enjoy your ride?”

“Ah.”

“Not too cold?”

“Mm.”

She stretched again, pulled off the blankets and sat up in bed. She rubbed her arms against herself and laughed a little. “I think we may have different standards for cold. I’m cold already.”

He got into bed behind her and put his arms around her, rubbing them all over her. She laughed again, unsteadily. “You know, this is not making me want to leave the bed.”

“Then don’t,” he whispered into her ear, and kissed just under it.

“I’m supposed to be leading drills at seven sharp. Look, the sun’s up.”

He relinquished his hold regretfully. “I go with the king today.”

She twisted to look at him. “Do you know where?”

He shook his head.

“Or when you’ll be back?”

Another shake.

She frowned, seemed to be considering for a minute, then sighed. “I’ll miss you.”

He kissed her as answer.

———

When Lu Xun’s boat pulled up to the dock in Jianye, he could see that Sun Quan himself, with Zhou Tai his shadow, was waiting for him.

He went to kowtow upon the dock, but Sun Quan waved it aside. “Welcome home, Boyan.”

“My lord,” Lu Xun said, bowing instead. “I did not think to receive such an honour as to be welcomed by you personally.”

“You deserve it,” Sun Quan said, with a smile, “but it’s more my own impatience. Plus it felt good to get out, you know.”

“Yes,” Lu Xun said, smiling at the bright sunny weather. “Spring is really here.”
After directing servants for how to deliver Lu Xun’s baggage, they walked a little down the riverside together.

Sun Quan looked northwest. “You know what it is in my mind, I expect.”

Lu Xun nodded. Invading Shouchun. “What is the latest word?”

“Good, for us. The rebellions still continue; they are not centralized, and Cao Xiu is struggling to extinguish them with no real ringleaders to catch. Their troops are demoralized, depleted, and tired. All evidence, all probability, supports the decision. But…” Sun Quan looked down with a sad smile. “So many bad memories…”

His lord was thinking of the disaster of Hefei. “Your hesitance does you credit, my lord. We all honour your concern for your men’s lives over your own gains.”

“That’s a good spin to put on it.” He turned to Lu Xun. “But what is your opinion?”

“I will need to know, as far as is possible, how things go at Tong Gate. So long as the battle there is inconclusive, Wei will certainly consider it their top priority; therefore we proceed. If it goes well for Wei, they will still probably prioritize the retaking of Chang’an; but we would need to act with caution. However, if it goes badly for them, they will be determined to shore up their eastern defence. But they could take that determination in several directions. If I were the Wei prime minister, given the peasant situation, I would temporarily abandon the territory below the Huai River in order to use it as a natural border. But Cao Pi has been yearning to get his border to the Yangtze for years. He may think, with his still massive number of troops, that he could sweep through the province, terrify the common people into submission along the way, and finally obtain the threatening position on Jianye that he craves. In such a case, we should bolster Shiting, Tutang and Wan Castle and ride out his fury until he exhausts himself.” Lu Xun rubbed at his chin. “Whether we advance or defend, those three locations will be the key. I know they are already well-defended, but let us draw upon the troops in Jing province and the south to increase them further.”

“You’re sure Jing province will be safe?”

“The north of Jing province is in bad shape,” Lu Xun said, shaking his head. “Ling Tong was a good choice, but he’ll have his hands full dealing with all the administration issues. Even if Cao Pi’s pride wants it back, it’s not going to be his priority, especially when Shu could reinforce us along the Han River at any time.”

“What about Guangling?”

“Cao Pi still flatters himself that he escaped a trap,” Lu Xun said with a broad grin. “He thinks we tried to trick him into thinking the castle and forces were false. He won’t choose it as an easy target, and he’d be coming from such a long way, we’d surely get wind of it in time. Especially now that the fortress there is actually becoming worthy of the name.”

Sun Quan crossed his arms. “Are we… actually doing alright?”

“It’s refreshing isn’t it?”

———

“It’s impossible,” Jia Xu heard one soldier lamenting to another as he passed by a tent. “How can we defeat a fox spirit?”

“And if she’s a fox spirit… what does that make her husband?” his fellow answered with a
Jia Xu shook his head and continued to his own tent. The he and she that his men were cowed by were the Shu prime minister Zhuge Liang and his wife. Though he was a skeptic by nature, the Wei strategist could not really blame the soldiers for ascribing preternatural abilities to Huang Yueying. Even Jia Xu was at a loss to explain how the Shu forces had somehow blown open a hole in the outer wall of Tong Gate and taken the city in a single day, yet his own siege could not even penetrate the repaired portion of the wall after several weeks. His initial, reasonable decision to have the troops concentrate their assault in that section had been a deadly error, as the Shu engineers had not simply put up an ordinary barrier, but rather some kind of unholy machine that spat flame into the faces of his soldiers.

Ordinary men could not be expected to understand that this was artifice, not fox magic. There wasn’t even any proof that the prime minister’s wife was involved at all. It was only that her disturbingly placid face, with its uncanny forehead birthmark—a third eye, whispered the men—often poked over the wall to watch his soldiers burning to death. When she was heard to speak, it was always inscrutable nonsense like, “It needs more bone ash.”

The situation was at a critical point. Jia Xu had stopped ordering men to attack at that point, because he feared the consequences to his authority if the men and even officers should outright defy his orders.

With the failure of direct attempts to breach the defences, the most obvious alternative was the other traditional method of siege, waiting out the depletion of supplies within the fort. His troops now chiefly spent their days patrolling the roads and the riverside west of Tong Gate, watching for attempts from Chang’an to send supplies.

But this strategy was far from a guarantee of victory. The quick, decisive capture of Tong Gate by Shu meant that they would have ample supplies in the storehouses. It had already been over a month, and it could be months more before it would effect morale within the fort. And supplies were not the only thing that could be sent from Chang’an. Though messages had been sent to the forces in the northwest to begin a siege of Chang’an that would at least keep those troops busy, without Chang’an, the routes to the northwest were difficult, prone to their own unrests. It was impossible to know how many messages had even made it to their destinations; certainly no reply had been received from any of them.

Jia Xu had the sinking feeling that Master Sima Yi had been correct. They should have bolstered Luoyang and concentrated on subduing the southeast. But what could be done about it now? The loss of morale, if they slunk back to Luoyang…

“Demons!” howled a cavalry scout as he galloped into the camp. “Demons riding monsters!”

“What the devil are you talking about?” Jia Xu challenged him, running out of his tent.

“Demons from the west,” the rider gasped, pulling up, “An army of savages! Monsters that shake the earth as they approach! A trumpeting sound that I cannot even describe!”

“You just described it as a trumpeting sound,” Jia Xu pointed out. “Do you mean elephants?”

The terrified rider would not hear reason. His horse, sensing his distress, whinnied and stomped its hooves. “We must flee at once! I tell you they’re demons!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jia Xu said, loudly to be heard over the murmuring of the troops. “They are merely relief troops from Chang’an, as I predicted. I may not have predicted elephants, but if we
keep our heads, we can handle them."

“Keep our heads?!” The rider began to laugh hysterically. “Keep our heads—not a single one of us will keep our heads if we face them—I can’t take it—I can’t take it!”

The scout suddenly urged his horse into a gallop, dead east out of the camp.

“A deserter!” Jia Xu shouted, cursing himself for not having a bow. “Stop him! Shoot him!”

This call of attention to the deserting scout, though instinctual in an officer, was the precise opposite of what the mood in the camp needed. There was hardly a common soldier in the camp who didn’t already wish to desert. Seeing a scout shoot through their midst, terror across his face, did not make them wish to stop him; it made them determined to join him.

At first it was only a few who moved, the boldest and the most cowardly; but as their fellows realized that nobody was making a move to stop the deserters, the trickle became a flow.

Jia Xu, realizing that his camp was at the risk of deserting en masse, had a quick decision to make. Attempt to stop them? Attempt to turn the desertion into a more orderly retreat?

Neither option seemed possible at this point. He could always flee as well; but where would he go? What would Cao Pi do when he caught him?

The sound of drums advancing from the west turned the flow into a tide. Then the fortress itself began to beat its drums, and Jia Xu turned to see it was opening its eastern gate.

“It’s too late!” A spearman near Jia Xu dropped his spear and fell to his knees sobbing. “We’ll never get away!”

It was too late, Jia Xu realized. As the distant sound of elephants braying became audible, he did the only smart thing left. He dropped his weapon and put his hands up.

———

“Are you smart?”

Xu Shu blinked at the Nanman girl who had plunked herself across the table from him in the officers’ mess hall and spoken without even a greeting first. What was her name? She was a princess, wasn’t she? Meng Huo’s daughter. “Ah, not really,” he said.

The woman nodded as if she had suspected as much. “Here, many people, not very smart. The Han always say you are smarter than us. My father…” She pointed, unnecessarily, at Meng Huo. “He also says, the Han are very smart. I think, only a few are smart. Many people, dumber than us.” She frowned. “I want to learn Chinese.”

“It’s bad. You know it’s bad. Lying is no good. Nanman, we think lying is very bad. The Han think lies are good. The Han always lie, lie, lie.” She crossed her arms. “What’s your name?”

He bowed. “My name is Xu Shu. May I ask your name?”

“I am Princess Huaman. You say, ‘princess’, right? King’s daughter?”

“Yes.”
“Don’t like that.” She shook her head and leaned forward. “How old are you?”

The question was not in itself rude in the Han culture, but the abrupt subject change nonetheless took Xu Shu aback. “I’m thirty-nine.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Lying.”

He laughed. “No, I really am.”

“You have a wife?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Maybe true, have no wife, young, then.” She rubbed a finger over her upper lip, and pointed to him. “This is no good. You are too old. Give up.”

Xu Shu blushed, and self-consciously rubbed the same thing on his own face, where he had only scant facial hair. “Well, you may be right that it looks bad, but I’m not actually trying to grow a beard,” he admitted. “I just leave it alone.”

She sat back and gestured to herself. “Me now. You guess.”

He hesitated.

“No lying.”

“Twenty-five?” he said, going for the truth.

She looked pleased. “Yes, twenty-five. I have husband, once.” Huaman held up a single finger. “He was not good. My father says, now, I need to come here, marry a Han.” She made a face. “Han people think Nanman people are no good, you say, we are snake people. Han people say the Nanman’s dark skin is very ugly, this—” she traced a line of the tattoo on her face. “They also say this is no good. I think, to marry a Han is no good.” She shrugged. “But, my father needs. I am the oldest daughter.”

“Alliance marriages are like that.”

“What is alliance?”

Xu Shu thought how to reword it. “Your king, and our emperor, become friends.”

“They are not friends,” she laughed. “But I understand now. How do you say this one?”

“Tattoo.”

“Ah yes. I remember. Tattoo.” She nodded. “You think tattoos are no good?”

“We think the body is a gift from our parents,” he said, “so we can’t hurt it.”

“Gift, I know. Hm. Not wrong, maybe. We think, tattoos…” She appeared to be searching for the words for some time. Finally, frustrated, she tapped her chest. “Here, I know.” She tapped her mouth. “Here, I don’t know.”

“When you learn how to say it, I would like to hear it.” Xu Shu said.

She looked pleased. “I think, you are smart, maybe.”
He laughed and shook his head. “I’m really, really not.”

“Oh, it is also Han lying. I know now,” she said waving him off when he tried to protest again. “The Han are always like this. You say, the good man cannot say he is good, he must say he is bad. I already know.” She stood up. “Your name is Xu Shu?”

He bowed. “Correct.”

“Okay. Xu Shu. I learn to say this,” she tapped her heart again, “then I tell you. Then, you know me more, maybe. Now, goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” He smiled after her as she left. Though he had been shocked at her sudden and unconventional conversation, through her limited vocabulary, she was already a very entertaining companion. He wondered if he really would have the chance to speak to her when she was more able to express what was in her heart. He had the feeling she would only get more fascinating.

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Zhang He followed the mournful voice of the guqin down corridors and around corners for some time before he found the room where Cai Wenji was playing. The mood in the palace was so depressed these days, that he was able to hear it from that far away.

Cai Wenji’s concentration on the plucking of her strings did not waver as Zhang He opened the door and entered. He leaned against the door and closed his eyes, listening.

The last note diminished into nothingness. After a few moments, Zhang He reopened his eyes.

“Master Zhang He,” Lady Cai said, “I did not know you were in Luoyang.”

“Did you not? I have been here some weeks.”

“Ah. I have… withdrawn from the world, somewhat. I do not wish to know. I do not wish to see.”

Zhang He took a seat on a bench. “You will not have a choice, I fear, very soon.”

Lady Cai’s nimble fingers picked out a quick series of trembling notes, then sighed and sat back.

“I owe his father everything,” Lady Cai said in a low voice. “His father saved me, at great expense, only for the love of art. And I thought he, too, understood art. His poetry was, at one time, excellent… If the Han could not be restored to its former glory, I thought, at least, the new dynasty will form a new golden age, where beauty can flourish again.”

Zhang He also sighed. His chest hurt even to do that. “That is what I have longed for as well.”

“But how can I act? Would it not be the foulest ingratitude?”

“My dear lady,” Zhang He said, “I assure you, your role in whatever comes must only be to write of what occurs. You must turn it into beauty. That is the way to repay our departed lord Cao Cao.”

Zhang He got up to leave. When he was at the door, Lady Cai said softly, “The emperor also favours this room. He likes to come here to be alone, to write poetry, especially late at night. The feng shui of the layout is, he says, conducive to one’s qi and the creative mind.”

“What excellent information. As a fellow creative, I shall make good use of it,” Zhang He said, and departed.
Zhuge Liang strolled into the Tong Gate council room a few minutes past when he was called for, but the emperor made no demur as he made his kowtows. He rose and brushed off the dust with his fan. “I apologize for the delay, my lord. Master Jia Xu had quite a lot to say.” He smiled. “I allowed Xu Huang, restrained nearby, to hear just how much. I have hopes that when he sleeps on the matter, he will realize that he has more to gain by cooperation as well.” He settled into his place at the right hand of the emperor. “Up until now, our enemies have folded beneath my colleagues’ simple stratagems as grass folding beneath the foot of the ox. But our next step will not be so. Luoyang’s defence is lead by Sima Yi. All my life has led up to this point. I, I alone, can counter him.”

“He is absolutely insufferable,” Fa Zheng complained to Lady Huang, who was seated between him and Zhuge Liang. “Have you truly lived with this for twenty years? Ah, there goes the fan; I’ve vexed him.”

“Insufferable?” Lady Huang blinked. “I haven’t had any suffering, that I can remember.”

“Master Fa Zheng,” Jiang Wei interjected, scandalized, “the prime minister was speaking!”

“I thank you, Jiang Wei, for your efforts to brace my diminishing prestige,” Zhuge Liang said, “but though I cannot say Master Fa Zheng’s interruption pleased me, I have come to realize that his odious personality is the price I must pay for his value to our emperor.”

“Flatterer,” Fa Zheng said, with a broad smile. “I think I’ll let you live after all.”

“To continue, if I may, Xiaozhi,” Zhuge Liang said, and at Fa Zheng’s benediction-like gesture he went on, “despite our string of successes, there will be nothing easy about this next task. Sima Yi cannot be easily tricked, nor is he vulnerable to temptations of defection. The Wei army is still mighty in its size and fearsome in its ability. This may take months, or years. I will need to spend every moment analyzing my opponent’s movements. But I assure you, my lord, that if our forces hold true to my instructions, we shall emerge victorious in the end.”

Xu Shu, sitting to the left of the emperor, hesitantly raised a finger.

“Yes, of course, Xu Shu,” the emperor called on him. “Please, give your opinion.”

“I have lived in Wei these past fifteen years, most of them in Luoyang,” he said, speaking towards the table more than his table companions. “This past year… even before they sent me out of Luoyang, I could see the capital was not immune to the poor harvest. It can only have gotten worse. Wei could have avoided much starvation by being freer with the grain stores, but they have not, almost anywhere. They are jealously hoarding it because of fear of sieges. But the end result is that it as if Shu and Wu have put the entirety of Wei under a siege this past winter.” He took a breath. “The people are already at the brink. If we surround Luoyang, and offer the people food, Luoyang will never hold. If they open their own storehouses at that point, they will be damned anyhow when they cannot replenish their supplies. We may have to fight reinforcements attempting to lift the siege, but our morale is high, and their soldiers, too, will be vulnerable to the allure of food freely offered.” He looked up at Zhuge Liang’s expressionless face and gave an apologetic smile. “Kongming, I think this siege will be neither long or difficult.”

Zhuge Liang and Xu Shu stared at each other, in the dead silence of the rest of the room, for about fifteen seconds.

“Yuanzhi, I believe when we had our reunion I said that I was looking forward to the blessing of your principled sincerity.”
Xu Shu’s sheepish smile became warmer. “I remember.”

“I was a fool, and you are damnably right.” The crane fan twitched. “My lord. As we have already established the supply chain, we march at the imperial pleasure.”

“The imperial pleasure,” Liu Bei said, “is to liberate my people as quickly as possible.”

Zhuge Liang, and the rest of the officers around the table, brought their hands together to bow.

Chapter End Notes

Wei Boyang was a Han dynasty Taoist alchemist who described what might be the earliest accidental discovery of gunpowder (which, in the real world, was not rediscovered usefully until centuries later). In the Clouds & Rain universe, Lady Huang replicated his discovery and realized its military applications.

Bone ash was a traditional source of phosphorus, which Lady Huang is using for its flammability.

If elephants can make it through the Alps, they can make it through the Ziwu valley. Let me live.

I have long felt that most media handles limited second language learners badly. I wanted to try to write a characters whose speech is realistically limited, yet whose intelligence and personality nevertheless comes through; hence Princess Huaman. The character's name and relation to Meng Huo comes from popular legend surrounding Guan Suo; she was one of his four wives. Like all pretty much all terms for non-Han peoples, the Chinese for "Nanman" is a slur, likening the people to snakes. Unfortunately we have no other name for them; we don’t know to what extent they were related to extant peoples such as the Hmong, Burmese, or Tai. Ancient Chinese texts mention that they used facial tattoos, and sacred tattoos are very common among peoples of southeast Asia, so I was sure to include them in my depiction of her.
望子成龍 (To hope one's child becomes a dragon)

Chapter Notes

Kongming is Zhuge Liang’s style name, Yuanzhi is Xu Shu's.

Dajiu is a term of address for one's wife's older brother.

All translations from classical Chinese are my own.

Zhongdan is a type of inner clothing worn over underwear but under one's regular clothes. It would typically be a plain silk or cotton robe, often white (which is otherwise not a colour that predominates in clothing, because it is associated with death). It could be worn without outer clothing in private as loungewear.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

望子成龍：wang zi cheng long
hope / child / becomes / dragon
“To hope one’s child becomes a dragon; to wish for one’s child to be successful”

“We are not naming her that!”

Sun Quan sighed. “But the divination said—”

“I don’t care how many strokes are in the characters and how perfectly it balances something or other about the exact minute that I pushed her out of my body,” Lianshi said, eyes blazing. “Over my dead body are you naming her Luban. ‘Vulgar’? You want to name my beautiful little girl ‘Vulgar’?”

“I admit it’s somewhat strange—“

“Never, never, never!” she interrupted him again. “I have and I do and I will again put up with all sorts of things from you, my lord, but this will not happen! Luban—that is not a name for a girl, that is a name for a villainess!”

He raised his hands in surrender. “Lianshi, you don’t need to get yourself into such a state,” he soothed. “I won’t name her anything you hate so much, I promise.”

When she was pregnant, Lianshi had seemed as serene and unwavering as ever. He had never expected that anything would change once the children were born. Was it the lack of sleep that made her behave this way? She was his rock, but in the past hundred days it had been him reassuring her when she became a blubbering mess over the slightest thing; him absorbing and deflecting her over-the-top outrage over minor issues.

He had made the mistake once of joking that this must be what it was like to be her for him. That had made her sob.

Lianshi still had her lips pursed. “And what did this astrologer say would be the proper name for our son?”

Ok. At least this one she wouldn’t mind. “Ba. Ba as in ‘Baquan’—” Combined with his own name
it formed the word *supremacy*.

“Ba as in tyranny!” exclaimed Lianshi. “Ba as in despotic! Is this a name for a prince in an era of peace?!”

“Well… they called my brother ‘Xiao Bawang’,” he pointed out—*the Little Conqueror*. “It’s not necessarily—”

“Your brother is dead!” wailed Lianshi, ripping the sheet of the bed she was sitting on in her distress. “Oh! Look, look, is this not an omen? Is this what you want? You want my baby to die?”

“Lianshi, get a hold of yourself.” Sun Quan took her hands and stilled them. “Were you not listening to me? I said I wouldn’t name them anything you hate, didn’t I?”

She sniffled. “I’m sorry, my lord… I’m just so, so tired… But don’t bring up a wetnurse again! They are *my* babies!”

Sun Quan patted her hands. The last thing he wanted to do was to reopen *that* argument. “Look, they’re both asleep now, you take a nap too. I’ll tell the fortune teller to find different names, better ones. Alright? You rest. Everything will be fine.”

She nodded tearfully, and he tucked her in with the ripped sheet and added a blanket.

In the hall just outside, his sister was waiting.

“Don’t start with me, Shangxiang.”

She raised her hands. “Hey, I didn’t even say anything yet! I know I can be mean, but I do love you, you know, stupid.”

He smiled despite himself. “She hates the names the fortune teller recommended. I’ll have to ask him to come up with something else… or maybe I should find a different fortune teller…”

“You could always just come up with a name yourself,” Shangxiang suggested, falling into step with him. “Like Da Ge and Lord Zhou Yu did. And don’t start comparing yourself to them and saying you’re not as good,” she said, cutting him off. “That’s not the point. The point is that only Da Ge would’ve picked a name like *Jingshi*, especially for a girl. Lord Zhou Yu would never have picked a name like that. And Da Ge wouldn’t have picked any of the names that Lord Zhou Yu did. Think about it, you know I’m right. What you name your children is a gift from you. So it should sound like it’s from you.”

Sun Quan did think about it. She had a point. Zhou Yu had picked names that championed a life of intelligent service—Xun, follow; Shou, keep watch; Wen, listen; Shen, caution. His brother, on the other hand, had named his daughter “contend with the world”. Both sets of names gave a pretty accurate picture of their fathers’ attitudes toward life.

What was his life path, that he wanted his children to follow?

What was a good name for a prince and princess in an era of peace, as Lianshi wished?

“Maybe ask Lord Lu Xun what he thinks,” Shangxiang added, seeing that her brother was really considering her words. “He’s so scholarly, and the name he picked for his daughter is lovely, don’t you think? At least he can commiserate with the pressure.”
“How did you pick Ruofeng’s name?”

Lu Xun looked up at his lord from the maps of Shouchun and Jing province. It was an abrupt change from the matter of what Wu should do now that Cao Wei was abandoning the land south of the Huai river and leaving Ru’nan only lightly defended as troops from each surged north to clash with Shu at Luoyang. Still, his lord had asked a question.

“From Master Yang’s *Fa Yan,*” and Lu Xun quoted the relevant paragraph of the Confucian work—in times of good government, *ruo feng* (be like the phoenix); in times of chaos, *ruo feng* (be like the phoenix). “The phoenix remains itself, and succeeds in any era; this is what I wish for her.”

Sun Quan drummed the fingers of one hand on the table. “Did it take you a long time to choose?”

“Ages, my lord. My heart was sick about it.” Lu Xun sat back in his chair. “Were the fortune teller’s names unacceptable?”

“The queen despised them,” Sun Quan said, “and from the plain meaning of the names, I admit she was not unreasonable in her dislike. The empress suggested I should choose the names, giving my brother, Zhou Yu, and you as examples. But I don’t know how I can do so. I don’t have my brother’s strength, or Zhou Yu’s intelligence, or your wisdom.”

“The king is too kind to already attribute to me the wisdom I one day aspire to possess. But it is only you who managed to become king, my lord. You became king in your own way, and you rule in your own way. Your father was perfectly right to give you the name Quan, ‘authority’. The kingdom, and your officers, love and honour you. I am sure, if you choose your children’s names in your own way, they will be excellent names.” He paused a moment, studying his monarch’s face and guessing at the thoughts behind it. “Have you already thought of some? I would be honoured to advise you on the matter, as I advise you in all matters of the kingdom.”

“Tigers… for good or ill, we of the south are always called tigers… feared, but despised. I would wish for my son and daughter to be such that no one would dare look down on them… *ru hu tian yi,* like the tiger that has grown wings.” Sun Quan shrugged. “So I thought of Ruhu, for my daughter, and Yi, for my son.”

Lu Xun saw the doubt in his lord’s face as he searched Lu Xun’s for disapproval, and was glad that he could be sincere in his response. “These are auspicious names, truly! To call your son *wings,* is to remind him that to remain above requires balance. No bird can fly, without the support of the air; no ruler can govern, without the support of the people. As for your daughter, the fierceness of the women of the Sun family is admired everywhere; her aunt, who has become empress, is the beloved of the Son of Heaven. Your son and daughter, indeed, will ensure that to be called ‘like a tiger’ will become the highest compliment.”

Sun Quan gave a disbelieving smile. “You’re sure you didn’t pick up tips on bullshitting from that smug fan-waving motherfucker?”

Lu Xun laughed. “I would not deceive you, my lord!”

“I know.” Sun Quan shook his head, still smiling. “I’ll have to see what Lianshi thinks. I appreciate your endorsement.” He drummed his fingers again. “We should return to the topic of reinforcing Shu at Luoyang. Even if you do not think it necessary, would it not show magnanimity?”

———

Sima Yi paced in his study, while his wife sat on a chair in the corner, quietly embroidering a slipper.
Ordinarily he did not want her, or anyone, in the room while he thought, but she had unexpectedly come in at some point while he was sitting at his desk with his eyes closed, so absorbed in the disaster that he was not even aware that she had done so. He was actually glad of her presence; it was a check to his nerves. He could not scream, as his heart wished to; therefore he would think instead.

When the news of Jia Xu’s defeat had come in, Cao Pi had again rejected his suggestion that he leave Sima Yi to defend Luoyang while he pushed east, instead abandoning Shouchun just as the modest spring harvest was finally calming the tensions. Now the emperor was not even listening to him about how to counter the siege. He was relying totally on his idea that the city would easily hold out until relief troops could surround the siege and snuff out Shu. Troop numbers! Was there a more perilous advantage?

Imbecile… Cao Pi had once had it in him to rule the land, Sima Yi had been sure, so what had turned him into such an imbecile?

The worst part was that Sima Yi could not hold himself blameless.

He cursed the day he had ever tried to tamper with the winds. He was reaping the harvest of his own foolishness now. He had gambled for a prize he did not understand, with stakes he could not control; idiocy indeed!

As long as he had regained his senses, and as long as he had his life and his family’s lives, all was not yet lost. He stopped pacing suddenly, and stared at Chunhua, still placidly piercing the fabric with the needle as if she had no anxieties. She was far from insensate to the danger, so she believed in his ability to extricate them all.

And so he would.

———

Liu Bei was taking tea with Zhuge Liang and Xu Shu at the end of the second week of the siege.

So far all had been rather dull. They had not attacked, and they kept out of useful range, for the most part. Twice a day, wagons bearing grain and other foodstuffs were sent to circle the city while the troops beat drums and sang. Otherwise, they did nothing.

That Wei was sending a large army northwest from Shouchun, they knew; but that was a long way to come on foot, and would arrive tired and useless if they pushed themselves. Still, they ought to arrive in the next few days; then things would become interesting very quickly. Cao Pi was truly staking everything on Luoyang.

Despite Zhuge Liang’s depressed acknowledgement of Xu Shu’s plan, it seemed to Liu Bei that things were going to turn into a battle for the ages after all.

“Kongming, I appreciate your confidence in Xu Shu’s plan,” Liu Bei began, after they had drunk two cups of tea without any conversation of importance, “but given the lack of progress, are you sure that you do not wish to devise alternate plans?”

“It is not just Yuanzhi’s plan,” murmured Zhuge Liang.

An ordinary observer, without long experience of Zhuge Liang, might have mistaken this for a petulant demand at being allowed to share in the credit. Neither Liu Bei nor Xu Shu made that mistake. The two exchanged glances that said as much.
“Will you share what other plans you have made?” Liu Bei asked.

“It is not a plan.” He paused to refill the emperor’s cup and then Xu Shu’s. “Yuanzhi’s plan merely caused me to realize the situation I was faced with. I know Sima Yi. Wei’s counterattacks, these past months… these have not been Sima Yi. He has, somehow, lost the ear of his lord. And these Wei reinforcements, now, that we are awaiting, they did not come at the command of Sima Yi. I know Sima Yi,” he repeated, and smiled. “He is also waiting. There is only one chance open to him. And when he takes it, Luoyang is won, and the chaos will be largely quelled; then, Sima Yi and I, we will have our game at another time.”

Liu Bei frowned, frustrated. He didn’t understand, and he didn’t even know what to ask. He saw some understanding on Xu Shu’s face, and hoped the other man would put forward the right questions.

Xu Shu delivered. “Cao Pi did not already send away his son? I would have thought… oh, of course.”

“Yes,” Zhuge Liang smiled. “Cao Pi could not admit to the possibility of danger. Now, of course, it is too late.”

“But if Sima Yi means to take Cao Pi’s heir and flee,” Xu Shu said, “should we not make plans to catch him?”

“By no means.” Zhuge Liang looked affronted. “He will flee to the northeast, and gather all Wei loyalists to himself. So much the better; they will be smoked out, in this way. We would have had to regain the northeast eventually regardless; with such a one as Sima Yi governing it in the meantime, the people will not suffer excessively until then. For now,” he picked up his cup, “your tea is getting cold.”

———

When Zhao Yun, with Liu Bei’s forces, had swept through Chang’an on their way to attack Tong Gate, though most of the officers and strategists there had come along, Ma Chao had not. Time being critical, Zhao Yun had not so much as seen him in passing. All their minds were set on making it to Tong Gate by New Year’s Eve without letting Wei catch wind of their coming. At the time, he only vaguely heard that Ma Chao was remaining in command at Chang’an.

Therefore, when he saw Ma Chao riding towards him across the camp, he was surprised. That it had to be the man himself was obvious. As always, the man had on his magnificent armour. It always drew every eye, and therefore every archer’s arrow. That he was still alive and fighting was a testament to his skill and determination.

It still didn’t give Zhao Yun much time to consider how he would handle the coming conversation. He had hoped that all would be peaceful when they next met.

“Dajiu,” Zhao Yun called out to him as he rode up, “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Ma Chao was smiling as he pulled his horse up next to Zhao Yun’s. “‘Dajiu’, that feels wrong somehow,” he said ruefully. “I’m younger than you, after all. I’m honoured even to have you use my style name.”

“Don’t be embarrassed, family is family,” Zhao Yun said firmly. “Your sister has been missing you.”

“I’ve missed her as well. I can’t wait to see her when all of this is settled. When do you next write her? I would be very grateful if I could attach my own letter.”
With their horses side by side, they were not facing each other, and Zhao Yun was glad for the opportunity to let his eyes roam over the camp as he thought how to answer this. He finally decided on the blunt truth. “You don’t need to write her a letter, because she is here.”

Ma Chao turned in the saddle, as Zhao Yun expected he would. “She’s here? She’s here. Here? Here in the camp?”

“Yes,” said Zhao Yun, turning himself. “She came with me from Nanman.”

Ma Chao’s face was still incredulous. “She was with you in Nanman? You left her unattended in the camp while you fought?”

“No, she fought at my side,” Zhao Yun said. The little matter of the time they had become separated in the fray, he wisely did not bring up.

Ma Chao’s eyes widened further still. “She engaged the enemy? With you? You, who must have been in the front lines…” As he digested this, his shock and disbelief was giving way to anger. “You don’t say she is injured, but… how could you? You said… you promised me you’d keep her safe!”

“I promised I would keep her safe and make her happy,” Zhao Yun said carefully. “In fulfilling her request to fight at my side, I attempted to balance both.”

Ma Chao made a little noise of frustration, his eyes darting as if searching for the response.

“I agreed because she wanted to fight,” Zhao Yun said. “If it were just pain at being parted from me, I would not have burdened the army with her. We talked about it long. I do not think she could have been happy without this chance.”

“It doesn’t matter if she’s happy if she’s exposed to danger! I would never have allowed her to do it!”

“But you are her older brother. I am her husband.”

Ma Chao gave an unamused laugh. “Yes, I know I cannot stop you…”

“No, that is not what I mean. You love her as a sister; I love her as a wife. How can I ask her to someday take the risk of death to carry my child, but deny her the risk of death to fight for our lord? It would be only selfishness. For you, her safety was rightly paramount; but for me, blessings exist that are worth the risk to her safety. I have judged that this is one of them. If I judge wrongly, I have erred from love.”

He saw Ma Chao close his eyes. When the man reopened them, his voice was softer. “You know, I’ve lost my cousin?”

“Ma Dai has died? I did not know. Neither does she.”

“Tell me where I can find her. I must tell her… I must beg her not to fight anymore. I know it’s too late for her to leave, but if she would at least stay in the camp…”

“I can’t leave my post here,” Zhao Yun said, “but she is probably with Lady Huang, by the armaments.”

Ma Chao urged his horse forward without saying goodbye, but Zhao Yun did not blame him. His brother-in-law had taken a bad shock better than he expected, all things considered.
Lulu rubbed the nose of a nervous horse and clucked soothingly at him. She had promised her brother she would stop fighting from now on, and they had come up with the solution, for the time being, that when combat occurred she would go directly to where the horses were being kept. This was well back from any predicted hostilities and constantly guarded. Moreover, she knew all there was to know about horses and could make herself useful in helping to care for them.

Ma Dai, dead… it didn’t seem possible. She rubbed at her own face, trying to stop herself from crying again. Her cousin was such a wonderful man, always so cheerful and encouraging. That she would never again hear his jokes, his laughter, his teasing… It was hard to bear, it was impossible to bear.

Her brother had gotten down on his knees to beg her not to fight anymore, and she had gotten down on her knees too, asking his forgiveness for her selfishness. They had actually lost their balance as they cried and fallen over onto the floor of her tent, and her brother had said, “If Ma Dai were here…”

Oh, yes, their cousin would have taken such advantage of the absurd picture of Ma Chao, the Splendid, toppled onto the ground, his helmet askew and his golden hair in his face.

The horse nickered and nudged at her watery cheek, and she came back to herself.

The Wei reinforcements had been sighted at last, so the Shu forces had taken up formations west of Luoyang, preventing Wei from surrounding them but leaving open direct access to Luoyang from the east.

She kept on expecting and expecting the drums and the gongs and war chants to begin, but they never did. Now it was getting dark.

She sighted the lean, elegant figure of the prime minister approaching the marshal, and made her way closer as unobtrusively as possible.

“Be at ease,” Zhuge Liang said as the man made to kowtow. “All will be quiet tonight. Make sure the one who relieves you knows to have the wagons prepared to set off as soon as the sun is fully risen above the horizon. Before noon, we will have Luoyang.”

In the streets of Luoyang, the noise and the chaos were worse than even the past few weeks.

Yes, the reinforcements were here, yet there was no sense of relief in anyone, not even in Cao Pi, who had called for them. This siege had not been a siege, it had been a taunting. And these reinforcements had not stopped the sting of the taunting, and would not until the Shu forces were properly crushed as he wished. But how to do it? When he had called for the reinforcements from Ru’nan and Shouchun, he had been expecting a typical siege, and that the reinforcements would join a battle already in progress. Not this vile standoff.

He wanted Sima Yi, and yet no one seemed to be able to find him today.

Cao Pi had tried to sleep. He had fucked a woman and ejaculated, even, without the lethargy he craved.

Without bothering to dress more than his zhongdan, without bothering with any guard more than his own weapon, he stalked through the corridors of the palace to his favourite music room. He went in,
locked the door from the inside, and found the lamp to light it.

When he lit it, he discovered he was not alone.

“My emperor,” said Zhang He, more quietly than had been his habit of old.

Cao Pi had startled, and he couldn’t blame himself for that. His officer was reclining upon a couch, but not looking particularly as if he had been sleeping; he was fully dressed. It was suspicious. “Oh, Zhang He. I didn’t expect to see anyone here, at this time of night… I did not know you used this room.”

“Lady Cai informed me of its artistic properties,” Zhang He said. “Though I cannot yet dance, I find it an excellent place to meditate upon beauty.”

This, at least, was a soothing topic of conversation. Cao Pi relaxed a little. “It is indeed… I like to come here to write poetry.”

“The house of Cao has produced such poets!” Zhang He said. “Do you ever wonder? If the Han had never fallen, perhaps you would be able to do nothing but write poetry. There may be great works, which you and your father would have given the world, had your time not been so otherwise occupied… not to mention your brother…”

His brother. Cao Pi thought of his brother Cao Zhi. In had been in this very room that they had seen each other for the last time, where Cao Pi had challenged his brother to write poetry on the fly.

_Cooking beans on a beanstalk fire_
_The beans weeping in the fryer_
_Born from the same root and sire_
_Is such haste to burn the other required?_

What a poem, to produce instantly at such a moment. Cao Pi had been unable to follow his advisor’s urging to have his brother executed, after hearing it. He had merely demoted and exiled him. He wondered what poetry Cao Zhi had written since then. How he would like to hear it…

“Perhaps I would have taken the sword dance to new heights,” Zhang He was continuing to muse. “Lady Cai, of course, would never have been wasted all those years with the barbarians… none of her father’s poetry would have been lost… and Liu Bei, I suppose, would have crafted excellent grass slippers.”

Cao Pi had to laugh at that. “That does sound like a better world. Is that all you were thinking of in here?”

“Lord Sima Yi is a more difficult case,” Zhang He said, as if Cao Pi had not spoken. “Presumably, your honoured father would never have requested his service, but would the magnificent Lady Zhang have been satisfied with a quiet and obscure life? I somehow doubt it… no, she would have brought him to prominence in any world, I feel.”

“Do you… know where Sima Yi is?” Cao Pi asked, afraid he did not want the answer.

Zhang He briefly glanced over his shoulder at the window. “Is it past midnight? Presumably, he has gotten through Hulao Gate by now; I don’t know whether he arranged a boat on the Yellow River in advance, or if it he will need to hire one. In any event, wherever he is, I am sure he never lets your son out of his sight.”

Cao Pi’s blood went cold. “My son? He has taken my son?”
“Oh yes. He will guard him like the apple of his eye. How else can he claim to be regent when you die?”

Cao Pi grabbed for his sword. “You’re conspiring with him against me.”

“Not at all.” Zhang He showed no alarm at the emperor’s brandishing of his weapon. “Alas, he did not take me into his confidence. His departure took me quite by surprise. I am very unhappy about it. I thought, when you died, everything would be settled.”

“I don’t understand you,” Cao Pi said warily. “What are you playing at?”

“My lord, you are a perceptive man,” Zhang He met his eyes. “You already know you are going to die. There are several ways it could happen, some of them very distasteful. As your retainer, I wish to offer you a swift and private end. It is the last service I can perform for you.”

Cao Pi walked past Zhang He’s couch and to the window, looking out on his capital city, so deceptively peaceful in the darkness. He knew better. It was seething with unrest. Not even his troops had faith in him anymore. And now that Sima Yi had kidnapped Cao Rui…

Well. At least, that meant Cao Rui was safe for now. If Cao Pi had followed Sima Yi’s advice earlier… too late for such thoughts to matter for himself, but it meant that Cao Rui still had a chance. The boy was as winsome as his mother had warned him to be.

I could still win, he wanted to protest, but could not.

I could still escape. That felt even more hollow.

Cao Pi leaned his sword on the wall. He did not turn around.

———

In the morning it all broke.

As the Shu wagons began their slow lap around Luoyang, crowds of people gathered in the streets of Luoyang, making demands that the half-hearted guards had no idea how to handle. Communication from the palace had ceased. When a particularly bold group of women began working at lifting the bar of a side gate, the guard captain had said, “Ah, what the hell,” and joined them.

Zhuge Liang mounted a horse next to his emperor, who had a hand over his eyes to watch as people came pouring out of Luoyang towards the wagon train.

A single archer on the Luoyang walls fired an arrow, but it hit the ground, and either he gave up the idea or was stopped, as no more came.

Another gate opened.

“My lord,” Zhuge Liang said, “your people are ready for you.”

“Beat the drum,” Liu Bei said.

———

Zhang He smiled as the door to the emperor’s throne room was forced open, and Liu Bei and a group of his officers rushed in, weapons outstretched.

“My emperor,” he said, as grandly as he could manage with his diminished lung capacity. “I have
been expecting you.”

Liu Bei was not looking at him; he, and all of the Shu officers, were staring with some horror at the
severed head which hung by its ponytail from Zhang He’s hand.

“You need not imagine any craven betrayal,” Zhang He said. “It was my honour to so serve him. He
had a dignified end. Truly, it was beautiful.”

Chapter End Notes

I made myself very merry at the expense of Sun Quan's historical children's names. One
of his only daughters to have any of her names recorded at all, Sun Luban (style name:
Dahu, "big tiger") was indeed treated as a villainess by history for her machinations
during the struggle between Sun Quan's sons for who would succeed him. One of those
sons, her half-brother Sun Ba, is also commonly regarded by history as bad news. Both
children had ignominious ends.

None of Sun Ce's daughters' names are recorded. Zhou Yu had a son named Xun, but
the other names are my invention.

Here are all my OC names in characters, for those interested:
孫如虎 - Sun Ruhu
孫翼 - Sun Yi
陸若鳳 - Lu Ruofeng
孫競世 - Sun Jingshi
周循 - Zhou Xun (this was a historical son)
孫守 - Sun Shou (born Zhou--Sun Ce's adopted son)
周聞 - Zhou Wen
周慎 - Zhou Shen
胳膊肘向外拐 (The elbow turns the wrong way)

Chapter Notes

Jiejie, "big sister", is what Xiao Qiao calls Da Qiao. The source materials' lack of real names for the Qiao sisters puts me in a bit of an awkward situation. I mostly avoid having other characters address them by name other than Lady Qiao or relationship names.

Content warnings: There is some Sinocentric bigotry in this chapter. There is discussion of hypothetical marriage between first cousins, which of this type and in this era was not taboo. Rape is mentioned.

胳膊肘向外拐：gebozhou xiang wai guai
arm / arm / elbow / towards / outside / turn
“The elbow turns the wrong way; backing outsiders rather than your own kind.”

Zhuge Liang was in his element, seated in the study so lately dwelled in by his only true rival; like a spider at the centre of her web, attuned to every vibration of the strings.

Sima Yi had, of course, burned or otherwise destroyed all that he could not take with him from his own space; but he had not been able to get at Cao Pi’s private spaces, and thus Zhuge Liang had plenty of reading material in between reports, interrogations, and meetings.

Messages had been dispatched to Sun Quan: recounting the victory, bidding the empress to return to her lord’s side before her confinement would make travel impossible, and inviting Sun Quan to take possession of his agreed upon portion of Huainan, along with the cordial reminder that the negotiated border granted almost all of Ru’nan to the emperor.

Messages had also been sent to Ling Tong, the governor of Jing province: congratulating him on his ascension to that position and reminding him, a little less cordially than had been expressed to the King of Wu, that everything north of the Huai River did not and would not belong to Wu. However, if Wu troops needed to cross over Shu territory on their way to quell the anarchy in Huainan, they were welcome to do so.

Then there were messages to be sent far and wide to former Wei territory, inviting officials of every rank to submit to the true emperor, who would generously pardon all former rebellion against his gracious reign. It would be important, as far as was possible, to get out ahead of Sima Yi in this way. Otherwise, matters of the northeast were, for the time being, on hold.

There was the matter of integrating those officers and troops which had already surrendered, without causing resentment from those who had contributed long and meritorious service, not to mention adroitly handling the barbarian troops from Nanman. Some were easier than others. Jia Xu, whom he knew he could not trust but could predict, he gave to Fa Zheng, whom he could neither trust nor predict. To Fa Zheng he also assigned Jiang Wei, whose virtue needed to see a little more of the ways of the world, and Guan Xing, for whom it was time to decide what he truly believed. The four of them would start with Chen Cang on a Western campaign. Ma Chao would go with them as far as Chang’an, but would retake the role he had held in Hanzhong of governor; a man of his moral rectitude was far more valuable as an administrator than a general at this point.
He would keep his wife with him in Luoyang, of course, and he thought he could indulge himself by keeping Xu Shu as well; that was a comfort. The crown prince would need to be brought to Luoyang from Chengdu. Zhang Fei, Zhuge Liang thought, could safely be given governorship of Yi province in Chengdu; this would provide him with the honour that Liu Bei would demand for his oath brother without straining Zhang Fei’s mediocre administrative abilities. In a few years, perhaps, both of them could be coaxed into allowing Zhang Fei to “retire” in the capital.

There was the matter of how to handle Cao Pi’s body. Should he be treated as a traitor? Buried with any honour at all? If a rank, what rank? To be gracious in victory was not only benevolent but also more likely to win over both newly defected officers with ties to the Cao clan, like Xiahou Ba, and the undecided officers in the former Wei territory. Complicating this was Cao Pi’s widow, heavily pregnant; his mother; his sisters and their husbands; and his daughter, a child of four. Then there was the matter of Cao Pi’s brother, Cao Zhi; he had vied with Cao Pi for Cao Cao’s favour and lost, but now that his brother had died he might very well attempt to claim succession. Troops had already been dispatched to where he was supposed to be, but Zhuge Liang was expecting them to find that the bird had already flown.

Then there was the matter of how to position the rest of the troops…

“My lord, Master Xu Shu is here.”

Zhuge Liang smiled sincerely and returned his old friend’s bow as Xu Shu took a seat opposite his desk. He always liked to see Xu Shu, and today he had ample ammunition to fluster him, which was a particular amusement. “My dear Yuanzhi, my highest thanks for the success of your plan.”

As predicted, Xu Shu flushed and scratched at his hair. “Kongming, it was nothing.”

“The emperor will, of course, enfeoff you once the situation has calmed,” he continued, “but I believe I have a more direct reward available much sooner.”

“Eh?” Xu Shu was already wary. His friend was getting wise to him at last, after twenty years.

“Meng Huo, of the Nanman, wishes to ally his… ‘kingdom’ to ours in a more traditional, connubial sense,” Zhuge Liang said. “At first he wished to marry his daughter to our crown prince, and was having difficulty accepting that this was not possible. Further negotiation seemed at a standstill, but just lately they have come to me, and whose name do you think they suggested?”

“Mine, since you are telling me this,” Xu Shu muttered.

“Indeed, apparently you have caught the fancy of a barbarian princess. Still unintentionally breaking hearts, like you did when you were a teenage vigilante!” laughed Zhuge Liang, but his laughter faded as Xu Shu was not reacting with the blushing protests he expected. Ah well. He would have needed to come clean eventually anyway. “You need not worry, I can handle the rejection myself without causing you any embarrassment. When I have time to go through it, I’ll arrange for her to be wed to some former Wei officer—that will serve two purposes at once.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Xu Shu said. “If Princess Huaman’s father finds me suitable, I have no objections.”

Zhuge Liang was rarely even surprised. This, from Xu Shu, flabbergasted him. “You are joking…” he said, but without any force behind the words, because Xu Shu did not joke like this.

“I’ve only spoken to her once,” Xu Shu admitted, “but I think we could get along.”

“Get along?” Zhuge Liang leaned forward, his supercilious airs all cast aside. “Xu Shu, if you desire
a wife so much, I can help you find one much better than this Nanman.”

“I told you I have no objections,” Xu Shu said. “I don’t object to her being a Nanman.”

Zhuge Liang leaned back slowly in his chair. “I thought I understood you completely,” he said, “but I do not understand this at all. If you have been wishing to mystify me, for once, you have succeeded.”

“That is only an unexpected bonus,” Xu Shu said dryly. “Kongming, I am perfectly sincere. Also, as turnabout is fair play, I will be expecting you to act as my brother for the wedding.”

“I suppose it is in the nature of brothers to have parts of themselves that are unfathomable to each other,” Zhuge Liang said with a sigh of resignation. “Very well. And not only will I have to act as your brother, but I will be responsible for sparing you from whatever bizarre notions such savages consider as a wedding ceremony. You are getting your repayment with interest, are you not? Had I known you had such a greedy nature, I would have asked Pang Tong back then.”

Xu Shu grinned. “You still would not have.”

“You’re probably right. The score is two in your favour in one conversation. How aggravatingly wise you have become in your old age. Pang Tong is, without doubt, cheering for you in hell.”

———

The night before she was to leave for the slow journey to Luoyang, Sun Shangxiang obtained the reluctant consent of her brother to allow her to spend the night with Lianshi, as the two had done so many times before Sun Shangxiang married.

“This is just like old times,” Shangxiang said, a little tearfully, as she lay pillowed against Lianshi’s lovely soft chest. “Oh, Lianshi! I am the most selfish woman alive. I know how exhausted you are, yet I’m imposing on you so dreadfully.”

“I thank heaven that you are selfish, then,” Lianshi said, stroking her former lady’s hair. “It is just like old times, indeed.”

“I’m so scared, I’m so unhappy,” Shangxiang confessed, and began to cry. “Do you remember our last night before I left with Lord Liu Bei? I acted so tough. Why don’t I have it in me to act tough anymore?”

“You never need to act tough around me, my lady.”

Shangxiang wiped at her tears. “I want you with me when I give birth! There is no one in Shu who can be what you are to me!”

“How I wish I could go. This distance, and our circumstances…”

“I know. I know all too well.” Shangxiang hugged onto Lianshi. “You’re even more huggable now, by the way.”

Lianshi laughed. “But you will be glad to see the emperor again, surely?”

“I will… but won’t he be busier than ever before? And every time I think of giving birth without you I just… hate it!”

“If you write that you fear your condition is too delicate for travel, I am sure the emperor and the
king will both allow you to stay in Jianye,” Lianshi said.

Shangxiang shook her head. “It would be a lie. I feel perfectly healthy. It’s my duty to go, Lianshi, and I know it is… and I would go happily, if only I could take you and the twins!” She sighed. “But it’s impossible. You belong here, and I belong there. We must be parted again.”

“Not forever,” Lianshi vowed. “As the peace deepens, it will become ever easier for us to see each other. Our children must be the best of friends.”

“Maybe even more than that… hmm? You have a boy and a girl to choose from, after all…”

“It’s a little early to matchmake, my lady!” laughed Lianshi.

“I know… but it is a nice thought… at least, what it would represent… the empire and Wu continuing to be in harmony.”

“We will raise them to love each other, in whatever sense suits them,” Lianshi said, ever practical. “If they know each other from babies, they will hardly be likely to fall in love, you know.”

“You are right… they had much better be the best of friends, like we are,” Shangxiang said, and snuggled against Lianshi. “Shall we sleep?”

“I’m always ready for that these days,” Lianshi said with a yawn. “Goodnight, my lady.”

———

Ling Tong made a brief speech to the vanguard as they prepared to begin their push east, energizing, encouraging, yet educated, correct, and mindful of his authority.

Gan Ning, beside him at the stern of the head boat of the fleet about to push off from the shore of the River Huai, was more succinct: “Let’s fuck ‘em up!”

The troops roared, and Gan Ning’s personal men stomped to make their bells ring.

“You ape,” Ling Tong said, audible only to Gan Ning and those nearby under the din.

“That’s no way to talk to your father-in-law,” the pirate retorted with a grin.

Ling Tong tripped Gan Ning as the latter went to take up steering. “Getting clumsy in your old age,” he tutted as he walked out of range before Gan Ning could scramble back up.

Xiao Qiao clapped her fans together. “I’m pumped!” she said. “How soon will we get to fight, Lord Ling Tong?”

“I’d say we’re likely to encounter some disorganized resistance, but for the most part they’ll surrender to our faces, at least,” Ling Tong said. “We’ll be focusing only on capturing major points. Truly pacifying the land and restoring respect for the law will be the work of many years.”

“I’m running my own brethren out of business,” Gan Ning chimed in, with mock mournfulness. “Jiang Qin was right, I really am a shitty pirate.”

“I cannot believe your nerve,” Da Qiao had not spoken a word to her younger sister since she had turned up in Nanyang about a week after the rest of them had gotten there, blithely explaining that she had gotten lost.

Xiao Qiao perked up even further at this. “So you forgive me at last, Jiejie?”
“Forgive you—do you even now not understand what could have happened to you on your own? And your sons, how they must be missing you! Not to mention that you left my daughter to run everything by herself!” Da Qiao looked with angry expectation at her sister, but received only a sheepish grin in return. The elder sister crossed her arms. “When we meet up with Master Ding Feng, I’m going to tell him you adore epic poetry.”

“You wouldn’t,” Xiao Qiao gasped.

“I will! It would seem that nothing but childish punishments will break through to you. Or perhaps I ought to break your legs so that you’ll actually stay where I put you until I can get you home! ‘How soon will we get to fight’ indeed!”

“Aw, c’mon, Jiejie, can’t you forgive me even a little bit?” Her already big eyes widened further and her lip wibbled.

“You are thirty years old!” Da Qiao exclaimed. “You can’t pout your way out of this one. I’m not Lord Zhou Yu!”

Xiao Qiao’s cute look of pleading sobered in an instant. “No one is…” She folded her fans and went to go below deck without another word.

“Playing awfully dirty there, wife,” Gan Ning said once Xiao Qiao had disappeared below deck.

“I’ll play as dirty as I need to for her to come to her senses, if she has any!”

He glanced over at his wife, and saw that she was still spitting mad. “Why did she suddenly come, anyway? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I live for the fight myself, so I can understand that, but I don’t ever recall her being on the battlefield when I was around.”

“She was at the battle where my father died,” Ling Tong said, flat and a little distant, looking at the slowly passing scenery.

“Lord Zhou Yu had not wanted her to be at even that battle,” Da Qiao said. “It was Lord Sun Ce who contrived to get us there. After that, Lord Zhou Yu agreed reluctantly to let her fight with him… so long as she was not pregnant or nursing…”

Gan Ning started to crack up. “And he just kept knocking her up, huh? Can’t blame him there!”

“She had four sons in eight years,” said his wife.

“Not often that strategy goes with pleasure.” Gan Ning wished, not for the first time, that he had been able to have more time to learn from Lord Zhou Yu before his death. The man truly was a genius. “Maybe she’s just grabbing at an unexpected chance, then? If she was only ever able to fight one time…”

Da Qiao took in a big breath and let it out slowly. “I’ll go talk to her.”

———

The key turned in the lock of his door. It wasn’t the time for his daily allotment of exercise, nor a meal, and so Li Dian looked up eagerly, hoping to see the helmeted figure of Ma Chao once again. He had requested the guards to let him talk to the Shu officer, but that must have been weeks ago.

Instead of Ma Chao however, it was a different man, who gave the intuitive Li Dian a distinct feeling of unease.
“Ma Chao is here, but occupied,” the unidentified man said without preamble, and Li Dian’s unease deepened to a sick chill in his stomach at the man’s sinister baritone. “My name is Fa Zheng. Events have put you into a rather unenviable position. I understand you have been asking for my comrade, so may I assume you had come around to our way of thinking?”

Li Dian swallowed. “I had.”

“The emperor, may he reign ten thousand years, would be glad of your assistance in his aims,” Fa Zheng said, “but I am instructed to inform you that although the pretender Cao Pi has been slain, the rebel Sima Yi is claiming regency in the name of his son in the northeast… your people are there, in Hebei, are they not?”

“They are.”

“An unenviable position,” Fa Zheng repeated, but he seemed sadistically amused at Li Dian’s predicament. “If you fight for us now, Sima Yi will, most likely, put them all to the sword. But if you will not fight for us at this point, I am afraid you have no more value for us, and I don’t believe in leaving loose ends. And once you are dead, while Sima Yi will have no reason to actively persecute them, he will also have no rationale to waste his limited resources on supporting your family.”

Fa Zheng smiled at Li Dian’s stricken face. “However, while there is life there is hope, is there not? You are not so old that you could not father another family. A few more sons, to light incense for those who have died when you no longer can. Then, too, I have heard there has been quite a bit of disease in Hebei. Your family might already be dead. That could be a comfort to you.”

Li Dian was speechless.

“Well, I’ll give you tonight to think it over,” Fa Zheng said, still smiling. “If you swear loyalty to the emperor, you will be joining me in venturing west on a campaign against Chen Cang. We know how to be discreet. If, when we reclaim Hebei, any of your family still lives, of course, we shall treat them as they deserve, based on your service.”

The key turned in the lock again.

———

“Was that not unnecessarily cruel?” Guan Xing, who had been listening in the prison corridor, inquired of Fa Zheng as they walked on.

“Perhaps I indulged myself a little,” Fa Zheng said carelessly. “You have only moral objections?”

“You will make him despair. He will fight poorly, or he will attempt to flee to Sima Yi himself.”

“It’s possible,” Fa Zheng agreed.

Guan Xing studied the older man’s face. “You don’t actually care what becomes of him, do you?”

“You are quite perceptive for your age,” Fa Zheng said. “If I had no orders, I would have just killed him to save time.”

“So you’re trying to goad him into requesting execution?”

Fa Zheng shrugged. “Let us say, instead, that I will put up with him only if he is willing to fight directly against his old comrades while knowing how much he has already lost beyond recovery. What would you have done?”
Guan Xing thought for some time. “If we are to offer him entry into honourable service,” he said at last, “we should do so with the offer to find out how his family does and aid in their escape from Sima Yi if possible.”

“Is one man worth so much effort?”

“I don’t know… but I feel compassion for him.”

Fa Zheng sighed with mock regret. “When you come out with words like that, Young Master Guan, you shake my belief in your potential for villainy.” He gave the younger man a sly look from the side. “But perhaps this compassion is only because Li Dian has never come against your loved ones directly in combat? He has created a great many orphans in Wu, you know.”

The mention of Wu, even now, tightened Guan Xing’s mouth.

“There, now,” Fa Zheng said, pleased. “That is my disciple.”

—

After the capture of Luoyang, the emperor assigned Ma Chao back to governorship of Liang—although it was now a strange, lop-sided combination of the Shu Liang and the Wei Qin and Liang provinces. The Wei portions of it had not even been entirely pacified yet. Eventually, he had been told, his command would be only that of the true Liang province, whenever that boundary was redrawn, but for now he would oversee all of it from Chang’an. He sat down in the old chair slowly. It felt strange somehow. Before, it was a chair that he was always prepared to leave—though he always did his civil duties diligently, his real life was on the battlefield.

Although the possibility remained that he would be ordered back to fight, it was no longer even a probability, let alone the certainty it had been in his previous term as governor in Hanzhong.

This was his life now.

Reports came, and they were all dull, until the very end.

“Status of prisoners? Besides Yue Jin and Li Dian, of course; I already know that Master Fa Zheng is managing those two. Any other criminals caught, executions in my absence?”

“The usual problems with minor bandits and opportunistic thieves, my lord. Nothing for you to be concerned about. The only notable incident is that Wang Yi started refusing to eat about a week ago, telling us that she knew you had left for Luoyang. We’re not sure how she knew, but it’s possible that some guards gossiped unwisely in her hearing. Or perhaps she just realized that’s what must have happened after no one interrogated her for so long.”

“I’ll see her in her cell now.”

—

Wang Yi lay on her side on her thin mattress and stared at the scratches on the wall she had made there to mark the days since she had begun her death. She counted them and recounted them, but there were only eight. She knew this could take as much as two months, and she cursed herself again for not realizing until she overheard those guards that Ma Chao was not simply attempting a torture of isolation, but had actually gone—that they were actually attempting to take the capital.

At least she knew, with its defences, that a siege of Luoyang would take months, perhaps over a year. At first she had tried entertaining herself with thoughts that Ma Chao might die in the siege, but
they brought her no satisfaction. For him to die like that, completely unrelated to her… how could that make up for what he had done?

Two months—two months minus one week, now. She could endure that. Maybe she would become a hungry ghost when she died, and get her revenge on him that way… now that thought brought a smile to her face. Yes… to fight the demon she would become a demon herself.

The door to her cell opened, but she didn’t turn around. It would just be another tray of food. The scent didn’t even tempt her anymore. She felt nothing.

“Wang Yi, can you sit up?”

Ma Chao. Ma Chao! Ma Chao speaking to her with pity in his voice. What horrible nightmare was this?

She rolled over, and he was there, towering over her bed, looking as splendid as his nickname always suggested. And she… she pictured herself, already thinner and weaker from her imprisonment without good food or exercise, her week without food surely having made her more pathetic still. She felt disgusted with herself, even more so that she felt tears wanting to come to her eyes. At least she was able to hold them back.

“Did they repel you so soon?” she said, meaning it to be defiant, but she did not have the energy to say it any other way than flat.

“No, we captured Luoyang a few weeks ago.”

She felt as cold as ice. “It’s not possible. You’re lying to me to try to get me to tell you how to break the defences.”

“We didn’t have to break them. We circled the city with wagons bearing sacks of grain and rice. Eventually, the people of Luoyang rose in revolt. Cao Pi was killed by his own men, while some others managed to flee with his heir, though they left his wife and daughter behind—charming people you have in Wei. Sima Yi claims regency now, I believe, but that won’t last. The drought has been bad in Wei, hasn’t it? The rains came too late. In fact, the people believe they came to welcome the true emperor home.”

She was silent. She had felt no real loyalty to Wei beyond the opportunity to kill Ma Chao, but it was still stunning. “And Princess Dongxiang—what have you done to her?”

“She can’t be more than four, is she? I believe that has not yet been decided. Xiahou Ba defected to us, and they are related, but he is so young and hasn’t married. I am not sure who has official guardianship of her at the moment. I can assure you she is being cared for.”

“Xiahou Ba…” She shook her head as if to clear away this distraction. “So at least to royal children you pretend mercy.”

He was silent for a moment, then he spoke again. His tone was not harsh, but it was certainly sterner. “You know that Cao Cao killed my clan. And he didn’t do it spur of the moment, like I… I did to yours. It was supposed to be a banquet. It was a sheer accident that I wasn’t there with the rest of them. Two hundred unarmed men, women and children. Do you know their crime? My father was too successful against Dong Zhuo, and Cao Cao perceived a potential rival. So I swore revenge. That’s why I understand you.”

“You can’t understand me,” she said. For him to sympathize with her like this was an intolerable torture. “You were never truly alone—you had your cousin, you married again—”
“And your husband killed my wife, if I remember correctly,” he said dryly.

“It wasn’t my husband, it was one of our comrades, without consulting us,” she said. “We had been discussing ways to lure you back and one of them seized upon the idea and did it, the fool.”

“Just like I didn’t order you and your children to be killed?”

She was silenced. She felt her face getting wet, but she wasn’t crying. She couldn’t be crying.

“You’ve taken… you’ve taken everything from me… I won’t let you take my revenge… It’s all I have left… you demon…”

Wang Yi rolled onto her front, burying her face in the rough, thin sheet that barely held in the straw of the mattress.

His voice was soft. “I understand you, Lady Wang. I was the same. My vengeance… I said it was justice. It consumed me. I did nothing but fail. I was routed, I was continually betrayed. Even my closest ally joined my enemy. Why was heaven so set against my just revenge? Then I met a man named Liu Bei, and he gave me a glimpse into another way. Another kind of justice.”

She made a noise of disgust, but he kept speaking. “I know. I didn’t accept it at first either. It took me years. But I came to realize that I had to move on. That I was still alive, and as long as I was alive, I could still do good in this world. When I was obsessed with vengeance, I did nothing but add to the chaos. Nothing I could do would ever bring my family back anyway. It took me time, too much time, but I let it go. Cao Cao died in his bed, surrounded by his loved ones. It barely affected me when I heard. I had a new future to strive for.”

———

He looked down at this frail, miserable creature. Even though he had intended his attack to be conducted with honour, he had to admit that he bore responsibility for the massacre it became. Everyone could tell how enraged he was by the news that his wife Lady Yang had died while supposedly the guest of Zhao Ang, and when he saw her corpse, he knew at once that it hadn’t been an accident. Zhao Ang and the others were ready for his attack—they had never stopped being rebels, had they? Never stopped wanting control of their land back… another kind of revenge, wasn’t it…

One moment of imprecision in his rage—“Kill them all!” Even in his rage, he hadn’t realized how thoroughly they would interpret this. The women, the children, the aged—they had all been slaughtered long before he finished his fight with the leaders. He had killed Zhao Ang first… his entire fight he had been screaming at his wife to flee, but despite the child in her arms she hadn’t left. She must have tried to flee once her husband died and run into his men…

He remembered the feeling of satisfaction he had had when his spear impaled the last rebel leader, the feeling of justice, of it all being over, and then the world spinning as he had stepped outside the room and seen the carnage.

The worst part was the memory of how he had initially consoled himself, saying it was all for the best… no one left to take revenge, not even to grow up to do so. That practical, merciless little voice in his head.

The same internal voice Cao Cao had listened to when he ordered the massacre of the Ma clan.

Wang Yi was to him as he had been to Cao Cao.

Would it ever end… how many innocent people had died because of his pursuit of Cao Cao, and
how many had this woman killed in pursuit of him? Ma Dai was the last, and she had surely been speaking the truth when she said his end was agonizing. Who knew how many others… were there people out there plotting their revenge on her?

Perhaps he should just execute her… should have executed her the first day she was captured. It was obvious then she would never talk. He had told himself that he had a duty to keep trying, but maybe he wasn’t thinking about duty at all. Maybe executing her would have felt like destroying himself.

She hadn’t spoken or really moved. He went to the door of the cell and picked up the tray he had left there, with its steaming bowl of fragrant medicinal bone broth, as recommended by the doctor for someone who had been starving.

He set the tray on the small table. “I won’t force you to, but I hope you choose to live, Wang Yi. If there’s anything I can do to help you do that, just tell me. I won’t let you kill me, though. I have too many people counting on me.”

———

Ma Chao exhaled when the guards first reported that Wang Yi’s bowl had come back half-empty, and sighed again the next morning, when the breakfast bowl was reported empty.

Over the next days, she slowly returned to a normal diet, and submitted in silence to an order to be moved to a cell in the governor’s palace, rather than remain in the prison. The new cell was larger, furnished with a simple bed, a table with two chairs, a few books, and a barred window. It even had a private washing area. He came to see her again when it had been a week since she had ended her hunger strike.

“Are you here to rape me?” she said.

He had been smiling to see her so improved, and that completely wiped the smile off his face. “Uh… I thought we went through that.”

“Well, I’m much better looking now, and I have to admit that this bed is more comfortable than the previous one, so I thought perhaps this was in the manner of one who places his shellfish in clean water before he consumes it.” She was smirking at him. Was she making a joke? What a sick joke…

“I’m… I’m not going to rape you,” he muttered.

“Hmm. Then why are you here, demon?”

He actually wasn’t sure why he was there. The Cao Wei that they had been fighting, that she had been a part of, was gone. She couldn’t have any useful information about the enemies who remained.

Ma Chao found himself making small talk with his sworn enemy for about fifteen minutes before he left, wondering where the hell this would go from here. By eating, he thought she was choosing to move on. Her behaviour was not that of someone who had been swayed to the path of benevolence, that was for sure, but neither was it what it had been. If only Liu Bei could have talked to her.

———

“Are you here to rape me?”

Wang Yi began every visit Ma Chao made to her that way. It became almost like a running joke, though not one he was able to let himself laugh at. Sometimes she said it pleasantly, sometimes angrily, sometimes mockingly, sometimes flatly, sometimes bitterly. But she always said it.
He kept on visiting her, whenever he had a spare hour or so. The visits were absurd, quasi-social; hostile and distant and intimate and obsessive, changing moment by moment. Her query about whether today was the day for her to be sexually assaulted seemed somehow to set every visit on a bizarre angle—it reminded both captor and captive of their relative power, and of every moment in their past that had led to her becoming his captive.

“I am not,” would be his reply, or, “I’m just here to talk,” or, “I would never do that.” He was careful, in fact, not to use the same words every time. It seemed important, somehow, never to let his own response be flippant or meaningless, no matter what the words she spoke meant to her.

They talked about meaningless things, played xiangqi and go and luobo, observed the weather through the barred window, and discussed the food of Liang, Shu, and Wei. Through this empty chatter, they would somehow inevitably get onto an actual topic of importance.

About three weeks in, she mentioned that she had heard a bridal procession’s music going by, and inquired if he knew the identity of the couple.

“The head jailer. I’m afraid I don’t know who the bride is. I sent them a red envelope.”

“Who’s watching the jail?”

“It’s empty right now. That’s part of why I had you moved over here.” He thought she might ask what the other reasons were, but she was silent.

At last she said, “If my oldest child had lived, perhaps she’d be getting married by now…”

“How old would she have been?” he forced himself to ask.

“Seventeen. She was nine when she died.”

“What was her name?”

“Ting. We used to call her Piglet, because she snorted so much when she was a baby. She was just asking me to stop calling her that… starting to grow up and get embarrassed by her mother…”

“What about your other children?” he said. He was responsible for their deaths; the least he could do was acknowledge them as individuals.

“She was my only girl left,” she said, staring out the window. “I had two other girls but they both died when there was a smallpox outbreak, which took my second son as well. The only ones left for your men were my son Kang—he was five—and my baby… my baby died without a real name… just a milk name…”

She trailed off. He didn’t ask what the milk name had been; somehow it seemed like an intrusion.

“How old were your children?” she said.

“Wen would have been three at the new year,” he said. “He was the only child I ever had, although my first wife was pregnant when she died. My second wife, we had only been married a few months when you—your people killed her.”

“You didn’t marry again?”

“Two wives murdered in a row… I don’t know what kind of family would want to give me one of their daughters after that. Zhang Lu once intended me to marry one of his daughters, and then
changed his mind for exactly that reason.”

She laughed without humour. “Well, you’re the governor now. You could have slit your wives’ throats in the market square and you’d still have families lining up to offer you young virgins. And you’re so young… how old are you?”

“I’m thirty.”

She sighed. “You’ll find your horsewoman and be surrounded by little ponies before a few years have passed.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m thirty-four. I have given birth six times, but I’ll die without anyone to burn incense for me.”

“Thirty-four isn’t that old… you could still—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said with contempt. “A thirty-four year old widow, battle-scarred, with no money and an infamous name, when compared to the enormous surplus of young women after a war that has killed so many men? That’s even assuming I ever get out of this cell.”

“You control when you get out of this cell.”

“I still want to kill you, if that’s what you’re asking,” she snarled, and turned away.

He awkwardly took his leave.

———

Jia Xu, Jiang Wei, Yue Jin, and Li Dian rode up ahead of the Shu vanguard along the road to the main gate of Chen Cang.

“What do you want, my lords,” the watchman cried, stiff with fear.

“Tell Master Guo Huai who is here to speak with him,” Jia Xu answered.

The response came, after a period of time: “He will speak with Master Jiang Wei, if he will enter.”

Jia Xu shrugged, but Jiang Wei was already dismounting to enter. “Good luck.”

“He is a reasonable man,” Jiang Wei said. “I shall spare our forces and theirs.”

After reclosing the gate, the guards made to take Jiang Wei’s weapon, but he twirled his spear and they backed up in a hurry. Exchanging defeated glances, they gave up the idea and led him on.

Guo Huai was standing on the parapet, looking out at the Shu vanguard. “I felt you would be unlikely to lie to me,” he said, without turning.

Jiang Wei bowed, regardless. “There is no need for lies, Master Guo Huai. I have joined the true emperor in his quest to create a world of benevolence. Heaven favours our cause. The pretender is slain, and the land will know unity and peace once more. Do not throw away your life or your men’s lives in resisting it, but rather accept our emperor’s gracious pardon and contribute your talents to the glorious future.”

The Wei commander coughed into his sleeve, thumped at his chest, and sighed. “About my own life, it is not much whether thrown away or not,” he said, “and my men’s lives were entrusted to me by
the one you call the pretender. Since you betrayed us at Chang’an, we have been so isolated here. I cannot imagine that our aid was not wanted, but we never received instructions. I did not imagine that things would proceed so fast, or I would have acted on my own initiative.”

“I have letters for you from Lord Zhang He and Master Xiahou Ba.”

Guo Huai did turn away from the wall at that. He coughed again as he accepted the letters.

Jiang Wei stood in silence as Guo Huai read the letters, slowly and repeatedly, going back and forth from one to the other. Eventually, the man sighed deeply, which became yet another hacking wheeze, but he folded up the letters as his body shook with the cough.

“It was only through the courage and talent of Lord Zhang He that young Master Xiahou Ba and I escaped after the sad death of Lord Xiahou Yuan,” he mused. “You have already got them both, eh? Perhaps heaven does favour you…”

Guo Huai turned back to look out at the land and was quiet for a time.

“I will surrender,” he said, “but Cao Zhen will not, so prepare for a long seige of Tianshui. There is no possible offer of amnesty that he would believe.” Cao Zhen, though an adopted and not blood son of Cao Cao, had been particularly close to his adopted brother Cao Pi.

“That is unfortunate for his men,” said Jiang Wei.
Content warnings: this chapter includes both mild corporal punishment of a child, and discussion of a past incident of serious child abuse. Zhuge Liang is, once again, a bigot against non-Han. There is a brief explicit sex scene that comes where you would expect it to.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

全盤托出：quan pan tuo chu
entire / dish / carry from beneath / out
“To bring out everything including the container; to empty the bag; to reveal the whole secret.”

A more direct route was held to still be far too dangerous for the empress to travel from Jianye to Luoyang, and so she sailed west along the Yangtze all the way into Jing province before heading north. This added an extra week at least to what the travel time would be when all was peaceful. Still, Shangxiang thought philosophically, it wasn’t that bad. She would gladly endure it twice every other year or so, in order to see her Wu family and friends.

Zhao Yun and Lulu met her in Nanyang.

“My dear shadow!” Shangxiang said archly. “It has been strange not seeing you out of the corner of my eye twelve hours a day. I already feel at home and we are not even in Shu territory yet. And Lulu! Did you see the battlefield?”

“I did, your majesty.”

“And how was it? No, don’t tell me now, actually. We’ll have days of sitting ahead of us to talk about it. Ah, but there are things I can’t wait to hear about. The emperor is well? Has my son arrived in Chengdu?”

“He is very well, and the crown prince had not made it to Luoyang when we left, your majesty, but should have done so by the time you arrive,” said Zhao Yun. “Your squadron of maidens are escorting him.”

“He will certainly be safe then!” she laughed. “I’d hoped I would see my sisters-in-law here, but I’m told they all went east to meet with the forces Ding Feng is leading from the south to subdue Shouchun. So there’s no reason for me to stay here at all. When can we leave?”

“At first light, if you wish, my lady.”

“No sooner?” She stretched. “Well, if that’s how it is, I might as well get some exercise. Which one of you will spar with me first?”

———

“Stop a moment.”

Zhang Chunhua’s voice was all sweetness, but the servant she spoke to could not hide his panic as
he stopped.

The wife of the Wei regent sidled over and lifted the lid off the basket he was carrying. Inside was an assortment of early summer produce.

“This is far too fine to be fed to pigs, is it not?” she asked.

“I-I beg your pardon, my lady,” he stammered. “I was in a hurry.”

“You will certainly take these back and make sure you select only from the true scraps, will you not?”

“Yes, oh yes, my lady! I’ll n-never make this mistake again!” The servant bowed over and over, sweating in his dismay at having been caught attempting to steal.

“See that you tell your fellows to avoid such a mistake. We must all be scrupulous with our meagre resources until my husband restores the emperor,” she said, still smiling. “Pigs are not picky at all, are they? Why, I understand they will happily eat human flesh.”

With that, her ladyship continued on her way.

When she entered the courtyard outside her home, the maidservant was hanging clothes to dry in the sun, while her younger son was on his knees, watching a trail of ants with his thumb in his mouth. Little Sima Zhao turned and brightened to see his mother, but then guiltily popped his thumb out of his mouth and held his hand out.

His mother approached and gave the outstretched hand a brisk smack. “Bad boy. No thumb in your mouth,” she said. “It’s a disgusting habit.” Then she squatted down and held out her arms. “Give mother a kiss.”

The three-year-old eagerly threw himself into her embrace and kissed her cheek. She rubbed his back and kissed his face in return, then let him go. She then stood up and addressed the maid. “Where is the emperor and my son?”

“Lord Sima Yi fetched them himself, my lady.”

“Has A-Zhao had lunch?”

“He has, my lady.”

“When you finish here, take him for a nap, but make sure you watch him until he falls asleep so that he doesn’t suck his thumb. Every time it goes in your mouth, A-Zhao, you get a smack,” she warned him with a smile. “Be good for nanny.”

When she made her way to her husband’s temporary study, she found only her son. Though Sima Shi was only five years old, he was already learning the basics of reading and writing, and that was what he was engaged in. He stood up and bowed to his mother. “Good afternoon, mother. Father was teaching me—and the emperor. But a servant came with a message for father. Father told me to stay here and keep practicing, but he took the emperor with him.”

Lady Zhang smiled at how clever her son was, to anticipate her question and answer it without wasting time. Though her son reported in quite a mature fashion for his age, she still noticed his bad mood. “You don’t like the emperor, do you?”

“He’s always smiling,” Sima Shi said, “and he’s always thanking father and praising him. And father
always smiles at him.”

“The emperor is older than you, and perhaps you can consider him as an example to learn from,” his mother coaxed. “He has learned the value of being liked. That is a good skill to acquire.”

“Father doesn’t really like him, does he mother?”

“A-Shi, he is the emperor. Sit down and return to your studies.”

She went on through the compound until raised voices drew her to the proper place.

As Lady Zhang let herself in, a man she did not recognize who was shouting merely glanced at her, but Sima Yi’s look, though only slightly longer, told her what she needed to know. The young emperor sat with Sima Yi’s hand on his shoulder, looking nervous.

“—and why would you not have taken the empress with you, if your flight was really at my brother’s command?” the man demanded.

“Lady Guo was too heavily pregnant to travel,” Sima Yi said.

“Too heavily pregnant to escape a city that was about to go up in flames? Ridiculous!” the man shouted. “And what about my mother? There is no way that my brother would not have sent her to safety. You were among the conspirators who killed him!”

Lady Zhang walked further into the room with her handkerchief fluttering, the picture of a woman in distress. The shouting man—Cao Pi’s brother Cao Zhi—ignored her.

“You have no right to claim any regency. This boy is not even my brother’s legitimate heir! His father could be Yuan Xi, for all anyone can prove,” he said. “I am the most legitimate successor! I should be—!”

He stopped speaking because the dagger behind Lady Zhang’s handkerchief had pierced his throat. Sima Yi surged forward to grab the man’s arms from the front and prevent him from breaking free from or injuring Lady Zhang as she pushed the blade in deeper.

Cao Rui did not scream or get up as he watched his regent and his wife slay his uncle.

When the man was beyond struggling, Lady Zhang backed up and let him slide to the floor. She picked up the handkerchief from where it had dropped and wiped the worst of the blood off her hands and face.

Sima Yi was doing likewise with a handkerchief from his own sleeve. “You see, my lord,” he addressed the young emperor without turning around, “I will humbly bear those who criticize my regency, but I will eliminate without hesitation those who threaten your reign.”

“I will remember your loyalty when I come of age,” the boy answered.

———

“Are you all going to invade our room?” Xu Shu said to Zhuge Liang, who was standing against a wall with a glass of wine in his hand looking put upon and resentful.

“No, although you would deserve it, Yuanzhi,” his friend answered. “I thank heaven this nightmare is almost over. The savage’s traditions of the wedding night apparently involve some sort of arcane barrier over the door to give you a full day together alone. Cat vomit or dog urine or something along
those lines, I am sure. Your noble father- and mother-in-law will be applying it as soon as the two of you enter your room. I hope it stinks.”

“You are a good friend,” Xu Shu said, and Zhuge Liang reluctantly smiled.

“You had better go and thank the emperor one last time for making you a marquis,” he said. “Where is your marchioness, anyway?”

“Speaking with your wife, I believe.” He indicated with his head the table in the distance where Lady Huang and Princess Huaman could be seen, apparently indeed in deep conversation.

“The nightmare continues!” Zhuge Liang stalked off in that direction, while Xu Shu shook his head and laughed a little, then went to the emperor’s table.

As Xu Shu made his kowtows, the empress exclaimed a little.

“Is my brother kicking again?” the crown prince dropped his chopsticks. “May I feel?”

“Of course you may,” said the empress, and the crown prince’s face shone as she guided his hand to the right area of her belly. “But the baby might be a sister, A-Dou!”

“Oh, there it is!” The crown prince laughed with delight. “My brother is so strong!”

The emperor seemed preoccupied. As Xu Shu rose out of his kowtows, he was regarding his wine cup, but not as if he was seeing it either.

“Your majesty, I wished to thank you again…”

Liu Bei waved it away. “The joy is mine, to have you in my employ again to honour,” he said. “Even when we were apart, it was only Kongming that kept me alive, and I have not forgotten who enabled me to obtain him. You would deserve the title for that alone; your later efforts merely increase the depth of my gratitude.”

“Are you leaving, Master Xu Shu?” said the empress, and Xu Shu nodded respectfully. She grinned. “I congratulate you. She seems a woman of passion, and only the very best of men can handle such a woman—is that not so, my lord?”

Liu Bei did smile at that. “That is only because the very best of men realize quickly that the point is not to handle but to be handled.”

Sun Shangxiang laughed. “Oh, how he blushes! Master Xu Shu, you should certainly begin your wedding night as soon as possible. You have so much yet to learn!”

Liu Bei made a gesture of dismissal and leaned forward to whisper something to his wife, who laughed even harder and playfully slapped his hand. Xu Shu went to fetch his new bride.

———

“I think we have time to talk before now, maybe,” Princess Huaman said as they sat together on the foot of his bed, while at the door there was chanting as they were ritually sealed within.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean,” Xu Shu said.

She let out a little frustrated sigh. “I tell my father, ‘this Xu Shu, how about it?’ And he says, he will see. Then, he tells me, fine. And now, we marry. Done.” She lifted her hands. “No talking.”
“That’s kind of typical for Han,” Xu Shu said.

She looked at him. “You… agree? No problem?” She made a gesture encompassing her self. “Or, your emperor says you must, maybe.”

“I was not forced at all,” he said. “So it really did come from you? I didn’t think you disliked me, but…”

“You are not bad. For a Han.” She smiled mischievously, then said more seriously, “I think… patient.”

He pointed at his sparse facial hair. “You can live with this?”

She laughed. “Ah, not too bad. Rest is handsome. And me, too? You can live?”

“I think you are a beautiful woman,” he said, hoping his blush wasn’t as hot as it felt. “Have you learned anymore about how to talk about your tattoo?”

“You want to hear,” she said, pleased. “I learned some words. The head is the highest part of the body. The face looks towards heaven. So, what we have on our face, we show to heaven. My mother’s people are born from the fire goddess. Only her descendants can have this tattoo. Great honour. It goes the eight directions, I think Han also know this eight directions?”

Xu Shu nodded.

“So. My face looks to heaven, asks the goddess of fire for protection, everywhere I go. Future, past, also. My mother gives me the tattoo with her own hands.” She smiled proudly. “You said, Han think, body is a gift, leave it alone. We think, body is a gift, yes, but you can add a gift to a gift. Tattoo is a gift from my mother, too.”

The chanting outside ended, and the noises were fading away.

“I have more,” she said, and began unfastening her own dress. She turned her back to him and slipped the dress down so that it fell around her hips. She touched her bare shoulder. “This one, people look at me with kind hearts,” she said.

Xu Shu cleared his throat. “Really…”

She looked over her shoulder at him with a bit of a smirk, and Xu Shu realized she knew exactly what she was doing. Taking courage, he reached out and touched the small of her back.

“That one is for health,” she said, looking up at him as he pulled her into his embrace and kissed her.

It took him longer than her to get undressed, and when he finally turned to climb onto the bed after her, her face was both surprised and appreciative.

“Rest is very handsome,” she said.

He laughed. “Thank you.”

She ran her hands over the muscles of his arm and chest, and said incredulously, “Thirty-nine years old!”

She was muscular too, and Xu Shu’s eyes were drawn to the sweep of her thighs as she parted them, welcoming him between them. He kissed her again. One of her hands was caressing his back while the other was in between them, rubbing the head of his cock along her slit.
“Okay?” he asked.

“Okay.” She wrapped her legs around his waist and moaned as he pushed in.

There was no need for words. She moved her legs and he put his arm under each knee, bending her legs back so he could thrust deeper. He had not enjoyed a woman this much since he was a teenager. His stamina, thank heaven, lasted somewhat longer than back then.

“Oh,” she said at one point, and then a word in her own language, which she repeated in a higher pitch.

Coming, he thought, and let go of any vestiges of his control to join her.

———

“Never thought I’d die like this,” Gan Ning muttered into Ling Tong’s ear.

“Would you shut the fuck up? You’re not dying,” Ling Tong said as he adjusted his grip on the wounded man’s uninjured arm around his waist. “Open your eyes, the fleet’s right there.”

Gan Ning, his head leaning against Ling Tong’s shoulder as the man rode them both away from the ambush, obediently opened his eyes and saw that his fellow officer was telling the truth.

“The doctor and fast,” Ling Tong barked as he rode up to the river side encampment. “Help the general down. Cheng Zhao is to lead reinforcements to assist our comrades. They caught us by surprise, but their numbers aren’t much.”

“Should we tell the women, my lord?”

Ling Tong hesitated, but Gan Ning said nothing, so he said, “Not yet. Let’s let the doctor work undistracted first.”

The doctor came running with his tools. “Here, my lord.”

“The general was stabbed with a spear here,” Ling Tong said as the injured man was propped up on a boulder. The site of the injury was the underarm and outer torso where a spear, aimed for the gut, had missed its mark but sliced deeply and apparently caught a vein. The ripped bit of fabric Ling Tong had hurriedly wedged beneath the armpit as they made their escape was soaked with blood and more had run all over the two men and the horse.

“Stupid way to die,” Gan Ning muttered.

“Would you stop that?! You wouldn’t have been injured at all if you wore clothing like a normal person,” Ling Tong lectured.

“I’m not normal,” Gan Ning said, closing his eyes.

“Heat this lance to cauterize the wound,” the doctor instructed another soldier. “Don’t move for now, Master Gan Ning.”

“Tell him he’s going to be fine,” ordered Ling Tong.

“You’ll be fine, sir,” the doctor said automatically to the man who still had his eyes closed, but his facial expression to Ling Tong made no such guarantee.

When the metal was ready, the doctor said, “You, you, and you, will hold the general still—he may
thrash. Tilt him back slightly that way so I have as much light to see the wound as possible.”

Gan Ning did not react even to open his eyes as his comrades surrounded him and the doctor quickly pulled away the sodden cloth and slightly opened the gap between his arm and torso. The superheated metal, however, roused him instantly.

He let out a wordless scream and tried to struggle against the strong arms that gripped him as the doctor, with deft and practiced skill, relentlessly pressed the hot metal against the skin in short bursts. All at once Gan Ning fainted from the pain and went limp while the smell of burning flesh filled their nostrils.

Gan Ning did not rouse as the doctor finished and cleaned the blistered wound, applied a paste and wrapped his arm and torso in bandages. “Carry him on board and restrain him as quickly as you can,” the doctor instructed. “Someone whom he will listen to should be there to calm him when he awakens.”

“Get Lady Qiao,” ordered Ling Tong. “I’ll go with him for now.” As they went aboard, he asked the doctor, “It can’t be that bad?”

“Impossible to say,” the doctor said. “How long did he bleed freely before you got that cloth there?”

“Not long at all—almost right away.”

“That will help. It’s not the wound itself, it’s the loss of blood,” the doctor said. “The arm wound hit an artery. The good thing is, we should know pretty soon. Of course, infection is always a risk, but if he wakes up, he will probably live.”

———

Gan Ning blearily opened his eyes. He had never felt more exhausted in his life, and his side hurt like hell, and he wasn’t sure why he was awake… or where he was… or why someone was tying his arm down… “What the hell…”

“Oh,” came Ling Tong’s familiar sulky voice. “You’re already awake, huh? Just stay still, alright? You got hurt pretty bad and the doctor doesn’t want you to move so you don’t reopen the wound.”

“I remember,” Gan Ning said, and he did, sort of. It felt like a bad dream, but the current situation also felt like a dream. He felt light headed, craving oxygen, but neither fast breaths nor deep breaths seemed to make it better. He was only half in his own body, but given how much pain it was in, he was in no hurry to get fully back into it. “I’m not stupid.”

“You are incredibly stupid,” said Ling Tong, but with relief in his voice. “If that spear had gone where it was aimed…”

“Thank you for saving me,” said Gan Ning, looking at Ling Tong’s face, those full lips, the silky hair escaping its ponytail and framing those strong cheekbones. “You even look beautiful when you’re worried.”

Ling Tong’s beautiful worried face became a beautiful confused face. “What?”

“You face is always so pretty,” said Gan Ning, letting his eyes close.

He heard Ling Tong’s laugh. “I’m Ling Tong, I’m not Lady Qiao. You really are out of it.”

“I know who you are,” Gan Ning sighed. “It’s ok, she knows.”
“Knows what?” said Ling Tong’s voice, far away.

“That I’m in love with you.”

———

Lady Qiao rushed into her husband’s sick room aboard the ship and found him lying down with his eyes closed and Ling Tong at his side, looking puzzled.

“My lord,” she gasped, “I heard he was stabbed…?”

Ling Tong instantly perceived that she was remembering Sun Ce’s gut wound that eventually killed him. “In the arm,” he said, “He lost a lot of blood, but the doctor said if he reawoke, he’d probably live, and he’s already woken back up once… he was really, really out of it though.” Ling Tong laughed humourlessly. “He said I was beautiful and that he was in love with me…”

Lady Qiao did not know what to say or how to arrange her face. She was still so worried for Gan Ning’s life that she had hardly any of her mind available to think of other things. It was also a surprise for her—though Gan Ning had warned her that there was a male comrade that he would “go for in a heartbeat,” she hadn’t known it was Ling Tong. But having been told it, she felt stupid for not having realized it herself, and then angry for feeling stupid.

Ling Tong studied the complicated emotions on her face. “You knew about it?”

“I didn’t know it was you,” she answered, picking one thing that she thought she could get out in a relatively even tone.

“Unrequited love… so that’s what he meant back then,” Ling Tong said, aloud but to himself. He stood up. “I’ll go see what the doctor wants us to do from here. If he wakes up, try to keep him calm?”

“Of course,” she said, moving to take the seat he was vacating.

———

Ling Tong was finally able to come and see Gan Ning again a few days later, once the arrival of Ding Feng’s forces quickly routed the would-be warlord who had ambushed them, attempting to hold on to a part of Shouchun he had seized during the power vacuum after the Wei withdrawal.

He walked into Gan Ning’s room and found him propped up in the bed, looking tired and in pain but alert. His wife was at his side, reading aloud to him from a volume of the Records of the Grand Historian.

“I heard I fucked up again,” Gan Ning said to him, by way of greeting.

“Hello to you too,” Ling Tong said, sitting on the end of the bed. “Which particular fuck up are you talking about? Pardon my language, Lady Qiao.”

She smiled. “I’m used to it.”

Gan Ning laughed, but a bit nervously. “Yeah, with me it’s never just one fuck up, huh?” He glanced at his wife, who had closed the book. “My, uh, confession.”

“Oh, that,” said Ling Tong carelessly. “Well, it was a surprise, but I’d rather you make that kind of fuck up than get another spear in your chest.”
“Yeah, shit,” Gan Ning said, grinning sheepishly. “I can’t even nearly die correctly. How do either of you put up with me?”

Ling Tong and Da Qiao smiled at each other. Lady Qiao said, standing up, “If you don’t mind staying with him, my lord, I’d like to make sure my sister is actually making the preparations I asked of her.”

There was a brief silence when she closed the door behind her.

“You’re sure you’re not mad?” said Gan Ning, with a softness that was unlike him. “I didn’t expect you’d take it like this.”

Ling Tong sighed and leaned back on his hands. “I said it surprised me, and it did, but it also didn’t,” he told the low ceiling of the boat, then looked at Gan Ning with a bit more of a frown as he said, “It’s not because you think I look like a girl, is it?”

Gan Ning chuckled. “You always did hate it when I called you Pretty Boy. It would be pointless for me to deny that I do think you’re pretty, alright, but not like a girl, exactly… your body, for sure, isn’t a girl’s…” His voice, which had started out normal, petered out into severe embarrassment as he muttered the last words.

Well, of course. Gan Ning had seen him naked many times, and Ling Tong had never thought anything of it at the time. Gan Ning had handled his attraction as his own problem. With all of their arguments, their spars, and their fights, there had never been anything that crossed the line.

“Well,” said Ling Tong, looking back up at the ceiling, “obviously you already know I don’t feel the same way. In a weird way, when I look back, you’ve usually been the controlled one. We’ve become… good friends, haven’t we?”

“You’re my best friend,” said Gan Ning.

“Best friends, then.” Ling Tong smiled back at him. “Lady Qiao’s alright?”

“Oh, she’s furious,” Gan Ning answered with a laugh, “but more about me getting myself wounded, just like you. She’s also taking it out on me that she didn’t think to ask the name of the man I was in love with, but that isn’t my fault. I would have told her! Anyway, she knows I’m honest with her, so I don’t think she doubts that I’m in love with her too. It’ll shake out. When the doctor finally gives me the all clear, maybe I’ll even get some jealousy sex. That’s the best.”

Ling Tong sighed. “Ass. We may not see each other for a while. Ding Feng has arrived, so I’m heading back to Nanyang. And when you’re a little more stable, the doctor says you can go back home, or at least to Jianye.”

“Oh, I’m sure you can find some excuse to come visit your poor wounded father-in-law’s sick bed,” Gan Ning teased.

Ling Tong groaned. “You really are awful. You know that’s incest, right?”

“Ugh, no, I hadn’t thought of it that way actually, gross,” said Gan Ning. “Alright, I guess I have to lay off the father-in-law jokes.”

“At least something good came of this, then.”
“My lord?”

Liu Bei paused in the act of redressing, then slowly turned around. “Were you pretending to be asleep?”

“Yes.” Shangxiang sat up in bed. “My lord, you are withdrawing from me again. I don’t just mean the way you are literally leaving right now. Emotionally… even when we are making love… you come to me, but you don’t stay with me. Do you understand what I mean?”

He sank down onto the corner of the bed, but he did not answer her.

“When I told you about the baby, you seemed truly happy. But since then, it seems like… you can’t bear to be apart from me, but you can’t bear to be with me either. Before I left for Jianye, I thought it was just your anxiety that I was in danger. But since I came back to Luoyang it’s been even worse. Tell me what’s going on!”

“Shangxiang, I have faced Lü Bu himself in battle, but I cannot face my own shame.” He took a deep breath. “It’s about Liu Shan.”

“I told you when I first met him, my lord, these things are no one’s fault—”

He interrupted her. “Shangxiang, please let me finish… this is difficult enough for me to say. Especially because I should have told you long before you ever accepted my advances.

“You may have heard some version of the story before… how at Changban, in the confusion of the retreat, my wife, Lady Mi, and my son, her stepson, were thought to have been evacuated but in actuality they had been left behind. When Zhao Yun heard this, he risked his life to head back and save them. He was too late to save my wife. She had already injured her leg and when she realized that his attempts to save her would only hinder his ability to save the baby, she killed herself before he could stop her. But A-Dou was alright… he was still… whole… perfect…”

Liu Bei was silent for a while, but then continued. “Zhao Yun suffered many attacks along the way, but at the very end of the battle, he brought my son back to me, and placed him in my arms. I remember A-Dou was crying. He was so loud, I heard him crying even before Zhao Yun brought him in. It should have been a moment of joy, of hope for the future, but I looked down at his crying face and I felt… I felt nothing… he kept crying, he wouldn’t stop crying… and I started to feel… angry.”

He said this last word so low that even in the silence of the night, Shangxiang could only barely hear it.

“Angry at what? I’ve asked myself that a thousand times. Why was I so angry at a baby, my own son, my only child? Was it his responsibility that a message was lost, that he was left behind? Why did I find the noise of his crying unendurable, when I had heard hundreds of people die that day, many by my own hand? In that moment, I was worse than an animal. I looked down at my son and I hated him. I hated that his mother had died giving birth to him, and that his stepmother had killed herself to save him. I hated that because of him I had nearly lost Zhao Yun. How dare he keep crying like this when so many had sacrificed for him? I just wanted him to shut up.”

Liu Bei was staring at his hands. In the moonlight, Shangxiang could see tears were falling down his cheeks.

“Shangxiang, I… I threw A-Dou to the ground… Zhao Yun caught him, but… I think the only difference it made was that if he had hit the ground, he would have died outright, instead of…”
instead of…”

Her heart was caught in her throat. She could never have imagined her husband capable of such an act, but his clear pain and remorse at his evil deed and its consequences moved her to tears herself. She pulled herself up and drew closer to him.

At her movement, he turned quickly, expecting to see her regret at the monster she had joined herself to, but instead her eyes held just as much love as ever. “Oh, my lord,” she said simply, and this undid him completely. He simply wept into her arms for a while before he could continue.

“He was never the same!” he said through the tears. “When he landed he… he stopped crying… and I thought I had killed him, but… he awoke again in just a minute or so… but he didn’t start crying again, and the light… the light in his eyes was… gone. He looked at me, but he didn’t see me…. I did kill him, Shangxiang; only his body and his… his goodness remained… to punish me…”

When he finally stopped crying, he was completely exhausted. He had never revealed his innermost vulnerabilities like that to anyone, yet he had no energy left even to feel shame. His wife gently pulled his coat off and pulled him back onto the bed, tenderly adjusting the pillow beneath his head and smoothing his hair on his face.

“Why are you being so kind to me?” he whispered. “Aren’t you afraid of what I may do to our child?”

She had asked him a few times to feel the baby kicking, but he had always shied away from touching her abdomen directly. Even during sex, he exclusively preferred positions where the swell of her belly was obscured from his sight.

She took his hand and placed it upon her abdomen. “My lord, this child will see the chaos end, and will be one who heals and unifies the land. Heaven has already taken its punishment on you for your action; any punishment from any other source would be superfluous. You have always shown mercy to defeated enemies who wish to take up the cause of benevolence. Give the same second chance to yourself in fatherhood.”

He smiled wearily as she pulled the blankets up and curled into his arms. “So you agree with A-Dou that the child will be a boy?”

With a spark in her eyes, she said, “Hey, who said it had to be a boy to unify the land?”

Slightly alarmed, as he was after all a traditional man, Liu Bei managed to say diplomatically, “But, my dear, with the land only just coming out of chaos, surely it is not ready for such a novelty as a woman leader? Perhaps,” and with heroic effort, he pushed aside his real feelings, “a great-granddaughter of ours.”

“Hmm. You’re probably right. I just hope I live to see it.”

———

The weeks passed in Liang province, and Wang Yi watched them pass through her window. Ma Chao, with that same cringeworthy reverence he always used when speaking of Liu Bei, told her that the emperor had decided that the people could not endure pressing into the northeast to eliminate the vestigial Wei. Famine and disease were rampant, and since basically an entire harvest was missing in the former Wei territory, the rest of the empire would need to give aid. With their own substandard harvests and the ravages of war, this was bound to be a hard sell. It would be considerably sweetened by allowing tens of thousands of soldiers to return to family, fishing boat, or plow.
Apparently Ma Chao’s duties rarely required him to actually leave Chang’an, because hardly a
day went by without him coming to visit her.

He invited her to walk on the grounds with him, to see this or that, but she always declined,
imagining the humiliation of being led around like a dog with its master. The offer of a flute she
accepted, though she always played late at night, when she hoped no one was listening. She had not
touched an instrument since her early days of marriage, and her level of play had never been high,
but she truly enjoyed music. The hesitant, often misplayed notes made her think of the exquisite
artistry of the Wei beauties: the late empress Zhenji, and Cai Wenji, whom she hoped was still alive.
That made her begin to wonder about the other officers. Who had died, who had been executed, who
had defected, who had escaped?

Ma Chao gave minimal answers and evaded requests for details. He seemed impatient with the
queries. “Were they your friends?”

“They were comrades. You can’t fight on the same side as someone for so long and not care even a
little bit about their fates. I’m not so unnatural as that.”

He smiled. “I didn’t mean to offend you. No, you’re right, it is natural for you to want to know…but
I don’t have the answers to give you. They are all out of my hands, and I have never requested
details beyond my own work. I can only tell you the emperor has been sweeping in his pardons and
effusive in his generosity.”

Wang Yi rolled her eyes at yet another rapturous endorsement of Liu Bei, then sighed. “I am still
surprised that Li Dian defected… Sima Yi will kill the Li clan, without question.” She closed her
eyes and bowed her head, her silence all the prayer she could offer for the women and children of the
Li clan.

“His death could not have saved them,” Ma Chao said.

“I suppose not,” she said, reopening her eyes. “Women and children are nothing but pawns when
men want to hurt each other.”

“That is not the way it should be;” he said gravely. “When the emperor creates his land of
benevolence—”

“Oh, go away,” she said, abruptly getting up from the chair across from him and walking to her little
window. “You are attempting to make me into some dreamer like you. Disgusting.”

He always took her rude dismissals with grace, as if she actually was master of her cell and could
turn him out of it without consequence. When the door closed behind him, she gripped the bars of
the window tightly with both hands to remind herself that the world was irredeemably foul.

———

Ma Chao sat down on Ma Dai’s grave and leaned against the stele.

“Hello, cousin,” he said. “I don’t know if I should apologize for trying to talk to you like this.
Somehow… I don’t feel any connection to you at your altar. It’s too oppressive, the smoke and the
dim… you belong out here…”

He looked out at the mountains, so like their homeland. “I’m glad I could find you such a beautiful
place to rest. When I came out here, I thought, ‘My cousin would have loved to paint this.’ And I felt
like I could see you smiling. That’s how I knew it was the right place for you. You always wanted
me to cheer up. You lost as much as me, and much of it because of me, but you were always smiling.
I had to be convinced to put aside my rage and my vindictiveness in order to protect the ones who were left, but you never did. Maybe it was just your nature to care for others. In the end, because of me, you lost your life. You charged her because you didn’t want me to have to face her…”

He listened to the wind for a moment, and sighed. “Do you know, wherever you are, what I’m thinking of doing? I can’t decide if you would approve or not. Now that you’re gone, I don’t have anyone to talk to. Even if they weren’t all in Luoyang… I don’t think any of the rest of them understand me as you did… well, there’s the emperor, but I can’t exactly bother him.”

It was nearly silent; only the loudness of the wind. He imagined his cousin grabbing onto his hat with one hand to keep the wind from blowing it off and remonstrating, “Now, Young Master…”

And then what would he have said?

*How could you think of marrying the woman who killed me, who purposefully let me bleed to death from dozens of non-lethal wounds instead of killing me with any honour?*

Would Ma Dai have said that?

Somehow Ma Chao couldn’t picture him saying it.

What would he have said?

*Why do you want to marry her?*

“Because…” he told this shadowy Ma Dai aloud, “It’s one thing that maybe I can actually fix. I took her children from her… I can’t bring them back, but I can give her more. I can provide for her… maybe even make her happy…”

*And would that make you smile, Young Master?*

He hadn’t really thought about it that way. He’d been focused upon it as a duty, as a repayment, as a justice. Not on whether there would be any pleasure about it.

Pleasure…

If she actually said yes, what would it be like to go to bed with her? Would it be mechanical, simply going through the motions until she got pregnant? He somehow doubted it. She was a woman of passion. Despite being all alone, he reddened. His wives had both been shy and innocent. After the second murder he felt like he couldn’t risk touching another woman, even casually. Anyone who was loved by him ended up getting hurt.

*You think she’s sexy, don’t you? You even like those snake eyes of hers. You always did like a challenge. You never settled for a horse that was an easy ride…*

Ma Chao pulled off his helmet and ran his hand through his hair. Amazing. Even dead, Ma Dai’s memory was enough to fluster him like this…

*You can let me go, young master.*

“I know I can,” Ma Chao whispered into the wind, “but is it right?”

*It all has to be let go,* the wind whispered back. *Our clan, and her clan, and so many other lives ended before their time. We can’t kill our way out of the chaos. We have to let go.*

“But you died for me.” He closed his eyes as the tears seeped out.
I died to try to save you, not to get revenge for those past saving. I’m past saving now, young master, so let me go.

“Goodbye,” Ma Chao choked out, still crying on the lonely side of the mountain.

The wind said nothing more.

———

Wang Yi sat on her bed with her knees up to her chest, looking out at the early summer evening sky, when the door opened.

“Are you here to rape me?” she said, without bothering to look at Ma Chao.

“No, I’m here to make a proposal to you,” he said.

She turned at that. “Don’t tell me your gracious emperor wants me to fight for him,” she said.

“No, this idea did not come from him, it is all mine.” He sat down in one of the chairs. “Will you sit?”

She was curious, so she got up and took the other seat across from him.

“I have never apologized to you,” he began, and at her noise of disgust, quickly went on, “I know, I know that an apology could never change what happened between us. Nothing can, I don’t want to pretend it can. But I have wronged you, and I do want to do something, if it’s in my power, to improve your future.”

“What do you imagine you can do?” she said, tilting up her chin.

“I could marry you.”

She laughed, mostly from shock.

“I am serious,” he said. “I would marry you with all honour… provide for you…”

“You want me as a wife?” she demanded, searching his face for signs of insanity. “You’ve forgotten what I did to Ma Dai?”

“I haven’t forgotten. He was a soldier and he knew what he was risking when he tried to take you on alone. That you tried to make his end more painful was not right, but it can’t be undone either.”

“So you think you’re going to just… forgive me?” she spat.

“Yes. Exactly.”

“You say with that mouth how harmless you find me, yet you keep me in here behind a barred window and locked door—“

“The door isn’t locked.”

What kind of foolishness was this? “I don’t mean when you’re in here with me.”

“The door hasn’t been locked since you were moved to the palace. The bars on the windows are in case you had a sudden impulse… it’s a long drop.”
She pushed her chair back from the table and stood up. “You’re lying. Why are you always lying!”

“Did you ever try the door? Ever attempt to escape in any way?”

She was speechless. Did he have a death wish? No… he really thought so little of her, he really thought she was that weak…

…and she had proved him right… she had never tried to escape… and all these times he had come to her, she had never tried to attack him, never tried to strangle him, to gouge out those awful, compassionate eyes…

“You’re your own prisoner, Wang Yi,” he said, with that horrible, nausea-inducing pity oozing out of his disgusting demon mouth again.

She stared him down. How she hated him. She hated him! “Have you forgotten that Ma Dai isn’t the only one left for me to hurt you through?”

He actually flinched. What a bad giveaway. “What are you talking about?”

“You really thought I didn’t know about your sister?” The fear on his face was exhilarating. She had never seen him like this before—now this, this was vulnerability! It was the look he had worn in her dreams thousands of times before she beheaded him. Now at last she was seeing it in reality. It pushed her on. “She must be so precious to you… was it hard to marry her off so young? A fourteen-year-old bride, she was even younger than I was… and what an old husband you caught for her! The Little Dragon, isn’t that what you call him? Did you choose him because you thought he’d keep her safe?”

His lips were getting pale, and his grip on the table made his hands whiten as well. She laughed. How amazing this felt! “Where did you keep her hidden so well those first five years? You should have kept her there! How they all laughed at you in Wei, the way that you tried to keep the identity of the bride a secret, insisting that everyone in Shu called her only Madam Zhao. ‘Little fool,’ they said! ‘Didn’t he realize that would just make us more determined to find out who she was? Did he actually imagine that he was important enough to Cao Cao for our lord to care who she was?’ Only I knew the truth. I knew then how much you really feared me. How it thrilled me! Does she have beautiful golden hair like yours? How much lovelier it would look matted with blood.”

“I’ll never let you touch her,” he said, his voice almost shaking with his anger.

“Oh? You’ll marry me, but you won’t introduce me to my sister-in-law? Thought better of your offer? Or was it never anything more than a pretence to get me to fuck you without struggling? You wanted a rape that didn’t feel like a rape, huh? Picky, picky!” She turned her head and looked at the door. “Is she still in Chengdu, or has she followed her husband to Luoyang?”

Ma Chao sprang up and strode out the door. She heard a key jangle and then the lock turn, and realized that she had indeed never heard that sound up until now.

He hadn’t been lying. She had been free all this time…

She tried to remind herself of his terror, but it felt like nothing. The pleasure was already gone.

If she had actually killed him, it would have been satisfying. It would have lasted.

Wouldn’t it?

Numbly she undressed, though it was not yet even sunset, and climbed into the bed.
I knew I wanted to try to wrestle with some very dark topics here. I didn't want to ignore some of the dark histories and legends around these people, nor did I want to simply go for "actually it was NBD", rather I wanted to actually allow for (mostly) positive characters to have some seriously bad, even evil, decisions/reactions in their past. Is it possible to both acknowledge the horror of a crime and to also think that a criminal can have sincere remorse and be rehabilitated? ~serious thoughts for serious fic~

One more chapter and then, perhaps, an epilogue, I think.
Chapter Notes

Content warnings: there is a brief mention of sex trafficking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

天要下雨 娘要嫁人：tian yao xia yu, niang yao jia ren
heaven / will / fall / rain / maiden / will / marry / someone
“Rain will fall and girls will marry; some things never change.”

Zhu Ran watched the running troops with a critical eye.

“No good,” he yelled at one of them, stopping him. “You’ve gotta be more aware of the wind. You’re already running, so if the wind is against you, it might put the flame out. You may need to go at an angle.”

A gong sounded from within the fortress, indicating that lunch was ready to serve.

“Okay, torch troops, we reconvene for a mock skirmish in one hour,” he said, and went in himself to his office.

“A letter from Jianye, sir,” said the messenger who was waiting for him there with a deep bow.

“From the king?” Zhu Ran took the letter and dismissed him.

It was not from the king.

Master Zhu Ran, I must apologize. Having promised you my aid in finding a wife, I should have been in contact with you long before this, no matter my other duties.

Zhu Ran sat down with a thump.

Though Lady Lu Yusheng was not tied to you with the red string, the queen wrote, there are many fine young ladies, not only in the kingdom, but in the entire empire. The king is anxious to reinforce the ties between our nation and the emperor, and every marriage tie is another tightening of that bond.

Zhu Ran felt as if he was tied in a tight bond, alright. Getting over the sting of losing out on Lu Yusheng to that Shu officer had taken him no time at all. Now that he was both a war hero and a commanding officer, he had never had an easier time finding adoring female companionship of a decidedly temporary nature. He felt young and immortal and had no urge to reproduce just yet.

I list below some information of the daughters and sisters of former Wei officers, in particular. Is it not marvellous that your love can help ensure the peace of all under heaven?

Zhu Ran skimmed the information. Xiahou Yuan’s daughter and Xiahou Ba’s older sister, who was also aunt to Lady Zhang… interesting. Jia Xu’s daughter. Yue Jin’s sister. Jiang Wei’s sister.

Of course I will need to find out more, but please respond if your preference already leans a certain
How could his preference lean a certain way from a list of names and ages and very little more? But he supposed it would have to happen sooner or later. Would it be terribly crude for him to ask the queen what these women looked like? She would have to understand that, right?

With a sigh, he got out supplies to write a return letter.

———

Ma Chao unlocked the door to Wang Yi’s room a few days after her explosive reaction to his proposal, took a breath, and opened it.

She was sitting on the floor, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders despite the heat. Her eyes met his, and they were so sad. “Are you here to rape me?”

This time, he didn’t bother to answer the question. “It’s a little awkward for me, to have to admit that I failed the very first challenge you set me,” he said.

She tilted her head. “Failed?”

“I let you chase me off so easily,” he said. “Doesn’t make me look very good as a potential husband.”

“You really are a madman, I think,” she said, with no force to her tone.

He got down to the ground, eye level with her. “I should have realized how my offer would hurt and frighten you,” he said. “I can’t blame you for seeking to hurt and frighten me in return. You really got me where I’m weakest. It took me hours to realize how false and theatrical it was.”

Wang Yi blinked, blinked again, and put her hands to her face. “Go away.”

“I believe in your goodness, Wang Yi,” he said. “I know that you don’t yet trust that there can be a land of benevolence, but I know that you want women and children to be safe. I simply don’t believe that you would kill my sister just to hurt me.”

“I said go away!”

“I will in a moment. I only want to tell you that we can find a way for you to be happy again. Forget about the marriage, if it wouldn’t help you.” He got back up. “I won’t lock the door. Whatever you decide has my support.”

———

Ma Chao awoke to a strange sensation. Fingers stroking his neck.

The moon was just beginning to wax, and with no fire, the room was very dark, but guessing the identity of the shadowy figure wasn’t difficult.

Although he had been a good student, no one had ever called him smart, or indeed any variant of witty. Dull, but responsible; handsome, but bland; hard-working, not clever. So he surprised even himself when he said, “Are you here to rape me?”

Wang Yi laughed, and it was the first real laugh he had ever heard from her. In those long ago days, when her husband and comrades were plotting against him secretly, her laughter had been diplomatic and empty; after the massacre, bitter and mocking. This laugh was from a person he thought must
exist somewhere but had never met for himself.

“What have I told you a hundred times in battle?” she murmured into his neck. “Do not resist me…”

She moved on top of him, with the blankets in between them. His hands reached for her, and he discovered she was totally naked.

“How did you get in here?” he said, not sure whether he should be angry at his bodyguards or concerned for their lives.

“Your guards are asleep—_really_ asleep,” she said. “Look.” She reached to his end table and held up a standard issue guard sword, barely glinting in the low light. “These weapons are pathetic. There would have been no pleasure killing you with this. Even so, you are cruel to put such temptation in my way. I’m not all that reformed, you know.”

He couldn’t stop his hands moving over her body, even as he tried to pay attention to her words. “Right…”

She laughed again, softly, as she put the sword back down. “I was going to say that peace has made you soft, but you’re already contradicting me.”

She shifted her thigh off his erection but reached down with her hand to feel him through the blanket. “So you sleep naked? How much do you live up to your nickname?”

“I… ah…”

“Do you ride a woman as well as you ride a horse?” she purred. “I’m not a little virgin who just takes whoever her father decides, you know. You get one chance to impress me.”

“Only one…?” He pulled the blanket out from between them and pulled her against him directly. His fingers slipped between her legs and felt how slick and hot she was already. She spoke of him riding her; very well. He rolled over, pinning her beneath him. “I do improve with guidance,” he said, and entered her.

———

“Why do you always wear your helmet? Even indoors…”

He turned, still holding his helmet in his hands. “Did I wake you?”

“You and the sun,” she yawned. “Don’t evade the question. Is it because of your hair?”

“Yes.”

“Why? It’s beautiful. You should come here so I can enjoy it. I couldn’t in the dark.”

He hesitated, but came over and sat at the edge of the bed. She sat up and ran her hands through his short bronze locks. “You keep it so messy,” she complained. “Do you cut it yourself?”

“Yes.”

She was visibly surprised by that. “You find it that shameful?”

“It’s embarrassing,” he said. “Anyone can tell when they see it that I’m not completely Han. My sister was luckier, by the way. Her hair is normal.”
“There’s nothing abnormal about not being a Han…” she said slowly. “What else are you, anyway? Qiang?”

“Yes.” He got up and put the helmet on. “So did I pass?”

“Hmm?”

“Last night.”

“It’ll do for a start,” she said. She threw the blankets off, and he too enjoyed the opportunity to look at her in the light. Despite what she had said all those months ago about her scars, he really didn’t see that many. No, she wasn’t a fresh, untouched maiden, but that wasn’t something that lasted long anyway. His first wife’s body had changed after she gave birth, and he had still loved her and enjoyed her.

“If you’re going to give me children then we’ll have lots of practice. Now how exactly does the governor announce that he’s marrying his prisoner?”

“Loftily, I suppose,” he said, shrugging. He picked up her clothes which she had left by the end of his bed. “Do you want to get back in these for now? As my wife of course I’ll want you to have much better things.”

“I won’t be calling you my lord,” she said, taking the clothes from him.

“I don’t care what you call me between us,” he said, “but in public…”

“Oh, I’ve already decided about that.” She got up and absentmindedly began tying on her xieyi and breast-binding. “I’ll just follow you around at a respectful distance with a little smile on my face and say absolutely nothing. ‘That Governor Ma,’ they’ll all say. ‘What a strong man, to turn a woman like that into such a sweet, obedient wife.’”

“Now who enjoys lying?”

She smiled. “I’ll give you the opportunity to earn the title, if you like,” she said. Her voice was soft, but it held a challenge.

He took her half-dressed into his arms and kissed her. “It’ll take me a few weeks to arrange the wedding, but I want you in my bed from now on.”

“It’s more comfortable than mine, anyway,” she murmured.

———

When Ling Tong arrived back in Nanyang, he saw a line of messengers waiting to report to him and sighed deeply. His horse snorted with displeasure when he attempted to have him walk at a slower pace.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Ling Tong griped to the animal. “You have food and a rubdown waiting for you. I have nothing but hassle.”

Nevertheless, he gave up on curbing the horse’s eagerness to arrive. As he predicted, even before he had got out of the saddle, messengers were jockeying with each other to report first.

“My lord—”
“Governor Ling Tong—”

“I have a message from Lord—”

“An urgent request from the magistrate of—”

“Hey,” Ling Tong said reproachfully, rubbing the back of his neck as he handed the reins of the horse to a groom. “I know I haven’t been here for a while, but have you all really forgotten how to behave?”

The messengers were silenced by this mild rebuke from the respected war hero Ling Tong, and at his gesture, arranged themselves somewhat sullenly into a line.

“Those whose messages are oral only, form a line here,” Ling Tong gestured, “and you,” he indicated a steward, “why is there no scribe here?”

The man bowed low. “I’ll fetch one at once, my lord.”

“Have him taken to my office,” Ling Tong said, and the servant left. To the line of oral reporters, he said, “You lot, also, line up outside my office. I’ll have you in one at a time when the scribe is ready.” They left in a hurry, no doubt hoping to maintain or better their position in the queue. Ling Tong turned back to the remaining messengers. “I’ll take your letters and a brief description now.”

The line progressed without real surprises until he got to the fifth messenger. “A letter from your future wife, my lord.”

“My future—oh.” Ling Tong cleared his throat and tucked that one into the pile with the others. “Next?”

When he was finally done and walking back to his office—albeit by a somewhat indirect path and at a gait best described as a stroll—there was plenty of messages that by rights ought to be opened first.

He slowed to a stop in an empty corridor, leaned against a wall, and opened the one from Princess Jingshi. Two sealed letters that were within it almost fell out, but he caught them.

The handwriting was precise but not delicate, the wording straightforward but deferential. The required opening section where the letter writer professes that they miss the recipient was entirely rote and therefore skimmed. Then the princess wrote, briefly, that everything was peaceful on the Qiao lands; her younger brother and cousins were healthy and proceeding in their studies; her uncle, concerned for her safety, had sent her a personal squadron of bodyguards; and that she was chiefly using this squadron to practice her own self-defence skills.

That surprised him, though he supposed it shouldn’t have. Both of the Qiao sisters, after all, knew how to fight and even fought well. Of course they would teach their daughter to do the same. He wondered, idly, if she fought with pugil sticks like her mother or fans like her aunt.

He turned the page. She wrote that she had heard of her stepfather’s injury, but did not know how to direct her letters to him and her mother. She did not wish to trouble her uncle; Lord Ling Tong, surely, would know? She humbly, etc, thanked Lord Ling Tong for his kind, etc, service in forwarding her letters.

Before the closing, she made his stomach twist somewhat when she wrote that she felt privileged to be able to learn from him, in light of his many accomplishments and far superior experience of the world, and looked forward to reading his reply, which she promised to study earnestly. And then a rote, skimmable closing and her name.
He sighed, closed his eyes, and put the back of the hand with the letter in it against his forehead. It felt like he had been assigned a little sister or even a daughter, but in three years, he would have to bring her here and marry her. He understood why Lady Qiao had suggested they write to each other, but…

He refolded the letters and steadied himself to resume walking back to his office. He could forward the letters without a problem, and write her a brief reply that he had done so; a longer letter, he could legitimately claim he could not write while he was so busy, right?

Ling Tong hoped that excuse would hold for a while.

———

The officers of Shu sat around at the end of the first week of their siege of Tianshui, eating dinner in their tent.

Cao Zhen had known they were coming and had attempted the bold strategy of setting out to meet them, rather than entrenching himself in the city. An ambush in a mountain pass had showed great self-control, ignoring the vanguard and pouncing into action only when the siege weaponry had appeared. It had been a pitched battle. Though Shu had eventually eliminated the enemy, they had lost almost all their siege weapons beyond repair. It had been a suicide mission from Wei’s perspective and its success spoke well for how Cao Zhen was managing his internal morale. Now Shu had surrounded Tianshui, but there was nothing to do but wait. Wait for the city to run low on supplies, and wait for engineer corps and supplies to arrive to build new rams, siege towers, ladder carts, and trebuchets.

“If you desire to be a strategist, Master Guan Xing,” Jiang Wei was saying, “it amazes me that you have not sought out the prime minister more!”

Guan Xing didn’t like Jiang Wei. He had been surrounded by the dream of a land of benevolence since childhood, and that this newcomer, with his convert’s enthusiasm, was continually attempting to patronize him, the son of the emperor’s oath brother, was insulting. Moreover, Jiang Wei was the same age as he was. “The prime minister has given his honourable service to my uncle,” he said, without, he hoped, revealing his irritation. “I learned from my father, and I could not have had a better teacher in the arts of war.”

“Oh, naturally, Lord Guan Yu’s prowess on the battlefield was well-known. Master Li Dian, you served alongside him when he was with Wei, did you not?”

Li Dian was as somber and silent as ever, but he would answer direct questions. “I did. Lord Cao Cao respected no warrior more than Lord Guan Yu.”

“My father never had anything ill to say of his time under Cao Cao,” Guan Xing said, and ate another spoonful of millet porridge.

“It is only natural and creditable to your filial piety that you put your father in first place in your heart,” Jiang Wei said kindly, and Guan Xing clenched his jaw. “However, he is gone now, alas! But the prime minister still lives, and he has never been outsmarted in battle!”

Guan Xing looked up swiftly at that. “Excuse me?”

Jiang Wei’s mouth was full of food, and his expression showed his surprise at Guan Xing’s offence.

“It is better not to presume to compare Lord Guan Yu to anyone in Master Guan Xing’s presence, Master Jiang Wei,” came Fa Zheng’s voice from behind Guan Xing’s back. “For your own lifespan,
if nothing else.”

Guan Xing glanced back. Fa Zheng was standing in the entrance of the tent, smiling in his usual sardonic way, holding a letter.

“‘I meant no offence,’” Jiang Wei said, stiffly. “‘I only meant—’”

He stopped talking because Fa Zheng had raised a finger to his lips. “Please leave it at that, Master Jiang Wei. As much as I desire the opportunity to show my student how to kill someone and make it look like an accident, I do actually require your talents for the medium term.” He held up a scroll. “I have a message for Master Li Dian of a most gratifying nature.”

Li Dian accepted the scroll with no enthusiasm and Fa Zheng sat next to Guan Xing and called for food.

The moment he saw the handwriting, Li Dian gasped. Yue Jin, next to him, looked at his friend with concern, which only increased as Li Dian began to weep as he read the message. The short former Wei officer placed a hesitant comforting hand on Li Dian’s back.

Guan Xing glanced at Fa Zheng, whose sardonic grin had only broadened. “Your reaction surprises me, Master Li Dian,” he said. “Is it a cause for tears?”

“Shut up,” Li Dian choked out. “I can cry for them if I wish.”

“Had you not already mourned their deaths? With the long faces you have worn…”

Guan Xing nudged at Fa Zheng with his knee. He hated to see his master’s pleasure at the distress of others.

Yue Jin evidently felt the same way. “Leave him alone!”

Fa Zheng held his hands up in a gesture of surrender, and his smile to Guan Xing did perhaps hold a hint of apology to it.

“Master Li Dian,” Guan Xing, “no one can object if you wish you take your letter to your own tent. We will make sure your meal is kept for you.”

Li Dian wiped a cloth across his face. “There’s no point now. Why don’t you tell them what it said, Lord Fa Zheng? You gave it to me in front of them to humiliate me; complete the job.”

“You could not be farther off in your guess at my motivations,” Fa Zheng replied. To the tent at large, he said, “Master Li Dian, whose family we all presumed dead from one cause or another, has just learned that some of them are, miraculously, alive and recovered to safety in Luoyang. Specifically, his beautiful wife and daughter, and even one son.”

“You’re not going to say how they left Hebei?” Li Dian said bitterly when Fa Zheng paused his speech to take a drink of wine. “It’s surely the best part, for you.”

“I am not so evil that the sale of captured women to brothels delights me,” Fa Zheng said mildly. “You insult me a little there, but I will make allowances for your state of mind and let it go.”

Li Dian spat on the ground to show his disgust.

“But it is like I told you!” Fa Zheng went on. “Where there is life, there is hope. Their predicament kept them out of Sima Yi’s attention, they were sold into Shu territory, they were discovered, and
now they are restored to honour as your kin. And that one of your sons lived is remarkable, I thought. Their captors cannot have been entirely heartless, if they were allowed to feed a male child.”

Li Dian shuddered, and Jiang Wei said with a frown, “Lord Fa Zheng, to drag this out before all of us is unseemly.” For once, Guan Xing was in agreement with Jiang Wei.

“Master Guan Xing.”

Guan Xing turned his face back to Fa Zheng, who was leaning back in his chair.

“Have you really not perceived what I am putting before you?” The elder strategist was speaking directly to Guan Xing, now. “Will it direct your focus if I tell you that Li Dian’s daughter is seventeen years of age?”

And in a flash, Guan Xing did perceive it.

Li Dian’s situation had become a recurring subject of conversation between the two of them ever since they left Chang’an. Fa Zheng had been using it ruthlessly to poke holes in Guan Xing’s self-concepts of honour, benevolence, pragmatics, loyalty, vengeance, and service, and then challenging his protege to demonstrate that the whole still held.

One conversation in particular was suddenly very relevant.

“‘Death before dishonour,’ of course,” Fa Zheng had been mocking. “But what is dishonour to a man and an officer? To serve another lord? Surely the son of Guan Yu could not say so.”

“When my father served Cao Cao, he was never false in his heart. He repaid his debts and never lied that he would not leave when they were repaid.”

“So is honour all located in the heart, and not the rest of the body? How very convenient. So the honourable course for Master Li Dian, then, is that he remain true in his heart to Wei, and bide his time until his body can again serve it? If that is the case, I wonder that you are so adamant that we rescue his family. It seems, rather, that you should be urging his execution, as he will never truly serve us.”

“The emperor is not like Cao Cao; he has the mandate, and all under heaven must serve him. Master Li Dian does not err to switch his allegiance.”

“Neatly parried.” Fa Zheng had tilted his head. “Does this distinction between the honour of heart and body also apply to women?”

Guan Xing had laid his hand on his weapon. “My lord, don’t speak of my sister.”

Fa Zheng had been surprised, and then laughed. “Do you know I had actually forgotten the applicability of her... situation to my question? Though you surprise me, young master. You have shown great tolerance in our conversations in allowing me to challenge your morality using your father’s name. I thought it demonstrated a certain maturity, even a trust in my regard for you which was almost touching.” He had smiled at Guan Xing’s hand, still on the handle of his blade. “You hold your sister higher still? That is interesting.”

Guan Xing had let his hand slide off with effort. “It is not that. I simply cannot allow myself to recall the past.”

“That is weakness.”
Guan Xing had not been able to deny that. “I suppose it is.”

“Shall we speak of other women, as was my original intention, then?”

“I fail to see the relevance.”

“You will marry soon, will you not?”

“I had already decided to find a wife, when this campaign ends. I must give my father grandsons.”

“Your uncle will certainly wish for that, but in this present circumstance, he will also want your marriage to serve other purposes.”

“You mean alliance.”

“I mean alliance. Probably a woman whose closest male relations were, until very recently, enemies of us; almost as likely, one whose loved ones we have killed. I suppose you will want a wife who has honour, so where will hers be located? In the chastity of her body? In the loyalty of her heart to her living male relatives? Should her heart and body in future submit to yours at their coerced command, though their own hearts hate the sight of you?”

It was a terrible way to think of marriage. “An honourable woman intends the good of the land and her family; her body and her heart both submit to this. A marriage begins a new family, so she will submit her body and her heart to its good also.”

“You don’t mention chastity at all.” Fa Zheng had said, with a skeptical eyebrow.

“Of course, she must be chaste.”

“So while men can allow their bodies to be used indefinitely by other masters so long as their hearts are silently pure, a woman’s honour can be taken against her will in a single event? How painful, indeed, it is to be a woman in a time of chaos. I only wonder why more women don’t kill themselves, in that case.”

Guan Xing had considered this for a moment. “Chastity must be of the heart, then.”

Fa Zheng had laughed. “Everything is in the heart to you, suddenly. If that is the case, you should not betray your heart by allowing the opinion of your lips to contradict it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come now. Would you take a woman as a wife who had not been chaste in body? Who had allowed herself to endure the touch of an enemy’s hand? Don’t make me bring up the past you cannot allow yourself to recall—young master, come back. Running away, really?”

Guan Xing was running away at that point, though there was no outward hurry in his movements. Fa Zheng’s disbelieving laughter was stinging him with every cowardly step.

In the present, Guan Xing said to Fa Zheng, “You are being unnecessarily cruel.”

“You repeat yourself,” Fa Zheng said. “I am not simply amusing myself this time. It’s time for you to watch yourself make a decision.”

“And to do so you make all the rest of them pawns?”

“That is who I am.” Still he smiled. “Who are you?”
Guan Xing understood now. Fa Zheng liked him and held him in contempt at the same time, and the aspect that he found contemptible was, as Fa Zheng no doubt saw it, his hypocrisy. Fa Zheng’s own amorality made him indifferent to what Guan Xing actually believed. The older man only had loves and hatreds, whims and repulsions, amusements and irritations.

Fa Zheng had read the letter for Li Dian and perceived an opportunity to force Guan Xing to revisit the subject without the ability to run away, and seized upon it. It did not matter to Fa Zheng one way or the other how much discomfort and loss of face among the officers this would cause, how much more they would all dislike him.

Being Fa Zheng’s disciple, as the older man called him, was a dangerous path. And yet he could not say for certain that it was not the path he needed to walk right now.

Watch yourself make a decision.

That was a significant way to word it. That was what this was all about, for Fa Zheng. The tragedy of Li Dian and his family was exchangeable with any other problem for his purpose.

That was not righteous… that was despicable, to be so withdrawn from the actual consequences, the actual people… benevolence was all about relationships. How could it be treated as something so hypothetical? Li Dian was right there, right in front of him.

The decision that he watched himself make was that it was ludicrous to expect him to make a snap decision. This was not a test case to prove his position one way or another. The only choice he could make with virtue was to treat Li Dian with the dignity that he would want to receive in his place.

“Master Li Dian,” he said, “in his own particular fashion, Lord Fa Zheng wished to bring to my attention my earlier expressed intention to find a wife. I would have wished that the matter could have been handled without such public attention on us. However, if she has no prior claim for her hand, I would be honoured to wait on you to discuss the possibility of marriage between your daughter and me at any time.”

He saw Li Dian’s eyes widen and then narrow. “I thank you for your courtesy, Master Guan Xing. Your interest is honourably expressed. But by no means will I allow my daughter to be a pawn in whatever game you are playing with Lord Fa Zheng. You’ll all excuse me.”

The former Wei officer got up at once. Yue Jin hastily finished his own plate and left as well.

Guan Xing did not have much on his plate, but he ate at a normal pace and answered a few casual remarks from Fa Zheng about local hunting as a supplementation to the supply chain.

When he finished and left, he had not gotten more than a few paces before he found that Jiang Wei was pursuing him.

“Master Guan Xing,” he said urgently as he fell into step, “if I may be so bold as to say—”

“You may not,” Guan Xing answered him succinctly, and felt an undue amount of pleasure at how the other officer fell back without another word.

When he reached his tent, he found a note on his bed roll. Puzzled, he opened it.

Master Guan Xing,

If you are seeking a wife, I have a daughter, eighteen years old, beautiful and well-matched for you in intelligence. Seek me out at your convenience to discuss the matter further.
He sat down crosslegged on the bed roll and shook his head. Yes, Jia Xu had been there too, hadn’t he? Hadn’t spoken a single word at the time, but had obviously been listening. Guan Xing refolded the note and tapped it on his knee.

*Watch yourself make a decision.*

“I have a lot of them to make, don’t I, my lord?” he mused aloud. “And you… you will watch me watch myself… is that all you want out of it? I wonder…”

Master Li Dian had called it a game. It was not a game, precisely; yet part of Guan Xing was itching with anticipation to take his turn nevertheless. Another part of him was horrified. He observed both parts of himself for a moment.

Guan Xing held the note to the fire of his lamp, and when it was burned, he sat by its glow to read a copy of *Han Fei Zi* that Fa Zheng had lent to him.

———

Zhang He sipped his tea while he listened to Lady Cai’s latest revision of her new work. When the last note faded, he called, not unkindly, “The rhyme is a bit too predictable, still.”

She sighed.

“I believe the word *regicide* would fit better,” he added, “so why do you not use it?”

“I don’t wish you to be remembered that way.”

“My dear lady.” He was reproachful, and went up to the barred window to look out at her directly. “With the greatest respect for how your immortal art will doubtless pass down the generations, did you really think I would be remembered any other way, no matter what you wrote?”

He had been given a very comfortable cell, considering the circumstances. It was not even part of the prison, but rather a modified ordinary room. It overlooked a pleasant courtyard with a small copse of fruit trees. Lady Cai often came and set up her instrument beneath his window; otherwise he did not have visitors.

“You were not a usurper,” she replied, not looking up at him.

“I killed my sworn lord,” he said. “Not even the emperor who most benefitted from it will ever forgive that. Truth is too beautiful to mar for any reason, Lady Cai!”

She was silent for a moment. “Do you know your wife has brought your sons to Luoyang?”

That did surprise him. He had not seen his wife since he had dutifully fathered the requisite heir and a spare many years ago. He had written back and forth to his sons since they had reached their teens, but…

“She has some relation to Zhao Yun, were you aware? She is attempting to secure his assistance, I believe.”

“Does she?” He laughed. “I did not know; I was only her husband. So you no longer withdraw from the world, then, my lady?”

“I must curry favour in this new world as well,” she said. “My husband…”
She let it trail off, but Zhang He knew what she was referring to. Cao Cao had arranged her marriage, when she was ransomed from the northern barbarians, to a middling civil official, and only her favour in the eyes of Cao Cao and then Cao Pi had repeatedly spared him from the consequences of his incompetence and corruption. While Zhang He doubted that Lady Cai held any affection for him, he had nonetheless fathered the only children she still had access to, and thus her fate was tied to his.

“She’ll encourage her to visit you?” she said, returning the subject to his wife.

He shrugged. “I don’t know what we would talk about. My sons, I would be interested to see.”

———

Sun Quan stopped his horse on the crest of the hill and looked down at the grassy yard of the academy below. A number of teenage boys were spread across it, some in large groups, others in smaller groups or pairs, and others by themselves.

He instantly picked out his own son, of course, from the unnatural reddish tinge of the hair that was pulled back into a low ponytail at the nape of his neck. Sun Deng was a little removed from the others, kicking a *cuju* ball against the side of a school building. His son’s bodyguards stood nearby, looking bored. He frowned a little at that. He could have taken out an arrow and shot his son easily, were he an assassin. There would need to be consequences for that.

Within a minute he was noticed.

“Isn’t that the king?”

“What’s the king doing here?”

“A-Deng, it’s your father.”

Laughter.

His son turned and looked up at him, of course, but he did not yell a greeting or even smile. He simply looked confused.

Sun Quan nudged his horse to continue down the hill, Zhou Tai following him as always. The staff of the school, which relied on royal funding for more than half of their income, rushed out to greet him effusively.

“If my son hasn’t eaten,” he said, “I would like to eat with him in his rooms.”

Sun Deng led his father to the grandest suite in the dormitory, no longer looking confused, but not precisely looking pleased either. Sun Quan indicated to Zhou Tai to remain outside.

Sun Quan knelt by the low table as his son kowtowed to him, then spoke. “The end of your term is coming up soon. How have your studies been going?”

“Alright… I think… have my teachers written to you…? Father,” Sun Deng added the last hastily, as if afraid he had been rude.

“Alright… I think… have my teachers written to you…? Father,” Sun Deng added the last hastily, as if afraid he had been rude.

“No.” Sun Quan looked at his son’s face. It had even more pimples on it than the last time he had seen him. “I was thinking… if you prefer, of course, you can go to your grandmother’s house as usual, but if you would like, perhaps you could come to Jianye for the duration of your break.”
“And stay with you, father?”

“Yes, of course. You can meet your new brother and sister, and maybe learn a little about government.”

The boy’s eyes widened. “Oh,” he said, then he blushed, and said in a rush, “I mean I would be honoured, father!”

“Good. I’ll arrange it.”

There was a long, awkward silence, without even the excuse of eating to alleviate it.

“Father,” Sun Deng said at last, though he didn’t meet his father’s eyes, “was there anything else you needed to tell me?”

Sun Quan opened his mouth to say no, but changed his mind at the last moment and said, “Like what?” instead.

“I thought perhaps you were here to tell me I would no longer be the crown prince,” Sun Deng told the table.

Sun Quan blinked. “Did someone tell you I was going to do that?”

“No, but… now you have a son who is… legitimate,” Sun Deng said. “So… I assumed it would happen sooner or later.”

“Your existence may have come as a shock to me,” Sun Quan said frankly, “but there’s not a person under heaven who would be fool enough to claim you are not my son.”

Sun Deng cracked a half-smile at that and a hand came up to touch a strand of his own hair where it had escaped the ponytail.

“Do the other boys make fun of you for it?” Sun Quan guessed.

“Not so much anymore,” Sun Deng admitted, and he looked up into his father’s green eyes with a hint of pride. “I told them it’s the king’s hair.”

Sun Quan smiled. “I got it about my hair endlessly. They called me a devil’s son and a red-haired monkey.”

Sun Deng laughed in recognition. “Yes, a monkey… or they make monkey sounds…”

Oh, that brought back bad memories… and good ones too, like his older brother beating the worst of the bullies to within an inch of his life. “My skin was as bad as yours, too.”

Sun Deng sighed. “When does it go away?”

“No for a few more years, I’m afraid.”

“Well… it’s still a relief,” he said, laughing almost guiltily.

“Why a relief? Did you really think you would have pimples forever?” Sun Quan teased.

“No, but… well, you were about my age when you fathered me, so I thought that you were…” his son abruptly stopped his careless speech and turned scarlet.
Sun Quan laughed and finished the sentence anyway. “You thought I was cool, is that it? Far from it.”

There was a knock at the door that brought the food, and Sun Quan turned the conversation away from his own teenage years and towards Sun Deng’s schooling, his thoughts on the various curricula and the teachers.

When he rode back to the palace with Zhou Tai afterwards, Sun Quan observed the guilt that rose in himself at never having taken the easy hour’s ride out to his son’s school and let it pass. There was no changing the past, anyway. He hadn’t been ready to be a father, and the boy’s resemblance to himself, considering his own self-hatred, had only made Sun Quan less inclined to spend time with him. Maybe avoiding his son had been the best of a bunch of bad options.

He was ready now though. Ready to see that he had something in himself that was worthy of being loved, and ready to recognize it in his son also.

*It’s the king’s hair.*

*You thought I was cool, is that it?*

Sun Quan laughed a little and urged the horse to go a bit faster, just for the enjoyment of the ride. *I wonder how long it will take my son to realize that I’m still not cool…*

Chapter End Notes

Well, I know I said that there would only be one more chapter last time, but I realized that to really conclude the story I had to revisit more characters, and therefore the word count was far too high for just one chapter. Looks like this is really going to be a 200k work. Holy heck.

I appreciate every comment so so much! Thank you for going along on this long ride with me!
天下興亡 匹夫有責 (We're all responsible for the fate of this land.)

Chapter Notes

"Baba" is the Chinese word for "papa" or "dad".

The scene between Gan Ning and Lady Qiao is pretty much just a sex scene, so if you're skipping sex scenes, then... yeah.

There is a graphic childbirth scene.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

天下興亡 匹夫有責：tianxia xingwang, pifu you ze
heaven / beneath / prosper / perish / ordinary / man / has / responsibility
“For the success or failure of the land, each person has a responsibility.”

Lu Xun was a shrewd, level-headed, rational man, and a complete wreck as he scanned the river looking for the boat that should have been there by now, surely?

“My lord,” said a servant, “you can go and get something to eat. We can deal with—”

“I’m going to be here,” Lu Xun cut him off impatiently.

After what felt like days, but was in actuality a little under an hour, he saw at last a boat coming up to the dock with a beautiful young woman standing on the deck with a chubby little baby tied in a sling on her hip.

“Yinping,” he cried.

She waved at him wildly, gripping onto the railing to keep from being knocked over as the boat shook from bumping gently into the dock.

He couldn’t even wait for her to get off the boat, climbing on board himself instead, bowling sailors out of his way until he could reach her. Lu Xun kissed his wife passionately, which pleased their young daughter not at all. She began to cry.

“She doesn’t recognize me,” he said ruefully as the child buried her face in her mother’s shoulder.

“She will soon,” Yinping reassured him. “This is Baba, Little Mouse! He loves you so so much!”

“She’s gotten so big,” Lu Xun said, tentatively touching a chubby arm despite the wails. “I can’t believe how much I’ve missed.”

“Now you won’t have to miss anymore,” Yinping said, and tears came to her eyes. “I’m so glad to be with you again!”

He kissed her again. “I’ve got better rooms for us in the palace now, we have our own courtyard for Little Mouse to play in and everything you could want. Let me take you home.”

———
Lady Qiao reached down and touched Gan Ning’s soft penis, causing his eyes to jerk open.

“Huh?” he said. He looked over her, blinking in the near total darkness of their room in the inn. It was their first night on their journey from Shouchun to Jianye. “What, here?”

She blushed, but whispered, “Well, it’s been so long...!”

He lowered his voice as well. “Sure fucking has, but here? These walls are thin as hell.”

“I can be quiet,” she whispered, and then insisted, “I can!” as he laughed quietly at her.

Nevertheless, she could feel him stirring under her hand, and when she pulled back the blanket and took him into her mouth, his laugh immediately became a low groan.

“Shit, shit, shit,” she heard him hiss as she bobbed her head up and down. His dick was hardening in her mouth. He pushed himself up to sitting and pulled her off of him and into his lap.

He grinded her against his almost fully hard erection and whispered into her ear, “If you’re going to prove you can be quiet, you can’t have your mouth full, can you, my wife?” Gan Ning put a hand on each of her thighs and lifted her up slightly, spreading her out for him, teasing her entrance with the head of his cock. “And since you’ve been caring for me so well I really need to make sure I take care of you first...”

With that he lowered her onto him to the hilt, then kissed her cheek as she bit her lip in the dim summer twilight. “This was your idea, baby, you do the work.”

As she began to rock in his lap, he played with her breasts and started whispering little things into her ear.

“You couldn’t wait to take this cock, huh?”

“Oh, was that a moan? I think that’s a moan trying to get out.”

“I hear someone in the hall... don’t make a sound, you don’t want them to know you’re not the perfect lady they all think, are you... you’re a bad girl who just needs to get fucked, aren’t you?”

“That naughty cunt of yours just loves getting stuffed doesn’t it.”

“Mmm!” She had tears in her eyes from the effort of holding back her usual groans, moans, and wails. He wouldn’t even kiss her mouth! He would skim past it to her chin, her nose, her neck.

“My wife,” he nibbled at her earlobe, “you’re getting so close, aren’t you?”

“Ah,” she choked out.

“Do it, come all over my cock, I’ll pump you good and full,” he hissed.

She couldn’t help it. Lady Qiao latched onto the top of his shoulder and bit down hard as she came. Gan Ning sucked in a breath sharply and threw his head back as he came as well.

When they were panting in each others’ arms afterward and Lady Qiao came back to her senses, she was horrified. “I bit you!”

“I probably deserved it for teasing you,” he whispered with a chuckle. “Felt pretty fucking good at the time, I must say. Gonna leave a mark though for sure.”
“Oh no!” Lady Qiao whispered.

He mussed her hair. “Don’t worry, I think my necklace will mask it… will that tide you over until we get back to Jianye, or should I invest in a gag for you?”

“A gag?” she whispered, with curiosity. “I never thought of it before… but now that you mention it…”

“Fuuuck, how did I get this lucky!”

———

The morning after she arrived in Jianye, a messenger came at breakfast to ask if Lady Guan would be available to have tea with the queen, perhaps during Lu Ruofeng’s morning nap, if it were at a convenient hour? Lady Guan accepted with enthusiasm.

But when she was shown into an empty room, the one who came in after was not Lianshi.

“Oh!” said Yinping, freezing only half out of her chair. She had been standing up to hug Lianshi; seeing instead her husband Sun Quan threw her off entirely. She had avoided him as much as possible when she was in Jianye before. Her strongest association with him was, naturally, how he had offered her up to be serially raped at that horrible banquet. Yinping was surprised, angry, afraid; and then while she was struggling with all these emotions, her reason was yelling at her that Sun Quan was very easily offended and she needed to do the kowtows to a king now.

“Please—you can sit down,” Sun Quan said. “I’m sorry I had to trick you like this. Lianshi didn’t know anything about it.”

Yinping sat down on the very edge of her seat and instinctively glanced around for exits.

“You’re not in any danger, I swear,” Sun Quan said, and moved deliberately sideways, out of the way between her and the single door, and leaned against a wall.

Yinping didn’t know what to do or say, so she did nothing but look at him.

Sun Quan looked at the floor for a moment, then back at her. “Lady Guan, I arranged for us to meet privately like this because I need to apologize to you. The alliance requires that all the events of that campaign and its aftermath be publicly forgotten. But you cannot be expected to forget what I almost did to you. I was entirely in the wrong and have no excuses for my conduct.”

Yinping’s eyes widened til she felt like her eyes might pop out of her head as she watched Sun Quan drop down to a kneel and put his forehead on the ground.

“I do not order it, but I ask you humbly to forgive me,” he said.

“Oh my goodness,” blurted Yinping, then reddened. “Oh, I’m sorry! I don’t know what I’m supposed to say!”

Sun Quan chuckled, then rose to an ordinary kneel and made his face serious again. “I shouldn’t laugh. But this isn’t a ceremony, Lady Guan, there’s no wrong answer. You don’t even have to give me an answer. If you want, I’ll simply leave and you can go as you please.”

Yinping looked down at her red and pink dress. “I know your intentions at that time were… bad, but, in the end, I am happier than I ever dreamed of being with my husband… and I know how my husband honours you. He is your chancellor… and I support him… so I suppose I must support you
in any case. I do appreciate your apology, and I forgive you… but…”

“But?”

Yinping made a face. “I really did want to see Lianshi!”

Sun Quan laughed again at that, and rose to his feet. “I believe I can take you to her, if you’d like to give her the opportunity to show off the twins.”

———

“My lord! My lord!”

Zhao Yun was of course well known to every Shu soldier and guard in Luoyang, and had no problem evading the routine blocks that would have ordinarily slowed one’s passage into the inner recesses of the palace. He pushed the final guard out of the way and slammed open the door, revealing a table of startled civil officials and the emperor, who out of habit leapt to his feet with his swords raised to block.

Only the emperor relaxed at all when he recognized the intruder, who began to speak while making the barest rush of a field bow, “My lord, the empress—”

“You cannot speak to the emperor without making proper—” A civil official who had far too high an idea of his understanding of Confucian principles talked over Zhao Yun.

“Shut up!” barked the emperor, sheathing his swords and moving quickly to Zhao Yun’s side. “Tell me on the way.”

Zhao Yun lead his emperor at a brisk walk. “The empress was walking in the gardens and her time came upon her all at once, my lord, and she would not leave.”

“Would not leave?”

“She said she was not going to move and that anyone who tried to make her would lose a hand… my lord, I didn’t know what to do! I could only think to tell you!”

Liu Bei sighed. “This woman is really going to kill me. Alright, take me to her and then the thing to do is to alert the midwives. I’ll calm the empress down enough to take her to the empress’s quarters.”

———

Sun Shangxiang had thought that her experience of childbirth alongside Lianshi had prepared her for the course of events, at least. The midwives, too, had mentioned that a first birth could go on a very long time.

For her, however, the first pang of labour had hit her like a horse kick to the abdomen, sending her lurching into a bench in the palace gardens. The contraction lasted a full minute, during which she could not speak at all in response to the worried questions of Lulu and Zhao Yun, who had rushed after her. She had walked shakily towards the exit that led to her quarters for two minutes before another pang hit her, just as strong as the first. As soon as that full minute of hell was over, she had instinctively staggered into a nearby pavilion and refused to move.

Zhao Yun at first attempted to persuade her, but after having been threatened with the loss of his limbs, he had gone, leaving her with only Lulu, who was even less prepared to handle these events than Shangxiang was.
Shangxiang found herself gripping the decorative railing of the pavilion so tightly she feared she might crack it, staring at a lot of lotuses in the pond below, their utter tranquility almost seeming a mockery to the way her body had suddenly decided to move things along without consulting her. She lost the sense of time as the contractions came even closer together, until they almost seemed to go without ceasing.

She had assumed she would scream, but she did not. She breathed in and out in noisy groans, but that was the only noise she made.

At some point, her husband was suddenly there.

“My lord, I think the baby is coming now,” Lulu was saying to him.

*What was your first clue?!* some corner of Shangxiang’s mind screamed as she sucked in a breath.

Her water broke. Was it disgusting? Shangxiang didn’t know and didn’t care.

The instinctual desire to push, however, forced her to speak. “I need to push.”

Liu Bei and Lulu engaged in a brief frantic conversation that was beyond her ability to follow, before Liu Bei came up behind her and said, “Everything’s going to be fine, Shangxiang. I’ll catch the baby.”

She couldn’t respond, but he repeated like a chant, “It’s going to be fine.” She would have to tell him afterwards what a relief it was. Afterwards, afterwards, there *would* be an end to this, she told herself furiously!

And there was.

———

Lulu watched the emperor catch the child in the Lotus Pavilion of the imperial palace, in the hour of the dragon and the year of the dragon. She knew, as she watched it happen, what a momentous and historic occasion it was, and yet it was so humble and intimate as well. In both aspects of it, she felt herself to be a useless and inappropriate onlooker.

The emperor brought the baby up to his chest, heedless of the blood on the imperial robes, and used his inner sleeve to wipe the baby’s wailing face. “You have a son, Shangxiang,” he said.

“Thank heaven, I had no idea how I was going to explain to A-Dou if it were otherwise,” the empress said in an exhausted, tremulous voice. She slowly sank down from the assisted squat she had been doing against the railing of the pavilion and leaned back against the low wall.

The baby was still attached by the cord to his mother, and Liu Bei, who had been kneeling at his wife’s feet, shifted his position carefully to bring him closer to her. “Madam Zhao, please go as quickly as you can to the empress’s quarters and let them all know how things have progressed. Whichever doctor they can get fastest must come here, and Li Kang is to be summoned with all speed from wherever he is.”

“At once, your imperial majesty,” Lulu said, and ran.

———

“Father, how is Mama? How is my brother?”
Liu Bei laughed ruefully. It had been many hours since the birth of his second son, but those hours had been filled with activity. Examinations and records and navigating the complicated reactions of everyone to the emperor’s literally hands-on role in his son’s birth. It would be important, he already knew, to frame the extraordinary manner of his son’s birth as a portent of an extraordinary destiny, and the work of that must begin immediately. But with A-Dou, all was much simpler. “I came to tell you that you were right it would be a boy, but I get the feeling you would insist it was a boy even if I told you otherwise. The birth… was not what any of us expected, but your brother is very well. He roars just like a tiger. I told Mama that clearly came from her side. She threw a glass at me. I’m glad she’s still a bit weak from giving birth, otherwise she would never have missed…”

He trailed off as his son was not laughing at the obvious joke, but rather his vacant face had clouded with worry. Liu Bei hugged his son. “They are both just fine, A-Dou.”

“I’m so glad,” A-Dou sighed. “Everything will be fine now that Mama has had a son. I’m so happy.”

The young man slipped away from his embrace and went back to his work, stringing wooden beads on a strip of leather with great concentration.

Liu Bei waited for a moment, but his son had apparently lost interest in the conversation. He had not even asked the new prince’s milk name.

“A-Dou, I’m going now.”

“Alright, father.”

In another part of the imperial garden, Zhuge Liang was reclining in a chair in a pavilion, fanning himself, eyes nearly closed.

“Please remain at ease, my friend,” said Liu Bei, taking the chair next to him.

They sat in companionable silence for a time, listening to the birds of the evening. The sun still shone, but a peel of distant thunder was faintly heard.

The sound of the thunder seemed to prompt Liu Bei to talk. “Old friend, a few years ago I asked you to make me a promise, and you refused. The only thing you have ever refused me outright, even with all the foolish battles I requested plans for.”

Zhuge Liang was silent.

“I accepted your refusal, although it always puzzled me. I knew it was the deepest proof I could ask for of your loyalty and respect for me, and yet…” He waved it aside vaguely. “Kongming, would it be fruitless for me to make a similar request?”

“My lord, if you think the requests are similar, you still don’t comprehend me at all.”

“Perhaps I am as simple as A-Dou in some ways… Kongming.”

Zhuge Liang opened his eyes fully and turned them towards Liu Bei.

“I do not see how I can name a newborn as my crown prince, but if I die before it can happen, I want you to ensure that he succeeds me.”

“In the absence of a public declaration from you, that may provide a bit of a challenge.” The fan brushed a fly aside. “Nothing that I could not deal with, though. If it puts your mind at ease, you may rely upon me. However, I do not anticipate the situation to arise. Now that we have seized Luoyang,
it would be pointless for you to expose yourself to future battles. Let the young make names for themselves.”

“Good. I want to live, and be a better father this time.”

Another peel of thunder proclaimed that despite the sunshine, the storm was approaching. Liu Bei stood up. “I’m going back in. You should as well, before the rain comes and ruins your fan.”

“It will not start to rain here for another twenty-three to twenty-four minutes. In the meantime, I am quite content.”

Liu Bei laughed and left.

However, Zhuge Liang got up after only a few minutes. Not for the few minutes’ walk to the main part of the palace, but out to a compound on one end, where his wife’s laboratory was set up.

Just a few seconds after he entered the door, a very loud crack of thunder sounded, and the downpour began. “Twenty-three minutes exactly,” he murmured. “I need not have hedged after all.”

“Is that you, my lord?” came a muffled voice from beneath a juggernaut.

Zhuge Liang walked over. Yueying slid out from under the machine, brushing the worst of the sawdust off her hair and dress. “Hello, Yueying.”

“Did you want me for something, my lord? I am trying to determine why this juggernaut will no longer turn.”

“Yueying, I am getting old.”

“Getting old?” Yueying frowned. “Older, perhaps, but you are by no means old, my lord. You look and act almost exactly the same as I remember on the day I met you.”

“And yet I have changed. I recognize the signs of old age in myself.”

She laughed. “What signs?”

“The very gravest sign. I begin to think of posterity.”

“My lord, you were obsessed with posterity before you ever met me. It was part of why you sought me out, after all.”

“I see as always I must be concrete with you, wife.” He reached out and brushed a bit more sawdust from her cheek. “I want children.”

“I thought we agreed that children would be a distraction from our tasks.”

“I was wrong. Children must be our task as well. I may be able to unify the land, but without a virtuous and talented next generation, it will not last.”

She shrugged. “Alright. I have always listened to you regarding future plans, and I see no reason to change that. I’ll stop drinking the elixirs immediately.” She glanced, distracted, back at the juggernaut. “May I go back to work now?”

Later that evening, she came to his chambers.
“I apologize for my coldness and flippancy in our conversation earlier,” Yueying said, as the rain pelted the window. “It is difficult for me for focus on more than one thing at a time. That is part of why I have always relied upon you, my lord.”

“I was not offended.”

“My lord,” she hesitated, “are you sure that you have considered my capabilities with this decision? I know that I feel… love… for you, and for some others, but I know I do not show my love as other women seem to. Are you certain I could be effective as a mother? It seems to be a required component for children to thrive.”

“Any child of yours and mine, Yueying, is bound to have unusual requirements. We shall simply adapt at the circumstances change.”

Yueying considered this. “Hmm. I can see that. Alright, my lord. Good night.”

“Come here.”

She turned back. “My lord, it will take some time for the residual effects of the elixirs I been consuming all these years to wear off.”

He did not attempt to reason with her. He merely held out his hand. “Come here.”

In the skies over Luoyang, more and more clouds were gathering.

———

“Boy, this is some storm isn’t it?” Bao Sanniang said, pressing her nose up to the window. “I thought it would have stopped by now. Maybe everybody will just end up spending the night together here like a big camp!”

Before he went to Jianye, having to spend all night in the same room as Lady Bao would have seemed like a torture from hell to Zhang Bao, but either she was better than he remembered or getting married himself had made him more tolerant of the gross imperfections of other women. Possibly, he thought, it was a little of both. His cousin Guan Suo was certainly much more like the easy-going, effortlessly charming young man he had been before Guan Yu’s death. Since Lady Bao dedicated herself to getting his attention ninety-nine percent of the time, this actually present Guan Suo, as opposed to the mentally checked-out walking ghost he had been before, seemed to inspire much less obnoxious behaviour from her.

The “everybody” to which Lady Bao had referred was an admittedly awkward gathering between his mother, his uncle Xiahou Ba, and a lot of hitherto unknown uncles, aunts, cousins, and other relations from his Xiahou side. Guan Suo had offered to come with his wife to “tilt the balance” and make it not feel quite so overwhelmingly anti-Shu, and his mother had said she thought that was not be a bad idea.

In the faces of these strangers, Zhang Bao saw those of his mother, his sister, and himself, and vice versa. There was a lot of reminiscing going on about Xiahou Yuan, the grandfather he had never known. The matters of his mother’s kidnapping, and Xiahou Yuan’s death, were not spoken of aloud, yet Zhang Bao felt them floating in the air.

Xiahou Ba had told him back in Nanyang that Xiahou Yuan was always smiling, and his branch of the Xiahou clan, at least, seemed to be a rather cheerful bunch, the kind of people who make the best of difficult things. It seemed to have made this reintegration much easier than it might have been. All of them needed to adjust to this Han restoration, as his uncle Liu Bei was calling his new dynasty.
Before they had a direct relation to Cao Pi; now their relationship to the emperor would have to be through the intermediary Zhang Bao… and therefore his father. That was floating in the air too.

Zhang Bao was very glad that their father was staying in Chengdu for the indefinite future.

“I doubt it,” said Guan Suo lightly. “I think everyone lives very close by, if they don’t live within the palace itself.”

“I’m not sure I could find my way in the dark without you, Guan Suo,” she said adoringly. “This place is even more of a maze than Chengdu!”

Zhang Bao rolled his eyes a little and stepped away to see if his mother wanted or needed anything from him.

His wife was speaking to an attentive audience of not only his mother but several others. “The year of the dragon, and the hour of the dragon, are a potent combination indeed. I understand how it grabs the imagination of the ordinary people. But it is the solar term of the sheep, and to me that is the most auspicious aspect by far. Someone born in the term of the sheep will, in adulthood, value peace, act with caution, eschew excess, and support the arts. These traits will support and balance the energy of dragon year and dragon hour.”

“You will have a little dragon before too long yourself, Lady Lu,” said one of his aunts. “Do you hope for a particular solar term?”

“I would not venture to think I could know better than what heaven will ordain,” she said serenely, resting her hand on her bump.

———

The same night, in Jianye, the sky was clear and the moon round.

A couple were taking advantage of the cool of the summer night and the brightness of the moon to enjoy their second favourite activity: sparring.

Cool was a relative term in high summer, of course, and when the two took a break to hydrate, Xingcai pulled off her top.

They were in their own private courtyard, which was entirely set up as a training ground, so her husband Zhou Tai merely finished his cup of wine and said, “Cheating.”

“I am not! You’ve seen what’s beneath even my breast binding enough by now that I will not allow that it’s a distraction of any kind. If you’re going to claim…” She trailed off and narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re teasing me.”

His grin broadened. “Maybe.”

She huffed, but smiled herself nonetheless, and the two began another round.

He was aggressive in his style this time, closing with her again and again. It kept her on the defensive. Though with her weapon she also needed to be in close, his unusual speed made her wary of attempting to do much more than block while she figured out his game.

They had set up one side of the courtyard with training dummies, pommel horses, and targets. She coaxed him into pursuing her there, using her smaller profile and greater flexibility to give her the advantage.
And then it finally happened.

She blocked his attack with her shield, twisted her body into him, and brought her sword down hard on his hand while pushing up with her shield.

His sword spun out of his grasp, while she ended with her back against his chest.

Zhou Tai rubbed his hand and wrist and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Good match.”

“Did I… wait. I disarmed you? Did that just happen?” she demanded, twisting back around.

“Seems so.”

“I really did?” She walked over to where the practice blade had landed and poked it with her boot, as if it might vanish. “I disarmed you. I disarmed you?”

“I was there,” he agreed.

“You didn’t… you wouldn’t just let me win.”

“I wouldn’t.”

Her disbelieving face slowly spread all over with joy. She put her hand to her mouth, flushed, tried to act natural, grinned like an idiot again.

“You’re cute,” he said from where he was refilling his wine.

She laughed. “We had better quit for tonight. Now I’m the one who would be too distracted to focus.”

———

It was very early in the morning. The moon had passed its peak but was still well above the horizon.

A small family was sleeping in a luxurious bed. The father and mother on either side, with the baby in between, looked like the character 川 (river). Although this sleeping arrangement was standard among the common people, it was unusual in a household of such obviously high status, which could have easily had sumptuous quarters for husband and wife separately and then, far from disturbing the sleep of either, a place for the baby with a wet-nurse and nanny to tend to her every whim.

For this family, however, being together like this was the greatest luxury they could imagine.

The baby stirred, and only half-waking, the mother bared her breast to feed her. Everything was still, and peaceful.

The mother realized in her half-awake state that someone was stroking her cheek, and she opened her eyes more fully to see that her husband was awake.

“Did Little Mouse wake you?” she whispered sleepily.

“I’m not sure what woke me,” he whispered. “Whenever I wake up and see you and our daughter in bed with me, I can’t believe how lucky I am, Yinping.”

“Mm-hmm.” She yawned, and her eyes fluttered, then closed again.
Lu Xun was amazed that she somehow was able to mostly sleep through Little Mouse nursing. This woman really did have a talent for sleep.

But then she spoke again, “I’m so glad the chaos is really over… I hope they just keep you here and you don’t have to join in the last battles.”

“Ohmm. It will be hard to get used to not planning battles anymore. Hopefully we get at least a few rebellions to keep me in form. Don’t want to get bored.”

Chapter End Notes

IT’S OVER!!!!

I’m marking this one complete because even if I decide to add an epilogue or afterword, this is the end of the story I wanted to tell in this work. Obviously these characters have things in their lives they would continue to work through, but their story arcs here are finished.

I would like to thank myself, first of all, for being my own biggest fan. Secondly I would like to thank some big supporters of this work: RoseKitsuen, Reachfan2, and especially JUICEY, whom I haven't seen around for a while but who was literally the BIGGEST reason I kept writing for such a long time with her long, wonderful comments. I hope she comes back to see the work someday and lets me know what she thinks, and wherever she is I wish her well.

I'd also like to thank midnightandmoon, who left me a wonderful comment during my long dryspell of not working on this work. I seriously left that comment on unread so I would see it every time I logged into AO3, it was so encouraging.

Feel free to leave comments or message me on Tumblr (fineillsignup) with questions and thoughts!

I still have other stories in this universe (click the Clouds and Rain series) to finish, and some thoughts for further stories, so if you enjoyed this work, hopefully there will be more!

Edit, May 8 2019: I have turned the epilogue into a sequel and given it its own page here on AO3 under the title One Side Clouds, the Other Rain.
Epilogue Side Story: Ling Tong, part 1

Chapter Notes

Ling Tong: ugh, I can't believe I've been railroaded into this marriage, I'm going to just ignore her as hard as I can as long as I can
Sun Jingshi: you should get down on your knees, kiss my feet and call me princess
Ling Tong:

that’s it that’s the fic

This is more like the first half of a short story surrounding Ling Tong and Sun Jingshi, but since I don't want to spoil the pairing for people who haven't yet read Clouds and Rain, I'm posting it on as an extra chapter here, rather than as a separate work. If I posted it as a separate work, the synopsis and tags etc would spoil Clouds and Rain.

I'm leaving the work marked complete because C&R itself IS complete.

I gave Jingshi an eku as her weapon because it is a traditional Okinawan martial arts weapon like many of the other weapons in Wu. If I controlled Dynasty Warriors, I would make ALL the Wu characters use Okinawan weapons because 1. I think it's neat 2. I don't really care about historical accuracy in weaponry 3. I think it's neat and 4. I think it's neat.

Princess Sun Jingshi, only child by birth of Sun Ce, the deceased elder brother of the king of Wu, first ran a fief solo just shy of age fifteen, when her mother, the elder Lady Qiao, and new stepfather, Gan Ning, went off to war and then her aunt, the younger Lady Qiao, snuck after them to join in too.

That was fine with Jingshi. It wasn’t like there was that much to do in the dead of winter anyway, and the servants and stewards all respected her well enough. The only daunting part was dealing with her cousins, all rowdy boys who (very naturally) missed their mother and aunt.

It was a bit odd to be the one handing out red envelopes to the children of servants and tenants during the New Year. Should she give some to herself? She was a child and an adult simultaneously.

Her uncle the king, concerned for her personal safety, sent her more bodyguards, which she felt was overkill. They already had guards, and the area was prosperous and stable. Her mother, who did almost all the work of running the estate since Lord Zhou Yu’s death, was well-liked for her fairness, shrewdness, and kindness. Jingshi simply did things the same way her mother had done them and experienced no problems at all.

The bodyguards, therefore, she mostly utilized as sparring partners for herself and tutors in martial arts for her cousins, the latter particularly helpful as an outlet for their energy.

She got a message from her uncle in summer telling her not to worry about her stepfather’s injury. Jingshi had not been worried, as she had not known her stepfather had been injured. Not knowing where he or her mother or aunt were, she had the bright idea that this was a perfect opportunity to write a letter to Lord Ling Tong, the governor of Jing province.
Her future husband.

The thought still put butterflies in her stomach whenever it occurred to her. She had long known she would have an arranged marriage—her close kinship to the king, in context of his small number of female relations generally, made her too valuable a pawn to waste. But her mother had also promised her that she would do her best to make it a man whom she could love as well. And when she met him—his face, his hair, his fit body, his reputation for valour, his status, everything exactly what any girl could dream of—it seemed her mother had indeed delivered.

He, unfortunately, had seemed decidedly less thrilled with her in their brief meeting. That stung, she couldn’t pretend it didn’t. She was very short, and she resembled her beautiful mother hardly at all. And she almost always had a few pimples—something her mother assured her that her uncle Sun Quan and aunt Sun Shangxiang had also had at her age. Both of them were widely regarded as good looking now, and her father, too, everyone described as having been handsome.

Jingshi allowed herself to hope that by the time she turned eighteen, when their wedding was to occur, she would be a beauty worthy of Lord Ling Tong.

She sent off her letters, but instead of a response, her mother, aunt, and step-father came home themselves.

“Hey kid,” her stepfather said with a smile, though he was noticeably thinner than he had been before he left. “Looks like you held down the home front pretty well, huh? You can relax now and enjoy being a kid again.”

Jingshi glanced over at her aunt, who was crying with joy and apologizing over and over again to her crying sons, and her mother, who was efficiently directing the servants and hadn’t had time to do more than wave at her daughter. She turned back to Gan Ning and smiled weakly. “It wasn’t difficult, really.”

It seemed to her that he eyed her with a bit of speculation. “It’ll be an adjustment for everybody, us being back, I guess,” he said. “I haven’t been a father myself for a long time, and I’ve never been an uncle at all.”

Jingshi bowed. “I’m sure we will all do our best, stepfather.”

He laughed. “Your mom’s really taught you how to behave, huh? You don’t have to be formal with me, kid. You got questions, ask ‘em. Something I can do for you, tell me. If I’m bothering you, tell me that too. Sooner we can go from strangers to family, the better, far as I’m concerned.”

“Maybe we can talk at dinner,” she said, a little shy.

Gan Ning perked up. “Great idea, I’m already starving, shit. Oh shit, I didn’t mean to say shit so soon.”

Jingshi laughed as her mother joined them.

“What’s so funny?” her mother said.

“I swore already,” Gan Ning said. “Now I owe Ling Tong a whole night of drinks. He bet me I wouldn’t make it to nightfall the first day home without swearing.”

Her mother sighed indulgently, then turned to hug her daughter. “You truly did an excellent job, Jingshi. Everything is just as if I had done it myself. I even tried to order dinner and found out that you already had!”
“How soon did she order dinner?” Gan Ning cut in.

“I told them to move it up,” her mother laughed again. “Shall we go in?”

———

Her new stepfather was immediately intensely popular with her cousins, which was only to be expected. A war hero and a pirate—what young boy could resist that combination?

But Jingshi had been surprised at how quickly she took to him as well. She had been, if not frightened of him, at least wary of him. There were plenty of cautionary tales about villainous stepparents, and he certainly looked dangerous. But he was friendly from the beginning and the more she thawed towards him, the more paternally affectionate he became.

She found out that his previous experience with fatherhood had been with a little girl as well, a girl who would have been about her age, had she lived. Xiao Wan and her mother were added to the family shrine, represented by a painting of a woman with bells in her hair holding a little girl with a bell around her neck. Jingshi made sure to include them in her reverences.

Sun Quan’s squadron of bodyguards left, which had disappointed her, but then Gan Ning offered to teach her himself, which was even better.

“Hell, I need to get back into form myself, so you’re only doing me a favour,” he said. “Why an eku? Not the sort of weapon I’d expect you to use.”

Jingshi looked at the humble, traditional weapon, a variant of the bo staff that resembled a fisherman’s oar. “My uncle, Lord Zhou Yu, taught me the bo staff before he died,” she said. “I kept working with it, but then I tried the eku, and I like it even better.”

“Maybe we should get you some tonfa like your dad used, though I don’t know who’d teach you to use it,” Gan Ning said. He readied a wooden sword. “This ain’t my usual style, but your mother forbade me from using even a practice flail with you—can’t say as I blame her, heh. Show me whatcha got, kid!”

———

A few weeks after their return, she finally got a letter from Ling Tong.

When she stripped away all the rote expressions and formula, essentially it said: I am too busy to write to you.

Jingshi counted the pimples on her reflection in the pond and sighed.

———

In late summer they discovered that her mother was pregnant.

When her mother went into labour the next year, Jingshi assisted at the birth. It was very strange to see her mother in pain and struggling, to see her aunt being the strong one who soothed her older sister.

It all went well, and she had a baby sister.

Jingshi went to tell her stepfather the good news and found him on his knees in front of the family shrine. She heard him before she even went inside: “Please, Lord Sun Ce, I can’t blame ya for hating
my guts, but if you can hear me, if you can do anything for them…”

Her mother had warned her that he would probably rush into the birthing room and she was correct. Gan Ning kissed his wife and his newborn daughter over and over, pulled Jingshi over and kissed her forehead too.

———

Ling Tong picked up the letter from Gan Ning, put it down again, and sighed.

His friend was inviting, but more like demanding, him to visit for the upcoming new year.

Sima Yi had negotiated a surrender to the emperor, ending the last formal, organized resistance to the new dynasty. China was almost whole again. The land was rebounding. Ling Tong had taken office two years previously as governor to a place that was in rough shape. It was considerably better now, and the situation in the north considered stable enough that they could move the capital of Jing province from Nanyang back to Nanjun. Since Nanjun was also on the Yangtze, this made communication and trade with Jianye easier.

It also made it a much shorter trip to visit Gan Ning. And his wife. And his stepdaughter… who was Ling Tong’s future wife.

He really didn’t have a good reason to refuse, so he accepted.

———

The weather was snowy when his boat docked. Ling Tong couldn’t stand the idea of crawling along inside a carriage on the snowy roads to the Qiao lands. He bundled up, gave direction for the bags, and took off by himself on a horse.

The coating of snow on the ground was not very deep and presented no real issues to a single horse, and Ling Tong enjoyed the run very much. As he came towards the Qiao lands, he saw from a distance two tiny figures, one still, the other very active. As he got closer, he saw that one was a training dummy and the other was a person fighting with an eku, though he could not identify the person.

He rode his horse all the way up and stopped, staring at the person’s red face, huffing from the exertion.

The person bowed and spoke, out of breath. “Lord Ling Tong—we didn’t expect you so early—”

She stopped speaking because he began to laugh. It was Jingshi! She was completely bundled up with so many layers that she looked as round as a meat bun. Even her head, covered in a hat and then wrapped with scarves, looked round. She was still so short, and yet she was swinging around this enormous paddle!

“What’s so funny?” she demanded, looking embarrassed.

Ling Tong wiped the tears from his eyes. “I’m sorry, uh, my lady, it’s just… isn’t that weapon awfully big for you?”

Jingshi looked at him, looked at the eku, looked back at him. “No…? This is what size they are, my lord.”

“Never mind,” he said, dismounting. “Please lead me to the stables.”
She turned around and started attempting to walk with dignity, but between her thick clothes, boots, the snow, and the unbalanced heft of the eku, it was more like a waddle. He bit the back of his own glove to muffle his laughter.

———

“Eh? Eh???”

Jingshi had to stifle her laughter. Her stepfather was beyond proud of his baby girl, and Lord Ling Tong could not have been more out of his element. Her half-sister Yuhui, sitting upon a mat and chewing a string of wooden beads, seemed unimpressed with the visitor.

“Well? You haven’t said anything!” Gan Ning challenged his friend. “Isn’t she great?”

“She’s… cute?” said Lord Ling Tong cautiously. “I didn’t know they could sit like that this young. Does she talk?”

“You really don’t know anything,” Gan Ning groused. “This is like playing a zither to a cow.”

“Well aren’t you cultured,” said Lord Ling Tong as Gan Ning reached down and swept Yuhui up into his arms.

“You want Baba’s bells, don’t you?” he laughed as the baby, as usual, had tried to grab them on her way up. “Smart girl. You’ll get them one day, won’t you? Won’t you?” He turned to Lord Ling Tong. “Here you go!”

“Wait, no no no no n—” Lord Ling Tong, having taken Yuhui under the armpits against his will, attempted to hand her back, but Gan Ning had backed out of reach.

“You’ve got to hold her closer than that,” Gan Ning said. “You really don’t know anything!”

“Not about babies!” his harassed friend said, but nonetheless gingerly moved the baby into some semblance of the hip carry position. Yuhui, curious, reached a hand up to poke at the beauty mark beneath his eye.

“See how smart she is,” Gan Ning said. “She’s already figured out your charm point.”

“Oh, shut up. When are you going to take her back?” He tried to block Yuhui’s inquisitive fingers with his other hand, but the baby was relentless.

“Hey, if you know as little as that, you need practice. Won’t be long for you, you know!”

Jingshi’s eyes met Lord Ling Tong’s for only a moment before she flushed and stared down at her sewing, just in time for her to prick her finger. “Oh!” she said, startled at her own mistake, and then, “Oh no!” as the baby clothing she had been embroidering slipped from her lap when she let it go and down onto the floor before the fire, where it was instantly dirtied with ash. She picked it up and shook it as if that could get all the soot off, then realized she was getting blood from her finger on it. “Oh no!” And some soot had shaken off, right onto her own clothes. “Oh no!”

She heard Lord Ling Tong snicker, and looking back, she saw that he was once again internally dying with laughter at the ridiculous picture she made. She bowed, red-faced and said, “I’ll just see if my mother can help me clean this,” and rushed out.

———
“Do you have to tease her so much?”

Ling Tong looked at Gan Ning, whom he was playing *xiangqi* with, genuinely puzzled. “Tease who?”

“Jingshi.” Gan Ning moved an elephant piece.

“Jingshi?” Ling Tong looked at the board, frowned, and moved a soldier piece across the river. “I don’t tease Jingshi.”

“If you’re not doing it intentionally, then I really do feel sorry for her,” Gan Ning said.

“I hardly speak to her.”

Gan Ning captured a piece with a cannon. “You do it with your eyes. I get that she amuses you, but it’s not very kind to your future wife, is it?”

“Did Da Qiao put you up to this? This isn’t the kind of thing you notice, or care about.”

Gan Ning scratched his head self-consciously. “Well, I’m kind of her dad, you know. She’s a good kid.”


Gan Ning moved his general out of check. “Well just because she’s a kid to me doesn’t mean she’s really a kid. When her mother was her age, she’d already given birth to her. She doesn’t act as immature all the time as you make her act. You fluster her.”

Ling Tong moved his soldier again. “What do you want me to do? I interact with her as little as possible as it is.”

“Well, that’s a problem all on its own. You’re going to be marrying her in a year, and you’re only here for a few more weeks. And I know there won’t be much time before the wedding for talking,” Gan Ning said, hovering his hand between an elephant and a horse piece. “How are you supposed to get to know each other?”

“You’re looking at it the wrong way,” Ling Tong said, while Gan Ning decided on moving the elephant. “I’ve *only* got a year left before I *have* to get to know her. Forgive me if I put it off as long as possible.”

Gan Ning stared at Ling Tong as the other man looked at the board. “Is it Lady Zhang still?”

Ling Tong huffed and moved his chariot. “Check.”

Gan Ning moved his general to counter the check carelessly. “Still? It’s been over two years. When did you even see her last?”

“Well, it took me twenty-nine years to fall in love for the first time, so I have no idea how long it’s supposed to take to get over it,” Ling Tong said, and moved a soldier horizontally to capture a piece. “Checkmate.”

Gan Ning sighed and began clearing the board.

———

About a month after Lord Ling Tong left, Jingshi tried writing him a letter again.
She tried to be open. She tried to be her best, most interesting self.

After reading the letter back to herself, she burned it and didn’t try to write any more.

She couldn’t kid herself that her personality was anywhere near sparkling enough to make up for her stubborn shortness, her heavy brows, her small eyes, her coarse hair, and those goddamn pimples.

The only real change in her appearance since she first met him was that her breasts and hips had widened. But that just made her look dumpier, she thought bitterly. Not like her mother and aunt, whom even after many years and several children, both looked the definition of the word ‘willowy’.

She should just leave him alone. Let him pretend, as long as he can, that he won’t have to be shackled to a little toad like her.

Jingshi broke her eku sparring with her eldest cousin and cried so hard that he panicked and ran to his aunt for help.

“What’s really wrong, darling?” her mother said, combing her hair.

“Why are you even bothering with that?” Jingshi said miserably. “It never looks nice no matter how much you comb it.”

“Your hair is charming,” Lady Qiao said. “It takes up space. It says, ‘here I come.’”

“‘Here comes ugly,’ more like.”

“Ugly or beautiful is not as absolute as you seem to think. Your aunt has hair like this, and now that she’s the empress, she’s set a fashion for short hair in Luoyang. From what I hear, all the noble ladies are cutting their hair and fluffing it out to look like hers.” She played with one of Jingshi’s three ponytails which cascaded in a vertical line down the back of her head, making her look wild and controlled at the same time. “You know, you could cut your hair, if you like. You could pull that look off.”

“I don’t have my aunt’s beautiful eyes or adorable face. I’d look even worse, because everyone would know I was trying to imitate her.”

Lady Qiao sat on the edge of the dressing table to look her daughter in the face. “Jingshi, I wouldn’t lie to you. You are not ugly, not even close to ugly.”

“Mothers never think their children are ugly,” Jingshi pointed out.

Lady Qiao sighed, smiled, and shook her head. “I know when not to waste my breath. Did one of the boys tease you or something?”

“No, I have eyes. I can see why you might not realize I have eyes, since they’re so small.”

Lady Qiao laughed. “Oh, my dear! I wish I could make you see what I see.”

Jingshi grumbled a little as her mother gave her a hug and forehead kiss, but it was comforting to receive her mother’s affection, nonetheless.

———

The Night of Sevens occurred that year with fine, clear weather, perfect to see the stars that represented the cowherd and the weaver girl, who could cross the milky way to see each other tonight.
“Imagine,” said a girl standing near Jingshi at the temple waiting to burn paper offerings of symbolic cloth and accessories, “having such a good husband and only being able to meet him once a year!”

“That’s nothing,” said another young woman, “there’s a lot of women who’ve been married decades and yet haven’t spent even one evening with a good husband!”

“Your highness,” said the high priestess, and the girls around her drew back. “Please, be the first.”

Jingshi walked forward calmly, set her pile of offerings on the tray, made the appropriate reverences, and set them alight.

When she walked out into the summer moonlight, various games and challenges were taking place, young women displaying their skills and their best works, and playing at threading needles in candlelight. Some acrobats had set up and were performing with loud music, and she stopped to watch.

A stick of candied gooseberries suddenly appeared before her face. “Want it?” her stepfather said.

“Oh! You startled me. Thank you,” said Jingshi, taking the treat.

“You didn’t hear me coming?” he laughed, and bit a berry off his own stick. “Bells in the music, I guess.”

“I guess,” she agreed.

He sidestepped so he was slightly closer to her, but stayed facing ahead. “You’ve been pretty down lately.”

Jingshi chewed up the sour berry within the candy coating and swallowed it down. “I guess,” she repeated, dully.

“Hey, listen. I know I’m not your real dad or anything… but can I give you some advice?”

“Of course,” said Jingshi, turning her face up to look at him.

Gan Ning was still staring at the acrobats. “Your mom and your aunt did a good job raising you, I’m not gonna say they didn’t, for sure. And I get why they lived so quietly and why they kept you at home and didn’t send you away for school or to stay with your uncle in Jianye or whatever. They wanted to keep you close, and they didn’t want you to get arrogant. But it seems to me at this point that ain’t a concern anymore. Jingshi, you could stand to be a hell of a lot more proud of yourself.”

“Proud of what?”

He chuckled. “Huh, well, princess, you really can’t think of any reason to be proud? I’ll tell you what, there’s not a lot of fifteen year old girls who could get the running of an entire fief dumped on them and carry on with it so smoothly that when the people who were actually supposed to run it came back it was like they’d never left.”

“That was nothing. The stewards—”

“—knew better than to think they could pull a swindle over you, kid. Skip the modesty for once. I’ve had to learn a lot about running a fief to help your mom, now that your aunt has decided that with a man around she doesn’t have to do a thing.”

“My aunt never really did anything even before you came.” Jingshi grinned.
“Heh, I believe it. Point is, it’s a lot of work, and that’s with your mom here with me. Fuck, I ran into trouble at first because lots of people take a look at me and figure I’m some dumb thug. Joke’s on them, I’m a smart thug.”

Jingshi laughed.

“But what I’m trying to tell you, kid, is that all the people who tried to play me for a fool? They didn’t try it with you. They already knew you were somebody to respect. Princess Sun Jingshi, only child of the Little Conqueror.” He looked down at her. “Listen. Your dad gave you a great name, and I bet I know exactly why he chose it. He wanted his daughter to be someone who raises hell! Who stands up proud and says, ‘Here I am, world! You want me to move, then try and move me.’ When you were just a baby, he believed in you like that.”

Jingshi bit her lip and turned to stare at the acrobats without seeing them.

“Your mom says you’re down on your looks. Really? Your looks? That’s the biggest proof anybody could ask for that you’ve been too sheltered. You’ve been comparing how you look to your mom and your aunt. Well no shit that’s gonna be a hard comparison! They were literally called the most beautiful women in China! You have a few flaws, so what? That doesn’t mean people don’t think you’re beautiful. I’ll tell you this, kid: objectively speaking, my first wife had a shit-ton of flaws. Her teeth were really crooked and a few were missing. She had freckles. She was way taller and more muscular than most men would care for. Her face could pass as a boy’s. And I loved her desperately. As much as I love your mother. I know men are mostly shitty, but we aren’t as picky as you think. Most men would be satisfied with most women; that’s how humanity goes on.”

Jingshi grinned again despite herself.

“And I’ll tell you one area where you leave your mom and your aunt in the dust: you’re a fucking princess. You’re part of the Sun clan, the royal family of Wu. You think the king would have ever gotten where he is without what he inherited from your dad? No way. Damn right that makes you a princess. You’re one of the only princesses in China and you’re not walking around like you’re hot shit? That’s bullshit.” He gently punched at her upper arm. “You should think highly of yourself! And you know what else? There are some women who are naturally quiet and soft, and that’s fine; hell, your mom’s like that most of the time. But I don’t think that’s who you are, Jingshi. You’ve got a ton of fire inside you. Deep down, I think you know you should be proud to be who you are. So be proud.”

Still unwillingly smiling, Jingshi turned her face back towards him. “Don’t men hate vanity in women?”

Gan Ning scoffed. “I’m not worried that you’ll carry it too far. If you do, I’ll knock you out of it. As for men who don’t like confidence, they’re bullshit too. A lot of people are bullshit, I gotta admit. You’ll realize that the first time you have to go to some kind of diplomatic function.”

Jingshi laughed again. The acrobats were winding up their performance, and one of them was coming around to collect donations. Gan Ning jumbled in his pockets to give them some coin, then patted her on the shoulder. “C’mon, let’s find the rest of them.”

She thought about what he’d said as she followed quietly behind him for a few minutes, then she walked a little faster to fall into step beside him. “Stepfather?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask why you named my sister Yuhui?” It was, after all, a pretty and soft name, meaning a
surplus of kindness.

He gave her a slight smile. “You can’t guess?”

She shook her head.

“It was from gratitude,” he said. “I never deserved a daughter to begin with, let alone a second and third one… oh, there they are! Hey!”

Gan Ning pulled ahead to scoop her youngest cousin into the air as the boy and one of his brothers clambered around asking if Gan Ning would buy them more fruit. Her aunt waved at her, and Jingshi waved back, smiling absently. Her mother had stayed at home with the baby…

A second and a third daughter? But he only had his first daughter who died and now Yuhui… who’s the third… oh. Oh!

Jingshi blinked back tears, and thought to herself that being considered a daughter by Gan Ning was also something to boast of.

———

Since her mother, what with having a toddler and being pregnant again, could not travel with them to Jing province to see her get married, she did the hair combing ritual the night before they were to leave.

Jingshi wept as she faced out the door of her family home while her mother chanted blessings over her and her aunt lovingly held her hand.

When the actual ritual was over, her mother also took a seat and took her other hand. “My daughter, I know this ritual is all about how you are to leave us, but you never really will, you know that, right? You will always be a part of us.”

“Tears are good luck for a bride, yanno!” her aunt chirped. “You’ll be very happy soon, just wait! Being married is great!”

Jingshi felt the tears dripping down her face. Her father had adored her mother, everyone said so; and she had seen with her own eyes how her uncle had doted on her aunt. Of course marriage was great when that was your experience. She, on the other hand, foresaw nothing but civil contempt and restrained ridicule.

“You’ll have busy days, you’ll hardly have time to miss us,” her mother said, “and you won’t lack for friends; you should actually be careful not to trust too easily, you know. There will be many who will want to get close to you only for your influence… but you’ll find true friends, I’m sure, you’re very discerning.”

“Living in a big city will be so exciting!” her aunt added. “You’ll be invited to banquets all the time! And wait until you get to wear all the pretty new clothes we’ve packed in your dowry. You’ll be the envy of Nanjun!”

She smiled, for their sakes.

———

Ling Tong had another dream about Xingcai the night before his new wife and her entourage were to arrive.
In the dream he had just finished masturbating; his hand and his pants were disgusting with it. He looked up from them, and there was Xingcai, holding out a handkerchief with a look of contempt.

“Xingcai,” he exclaimed, snatching the handkerchief from her hand, burning with embarrassment, “what are you doing here?”

“You want me here,” she spat. “All this time and you still want me here.”

Shamefully he wiped his softening cock and tucked it away in the dampened, twisted loincloth. What could he say? He knew he was dreaming, for once, and yet he still felt like he had no control over what was happening.

Before he could refasten his pants, she straddled his lap and put a finger beneath his chin to keep his eyes on hers. “You’ll ruin your life, you know.”

“I know, but I still want you.” He didn’t try to look away from her cold eyes. “You tell me, how am I supposed to fuck a little girl and forget about you? You… you are the only woman I want.”

Her face came closer to his, her mouth almost touching his.

Ling Tong’s eyes fluttered closed.

Her voice was very soft. “Pretty boy… man up and get the fuck over it.”

This coarse wording—something she would never say—made his eyes fly open in surprise. He was lying in his bed, and it was still dark.

He swept his hair out of his face, rolled over onto his other side, and sighed. Xingcai had dominated his erotic dreams for some time, and while they were frequently upsetting, this was a new low.

That last sentence had been the kind of thing Gan Ning would say. Great. Now, whenever he saw Gan Ning—who should be arriving in only hours—he would be thinking about Xingcai sitting on top of his lap, sticky with cooling semen. Rejecting him, once again.

It’s not like I don’t want to get over it! he thought petulantly, huffed, and flopped onto his back. If I have to dream about her, why can’t she at least want me in my dreams? Fuck, I’m so backed up…

He turned back onto his left side again, made a frustrated noise, sat up, grabbed a towel, and masturbated angrily, forcing himself to imagine fucking a pretty woman he had seen on the street that day, rather than Xingcai. Ling Tong crumpled up the dirty towel and pitched it across the room when he was finished, then, still unhappy but at least more tired, he laid back down and pulled the blanket up.

———

Because of the distance and the possibilities for hold-ups in travel, they had planned to arrive more than two weeks before the actual wedding banquet, and though they did have some hold-ups, they still arrived with about two weeks to go.

Her stepfather, well-intentioned, kept trying to give her and Lord Ling Tong privacy, and Lord Ling Tong kept preventing it, correctly yet with a humiliating lack of interest in trying to push the boundaries of propriety.

There was only one occasion, a mere four days before their wedding, that they had a private conversation, and that was an accident.
She had been given fairly free access to the governor’s palace, and she decided she would take her eku and work out some frustrations in the practice rooms. She would have asked her stepfather to spar, but he had stayed up until the small hours drinking with some old buddies—whether from piracy or the navy or both, she didn’t ask—and was still dead to the world.

When she entered the practice room and closed the door behind her, she saw she was not alone.

“My lady,” said Lord Ling Tong with a bow. He had a light sheen of sweat, and his three-section-staff was in one hand.

“Good morning, my lord,” she said, hoping her bow wasn’t as awkward as she felt.

“I’ll let you use the room,” he said. “Please, use whatever equipment you wish.”

“You don’t have to go!” she said quickly. “I mean… there’s plenty of room here… even if you’re finished with your forms, you could critique mine…”

“I don’t think that would be appropriate, Jingshi.” His smile, to her, seemed unbearably condescending.

A tiny spark of anger began to glow within her. “Why not? We’re getting married in four days anyway; it’s not as if anything can stop that now.”

“I’m afraid I really don’t have time to play,” he said. “That’s something that won’t change once we’re married, either.”

So! He thought he could just tell her to her face that he intended to never see her! “It wouldn’t have to be play,” she said, tightly. “I can be useful to you. We could spar.”

He laughed, and the spark became a fire.

———

Ling Tong unconvincingly turned his laughter into a cough, and tried to let her down easy. “It’s not safe to spar with someone who’s so above you in skill.”

“I’ve been taught by Lord Zhou Yu and Lord Gan Ning! How do you know what my skill is? You’ve never seen me fight!”

“Oh yes I have,” the laughter coming back as he remembered that day in the snow.

She looked like a furious kitten now. “Fight me!”

The more he tried to tell himself to stop laughing, the harder he laughed. “Jingshi, stop being such a child.”

“I’m not a child! And you should call me princess!”

He laughed at her, not even really looking at her, and turned his back.

That was a mistake.

She would never have had a chance against him in a fair fight, but he brought an unfair fight upon himself. Her eku knocked his sanjiegun from its loose grip in his hand, and when he turned to grab for it with an exasperated exclamation, she knocked the breath right out of him with a solid hit to his torso.
He was extremely nimble, but she had him flat-footed, and he still didn’t want to fight back, so she easily pressed him back, back, back, until he was up against the wall, with the end of the weapon touching his throat.

“Say you yield!” she barked.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said.

“Maybe I should just crush your stupid throat and stop you laughing at me permanently,” she hissed.

“I said—” He reached up suddenly, grabbed the *eku*, and with only slight effort wrenched it from her hands. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

He dropped the weapon to the ground and they stared at each other for a few moments. They were both catching their breath, and she was spitting mad.

“I’m through with you acting like I’m such a terrible imposition on you! So what, I look like my father. You’ve had three years to get used to how I look and I’m not going to feel ashamed of it anymore. I *am* the daughter of Sun Ce, the Little Conqueror, posthumous king of Wu. That makes me a princess of the Sun clan. You should be down on your knees kissing my feet that I’m willing to take you as my husband.”

Ling Tong’s eyes widened further and further as she spoke, but he didn’t interject. She took a breath and continued.

“That’s what I deserve. But don’t worry.” She spat on the floor to the side. “I won’t cause a scene at the wedding because I won’t embarrass my clan and my uncle. I know what I owe to them.”

With that, she left the practice rooms, slamming the door behind her, leaving Ling Tong in a state of total confusion.

He sat down on the ground, picked up the *eku*, and replayed the scene in his mind.

What was she going on about, him having three years to get used to how she looks? She thought he found her ugly?

She was far from that, especially now that her figure had developed and her skin was clearer. Her resemblance to her father was in her eyes, which were single-lidded and smaller than beauty standards dictated; her strong brows; and her hair, which had the Sun family’s characteristic unruly volume rather than her mother’s well-behaved gloss. But she had certainly inherited her mother’s curvy silhouette and sweet mouth—well, the shape of it was sweet, anyway. And the parts of her that resembled her father weren’t ugly, anyway—they were just intense.

As he deliberated over this, picturing in his mind how she had looked as she lectured him, he was forced to admit to himself that he actually thought she was attractive. Intensity… that was his type, wasn’t it?

She had been very attractive when she was telling him he should be down on his knees for her. That had done funny things to his stomach, in fact.

He’d been so focused on remaining in denial about how soon he would have to marry. Had he even really properly let himself look at her in the days that she’d been here in Nanjun?

He hadn’t. But now that she had whacked him in the gut with an *eku* and *made* him see her, he had.
She, on the other hand, had been watching him for quite some time. His memory searched back all through their interactions. At the beginning, the princess had been willing, no, eager, to like him. She had kept on trying to like him, in the face of his contemptuous indifference, until she finally couldn’t take it anymore. He had blown through all of her good will before they had even married.

Ling Tong blew out air in a long stream, sighed, and undid his ponytail to redo it.

“What was it you said, Lady Zhang?” he muttered to himself as he worked. “‘Personal magnificence in a great defeat…’ I’ve got another retreat to make, I think. Once again, somebody got left behind…”

He fastened his hair with the stick, sighed again as a strand almost immediately swung forward into his face, and tucked it behind his ear.

Ling Tong stood up. Carefully, he leaned the *eku* against the wall where the other staff weapons were stored. He would have to get a proper stand for it. Did he have any books in his library about *eku* tactics? As he walked back to his quarters to wash, his mind was buzzing with plans.
“You remember how you bet me I wouldn’t make it to the end of my first day back without swearing?”

Ling Tong stared at Gan Ning, who had knocked at his door when he was already in bed and opened up with that perplexing statement without even bothering to say a greeting. “No..?”

“Oh. Well, you did. So I’m supposed to pay for the booze for a night.”

Ling Tong groaned and gestured to his night clothes. “Do I look like I want to go out drinking with you? I can’t have a hangover tomorrow.”

“Who said we have to go out?” Gan Ning grinned and hefted further up the jug of wine he was carrying, and Ling Tong’s eyes widened a bit when he recognized it as a luxury product from Kuaiji. “Aren’t you going to invite me in, you shitty host?”

Ling Tong rolled his eyes but stepped back and turned to go get cups and light more lamps.

“A rich boy like you ought to appreciate this,” Gan Ning said cheerfully, sprawling himself onto a couch. “Pretty expensive stuff, right? Aged eighteen years, they said.”

Ling Tong checked himself in the act of opening the bottle and narrowed his eyes at Gan Ning. “Hit me over the head with the symbolism, huh?”

Gan Ning grinned back, unabashed. “Hey, at least it’s a symbolism that gets you drunk, right?”

His friend sighed and finished pouring them each a cup. “How much do I need to drink before I’ll be prepared to hear whatever this ambush is about?”

“As much as you like.” Gan Ning drank, and then whistled. “Fuck, this shit is pretty smooth! I don’t feel as ripped off now.”

It was excellent wine. Ling Tong finished his cup and waited for Gan Ning to get to the point.

“It’s really just the one thing,” Gan Ning said, taking the bottle to refill their cups. “I told Da Qiao it didn’t need to be said, but she was getting all anxious before we left so I had to promise her. It’s about the whole sheets thing.”

The custom of publicly displaying the bloodied wedding night sheets was one that Ling Tong always found disgusting, but unfortunately as governor he couldn’t get away from it. It was an immensely popular gesture to the common people, a symbol of their leader’s potency and yet also his humanity; moreover they seemed to imbue it with fertility mysticism and good fortune. The crowds would come out to see it, and if it wasn’t there, they would talk. “What about it?”

“Da Qiao said she hardly bled at all on her wedding night, and as for Xiao Qiao… uh, Lord Zhou
Yu faked the sheets on their wedding night and didn’t consummate until much later. When they finally did, Xiao Qiao didn’t bleed at all, even though she was absolutely a virgin. So. Orders are for you to be aware that maybe Jingshi won’t bleed and prepare accordingly, so she isn’t embarrassed."

“Well, thanks for the tip… I guess… but I was already planning on having that ready just in case of other things.”

Gan Ning sighed. “Well, beyond that, I guess it’s none of my fucking business. I hope you’ll give her a chance, she deserves one.”

_You should be down on your knees kissing my feet. That’s what I deserve._

“She deserves more than a chance,” Ling Tong said meditatively. “So you’re right on two points.”

“What was the other point?”

“That it’s none of your fucking business. Ganbei (cheers).”

Gan Ning laughed and lifted his cup to drain it with his friend.

———

Jingshi did not weep in the bridal palanquin, did not shed tears as she was formally accepted by her new husband, and did not cry through the bride and groom’s ritual kowtows to the gods, his and her ancestors, and each other. She was glad of the veil, which hid her face and allowed her to keep her feelings as her own.

She saw her stepfather discreetly switching a bottle of wine with another, identical-looking bottle, as her new husband was doing the rounds of the tables taking shots with the guests. Water for wine, she guessed, seeing the quantity Lord Ling Tong was clearly expected to down.

_So he won’t be too drunk tonight…_

Suddenly she lost her appetite.

He wouldn’t have any excuse not to touch her. Well, no _good_ excuse. Perhaps he would just tell her honestly that he couldn’t stand to touch her. Fine. That was his problem.

With a sense of defiance, Jingshi took a drink of her own wine.

———

Ling Tong led his new bride to their bedroom, but remained at the door instead of following her in. “I’ll be a little while,” he said. “I have to make sure everything is as it should be. Unfortunately, I have no living father or brothers or even cousins, so I’ve had to do everything myself. I just want to make sure we won’t be bothered. You can make yourself comfortable while you wait.”

He checked in with his stewards, questioned other servants, warned Gan Ning not to try anything —“I’d mess with you, sure, but you’re crazy if you think I’d embarrass Jingshi on purpose!” the pirate had said, offended. He mollified his friend by recruiting him to make sure that the remaining guests didn’t do anything too wild under the influence, feeling a bit like he had put a wolf in charge of the other wolves, but there was nothing for that.

Then he decided he would get his personal servant to take charge of his heirloom Ling family robes directly, so that they could be cleaned and stored properly. Dressed in only _zhongdan_, his hair down,
he finally went back.

When he returned to the bedroom, he found it in total darkness. “What the… what happened to the lights?”

He heard the rustling movement of a body over blankets. “I blew them out,” came her voice from the direction of the bed, cold and furious. “I figured, if you even came back, you would only want to do it in the dark.”

He laughed a little. Wow, she was a frosty one. He groped around as his eyes adjusted to find a lamp and means to light it.

Ling Tong turned back towards the bed. The lamplight revealed that she was naked, but sitting on the foot of the bed with her knees hugged up to her chest and feet together. “Princess Jingshi… I know we’re not strangers, but I think maybe we’ve been worse than that up until now. Do you think we could start over?”

Her chin tilted up and her expression was wary. “What are you talking about? If you’re worried I won’t fulfill my duty, you’re wrong.”

“I’ve had the wrong idea about you, I’ll admit it.” He walked towards the bed and stopped just in front of her, but didn’t touch her. “But you also have the wrong idea about me. I’ll admit something else: you’re right that I never wanted to marry you. But you’re wrong about why. Biggest reason was because I was in love with someone else.”

Jingshi blinked, blushed, and looked away. “Oh.” He saw her worry at her lip, then part them again to speak. “And… and are you still?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to be. She never returned my feelings, and she’s very happy with someone else.”

“Oh. That… must be hard for you.”

“The other big reason why is that when your uncle offered you to me, you were less than half my age. I’m sixteen years older than you. I didn’t even go for fifteen year olds when I was fifteen. It bothered me a lot. It still bothers me.”

“Then… why didn’t you decline?”

“Have you met your uncle?”

She smiled a little at that, but then his face got serious.

“I couldn’t turn him down, Jingshi, because you are a princess of the Sun clan. You are Lord Sun Ce’s only child. It was and is an extreme honour for me to be offered your hand. I knew immediately I couldn’t decline it; it would be like spitting in the king’s face. In fact, what you said when you fought me was right: I should get down on my knees and kiss your feet for being willing to wed me.”

———

Her eyes got very wide as she saw he was matching his actions to his words. He sank slowly to his knees, his eyes gazing up at hers, then bent forward to place a lingering kiss on the outside of one ankle. Then he straightened back up to his knees and looked at her again, as if waiting for her to speak.
She said the only coherent thought that tumbled loose from her flurried brain: “That was my ankle.”

He laughed. “Alright, alright. Picky.” Ling Tong leaned forward again and kissed first the top of one foot, then the other, slow and leisurely. This time he didn’t straighten back up, but gazed up at her so that she was peering down at him from over her knees. “Is that satisfactory, princess?”

“You put me through a lot of pain and embarrassment to be wiped away with only three kisses and a belated explanation,” she said, though her heart was thudding in her chest.

“Very picky,” but his face was amused. “I suppose three is a small number. Shall I tell you what I really think of how you look?”

“Go ahead.”

He dropped another kiss on her ankle, then once slightly up the calf. “You do look like your father, but it’s not a bad thing.” His breath tickled her leg as he spoke, then he laid another kiss, properly on the calf. “He had intense eyes, eyes of command, but they were also eyes full of joy and laughter. Yours are the same… though, you’re more reserved than he was. But you resemble your mother more than you think.” Another kiss, further up the calf. “Your smile is just like hers… and so is your mouth when you’re angry, to be honest. And…” He dropped a kiss on her kneecap. “You have your mother’s figure.”

His face was very close to hers now.

She swallowed. “No, I don’t. She was much slimmer than I am.”

“Is that so?” His eyes looked down. Even with her knees up, Jingshi was terribly aware of all that he could perceive. He looked back into her eyes. “Your body looks beautiful to me.”

Jingshi put a hand up to her hot cheek and dropped her gaze. Suddenly she remembered doing something similar three years before, when she had first learned that she was betrothed to this handsome officer.

“Princess,” he said, very softly, drawing her eyes back to his, “I would like to fall in love with you, and I would like to make you fall in love with me. May I try?”

Her eyes drifted down to his mouth, and back up to his eyes. “As your wife, it is my duty to do all I can to assist you in your goals.”

He laughed a little, closed his eyes and leaned in to kiss her.

Oh his lips were soft, softer than hers; his hair was smooth as silk, where she found her hand running through the thick locks that cascaded past his shoulders. He had a hand cradling her face and another on the small of her bare back. The calluses of his fingertips felt electric on her skin.

“This isn’t fair,” she complained breathlessly when they finally broke the kiss. “You’re going to make me fall in love first. You have all the advantages. Look, you’re making my heart beat like this, and you’re not even undressed.”

“You hate to lose too, don’t you?” he murmured, and kissed her pulse point. “It is beating very fast, isn’t it? You could always take the offensive and undress me.”

“Stand up then,” she ordered, and he complied.
Despite her inexperience, she only revealed brief glimpses of nervousness and shyness. It wasn’t simply a matter of her plastering over her real feelings with false bravado, either, he thought. She liked his looks; she desired him. Though this was new to her, she already wanted him. It was not the stereotypical withdrawing fear of the virgin. She was more nervous that she would make a wrong step, shy of making a mistake. She didn’t want him to laugh at her, he thought ruefully.

“You haven’t ever told me what you think of me, you know,” he said as she untied the inner sash so that the zhongdan robe could be fully opened, exposing his bare chest. He shrugged off the robe so that it pooled to the floor around his feet.

“I think you know very well that I think you’re handsome,” she muttered at his stomach. “I thought when I first heard I was to marry you that you were the most handsome man I’d ever seen. You are… more scarred than I was expecting, though… although I don’t know why I didn’t expect them, I’ve heard my stepfather tell the story of how you saved my uncle’s life…”

“It wasn’t as heroic as you’re imagining,” he said. “He should never have been in that much danger in the first place… I don’t want to think about back then, anyway. Just about being here, right now, with you.” Teasingly, he added, “Am I still the most handsome man you’ve ever seen?”

She turned her head away and pressed the back of her hand to her lips.

“Well?”

“You are,” she said very softly.

“What was that? You’re so quiet and shy suddenly.”

“I said you are!” she said, and turned her face back to his, despite her blazing cheeks. “Even the scars are sexy.” She squared her shoulders, as if facing up to a challenge. “Are you just stalling because you don’t want to finish undressing?”

“You’re the one undressing me,” he pointed out.

She looked at his loincloth. “I don’t know how it works,” she admitted.

“It untucks on the side, in the back.”

He thought she would ask him to turn around, but instead she reached her hands forward. He hadn’t mentioned which side, and so she was mostly feeling up his waist and upper buttocks as she searched for the end of the cloth. Jingshi craned her head to one side, then the other, and found it. She began uncoiling it. As it loosened, it drooped and soon suddenly came loose entirely.

His cock, of course, sprang free, and because of how she was leaning to one side, it actually landed on her shoulder.

He bit his cheek hard in order not to laugh as she very slowly turned her head to look at it.

“Well,” she said dryly, “hello, I guess. Not sure what I was expecting…”

Ling Tong let the laugh out. “You are really something, princess.”

She moved further back onto the bed, still looking at his cock, then tilted her chin up to look at his face. “You’re undressed now.”

“My turn, you mean?” Her sassiness was exciting him even further. And she was a virgin! What
would she be like when she was more experienced? He shook the clothing off his feet as he got onto
the bed, moving past her to the middle of it, and sitting casually with his legs crossed at the ankles.
“Come here, then.”

She couldn’t challenge him and then not meet his challenge. Jingshi clambered forward and let him
pull her into his lap, her legs wrapping loosely around his waist. His cock was touching her, but that
was all, and he made no action to change that as he pulled her into another kiss.

It felt like wherever she touched him she got another reminder of how perfectly sexy he was. She lost
herself in how amazing it felt to feel every bit of him. And he, for his part, was not shy with his
hands.

Suddenly his hands slipped beneath her thighs and lifted her up such that her chest was level with his
mouth and he… ohhhhh.

“Lord Ling Tong!” she wailed as he latched onto one of her nipples and began to tease it with his
tongue. But she didn’t say stop, and she didn’t want him to.

He broke off her breast only long enough to open his eyes and give her the most annoyedly smug
look from beneath his long lashes before turning his attention to the other breast.

Jingshi felt herself getting wetter and wetter between her legs and she grabbed at her husband’s
shoulders, not knowing the words to give the orders she wanted to give. “Please, I need…”

His hands slowly lowered her down, so that his cock was directly against her. “You sure do,” he
said, hushed. “I can feel you dripping on me.”

“Then do it, do it now,” she said, not sure if she was ordering him or begging him.

One hand propped her up a bit while the other reached down and fumbled around to set his cock
head to her entrance, her gasp perhaps alerting him that he’d found his target. Their eyes locked as he
pushed in slowly.

“How is this?” His voice was thick with controlled pleasure. “Alright so far?”

He was filling a space within her she’d only vaguely known was there. Shouldn’t she be more
nervous? Shouldn’t she be shying away and telling him to slow down? Shouldn’t it hurt? But she
couldn’t lie. “You feel… good… inside me…”

She felt the blush spreading down from her cheeks to her chest.

Ling Tong let out a kind of choked laugh. “Do I… that’s good… you also feel… good… really
good…”

He moved one hand to begin rubbing above where they were joined with his thumb as she sank
further down on him, and that made everything go absolutely wild.

“M-my lord!”

“You can move your hips as you like,” he said, and it was the greatest idea she’d ever heard. She
took up this suggestion with gusto, and was rewarded by hearing his moaning laugh. “Ohhh
princess…”
“My lord!” she moaned back again. Jingshi gripped onto his shoulders to move her legs into a position that allowed her to ride him faster and with longer strokes.

“Call me Gongji,” he said as she rocked on him. His style name? Was she allowed to do that? Well, she couldn’t deny a request from someone who was making her feel this good. He ought to know about it.

“Gongji, I feel like I’m going to burst! It’s so—ah!”

Now that she was handling the movement of her hips, his other hand was free and rubbing its thumb across her nipple.

“Gongji, Gongji, mm, mmf~” This last because he was kissing her, stifling her cries of delight as she came apart around his cock.

———

The princess let her body slow to motionlessness as her orgasm faded, practically boneless and helpless in post-orgasmic bliss. Just when his own orgasm was about to begin… he laughed a little and kissed the side of her face which was laying, panting, on his shoulder. Never mind, he could take care of things from here.

Ling Tong glanced behind him to see if the pillows were in a good position, and luckily they were. He kept her vertical with his hands and laid back so he was only just propped up slightly, which made her sink more fully onto him. He moved his hands down to her bottom and began to move her again, setting his own pace with her. His gaze raked up and down on her as well. One moment he savoured her unfocused, well-fucked expression, another how her breasts were bouncing as he made her ride him, another the beautiful sight where his cock could be seen thrusting in and out of her soaking pussy.

She was breathing hard now and looking down at him with awe. “Nngh… should it… still feel so good…?”

“I’ll make you feel that way again and again,” he said, matching his speech to the rhythm of his cock sinking to the hilt inside her, “and again and again and again.”

“Nngaa~” Because he was handling the movement of her body, she had her hands free to play with her own tits, an erotic sight all in itself.

He groaned. “You’re too much… if you keep doing that I’m going to come inside you, princess.”

Oh, she blushed so prettily, so modestly, especially considering the immodest words she was about to say, her hands still teasing her own nipples: “Come inside my cunt, Gongji!”

That wasn’t fair… how did she even know that word…? He was going to, fuck, he was going to fill her up, fuck, fuck, fuck…

His back arched as he thrusted in tandem with how he lifted her up and down on his body as he came.

“Ha…” he let out a long, shaky sigh and flexed his hands, stretching his arms. That had been incredible, but it had come at the end of a hell of a long week, and it’s not like he wasn’t overworked as the governor at the best of times.

Jingshi looked a little sheepish as she gingerly got off of him. “Was that alright to say?”
“Here in our bed, sure,” he said sleepily. “How did you know that word, anyway?”

“Lord Gan Ning is my stepfather, so, you know, whenever he hurts himself, he swears a _lot_… fuck your mother’s cunt… fuck your grandma’s cunt…” She smiled as Ling Tong snickered.

He pulled her down to lie in his arms, and reached for the blanket.

“What about the lamp?”

“It’s fine.”

“But that’s so wasteful,” she said, and shrugged herself out of his arms to go and put the light out herself. Despite how difficult it was to keep his eyes open, he enjoyed watching her walk naked.

Instead of putting the lamp out right away, she paused at she stood beside it, looked down at herself, and put her hand between her legs. In the flickering lamplight, he watched her bring her hand up to her face and study his cum on her fingertips.

Jingshi turned to look at him and gave him a sly smile, wiping the substance off nonchalantly onto her breasts. “You sure made a mess.”

His wife was going to be extremely dangerous for his health. “Yeah, I did.”

She blew the lamp out.

———

Jingshi stirred in the darkness, not sure why she was awake.

“But those melons, the other ones,” Lord Ling Tong was saying in a grumpy sort of mutter. “Hopeless…”

She realized he was talking in his sleep. His body was still curled around hers like a monkey upon a branch. How unexpectedly cute.

He had stilled, now. How unfairly beautiful his face was. How was she supposed to close her eyes and go back to sleep when with them open she had such a perfect, undisturbed view of every flawless inch of it?

With a little daring, she shifted just enough to allow her to kiss his slightly parted lips. He didn’t stir at all, and she sighed, not unhappily, and closed her eyes.

*I can see this face for years, after all*…

———

Ling Tong had a firm internal alarm clock. Having shadowed his father in military service from childhood, he had stayed in military service for more than twenty continuous years. He’s not at his best in the mornings, but he can never sleep in.

This morning, he realized, he would actually get to have a slow start to his day. He was lying on his side, and Jingshi was lying on her back asleep, with his arm serving as the pillow for her head and one of his knees beneath her knees.

Carefully he tried to disentangle himself without waking her, but she stirred and blinked at him.
“You can go back to sleep,” he said quietly.

She seemed to accept this and turned onto her side, reclosing her eyes.

The section of the bed where he had taken her was still covered by the blanket. Ling Tong lifted the blanket and peered at the sheets in the dim morning light. No blood there that he could see.

Jingshi turned back over. “What are you doing?”

“Just fixing something. Not important. You can still go back to sleep,” he said, going to a drawer to get the phial of chicken blood.

She was distinctly awake when he came back to the bed, so he gave up on trying that.

“Could you move a little more to that side, please, princess?”

Jingshi obeyed, confused, and watched as he applied an artistic streak of crimson in a likely spot.

“My lord… Gongji, what is that for?”

“They’re going to display the sheets later today,” he said. “It has to look dramatic.”

She sits up in bed, clutching the blanket to her chest. “There… there wasn’t blood from me?”

“But why wasn’t there blood? I was a virgin.”

Ling Tong shrugged. “Maybe you just don’t bleed much. Princess, it genuinely doesn’t matter. This—” he pointed at the bloodstain—“is for them—” he waved vaguely in a matter meant to indicate the public generally. “It’s not for me. The way that sassy mouth of yours made me lose control—that was for me. That’s what I’d remember about our first time, even if you had bled all over the bed.”

The animal blood having had a little time to set, he blotted up the excess with a handkerchief so it would convincingly look dried by the time the servants come in.

Jingshi was blushing. “It was… it was really nice… I didn’t expect… anything like that…”

Suddenly Ling Tong was glad he had awoken so early. “Well, like I told you last night, princess… I’ll make you feel that way again and again.”

Her grip slackened on the blanket as he maneuvered around the bloodstain and to her side of the bed.

“Just now you said ‘unconventional position’… what is conventional, then?”

“The man on top,” he said, pulling the blanket out of the way. “Would you like to try it?”

Oh, the way he was looking at her! His desire and his excitement to be with her were all over his beautiful face. She felt thrilled. She felt… confident. “You’ve got to have me again so soon, Gongji?”

Ling Tong let out a kind of choked moaning laugh as he maneuvered himself over her. “You’re irresistible, princess.”

His cock was already hard, sliding against her as he ground his hips against hers, his body pressing
into hers as they kissed. Jingshi let herself enjoy the silkiness of his hair without restraint, running her fingers through it again and again,

The friction of his pelvis and his cock against her felt so good, yet he hadn’t made any move to do more than that. She began to get impatient and shifted her hips against him.

“You want something?” he hummed into her ear, and nibbled at her earlobe. “You need something?”

Rather than give in to that, Jingshi reached between them herself and took his cock into her hand.

“Ahhh, princess,” he groaned as she guided him into her, “you don’t play fair.”

“No, princess,” she moaned in return. He still was more grinding on her than thrusting into her, which meant that her clit was still getting a ton of stimulation and now his cock was stretching her as well. “Ngh! Gongji!”

“Feels good?” he grunted.

“Yes! Amazing!”

He kissed her again for a while, then broke the kiss to say breathily, “Your pussy feels too good on me. Just came in you last night—hah—you’re already testing my control again.”

Jingshi wasn’t sure what he meant by control. “Don’t you want to come?”

“Heh. Not… not until you come first…” He groaned. “It’s… easier for men…”

“Is it? You make it… unh… you make it easy… oh! Oh Gongji!”

“Yes, squeeze me just like that princess, fuck, oh, oh~”

She gasped as he shifted suddenly to powerful strokes in and out of her, his head thrown back. Through the haze of her own cresting orgasm she could see the ecstasy in his face. All for her, all because of her.

As he came down from his high he had flopped down onto her, breathing hard, the weight of him pressing down on her body somehow feeling really comforting and right.

You were right, auntie, she thought to herself. Being married really is great!

———

The fall of the year they were married, they were invited to the capital to attend the wedding of Prince Sun Deng. As the boat sailed the last section of the Yangtze to Jianye, the rainy weather kept them under cover. Ling Tong’s wife’s early pregnancy nausea had been exacerbated by the movement of the boat, and she was sitting beside him with an empty basin in her lap, looking out at the rain hitting the river. He’d been trying his best to help her keep her mind off of it with conversation, but he was running out of topics.

“Just a few more hours,” he said, to her but also to himself. He didn’t like seeing her uncomfortable like this.

Jingshi’s nails tapped against the side of the basin. “You remember you told me you didn’t want to be engaged to me because you were in love with someone else?”

Now that was a topic from out of nowhere. She hadn’t brought it up once since their wedding night
several months ago. “Uh… yes.”

“Was it with a woman in Jianye?”

“…Yes.”

She was still looking straight ahead at the water. “Will we be seeing her in Jianye?”

He answered the question she was really asking instead. “Her name is Lady Zhang Xingcai. She was originally from Shu, but she’s married to your uncle’s bodyguard Zhou Tai and she holds the rank of general in the Wu army in her own right. She’ll certainly be at your cousin’s wedding.” Suddenly he laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“It just occurred to me I should actually call him Lord Zhou Tai. The king made him a marquis… ha. I can just imagine how uncomfortable he looks being called ‘my lord’.”

“Is he… the very tall and quiet man…?”

“Yeah. Unforgettable, isn’t he?”

She turned to look at him. “I’m not jealous,” she insisted, then pursed her lips a moment. “Well. Not precisely, at least. I just was thinking… she must be an extraordinary person, to have caught your heart so much that even three years later you couldn’t say you were over her…” She looked down at her basin. “Maybe I am jealous.”

“I couldn’t say it then, but I can say it now,” Ling Tong said, and she looked back up at him. Smiling, he said, “Princess, you’ve taken all of my heart. I don’t have even a scrap left for another woman.”

She blushed, and he could see she was unsuccessfully fighting off a smile. “But she must be very pretty?”

“Fishing for compliments again?” Ling Tong said with mock severity.

“Well, I’m going to see her for myself anyway,” she said, huffing. “I bet she is, since you’re dodging it.”

“I’m not dodging it,” he said. “She’s a beautiful woman, sure. But, I’ve never seen a woman with a prettier feature than this one.”

He placed his hand on the small swelling where his child was growing within her. This time she didn’t even try to fight off her grin, and leaned to rest her head on his shoulder.
Epilogue Side Story: Zhu Ran

Zhu Ran’s official smile of welcome became more genuine when Jia Xu and his daughter Jia Tingbai came close enough for him to see that the former Wei strategist had not lied when he described his daughter as beautiful.

He proposed a walk to his visitors and was pleased when Jia Xu demurred that that his poor aged feet could not bear more exertion after their journey, but that if Lord Zhu Ran wished to take Lady Jia for a simple stroll in his lovely gardens while he rested on a bench…

A tete-a-tete was a perfect opportunity to really get to know his potential bride. She apparently thought the same thing.

“Why didn’t you kill my father when you had the chance?” she said, when they had just made the first turn of the meandering path.

Zhu Ran, who had been about to make some commonplace remark about the weather, stared at her dumbfounded instead. “I beg your pardon?”

“When you successfully attacked him in his camp, you knocked him unconscious, yes? There was no one else around? Why didn’t you finish the job?” Her face was calm and interested.

“Uhhh…” Zhu Ran had no idea what answer she wanted to hear, so he told the truth. “Well, I wasn’t sure that I hadn’t killed him.”

“But you could have made sure that you had,” she pressed. “And you didn’t.”

Was she… trying to express her gratitude for his sparing her father’s life? She certainly didn’t look grateful. She looked more like a teacher giving him an exam, one that he was failing. “I suppose I don’t like to hurt people more than necessary… weird, when you consider I’ve always been a soldier, but there it is.” He shrugged. “Probably why I prefer fire attacks and archery too… keeps me at a distance, you know?”

Lady Jia nodded thoughtfully. “I see.”

She didn’t say anything for a while, so he changed the subject onto the weather in Guangling.

———

“The man’s a weak idiot,” Lady Jia said without preamble when she and her father retired to their guest rooms that night. “How on earth did you let yourself be caught off guard and defeated by such a fool?”

Jia Xu laughed. “What’s incensed you so much? I didn’t notice anything amiss at dinner.”

She recapped their conversation in the garden briefly. “I don’t believe he ever even considered how he ought to have killed you until I asked him about it,” she said.

“How fortunate for me that you were not my opponent,” her father said dryly.

“Well, exactly!” She was exasperated. “And he’s the governor here now?! Are all Wu men so feeble
that he was the best they could do? And all that Shu talk of benevolence—pah! How the devil did those two together conquer Wei?"

“They took advantage of their opportunities intrepidly,” said Jia Xu. “We failed to perceive the changing circumstances until it was too late.”

“Luck, in other words,” she said bitterly, sitting down at a dressing table. “I can’t believe I will need to be married to one of these fools. I wish Lord Guan Xing had taken a liking to me. He’s the only one you’ve introduced me to so far that I could even respect.”

“You still think so?” Jia Xu watched his daughter removing her jewelry. “I won’t deny, it would be a better match than this in every way, but I did not realize that you actually liked him.”

“He would not have hesitated to kill you, in Zhu Ran’s position,” she declared.

Jia Xu nodded. “I think you’re right. So your standard for a husband is that he would kill a helpless enemy without hesitation? You are too much my daughter for your own good.”

She frowned at that. “Do you mean I am being foolish?”

“A merciless husband is not always a pleasant companion. You could ask your mother more about that, were she still alive.”

Lady Jia bit her lip, then spoke again. “If I accept that I should not decline him for his weakness… Do you also think I am wrong that he is stupid?”

“He has his own kind of intelligence,” Jia Xu said thoughtfully. “He came up with the scheme of the false defection, in order to buy time for his lord to flee while making us too cautious of a trap to attempt to attack. That was both astute and bold. Then when we finally did prepare to attack, he modified his scheme on the fly to take me out and set most of our camp on fire. So he is a quick thinker and flexible. And he was a superb actor. I wanted to doubt him, and I was still taken in.”

“So in his original plan, he intended to die?”

“He was willing to die, I think, but not eager to do so. He might have become a double agent longer term, had his original plan succeeded. It hardly matters now, does it? Shall I help you with your hair?”

“Thank you, father.”

She sat quietly as he undid the pins carefully, one at a time.

“I don’t think he would give you cause to complain,” Jia Xu said. “He strikes me as a man who will indulge his wife if he loves her and ignore her if he doesn’t. If you had children by him, he would adore them but defer entirely to you on how to raise them, a girl forever and a boy at least until he became a youth. I think you would suit each other very comfortably. You might even grow to love him.”

“Love him?” Lady Jia scoffed. “You’re the only person I’ve ever really loved, father. I didn’t even like my mother all that much.”

“Yes, that was my fault, I think,” Jia Xu said, placing the collected pins upon the dresser. “I didn’t want her weakness influencing you or your brothers.”

“And she was weak,” Lady Jia said, with heat. “She never fought for us at all.”
“She was the kind of person who never fights for anything,” said Jia Xu, “which was the feature of her I appreciated the most, because it made my life very easy.”

“My dear father, you were all I ever needed,” she said, twisting in her chair and taking his hand to kiss it.

He smiled indulgently at her. “You do have a lot of love to give, you little minx,” he said, with affection. “It would be a shame if you only ever loved me.”

“Don’t worry about that,” she said, letting his hand go. “I will love my children, no matter how I feel about their father.”

Jia Xu kissed his daughter’s forehead and exited through the connecting door to his own bedroom.

———

Jia Tingbai wore white when her father died. It was all she could do, as she had a toddler and was already pregnant again; there was no way she could have made the long journey from Guangling to Luoyang to visit his sickbed.

You were right that I might grow to love him, father, and I am very happy, she had written in her last letter to him, and she hadn’t lied. She respected her father’s shrewdness too much to ever attempt to lie to him.

She had never thought she could love a man she didn’t respect, yet she had loved Zhu Ran first and only respected him much later. There was a good portion of her love for him that he had gained for himself in the bedroom, which she was not about to tell her father; but his bizarre combination of idiocy and genius, eagerness and sulkiness, diffidence and ambition, had so gradually bewitched her that she did not even notice her opinion changing until it was far too late.

And by the time she realized she loved him and had loved him for some time, she realized that she was starting to respect him. He almost never made the choices she would have made in his governance, yet his choices almost always worked. He modified everything constantly, which she initially found irritating but soon came to find as one of his best features. He liked things to be the best, he was always chasing the best. That was something she really could respect.

It also helped, she admitted to herself, that he hadn’t seemed overly thrilled with her either to begin with. She may not have thought it necessary to love her husband, but she’d be damned if she couldn’t make him adore her, and adore her he did before they’d been married a month.

The only pall on her happiness now was that her grandchildren would never know the brilliance of their grandfather. Their father’s idiot-genius would be the only kind of intelligence they were exposed to. Lady Jia resolved to be more openly shrewd herself. Purely for the children’s benefit, of course.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve had this finished for a while but I had a feeling that it would not be well-received, so I sat on it. Let’s see if my prediction comes true.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!