Dig Two Graves

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Summary

When Mulan is left to freeze in the mountains, injured and alone, she swears revenge upon the man who denied her an honorable death: Li Shang. An AU loosely based on The Revenant (2016).

Notes

"Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves: one for your enemy, and one for yourself." (Confucius)
Chapter 1

It occurred to Mulan, as she knelt before her commanding officer under the poised shadow of her own sword, that everything she had done since stealing her father’s conscription notice led her right to this moment.

The sword landed before her on the cold hard ground.

Relief flooded her, leaving her limbs like jelly. She barely heard Shang’s words as he turned away.

Hot tears shivered on her lashes for a moment before dropping into the snow. She wasn’t sure if they were from relief or rage.

Mulan felt her friends’ presence as they approached. Ling was the first to speak. “I'm sorry,” he said, his voice as soft and sad as snowfall. “I'm so sorry.”

She shook her head weakly. “Not your fault.”

Yao nudged a covered basket with his toe and grunted as he turned away. Mulan lifted the corner of the cloth. The basket was packed with food. Battle rations, sure, but food all the same.

Chien-Po gave her a little bow, as was his way.

“Soldiers!” Shang barked across the pass. The three jumped guiltily. Shang stared right at them. “Move out!”

Chien-Po turned back to Mulan and pressed a bundle of herbs into her hand. “For infection,” he said.

Ling looked over his shoulder. The captain and Chi Fu were still preoccupied with a particularly obstinate pack mule a dozen meters away. Without ceremony, Ling dumped a pack of bandages into Mulan’s lap and walked away whistling. He wasn’t fooling anyone. Mulan smiled and felt a pang, unrelated to her physical injury but no less painful. She would miss these men. She knew they felt it too – each of them sneaked glances back at her until they disappeared over the crest of the pass and vanished from sight.

Whatever medicine the herbalist had administered wore off sometime during the night. Mulan woke up to blinding pain coursing over her in waves. She rode them as surely as she had the avalanche, teeth gritted as tears froze like pearls on her cheeks.

She lifted the hem of her shirt to find the bandage soaked through. She pulled it loose and the wound bled freely. Her flesh was red and hot to the touch. Mulan applied a fistful of snow and hissed at the paltry relief it brought. She was a little aghast at how much pain such a seemingly small wound could bring.

Mushu lit a fire that cast frightful shadows over her haggard face. Mulan’s teeth chattered as chills racked her body. The threadbare horse blanket did little to fend off the cold. The herbs Chien-Po left dulled the pain, but the steady throb in her side still kept her awake long after moonrise. Mulan huddled against Khan for warmth and drank melted snow from her helmet. She licked her lips; the sour aftertaste of her own sweat lingered there. Mulan stared into the smoldering fire.

Her thoughts were jumbled and aimless as she replayed the battle in her mind, second-guessing
each moment, every choice. If she hadn't gone back for Shang. If she hadn't snatched the last cannon from Yao’s startled hands. If she had followed orders like a good little soldier – then maybe she wouldn't be here, freezing to death, alone, while her body waged a war of its own.

Mulan couldn’t get Shang’s face out of her head – the shadow that had darkened his expression as he’d looked down on her, crouching in the snow. She had seen anger, yes, and betrayal – but there had also been cowardice and fear there.

“A life for a life; my debt is repaid,” he had said. But he truly hadn’t spared her at all; he’d merely delayed her execution. He was too much a coward to do it himself, so he had left the elements and the pass to do it for him. She narrowed her eyes. Shang had sentenced her to a death without honor. She would survive to return the favor if it was the last thing she did. It wasn’t a happy thought, but it did bring her some comfort as she fell into a fitful, fevered sleep.

“Mushu, I need a favor,” Mulan began slowly. She needed to pick her words carefully on such a sensitive topic, and charging in like a bull in a tea shop (her usual approach) would win her no aid.

“Just say the word, girl, and I will make it happen!” Mushu said with his usual flair.

Mulan took a breath. “I need you – to light me on fire. Well, only part of me. I can't let this get infected.” She gestured at her heavily bandaged torso.

Mushu stared at her, then cracked a smile. “Oh, I get it. You're making a joke. Ha ha ha, color me amused,” he said with a wink. “I know they say laughter’s the best medicine, Mulan, but I think your sense of humor’s gotten a little skewed. What's in those herbs, anyway?”

“I'm serious.”

Silence.

“Unh-uh,” Mushu said stoutly, folding his snakey little arms over his chest. “Nope. Not doing it.”

“Mushu,” Mulan pleaded.

The dragon hesitated, his resolve wavering, then looked away. “No.”

Mulan groaned and slumped back against Khan’s broad ribcage, her face like a storm cloud. The proud stallion glared at Mushu.

“Oh, get off your high horse – er,” Mushu stopped. “Look, I'm already in deep doo-doo with the other ancestors! I'm not gonna get Mulan killed on top of gettin’ her kicked out of the army!”

“What does it matter?” Mulan said bitterly. “I've already dishonored myself and my family in every way possible. Death would be my only redemption at this point.”

“You don't believe that,” Mushu said, stricken.

“No,” Mulan said. She sat up. “Not really. My best chance at restoring my honor is to hunt down the one who did this and grant him the death he denied me.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Mushu said, waving his arms. “Shan Yu is already dead; the avalanche killed him. The avalanche you caused, I might add.”

“Not Shan Yu,” Mulan said impatiently, “Shang.”
“What?! Are you crazy?”

Mulan said nothing.

“But - but you were making googly eyes at him just yesterday! He’s your commanding officer!”

“That was yesterday,” Mulan said, her voice as hard as the mountain itself. “Today he’s just the man who left me out here to die.”

Mulan waited until Mushu was deeply asleep to act. In the meantime, she prepared herself by using a tuft of grass to spread the precious little black powder left to her over the angry red flesh of her abdomen. The granules took hold of the congealing blood there and stung mightily. Mulan stifled a hiss of pain.

She slipped her slender hands under the dragon’s tiny, lithe body, holding him gently in place with her thumbs. She had done this once before in the midst of battle, to light the last cannon, but this was a much more delicate procedure. Mushu’s chest rose and fell with each breath, and wisps of smoke escaped his nostrils every so often as he snorted in his sleep.

Mulan took aim and squeezed, hard. Mushu woke with a startled cry and a burst of flame. Mulan screamed as her skin ignited. Across the pass, packed snow sloughed off the side of the mountain and a murder of crows took flight.

“Mulan?!” Mushu cried, picking himself up and looking around. She was lying on her back in the snow, as still as death. He pulled up one eyelid and felt her breath on his scales. She was still alive – for now. He gaped in horror at the ashen crust that now marred her side, oozing pus.

Mulan slept through the night and much of the following day. Mushu grew increasingly worried as time passed. He wiped the sweat from her brow and watched her chest rise and fall, praying to the ancestors. Some great guardian he was – he couldn't even protect Mulan from herself! Now she’d gone where he couldn’t follow, and grappled with demons while Mushu could only sit by and wait.

Mulan woke slowly, fretful dreams bleeding away as reality took hold. She sat up gingerly as her vision cleared, but she needn't have worried. Her pain was gone. Mulan frowned. She must have slept much longer than she thought. Days, perhaps weeks.

She looked around. She was no longer in the Tung Shao pass and her surroundings were unfamiliar to her. Mulan wondered how Mushu and Khan had managed to move her while she was unconscious. The mountains rose like shadows in the distance. They’d cleared the pass, then, and were in the foothills. She could see smoke curling up to the west, and the dark thatched roofs of a small village. Her heart sank. Was this another town the Huns had razed? They had to be stopped. She wondered where Shang and the troops had gone; why they hadn’t defended this town, when they knew what the Huns were capable of. Another laurel of shame to lay upon the captain.

“Mushu?” she called, standing up.

“Your guardian is not here,” said a pleasant voice to her left. Mulan whirléd around, reaching at her hip for her missing sword.

“Your majesty,” she said, dropping to her knees. She’d only seen paintings of the emperor, but this could be no one else.
He said nothing, merely blinking down at her as he waited for her to stand up again. Mulan was left feeling a bit foolish, though she didn’t know why.

“I’ve been waiting a long time to meet you, Fa Mulan,” the emperor said.

“You know me?” she whispered.

He smiled.

Mulan heard a faint shout and turned towards the sound. A wave of soldiers had appeared on the horizon, jogging in formation with their weapons at the ready. Their bannermen bore the insignia of the Chinese army. Opposite, another wave of warriors approached to meet them. Huns, though Shan Yu was nowhere in sight. Perhaps they had appointed another to lead them. Mulan’s eyes widened. “Your majesty! We’ve got to move, now!”

But the emperor seemed unconcerned. “I appreciate your sense of urgency, but there is nothing to fear.”

Mulan gaped at him. Was he crazy? She wasn’t armed; she couldn’t protect them both. If they didn’t move, they would be trampled. But as the troops came closer, she realized the sounds she should be hearing -- horses, the clamor of metal on metal, orders being given -- were all condensed into a low, muffled buzzing. The two armies clashed against each other without a sound. As she watched, one man in particular caught Mulan’s eye. She would know those eyes and that armor anywhere. She’d inherited both from the man who wore them now.

“This isn’t real,” Mulan said, slowly turning on the spot. She watched the battle in fascination, as men fought and died around her as if she did not exist. “I wasn’t here; this battle happened many years before I was born.”

“You are here now,” said the emperor, gesturing around them with his staff. “Does it feel real?”

“A soldier can’t trust his feelings,” Mulan said. “He must trust his training. That’s what Shang taught us.”

“It is interesting that you still speak of him with respect,” the emperor said. By his mild tone, they might have been discussing the weather.

“The lesson holds,” Mulan said simply.

The two were quiet for a time. Mulan suspected the emperor was trying to prompt her into revealing more, but she had long since become comfortable with silence.

“I go to dreamland to meet the old sages, just as Confucius did,” the emperor said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The emperor shrugged. “Perhaps there is yet something to be learned from this.”

“What can I possibly learn from watching my father get injured?” Mulan demanded. “I can't stop it from happening, and I can't help him. It's in the past. Nothing good can come of it.”

“Then why has your mind brought us here?”

Mulan wondered if the real emperor was as frustrating as this one. Instead, she turned her eyes back to watch her father, knowing what was happening a split second before it did. A Hun’s blade
caught him in the thigh. His leg buckled and he went down.

“Father!” Mulan cried. She tried to go to him, but a sharp pain lanced up her side that brought her to her knees and left her breathless. She looked down to see blood seeping through her tunic in the shape of a magnolia blossom. She fell back, paralyzed by pain and powerlessness.

Fa Zhou got up as if he’d never been injured at all. It was a surreal thing, indeed, to watch him stand up, straight and proud, for the first time in her life. He came to her side and knelt in the dirt.

“Father, it hurts,” she whimpered, her eyes searching his.

“I know,” he said. His deep, slow voice reverberated through her chest and soothed her. “I know it hurts. But as long as you can still grab a breath, you fight.”

“I can’t,” she said.

“This isn’t where you perish, my daughter,” Fa Zhou said, his fingers brushing hair from her forehead. For all that this was a dream, she swore she could feel his touch. “As long as you can still grab a breath, you fight. Do you understand?”

Mulan nodded. She took a deep breath and felt the pain burning away. The mirage of her father went with it, fading like a wisp of smoke, his last advice to her still echoing in her ears.

“Father?” Mulan said groggily. Her dry throat caught on the word.

“Mulan! You’re awake!”

Mulan tried to sit up, the last of the dream bleeding away. Her father was not here. She was still in the mountains. “Wha’s goin’ on?”

“Shhhh . . . don't try to talk,” the dragon said. Mulan cracked a smile – he talked enough for the both of them. “Just rest.”

“I don't think I'm gonna make it out of this alive,” she said.

“Don't talk like that!” Mushu said, aghast. “We’ll get you all cleaned up; you’ll feel better. A nice bath makes everyone feel like new. Speaking of which, you really need one. Pee-yew! You stink!”

“My fever broke,” Mulan said, peeling her damp tunic away from her skin. She smiled weakly. “I'm healing.”

Perhaps she would make it through this after all. And then: revenge.
Another week passed before Mulan felt strong enough to ride. Even then, Mushu fussed over her so much Mulan finally threatened to strap him to the biggest cannon she could find and light it if he didn't shut up.

(He didn't actually think she'd do it, but he did shut up.)

The Chinese army had a solid head start on Mulan; still, it wasn't hard to track them by the swathe they carved through the snow. Mulan spent long days on horseback, seemingly tireless in her crusade. Mushu and Khan grew weary, but they dared not complain or face Mulan’s wrath.

As they made their way through the pass, the altitude dropped, and the snow went from knee-deep to patchy at best. They lost the trail in places. Mulan led them up a ridge to get a better vantage point, Khan picking his way carefully over the rocky crags and boulders. His hooves slipped on patches of snow, but he kept his footing as befitting the proud warhorse he was as they trudged higher, until Mulan was gasping for breath in the thin mountain air. The ridge afforded her a clearer view of the route the army had taken. But that wasn’t the only thing that caught her eye.

Mulan saw great plumes of black smoke rising over the crest of the pass. “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” she murmured, almost to herself. “This way.”

In the distance: a sharp, keening cry. An echoing response.

Two people looked up from opposite sides of the pass.

“Was that what I think it was?” Mushu asked.

“If you think it was Shan Yu’s falcon, then yes,” Mulan replied. “We've got to keep moving. If the Huns find us . . .” She let that thought go unvoiced. They had no chance if the falcon tracked them.

“Maybe we should just keep going,” Mushu hissed.

But Mulan shook her head. “We need supplies. It’s worth the risk.”

Mushu gulped and said nothing.

The closer they got, they picked up the smell of burning wood and flesh. It stung Mulan’s nostrils. Even Mushu wrinkled his nose. Another village, destroyed by the Huns. Burned to the ground along with everyone in it. Monsters.

This only confirmed her suspicions: the Huns were not as dead as they had originally presumed. Mulan’s spine tingled like she was being watched. She glanced around, one hand on the hilt of her sword, but no one was there. She shrugged off the feeling and pressed on.

There were no Imperial helmets this time – these people had been slaughtered like livestock, with no one to defend them and unable to defend themselves. The buildings still smoldered, many of their occupants along with them. Her eyes lingered on a blackened corpse, its skeletal arms wrapped around a child. Both had been reduced to nothing more than cinders and bone. Mulan looked away.
Mulan picked her way through the wreckage, looking for supplies to salvage, but there was nothing left for her here. There was nothing left for anyone.

She saw movement from the corner of her eye and stopped dead. Mushu, who wasn’t paying attention, walked right into her.

“What – oh,” Mushu trailed off as he followed her gaze.

A mottled corpse dangled from a spindly tree whose roots clung to the side of the mountain like the talons of a raptor. The cold had slowed its decay enough that Mulan could still recognize the man as a recruit from her unit, though she didn’t know his name. A charred plank, salvaged from the village, bore a crudely written message in what appeared to be the dead man’s own dried blood.

“By the emperor’s polka-dotted underwear, that's –” But even Mushu’s smooth tongue failed him. Mulan wasn’t sure any words could adequately describe this.

“‘We are all monsters,’” Mulan read aloud. The body swayed in the wind.

The wind swelled, sweeping through the village. Mulan’s loose hair whipped across her face. The fetid odor of her decomposing comrade made bile rise in her throat. Her side barely twinged at all as she climbed the steep rock face and cut down the body. It dropped into the snow with a damp thud. Mulan pushed off the craggy rock face and landed on her feet.

Birds had pecked out the corpse’s eyes, leaving gaping black holes in his face. It left Mulan distinctly unsettled, as if the dead man were staring into her soul with eyes unseeing. She was afraid of what he might find.

This war, Shang’s betrayal, what she’d been forced to become to survive – maybe the Huns were right. They were all monsters.

Mulan worked for hours, until the sun had set in earnest, scraping at the ground until her fingertips were numb and bleeding and her sword was dull and dirty. Sweat trickled down and froze on her neck and between her breasts. Mushu helped without a word, carrying rocks from where they’d tumbled off the cliff face. Mulan erected a makeshift cairn in the fallen soldier’s honor. He deserved so much more than that, but it was all she could give. It was more than she would have received, had Shang carried out his duty.

As she worked, Mulan felt her rage boiling just under the surface. Rage at Shang, at Shan Yu and the Huns, at the powerlessness she felt in the face of it all. It threatened to consume her. Even this man’s death felt like a slight. His fate was as unjust as hers had been – but she still lived. She could change her fate yet.

When she had finished, she stood before the grave with Mushu to pay her respects.

“They won't get away with this,” she said.

“They?”

“All of them,” Mulan said, her voice cold. “Everyone who ever underestimated me. The matchmaker. Shang. Shan Yu. Those who took this man’s life without honor.”

“What’s gotten into you?” Mushu asked. His voice was hushed, as though he wasn’t sure he truly wanted an answer. “This isn't you! The Mulan I know wouldn’t throw away everything on some pointless quest for revenge!”
“Then you never knew me at all,” Mulan said.

“But . . . this isn't honor; this is insane! Okay, I know what you're thinking, and you're right. Maybe I don't know much about honor, considering I lied to just about everyone to get you into this war. So if I say something's wrong, something must be really wrong.”

Mulan mounted Khan and stared down at Mushu. “If you're not with me, you're against me. Now, are we in this together or not?”

Mushu gulped. “Yeah, I’m with you.”

“It ends in the Forbidden City.” Mulan said. The reins twitched in her hands, and Khan turned towards the capitol. “This way.”

Mulan led Khan out of the village, Mushu trailing behind. They were still many days’ journey from the capitol. They couldn't afford to waste time.

However, they also couldn’t go long without sleep. Mulan made camp against the cliff face, using boughs salvaged from nearby trees to construct a makeshift shelter. She fell asleep almost immediately and woke suddenly before dawn. Gone were the days of being late for chores, or Mushu dragging her out of her tent before Shang noticed she’d overslept. She didn’t move or make a sound, listening for what had woken her.

A searing cry sounded overhead, and Mulan jumped to her feet, kicking snow over the smoldering fire and gathering up her few belongings.

“Mushu!” she hissed. “Mushu, we’ve been found! Get up! Get up!”

Mushu snorted and rolled over, mumbling in his sleep. She jabbed her toe into the ground, sending a spray of snow over the sleeping dragon.

“Mushu! Khan! Get up!”

Mulan turned around, and there he was. The Hun leader, back from the dead. She should have known better than to assume an avalanche could bury someone as tenacious as he. Her breath caught in her throat.

“The soldier from the mountains,” Shan Yu said. He jabbed his finger at her. “You stole my victory!”

He came at her with an enraged roar. Mulan leapt to one side, tucking and rolling, as Shan Yu’s momentum carried him forward to where she had been a moment ago. She could hear Mushu’s strangled shriek as he battled a foe of his own. The falcon was intent on pecking out his eyes.

Mulan had only bought herself a few seconds, but it was just enough. She reached at her hip for her sword, only to realize it wasn’t there. She glanced back at Khan, the blade still slung uselessly over his saddle. She had only her wits to protect her now. She widened her feet into a battle stance and raised her hands, palms open, ready to strike Shan Yu or shield her face as necessary.

Mulan sidestepped the Hun’s next clumsy advance, backtracking with the surefootedness of one who had spent most of her childhood ducking a bamboo switch for neglecting her chores. Her back bumped against the rough face of the ridge. She glanced to each side, but Shan Yu was advancing on her too quickly. Mulan felt the first tendrils of fear unfurling in her gut.
Mulan was only vaguely aware of a frenzied chirping as Cri-Kee springboarded off her shoulder at the Hun. Shan Yu halted, flailing his arms as he attempted in vain to catch the cricket, who was hopping between his broad shoulders and the top of his head, still chirping furiously.

“What's this?” Shan Yu said lazily, catching the cricket’s antennae between his thumb and forefinger. The Hun chuckled. “For luck, I suppose. You Chinamen are so superstitious.”

He closed his fist with a wet crunch. Mulan gasped.

“Cri-Kee!” Mushu cried.

Shan Yu opened his palm. His falcon landed on his shoulder and scooped up the broken shell in its beak, swallowing Cri-Kee whole.

Mulan remembered how it started: with her grandmother’s wink. Cri-Kee soaking in the matchmaker’s tea. Cri-Kee and his chirping laugh at Mushu’s antics. Cri-Kee leaving spidery ink stains all down Mulan’s arm after forging a letter from the general. And now Cri-Kee was gone, his life as fleeting as the memories he left behind. Her luck had run out.

Mulan’s hands were shaking with anger. She curled them into fists. A cricket couldn't make her lucky, any more than an apple could grant her serenity or beads of jade could make her beautiful.

Mushu lunged at Shan Yu, but Khan caught the dragon’s tail between his teeth so Mushu was effectively walking in place, carving furrows in the ground with his claws.

Shan Yu pointed at him. “Your lizard friend is next.”

“How many times do I have to – I'm a dragon. Draaaag-uuunnn.”

“You leave him alone,” Mulan said.

Shan Yu grinned, and it was terrifying. “Or what?”

Mulan bolted to the left. An arm thick as a tree branch shot out.

Shan Yu grabbed her by her hair and dragged her down into the snow. She cried out as his bulk fell on top of her, pinning her to the ground. She wriggled her shoulders, but her arms were clamped to her sides. A sour dread tingled in the back of her throat that had little to do with being outmatched in a fight and everything to do with being a woman at the mercy of a man – something she had sworn to never be again.

Her hand closed around the hilt of the knife at his belt. His face loomed over hers. She cracked her forehead into his nose. He reared back, and she took the opening to squirm free. She stood at the ready a few paces away, brandishing the knife. Shan Yu took a step towards her – his mistake. Mulan lashed out at him. A thin red line marred his cheek. When he made no move to retaliate, glowering at her, she stuck the blade into her belt.

“Don't take me for a fool,” she warned. “I should kill you, but you're a worthy opponent. My quarrel is not with you.”

His lip twisted. He growled at her, a feral sound low in his throat. “Chinese bitch,” he spat. “My men will take your land and force your men to work it like the beasts they are, fill your women with our superior seed and burn everything your people have built until it is ashes in your mouth. You are a fool to let me live.”
Mulan spat at his feet.

“Let China burn,” she said. “It does not matter to me.”
Chapter 3

Shan Yu watched the strange soldier mount her horse and ride away, his thoughts a mutiny inside him. Twice he had met her upon a battlefield, and he was not the better for it. He would not underestimate her like her fellow soldiers so clearly had. But now he had discovered something gravely important: she was not a patriot. Patriots, blinded by nationalistic pride, were infinitely dangerous – willing to do anything their beloved emperor asked of them, more than they would ever be willing to do for any selfish whim.

His falcon alighted with a shrill cry. The hunt had begun.

This soldier was perhaps more dangerous still – but if Shan Yu could sway her allegiance for even the briefest moment, he might gain more than he'd ever hoped when he scaled the emperor’s wall.

Shan Yu felt a presence by his side, all taut energy like a drawn bowstring. His lieutenant was tall and slender, a swarthy man with a reedy voice. “My lord?”

“Gather the men,” he commanded grimly. “Salvage any supplies you can. Leave the rest.”

“And what of her?” The lieutenant fingered his bow.

“She has seen our faces,” said Shan Yu. “She knows we yet live. We cannot allow her to reach the city before us.”

“What would you have me do?”

Shan Yu did not answer at first. He looked up. The skies were the color of chilled iron. His falcon still circled, high above them, riding columns of air they could not see.

“Follow her,” Shan Yu decided. “But do not kill her. She may yet prove useful.”

His falcon dived. A spray of blood. The falcon rose, talons empty. The injured prey made its escape.

It was well past dark and Mushu’s teeth were chattering before Mulan felt they had put enough distance between them and the Huns to make camp. Their grief was silent as they kindled a fire, ate portions of bland battle rations, and tried to ignore the cricket-shaped hole in their midst, until Mushu could be silent no longer.

“You should have killed him,” Mushu said. “For what he did to Cri-Kee.”

“Shan Yu and his army slaughtered China’s finest regiment, Shang’s father included – the soldiers in whom the Emperor placed his highest confidence. He has likely been trained in the arts of combat and strategy since birth. And you think I’m capable of killing him?” Mulan laughed. “I’m flattered.”

Mushu paused. It had never occurred to him that Mulan might not be able to do whatever she put her mind to -- that it was not mercy, but self-preservation that stayed her hand. Since the day they had met she had seemed less a woman and more a force of nature. “Well, if you can’t do it, someone should.”

Mulan flushed. “Who are you to decide whether he deserves to die?”
“He killed Cri-Kee just to taunt you! Of course he deserves to die!”

“One life is hardly the tipping point –”

“Are you even listening to yourself?” Mushu said. “You can’t honestly expect me to believe that Cri-Kee’s life meant less to you than anyone else the Huns have killed. What if it had been your friends? Yao or Ling or Chien-Po?” Mushu gasped. “What if it had been . . . me? Would my life be worth the same to you as some random soldier?”

“Of course not,” Mulan snapped. “But I can’t allow my feelings to color my actions. If I'm going to survive long enough to make it to the capitol, I need to stay objective.”

Mushu groaned and smoke puffed from his nostrils. “Objectively, that egg-sucking gargoyle needs to fall off a tall cliff. Onto a sword. No, a thousand swords. Dull ones, too; so he really suffers.”

Mushu looked down to his right, as if to make his point to someone unseen. His whiskers wilted.

“He might still be useful,” Mulan said.

“The only thing he’ll be useful for is giving me a good belly laugh when he falls off that cliff I told you about.”

“Fine. You're right, Mushu,” Mulan said. “Is that what you want me to say? Shan Yu is the scum of the earth. He’s detestable, and he deserves to die. But I would see Shang dead first for what he did to me, and if I must shake hands with a *mogwai* to that end . . .” She trailed off. Her eyes hardened and glittered black as beetles in the firelight. “So be it.”

Mulan knew they had not seen the last of Shan Yu and the Huns, but she had hoped their last brief encounter would lead to a tense if distant understanding. She couldn't pinpoint how she knew – a soldier’s battle sense, or *woman’s intuition* – she only knew with certainty she was being tirelessly hunted.

Mulan endured the tingle between her shoulder blades for a few days before she saw her shadow. He appeared alone, but Mulan knew better. Shan Yu would be nearby. Sure enough, she heard his falcon’s shrill call overhead. The distance between Mulan and the Hun remained constant, a strained truce until one side made a move otherwise.

The chase began as chases always do – someone runs.

Mulan felt the blood rise in her cheeks, whipped there by the air rushing past. Her heart pounded in time with Khan’s hooves. The fierce keen of Shan Yu’s falcon sounded above them, chilling her to the bone. Her vision blurred as the cold wind gouged her eyes like invisible knives, her tears drying as quickly as they fell. She urged Khan faster, *faster* – and then the world fell out from under them and they were flying, falling –

The landing threw Mulan clear, her impact cushioned by mounds of snow. Dazed, she was vaguely aware of a horrendous shrieking to her left, and there was no sign of Mushu anywhere.

Mulan looked up to see the hulking silhouette of Shan Yu on the edge of the cliff. His falcon alighted on his shoulder. The cut she had given him was an angry red line. Without rope or supplies, the Hun would not be able to safely descend the ridge to get at her for a day’s journey in either direction.

After a moment, the Hun leader turned and walked away. Mulan let out the breath she’d been holding. She got to her feet, shaking, and made her way towards the screams. It was Khan.
Three of the stallion’s legs had broken in the fall. Jagged white bone poked through the skin, a scarlet stain spreading around the injured horse. Tendrils of steam rose from the hot blood. A lump formed in Mulan’s throat. She knelt beside Khan, resting her hand on his neck.

“I’m so sorry, my prince,” she whispered. “You were the best. You’ve done so much. You’ve done more than enough. Thank you. Thank you.”

Mulan stood and resolutely drew her sword. She plunged the blade into her beloved stallion’s broad chest. She sank to her knees beside the dead horse and cried silently until her throat ached and she ran out of tears.

Then she put away her emotions and drew the Hun knife. She made the incision in the horse’s belly with a hunter’s precision. She stuck her hand inside, her fingers sliding over the slippery organs as she methodically pulled them out into the open. When the horse had been turned inside out, Mulan stared at her hands, slick with blood to the elbows. They felt like someone else’s hands.

She thought to build a fire, but the allure of fresh meat was overpowering after so many days spent hungry. Her stomach cramped painfully as she ate. She tried not to think about it.

The liver nearly melted on her tongue. She lingered over the rich, fatty texture. It was a meal fit for an emperor, and here she was, a traitor who still drew breath for no other reason than a captain’s weak heart.

When she had eaten her fill, she stripped off her clothes and crawled inside the carcass, resting her head in the hollow of Khan’s broad chest. She closed her eyes and imagined she could still hear a steady, slow beat in the cavity where his heart had been. It lulled her to sleep in the grisly cocoon.
Mulan woke to numb fingers and toes, and a steady stream of anxious chatter.

“It's not enough for those—those monsters to kill a horse, they've got to turn it inside out too? Inhuman, disgusting—”

“Mushu?”

“Mulan?” From the alarm in his voice she could imagine him whipping his scaly head back and forth, looking around for her.

She shifted. Her muscles protested the movement, stiff from her landing and spending the night contorted in a cramped space. Her skin itched where Khan’s blood had dried upon it, flaking off as she moved. Tendons and flesh cracked, frozen by rigor and the elements, as Mulan struggled to free herself from the horse carcass like a grotesque butterfly emerging from a macabre chrysalis.

She scooped up snow with her bare hands, scrubbing her arms, legs and torso to cleanse herself before she put her filthy clothes back on. She ached all over, bruises darkening her skin at its thinnest.

Mulan noticed Mushu gaping at her. “What?”

“How could you?” His words were whispered, as fragile as the first sheen of ice on a winter pond. “Khan—you—he trusted you—”


Mushu grimaced, and her stomach dropped. “I don't know anymore, Mulan. And that’s what really freaks me out.”

“You think I—killed—”

“Well, that's certainly no paper cut,” Mushu said, staring at the ugly wound in Khan’s chest.

Mulan blanched. “It's not what it looks like—I can explain—”

“Really? Tell me, Mulan, how could this possibly not be what it looks like?”

“I had to do it,” Mulan said. “He was injured and in pain—please—” She felt tears spring to her eyes, burning tracks through the grime on her cheeks. “Please, you have to believe me. Mushu—you're all I've got left. I can’t lose you.”

Mushu sighed. Dynasties rose and fell before he answered. “Okay. But only because you used the puppy dog eyes.”

Mulan let out a huff of air. “The Huns will be back to finish the job. We’ve got to get moving.”

“Which way?”

Mulan hesitated. Her flight from the Huns had skewed her sense of direction, and it took a moment to reorient herself from the sun’s position overhead. Her stomach roiled, the previous evening’s meal heavy in her bowels. She felt like a newborn foal, weak and shaky. She stumbled and nearly fell.
“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Mulan said harshly. “Let’s just go.”

Their progress was slowed by knee-deep snow and sorrow. Meals were foraged as they hiked: fiddlehead ferns, wild mugwort, starchy tubers and coarse herbs that slumbered, dormant, under the frost. Mulan slept fitfully, when she did at all. Mushu laid awake, blinking in the wan glow of firelight.

As they continued their trek through the pass, Mushu rode in the cowl of Mulan’s tunic like a scaly scarf. Mulan trudged along a raised embankment, gradually rising out of the valley in which they had landed. Mushu drowsed against Mulan’s sweaty nape, enshrouded by her hair through which he peered like a dark curtain.

Mushu could feel Mulan’s exertion, her skin flushed and breathing labored. She felt as strong as he had always known her to be; she seemed invincible. Mushu knew, peripherally, that the Huns were still after them and had every reason to want Mulan dead, but he allowed Mulan’s presence to lull him into a false sense of security. After all, they’d borne enough hardship already. Could the Ancestors be so cruel?—Yes.

This bitter thought compelled him to keep a better lookout. The little dragon caught a glimpse of a hulking shadow against the snow.

“Mulan!”

Only Mushu’s sharp warning saved her. Shan Yu whipped around at the little dragon’s shout. Mulan gasped and stumbled backwards, putting distance between them. She had been nearly on top of him without realizing it.

“You again!” He jabbed a gnarled fingernail in her face. “You are quite the thorn.” The Hun didn’t have a blade in his hand, but Mulan knew better than to think he was unarmed.

“I warned you before,” Mulan said, drawing her sword. “Whatever happens next is your fault.”

“Wait,” Shan Yu said, and Mulan paused. “I’ve thought long on your words. It seems we have . . . common goals.”

“Don't listen to him! Think of Cri-Kee! Think of Khan!” Mushu hissed from his perch on her shoulder. Mulan reached back and shoved him down into her collar.

“I'm listening,” she said, her sword still ready at her side.

“Help my men and I infiltrate the Capitol, and I won't kill you. Or your pet,” he added.

Mulan scoffed. “I can't trust a word you say. What's to stop you from killing me anyway the moment I let down my guard? And what makes you think I won't turn you over to the Chinese army the moment they open the gates?”

“Yeah! You tell him, Mulan!”

“Shut up, Mushu,” Mulan said sharply.

Shan Yu chuckled darkly. “I would kill you now if I were so inclined. To the other: if you had even a shred of respect left for your comrades, I might believe you capable of such a betrayal. As it
stands—I don’t.”

“How can you take that chance? How can I?”

“Leading men into battle takes no small amount of risk. This is my offer; take it as you will. I do not ask for privileged information or battle strategy. I have no need for such things. You already know this.”

Mulan shrugged. “I might be wrong.”

“How else were you planning on getting into the city?”

“I’ll find a way.”

“Your horse is dead,” Shan Yu pointed out. “You have no supplies. It is a long way to the city on foot.”

“You say it as if you care what happens to me.”

“Not in the least. But it is the truth. You can be of use to me, and I to you. Nothing more.” Shan Yu shrugged. “Decide quickly. I am not known for my patience.”

“I will help you,” Mulan said. “But I will never trust you.”

“I expected nothing less.”

Shan Yu watched the girl where she hovered just outside the wash of firelight. She reminded him of the huge, feral dogs back home that prowled the fringes of settlements, leering at scraps with hungry, glittering eyes. Too proud to beg, but a beggar all the same.

“Bankhar,” he called. “Come, sit and eat.”

She halted in her tracks. Shan Yu saw her weighing the risks against the consequences of refusal before she carefully picked her way over to him and sat down. Tension tightened the space between them. He wrenched a leg off the animal on his plate and passed it to her. She took it with delicate fingers.

“Eat.”

She fell upon the leg with ravenous fervor, gnawing and tearing like the animal she was.

“Where is your little pet?”

“Tent,” she grunted, her mouth full of flesh. She washed it down with a flask of fermented mare’s milk offered to her. “He doesn’t care much for our arrangement.”

“Yet here you are.”

“Mushu and I disagree, but I stand by my decision,” snapped the girl. “It is pointless to argue. I don’t need to like you, trust you, or respect you as long as you hold up your end of our bargain.”

Shan Yu hummed to himself, a small smile twisting his lips.

“What?”
“You amuse me, bankhar.”

“That’s twice you’ve called me that. What is it?”

“They are the dogs of our homeland; strong guardians who protect our settlements and livestock. They are the only beasts who have souls, like humans, and are buried with the respect due a warrior—high on the steppes, so the unworthy do not walk over their bones.”

At a loss for words, Mulan felt uncomfortable under Shan Yu’s gaze. Once, she might have fidgeted. The pass had changed her even more than the army had.
They set out before first light, creeping ever closer to the Forbidden City, closer to Shang and her fate.

“Bankhar,” Shan Yu beckoned her. “Walk with me.”

Clearly he liked to keep his enemies close. Mulan squared her shoulders and fell into step beside the Hun general. She heard a scream above her and dropped into a defensive stance, hand on her sword. Shan Yu smirked. A sharp-winged falcon wheeled around and landed on the thick pauldron Shan Yu wore over one broad shoulder. The bird’s razor-sharp talons scraped over the leather. He turned his yellow eyes on Mulan.

“This is Hayabusa,” Shan Yu said, stroking the creature’s beak. “He gifts me his eyes, when I have need of them.”

“You are a Seer?” Mulan asked with some surprise. It certainly explained the Huns’ advantage in battle. How they were always one step ahead.

“Hayabusa is my spirit in another body,” Shan Yu said.

“What does he see today?” she asked.

Shan Yu was silent for a moment. “The path ahead is clear. The Chinese have entered the city. We are three days’ journey from the gates.”

“I could have told you that,” Mulan said.

Shan Yu smiled. “But I could not have trusted your intel.” He burrowed his thick fingers in the soft feathers between the falcon’s pinions.

The bird took flight once more. Mulan followed the fond gaze of Shan Yu as he watched Hayabusa soar away. She filed her observations away for another time, and kept pace with the Hun general.

“Look, this whole braiding-each-other’s-hair, friendship-bracelet thing you’ve got going on with Shan Yu is getting a little creepy,” Mushu said later, after they had pitched camp.

Mulan rolled her eyes. “I’m not going to explain myself to you again.”

“I know, I know—agree to disagree. All I’m saying is maybe you just do the bare minimum and get the Huns into the city, but you don’t have to be so—so—”

“What?” Mulan said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“It’s like you’re turning into one of them. Just don’t forget who you are, okay?”

“I’m getting us to the city, no matter what it takes. What more do you want from me?”

“I never asked for this, Mulan!”
She snorted. “Right, I forgot. You’re only here because you were too much of a coward to face the Ancestors. You don’t care about me at all.”

“That’s not true and you know it.”

“Then why don’t you just leave? I’m not going to stop you.”

Mushu didn’t respond.

“If you’ve got something to say, spit it out. Otherwise I’m going out there. I’m going to eat Shan Yu’s food and drink his airag until I’m full and drunk, and maybe I’ll even hold a conversation with someone who doesn’t judge and question every choice I make!” The door flap billowed in her wake as she swept out of the tent.

The Huns has lit a collection of small fires within the ring of their tents and wagons, roasting boar and salted yak over the flames. Mulan’s stomach twisted painfully as she boldly approached Shan Yu and took a seat beside him. The other Huns that shared their leader’s circle stared at her: some at her audacity, some at the shape of her body. Shan Yu did not acknowledge her. Mulan grabbed a hunk of meat and bit into it, grease dripping down her chin.

“Tell me about your commander, bankhar.”

“He is a competent fighter, skilled in many forms of combat. I once thought him honorable, but he revealed himself to be a coward after all.” She shrugged, licking fat off her fingers.

“I do not care what sort of man he is; what kind of leader is he?”

Mulan frowned. “Aren’t they the same thing?”

“Not at all,” Shan Yu said. “A man who sees his troops as fellow men is weak, prone to make decisions based on his emotions rather than strategy. He will always choose their lives over the mission. A true leader views his soldiers as tools to be used.”

“And that’s how you see your men? As tools?” Mulan said. “You don’t care whether they live or die. What is honor when lives are cheap? It’s barbaric.”

“Not so. They are more valuable to me as tools than men. Think of this: would a skilled craftsman willingly damage his tools? When they are the reason for and the means to continue his livelihood?”

“I never thought about it that way,” Mulan admitted.

“What do they teach you in that army of yours? That every life is sacred? To die is in itself honorable?” His words dripped with scorn.

“Something like that.”

Shan Yu chuckled derisively. He drank deeply from a flask of airag, the milky liquid dribbling down his chin. “That is why all of China will bow to me, in the end. Some tools are more useful than others, as are some soldiers. Some are only good for cannon fodder; that is their purpose, a means to an end. But death is not always honorable. Sometimes it is just a waste.”

What if he was right? What if Shang had lied to her—not just Shang, but her father, her country, her emperor? Was she so worthless as to deserve death for the simple crime of womanhood?
wondered if her own death would have been a waste in Shan Yu’s eyes. She wondered if she cared.

“Do your women work? Do they fight?”

“Of course,” Shan Yu said. “In our culture women are hearth-keepers, but they defend our homes from enemies when necessary. They hunt and gather food, bring up our children, train and die alongside the men in our military when our land and lives are threatened. And woe to the man who ignores his wife’s advice.”

“You would listen to a woman? Even if she disagreed with you?”

Shan Yu grinned. “I do not take your advice because you are Chinese, not because of your sex.”

Mulan felt a flash of anger, but also disappointment. “Right.”

She excused herself to her tent. A pair of hungry eyes followed her, lingering on her breasts and hips as she walked. Shan Yu noticed all, and said nothing.

It was the sensation of being crushed that woke her—she dreamt of the avalanche, burying her under the snow. Mulan’s eyes snapped open. It was the Hun, grunting and naked on top of her, his sweaty, unwashed body greasy against her skin. She smelled the creamy sourness of the airag on his breath.

Mulan choked back the bile that rose in her throat. She’d fallen asleep with her left hand wrapped around the hilt of the stolen dagger—a sound decision. She drove the blade into the Hun’s belly and opened him from pelvis to sternum. His blood and bowels drenched her, hot and pungent. She dragged the corpse out of her tent with an angry shriek, drawing Shan Yu’s attention from where he sat near the fire. His smile was cruel and showed all of his yellowing teeth. His approval should have disgusted her, but it didn’t. She only felt numb—numb to the cold that had seeped from the mountains into her bones, through the marrow to harden her heart. Why should her body be her own, when she was overdue a soldier’s death?

She met Shan Yu’s eyes, breathing heavily from her exertion. The stench of death on her skin was overwhelming. She held his gaze longer than was comfortable before walking away, deliberately through the middle of camp, so every Hun could see what fate awaited any man who tried to take from her what was not theirs. What belonged to no one.

Mulan shucked off her ruined clothes and left them in a heap by the shore. The water was warmed by brimstone from the deepest parts of the earth, turning her skin pink as the filth washed away. She remembered bathing at the Wu Zhong camp. Back then, modesty was essential—it preserved her identity and saved her life. Now, she wanted them to see: the ugly, puckered scar on her side, still healing; lean, wiry muscle from hours of training; her sex between her legs. Let them see she was woman, and she was not afraid.

Mushu woke up to a commotion outside the tent, Mulan’s bedroll soiled by feces and blood. Too much blood. Oh Ancestors, Mulan couldn’t be—he warned her these Huns couldn’t be trusted! He burst out through the tent flap, stumbling over the dead Hun.

“Mulan? Mulan!” His heart pounded. The Huns around him seemed impossibly huge; he knew he should feel threatened but all he could think about was whether or not Mulan was still alive. Then he saw it—they all seemed to be staring in the same direction. He followed their gaze: the hot
springs.

“Alright, alright, y’all can put your eyes back in now! It’s like you’ve never seen a naked woman before! Move along; nothing to see here!” Mushu growled as he padded down the path to the springs as fast as his tiny legs could carry him. His relief at finding Mulan alive was tempered by irritation that he’d had to worry at all.

“What happened to you?”

Mulan didn’t answer as she scrubbed the grime from her skin.

“Oh, I get it—this is the part where you say, ‘You should see the other guy.’ Good one, Mulan.” Mushu’s smile looked more like gritted teeth. “Seriously, what happened?”

She shrugged. “He wanted to use me. I didn’t want him to.”

Mushu’s eyes bulged. “I knew this was a bad idea from the beginning. We should leave—strike out on our own! We can make it; it will just take a little longer. We don’t need them.”

“I can’t.”

“But—they’re monsters, Mulan!”

Her smile was a bleak, terrible thing. “We are all monsters.”

“Mulan.” Something in his voice made her look up. His eyes searched hers, but she was more of a stranger to him now than the day they’d met. “Are you okay?”

If she’d had the words, she might have explained it to him. But all she said was, “Leave me alone, Mushu.”
Chapter 6

After that, the Huns left her alone. Except Shan Yu, whose intrigue was piqued. Even though they never spoke of it again, he treated her with a subtle respect. It was the way she wished Shang had seen her, after finding out she was a woman. But he would see her for who she really was, in due time.

In the meantime, Mushu grew increasingly uneasy about their tense accord, and he didn’t shy away from vocalizing his concerns. It became their nightly ritual, to argue about it, and each night their remarks grew more and more biting until they came to a head, perhaps a mere day out from the capitol.

“Leave it alone, Mushu! We’ve been over this. Shang needs to pay for what he’s done. He left us there to die! It’s his fault Cri-Kee and Khan died in the pass. I couldn’t have gone home then, and I can’t go home now.”

“Are you crazy?! You’re so far gone you’ve made up this story in your head to justify some suicidal revenge mission! Cri-Kee and Khan are dead because of you! If we’d just gone home, none of this would have happened. They would still be alive.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Look around you! Your friends don’t tend to live very long. And might I remind you, Mr. Thug over there was the reason for that? He’s already tried to kill us, Mulan, more than once! What’s to stop him from killing us now?”

“He needs us,” Mulan said. “He needs us to get him into the city.”

“So he says, and you believe him? What about after that?”

Mulan said nothing.

“You haven’t thought that far ahead, have you,” Mushu said accusingly. “Once he’s inside the city gates he’ll kill you, Mulan. He won’t need you anymore.”

She laughed, a brittle sound like ice cracking. “I knew you were a lot of things, Mushu, but I didn’t think a coward was one of them.”

The little dragon shook his head. “I love you, Mulan, and I would follow you into almost anything. But not this. You wanna fall on your sword, go right ahead. I’m not gonna stick around and watch. I’m gonna do the right thing, since you won’t. I’m out.”

He walked away, his tail leaving a meandering divot in the snow. Mulan watched him go until he was just an orange speck on the horizon. She wanted to call after him and beg him to come back. She wished she could feel something other than the hollowness he left behind, like he had slit her open and scraped out her insides—like she had done to Khan, to the Hun. But what he wanted she couldn’t give.

She felt a hulking presence behind her, then the pinprick of claws as Hayabusa alighted on her shoulder. His talons drew blood.

“A soldier like you doesn't need him,” Shan Yu said. “You don't need anyone.”
Mulan stole away from her own tent in the dark of night, when all of Shan Yu’s men had let their fires smolder down to embers and gone to bed. By now she knew their camp, their habits—she knew where the watchers kept their vigils and which tents housed the lightest sleepers. She stalked her prey, stepping on the outside of her foot and rolling inwards as she’d been taught, until she ducked into the tent she intended without a sound.

It was bizarre, somehow, to see the formidable Shan Yu so vulnerable in sleep. In the dim glow cast by the remains of his fire Mulan could only make him out as a mountain draped in furs upon his bedroll. She felt a twinge of regret for what she was about to do—he had fed and sheltered her for the past few days, after her own people had cast her out in the cold. But she reminded herself that their ultimate goals were in conflict, and sooner or later they would be at odds once more. She could not allow him to compromise her plan.

She reached under her skirt for the knife she had taken from him before, hearing the blade scrape against the stiff leather of the sheath as she withdrew it.

Shan Yu’s eyes snapped open and his massive hand closed around her wrist.

Without thinking, Mulan dropped the knife and caught the hilt in her right hand. Shan Yu brought up his other arm, jagged sword in hand. He apparently slept with it close by for just such an occasion. A man after her own heart—if she’d still had one.

“Did you think I hadn’t noticed?” Shan Yu said, his smile a cruel gash that split his face. “You have a fire in your belly that burns against your countrymen, and a hunger in your gaze when you look at me. I knew it was only a matter of time before you either tried to kill or fuck me. A pity, though—I had hoped it’d be the latter. It’s been an age since I had a woman.”

“And yet, you respect me more because I chose to kill you rather than bed you.”

“I know a true warrior when I see one,” Shan Yu said. “You live for the battle. It makes you feel alive.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I know enough.” Shan Yu brought his blade down sharply. It caught hers by the hilt and sent it skittering out of her hand across the ground. Undeterred, Mulan spun away. She caught his wrist with both hands and used his own lumbering momentum to launch him over her shoulder as she dropped to one knee. He landed hard on his back, gasping. She straddled him, restraining his hands and tossing his sword away.


Mulan was uncomfortably aware of her body as she had never been before. She tightened her thighs, still through several heartbeats as they remained suspended in time. Mulan rubbed her thumb over the angry red line over Shan Yu’s cheek, already healing over. A reminder of her strength. She could do this without the Huns. Shan Yu had been right: she didn’t need anyone. Especially not him.

“Where do we go from here?”

“Clearly we cannot trust each other,” Shan Yu said. “I could still promise you safe passage into the city.”

“I could never take you at your word, and even less so now,” Mulan said. “You need me more
than I need you. I can walk through the gates untouched.”

“As can I,” Shan Yu said, bored. “Did you think I invaded China without a plan? You are a stupid girl. I have waited years for this. I would not throw it all away on a gamble with a Chinese whore.”

With a snarl, she clambered off him. “I am yet a virgin,” she spat.

“All the better, as it’s the only worth you have left. Go back to your tent, bankhar,” he said. “This arrangement of ours grows tiresome.”

“I can enter the city on my own,” Mulan said. “I never needed you.”

“Go, then. Take up your sword, and we will find out who lives to enter the city.”

Mulan didn’t move. Shan Yu’s lips curled into a cruel smile. “You’re still imagining our bodies as one,” he said.

Mulan felt a blush start to rise in her face, and left without a word. She couldn’t deny his words, and hated herself for it.

It was a shame. Of everyone she’d ever known, Shan Yu might understand her best of all.
The Forbidden City loomed before them, long before they reached it. Mulan kept her eyes fixed on it as they marched. Fireworks bloomed above the city with subdued pops. Festivities were underway as the Chinese prematurely celebrated their victory over the Huns. Sham Yu stopped them just after midday and sent scouts ahead. There was nothing left to do but wait.

“What are we waiting for?” Mulan asked. But Shan Yu did not answer.

“Surely we’re not going to walk in the front gate,” Mulan said.

Shan Yu nodded slowly.

“You’re not serious,” Mulan said. “I thought you had a plan! If I’d known you were going to waltz right into the city I’d have taken my chances on my own.”

“Bankhar,” Shan Yu said thinly, “be silent, before I cut out your tongue.”

Steaming, Mulan said nothing more.

The scouts returned shortly before dusk with folds of golden fabric and the massive face of a dragon.

“Where did you get those?” Mulan asked, before she remembered Shan Yu’s earlier threat.

One of the scouts smiled at her. “They won’t be missed,” he said.

“Bankhar,” Shan Yu said, gesturing her towards him. “Join me.” He tipped the dragon head over his own like an ostentatious hood.

Mulan hurried forwards. She felt the bulk of Shan Yu at her back like the solid comfort of a mountain.

The Huns rippled into formation behind them, falling into line under the heavy fabric of the dragon’s body.

“Forward!” Shan Yu cried hoarsely, and they shuffled forward.

“Routine inspection,” barked the lieutenant. With every guard’s bow and blade trained on the dragon, there was little they could do. They were overpowered. The guard nearest ripped the gaudy dragon head off to reveal Shan Yu himself.

“Arrest them all,” commanded the lieutenant. “Except her.” He pointed at Mulan. “Captain Li requested to speak with her directly.”

“What about her weapon, sir?”

“Take it from her,” he said. “A woman does not need a weapon.”

Mulan scowled but said nothing as they unbuckled her belt and confiscated her sword. Shan Yu’s dagger was a comforting secret strapped against her thigh.

Mulan was led through the crowd, which parted for the Imperial guards. She held her head high as
wide eyes watched and whispers started. They did not know anything about her. Mere words and
stares could not pierce her armor. She had made it to the Forbidden City, and she was that much
closer to fulfilling her promise.

The guards brought her into a chamber inside the inner fortress and dumped her onto the floor.
She looked up as they shut the door behind them. Black boots and a familiar scarlet cloak loomed
before her as Shang turned to face her. She got to her feet. She would not give him the satisfaction
of seeing her on her knees.

Her large eyes, sunken in her gaunt face, had a gleam of wildness in them, framed by lank strands
of dark oily hair.

Shang barely recognized her.

“Mulan,” he said. “Your guardian said you would come.”

So that was where Mushu had gone. Somehow, the betrayal hardly stung. “Then you know why
I'm here.”

“You should have gone home, Mulan,” Shang spat her name like it was ash on his tongue. “A war
is no place for a woman.”

“It's no place for a coward, either, but somehow you're still here.”

“I've already given you two chances to leave with your life. I won't give you another.”

“You mean you've insulted my honor twice,” Mulan said, “and I won't let you do it a third time.”

“If this is what it's come to, then you have no honor left.”

“This is what you made me,” Mulan said, spreading her hands. “A survivor. You should be
proud.”

“Proud?” Shang scoffed. “A woman aside—yes, I was proud. You were a promising recruit. You
had the potential to achieve greatness. But this? There's no honor in this. If you would throw all of
that away just to take my life, then you never had it in you to begin with.”

Mulan felt a certain serenity seep through her body, saturating her limbs. She had come too far to
turn away now. She'd stared too long into the eyes of monsters to become anything other than a
monster. The darkness inside her was an abyss in which she had lost herself, and from which there
could be no redemption.

Mulan hiked up her skirt and drew the dagger. Shang heard the whisper of her blade against its
scabbard and unsheathed his own by instinct.

“Please,” Shang said.  *Don't make me do this.*

Mulan lunged forward. Shang brought his sword up to parry. The clash of steel echoed through
the emperor’s chamber. It was a seamless dance, both of them light on their feet like they’d been
born to battle each other, he the master and she the precocious student. There was a rhythm to their
movements that grew sloppy, each more taxing than the last. It was nearly identical to practice,
when Shang had knocked her to the ground before extending a hand to help her up—and then it
wasn’t. Mulan went in for the killing blow, but her movement showed her tiles before she was
ready to play them. Shang brought up his sword, hilt perpendicular to his abdomen, and Mulan
stumbled forward onto his blade. Her momentum faded as her body met resistance, but it was
enough. Too much.

Shang pulled back. “Why?” he said, half a breath before she went down.

Shang dropped to his knees at her side, applying pressure to the wound, but Mulan batted his hands away with a whimper.

She grasped his wrist in her small, bloody fingers and pulled him down to whisper in his ear. Blood trickled down her chin. Shang watched tears leak from the corners of her eyes and disappear into the loose hair at her temples.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Her grip on his arm loosened and fell away.

Shang tasted bitterness in the back of his throat. He swept his crimson cloak back, his sword still slick with her blood. It sluiced down the blade, slowly, onto the floor.

*What a waste*, Shang thought.

Chien-Po carried Mulan’s body out of the room to prepare for burial. Yao howled like a wounded dog when he saw her.

The Huns were sentenced to death. Shan Yu died with a smile on his lips. Some of the more superstitious say his spirit still resides in his falcon, who was never captured.

Shang made the journey to Mulan’s hometown to return her effects to her parents. It was the least he could do.

“She died like a soldier,” he said. “With honor. And she didn’t die alone.”

Fa Li wept, clinging to the helmet like she was holding her daughter in her arms, an infant again. Shang remembered the makeshift marker he’d erected for his own father, and understood what cold comfort it was to hold a helmet where your child should be.

“That’s not the way to do it,” Fa Zhou said. Shang turned away.

It ate at him, long after her mother’s wails faded from his ears. Could he have done anything differently? Would she still be alive?

All he knew was in war, nobody wins.

Shang turned his horse and headed home.

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