Bride and Prejudice

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Bride and Prejudice

by 3431jess

Summary

After the mayhem she created in the Matchmaker's house, Mulan married Shang, the man she didn't know. When the war broke off, Mulan disguised herself as a man and took the place of her father. When Shang began to grow fond of the lanky, elusive boy named Ping in his regiment, the boy disappeared after saving him from the Huns. Would he know that Ping was the wife he had left behind?

A lot of sexual tension. And you will want to punch Shang at times. Kiss him at times.... Yeah, he could be such a handsome, clueless dork!

Note: posted in FF net, and normally updated ahead of time there. (I have to make an edit to post it here).
Snippet of the future chapter will be posted on my tumblr: 3431jessica. WARNING: unconsented sex implied.

Notes

This is my first Mulan multi-chapter fiction. I had just watched the first movie (and haven't watched the second one yet). I do apologize if something seems to be out of character.

Special thanks to WindSongEnchantment (FF, author of Love or Law) and crackersme (AO, author of Triskele) who agreed to drop their opinions and beta-ed this piece. I owed you two tons! Thank you!
This story is dedicated to two grandmothers of mine that have shown me what courage can change and do. They were both brought up as stereotypical Chinese women; deliberately crippled to conform to male ideals of beauty; living and abiding as the underlings of patrilineal society. Both of them obediently wedded the man they didn't know, bore them sons, and lived in never-ending loyalty, servitude, and submission. Arranged marriage was considered a quaint cultural taste that no modern people, especially in the west, could ever fathom.

Despite their oppression, both of my grandmothers became the most aspirational women to many younger women in our family. To the outside world, my grandmother appeared to be a failure, a victim of filial piety and testimony of what women willingly do to satisfy the whims and fancies of men. But underneath their delicate features, dainty hands and fragile appearance lay a true warrior's heart and an iron soul. They were individuals who were capable of restraining their selfish wants and needs, putting their children's welfare and their husband's honor before themselves. Their lives might never have been a fairy-tale or fabled legend; or end happily like a Disney movie; but their sacrifice, ardor, and zeal for life live as a legacy to their descendants to be retold.

"And though she be but little, she is fierce." - Shakespeare

"Prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future and renders the present inaccessible." - Maya Angelou

"Fearlessness may be a gift but perhaps more precious is the courage acquired through endeavour, courage that comes from cultivating the habit of refusing to let fear dictate one's actions, courage that could be described as 'grace under pressure' – grace which is renewed repeatedly in the face of harsh, unremitting pressure." - Aung San Suu Kyi

The wind blew softly, disturbing the sweeping limbs of the ancient plum tree, creating a magnificent display of soft, pink petals dancing through the air. This was one of those fine spring days, where the air was filled with the sweet scent of blossoms and the pasture was dense with sprouting wildflowers. However, Mulan failed to cultivate any appreciation for the majestic display mother nature had brought her. Under the tree, she sat on the garden bench with deep melancholy wrapping her posture, her eyes stared dejectedly into space.

"Mulan?"

She heard a familiar raspy voice calling. Mulan lifted her face to meet the sympathetic gaze of her grandmother. She averted her gaze back to the ground, fixing her sight on the dust collecting under the sole of her foot while the old lady approached and took a seat next to her.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, Grandma," Mulan said, almost inaudible to her Grandmother's ailing ears. Tears began to form at the corner of her eyes.
Mulan thought that everyone in her family would be furious after the epic apocalypse she created in the Matchmaker's house. But instead, Grandma Fa chuckled softly while generously rubbing Mulan's shoulder, offering her wordless consolation.

"I understand how you feel, Mulan," She said breaking the momentary was nothing in her voice but patience and understanding. "I was once…a young lady too, just like you. Full of dreams...of ideals. Full of life!" A nostalgic smile appeared on her face while her mind settled back into the past."And just like you, being a girl doesn't always agree with me."

Blinking through the tears that threatened to fall, Mulan looked at her grandmother's kind, lined face.

"You mean, you were... uhm.... —" Mulan's mouth worked wordlessly to find an appropriate word.

"A little bit...klutzy? Yes. In fact, exceptionally klutzy!" The old woman laughed, low and throaty. "My parents had a hard time finding a man who would be willing to marry me."

The bitterness in Mulan's face vanished, leaving only sweetness behind. "Did you... create chaos at the Matchmaker's house too?" She asked gingerly, but she couldn't hide the hint of relief in her voice.

Grandma Fa's smile spread an inch wider,"Not exactly. It was in my father's house when I first met this young man, handsome, dark and tall. And I trip and fell over the door and managed to slam the candle holder on the process. Alas, the candle was lit... it rolled under the table and stopped next to this young man's feet, and then his expensive silk trousers was..." she laughed. "You should have seen the mortified expression on my parents' faces. I nearly burned the house down! And incinerated my newly appointed fiance alive!" She narrated between her sporadic chuckles."I was so scared and nervous...I nearly wet myself!"

Mulan laughed. "Oh no! Is that the poor guy you ended up marrying?"

"No, not really," Grandma Fa chuckled, shaking her head into the memory. "But this has proven to us that we have to be open to the possibility of the universe when it comes to meeting the right spouses."

Mulan smiled, "Right you are, Grandma."

Seeing her granddaughter's mood lightened, the old lady inquired,"How about you tell me your story, hmm?"

Mulan eloquently accepted her offer.

*Mulan's sudden downfall started when the Matchmaker, an imperious looking lady with an ample bosom, called her name. At first, she was just complaining of Mulan's lapse of grace and then criticizing her waist size because she deemed it was unfavorable for childbearing.*

"Nonsense!" Grandma Fa grumbled with a disapproving tone."She was just jealous of your perfect waist size!" Mulan was sure the last bit was an exaggeration, but she couldn't help but laugh at her grandmother's astute, yet disparaging remark.

"Perhaps she thinks her phenomenal waist size would be perfect for bearing sons," Mulan said absently, attempting to be kind despite the situation.

"More like bearing an elephant, I should think," Grandma Fa added another pinch of her sarcasm
for good measure. No one insulted her granddaughter and got away with it!

When the moment came to recite the final admonition, flicking her fan to mask her uneasiness, Mulan began to quote, 'Fulfill your duties calmly and res...pectfully, reflect before you snack— ' She spluttered,—act! This shall bring you honor and glory.' She uttered while risking stealing a glance at the smudged inscription on her wrist.

"You mean that black blotch right there?" Grandma Fa interrupted and pointed to the black ink stain on Mulan's wrist. Mulan smothered an urge to cringe. She flashed an innocent smile to cover her discomfort, while her free hand fumbled to straighten her sleeve and cover the evidence of her crime. Grandma Fa smirked, inwardly congratulating her granddaughter for her cunning proclivity.

The next task seemed to be harmless enough. Pouring tea. What could possibly go wrong? It was something she had done every day of her life but, unfortunately for Mulan; she was unable to focus entirely on the trivial task. The Matchmaker's blackened palm (from despicably grabbing her wrist), had accidentally drawn two black lines on her face. Mulan ended up flooding the table.

She finally managed to locate the tea cup and fill it successfully. It was at that point that Mulan had wistfully thought the crisis was behind her. Then, her eyes discovered her lucky cricket relaxing blissfully inside the cup. With surprising grace, nearly impossible for a lady her size, the Matchmaker glided smoothly over to take a swig. It was awful coincidence indeed. With her good intention to avoid giving the copiously-bosomed lady an unhealthy protein intake, Mulan attempted to tug the cup away forcefully, but the Matchmaker was equally adamant. The battle of dominance broke off for a split second with an obvious winner, but then the cricket had slipped into the Matchmaker's bra.

"It was the lucky cricket you gave me, Grandma," Mulan glowered. She couldn't conceal the accusatory edge in her voice. Cri Kee snorted indignantly upon hearing this, flicking his eyes to the old lady as if asking for judicial review, but Grandma Fa registered none of it, only laughing loudly at Mulan's expense.

Realizing her lapse of grace, Mulan attempted to rectify her blunder. However, she ended up fester- ing the Matchmaker's fleshy butt into flames with her silk fan. Mulan then chased her around the room to douse it. She threw the entire pot of tea in a perfect, wrongly-timed throw that ended up bathing the Matchmaker's face and causing her thick make-up to run into a drippy mess. By then Grandma Fa was laughing so hard, she almost fell over before sobering into more ladylike giggles.

"The Matchmaker was right. I may look like a bride, but I will never bring honor to my family." Mulan let a resentful sigh escape her lips. She had thought it wouldn't take a genius to regale a Matchmaker lady, but she obviously had a talent for turning simple tea parties into absolute mayhem.

While Grandma Fa was aware of her granddaughter's catastrophic clumsiness, she still believed Mulan was more than capable of being a perfect wife. "Mulan, just because you are unlucky today, doesn't mean there won't be anyone who wants you as his wife." Truthfully, Mulan was wondering whether she would ever be fit to be a wife should anyone want her.

Mulan felt there was a certain prejudice stamped against her. Other girls were a shade or two fairer than she was. Their feet were neatly bound, peeking daintily from the hem of their hanfu. They kept their long hair in intricate buns, painted their nails neatly, and covered their faces with make-up that would enhance their natural beauty.
Mulan, in contrast, had a healthy hint of tan in her complexion. She never shied away from the sun or bothered to hide under the shadow of a parasol. Her feet were nimble and fast, free from the boundage of tradition and restraint. Her straight hair was running slightly longer than shoulder length, which she found a lot more practical and less time consuming than keeping it long.

While other maidens her age busied themselves in perfecting their domestic competence and equipping themselves to reach their womanly potential, Mulan preferred spending her time exploring the dense coppice on the back of her black steed or teamed up with her younger brother to wield their blades against fictitious enemies.

She understood that her father brought her up differently. The retired Imperial Army General and great strategist, Fa Zhou, had decided to give his daughter the same opportunities as his son and equal freedom in her life choices. Mulan was free to pursue the things that she liked; such as riding horse and learning sword fight; the same as her younger brother, Fa Ping. But at her life stage at the moment Mulan didn't know; was she the ugly one, or the lucky one? Maybe she was just too naive of social rules and society's expectations.

"My Dear, you think you are not lucky today because you cannot see the future. Think of this," Grandma Fa explained gently,"if you meet someone you love, months even years from now, wouldn't you be lucky not to get betrothed to the wrong man today?"

For a second Mulan was stunned, intrigued at her Grandmother's wisdom.

Love? Mulan ruminated. How could one love someone he or she hardly knows? Her mind argued with skepticism. But, her sight roamed through the garden archway where she could see her parents. Her father's hand enfolded her mother's affectionately as they spoke. His eyes gleamed with tenderness and passion, wandering occasionally to observe his wife who was still absorbed in talking to him. A warm wave wrapped her heart, hoisting her hope. Perhaps there is such a thing as love…. even in an arranged marriage.

"And I can feel that tomorrow will be your lucky day!" Grandma Fa added throatily, breaking Mulan from her momentary trance. But before she could continue her lecture, a distinct growl came from down below, impolitely interrupting their conversation. Mulan smiled sheepishly.

"Mulan, you haven't eaten since morning!" Grandma Fa rose from her seat. Her deceptively fragile hand tugging Mulan's forearm and dragging her towards the house. Mulan opened her mouth, about to refute the words of allegation, but her stomach protested even louder.

"I think we better feed it before it causes an earthquake." Grandma Fa remarked teasingly. This time Mulan nodded and followed her with obedience.

The next morning, with the dew still thick on the grass, Grandma Fa strode to the nearby temple to release Cri-Kee while taking a cauldron of soup for the monks. She serenaded a delightful tune as she walked, when a lady in a formal outfit walking in haste, accidentally barged into her. Both stumbled back from the impact of the collision, and were promptly covered in a soupy mess.

"Oh dear gods, my apology!" The lady hastily offered her hand, aiding Grandma Fa to stand up.

"No, don't worry dear. At least I smell delicious!" Grandma Fa waved her hand dismissively. "Shame for the soup though." The lady commented, looking pointedly at the vegetables clumped on the ground.
"And how are you?" Grandma Fa raked her gaze up and down the lady's figure, evaluating the situation. The lady's make-up was now smudged by a mixture of sweat and broth. There were a few slices of carrot and onion trapped in her beautifully styled hair, her silk slippers were coated with grime and ginger, and her fine silk hanfu was beyond recognition. But even in her chaotic appearance, Grandma Fa didn't fail to appreciate her striking features. Her big, dark eyes glinted under the sun, her sharp-hewn face was decorated with fine lines, a perfect balance of age and former beauty. Under her ruqun, the evidence of her tight, feminine figure was still obvious from her elegant posture.

"It will take a few hours, but I can still go home to change." The lady replied, but Grandma Fa could sense exasperation in her voice. After a few minutes questioning her, Grandma Fa gathered the lady —Mrs. Li, came to visit her sister who lived two villages down the road. She was on her way to her niece's wedding ceremony.

"Would you like to come to my home? I live only a few blocks away. I am sure my daughter-in-law has some spare clothes she could lend you." Grandma Fa proposed.

Mrs. Li contemplated for a moment. It was undeniably a hard offer to resist. After thanking Grandma Fa's benevolence incessantly, Mrs. Li walked alongside her.

Ceaseless conversation and harmless banter echoed from Grandma Fa's quarters. With Mulan and Ping in school, and their parents visiting a relative over the weekend, Grandma Fa had the house to herself.

"Thank you for opening your house for a stranger like me," Li Yue said, politely taking a sip of her tea. "And this ruqun... I shall...-

"Don't worry about it, my daughter-in-law has plenty. I bet she hardly noticed one of them was missing," Grandma Fa replied, pouring more tea into her own cup. "I believe our fateful meeting is not merely an accident."

"Maybe not," Li Yue smiled.

Minutes into the conversation, it became obvious to Li Yue that the Fa matriarch was a talkative and friendly lady—even indulging a little too much on a piece of scandalous tale. Grandma Fa's mesmerizing eyes twinkled with enthusiasm when she explicated her own life story, including the dramatic escape as she ran away from home to marry her lover. Instead of feeling ashamed and curbing the temptation to spill more salacious story, Grandma Fa fed her with more juicy scandal by saying her son was conceived outside the wedlock—the story that had become so intimately familiar with Li Yue.

"My life with him was this great, big adventure. Our life was, by no means easy. Our village people shunned us, both our parents disowned us....and we have to live the rest of our lives knowing the burden of dishonouring them was our choice and doings. But... we did have each other and we promise to conquer every storm of life together," Grandma Fa said, smiling somberly as she closed her story.

A glimpse of anger and regret rose in Li Yue's chest, but she chose not to say anything. This was someone else's life, someone else's story who happened to mirrored her own... except that...

"I should stop talking." Grandma Fa said. She must have noticed the swing of mood in the room.
Later on, Li Yue found out that Grandma Fa's son was none other than Fa Zhou, an illustrious soldier, and war strategist. She impressed Grandma Fa further with her knowledge of a few battle strategies Fa Zhou created during his time of duty before his injuries forced him to relinquish his position as Army General.

"I am honored to get to know an incredible lady like you, Aunt Fa," she flattered.

"You are quite knowledgeable yourself, Mrs. Li," Grandma Fa responded, "Not many women are well informed about what happens in the world of men, especially in the Army."

"Please, just call me Li Yue," she said with overwhelming sweetness in her voice. "My husband, Li Jiang used to work with your son. That's how I heard about how great he was." Grandma Fa's eyes glimmered with pride as Li Yue lavished a string of spontaneous adulations over Fa Zhou's previous exploits.

Their repartee drifted from their husbands and sons, to the betrothal. Of course, Grandma Fa didn't fail to mention Mulan's phenomenal performance at the Matchmaker's house, not that she considered it to be shameful, in fact quite the opposite.

"I actually have a son who is of a perfect age to marry. However, we haven't found a suitable bride yet," she articulated persuasively. Considering Mulan came from a desirable background of excellent nobility, Li Yue couldn't help but get ahead of herself to offer her son's hand in marriage.

"He is a Captain working under his father's regiment. A very hardworking and promising young man," she advertised eloquently while her idle hands gracefully located her purse to show a modest portrait of her son.

Li Yue's lips curled in a contented smile when Grandma Fa's eyes widened in astonishment, captivated at the likeness of a handsome young man with perfect posture, sharp facial features and firmly toned muscles.

Realizing victory was within her reach; Li Yue went to insinuate further."He is twenty-four years old," she took the liberty to add extra information," and his name is Li Shang."

Lowering her voice to a conspiratory whisper, as if she didn't want anyone to know, "I am sure he would love to come and stay for dinner," she added, closing her offer with an accommodating smile.

By then the spark of interest in Grandma Fa's eyes had turned into a blazing inferno.

I am sure I want him to stay forever. Grandma Fa replied in her thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

Note: In this chapter, I emphasized how Grandma Fa used to be an adventurous, brave and slightly rebellious girl. After seeing the movie, since General Fa Zhou and his wife appeared to be quite placid, I would imagine that Mulan got her assertive trait and spark of creativity from her Grandmother.
I know in the movie, little was said about Li Shang's mother. In my fic, I portrayed her as a sweet talker, patronizing and sniveling lady who indulge herself in a juicy gossip. I think it would be an interesting mix to have Mulan against a typical snappish, dictatorial mother-in-law in later chapter.
The Promise of Happy Ending

Chapter Notes

Again thanks to WindSongEnchantment (FF, author of Love or Law) for her beta :-)  
This is a filler chapter, I had to admit it's a little boring. I promise chapter 3 will be a lot more exciting. Meanwhile, enjoy!

Silence is the perfect herald of joy - Shakespeare

Shang reined in his horse alongside his parent's carriage. His eyes trailed to the solitary hill where a modest house, encased within a thick wall, was sitting by the riverside. The land around it flourished with lush grassland, cascading willows, and well-cultivated flower beds; a perfect setting for China's greatest hero to spend the rest of his peaceful retirement.

"I believe that is the Venerable Fa's house, General Li," Shang heard one of the foremen told his father after methodically drawing correlations between the squiggly lines on his map with the actual landmarks in their vision.

The entourage moved closer and stopped completely just outside the archway to the Fa's residence.

"Oh gods, look at that handsome man over there!" Shang's ears accidentally picked up a hushed whisper followed by muffled feminine giggles.

"...and he is in uniform too!" Proclaimed another enthusiastic squeak. Her voice was soon drowned out by the twittering and cackling dissent among them. Shang flicked his sight briefly to them but regretted his action soon after when his eyes were greeted by a number of coquettish ladies flashing their coy smiles at him.

Feeling the heat rise to his cheeks, the young captain hid his true discomfit under his usual stoic mask and stern facade. Shang wasn't known for bashfulness, nor insecurity, but when it came to women the only weapon he could yield when he was faced with this kind of mortal enemy; one he couldn't fight off with his sword; was his unperturbed, "in command" countenance.

He hastily engrossed himself with other thoughts, averting his eyes to focus his attention on the house in front of him. After all, this was what he came here for, to get himself a bride. He wondered what she was like and whether she would be his perfect wife. Shang was very much familiar with the protocol of betrothal, especially after his father lectured him about what was to be expected of their meeting today. He was aware he might not even have a chance to see his bride-to-be until the day of the wedding itself. The thought worried him but even as he masked his apprehension behind steely fortitude, his mother could decipher how anxious the young captain really was. Through the journey, she repetitively reassured him that she and his father had selected nothing but the best woman for him. Although Shang remained skeptical, he just quietly nodded in reply.
An opulent looking carriage was parked outside the Fa residence. A few of its foremen were chatting idly while feeding their steeds, relaxing after the long journey.

Emerging from the carriage was a stocky, mature looking gentleman dressed in formal robe. He was quickly joined by another, younger, man, slightly taller than him but with equally perfect posture. He looked to have been riding beside the carriage when they first arrived for his fine robes bore the dust of travel, unlike the first man. Behind the two men was a lady, who Grandma Fa immediately recognized.

Dressed in finest hanfu, which was embroidered with colorful thread, Mrs. Li looked like a stately lady, very much unlike the day she met Grandma Fa after her accidental debacle. Even from a distance, Mulan could see the exquisite beauty of her future mother-in-law. She owned a flawless complexion, flattering curves for a woman her age, and an alluring gait as she tottered on her bound feet, careful not to step past the hem of her ruqun. It was no wonder that General Li took a real interest in such an individual with perfect appealing beauty.

Mulan quickly hid herself inside the house. Her presence was unwanted unless someone invited her.

From behind the obscurity of the paper wall, Mulan heard the older gentleman introduce himself to her mother and her grandmother as General Li Jiang, who used to served on the same battalion as her father. Her cognitive mind quickly deduced that the younger man must be Li Shang, her husband to be.

The men sat in Fa Zhou's private business room. From the slight gap between the door and its frame when it was left slightly ajar, Mulan caught a glimpse of her future husband sitting with her father, listening intently to the conversation. He was like Grandma Fa described; tall, dark and handsome. Well, Mulan couldn't exactly take in too many of his features so quickly, worried he would notice her staring at him if she lingered, but it was clear to her who Li Shang inherited his charming appearance from.

While the three men conversed in the private room, busy with the more serious, mundane business of dowry, house and wedding rites; the ladies sat around the dining table, indulging themselves in mindless conversation.

Fa Li, acting as the generous host, regaled her guests with a wonderful spread of food and selection of tea in the dining room. That was when she invited Mulan to make her dramatic entrance.

Mulan tried to glide gracefully. However, one of her feet caught the hem of her formal dress. She ended up stumbling and spilling the tea all over the floor. This was not the kind of dramatic entrance she had been planning… but it was still dramatic nonetheless.

She flushed and fumbled to recover from the ordeal only to find that her constricting outfit impeded her movement to bend low enough to pick up the mess she created. Thankfully, her mother swiftly came to her rescue. After cleaning the stain off her impeccable ruqun, Mulan took a seat next to her mother. Suddenly, the room dropped eerily quiet. Mulan curbed her desire to squirm under the perusal of her future mother-in-law's piercing stare.

Li Yue inclined her head towards Fa Li, "So, this is the girl that caused the catastrophe in the Matchmaker's house?" At first, Li Yue had thought Grandma Fa was exaggerating her story about the phenomenal mishap Mulan had created during her attempt to obtain a groom. But now, seeing it for herself had her believing every word.
Fa Li couldn't believe Li Yue's audacity, but she remained silent until Grandma Fa opened her mouth ready to deliver her biting reply. Fa Li cleared her throat loudly to bring the old woman back to her senses. She knew exactly what Grandma Fa's insolent mouth was capable of doing.

"You heard right, Sister Yue," Fa Li responded with her long-suffering voice, "However..."

"Mulan is capable of a lot of things other girls cannot do," said an annoyed, raspy voice. Fa Li's eyes widened when she realized her mother-in-law had still gone ahead and sabotaged the conversation despite her warning. Mortally irritated at Li Yue's prejudice, Grandma Fa bluntly administered her sharp retribution."She is excellent with a sword, literate and educated."

By then, it was clear that Shang's mother didn't share the same value and sentiment as the Fa's matriarch.

Solemnly taking a sip from her cup, Li Yue replied, her voice calm and composed,"Playing with swords is not for girls," perhaps Mulan imagined it, but she heard the faintest note of warning in her tone. "And the effect of exposing your skin to the sun is irreversible." She added.

Mulan was shocked when Li Yue suddenly snatched at her hand. Apparently, her mother-in-law-to-be saw nothing wrong with taking unheard of liberties. The woman examined the rather unkempt palm very thoroughly.

"Hmmm...." Li Yue drew a breath while her eyes prowled over Mulan's sun-kissed skin. Judging by the disgusted expression on her face, Mulan knew she strongly disapproved.

"I am sure your son will be able to appreciate a girl with a brain rather than just a perfect figure, sister Yue," Mulan heard her mother offer her opinion modestly. "Besides, we still have time before the wedding to... fix those things."

Li Yue almost snorted in skepticism, but she held her grace. Grandma Fa was close to throwing another pot of soup at her, this time voluntarily. Perhaps she even considered making Mrs. Li an ingredient.

Thankfully, Fa Li caught on to Grandma Fa's burgeoning frustration. To relieve the escalating tension and the prospect of murder, Fa Li wisely asked Grandma Fa to usher Mulan to the kitchen to brew another pot of tea. Consecutively, the male members of the group trickled in to join the two remaining ladies. Grandma Fa was quick to return to the room and, after sending a sharp glare in Li Yue's direction, she took her seat once more. Mulan was equally quick to conceal herself behind the kitchen door, determined to hear every life-altering word. Fa Li averted her gaze to the floor, pretending nothing had happened. Glacial silence fell across the room.

With all the men seemingly oblivious to the ongoing rift, the ladies turned their attention back to the main topic of their meeting. Fa Zhou gestured for General Li to speak.

"The Honorable Fa Zhou and I have come to an agreement to accept the betrothal." General Li announced in a thundering voice that hit the silence like a mighty cannon."And, with the prospect of impending war hanging over China, we must finalize all the wedding preparations immediately." He addressed his audience who listened to him raptly. "Is everyone clear?"

Meanwhile, Mulan was concealing herself behind the door, taking note of every word that would alter her future.

His question was answered with a collective nod until Li Yue indicated she had something to say,"As Mulan's future mother-in-law, I would like to add a request. She will have to be trained
under my tutelage and constant supervision within the final eight weeks before her marriage." the woman darted her gaze to Mulan with enough scorn to make a grown man cry. Mulan flinched at the treatment.

After digesting Li Yue's request, Grandma Fa's eyes flashed dangerously and Fa Li's breath caught in her throat. By this point, Mulan's head was swimming in raw apprehension as hundreds of voices in her head screamed various scenarios of her condemned life in the hands of her snappish, distrustful and overbearing mother-in-law.

With the aura of contempt rising in the air, even the placid Fa Li felt she needed to stand up for her daughter's rights. "Sister Yue, isn't that a little bit… -"

"Irrational and unnecessary?" Grandma Fa interjected from where she sat. Her voice was dripping with disdain. By now the opposing party was looking truly offended.

Fa Zhou cleared his throat loudly. "Ladies!" His voice of supremacy took control of the situation, successfully halting the disagreement and restoring order.

"Mrs. Li, I appreciate your gracious offer," his voice gradually mollified into more persuasive tones. He softly looked over at his wife and gave her a reassuring nod. "However, since Mulan will be staying with your family after she marries and therefore we will spend less time with her, would it be agreeable for you to stay with us in our humble abode to assist in her learning process instead of shortening our time with her?" With polite diplomacy, Fa Zhou offered a solution. His eyes glanced to General Li, asking for further consent.

Li Yue's forehead creased with a blunt frown of disagreement, but she immediately rectified it, smoothing her features into a more agreeable outlook, upon seeing her husband's subtle look of disapproval in her direction before he refocused his attention on his colleague.

"Honorable Fa Zhou, we accept your wise suggestion." General Li swiftly dipped his head signifying his approval without consulting his wife's opinion further."We are looking forward to having Mulan as a part of the Li family."

There was no peace in the Fa house even a few weeks before Mrs. Li came to stay with them. Though Fa Zhou tried to reassure his wife and his mother that Mulan was more than capable of meeting her prospective mother-in-law's expectations, it didn't assuage Fa Li's apprehension.

Fa Li directed all of her energy into accommodating Li Yue's presence. She was constantly tidying the house; inspecting minuscule flaws that could potentially displease her important guest; while Mulan tried to find distraction by helping her Grandmother, who was not nearly as spry as she pretended to be.

Mulan tried not to think too much about the upcoming days when Mrs. Li would come, solely to educate her to be the wife she deemed fit for her son. She had a feeling it would not end well. Unfortunately, she found it hard to find anything that could divert her mind off the subject.

Ever since the unwanted betrothal, to Mulan's dismay, she had to stop practising her sword fighting. Also, in line with her future in-laws' mandate, Mulan was forbidden to spend any time in the sun without a covering of some kind and she had to limit her time riding Khan. In preparation to be a bride, she had to watch her figure, constantly bath herself with fanciful fragrances and rub her body down with exotic spices. Her mother began pestering her about her looks and prohibited the cutting of her hair to better enhance her feminine look.
Mulan used to go to school with her younger brother, Fa Ping, even though she had to dress like a man to avoid unwanted attention. Her father had permitted her to explore the world of boundless knowledge which was, at the current time, only available to privileged men. From the start; inspired by her own father's exploits; Mulan was drawn to politics and battle strategy. Unfortunately, this powerful insight had to cease right after her hand was given in marriage to Li Shang. In order not to disappoint his daughter further by depriving her of the things she loved, Fa Zhou summoned a tutor to come and teach her calligraphy and painting.

Mulan wistfully thought her problems would be solved after she got herself a man. She was about to find out just how very wrong she truly was.

The day of Mrs. Li's arrival finally came. It was strange to think that in a few weeks time, Mulan would be leaving her old life; its comfort and freedom; behind.

Mulan's anxiety built up by the minute, until she caught the silhouette of her parents tending the garden together, working side by side. Her father was always perfectly responsible and composed. He was the voice of wisdom and authority in the house, while her mother balanced his personality with her sensitivity and gentleness. Together they worked seamlessly building their home.

After five long years of marriage, Fa Li had given birth to a daughter. Mulan was a girl with astonishing positive energy, bringing joy into their household with her boundless spirit and her zest for life. But still, Mulan was not the son many Chinese families looked forward to from the strong, beautiful couple.

Grandma Fa thought that the couple's love would wither in the face of adversity and prejudice, but Fa Zhou refused to take another wife and chose to be son-less rather than hurt the love of his life. The trial, instead, paved their relationship and expedited the growth of their love. The gods seemed to reward Fa Zhou's loyalty and steadfast support when Fa Ping, their son, arrived ten years later.

Whether it was a lucky union or a planned coincidence, her parent's successful marriage was solid proof of how a random, unknown match with no potential of compatibility, could be nurtured into true love. This somehow soothed Mulan, reminding her of the possibility of a happy, fruitful marriage, even when one had to marry a stranger.

From the garden, Fa Li stole a glance at her daughter who was expeditiously dusting the porch of the house. All along, Fa Li had known Mulan was a wild-spirited, idealist girl.

Despite all their combined effort, Fa Li was certain her daughter would never fit into the mold of the perfect bride any traditional men had in their mind. With all honesty, as a mother, she was worried Mulan would never marry for the rest of her life.

Although Mulan's boundless courage was one of the most beautiful things about her - which men in their right mind would try to appreciate a girl born with a zeal of fire in her heart and clouds of fantasy in her mind? Now the universe had bestowed her a match. Instead of feeling liberated and peaceful, Fa Li felt apprehensive that Mulan would never be the perfect wife Shang had hoped for.

The feeling of strain enveloped the Fa's dwelling as soon as Li Yue made her appearance. Seeing the chance of an antagonistic interaction between Mrs. Li and his mother, Fa Zhou wisely sent the old woman away to avoid any possibility of unnecessary bloodshed.

Mulan wasn't completely clueless when it came to feminine courtesy and respectability. She
understood her womanly duty around the house, what she should or should not do. She knew how
to cook, clean, diligently keep the house tidy, and attend the family laundry, so they were never
short of clean, fresh clothing. But apparently, Fa Li's standard was nowhere near Li Yue's.

In her awareness that she had not much time to spend, Li Yue began preparing Mulan almost
immediately. She was determined to mould Mulan into her son's perfect bride. Ever since the first
bad impression Mulan had left on her the day she stumbled over her own dress, Li Yue had a
fundamental doubt about Mulan's ability to become a proficient, graceful wife - who acted and
conducted herself respectfully.

"Stop chewing so loudly! You were not born in a barn."

"Mulan, you are slouching!"

"Don't stare at your husband! However, he can stare at you."

"How many times do I need to remind you to redo your hair before your husband comes home?"

"You call this garment neatly ironed?"

"Oh gods, you smell like the kitchen! Don't expect Shang to cuddle you in bed if you are smelling
like his dinner."

"Mulan, you need to know how to hide your tiredness in front of your husband. Here, use some
makeup!"

Those lines of reproach became a regular encounter in the Fa's residence. Li Yue's lustrous, yet
sharp, yell rebuked Mulan for every minuscule mistake she committed.

Mulan wrestled and struggled with the implacable heap of lessons Li Yue piled on her. Li Yue
speculated that Mulan would eventually break down and give up the fight. Perhaps this would
ultimately convince her husband, Li Jiang, to call off the prenuptial arrangement, or even make Fa
Li realize her daughter would never be fit as anyone's wife.

Since the day of her arrival, Li Yue could see why Mulan behaved like a foolish teenager unaware
of social rules and expectation. No one in the Fa household seemed to be able to tame the dark
horse of the family. Fa Li was far too gentle, and Fa Zhou spoiled his daughter by giving the girl
freedom to pursue her heart desire.

But what Li Yue had falsely conjectured was Mulan's reaction to her brutal teaching regime.

At first, Fa Li disagreed with Li Yue's constant chiding, however, after four weeks under the
woman's merciless supervision, the results couldn't be argued with. Mulan began to get a grip on
the situation. Instead of surrendering to her failures and crying in defeat, Mulan was persistent and
kept up the fight. Li Yue's constant harsh criticism, belittlement, and barbarous admonitions
became Mulan's motivation to strive resolutely to succeed. Li Yue was pleased with the results,
and silently commended Mulan's unyielding spirit.

Just when Mulan thought the hard bit of the lesson was behind her, Li Yue had another important
task for Mulan to master.

It was exactly one week before her wedding when Li Yue invited Mulan to her quarters.

"Mulan, sit down. I have something to show you," she said commandingly, her hand picked up a
scroll from the pile that Mulan recognized as her dowry. Li Yue unraveled the parchment on her bed and with her index finger drew Mulan's attention to the inscription of ink marking its surface."This is a dowry painting, every exemplary Chinese wife must learn this fundamental knowledge prior to their wedding," Li Yue announced tonelessly.

Mulan felt her cheek blushed realizing the indecent content of the scroll. It was depicting an intimate lovemaking position, four of them to be precise. Next to her Li Yue coughed loudly, winning back Mulan's undivided concentration.

It was clear to Mulan that her future mother-in-law didn't just expect her to display ladylike gentility and make her husband feel at home. She also needed to excel in the much less public areas in her married life, such as pleasing him in bed or comforting him after a tiring day at work.

"I believe your mother has never properly educated you on how to please a man.... in bed." She gestured for Mulan to study the parchment."If a girl wishes to be a perfect wife, she needs to hone her bedroom skills and be prepared whenever her husband demands this of her. This is crucial to keep your marriage intact and a vital part in discouraging him from searching for comfort elsewhere."

Mulan couldn't believe she was having this conversation with her future mother-in-law. Retrospectively, Mulan admitted, just like the majority of Chinese parents, her mother was reluctant to share this kind of profane topic and had avoided it completely, now leaving her as a clueless damsel in distress merely a week before her husband required her service.

"I hardly have time to think about men," Mulan answered obstinately. In her critical mind she argued, why couldn't she be a perfect wife by just being who she was? Why couldn't she ask her husband to understand her and accept all of her personality traits and weaknesses, as she would his?

"Now you have to. You will be living with one," Li Yue stated, her expression unperturbed even though she began to feel irritated at Mulan impolite attitude. Li Yue went on to explain the detail of lovemaking procession so that Mulan knew what to expect on her wedding night. While Mulan had come to terms with her own arranged marriage, engaging in intimate rites with a stranger still repulsed her to no end, and she was hoping Shang would be reasonable when it came to this.

"Aren't all the chores I do; the cooking, the cleaning and bearing him sons; enough to suffice to make him happy and enough to abide by the social rules?" Mulan persisted, answering defensively."Why do I still need to strive to please him in bed like a whore?"

This time Li Yue had enough. Her annoyance compounded with every daring word Mulan said to defy her logic, manipulating her into abandoning the course of tradition.

"Mulan, my son is not marrying a maid nor a concubine!" she reprimanded her with a firm voice. Mulan cringed upon hearing her prospectus mother-in-law's blunt, biting reply. "As a wife, you must know your place. It's your primary duty to know how to please him, and that goes far beyond making a hospitable home and running a warm bath!"

Li Yue observed how Mulan's fearless, dazzling, dark eyes enveloped with disappointment. Her courageous posture now slumped in defeat, and the spark in her eyes disappeared upon realizing what kind of life she could expect from this marriage. She would have to trade her freedom for a life of unending servitude with no prospect of acknowledgment, respect, nor rewards. Honestly, Li Yue felt miserable to shatter her innocent dream, to tear her many fantasies of a loving marriage into the grim reality of life bound by rules and obligations.

"But how can I please him if I hardly know him?" This time there was hardly any defiance in
Mulan's intonation, only a sincere curiosity, demanding answer and enlightenment from Li Yue as the more experienced party.

The brief spur of frustration which was previously evoked by Mulan's stubbornness abruptly evaporated. Li Yue looked sympathetically into her youthful countenance, relating Mulan's experience with herself in her younger days thus realizing the validity of her inquiry.

"Well...." She said, her voice softening,"All men are the same. The key to their hearts is in their belly and underneath their pants."

Mulan blinked incredulously. That was the most absurd, shallow and unanticipated explanation she had ever heard from a lady as revered as Li Yue, the wife of the esteemed General Li, especially after the sudden detour from their conversation. She was expecting her to say deep proverbs that would silence her rebellious thoughts completely.

"You don't believe me?" Mulan heard Li Yue's deriding reply."Mulan, your failure with the Matchmaker, wasn't because you are not graceful, dainty nor lacking awareness in feminine proclivity."

After spending nearly two months with Mulan, Li Yue was very much aware of Mulan's hardiness and uncompromising spirit."You were unsuccessful because you refused to fit into the mold of a typical woman befitting to marry."

Mulan sunk her head. She knew the woman was right about her. The tradition demanded a wife to be effeminate, obedient and foolish, and Mulan was anything but those. She was tomboyish, independent and stubborn. She always challenged her own boundaries, dared to try new things, and believed no defeat could ever be final. She knew she could force herself to fit the mold if she wanted to. But even when she mastered all ladylike propriety and fooled the world, she still couldn't fool her heart.

However, Mulan was no selfish daughter. She understood she lived in a time and place where she had to conceal her heart and bury her dreams. Besides, she wasn't the idealistic little girl she once was. She used to have her head above the clouds, fantasizing about the things she would achieve when she grew up. By maturing in her choice, despite the intensity of her wants, she accepted her predicament and would adhere to pleasing her family and her country's traditions.

"Mulan, obey me," Li Yue implored. "And I promise you, you will be the perfect wife my son could ever want you to be."

Chapter End Notes

Laughing at your own mistakes can lengthen your life. - Shakespeare

Laughing at your wife's mistakes can shorten your life. - Shakespeare's wife

To those of you who are interested on Chinese tradition, The dowry painting was actually a file of erotic pictures: about 8-10 pieces of art that showed different ways of having sex. They were very crude and mostly from woodblock printing because there was a large demand for them. Before the wedding, the bride's parents would often buy one or two sets of dowry paintings and put them inside the dowry. The daughter brought the dowry paintings to her husband's house and spread them on the bed on the
wedding night. The newly-married couple would have sex according to the paintings.

The first record about dowry paintings appeared in the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD), and their material objects could still be found at the time of the founding of the Republic of China (1912 - 1949). Thus, we could see that dowry paintings existed for a very long time in Chinese history. (from: WomanOfChina dot cn)
The night before her wedding day, Mulan found herself looking into the reflection of her mother's mirror as Fa Li gently ran a comb through her silky hair. Her lips chanted some poems of blessing as a part of the wedding rites.

A few months ago Mulan's hair was brittle, rampant with split ends, and a lot shorter. Her skin was dark as peasants and her hands were calloused and rough. These past few weeks she had received an exhaustive beauty treatment, and the result definitely showed. Gazing into the mirror's reflective surface, Mulan hardly recognized the beautiful and delicate lady staring back at her.

"Mama?" Mulan saw a quiet smile grace her mother's face in their shared reflection in response to her query.

"How did you learn to love Baba?"

While love bore clear evidence in her parent's marriage, Mulan had never spared any thought on how that came about. Not until her turn was right around the corner. Her daughter's question stopped Fa Li's hand instinctively and her smile was transformed into a thoughtful frown.

"Are you worried you won't like your husband?" It was Mulan's turn to crease her forehead hearing her mother answered her with a question.

Fa Li reached to tuck a stray strand of Mulan's hair behind her ear as she leaned closer,"Time will teach you, Mulan. As your father and I went through the sea of life together, forging through tears and hurdles, plowing across hardship and challenge... friendship and trust were built, and our love began to grow." She answered sagely."It took days of serving, months of dedication, years of molding, learning to understand his character and the things that please him. Love is not about receiving, it is about giving."

Mulan sat quietly, pondering on her mother's wisdom. It is not about receiving, love is about giving. She repeated the words in her head.

Her hair was piled on her head, neatly secured with numerous pins and a massive headdress. She glanced at the luxurious, crimson Kua laid out on the bed, the words of the Matchmaker resonated in her head.

You may look like a bride, but you will never bring your family honor!

Her contemplative musing was interrupted when one dainty finger lingered on her cheek. "A little more face paint," Li Yue gestured to the makeup artist. Mulan stared at her other self, the Fa Mulan that she had known was opinionated, unfettered and full of life. In contrast, the unknown girl in the mirror was dainty, delicate and elegant.

Will he be disappointed when he knows who I am?

Unfortunately, no one could answer that question for her; it was for her to find out.
Their marriage ceremony would be modest and short. With the imminent threat from the Huns looming over China, all the wedding preparations were done in a rush. Despite the strain of time and busyness occupying most of her days, Mulan couldn't completely ignore the unavoidable reality of her unwanted marriage, a marriage that she was obliged to take part in to save her parents honor and fulfill her public duty as a woman.

The day itself came with a note of surreality surrounding it. Fa Zhou held her hand to lead her into the bridal sedan, where the unfamiliar figure of a man waited patiently for her. Mulan deposited herself on the couch opposite her future husband. Soon, their crusader headed to the Li's residence, where Mulan would spend the rest of her marriage life as his wife.

It was Mulan's first time being this close to the man she would soon be married to. She risked a quick, inquisitive glance, just to capture a silhouette of Shang through her crimson veil, sitting with his rod straight posture, his stoic expression betraying nothing. From her limited viewpoint, Mulan could see his dark, muscular frame. Very much fitting the image of the illustrious soldier her father had advertised to her. There was a certain aura of authority radiating from him. Mulan could see why this young man had been ordained as a captain at such a very young age.

After accepting Shang's hand to dismount from her bridal sedan, Mulan set foot in the Li's residence for the very first time.

The Li's residence resided on a quiet road at the outskirts of the city, a favorable distance away to reap the benefits of both the city's close convenience and the privacy of country life. It was spacious, perhaps twice or three times bigger than the Fa house. The splendid structure was supported by red pillars. Its walls were covered in painstakingly painted, extraordinarily detailed carvings alternating with jade marble tiles. The edge of the roof was gilded with silver and gold, gleaming under the perusal of the late summer sun. Servants and guards in full uniform stood readily on either side of the grand, double-door entrance. Fa Li and Mulan's brother, Fa Ping, were at the sedan as soon as it came to a halt to act as their official escorts.

In a large room, Mulan was welcomed by numerous eager faces that had been awaiting their entrance.

All their relatives gathered, waiting for the bride and groom to declare their vow in front of the family altar. Mulan paused then, to meet Shang's gaze ever so briefly through the veil. He gave her a very slight encouraging nod as if sensing her hesitation, though nothing on his face gave away even a hint of emotion. He went on to perform the ritual without bothering to look at her again, and she did the same.

His vows felt empty to her ears, to be answered with equally meaningless promises that fell from her lips.

Mulan maintained her calm and solemn composure throughout the ceremony, even though deep inside she was feeling insecure and uneasy. She might have saved her family's honor and landed a good catch in marrying a handsome captain, but her mind kept trailing off to the list of responsibilities she would now be obliged to do—from her wifely duty, bearing him sons, to relentless subjugation for the rest of her lifetime. Mulan coaxed herself with the illusion that every woman in China eventually had to marry a complete stranger, and there was no reason why she couldn't do what other girls were capable of doing.

But the sudden reality of her situation touched Mulan's mind when all the married women ushered her into the marital chamber, leaving their male counterparts laughing and drinking downstairs. Even though Li Yue had equipped her with all the necessary bedroom knowledge to please her new husband tonight, the thought of sharing such an intimate moment with a stranger completely
paralyzed her. Li Yue helped her to sit daintily on the edge of the bed, arranging her skirts attractively, while her mother left to invite the groom and the men to join them.

In front of the small audience that huddled around them to share the moment of joy, Shang lifted up her bridal veil to catch his first unrestricted view of his bride. Mulan reluctantly looked at her new husband. Beyond his intricate outfit and hidden underneath his fancy headdress, she could see a handsome soldier, a faint smile and his mysterious eyes gazing at her. His warm hands enclosed around her cold, tense fingertips. Suddenly, she felt her apprehension melt away on the gentleness of his touch. Maybe getting married to a stranger wasn't as frightening as she thought it would be.

Shang wrapped one of his arms around her waist, planting a chaste kiss on her forehead, and the crowd burst into a jubilant cheer. Mulan remained quiet, submissively curling her frame into his. Inadvertently, her eyes caught the sight of her parents, smiling in delight and shedding little tears of joy as the man of their choice gladly embraced their daughter as his wife.

Witnessing Mulan obediently submit herself, being the passive recipient of her husband's affection, Fa Li was hopeful that the match would eventually grow into love.

The guests stayed for an hour or so bantering poems and songs to help ease the tension between the newlyweds. It was close to midnight before General Li invited everyone for another round of drinks downstairs.

With all the guests leaving her, Mulan was left alone briefly with her mother and her mother in law. Fa Li told Mulan to sit down and began removing numerous intricate hair ornaments and straightening her hair, while Li Yue fetched her sleeping robe.

"Mama?" Her mother halted her expeditious hand from removing the pins from her daughter's hair.

"Do you think Shang will ever love me?" Suddenly, Fa Li's face turned rueful. Mulan immediately regretted her question. She should have known that in the context of an arranged marriage, love was the last thing that mattered, but in her churning mind she still couldn't give up the idea that one day their marriage would be based on love, trust and friendship instead of satisfying the biological call for procreation.

Briskly, Li Yue took over and helped Mulan to change into her night robe. "That will depend on you," Li Yue answered firmly. Mulan caught the slight annoyance in her voice. Fa Li backed away quietly because it was disrespectful for her to interrupt Li Yue as the groom's mother.

"Questioning your husband too much could be dangerous and inappropriate. I suggest that you just accept what we women are bound to do and serve your husband with devoted diligence." Her mother-in-law chided sharply, even as she gently patted away Mulan's formal makeup.

Fa Li made her exit soon after, and Mulan caught a note of frustration in her mother's eyes. Mulan hoped she would be able to reassure her mother the next morning, before she returned home with her father and her brother, that everything would be alright.

Li Yue rubbed spices on Mulan's skin, took a few step back to inspect, then meticulously tidied her hair into a simple bun. Meticulously, she reapplied a lighter layer of makeup; bringing out Mulan's eyes with a few subtle lines of kohl and reapplying stain to her lips to enrich the color; freshening her up after the pummeling of the day's activities. Finally satisfied that her son's wife looked nothing less than perfect, Li Yue's lips curled into a smile.

Then, she touched Mulan's chin forcing her to meet her intimidating gaze,"Please don't disappoint
your husband tonight. Remember what I've taught you." She warned, however, Mulan didn't detect any malice in her mother-in-law's voice. In fact, she caught a glimpse of bitterness, as if she was sympathizing with her predicament. After Mulan nodded in absolute submission, her mother in law left her to wait for her groom.

With the time slowly creeping well beyond midnight, Shang retreated into his chamber to find his wife already waiting for him faithfully. She looked tired but seemed to be more than willing to wait for him.

Mulan immediately felt the urge to occupy herself with something, just to avoid an awkward situation with her husband. She poured her attention into tidying up the already tidy pile that was her wedding dress, jewelry, and hair accessories, but couldn't concentrate entirely, because she felt Shang's unnerving gaze scrutinizing her every move, studying her and accessing what kind of wife she really was.

Shang was not in any rush to conversate with his new wife. In comfortable silence, he observed her inquisitively, taking note of her wonderful curves and the quaint profile of her delicate face as she laboriously employed her hands to folding the Kua she wore earlier on.

"So your name is Mulan," she was startled by the deep, baritone voice behind her. Mulan whirled around, sensing that it was impolite for her not to face her husband while he was speaking to her.

"Yes," she answered briefly, unconsciously staring at Shang's features that now looked a lot more relaxed. His raven-black hair that had been tied back neatly, fell down to graze his broad, powerful shoulders. He was clad in a matching, scarlet, sleeping robe, with a deep vee, exposing a large amount of his toned chest underneath. Mulan began to realize how pleasant looking her husband really was. His attractiveness, together with all of his heroic accolades, would render any woman defenseless. Most would waltz willingly into his arms.

Her husband's expression was still unreadable, but his piercing gaze methodically drifted from her face, to her frame, to the hem of her vermillion robes. Remembering that it was completely unacceptable for her to stare so openly at him, Mulan avoided his eyes and held her breath, hoping her husband would say something that would end the uncomfortable silence.

"I heard a great deal about you from my mother," Shang said, Mulan was sure Li Yue only spoke about the negative things that she did, "I heard you are quite…"He paused to select his words,"...an unusual girl."

"I suppose that is one way of putting it. I love to sword fight and am an experienced horse rider," Mulan lowered her voice, trying not to sound like she was bragging about her skills, however, mentally she was brimming with pride over her accomplishments.

Of course, Shang had heard the accounts of her trouble-making adventures, not to mention the mayhem she created at the Matchmakers. Therefore, hearing Mulan accredit her fighting ability, Shang could not repress a mocking scoff, "Sword fight you say?" His voice laced with a mix of disdain and skepticism, shredding her pride down to pieces. Perhaps her father had raised her wrongly for failing to discern her status as a woman but, in her mind, Mulan blindly objected to Shang's baseless prejudice.

"Yes, my father has been teaching me since I was a child, he said it's a good skill to have regardless of one's gender." Mulan tried to reason her radical point of view.

"That's interesting," His reply sounded very vapid and insincere. "You should start learning to use a
kitchen knife, which is much more fitting for a girl.” He stated in an overbearing voice.

Mulan's heart dropped to the floor. She had been futilely hoping her husband wouldn't be like every other man who couldn't value a girl with a brain and skills to rival a man's. But apparently, her mother-in-law was right. Ultimately, men were only interested in food and sex. Appreciating a woman's independent opinions would never exist in their agenda.

"Do you realize how beautiful you are?" He complimented, gazing intently at the delicate features of her face. Her distinctive, dark eyes embellished with curling eyelashes, stared at him arrestingy. Her arched brows knotted expressively as her mind drifted in thought, and her unusual gracefulness while running her nervous fingers through her straight ebony hair. The soft glow of the candlelight reflected on her fair skin, bathing her silky cream complexion with its golden touch. Her crimson robe rested invitingly on the edge of her shoulder, revealing her bare skin and more than a hint of cleavage, taking his breath away. The robe's rich color flattered against her pale complexion, and neatly accentuated the subtle contours lying underneath. She was, by far, the most bewitching creature he had ever had the pleasure of laying eyes on.

"Leave the fighting to men, Mulan." Absently, he ran his finger down her blushing, rosy cheek. Mulan jerked abruptly from the unexpected contact.

"But... my father said women are, in many ways, as capable as men." Mulan refuted in a low, strained voice. Shang could sense behind her bold statement, there was silent desperation, imploring him to accept her for who she was. Some part of him was impressed and applauded her for her courage to defy public bigotry, but Shang couldn't tolerate a housewife that acted like a man.

"Hmmm…. Is that so?" He raised his brows with mocking skepticism."No wonder you failed the matchmaker's test." Mulan looked at her husband in dismay. It hurt her, knowing the man she would share her life with didn't have any faith in her abilities.

Shang watched as a string of defenses formed on her lips. He had heard about Mulan's stubborn willfulness and her determination, although part of him appreciated his wife's fabled dexterity and was amused by her idealist mindset, he still wanted her to conform to the value of a typical aspirational marriage — that a man and a woman were viewed differently in the eyes of society. As the leader of his household, Shang didn't wish to be labeled as a husband who couldn't educate his wife.

Shang's growing dominance provoked Mulan to challenge him. Reinforcing her courage, Mulan grabbed two wooden swords and passed one of them to Shang as she spoke,"I dare you to show me your sword skills. If you lose, you have to admit that a woman can be a master in this art, as much as any man."

Her fluent articulation and impetuous request startled him. Shang nearly burst out laughing in disbelief at Mulan's audacity, but his mind fell into a speculative stillness noticing his wife was entirely serious about her proposition.

Mulan saw Shang's jaw tighten and his fists clench hearing her insulting demand, but he still solemnly retained his composure. She knew Shang was offended by her contemptuous behavior.

"Fine," he hissed viciously, accepting her offer of confrontation. Shang's rationality rebuked him fiercely. It was their wedding night, and the bedroom was certainly no place for a show of martial arts, let alone a husband and wife's battle for superiority. But his manly arrogance told him otherwise—this strife was necessary to teach his rebellious wife a lesson in submission and make her aware of her position in his domestic establishment.
"And if you lose… you will have to obey me as your husband from now on." Shang declared, breaking the contemplative silence. A thousand warning bells clanged madly in Mulan's head, but she couldn't afford to back down, especially when it was she who challenged him first.

The tension in the room was palpable, but Mulan refused to go down without a fight.

Both of them stood in their defensive stance. Shang was the first to ensue the onslaught. The sound of wood clacking together filled the air. Thankfully the party downstairs was equally loud to mask whatever ruckus they created upstairs.

Mulan watched Shang's fluid movements as he thwarted her attack, executing his form with cool sophistication which stirred something unknown inside her, was that unbridled admiration? Shang was equally captivated upon seeing that her gentle, fragile wrist was capable of delivering dangerous cuts and devastating blows. She was a lot more agile and nimble than he thought she would be. As the fight continued, Mulan's bun came undone in the process. Raven black streams cascaded down her back like a waterfall over her fair skin. Shang was briefly mesmerized at her unique splendor, deeply bewitched by her unconscious gracefulness. He had fought with many great fighters, but he had never been challenged by a woman, let alone his own wife. Noticing that Shang had let his guard down, Mulan leaped forward in a lethal ambush, disarming him and stopping right when the tip of her wooden sword threatened Shang's jugular.

"Do you yield, Captain?" she smirked victoriously. Shang was surprised, but he quickly retaliated by grabbing her wrist and snatching her sword from her unsuspecting hand. In one swift, sure movement, he thrust the sword towards her torso for a fatal blow. Mulan was cornered and rendered helpless. With infuriating force, Shang made a final slashing motion meant to utterly defeat her, only to pull the sash of her robe with the tip of his sword, revealing her almost bare figure underneath. A winning smile spread across his face as he pointed his sword towards his half disrobed wife.

Mulan felt her breath leave her and her hands instinctively clamped down on the edges of her robe, preventing it from leaving her shoulders. She was still regulating her shaky breaths from the exertion when her mind reminded her that her husband had won.

"From now on, I won't condone with any more disrespectful behavior from you." Shang berated haughtily, putting away the swords and flashing a warning look at her. "Women are not made to fight. Understand?" Evaluating her husband's curtly given statement, Mulan felt anxiety claw up her throat.

"I… I am sorry," Her quivering lips shook as she apologized. Her vision of him blurred behind a sudden blanket of tears.

The lines of argument about how much she wished to be his equal died prematurely on her lips. She knew she deserved her husband's verbal castigation for her mutinous actions.

Although Mulan admitted her defeat, witnessing her sorrowful countenance impeded Shang from claiming his victory. He felt a sudden bite of remorse assail him. Shang hated to see her beautiful eyes shrouded with sadness.

"I guess now we are ready to enjoy our wedding night," This time his words were uttered with tenderness.

"But…I am not ready." Her shaky voice was catching him off guard.

"You aren't ready?" Shang nearly exclaimed at her, his eyes narrowed intimidatively, demanding
clarification. His mind was formulating a line of accusation, wondering if this was another way his wife was trying to manipulate him.

"What do you mean you are not ready?" His lips were ready to berate her again for her lack of preparation. He would not let her throw another mindless excuse at him or attempt to sell more feminist propaganda.

"I am not ready to please you." Mulan forced the words from her throat, fearing Shang's angry retribution."I may be able to satisfy you with my body, but not with my heart." Her words pierced his soul like an arrow, decimating all his fury, tearing away all his desire to rule over her.

*Your heart.* Shang repeated to himself. Did he ever wish to have her give all her dedication and her obedience with the wholeness of her heart? Did he ever wish this woman to do everything for him out of love and not duty? And wouldn't it be perfect if he requited the same sentiment equally? *That would be nice*—he thought. But there was hardly any time to cultivate love. Adhering to rites and rules must come first, because that was their duty to their parents and ancestors.

Shang made up his mind.

"You don't have to do anything. Just follow my lead," He said soothingly."And you will be my perfect bride tonight."

Chapter End Notes

A hair combing ceremony (梳頭 [sò tàuh]) is also conducted on the eve of the wedding. After showering with water infused with pomelo or pomegranate leaves, the bride and groom change into a new set of clothing and shoes. Attending female family members bless them aloud as they sit in front of an open window with the visible moon or in front of the mirror.

The four blessings are:

一梳、梳到尾、[yàt sò sò dou méih] (with the first combing, be blessed to be together to the end,) 二梳、百年好合、[yih sò baak nìhn hóu hahp] (with the second combing, be blessed with a hundred years of harmony in marriage,) 三梳、子孫滿堂、[sàam sò jí syùn múhn tôhng] (with the third combing, be blessed with a houseful of children and grandchildren) 四梳、白發齊眉、[sei sò baahk faat chàih mèih] (with the fourth combing, be blessed with longevity)

A sweet dessert soup containing pink glutinous-rice spherical dumplings called 湯圓 tòng yūhn is served after the hair combing ceremony to wish the couple a complete and sweet marriage.
...and you will be my perfect bride tonight.

His words of reassurance echoed in her head. Unfortunately, instead of a calming balm to her soul, his words inflicted horrifying fear. Her heart thundered in her ears. Mulan was hoping a mighty power of divine intervention would emerge from the night like a specter to deliver her from her fate.

Shang reached for her waist, fettering it within his strong arms. Mulan's body tensed as she felt his calloused hand brushing her shoulder, displacing the fabric of her robe to give him an unobstructed view. His warm lips touched on a sensitive spot around her collarbone, then behind her ears; sending shivers racing down her spine. Mulan wrestled with her desire to fidget or break free. She accepted her misfortune, like a calf being led to the slaughter. Feeling her chest tighten and choke her with fear, she closed her eyes, reminding herself of the lessons her mother-in-law taught her, but her mind struggled to find its focus.

Shang carried her to their bed and deposited her gently upon its cold, silky sheets. After a long moment, where he simply stared down at her with enough intensity to make her squirm, he left her to get undressed. Mulan, reciting what was expected of her next, began obediently removing the last piece of fabric that clung to her body even though her hands were shaking with terror and reluctance.

Behind the translucent concealment of the bed's valance, she could see her husband removing layers of his clothes, exposing dense muscular arms and thighs, rippling in perfect harmony with every unconscious movement. Under the perusal of the weak candlelight, his copper skin glowed with a captivating sheen. A couple of scattered battle scars enhanced his masculinity. His glossy hair glinted like silk threads, framing his sharp, bold features. His raven-black eyebrows accentuated his eyes and gave him a stern, serious look. Mulan found herself admiring the majestic display of his toned figure, but swiftly turned her head away in embarrassment when her husband's fingers hooked into the waistband of his pants to remove them.

Shang approached his wife to find her frigid frame facing the other way, her fingers tightly gripping the edge of the sheet that covered her own nakedness. Part of him was disappointed that Mulan didn't show any interest in pleasing him but the other part was feeling intensely guilty about forcing an innocent virgin to share an intimate passion with a man she hardly knew. While Shang understood loveless sex was common among arranged marriage's couples, as a man, he couldn't fathom the dread of sleeping with a stranger and the horror of being violated by a man, not until he witnessed how scared Mulan was.

"Mulan?" he pitched his voice to sound as gentle as possible.

"Yes?" she whispered back, but she didn't turn her head. Mulan shivered, fighting the deeply ingrained inclination to curl up and hide herself from Shang's scrutinizing gaze. His fingers reached out to her cheek, and his rough knuckles brushed it gently, inviting her to look at him. Mulan forced herself to look into his dark, fathomless eyes that were looking at her so softly.

Shang continued to study her countenance, taking note of her gently curved cheekbones, and her soft, thin lips. His stern expression eased when he saw her eyes. They were filled with dreams of
chaste romance, that kind of exhilarating, true love that she often read from the sappy novels and soap operas her grandmother indulged in. Instead, she was now faced with the dreadful reality of being enslaved by a man's sordid fantasy.

It hurt him that he had to break his wife's delusion of the loving marriage she had been craving. But what else could he do? He knew he was incapable of offering her the pure, unblemished love she coveted, because he hardly knew her. How could he give his sincere love to a stranger?

Well, he could have waited until she surrendered herself willingly. But Shang vigorously shook that idea from his head; they had to consummate their marriage immediately, whether they liked it or not was hardly relevant when it came to adherence of the rites and abiding the command of cherished traditions.

Shang crawled closer and lay down next to his wife, feeling the bed curve underneath their weight. He paused right then, engulfed in a drowning wave of admiration witnessing his wife's naked splendor. Her flawless, fair skin contrasted nicely with her long, midnight hair. Her tight figure sculpted with gentle curves around her waist and adorned with a pair of exquisite breasts. She may not be the perfect exhibit of ladylike elegance and femininity, but Shang had to admit his wife was astoundingly attractive and exceedingly beautiful. Not to mention her dexterity and sword skill were exhilarating and unique.

But was this love?


She felt his breath brushing her skin, spilling over her shoulder. His hand was comfortably warm in contrast to hers, but didn't help to alleviate her trepidation. Her heart thudded loudly in her ears as she felt his roving fingers travel on her midriff up to her chest, hungrily exploring his new privilege.

His parted lips brushed against hers gently, before firmly pressing in sensual surrender. The kiss was gentle, fervent and passionate, but it was lacking the element of sincerity and affection. It was the kind of kiss she never anticipated feeling—devoid of emotion, barren of love. It was a kiss that introduced an innocent maiden into the world of carnal passion and forbidden lust, a world that relished a woman as an object of pleasure. While her mind cultivated with panic and her heart shouted in despair, Mulan closed her eyes, denying all awareness of what would soon take place.

Shang placed his weight carefully on her, trapping her between his sculpted chest and the soft bed, imprisoning her hands within his. He sighed in disappointment when he found Mulan shutting her eyes tightly like a frightened child.

"Don't be afraid," Shang coaxed her in a soothing voice. He invited her to release her frigid grip that clawed into the bed.

Emerging from her own dreamlike daze, Mulan opened her eyes to meet his profound gaze.

Shang could see tears rimming the edge of her eyes, eliciting a wordless lamentation for her broken dreams under the curse of duty, bound by honor. But Mulan refused to let her tears to fall. She nodded shakily as a sign of her compliance while her pleading sight begged him for mercy, to do the act swiftly.

She knew she was a fool, for allowing her dreams to become the greatest expectation, a nonsensical hope that her first night with her husband would be filled with love, induced with passion and bathed in happiness.
"I promise I'll be gentle," he whispered again.

Mulan clutched his figure tightly, while her nervous fingers bit through the dense muscle on his back. Her body tingled with every contact of his skin and shuddered with petrifying anticipation as she felt his body press closer to her. Mulan tried to silence her conscience that was currently screaming to forbid this stranger to touch her. She looked again into his dark, hypnotizing eyes, swallowing the knot of terror and fear and seeking futile refuge from the climatic event that was about to alter her status forever.

Normally Mulan would welcome morning with a joyous tune. Despite her boring chores in the Fa house, Mulan always managed to find some sort of entertainment that would turn a mundane routine into an absolute adventure. Like feeding the chickens, for example—thanks to her grandmother's creativity gene—Mulan had invented a fast and efficient way to spread the seed by tying a holey sack full of corn together with a rod and a dangling bone on her dog's collar.

But today was different, for once, morning came with a definite feeling of dread attached to it. The bright brilliance of sunlight filtered through the slight gap of her bedroom window, and the birds serenaded sweetly, welcoming another beautiful day, but Mulan found none of this blissfulness calming. In fact, she felt that the wonderful sound of nature so completely diverged from her mood, that it only made her feel worse.

Sluggishly opening her eyes, Mulan was greeted by the alien sight of their marital bedroom. Shang must have awoken hours ago—he was neatly folded to the side, and his subtle masculine scent no longer filled the room. Going by how bright it was, it must have been well beyond breakfast time.

First day as a wife, and I'm already late. But, Mulan consoled herself with the thought that she did well to survive the havoc and chaotic schedule these last couple of days had brought. Having a little lay in wouldn't do much harm, in fact, it was well deserved.

Slowly, she pulled herself into a stretch and ran her fingers across the smooth surface of the bedsheet. It was then that she saw the crimson stain spread across its silky threads, reminding her that Shang had taken her maidenhood and bestowed upon her a new status, that of a wife. His wife.

The word sent a static ache of anxiety over everything, making her world feel unfocused and unreal.

Staring wide-eyed at the red canopy of their bed, Mulan let her mind evoke the vivid recollection of the passion induced moment that led to the stain on the fabric. She remembered those strong arms curling around her, trying to calm her spirit from the inevitable doom. She recalled how she had trembled and squirmed beneath him, and how her breath came in short, fearful gasps—but Shang hadn't seemed to notice her misgivings.

It was natural that she wanted to forget everything that happened that night but, to her chagrin, his searing kisses and the burning sensation of his body lingered with her long after he had gone. It was no doubt in her mind that her husband merely played his cards right to win her willingness to satisfy his call. Every affectionate gesture they shared that night had been a lie, after all.

And the marriage bed is supposed to be where a couple joins their souls and enjoys the blinding spell of passion no words can describe, she thought ruefully.
But why did his smile seem to resonate so strongly with her? Despite her mutinous act earlier, Shang did everything so gently with her. How could he forgive her after those frenzied moments? Did he draw from personal experience? Or was he just that good at lovemaking?

A loud knock on the door broke Mulan's mindless drivel. Without a word, her mother in law entered with a pot of tea and a fresh robe. Mulan hastily sat up, being sure to keep her blanket covering her bare torso, trying to compose herself and regain her sense of dignity.

A few steps into the chamber the woman stopped, as though something stalled her from coming any farther in. Mulan could feel her scrutinizing gaze roam across her figure. She hastily pulled the blanket higher around her chest to cover absolutely everything.

For a fleeting moment, their eyes met. There was an unexpected radiance of sympathy and remorse that Mulan had never seen from her before. But Li Yue was not going to admit to feeling it. Her features remained indifferent and unemotional while her hands efficiently cleared away the soiled bed sheet. Unceremoniously, she helped Mulan to cover herself with a fresh robe.

"This is to ensure conception," Li Yue announced while nonchalantly pouring the tea and offering Mulan the cup."Expect to serve your husband again tonight," she commanded in the way one might instruct a soldier. Mulan just bit her lip and nodded mutely, accepting her obligation to fulfill her nuptial commitment.

Thankfully, the evil mother-in-law disappeared from the scene in exchange for her gentle, caring mother.

Fa Li didn't fail to notice how disheveled her daughter was—her make-up from the night before was smeared all over her pillow, her bun was nonexistent, the pins having been pulled out by her husband's eager hands, and her hair was all over the place as though a tornado had happened last night, not to mention the dry tears encrusted on her cheeks—Mulan must have been crying in her sleep.

"Mulan," Fa Li voice implored warily,"Are you okay?"

Was he rough to you? Did he...hurt you? She wanted to say, but the words just choked and pricked her throat.

As though Mulan could hear her thoughts, she knew the meaning behind Fa Li's woeful expression.

"No Mama, don't worry," Mulan looked down into her tea, blinking her eyes furiously to keep tears at bay. "Shang was very gentle with me."

When she found her courage, Mulan met her mother's gaze and forced a weak smile, hoping Fa Li couldn't detect the emotional battle lurking underneath. "You need not be concerned." Mulan finished reassuringly, for she couldn't bear to see her mother heartbroken or worrying incessantly over their loveless exchange.

"Oh, thank goodness. I am relieved," Fa Li replied, almost sounding like she was trying to convince herself.

"Now, shall I help you bathe? I have prepared some warm water. You need a little rejuvenating after such a long day yesterday." Mulan obediently trailed behind her mother to the designated bathroom.

After combing and neatly tying her daughter's hair into a bun, Fa Li put away her robe, but as soon as the garment left her skin, Mulan heard Fa Li's faint gasp.
A few small red marks marked Mulan's pale skin; around her neck, arms and her collarbone—silent proof of the blinding passion and lustful desire that had consumed her husband last night.

"They're just love bites," she heard her mother say, trying to sound unconcerned and casual. Suddenly Mulan felt dirty with the traces of their lovemaking session imprinted all over her body. But her mother's bone-white face caused Mulan to keep whatever unhappy thoughts she had, confined inside her head. The last thing she wanted was for her mother to fret about her well-being in the Li's house.

After Mulan bathed, ate her breakfast and went to the Li family's temple to pay her respects, it was time for her to bid her farewell to her family.

Fa Zhou encased his daughter in his strong, warm hug, Fa Ping gave his sister a parting kiss, while Fa Li and Grandma Fa tried to hold back their tears. Soon, they were on their way home, and Mulan's new life as Shang's wife officially began.

A few days later, things started to fall into a pattern. Every day, Mulan started her new routine; waking up in the morning to help Li Yue to prepare breakfast for their husbands. From the kitchen, they could hear the distant battle cries from the men who were running through their drills.

Living in the Li's household required a few adjustments for Mulan. The interaction among family members tended to be confined by formal protocol in contrast to the casual and relaxed attitude of the Fa house. There were no written rules, but occupants of the Li house all seemed to be in a consensus to not talk about personal things unnecessarily.

Despite the formality, Li Shang and General Li were close to each other. They hardly spoke about anything deep, but the glint of affection and love between them were visible from the subtle gestures they exchanged. In comparison, the two of them appeared to have respect for Li Yue, but nothing more.

Exactly two weeks after her wedding, General Li and Li Shang had to attend an important strategical meeting in Chang'an, leaving the house under the commanding hand of Li Yue. Mulan prayed to her ancestors that everything remained calm and uneventful during her husband's absence.

Trying to be the exemplary wife and earning that passage rite that would bring honor to her family, Mulan rose early the next day to do a little spring cleaning inside the room that General Li and Shang shared as their office. There was a lot of confidential, sensitive items that General Li couldn't entrust to a stranger to clean the room.

The room was spacious but lacking personification. It seemed like neither Shang nor his father were sentimental people who were into ornamentation, memorabilia or anything along that line. Amidst the barren, minimalist room, something caught Mulan's undivided attention. On General Li's writing bureau were three framed pictures. One was of General Li, perhaps in his late thirties, one of Shang, as a toddler, perched on a seat in his unsmiling posture.

He looks cold and grave even as a child. Mulan noted.

And the last one was a poised, beautiful young woman.

Mulan's inquisitive eyes methodically studied her new found discovery. She certainly could draw some correlation between the General Li’s younger self and Shang at the present time, even the child version of Shang appeared distantly like him. But Mulan was positive the woman in the
picture wasn't Li Yue although some semblance was visible.

"Ah… you found something interesting I see," proclaimed a hoarse voice behind her, "Don't worry… I won't tell anyone." Mulan could hear the smile in her voice. She turned around to find an old woman, grinning smugly.

She said her name was Mei Lan, one of the longest serving maids in the house and the only one allowed into the General's office. The way the elderly lady smiled, teased and carried herself reminded Mulan a lot of her quirky Grandma Fa.

"As you may have gathered, that was Miss Xia, Madam Yue's sister." Mei Lan revealed, lowering her voice into a secretive whisper. "...and she was Shang's mother." Mulan gasped with unmistakable astonishment at her disclosure.

"What happened to her?" Mulan asked gingerly, voice low and filled with curiosity.

"Oh, she died long ago. Not that General Li has ever forgotten about her." The old woman nonchalantly pulled out a stash of pictures from a desk drawer. It was a picture of the same woman, in various poses, mostly portraying her doing a dance routine. Mulan could imagine how General Li was charmed by the woman's wild beauty, enthralled by her captivating smile and smitten by her flawless elegance.

"She is… very attractive," Mulan remarked with her eyes still fixated on the stash in front of her with unfeigned awe.

"Oh yes...yes. Both sisters were undoubtedly elegant, for sure. But, personality wise, Xia was very different from Yue despite them being siblings. Yue was serious, ambitious and hardworking while Xia was vivacious, full of life and carefree. It is a shame that even so long after her death, General Li can't seem to move on from his loss." Mei Lan remarked.

The additional information reiterated in Mulan's mind, turning the cogs and wheels of her critical thinking. Mei Lan's words fit well with the odd interactions between the Li family that she had witnessed. Perhaps that's why Shang was never as affectionate as one would expect from an only child to his mother.

Suddenly Mulan could sympathize with Li Yue, having to marry a man that had bestowed his heart to someone else. She could only imagine young Yue had to endure prolonged years of repressed jealousy, betrayal, and trauma. It gave her ruthless, sniveling attitude a little plausible context. Not to mention the look of genuine sympathy as she saw Mulan the night after her wedding. If a person understood how it felt to lay in bed with a stranger or to live a life with a man who was incapable of requiting her love, Li Yue would be the person.

The revelation served as a turning point for Mulan. She began to accept her mother-in-law's harsh disparages against her domestic ineptitude, generally being dismissive at her slanderous remarks.

At some point, Mulan realized the imaginary bar of expectation was astronomically high. It would take her more than a lifetime to be the perfect wife Li Yue hoped her to be, but part of her could now understand that Li Yue wasn't the not-so-nice person she initially conjectured. Quite contrary, perhaps her mother-in-law just wanted her to have a better life, being the wife well loved by her husband.

Two weeks later, an outbreak of typhoid swept through the region. A quarantine order was placed, and citizens were advised to stay at home as much as they could to prevent the disease from
spreading. The Li household was no exception. Mulan had to be content spending her days confined behind the walls of her home, reading scrolls and doing embroidery to minimize social contact.

Finally, after a month of absence, both General Li and Li Shang returned home; but the prospect of meeting her husband didn't trigger any excitement in Mulan's chest, especially when she recalled his cold, stern attitude.

That night, Mulan found herself sitting around the table with the Li family in uncomfortable silence. To keep her mind busy, she focused her sight on the generous spread of food on the table as if she were having a staring contest with each dish.

"The Huns are coming, we received the report that they have breached our northern border," General Li declared solemnly, breaking the grave silence.

"There is a letter from the Emperor, requesting every man older than fourteen from each family to join the war. There is no exception," he added, casually sipping his tea.

*Every man over fourteen? Would that mean…. Father needs to go?*

Mulan kept her peace even when she was frantically shouting inside. Everyone, including the servants, gasped collectively—but Li Yue hastily dismissed them. Mulan stole a brief glance at the opposite side of the table to witness Shang suddenly becoming very interested in his tea, his expression was unreadable. The room was eerily quiet, the absence of sound was so prominent it was as though no one was breathing.

"Uhm, forgive me, General Li," Mulan addressed her father-in-law reverently, even though she wasn't sure what she was apologizing for, "My father would not need to go too, would he? He can hardly walk, let alone fight the Huns," she tried to hide the disapproving tone in her voice.

General Li brought his fist to his mouth and coughed into it before flicking his sight briefly to his son and then to his wife. Mulan suddenly regretted candidly asking such a question in front of everyone. She should have bridled her tongue and waited until she was alone with her husband to address this kind of delicate matter. Mulan felt social anxiety creep into her posture under the grilling glare of her parent's in law.

"Mulan, we don't question this kind of thing… especially at the dinner table. War is the business of men," Li Yue sputtered, for once Mulan saw her losing her composure for a fleeting moment, but the woman quickly managed to collect herself and contain her emotion.

"But —" Mulan was about to argue, adding a palpable tension to the already perilous atmosphere brewing in the air. She had failed again to rein her lips.

Disregarding the barefaced suffering that was written all over Mulan's face, Shang interjected and glared at her, "That's enough Mulan!" he stood up, smacking his fist with such force that its movement rippled through the table clattering the dishes. His shoulders stiffened and eyes filled with prideful rage,"It's an honor for men to be able to defend their country, advocating our traditions and beliefs! I am sure your father will be proud to take his place," he paused to make sure his wife fully understood his words, "...and it's time for you to learn yours!"

Shang's sharp admonishment startled her. She could even hear his knuckles crack ominously to channel his explosive tirade. Mulan barely knew how to react. She felt insufferable pain pierce her chest, like a knife twisting there. Under the table, she gripped the fabric of her ruqun with both hands, twisting it between her fists to channel her frustration.
Remember a good wife is a submissive wife. Patience and obedience are their virtue. She chanted to herself.

The rest of dinner was done in grim silence and, soon after, everyone left the table nonchalantly.

In the confinement of their bedroom, Mulan tried to contain her nerves from the despicable argument during their dinner. She suppressed the desire to question her husband's authority, to challenge her father-in-law's supremacy, and to learn her place and role as a woman and wife in the Li's household. But it was no use, the more she attempted to subdue the voice within her, the louder it got.

Now it was just the two of them, Shang seemed to be slightly more relieved despite Mulan's thorny defensiveness still lingering in his mind.

"Mulan…" he turned to her revealing a phlegmatic look, but Mulan felt his eyes drill a hole into her soul.

"It was very inappropriate to meddle with manly business." Shang went on to lecture her, but this time his voice had mollified into a conversational tone. He fought with himself, managing to conceal the anger simmering in his chest.

"But, Shang… this had something to do with my Father," she insisted, unable to control the trembling edge in her voice."Isn't it right for a daughter to be concerned?" she tried to convince him, justifying her stand.

"Concern can't help you win a war, Mulan. Sacrifice does." Shang still held his peace, but there was biting irony behind his expressionless facade.

"Shang, please, why can't you go to take my father's place. You are his son too…. Aren't you?" It wasn't a question that required an answer, she had given voice to it more to stir guilt within him than anything else, but Shang had anticipated this.

"Mulan, you promised me that you would not defy me as your husband. This behavior will never bring your family the honor they deserve!" he snarled, eyebrows were drawn together, lips pulling back, and his fists clenching in his attempt to not completely lose his temper. Reminding Mulan of her promise to her parents was her husband's best tactical maneuver, it instantly stripped her of her rebellious state of mind and robbed her of her opinionated voice.

"But —" the word sounded so small and frail. Tears stung her eyes, but Mulan wouldn't let them fall, not in front of this man who had no room for sympathy for her suffering.

"No more "but's" Mulan. You can go ahead and ask your Father. I am fairly certain—a chivalrous man like him will think it is an honor to be able to protect his country, even if it could cost him his life," annoyance radiated from his voice, but Mulan wasn't going to let her father's fate slip through her fingers just like that.

"Shang, it is not that I don't love my country, but sending my father to war would certainly kill him! He can barely walk, let alone run and fight. It would be suicide!" Mulan retaliated, tossing her head of raven black hair with as much false bravado as she could manage in the hope of making up for the quivering that still lingered in her voice. "...and I love him too much to let him voluntarily walk to his death." Sadness and pain marred her words, but her husband was too angry to notice.

"Enough!" the heat of fury built in his eyes as the word flew from his lips. It was the only word he said, but by the withering, hate-filled look he gave her, Mulan knew she had crossed the boundary.
The gravity of the situation and her husband's unwillingness to listen to her plea, crushed her hopeful soul. She felt her husband held a twisted expectation of her being a good wife and a filial daughter. Was taking care of her household, being a subservient wife and being able to fulfill his physical needs become the only measure of her character? Was being infinitely compliant, dutiful and foolish be the only way to bring honor to her family? She was just a girl who had desperately attempted to fit into the mold—but it appeared that she never would be able to, no matter how hard she tried.

Mulan stared emptily out the window of their bedroom, holding back her frustrations by watching the birds freely going about their daily business. How simple her life would be to be as free as those birds, where there was no question of social accountability, marital obligation, and filial duty.

Shang found himself unable to control the sheer volume of ugly words that had built up inside him. But he knew a large part of it was because he couldn't understand his wife. In fact, he never did try to understand her—he was too busy forcefully exerting his authority, exercising his leadership and imposing his principles over her.

Suddenly, Shang regretted chiding his wife in such manner.

His sight found Mulan staring morosely out the window. When their gazes collided, she swiftly cut her eyes to the side, and that's when he realized that beneath the desperation and frustration she was heartbroken.

"Mulan…." he started, feigning empathy, the touch of his hands around her waist interrupted her idle gaze. Although Mulan enjoyed Shang's display of affection, she hardly believed her husband did it out of love.

"Can we just not talk about this?" Shang tried to get the topic off their argument. "I just came home from a tiring week, and all I want is to have a civil time with my wife." He planted a warm kiss on her forehead, "Please?"

Mulan replied to his plea with a joyless smile. She was desperate to push Shang away from her emotionally, because no matter how much he tried to make her believe he felt something for her; it wouldn't change how she felt about him. Mulan was fully aware of the consequences, but unable to stop herself. And it appeared to her….Shang knew this.

"You are certainly made for a purpose mightier than defeating those Huns," Shang declared invitingly. His eyes went around the places they hadn't been invited, and his hands slowly prowled upwards, roaming over the fabric of her clothes. His hot breath brushed her skin, leaving her completely spellbound.

"Besides, soldiers aren't sprouting from the ground just yet. Someone needs to make them…"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to WindSongEnchantment who had beta-ed this story! I would love to hear what you think. I've added a little twist of the story before Shang and Mulan headed for the war. Also, let me know your opinion: should I include Mushu in this story? Or you guys feel this piece had to be more realistic, nail-biting kind of adventure instead of comedic?
Thanks for reading!
"Besides, soldiers aren't sprouting from the ground, someone needs to make them… to raise and nurture them."

Mulan understood what her husband was insinuating, part of her was hoping that Shang would be able to appreciate her existence for more than quelling his sexual needs and answering his manly urges, "But, we just did that a few weeks ago—every day, right before you left for your mission," she argued. However, she quickly regretted her own words, remembering how her mother had often said that even a mighty warrior like her father was still a man with needs, especially after a stressful week and prolonged abstinence.

Shang didn't know whether he should laugh or cry at her naive reply. But a wave of guilt immediately assaulted him when he detected the pain hidden in her usually defiant eyes.

He could have forced her, he had a right to—after all, in Chinese households women were subject to men, she was his supplicant and he was her master. But tonight, he just didn't have the energy or the mood to confront her. Why can't she be submissive and obedient as other wives? Why does she have to be so opinionated? And how can I tame such a rebellious woman? How?...HOW?! The thought compounded more irritation within him.

Dejected and infuriated, Shang turned to leave. That was when he felt Mulan's hand on his sleeve, bringing him to a halt.

"I.. S-Shang, I am sorry." Shang looked at her, completely puzzled at her sudden change of heart, but Mulan caught the longing and desire in his eyes. It reminded her of what kind of wife she wished to be. Shy and uncertain, Mulan slid her own hands beneath the gap of his shirt in an open invitation. Her parted lips greeted him, dousing his anger and silencing his conscience.

I shall be a good wife. She promised wordlessly, watching her advancement kindle the heat of fire in her husband's eyes. There was no more fear; no more hesitation; and hopefully, someday, there would be love.

Mulan let him carry her to their bed and submissively obeyed as her husband removed layers of her clothes. She took the initiation to mimic his movements, indicating that she had learned a thing or two from their previous lovemaking. Her trembling hands clumsily undid his clothes, plucked its knot-buttons and sent her fingers to trace the granite muscles underneath.

Drops of golden candlelight teased her by tracing across his toned muscles, accentuating his god-chiselled chest and dressing his sun-kissed skin in a magnificent halo. His thick arms wrapped in bulging biceps flexed as they imprisoned her.

Mulan thought she would be as frightened as she was in their previous lovemaking encounter. But, to her surprise, her body began answering his call; shuddering with blind pleasure under his searing kisses and fervent touch. She couldn't comprehend her inability to control herself when she was near him. It was as though her body had a mind of its own and suddenly became traitorous. But she also noticed that her husband wasn't in a much different place.

Her name was Mei Lan, a sage looking lady in her late eighties who had been working for the Li
Family since she was fifteen. She was initially hired by General Li's father, a royal dignitary, to aid his two wives, who had ten children between the both of them—all boys, with General Li being the youngest. She had been taking care of General Li since he was in a diaper, through his teen years, watching him grow into the illustrious leader he currently was.

From the outside, Mei Lan was just an average looking lady. However, her warm, bubbly and sweet talking tendency made her personality impossible to hate. She had employed her charming charisma to sniff the truth from the gossip in a household full of contradicting interests, politics and lies. And therefore, she was one of the few that knew the Li's household darkest secrets, including General's Li previous romantic affair.

Once all of his brothers married, although still living in the same compound, Mei Lan became General Li's personal attendant and the household butler. She was laborious, intelligent and resourceful. She meticulously planned the household budget, scheduled the shifts of the other servants and made sure all the General's needs for food and fresh clothing were met. They talked very little to each other, but Mei Lan could decrypt and read the General's mind so well, there was a good chance she understood him better than his mother or his wife.

Shang remembered seeing Mei Lan since his first memory began to form. Due to the nature of his work, General Li often had to leave Shang in the capable hands of various handmaids, and Mei Lan was one of them. At first, Shang thought it was odd that his own mother, Li Yue wasn't interested in him at all, but he was too young to be able to question such things.

When Shang was five, his father moved her from his large family home into a smaller house outside Chang'an. He gave Mei Lan the sole responsibility of taking care of little Shang.

For the longest time, Shang had thought the head servant had been demoted, that she'd been stuck with him as a punishment for some unforgivable blunder. Perhaps she had forgotten to polish his father's sword or served his tea cold or something along those lines.

For the first year they were together, despite the familiarity, Shang hardly talked to Mei Lan. Sometimes, when she dressed him for school or for formal dinner, their eyes would collide briefly before Shang averted his gaze, feeling intimidated and awkward. She had never forced him to open up to her, the servant would keep on talking to him even if Shang never answered or commented on whatever she said.

Shang's insecurity wasn't unreasonable. During his short five years living under the same roof together with the rest of Li clan, all of his cousins, his uncles and aunties were always staring at him with condemnatory, cold and vicious eyes and, to Shang’s chagrin, Li Yue did nothing to advocate him either. They treated him as if he were the black sheep of the family, as if his presence was..... unwanted. Shang was relieved that his father had decided to leave that despicable place, to live on their own.

One day, when Mei Lan was dressing him for school, their eyes briefly met in the tall mirror. Normally Shang would be the first to tear his eyes away, but Mei Lan said something that impeded his intention.

"Xiao Shang," She said, smiling tenderly at his reflection in the mirror,"You reminded me of your father when he was your age."

That moment Shang froze on his toes, watching a radiant smile break on her face. It was a smile filled with unmistakable affection and sincerity, so unlike many of the "smiles" that had coloured all five years of his short life.
"You know what, Dear. Eyes are the window to one's soul, where people can see your mind and intent." She said with a raspy voice, her gentle fingers tracing the distinctive feature of his sharp jawline,"You have that discipline and loyalty from your father and a benevolent heart like…. your mother. I can see that in you."

From the way the old women structured her sentence, Shang suspected Mei Lan didn't speak of Li Yue when she mentioned his mother.

It was hard not to dig deeper once Shang had bitten the little truth out of his unknown past. Mei Lan was one of the few people who knew that General Li had an affair outside of his marriage with his wife's own sister.

"It was hardly his fault," Shang recalled Mei Lan espoused."Your father already expressed his desire to marry your mother since their romance first bloomed amidst the conflict with the Turks. But the Li family felt that your mother wasn't deserving and respectable enough. She was a poised, incredibly talented dancer who lived a carefree life, caring nothing about public image, nor was she interested in the Li's political agenda. Your grandparents agreed that marrying such a woman would make the Li's a social stigma under public scrutiny." Mei Lan narrated.

Since then, Shang frequently engaged with Li Yue in small talk, which would end after Shang asked her to tell him a little more about his mother. It was not long before Shang deduced that he was an unwanted child born as a result of his father's love affair with a woman he couldn't ever marry. It all made sense—it gave the Li family's alienation and disgust towards him a context.

"Then you were born, Shang. You were one very placid baby when your father brought you home to show me," she said back then, brimming with pride that Shang found rather strange."Unfortunately, even with your birth, your grandparents still wouldn't grant your father permission to marry your mother," the old woman sighed sadly.

"There was a big dispute and disagreement. Your mother's parents felt it was the Li's responsibility to raise you, while your grandparents, refused to take you in until your father was legally married to someone —public image was very important to them. So, in order to please the conflicting parties and conceal the scandalous affair—Yue, your mother's older sister, who was a fine, educated lady, was then given to your father to wife."

To be frank, even Shang couldn't imagine that his stern, disciplined father had fallen in love with a girl that looked like a feminine nonsense and seemed to be as delicate as a vintage heirloom. But Mei Lan insisted that love was blind, no one could control what kind of woman suited the desire of one's heart. "Love is a bright stain on vision, blotting out reasons. Don't you see how a grave and serious man like your father could be so gentle and affectionate towards you? It's because he loves you. We are shaped and fashioned by who we love… when you grow up you will understand this."

All throughout the narration, Mei Lan was taking extra precaution never to mention Shang's mother's name. She was scrupulous to give her depiction so Shang could know enough to know her and feel the connection, but would not go into the details that could provoke Shang's hatred towards the rest of his family for their ill-treatment.

It was probably for the best that Xia, Shang's biological mother, died not long after giving birth to Shang. Otherwise, Mei Lan could imagine that the young man would pursue the truth and tear his family apart to quench his curiosity of the woman he shared his blood with.

"But don't you be afraid." Mei Lan said again, watching trepidation rising in his innocent eyes when he learned of his mother's unhappy ending.
"Your story might not have a happy beginning, but that doesn't make you who you are. You are who you choose to be." Mei Lan's tender eyes gazed at him with sympathy.

After that unplanned encounter with his childhood secret, Shang was determined to prove himself harder than ever. Mei Lan was always there, although always in the background, but she was always present, reminding Shang to stand up straight, to carry himself confidently, to speak up for himself, and to maintain his manner in front of his family and dignitary.

Years rolled by. Inheriting his father's strength and his mother's poise had made Shang an excellent candidate for the Imperial Army. Before long, at the tender age of twenty-three, he was made a Captain, reporting directly to his father as the General. But of course, whatever position Li Shang had earned, inside the gates of his home, he was still the same little boy to Mei Lan.

It was the first morning since Shang and his father returned back from their one month post in Chang'an. A faint knock on the door woke the man. Shang opened his eyes to find his wife was no longer in bed. The scent of something delectable greeted his nostrils, he suspected Mulan was already in the kitchen with his mother preparing breakfast.

Shang hastily dressed himself in his bedroom robe."Please, do come in."

It was Mei Lan, the old woman's deceptively skinny hands carrying a tower of fresh clothes that was almost as tall as she was.

Without any preamble, Mei Lan asked him openly, watching the young captain in front of the mirror as he tried to make himself look a little more presentable before going down for breakfast. "Good morning Young Master Shang. Have a good rest I see," she said cordially. "I saw your new wife. She's very clever and independent for a woman."

The remark evoked a fragment of their heated argument flashing in his mind. You have no idea, but he merely shrugged.

"I saw she had a wooden sword. Is she a warrior or something?" the old woman added, bombarding the young captain with questions. Shang shook his head and chuckled in response to Mei Lan's astute remarks. He knew, his former nursemaid had a morbid snooping inclination that quite possibly had been ingrained in her blood.

"She isn't." Shang said tentatively, wondering whether or not telling the truth would spark another wave of juicy gossip."It's just... she —"

"Ah, it's shouldn't matter actually." Mei Lan interrupted him uncaringly. The old lady looked over her shoulder before whispering loudly to him."But I see that she pleased you rather well in bed, just see how late you wake up this morning!" she leered with a mischievous, seductive grin that looked completely out of place on her wrinkly face. Shang's face turned a few shades deeper at her slanderous remark. It was no secret that Mei Lan's audacity in teasing him was almost a daily occurrence—he wondered if he would ever get used to it.

Not knowing how to retaliate, Shang only could only groan into his palms. The old lady laughed and slapped the young man's shoulder like an old friend."Look how bashful you are now! Oh, gods! Shang, never in my life would I expect to see you so dramatically embarrassed over a simple comment. Especially a comment about girls. Get over it young man, she is your wife!"

"She is quite a strong headed girl, very opinionated." Shang finally found his voice, causing the old woman to pause in her giggling fit. "I heard that she failed the matchmaking test. But yes, apart from that, I think Mama Yue trained her well. Although with strict supervision, she managed to
cook me my favourite meal last night before we.. —" Thankfully he managed to stop himself from revealing too much detail about his personal life.

"Before what?" Mei Lan leaned closer, making sure she didn't miss a single word, and Shang just wanted to sink into the wall and die than to continue this conversation.

"Nothing." The young captain blushed, trying to stave off his nursemaid's drilling questions that cornered his faltering resistance. He glanced shyly at the old lady who grinned smugly like a madwoman.

"Xiao Shang, you are so proper. It's adorable!" a broad smile split her face.

"And you still called me 'Xiao.' I am not even small anymore," Shang scoffed, wanting the floorboard to swallow him whole. Thankfully no one else heard this mortifying conversation.

"Shang, you are a man with a tender heart," she patted Shang's hand affectionately while her eyes admired the handsome man he had become."It's just….you have had the slight misfortune of being surrounded by the wrong circumstances, and they crushed that kindness and gentleness out of you. A man doesn't live off rice and sex alone… you need a companion, and…. love."

Shang tugged the hilt of his sword nervously, he disliked anyone lecturing him about emotionally sensitive matters, but at least he knew Mei Lan meant well.

Mei Lan closed the door of the closet, while Shang fell silent. "The supreme happiness in life is the conviction that we are loved," Mei Lan stood up and walked towards the door,"...and that girl tries to love you, Shang. I hope someday you will learn to requite her gesture."

With that, she exited the room, leaving Shang alone with his thoughts.

Mulan struggled the whole day not to think or mention anything about their disagreement the day before. But the thought of her father's frail figure marching to war kept flashing in her mind. This morning alone, she had managed to pour Shang's tea into his bowl instead of his cup, spilt his porridge and offered him her slippers instead of his.

She knew Shang had noticed her negligence and carelessness but had decided to let it slide. Mulan was quite certain her husband knew exactly what had distracted her, but perhaps he wasn't keen to confront her and repeat the harsh conversation they had last night.

That night, even after spending hours cooking, dusting, cleaning and fulfilling her wifely duty in bed, Mulan still couldn't fall asleep. Next to her, Shang had long ago gone into slumber, snoring lightly with one of his heavy arms holding her waist. Carefully detaching herself from the warmth of her bed and her husband's clutch, she slipped away and headed to the family reading room.

With the purpose to bore herself to sleep, Mulan searched General Li's office and managed to fish out the thickest, most uninviting looking scrolls that were coated in thick layers of dust. Grappling two thick scrolls with her arms, she threw herself into a comfortable corner of the room, reading to fall asleep.

But instead of finding the content dull and uninteresting, Mulan was deeply captivated by their contents. It was General Li's war handbook titled Thirty-Six Stratagems, which meticulously depicted China's battle strategies and Master Sun's Art of War, written by a war theorist that expounded on the culmination of the epic feud between the Wu and the Chu dynasties.

She must have spent hours reading, drifting in and out of consciousness until someone called her.
"Mulan?"

The familiarity of the voice resonated within her mind and snapped it into full alert. Mulan vaguely remembered what had happened, but she found herself outside the Fa's residence, falling asleep under the blossoming plum tree. Her eyes quickly identified the source of the voice, none other than her Mother, standing by the moon gate.

"Mama… why are you here?" Mulan said, completely bewildered. She wasn't even sure why she questioned her mother's presence in her own home.

An amused smile twitched her mother's lips. "Oh, Mulan. Is there anything wrong with a mother wanting to have a little chat with her daughter?"

"No, not at all," Mulan muttered lowly before sobering. Truthfully, Mulan hardly ever had small talks with her mother. Each occasion such time became available to them Fa Li would end up lecturing her, and Mulan was obliged to listen out of respect.

"Tell me about Shang," her mother requested gently after depositing herself next to her daughter. For a fleeting moment, Mulan's mind flew off on a tangent. "Shang?" she said with a strained, subdued voice. All she recalled were a lot of unhappy thoughts. "Ugh, what… —what do you want to know about him?" Mulan gulped as her voice cracked a little. Her mind frantically tried to form the right sentence to express her thoughts on her strict, tyrannical husband and phrase it as diplomatically as possible.

"I just want to know how much you have learned about your husband, Mulan," Fa Li tried to mollify her daughter's atypical apprehension.

Mulan sighed dejectedly. There was no point of hiding it when, clearly, her mother could read her like a book. "He is cold and distant, Mama. I feel… I feel that he has no interest in knowing me. You are lucky to have Baba."

Fa Li laughed softly, gathering the perturbed child into her arms. Her fingers fondled her daughter's hair, running her digits between the strands. "Mulan, you think your father was gentle and caring from the start?"

"Was he… fierce and uncaring?"

Her mother shook her head. "Your father was impassive, arrogant and a very serious man when I first met him."

"Really?" Mulan ventured, completely unconvinced. "I would never have guessed!"

"He was. Well, put it this way, he was a soldier Mulan. Discipline, hardwork, and perseverance were his food. For the first year of our marriage, I did not dare speak to him. Let alone defy his orders," Fa Li chuckled as her mind drifted into the past.

"And then, what did you do?" Mulan scooted closer.

"Well… I wanted to make our marriage work. So, I learned and strived to please him. I did the things around the house for him willingly, I cooked his favourite food cheerfully, and I… —"

"And here goes the bed business." Mulan butted in, slightly satirical this time.

"Mulan…. —!" Fa Li gave her a knowing look.
"Sorry sorry... I am just teasing, Mama."

"It wasn't until years later that I knew your father loved me as much as I did him. Perhaps more," her mother continued, her face radiated with a brightness that could have lit up the entire universe.

"How did you find out?"

"I heard from his captain back then that he shed tears every time he received a letter from me. He also refused to take another wife despite me not giving birth to a son, he was faithful to me even through the ten years we waited until Fa Ping was born," Fa Li said with a smile that seemed permanently tattooed on her lips.

"That's awfully sweet. I think you've changed him," Mulan replied in a slightly disappointed tone. She knew how proud and obstinate her husband was; it was going to take her an entire lifetime to convince him of anything.

Her mother shook her head."No. Mulan. Your father didn't change. He just grew, turning into the man his family needed him to be," Fa Li consoled her."In due time, Shang will be just the same. Have faith. Have courage. Be patient in showing your affection and dedication. It'll bring honour to you and your family someday."

Fa Li was a long-suffering and caring woman, and Mulan knew she would never be like her mother. Fa Li was a perfect bride, a dream wife, in contrast, Mulan was everything her mother wasn't. What would people say if they knew Shang had a wife who could use a sword better than she could cook? A wife who questioned, challenged and antagonized her husband's every decision?

"I'm afraid, I don't have such courage. I am not you, Mama. You are obedient and submissive... a perfect portrayal of an exemplary wife," Mulan replied in a suppressed voice.

Fa Li smiled. She had predicted that Mulan's unyielding character would often cause friction between her daughter and her equally controlling son-in-law.

"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen." Fa Li exhaled pensively,"You must learn to love him unconditionally." She reached for her daughter's hand, her fingers curling around Mulan's anxious palm, warm and comforting.

"Unconditionally?" Mulan echoed, meeting her mother's eyes.

"Yes, it means you care about his happiness more than your own, no matter how much pain it may bring you," Fa Li imparted her wisdom, "And when you are suffering, remember: the flower that blooms in adversity is the rarest and most beautiful of all."

"I will try, Mama," Mulan promised.

"That's my brave girl," an unrestrained brilliance blossomed across Fa Li's face, "But I hope you'll still visit us from time to time despite your role as a wife. You know your Father misses you terribly."

"Ah, yes. Of course, I will. There can be many prospective grooms, but there will be only one father." Mulan giggled playfully, and leaned on her mother's shoulder, cuddling her arm affectionately. Fa Li began to hum a song from Mulan's childhood, while gently stroking her daughter's hand. Mulan closed her eyes, indulging in the rare moment of peace and tranquillity.

Suddenly a sharp knock was heard.
Mulan's eyes jolted open. She found herself on her bed, clutching the corner of the blanket to cover her clumsily worn robe, while Shang's arm lazily draped over her waist. The scrolls she read last night still sprawling uncaringly on the floor. She must have been sleep-walking or some short, Mulan mused.

Smiling just a fraction to herself through the confusing events of the fading dreamscape, Mulan rubbed her thumb against the jade pendant on her neck, a parting gift from her mother. The room was still dark, illuminated only by the fading light of the solitary candlestick as the night wore on, deep and quiet.

Mulan's eyes accidentally fell to the person she shared her bed with. There was a brief lapse in time as she watched Shang's peaceful features as he slept, staring at him indulgently. With his raven hair spread on his pillow, his eyes closed and his lips slightly parted in sleep, he was irresistibly charming. Mulan felt an unwanted fervour creep into her heart, as she fought the urge to push a stray hair back from his handsome face. Even though his presence unsettled her emotions with anxiety, it appeared her body craved more of his masculinity and enjoyed the spell of his sensuous touch.

Registering a sudden disturbance, her husband began to stir, snapping Mulan from her mindless reverie. As soon as his eyes opened, the stern mask he always wore fell into place and a steely stare greeted her. Shang nonchalantly got up from the bed.

Downstairs, a distinct noise of debate could be heard. Mulan jumped from her bed, rushing to get dressed. Unfortunately for Mulan, it took slightly longer for her to look presentable, while Shang just magically slipped into his robes and rushed outside before another calling knock was heard.

Running her fingers through her hair frantically, Mulan tried to decode the vague, grim conversation downstairs. She heard her father and her mother's name mentioned a couple of time with syllables wrapped tightly around alarming utterance. After she was done washing her face and had applied a thin layer of makeup, she went down. From the entrance of the Li's house, her eyes could easily identify the silhouette of Shang, General Li, and Li Yue, conversing with two men she was very familiar with. He was Chun Yi, the Fa's neighbour, with Chun Jing, his son.

It was an unsociable hour of the morning, the mist still hanging low and the sun's golden rays barely touching the virgin sky. But, just by reading everyone's bleak and tense expressions, Mulan knew something had gone terribly wrong.

"Ah, here she is," even General Li seemed to struggle to retain his usual calm, collected composure, "Mulan, these men have some news for you," he stepped back to give Chun Yi the audience's attention.

The man stepped forward slightly. Although no words fell from his lips, from his blanched expression; with his mouth curved down at the corners; and the way he seemed to swallow a sizeable knot in his throat, Mulan knew this couldn't be good news.

"Mulan," Chun Yi began, keenly aware of Mulan's apprehension.

"Your mother is dying..."

Chapter End Notes
Xiao: means small in Chinese, are a common appellative used by older generation to call little kids. And as far as the plot goes, on the last chapter—a few of you pointed out how ruthless and unforgiving Shang was. This is a stereotypical of Chinese men back in that time, but, as the case for Shang, I decided to give a little background chronicle of his life that 'perhaps' would explain (or forgive him?) for being such a stern, unloving husband that he was.

As for Fa Li, in the Chinese movie HUA MULAN 2009, Mulan had no mother and no grandmother, which I trade by giving Mulan a worthy lesson by her mother before her departure. (I hope no one hating me for doing this XD)

'the flower that blooms in adversity is the rarest and most beautiful of all.' - Emperor, on Mulan (Disney 1998).

Review, Fave and Follow (Kudos and Bookmarks in Ao3?) are highly appreciated! Thanks again for my wonderful beta, WindSongEnchantment, Sara.
"What.. —?" Mulan gasped, her hands reaching to cover her mouth in horror.

"Could you explain, Mister Chun?" Shang politely intervened. His intonation was level and calm as he took hold of Mulan's hands, trying to offer comfort.

"Fa Li is very ill. The whole Fa house has been under strict quarantine. The healer suspects another case of typhoid," the man announced glumly. On closer inspection, Chun Jing had taken Khan, Mulan's faithful steed, with him. "We must go now," he said, handing Khan's reins to Mulan.

Mulan was shellshocked, until she heard Shang's voice break the grave-like silence. "I'll go with her."

Even though there were a lot of voices resonating in her head, the few hours journey to the Fa's house was consumed in tense silence. The last remnants of night slowly receded before the light of the new day while the two of them rode, cutting across the landscape on the back of their horse. As the sight of her house emerged in the distance, Mulan felt fear and apprehension claw it's way up her throat.

It was noon when they arrived. The Fa house was extraordinarily quiet, only the clucking of chickens and the occasional dog barking filled the silence. Under strict quarantine, the Fa were prohibited to appear in public and couldn't entertain any visitor unless truly necessary. Even then, to minimize contact and contain the epidemic, only Fa Zhou was allowed to attend his wife.

"Baba!" Mulan dismounted from her horse and dashed to embrace her father. Behind her, Li Shang discreetly bowed as a way of respectfully greeted his Father-in-law.

"How is Mother? Is she okay? How long has she been ill?" The train of questions just gushed out of Mulan's mouth like a river bursting its dam.

"It's not good Mulan," he admitted, averting his glistening eyes so his daughter wouldn't notice. Fa Zhou sounded entirely unaffected, but the sorrowful look that clung to his features gave him away. "Your Mother has been sick for three weeks and her condition is deteriorating quickly. I...I am sorry—I just asked Chun Yi to fetch you now. I should've... —"

"Baba, it's okay." Mulan retorted with emphatic softness. She clasped her father's hand fervently and looked him in the eye to reaffirm her words.

"Where is Mama now? Can I see her?"

Fa Zhou glanced towards one of the closed doors before returning his attention back to his daughter. The hurt that was etched in her father's expression was very much palpable.

"Mulan," he began, the syllables was heavy and grievous. "Your Mother has been sleeping most of the time. Even when she is awake, she can barely speak. I...I have contacted quite a few healers and...and they said... —" The words faded as powerful sobs stole his breath away.

She doesn't have much time left, he wanted to say, but the words tasted more bitter than bile and
more painful than a knife. He hastily spun around so Mulan couldn't see the kind of broken man he was becoming at the thought of losing his beloved.

Mulan had never seen her father this desolate before. His usually gallant posture now slumped in despondency, and his eyes were dull yet slightly red with a desperate gleam. Looking at him so distressed and dismayed made her own eyes fill with moisture.

"Baba… what are we going to do?" Mulan was the first to reinitiate the conversation, her question drenched in despair. She didn't want to ask, but she had no other choice.

The room delved into a glacial silence. Fa Zhou stole a glance at his only daughter. Truthfully, his daughter had been through a lot these last couple of months: from marrying a stranger, moving into a house filled with unfamiliar faces, and now… she had to face the bitter reality of losing her mother.

He took another long breath, there was no point in showing her his frustration at his inability to make this life easier for her.

"Nothing, Mulan. All we can do is to wait…. and pray," Fa Zhou answered, trying to sound calm and composed. But Mulan could hear a note of melancholy that she seldom heard from him. "I am sure everything will turn out fine. We have been through tough times like this before," Fa Zhou continued comforting, reaching for Mulan's shoulder and guiding her into the house.

"Now, why don't you get inside and take your belongings and Shang to your old bedroom. You both must be exhausted after such a long journey," Fa Zhou advised. As they walked through the corridor, the only words that echoed in Mulan's head were the last wisdom her mother had imparted to her:

...And when you are suffering, remember: the flower that blooms in adversity is the rarest and most beautiful of all.

"Mulan! Thank goodness you are here!"

Mulan turned around in the direction of the raspy, familiar voice. She had just finished helping Shang transport the last of their belongings into her old room, which had been redecorated and refurbished to fit a small double bed.

"Grandma!" She threw her arms around her grandmother's deceptively frail frame and brought the old woman into an earnest hug. The two of them stayed that way for a long while.

"Where is Shang?" The old woman craned her neck to look behind her, seeking a glimpse of the young captain.

"He is outside, taking care of the horse," Mulan replied. It was then Mulan noticed the dark circles around her grandmother's eyes and the streaks of dried tears on her wrinkled cheeks.

"Grandma, are you okay?" Mulan asked tentatively. The question sounded meaningless, foolish even. Of course, Mulan knew the answer. Despite herself, Grandma Fa offered her a faint smile, but it soon evaporated into a thoughtful frown. "It's not good Mulan, your Mother… —"

"I know, Grandma," Mulan commented, trying to equate her smile to ease her Grandma's worried features. "How is…. Baba coping with this?"

"You know your Father won't show his true feelings in front of others. He suppresses them, so
"none of us worry," explained Grandma Fa, shaking her head over her son's stubbornness.

"That does sound very much like him, doesn't it?" Mulan remarked, remembering through the length of the Fa's history how her Father had always been the paragon of self-control, discipline, and temperance. He always kept his emotions in check and was level-headed even in the most dreadful of times.

"Indeed. But I think he feels rather guilty as well," the old woman mentioned ruefully.

"Guilty?" Mulan's brows climbed to her hairline.

"About a month ago a letter arrived here. Until today I wasn't sure as to the content; your Father was very secretive about it. I believe your Mother read it—with or without your Father's permission. The next thing I knew, they ended up in a big fight," Grandma Fa explained. Of course, the heated argument wasn't exactly the cause of Fa Li's illness. But now that it was ending this way, Fa Zhou was undeniably blaming himself.

Mulan became thoughtful. Her Father's inclination to keep away some secret or another was not news to her. It wasn't that he was a deceitful, conniving or disloyal man that hid some scandalous affair and was trying to cover his tracks. Normally, her Father didn't furnish all the exposition to his family if he felt doing so would only worry them or because of the confidential nature of the information as requested by Imperial order.

But then again, her parents hardly argued, let alone fought. It must be a serious matter to kindle her mother's anger—Fa Li was always known for her patience, long-suffering and obedience.

"I'll see whether I can speak to him about it, Grandma," Mulan promised.

That night, as her Father was predominantly occupied tending to her ill mother, Mulan took the opportunity to snoop a little, hoping to find evidence of the letter Grandma Fa had mentioned. It wasn't hard at all, after all these years living under the same roof with her Father, Mulan could guess at a few places he was likely to store his important correspondence.

As she went through her Father's drawers, she found an important looking scroll bearing the seal of the Emperor himself. Carefully, Mulan unraveled the parchment, scanning across the bottom of it to see the credentials of the Son of Man.

Mulan felt breathless as her eyes reiterated the line of requests in that letter. The statement seemed to be dictated personally from the Emperor, filled with a note of great urgency. She should have seen this coming—General Li and Shang already discussed the matter before. Nonetheless, reading the exact phrase and not having it delivered by someone else's mouth, gave her a better idea of the rawness of the situation.

The letter stated that the Huns had penetrated China's defensive wall and were moving towards Chang'an in no time. Despite the combined efforts of the Imperial Army and various regional regiments, the Huns remained undeterred and aggressively moving forward. When the country is on the brink of extinction, it's the duty of every able-bodied man to defend their country.

Shang had decided to remain incognito and distanced himself from intervening with the Fa family situation. He spent most of his time in the confinement of Mulan's old bedroom, reading Fa Zhou's collection of battle strategies or the stash of philosophical quotations and wartime poems. Occasionally, he would spot Grandma Fa in the kitchen, catch a glimpse of Mulan's shy younger brother, Fa Ping, or bump into Ling, the part-time maid that had been employed since Fa Li fell ill.
However, Shang almost never saw Fa Zhou—presumably because he was busy nursing his bedridden wife, except for one night when he spotted the retired strategist embroiled in a deep conversation with their family healer. The apprehension that creased his forehead, the fear and sadness that filled his face would be something that tattooed itself permanently into Shang's mind. He had never imagined that the charismatic and poised Fa Zhou could look so distressed and miserable. Shang was sure that seeing death and facing it with honor was not anything new to a gallant warrior like Fa Zhou, who had been involved in numerous battles, but losing someone you couldn't live without was something entirely different.

Despite his status as a son-in-law, truthfully, Shang didn't feel like he was part of the Fa family at all. Blame it on his stiff-upper-lip and unapproachable attitude, but Shang hardly knew his wife's family, with the exception of Fa Zhou's notable feats which were being chronicled by his Father, and even that was nothing personal; more like a history lesson enunciated by a mentor.

Shang watched quietly, disguising himself as a passive onlooker as the whole ordeal unfolded in front of his eyes. He tried to give the Fa family, especially Mulan, time and space to have her final reunion with her Mother.

In truth, Shang had a desire to offer his consolation, or simply say a word or two to let them know he was devastated about the whole unfortunate situation. But the idea of exchanging sentimental moments and potentially talking about his own emotions put a fear in Shang that he had never even experienced on the battlefield. Conclusively, he deduced it was best to keep a discreet separation between them, until one night he was forced to confront his fear.

Without warning, his wife entered their bedroom, nonchalantly heading towards the mountain of laundry, absorbing herself in re-folding the already neat pile as though not noticing her husband was even there.

"Oh, hi…" Shang greeted Mulan awkwardly, lacking better words to say. His eyes didn't leave the parchment in his hands, pretending to be engrossed with the mundane material that he had already read ten times over. Despite his deliberate act of ignorance, the streaks of drying tears on her cheeks caught and held his attention. He knew he had to say something to try and communicate his sympathy.

"I am… sorry… to hear about your Mother's health, Mulan," he murmured hesitantly. Regardless of his best efforts, the words sounded unconvincing and insincere.

A conflicted morass of emotion darted across her face, but Mulan just sat on the edge of the bed mutely, continuing to feign concentration on dealing with tidying their pile of clothing.

Suddenly, Mei Lan's words resonated in Shang's head: "The supreme happiness in life is the conviction that we are loved...and that girl tries to love you. I hope someday you will learn to requite her gesture."

Shang swallowed thickly; being all mushy, sentimental and open really wasn't his forte. All he knew was: as a husband, he was expected to be poised with pride and dignity, obeyed by his wife, revered by his household, respected by his colleagues and feared by his children. But for once, he desired to have a real connection with the woman he would share the rest of his life with; perhaps he could start by truly trying to sympathize with her current predicament. He had never seen Mulan so despondent before, not even when she was forced to let go of her freedom and was separated from her family to marry him.

But Shang was truly out of his depth. He wondered what it was like to have a mother—a real mother, who loved and cherished her children. He couldn't remember much about his own birth
mother, and his memory of Li Yue was nothing personal nor memorable. He could only imagine how close-knit the Fa family was, testified by them sharing their sorrow together and helping each other conquer this life's challenges.

This is your chance. He told himself firmly. Say something! His brain was racked with nonsensical sounding ideas. Anything that could make her feel better. Anything!

"Would you… would you like a cup of...tea? Perhaps, something warm will...help… —?" he suggested lamely, stumbling over his own words. He was so uncertain that Mulan would even like the idea—it sounded so ridiculous even to his own ears. Truth be told, Shang didn't have a clue how to brew tea. Mulan, Mei Lan and Li Yue had always served him.

However, Mulan flicked her sight up briefly in response to her husband's absurd offer and repaid his efforts with a small, sad smile. Shang could barely see the tears standing behind her usually defiant eyes. At that moment, something unknown, something painful and unpleasant, pierced his heart.

He sighed, desperately preparing himself to perhaps embarrass himself to say this. "Look," he retorted, sounding more convincing. "I can't promise I'll fix all your problems, but I can promise you won't face them alone," he said simply.

The hurt in her eyes gradually ebbed away. That rough, thick voice, heavily accented with affection, eased the wretched thought of the grim prospect of losing someone she held so dear. Mulan dared to lift her face and met Shang's strained, hopeful eyes and the stiff, uncertain half-smile decorating his lips.

And suddenly, she felt…safe.

"Thank you, Shang. Tea would be lovely." And the sadness in her smile vanished, leaving only sweetness behind.

Now that Fa Li was bedridden, Fa Zhou spent the majority of his time attending to her needs—not that his wife had a long list of whims and wants.

Due to the effect of the medication, she was sleeping most of the time, only waking up for dinner and when Fa Zhou cleaned her or changed her robe.

Thus, to occupy himself during the waits, Fa Zhou would sit inside their bedroom by her bedside, watching her peaceful countenance, reading her some of her favorite stories, citing some poems or simply talking to her. It didn't bother him that his wife remained hugely unresponsive to his narration, her presence alone was meaningful enough for him.

"Zhou…"

Hearing his wife's subdued voice, Fa Zhou rushed to her side, putting down the scroll that he had been focusing on. He held her small, weak hands in his, and gave them a light squeeze.

"Li, I am here," he pronounced softly.

He saw her eyes crack open heavily, revealing its dying hue. She gave him a weak smile, feeling one gentle hand running through her hair, his other warm hand affectionately wrapped around hers.

"Oh, yes! Mulan is here. She and Shang arrived in the afternoon," he stated casually while opening the lid of the nearby bowl and letting the warm, delectable aroma float through the air. But Fa Li
gestured that she wasn't in the mood to eat. Deep down, Fa Li wished to see her daughter one last time. However, considering her condition, her request would be impossible to fulfill—no one wanted to risk another soul to be wasted away by the despicable disease.

A smile was her word, instigating she was pleased with her daughter's presence.

Fa Zhou's eyes glimmered as he silently studied his dying wife—this was Fa Li, the woman that had changed his life, filled his days with simple happiness, and taught him how to be loved and to love in return. She was the woman that had tamed the most aggressive and ferocious fighter into a gentle pacifist. This was his heroine, the woman who changed the most hardcore warrior in all of China into a loving husband and father.

Both of them remained silent for a while, but their eyes spoke volumes of affection towards each other, replacing the words they couldn't utter. Fa Zhou's heart sank to the floor, his chest tightening upon realizing her time was almost up.

"I'll be a good listening husband today, Li," Fa Zhou tried to lighten the mood."You can lecture me all you like," he said, but despite his best effort, Fa Zhou couldn't withhold a note of poignancy from entering his voice.

She chuckled weakly, visibly struggling to keep her eyes open. She toiled to retain her consciousness as her brain ran to select a few last words she wanted to say.

"Zhou, I am… not going to say much," Her voice turned into a soft, faint whisper in between her struggling breaths. "But I want you to tell me… about us."

Fulfilling her last wish, Fa Zhou spoke of their life together from its beginning to its conclusion and everything in between. A smile was on her face at the memory of their wedding night, numerous awkward moments, clueless exchanges between the inexperienced man and his naive wife. Fa Li's smile grew an inch wider when they reminisced of their younger selves, keen to please each other and madly in love.

"You are such a perfect husband," she complimented as her husband concluded his story. "I am sorry… you have to journey through life without me," she said regretfully.

Blinking past the tears that threatened to fall, the man in front of her squeezed her hand and stared at her hopelessly. Please. Don't say that. He wanted to beg. Fa Zhou didn't want to accept it, but her vital signs were beginning to fade. But what kind of husband was he if he couldn't console his dying wife and give her a peaceful rest?

"I promise we all will be fine," he assured as though it was going to be an innocuous thing to tackle—even when his voice began to break. Just to think that he had to learn how to act, to move on, to fill the day without her by his side, crushed his heart to pieces. He was so used to her infectious smile, the melodic sound of her rapturous laughter, her voice of wisdom and patience and the glimpses of her rushing around the house to restore order and neatness. Fa Zhou took a few calming breath, mitigating the ongoing furore in his chest from surfacing into a display sorrow on his face.

"I love you. Fa, Li Juan," he whispered, not with the brave voice of a soldier, but with the fragile voice of a husband who was about to lose the love of his life. "You are the best thing that has ever happened to me," he said, planting a chaste kiss on her forehead.

A small, faint, satisfied smile beamed on her almost frozen lips, acknowledging his deepest feeling for her.
Zhou, I love you too.....and please forgive me.

And pulling her last labored breath from her tortured body, her eyes peacefully drew to a close. The fire left those luminous eyes, they were closed... forever. Tears fell from the soldier's eyes, silently lamenting the loss of a friend, a soulmate. It is indeed hard to say goodbye to someone you know you can't live without.

Behind the closed door, hot torrents of anguished tears coursed down his cheeks, lamenting the departure of his beloved wife in solitude.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: right, that chapter 6 done! I hope no one hated me for taking out Fa Li this soon in the story. I promise that chapter 7 won't take a month to write, perhaps a week or two. The snippet for next chapter will be posted in my Tumbr: 3431jessica. Thanks again to Sara for the beta.
Regardless of The Love We Bear

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took Fa Zhou a good hour before he was finally ready to face the world outside the room, breaking the most heart-wrenching news to the rest of his family. As soon as he stepped out of his quarters, his mother's empathic gaze greeted him.

"Mother…I just wanted to let you know that.. —"

Despite having rehearsed the line a few times, the words dissolved into thin air, crumbling together with his strong fortitude and his composure.

Grandma Fa saw the insufferable pain clinging all over her son's features, the same expression of anguish which she herself was very familiar with, that she hadn't felt in years, now anchored within her son's expression. She had lost someone she held dear before, she had tasted her own tears, buried her life under her own grief.

"Zhou… I'm sorry," she said, offering her condolences."It will get easier with time. You just have to be patient, Son," she added sympathetically.

"I know, but how can I… —" The words faded as his vocal chords cruelly forsook him. Everything felt so distant and unreal, as if it were all an illusion—a nightmare. How could his wife leave him at the tender age of forty-one? Their daughter was just married, their son was barely a teenager, and speaking of grandchildren —she hadn't even had a chance to dream about one.

An unspoken exchange of emotion passed between them. But Fa Zhou's stupor was only broken when he felt Grandma Fa brushing away the tears that streamed from his eyes.

"Zhou, if you love someone more than anything, then time only matters to the mind, not to the heart," she said, clapping his hand affectionately. "I know you are grieving. We all are. And I know our life will never be the same without Fa Li. But you must understand, grief can be a burden and but it can also be an anchor. You get used to the weight and how it holds you in place. Your grief is the price of love. Not many people are lucky enough to find it."

"I know, Mother," Fa Zhou finally replied, smiling bitterly before embracing his mother in an earnest hug.

Two weeks passed after Fa Li's funeral. The normality in the Fa's house had returned to some extent, despite the obvious lack of presence from the lady of the house.

After attending the funeral, which was conducted as a private family affair, Shang excused himself to immediately join his Father on the frontline. Prior to his departure, Shang had generously given his consent for Mulan to stay in the Fa's house until he returned from his duty—a proposition that Fa Zhou (and Mulan) were silently grateful for.

However, even as Mulan temporarily returned to her old life, her Father's presence on the battlefield was stated as necessary and crucial by the Emperor, much to her horror. She was quite certain her late Mother's opposition over her Father's physical inadequacy to join the war had been the source of their raw disagreement prior to her death. But, as a daughter, Mulan couldn't defy her father's wishes, as it was deemed disrespectful for her to do so.
The discussion surrounding Fa Zhou's imminent departure was done in secret, only discussed between Mulan and himself. Even Grandma Fa didn't seem to be aware that her own son had been called to join the war once again. Her Father insisted; no, demanded; that his mother should not be informed until he had already left, fearing the old woman would try to stop him or drive herself to an early grave in her stress and worry—as had seemed to happen with his wife.

Mulan felt her heart become strangled in the dilemma; imagining her father marching off to sacrifice himself, leaving a terse note to her grandmother and her brother. But knowing the chivalrous soldier that her father was, Mulan knew there was nothing to stop him—nothing but death itself.

Through the moongate, Mulan found her father sitting under the plum tree. His eyes stared into the sky, empty and hollow, watching the constellations adorn the night sky with their twinkling light. It had only been two weeks since his wife's death, but a soldier should never worry about his own personal agenda, his country and its citizens always have to come first.

Fa Zhou unsheathed the sword and began polishing it gently. Even from a distance, Mulan could see her father's fingers tremble as he traced the blade of his mighty battle companion.

"Old partner, it has been a while… I am sure you miss me," Mulan heard her father's hoarse voice say, speaking softly to his sword, his words wrapped with a strange combination of pride and sorrow. "It's time to show those Huns the Chinese nobility and strength!" He ended his sentence with a feigned, mirthful chuckle.

Mulan heard him grunt as his worn hands clutched the hilt, struggling to find the strength to carry the weight of its heavy metal edge. Mulan knew her mother was right to be worried, her father was walking to his grave if he went to join the war.

"Baba..." Mulan approached him carefully, carrying a hot pot of tea and his daily medicine."Your drink is ready."

"Thank you, Mulan," he said offhandedly, his eyes still engrossed in scrutinizing the blade in his hands, watching the reflection of the moon glinting on its glossy surface. Fa Zhou took a quick swig from his cup before drinking his medicine.

"I have some money hidden under the bed, it should be enough for Ping's schooling until he turns eighteen, and a little extra for you and your Grandma." Fa Zhou placed his cup next to him before continuing."At least you've found yourself a husband, Mulan. I have one less thing to worry about. Shang is a great warrior, he will return to you from the battle," he went on as he put his sword away. The metal clanked against its scabbard.

"Do not practice martial arts anymore," Fa Zhou appealed, "You are a wife now, and perhaps…. one day, a mother."

A mother? She couldn't even be a good wife, let alone a mother. Mulan's heart leapt to her throat and words of disagreement formed on her lips, but she could not find the courage to break her father's spirit by disobeying him.

"Someday…." Fa Zhou drawled with a long pensive breath."If you find a new star in the sky. That will be me." His intonation was thick with melancholy. "Your mother was the star of my life, my helpmeet and the place where my troubled soul found refuge. I still remember those restless nights during the war, her letters kept my spirit going and encouraged me to stay positive despite the atrocities that were happening around me."
He cast his eyes towards the sky once more. "Perhaps… this is the way the gods want us to be together," a gentle smile graced his lips when he saw a twinkling speck gleaming right above him. "She must be lonely up there..."

"But, Baba… —"

Mulan's antagonistic words died on her lips when Fa Zhou turned around and looked her in the eyes.

"Mulan, you know it is every man's pride to die on the battlefield. I am telling you all of this because you are the strongest in our family, and I know I can rely on you."

"It—can't be… —" Mulan asserted, but her voice sounded so small. *I can't lose you.* Her heart screamed in despair. *Not after Mama left us. Fa Ping would be an orphan and Grandma Fa would be... —*

A tender touch on her hand stopped her mental protests, together with her eagerness to oppose her father's opinion.

Fa Zhou patted his daughter's hand gently. "Remember that I love you, Mulan," he said softly. But, what was meant to console her spirit, instead broke Mulan's heart into pieces.

"But this *must* be done regardless of the love we bear. Sacrifice is a seal of love, Mulan. A lot of people can easily say 'I love you,' but very few have the chance to prove it's true." He let out an aggrieved sigh.

"Nothing lasts forever, my precious daughter."

They spent the night outside, leafing through the memories of her childhood. The tranquil sound of the brook and the calming serenade of the crickets contradicted Mulan's somber mood. She helplessly sank on her seat, placing her head on her father's lap.

They stayed like that for a long while. Fa Zhou ran his fingers through her hair, stroking her head affectionately, while Mulan tried her best not to weep.

Mulan couldn't sleep that night. A lot was going on in her mind, tugging her heartstrings and disturbing her conscience. How could she let her old, handicapped father march into war? How could she let her brother become an orphan?

No. Mulan thought resolutely. She couldn't.

But what could she do? She was only a daughter. A wife. A woman. A position of very little value in the predominantly male world.

Mulan sighed resignedly as she stood up, tidying her Father's desk that was filled with clutter and all sort of condolences letters that had been left unopened. She thought of tiring herself to the point of sleep.

Inadvertently, a stack of scrolls fell out of a cabinet—Mulan rebuked herself for not opening the cabinet door with more care. As she arranged the scrolls back into their place, her eyes fell onto a tatty-looking, green scroll, with intricate looking gold embellishments around its edge. Despite looking rather frayed and yellowed with age, Mulan could see that, once upon a time, it must have been an important, treasured possession of her Father's. Instantly, she stretched her hand out to satisfy her piqued curiosity.
Employing extra cautiousness, Mulan carefully pulled out the scroll.

It was her father's memoir. The first couple of lines were filled with his familiar strokes, engraved carefully, thoughtfully—pouring out his deepest sentiments and articulating his life chronicles as he began his journey as a young soldier.

Mulan dared not proceed further, knowing it would displease her Father and disrespect him to meddle with the most private of mementos that he desired to keep to himself. But Mulan couldn't help but notice the front page of the scroll, written: *the greatest pleasure in life is to do, accomplish, and to win what people say you can not do.*

Suddenly a spark of a brilliant idea surfaced in her mind.

Fa-Li Mulan may be a woman, a daughter and a wife, but didn't mean that she would let people dictate what she could or couldn't do. Society may never value her opinion, nor consider her able to bear arms to defend her people and to fight for the freedom of her country. But people would allow, accept and approve of her doing *all this* if she were a man!

That's it! Her heart gave a traitorous leap at the thought—she would disguise herself as a man, going in her Father's place.

Mulan smiled at the absurdity of the idea, but it wasn't all impossible. Even as a woman, she had the necessary skills, perhaps even better than some men in her village. In disparity with her retired Father, Mulan was still young and agile. If she were given the time, the place and the opportunity to learn and practice, Mulan was sure she would excel.

Marshaling all her courage and determination, she came up with a systematic plan: first to forge all the necessary documents and second to slip away in the night.

Unnoticed.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, finally all the boring details are done and dealt with! Next chapter we'll plow through the meat of the story. Sorry this chapter is a bit shorter than usual. Thank you for all the fave, follow and reviews (kudos and bookmarks in Ao3), I am humbled that you all loving the story so far. If you happen to ever watch Hua Mulan (2009), this scene of Fa Zhou talking to Mulan would be familiar to you.

Snippet of the next chapter will be published at my Tumblr account 3431jessica.

Again, thanks for Sara, the author of Love and Law for the beta. :-)
The designated night that Mulan had planned her escape for finally arrived. When everyone had fallen asleep, she went to visit the family temple, asking her ancestors to bless her as she ventured to do something no woman in China had ever done before. Then, she slipped into her brother's bedroom—who had been recruited to be her accomplice in her seamless deception.

"Fa Ping," she called him with a firm whisper.

"Dajie, is it time?" her brother replied. Mulan nodded. "All clear, everyone is asleep."

It was either a good coincidence or a sign of bad luck, but it just so happened that Fa Zhou was away for a few days to visit their distant relative who had fallen victim to a disease similar to what had taken Fa Li. With one less person to worry about, Mulan had to act now to execute her plan seamlessly.

Fa Ping grabbed the solitary candle by the alcove to light their way. Both of them tread carefully, making their way to the storage room.

"Where is the key?" Mulan prompted. Fa Ping grinned as he produced the item in question from the depths of his pocket.

"Excellent," Mulan commended her brother's crafty work. She placed the key into the lock, and with a modest click, the storage room was opened, revealing their father's battle armor.

"Mmm... there is one piece missing," Mulan mumbled under her breath as she retrieved Fa Zhou's armor and sword.

"Ah, that must be it!" Fa Ping extended his arms and stood on tiptoe to reach his Father's helmet. "There you go." He handed it to Mulan, who gave him a smile of gratitude.

At first, she tried to where her father's robe, similar to the one she saw her husband wearing underneath his war armor. It was a little bit too large for her, but thankfully not by much. Compared to Shang's stature, her father was slender and less broad across the shoulder. The extra room worked in Mulan's favor, allowing her to hide her feminine curvature.

There was a strange feeling as she fastened the armor to fit her figure. Mulan had never been involved in a war, and being a soldier had never crossed her mind before—but being the daughter of a famous war strategist, the atrocities of war had become something very intimate and real.

Mulan had first-hand experience witnessing her Father's heroic struggle, which had earned him a few permanent marks that weaved like a tapestry on his skin. She reminisced with a strange feeling of relief, pride, and fear in her chest. She often raptly listened to her Father's stories. In between his narrations, he would point out some of his blemishes—the countless testimonies of what a courageous warrior he had been. Each scar was a sacrifice: something he had chosen to take for the sake of someone else. And through the years, the number of these chivalrous marks increased until one day his luck ran dry, and a debilitating injury had forced the outstanding war strategist to lay his sword to rest.

From her Father's exposition, Mulan had heard of countless friends and enemies rising and dying,
learning how war's brutality stole many fathers, sons, and brothers from their loved ones. Despite the epic victories that Fa Zhou had won, strings of accomplishment that he had carved out of life, he had never felt proud of the enemies that he destroyed. It was obvious that the brutality of war had engraved marks on her father's soul as much as it had on his figure.

And if war's cruelty were not enough—anyone who ever looked into the glazed eyes of a soldier dying on the battlefield would consider long and hard before starting a war. How war had made use of the best warriors, like her father, to do the worst to others, was beyond comprehension—but unavoidable.

"How do I look?" Mulan said, turning to face her brother.

Fa Ping paused, scrutinizing his sister's new look. He came closer, helping Mulan to tighten the sash. "There!" A broad smile spread on Fa Ping's lips, as though admiring a rare showcase of an exquisite masterpiece. "Perfect! Just like a proper man," he grinned ecstatically.

The disguise appeared to be very convincing, especially after Mulan tucked her neatly bunned hair into the helmet. She could see the gleaming adoration in her young brother's eyes. She caught a glimpse of her figure donned in proper war armor. She looked nothing like her familiar self.

Excellent! She thought to herself with pride and contentment. No one would have guessed.

From now on, this would be her new identity: A man, a son and a soldier.

"Now, hand me the sword," Mulan told him, commandingly. Her brother trotted to the other end of the room to fetch their Father's sword, but his fingers stiffened there and his smile dissolved at the memory of what lay ahead of them, and what an armed conflict may entail.

"Dajie," he called her, voice thick with reluctance."Are you…. Are you sure about this?" he asked, hand trembling as he carried the sword.

Mulan felt her courage dwindling, being buffeted by her brother's melancholic plea. By joining the Army, she was gaining consent to kill… and to be killed. War, really did not conclude who was right, but who was left.

Fleetingly, the glimpse of her father's frail posture and her grandmother's longing look flashed in Mulan's mind. How would they react when they knew she sneaked off to join the Army? Would they be sad? Angry? Disappointed even? She shook her head, resolutely pushing her hesitation aside. This wasn't time for petty emotions, this was time to dare and endure! This was a chance that every man would take to stand for their dignity and proof of the love they had for their country. And there was no love without sacrifice.

"Fa Ping," Mulan sighed."We've talked about this… There are no other options. I can't let Baba go. Consenting to him going is like sending him to his grave!"

"But what about you? What if you are… —" the young boy couldn't finish his sentence. The thought of losing another person so dear to him crushed his heart in a painful grip.

Mulan wanted to lecture him with the exact same words their father told her yesterday. However, noticing beads of tears balancing on the edges of his eyes, Mulan abandoned her intention. Instead, she reached for her brother and pulled him into a hug.

"I promise I'll be back," Mulan tried to sound firm. Deep down, she knew no one could guarantee that. However, her own affirmation elated her spirit, sending a new wave of courage and determination through her. "Promise me you'll take care of Baba and Grandma in my absence." Her
voice dropped along with her eyes, as she loosened up her grip.

"Never let fear decide your fate. I am always proud of you, Fa Ping."

Fa Ping felt his heart break in that instant, but instead, he put his brazen facade on, smiled firmly and nodded to her.

Her brother looked immensely proud, wiping the tears from his innocent eyes, as he watched Mulan mount up on Khan and disappear into the night.

A bright, beautiful morning cast a magic spell on the landscape, turning the foggy, cold night into a warm, promising day. The path ahead was clear and wide, flecked with dazzling sunlight split into patterns by overhanging trees. Khan neighed ecstatically, barely containing his boundless energy to gallop and cut across the terrain—just as well, given the urgency of her mission.

"Oh calm there, Boy! Just give me a second, and I'll be ready," Mulan rubbed Khan's mane affectionately before she returned to attend to her belongings and rolled her sleeping bag neatly. Another neigh was his answer, and the horse obediently waited. Her hand accidentally brushed the scroll of her father's summon and Fa Ping's birth certificate which she had conscientiously forged to make him old enough to qualify to be a soldier. Her mind fleetingly went back to Fa Ping and everyone she had left behind. In accordance with her plan, Mulan had left a note to her father, pretending that her mother-in-law wanted her presence urgently. Now, she just hoped that Fa Ping could make up some clever excuses to delay their father realizing that his war outfit, sword and summon were gone.

Her train of thought was interrupted by a sudden itch, crawling up her leg. Mulan frantically leaped, hands vigorously scratching and repelling the source of the disturbance. It was only the first night that she oddly spent alone—just her and her horse, cutting through the length of the country, against mother nature and earth's natural elements, and she was already missing her warm, comfortable bed.

*Here goes nothing!* Mulan willed herself to move on. Too late for any consideration or second thoughts now.

Every now and then, Mulan's hand move instinctively to her sword, feeling it's cold hilt and hard metal scabbard—from now on, this would be her company, her companion that would help her to defend herself and her life. She remembered her father telling her he never left the weapon behind; even going so far as to cradle it in his sleep and sit it next to him as he ate. He even jokingly told Mulan that his sword was closer to him than his wife in a war, because no man would fancy taking his wife into the toilet when nature called.

War. Mulan mused. She was actually heading for war.

There would be a lot of bloodsheds, plenty of killing and the risk of fatal injuries.

But even with the grim prospect of dying and the wistful fate of never returning home as a possibility, Somehow, Mulan couldn't ignore a strange exhilaration and the swell of excitement over getting into the encampment. Perhaps, one part of her equated this exercise of being a man as complete freedom from her mundane life, endless household chores and a list of nuptial demands, and the other parts was celebrating the fact that she, as a woman, had a chance to defend her country, just like her Father.

Mulan knew she was never going to be an exemplary wife, but could she became an exemplary
soldier?

She reminisced, hearing her husband's commanding, borderline tyrannical, voice as he told her what he expected out of an exemplary wife: never defy his requests, nor meet him eye to eye. And then she remembered the training from her strict mother in law, Li Yue, not to make a sound when she chewed, walk slowly with elegance, speak softly and only do so when she was asked.

For once, Mulan would not need those 'ladylike' habit and could assert herself to be dominating like what was expected of a man.

Absently, she stood in front of her very few belongings, wondering what kind of outfit she should wear that would please her… —

Mulan mentally slapped herself. It appeared, subconsciously, she had truly transformed into this kind of woman—a woman whose life centered around her husband. Mulan picked up her Father's uniform carefully, running her digits on its rough, hard wearing fabrics. She had to leave the thought of being the devoted wife that she was behind for a while, because at this time and place, there was no Fa-Li Mulan.

There was only Fa Ping.

She mounted her horse, and with one firm instruction, Khan galloped into the woods.

After spending two night sleeping rough on the road, Mulan decided she'd earned enough credit for a night with a ceiling, instead of stars, above her head. She quickly made her pick and went in to ask the receptionist for a room if it was available.

"A room for the night, Sir?" addressed the demure lady with the copious bosom from behind the counter, staring at her invitingly. In a lapse of concentration, Mulan questioned the strange way the lady was leering at her. The young woman must have been around her age, hiding half of her pretty face behind an embroidered silk fan, batting her long eyelashes while her curious eyes sized up Mulan's figure from head to toe, drinking in every detail.

"Ugh, yes… one person… please," Mulan fumbled, thankfully remembering to lower her effeminate voice to sound more masculine. She reminded herself that many women, according to her late mother, had a thing for men in uniform. What was the word again? Fetish? Whatever it was, Mulan was sure she also had been afflicted—chronically, if not worse. Despite Shang's affinity to boss her around, Mulan had to admit—just a fantastical depiction of his toned figure wrapped in his captain's uniform with that crimson cape flapping behind his back—could make her weak at the knees. He was… utterly irresistible!

However, Mulan felt—as Fa Ping, unlike Shang—she was hardly heartthrob material, yet the unknown lady seemed eager to invite her to her chamber rather than offer a room in the hotel. Perhaps she underestimated the power of military armor.

"Unfortunately we only have shared rooms available," said the lady in feigned regret.

"That's ok, I'll take that," Mulan replied. Sharing or not was hardly a concern to her as long as there were no insects, criminals, or drunken men to worry about.

The lady opened her mouth, perhaps to offer another alternative, but Mulan quickly offered a few coins, insinuating that she was too exhausted even to do a little bit of harmless flirting. The lady winked as she slid the key across the counter. Thankfully, that was as far as the fooling went. Mulan wondered how horrified the lady would be if she knew she was a woman.
Scuttling towards her room with her belongings, Mulan politely knocked on the door before going inside.

The distinct smell of sweaty boots and masculine musk invaded her nostrils, and the sight of a messy room welcomed her.

"Ugh!" she gasped lowly. Perhaps this was revenge from that coquettish receptionist for ignoring her advancement, but hell—this was way over the line! What was a man doing in her bedroom?!

The large guy, possibly more than 5 feet tall, had his frame barely squeezed into the space between the top bunk and the ceiling (and Mulan briefly considered her safety in trusting the bed frame could hold such a load for the night. Just think of the mock and ridicule if everyone knew she died in the hotel and not during a battle). The man was topless, but thankfully was laying on his belly with one of his hands dangling down, mouth open, tongue lolling and a loud snore only to be expected to accompany them.

She better comes up with a good explanation, Mulan fumed. She was so focused on arranging her angry rhetoric that she didn't notice her potential roommate stir and turn his head.

"Ni hao," said the husky, sleepy voice. Mulan froze where she stood. The guy in front of her dragged his bulky figure sluggishly into a half-sitting position, managing to hit his head on the ceiling in the process and clumsily rubbed his bleary eyes.

"Ni… ni hao," Mulan responded, not knowing what else to say. After hearing Mulan's voice, the rotund man, suddenly doubting the gender of the person that had appeared completely uninvited, frantically tried to cover himself only to end up falling onto the floor. He let out an undignified yelp followed by a painful groan.

"Sorry… are you—are you okay?" She came closer and offered her hand.

With his alertness intact, the man rubbed his sore bottom, replying with a short, "Thank you," and accepted her hand. "But wait," he said, bewildered. "I don't remember… calling a… —" he stuttered, mind floating elsewhere—wondering whether he had gotten so drunk to have requested a prostitute undeliberately. He blinked again, studying her features and then her outfit. "Oh wait, you are a soldier. But, how come your voice… —? I mean, I don't mean to… —"

Then it hit her, of course, this guy was her roommate! The receptionist didn't make a mistake!

"I can explain," Mulan sighed, placing her bag on the bottom bunk, and removing her helmet, letting her bound hair fall to her shoulders. Her eyes fell on the large battle armor, very similar to hers. Seemed like sharing a bedroom with another man in uniform was the perks that came with her disguise.

Just as she thought her night couldn't get more interesting, the door slammed open, and another man appeared at the door. But instead of a warm welcome, he immediately gasped loudly.

"Mu—…Mulan? What are you doing here?"

Chapter End Notes

Note: Ok, it's time for Mulan to get some friends. I may insert Mushu somewhere in
the next chapter, but I am going to do a compromise—I am aware some of you were against me adding him, because he might destroy the 'realism' of the story. So I made an alteration on the nature of his character to accommodate this, so don't worry.

Dajie: Big sister in Mandarin.

Ni Hao: Hello in Mandarin.
"I am Chien-Po," the man with the rotund belly introduced himself.

"I am Fa Ping… —well supposed to be," Mulan replied. "Fa Mulan is my real name."

"I am Ling. Wait! You guys know me." The skinny one gazed at his friends in turn. "Mulan and I were neighbors in her village before I moved with my parents."

"Yes, I remember you were bullied a lot," Mulan chuckled teasingly.

"Hey!" Ling protested, pouting at Mulan's betrayal.

"So, how did you meet Chien-Po?"

"Well," Ling rubbed the back of his neck in a nervous gesture. "Chien-Po and I were mates in… —"

"Chinese Orchestra," his friend finished for him.

"What? You played?" Mulan's brow climbed to her hairline, while her scrawny ex-neighbour blushed from head to toe. For the better part of his life, the guy was famously known for his tall, slender figure and slightly effeminate body language. It often incited profuse bullying and was the source of a lot of mocking.

"I played the gong while Ling played something more dignified—an erhu. The local temple where we lived had a few monks looking for something to do—I guess constant peace and tranquillity could be boring at times," Chien-Po offered as an explanation.

"Anyway, how come you two are here? I mean… weren't all the soldiers supposed to gather a few weeks ago?" Mulan asked.

"I have just…. become engaged, so…. —" Chien-Po confessed shyly, his chubby cheeks blooming with happiness and pride, which Mulan found rather adorable.

"And I just recovered from typhoid," explained Ling, and that was enough to wipe any trace of a smile off Mulan's face. Her body went stiff as though she had been seized by a sudden paralysis.

"Speaking about that, I'm starving. I haven't eaten anything since noon," Ling continued, not noticing Mulan's reaction and reaching into his sack to pull out a bag of pork buns and dumplings. "Excuse me, recovering boy needs some nourishment," he went on and offered some to Chien-Po, who obviously delighted in the unexpected blessing.

"Mulan—?"

She ignored the portion of pork bun and dumpling that currently danced across her vision. "Are you ok, Mulan?" Ling repeated a touch louder.

After a few futile attempts, Ling's concerned voice broke through her brooding. The man was gesticulating animatedly to catch her attention. If this were done an hour ago, she would have burst into convulsive laughter witnessing him waving pork bun and dumpling around like a fool. Right
now, her somber mood prevented her from seeing its comedic value.

"I'm fine, thank you," she replied, almost curtly.

"You don't sound honest at all," Ling disagreed, looking at the now-cold dumpling in his palm. Despite feeling tired and famished, Mulan's appetite was destroyed. The bitter nostalgia of her departed mother lingered around her. Finally, after a beat of silence making sure her composure stayed intact, she spoke up. "My mother just passed away. I attended her funeral a few weeks ago," she breathed ruefully.

"Oh, I am sorry." Ling patted her shoulder offering his sympathy. "But… still, it doesn't explain why you are here, dressed in your father's gear."

"My father can no longer fight. Letting him go would be like sending him to his grave. My brother just lost his mother, I can't allow him to lose his father as well," Mulan sighed resignedly; imagining her father, who had no intention of resting with his past heroics, would be devastated and furious once he unravelled her ploy.

The room fell into profound silence. But it was clear, Mulan could sense her friends' ambivalence towards her, a combination of admiration and apprehension.

"I know you always protected me when I was bullied, Mulan. But war is not a game."

Ling's gentle but astute remark was touched a raw nerve. Mulan nearly shouted at him. Thankfully, she managed to withhold her emotions and settled with an exasperated sigh. Ling would never mean to insult her purposefully. Why couldn't she do what she wanted just because she was born with the wrong sex?

"I never said it was a game," she countered wryly, masking her sour expression. Unfortunately, Ling was much more sensitive than she thought he was.

"No, that's not what I meant… Look, you are a woman. If some of the army officers find out who you are, regardless of your excuse, they'll have you executed for misconduct."

The prospect of execution was enough to kill the strange exhilaration and the swell of excitement that filled her chest just days before. Ling was right; she would never be as free as a man. The reality was much more dreadful than she imagined it would be.

"I am aware of that. But I had to try. I can't let my father die… and my husband refused to… —"

"Wait! You...you are married?" Ling nearly lost his grip on the big pork bun on his hand.

"Ling!" Mulan reprimanded her friend's unwarranted shock. "Are you expecting me to be a spinster?!"

The lanky man snickered, nudging Chien-Po with his elbow in fun. "You should see how she beat those boys in my village. One word. Brutal! I am surprised there is still a man who dared to share a bed with her," he whispered loudly. "Speaking of which… when was your wedding?"

Mulan mentally kicked herself for opening the door to conversation about Shang.

"Couple of months ago, it was a family affair, I'm sorry I couldn't invite you," Mulan tried to give a close-ended answer.

Ling waved his hand, dismissing Mulan's remorseful plea.
"And how about you, Chien-Po, have you got the date fixed yet?" Mulan attempted to switch the topic, thankfully the man in question didn't seem to mind the detour.

Chien-Po rubbed his rotund belly as though it would help him think. "Hopefully after the war."

"What if the war lasts a decade? Would Su wait for you that long?"

"She said so," Chien-Po shrugged. "She would much rather stay single than marry another man."

"I can understand her rationale. There are not many men who cook for their wives," Ling commented, elbowing Chien-Po on his ribs.

"You can cook?" Mulan turned to Chien-Po. It was considered a rare sight for men to step into the kitchen, let alone to cook.

"Uhm....." the guy rubbed his side while trying to consider his reply. His profession as a chef wasn't exactly his favourite topic of conversation. Not because he wasn't proud of what he did, but because any discussion of it invariably seemed to invite a slew of snide remark or thoughtless insinuation about his unhealthy obsession with food. It was naive to hope that Mulan hadn't concluded that from his unusually large stature, although, what was the point of hiding the truth?

"I am a chef," he admitted. To his surprise, Mulan said nothing more than an impressed stare. "So, I've tailored the menu for my wedding myself." Nevermind even when he didn't know when would it happened (or would it ever happen), the feverish anticipation was enough to spur Chien-Po to go overboard and penned down all his most notable recipe and favourite dishes that his wedding guest would savour.

"I bet you look forward to the wedding," Ling butted in. A suggestive smile twitched his lips.

Chien-Po visibly flushed at that. "Hmm.... I look forward to all sort of things..." he retorted shyly.

Mulan rolled her eyes to another dimension. Men!

"Would you mind if.... If I ask for some household tips in the future?" Chien-Po turned to Mulan. "I want Su not just be happy, but also comfortable. It won't be easy to leave her childhood home to live in an unfamiliar house with a man."

Mulan thought his gesture was rather sweet. "Of course!"

"Thank you."

"So..." Ling bounced his questioning stare at Mulan. "I need to know this. Who is the lucky guy?" he asked, leaning closer to Mulan and batting his eyes expectantly. Mulan mentally berated Ling's unyielding spirit. Why was he so insistent on finding out, anyway?

"You don't know him. He's not from the village. His father and mine used to serve the Emperor together," she replied, hoping this time Ling would stop pestering her over her husband's identity.

"Oh... bet he must be of... good lineage."

Mulan snickered a little at the qualities Ling attached to her husband's persona. Yes, perhaps he wanted to marry me and chain me to the stove.

"Isn't your husband aware of what you're doing?" Chien Po raised his concern.

"No."
"What if he finds out?" he asked again.

"He won't," Mulan said confidently. "He is already a trained soldier, part of the elite group. He won't be training with us."

The next morning, Mulan and her two friends set off for the next stretch of the journey. But before they went any further out of the town, Mulan went to hire a messenger to send her letters.

"One for my mother in law, my father and the last for my husband," she explained, responding to her friends' curious gazes as they settled in for their breakfast stop.

"Such a shame you're married, Mulan… because there is a rumour," Ling began, rubbing both of his hands together expectantly as he whispered. "The son of one of the army's generals is going to train us. I've heard he is a very handsome young man, roughly our age. I think his family name is Li."

The statement was enough to make Mulan's blood freeze, but she dismissed her unreasonable alarm instantly. There were plenty enough men around with the surname Li; surely it could mean anyone.

"All army officers are horrible! I hear they're spoiled rotten and only interested in those promiscuous women in the bars," sneered Chien-Po, inhaling his breakfast in one go.

"No, this guy isn't!" Ling disagreed, absently pouring tea for his friends before pouring a cup for himself. "My father was in the same regiment a few years ago, and he wasn't even interested in going to the brothels!"

"Perhaps he doesn't like women," Chien-Po quipped, and Mulan tried to conceal all her emotions and appear as stoic as possible.

"Yes, perhaps," Mulan responded, faking a voice of disinterest.

"I think I know who you're talking about," added Chien-Po. "The one that's often disparagingly called a 'Pretty Boy' due to his dashing good looks and strong physique."

Mulan swallowed a rock that seemed to have lodged itself in her throat….or maybe her heart? She couldn't tell the difference, but somewhere deep in her mind, she agreed to all those qualities, imagining Shang with his magnificent raven mane, captivating eyes, angular jaw and sharp, well-defined brow, he was the perfect depiction of a prince or a knight in shining armour out of fabled legend. Despite her best effort to curb her thoughts away from her husband, the memory of him holding her on their bed, his body curling to surround hers, kept on returning like a plaguing disease.

"Are you suggesting that he might have an appetite for… —" Mulan's brows scrunched up at her friends' antics, while inwardly she was about to yell at Ling because he was blatantly gossiping about Shang in front of his wife.

The lanky man couldn't restrain his teasing smile as he continued to deliver rice into his mouth. What was better than salacious gossip about their future captain?

"No. Well… I don't think so. I heard he just got married recently and had since become exceptionally ruthless in his training!" clarified Ling. Mulan began to wonder where her friend had received this 'distribution' of practically sacrilegious gossip.

"Perhaps his wife annoyed him," Chien-Po mentioned nonchalantly, snickering into his bowl of
noodles.

Mulan nearly spat her tea. "What?" she exclaimed a notch too loud. The hulking giant cowered and wished he could hide behind the tiny piece of ceramic in his hands.

"Mulan? Are you okay?" Ling's puzzled stare was enough to bring Mulan's mind back into the realm of reality. Hell, she was even assuming this mysterious guy named Li would be the same person as the one that seduced her in bed.

"I... I'm sorry," she fumbled. "I am just... —"

"We don't mean to insult you. I bet you are different from any other wife, and that is a compliment," Ling interjected, presenting a sincere smile.

How would you know...? said the voice in Mulan's head mournfully. Regardless of her acknowledgement of her loveless marriage, she sincerely hoped her friends' hypothetical scenarios and speculations were far from the truth; that her husband didn't see her as a waspish, unpleasant woman he would have to share the rest of his life with.

"Thanks Ling," Mulan paid a faint smile, only daring to meet her friend's eyes fleetingly. She knew she could fool the world, but she could never fool her heart.

The next day the sight of large makeshift tents emerged on the edge of the horizon. A few war ensign and red banners advertised their presence.

"Here we are," Ling huffed. "There is no turning back now."

"I am actually worried," admitted Chien-Po, fiddling his fingers sheepishly. "I heard, during the war, soldiers are on strict food ration." He grimaced as though even the thought of such drastic measures could cause him physical pain. Ling could only shake his head in response to Chien-Po's dietary dilemma.

"I thought you were going to say you were worried about getting killed," Mulan muttered with nonchalance, but instantly regretted her words when the rotund man's countenance fell into a crestfallen frown.

"No, I mean... surely, a robust guy like you won't fall as easy prey on the battlefield. Perhaps you'll end up with some scars! Big manly scars! My father said they might help you impress a girl," Mulan revised, hoping her previous unapologetic rambling would be written off soon enough.

"That's true!" Ling piped up in excitedly. "Think about Su, the girl worth fighting for," he added, injecting some positive determination."Besides, we may return all lean and muscular! Like that handsome Captain," Ling gestured his hands up and down his thin frame, subsequently bringing his arms up and flexing his non-existent biceps, showcasing the idea of the burly figure he was becoming.

Spurred by the cheerful thought and promising future, Chien-Po chirped, enthusiasm returning to his stride.

Lucky you, Mulan watched the two men giggling and exchanging banter with euphoric thrill, imagining the risky wager of their life had paid off. At least both of them had a future waiting at home for them after the war, while she had to return to her life of imprisonment - living under the subjugation of her mother-in-law and husband.

But...what if she returned with visible scars or debilitating injuries like her father? Inadvertently,
Li Yue's disgusted face and Shang's infuriated rebuke transpired in her mind. However, what hurt her the most was imagining her father's disappointment. It would kill her if someone unravelled her impersonation and dishonored her family name forever.

*Perhaps death is a better option.* She brooded.

*Be optimistic, Mulan. You are not even on the battlefront yet!* She chided herself. *You can do this, train to be a man and a soldier and bring honor to the Fa and Li family!* Mulan sighed pensively realizing the risk of the gamble she took. It would be a steep learning curve, but she had purposed in her heart that she wouldn't say anything was impossible before trying it.

"I think I need some tips on how to be a proper man," Mulan said under her breath, halting Ling and Chien-Po chatter.

"You have to deepen your voice," advised Ling, pacing beside her.

"Like this?" Mulan offered a lower falsetto. Ling laughed but nodded approvingly, indicating his satisfaction. "Not too low, you sounded like a man who ate too much Sichuan chicken the day before."

"And don't walk with a gait. No….no….don't swing your hips," counseled Chien-Po, looking pointedly at Mulan's effeminate movements. "Think about marching, straight legs, straight back. *Ugh,* that's a bit too much, you look like you have constipation. Just relax a little, loosen your knees. Now, that's right…. Very good," he congratulated and clapped encouragingly.

"Don't forget to spit," Ling added. To accentuate his point, he sucked his breath and spat into the nearby river. "See that?"

Mulan's eyes widened, both from incredulity and repulsion. The imagination of Shang doing just that all over the house wasn't particularly an attractive fantasy to have.

"You need to yawn louder…. Speak with confidence….and *forget* whatever your mother ever told you about table manners," he said, moving forward and joining the long registration queue. "Just imagine you live in a barn! No rules!"

*You bet.* Mulan mused sarcastically, remembering her mother in law used to scold her on how she looked like someone who was raised in a barn."Let me rephrase again, if I want to be a real man, I have to expectorate at random occasion, laugh, eat and yawn loudly and punch anyone that overstep my territory?"

"Exactly! I know you are a fast learner!" praised Ling.

"But, what about…. the toilet business?" asked Chien-Po innocently.

"What about it?" Ling eyed him with confusion. The brawny man stood up and demonstrated by pretending to undo his trousers and stood facing a nearby bush.

"Oh, *that!*" Ling rubbed his chin as though thinking hard. Two months ago, Mulan would have fallen into a giggling fit if anyone said she would be embroiled in an in-depth lavatory discussion with two men.

"It's hard to learn how to do that without owning a proper *organ*…" sighed Ling.

"Not to mention that men in the army bathe together," quipped Chien-Po.
"Do they?" Mulan winced at that.

"Yes, but I take it since you are married, You've seen what naked men look like." Ling countered plainly.

His words evoked unfiltered images of Shang with his signature stern, stoic expression. His chiseled chest was peeking through the slight vee gap of his robe... perhaps with nothing else underneath, and his fingers left an invisible imprint, a floating memory of his touch against her skin.

"That doesn't mean I would like to see other naked men!" Mulan snarled, her cheeks reddening with embarrassment.

"I'm afraid you don't have much choice," stated Chien-Po.

The three of them talked as they joined the queue. After standing and moving at a pace close to a snail, they arrived in front of a long desk, where a few fully armed soldiers handed over their rudimentary supplies, armament and a bag of bathing equipment.

"Fa Ping?" called the raspy, high-pitched voice that reminded Mulan of the noodle stall owner in her neighborhood.

A judgemental stare greeted her. Chi Fu was his name, a scrawny looking old man with a sinister mustache, crooked teeth and a frown that appeared to be tattooed on his face. She sincerely prayed this man wasn't one of the leaders of the battalion. If Mulan had wished for an awe-inspiring leader or bold looking warrior, this guy was neither of them.

"Yes, that's me, Sir," Mulan firmly stepped forward and presented the forged birth certificate and her father's summons letter.

The man stuck his nose on the conscription, then he lifted his head and observed her closely, trying to draw correlations between Fa Zhou's imposing image and the young man's rather feminine features.

Mulan was right to have a sinking feeling about the man. Chi Fu didn't have an exactly pleasant reputation among the trainees. The air was palpable with dread as the man narrowed his eyes and scoffed incredulously when he appraised Mulan's less-than-stellar figure for a warrior, let alone that she claimed to be the son of the Honorable war strategist, Fa Zhou.

"Has your father ever trained you," he inquired without looking up, his hand busy scribbling something on his notes.

"Sword fighting, Sir," replied Mulan truthfully.

"Has he taken you into any battle before?" prodded the old man.

"No, Sir." Mulan tried to sound firm.

"No wonder," Chi-Fu sneered snidely.

Despite the colorful words that began to form in her head, Mulan tried to remain polite. She didn't want to be expelled from the regiment for misconduct just yet.

"But not to worry, Captain Li will train everyone in this battalion. He'll make a man out of you yet," the scrawny man made a wry chuckle.
"Cap... Captain Li?" she repeated in disbelief. Ok, after Ling's precious intel, she saw the prospect of them serving the same battalion. But having him as the man who trained her? Never.

"Yes, Captain Li Shang," Chi-Fu narrowed his eyes. "You know him?"

Mulan's heart stopped for a second. She didn't know whether to feel apprehensive or happy at the prospect of meeting Shang—fate be damned; apparently, it was much harder to escape from him than she thought it would be. Thankfully, Mulan didn't have the luxury of meditative contemplation over petty things like that. "Soldier Ping! I can't wait for your answer until the next century!" A rude, nasally yell broke her reverie.

"Ugh...uhm—" Mulan sobered, regretting that she had spoken her thought aloud. "No, Sir. I don't know him," she replied with a brisk shaking of her head.

The old, crotchety advisor looked unconvinced. "Really? I heard that he is your brother-in-law."

_Gods_, Mulan mentally facepalmed herself. How could she forget? Spending time with Ling and Chien-Po had evidently caused Mulan to let her guard down. And this Chi-Fu guy was a lot more perceptive than the average ignorant, foul-smelling soldiers that she had met so far. Mulan had to make sure she edited her cover story logically.

"Yes, but we met very briefly, Sir. My sister's wedding was done in a hurry," she finally said, being careful to tell the truth, or at least as much of the truth as she willing to divulge.

The creases on Chi-Fu's forehead deepened and his lips twisted into a distasteful scowl, but after a beat, he decided not to press the matter further. "Dismissed!" he ordered Mulan grumpily.

Joining Chien-Po and Ling, Mulan strode across the clearing towards a series of dull colored structures.

"Tent number fifteen," Ling read from his scroll. "This is ours," he announced, inviting his friends to join him inside.

The large tent was packed to the rafters with boisterous, sweaty men. Even with her hand covering her nose, she could do little to curb the stench of masculine musk intermingled with the scent of cheap alcohol. Mulan wrinkled her nose, thinking of how she had to share this tent for an unforeseeable amount of the future. The men didn't pay any attention to their arrival. Their concentration was absorbed by a curious spectacle occurring in one corner of the tent.

"I picked that spot first!" came the incensed voice of a man. He was short but stocky. The muscles of his arms rippled as he clenched his fists. In front of him, his opponent was a soldier twice as tall as he was, his muscular form wrapped in a protective shield that was literally shining under the rays of the sun, free from scratch and dents. Mulan could tell the man's armor had never seen the light of a battle yet. But her attention was drawn by a large crest of the emperor resting on the man's shoulder.

"Shut up!" the larger man demanded, looked very much affronted. He drove his fist to the table with so much power that the piece of furniture crumbled under his strength. "How dare you challenge me like that?!!"

The stocky man's nose flared and his chest heaved, looking just as infuriated. "Just because you are nobility doesn't mean you can treat other people like dirt!" he spat with vehemence. The watching onlookers let out a synchronous gasp at the man's audacity.

"You just arrived today, and I've been here for a week!" he fumed indignantly, finger pointing to
the exact point where his bedding was—currently disheveled and soiled with dirt—perhaps a result of the other's man dirty mischief.

Instead of trying to appease both conflicting parties, the crowd gave the men noises of encouragement, fueling them to fight.

"Is this what men normally do?" whispered Mulan, curiously watching the growing tension.


"That handsome man is the bully," Mulan remarked, brows slanted in annoyance, observing the unbalanced battle of dominion.

"Don't you recognize who he is?" came Ling's worried voice.

"No," Mulan mouthed uncaringly, her concentration devoted to the intense exchange in front of her.

"Prince of Wei… he is the Emperor's nephew!" Ling emphasized, hoping to give Mulan some logical explanation to stop whatever plan was currently brimming in her mind. But it was too late. The petite Ping had marched to the battlefront.

"Mu…—Ping! Wait!" But Ling's frantic warning only fell on deaf ears as Mulan made a beeline into the core of the commotion.

"Is this how a respectable man behaves?" Mulan began, looking at the handsome young man with dark eyes and broad shoulders who currently gripped the much shorter man by his collar.

The prince's eyes collided with hers. For a moment his mouth fell open… and close, his hardened expression evaporated… and transformed into satirical laughter. The prince's reaction elicited a sudden fit of hysterics from his gang, and Mulan began to realize almost the entire encampment had drawn to watch the heated disagreement that threatened to break into a physical brawl.

"Well...well...a newcomer wants to get a spotlight," the prince smiled with an amused expression, abandoning his grasp on his victim's collar. He clearly wasn't expecting a threat coming from someone that looked to be half of his stature.

"Who are you?" The prince scoffed in disdain as he scanned Mulan's petite frame.

"Is that relevant?" Mulan objected, hands flying to her hips showing her aversion. In the back row, Ling and Chien-Po cringed upon witnessing Mulan's hostile, yet unmanly, gesture. It didn't spell out provocation in the dictionary of a soldier who was trying to challenge his opponent, more like a mother scolding her child.

"Of course, if you knew who I am... you would be speaking to me with fear and respect," the Prince said relatively calmly. The room fell silent as though putting the prince on his rightful pedestal, paying him the reverence he demanded.

"I have no respect for people who dare to bully someone smaller than them," Mulan argued.

"Are you with this hopeless loser?" The young prince darted a derogatory glance at Yao and let out a disgusted scoff. "You need another weakling to defend you, how pathetic," he continued his verbal assault, pacing around Mulan like a predator stalking its prey. A smug smile graced his lips when he realized the watching crowd was beginning to take sides."I shall give you one more chance. Who are you?"
Mulan shot the prince a withering look, before replying firmly. "Fa Ping, my father is retired strategist, working for your uncle." Her answer stirred the crowd and evoked more incoherent murmurs.

"Oh, dropping names are we?"

The growing ruckus eventually invited more interlopers than they intended to, because not long after that a sniveling, nasally shout from Chi-Fu was heard. "What's going on here?"

His query was immediately reciprocated by a collective groan.

"This scumbag stole the prince's spot!" claimed one burly guy with a large scar on his neck, Mulan speculated that he must be one of the prince's lackey.

The scumbag, apparently a guy named Yao, snickered furiously as the gang retreated to give Chi-Fu the central stage. Mulan glared at the prince's accomplice, how could he lie so blatantly in front of so many witnesses? To her surprise, even Yao shut his mouth not daring to verbalize any advocation.

"And this Ping guy was admonishing the prince rudely!" bristled another. Mulan's restrained emotions were unexpectedly riled.

"What?!" she raised her voice, incredulous and affronted. "I wasn't rude! I was.. —"

"You shouted and were disrespectful!" rebuked one of the onlookers.

"That's because he won't listen!" Mulan shot back, refuting his claim in her attempt to defend her and Yao's position, but Chi-Fu took no notice, turning to the prince instead.

"Your Highness?" Chi-Fu addressed, flashing his skeptic glare towards Mulan, as though saying 'Credibility, you have not. Pick your enemy wisely, you fool!' before returning to the young nobility. "Is this true?" he consulted.

The prince remained mute, but his expression betrayed whatever was crossing through his mind. The prince was certainly pleased with Chi-Fu's unreasonable, mutual disdain against the regiment's latest recruit.

Mulan never thought that soldiers were capable of such vicious slander; far more than the idle gossipers one could find among the bored women in her village.

"Don't worry about it, Chi-Fu," the prince feigned a long-suffering sigh. "I will let it go this once."

"No, that won't do." And with a raise of his finger, the scrawny advisor pointed towards Mulan and Yao. "You two!" commanded Chi-Fu. "Go and clean the horse stalls and then help in the kitchen. No dinner for you two tonight as punishment!"

"You... —!" Mulan was about to confront the advisor when she felt Ling grasp her forearm tightly, his eyes glinting with fear. It took Mulan considerable willpower to bite back the snide remark that rose to the tip of her tongue.

Satisfied upon delivering his castigation which hopefully disciplined the two rebellious mutts, Chi-Fu stormed out of the tent with much flare and bravado.

"That was close..." Ling breathed in relief. He knew, defying the Prince could well mean his friend was to lose her head even before marching to war. But Mulan seemed to be completely
oblivious that the young ruler, despite his wrongdoing and boorishness, was being generous.

"They do say there is wild *man* inside each of us...." Chien-Po responded in a hushed tone, studying the angry Fa Ping from a reasonable distance. The girl in disguise was still glaring and seething at the horde of hulking men following the prince, grabbing their bottles and tossing their victorious cheers to the sky.

"If only *they* would stay inside."

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the late update! Thank you for waiting. This is where I introduce another OC, Prince of Wei (name will be fully revealed later), but this man will hold a big portion of the story to reveal some emotional part of Shang that otherwise would remain the voice in his head. He may sound really annoying at first, but I'll hope you all will grow to love him. To those of you who watched Hua Mulan 2009, may recognize that Prince of Wei in my fiction will mimic Wentai a lot, except that I took the personality of Chen Honghui—Mulan's love interest in the new Mulan live action 2018.

Shang would be back in the next chapter. Thank you for all you review, kudos, follow, favorites! Thank you!
With mounting annoyance, Mulan followed Yao exiting their tent. She didn't know where the kitchen was, but she couldn't care less, not with the amount of frustration over the brutish aristocrat who had been nothing but a bully and Chi-Fu's blatant unfairness in handling the situation. The world of men had presented its own unique problem that she hadn't foreseen.

Thankfully, Yao, the soldier in front of her seemed to know his way around the encampment like the back of his hand, even though he was steering autonomously because his mind was preoccupied with the same clouded haze that was bothering her mind.

"You shouldn't have done that," Yao said, breaking the silence. "You've picked the wrong enemy. I won't be able to forgive myself if you lose your head because of me."

Mulan opened her mouth, but after quick consideration, she shut it again. This wasn't the right time or place to argue. Even when she didn't see Yao's facial expression, Mulan could feel his visceral feeling of resentment still searing hot from the altercation earlier. She wanted to be clear they were on the same side, so she just dipped her head compliantly.

They entered a tent that looked no different from any of the others, but the amount of vegetables, sacks of grain and scattered pots and woks confirmed they were in the right place.

With an exasperated sigh, Yao flicked a brief glance over his shoulder, signaling her to follow him.

"We are here to help," Yao said shortly, fighting to keep his tone neutral so it wouldn't reflect how vexed he was to end up in the kitchen while his mates probably enjoyed the evening playing mahjong and drinking beer.

The Chef briefly introduced himself as Zhang, a man with hairy arms, thick biceps, a silvery mane and matching beard.

"Great, I can do with a few more hands!" he responded brightly. "Let me see…" He stroked his beard which was plaited into an intricate twist. For a second, Mulan thought he looked more like a Kung Fu master out of her brother's posters than a chef.

"You," he pointed at Yao after appraising his muscular arms. "Yes, you… take those sacks of rice outside where the large pot is. And you…" He flashed a frown after seeing Mulan's slender frame. "Slaughter these chickens for dinner," he commanded, pointing to the cage where a rambunctious clucking sound could be heard.

Mulan wrinkled her nose. An image of blood and gore transpired in her head. So far she had been sheltered and spared from witnessing such horror because her mother or their family maid had done the dirty work. But now, there was no such luxury. She had been demoted to a scullery maid after
allegedly defying that arrogant Prince.

"I don't like killing," Mulan said off-handedly. Not that she was questioning the morality of killing innocent creatures for the pure enjoyment of it. She clearly liked eating chicken and didn't have any plan of quitting anytime soon—not until this point.

"Well, no one does," the Chef concurred. "But it is necessary," he added, placing a blade on the table and bobbing his head instigating her to start working. But Mulan felt her limbs completely paralyzed, her mind running in havoc just imagining the queasiness that was sure to follow witnessing the bloody carnage.

"Don't tell me you are afraid of slaughtering chickens when you are supposed to slaughter men out there in a few weeks time," scoffed Zhang as though he could read her mind. Mulan could hear the implied disdain and mock in the way he spoke.

She was about to retaliate, but thinking about it—the Chef did have a point. She wouldn't be much of a soldier on the battlefield if she didn't even have the heart to kill a few chickens.

"I'll give you a tip," the Chef said, clearly understanding Mulan's detestation. "Do not hesitate. It makes them suffer less." The advice that was intended to assuage her fears seemed to amplify them.

In desperation, she looked across the room. Yao, although wearing the same thunderous expression, was working laboriously without saying a word. She looked at the chickens that were blissfully pecking a little bit of grain, completely unaware of their impending doom. And here she was, trapped in her own mental limbo, absurdly trying to reconcile her shrinking moral and logical necessity.

Sucking in a sharp breath with a combination of trepidation and helplessness, Mulan commanded her unwilling hand to grab the knife.

This would be her first voluntary kill.

Chef Zhang offered an encouraging smile as they approached the makeshift coop. "Ping, there will always be a first in everything, and I promise you, it'll get easier as time goes by."

Mulan nodded despite her disquiet, marshaling her courage as she wielded the blade. Seemed like she wouldn't be eating chicken for a very long time.

As the last tendrils of sunlight vanish, and the stars appear all around them, the previously quiet clearing was filled with sounds of a hunger driven mob eagerly fighting their way to fill their empty stomachs. Even after distancing himself at the far end of the field, Shao Wei could still hear the boisterous laughter and incompetent singing disturbing the peaceful silence.

Shao seethed when the nasally voice of one of the soldiers pulled a particularly ribald stunt to his ears. In this kind of situation, he abhorred his own resolve that caused him to be stranded in the least bonafide training camp in the country, leaving all his princely comfort behind.

"And he said to her… do you like sleeping?" He heard one of the recruits, named Jing, suspended dramatically in his narration, lifting his mug and wiping his mouth with his sleeve ungracefully before dropping the punchline. The crowds inched forward expectantly. "Me too. We should do it together sometimes."

A jarring sound of laughter filled the air. Shao could see the narrator's lips curled into a satisfied
smirk at the desired reaction.

Shao bristled once again. It wasn’t exactly because of the bawdy content of the joke or that he failed to decode the implied meaning of the sordid parody. Back in Chang’an, he and his friends had cracked the same kind of lecherous humor, perhaps even more vulgar than this one considering the absence of Chi-Fu's occasional policing around the vicinity. It was just that the cheerfulness reminded him of the life he had a few months ago, before his father… —Ugh, he berated himself for thinking about it again. He came here to complete his mission, to jeopardize his father's devious plan and to prove that he was wrong even to dare advocating such a ludicrous proposal.

Another inharmonious rendition with lewd lyrics followed by a peal of laughter deteriorated his foul mood further. But this was precisely the wrong moment to count his misfortunes. Leaving the comfortable life behind the walls of the Forbidden City was his choice—not that he had any alternative after he had openly challenged his father's decision.

He threw his sight far beyond the clearing. His sharp eyes quickly identified a lanky man, grunting and fumbling as he wrestled to lift a heavy cask from the top of the stack to the floor.

_Fa Ping_, Shao remembered him—the newest recruit who had been a dolt to meddle with him during his argument with Yao. _What was he thinking?_ Shao felt his temper flare. The way that petite framed warrior squared his chest, effectively taunting him despite his knowledge of his position still vividly permeated his mind. But there was something else that was alluring about Ping. The way he confronted him, his unyielding spirit, his sharp dark eyes and the spark of animosity declared within their hypnotic depths reminded him of _someone_—someone he was supposed to _forget_.

Shaking the irrelevant daze out of his head, Shao turned his attention back to reality. From where he sat, he could see the scrawny Ping wrapping his arms around the length of the barrel, pulling a sharp breath as he marshaled his strength, but despite his best effort, the vessel didn't move an inch.

Although bearing the penalty of his mistake, Ping didn't look resentful. He seemed to be trying to do the task to the best of his ability.

Had he misjudged the boy? Shao wondered.

"Oh, poor Ping…" Half inebriated Jing said in feigned pity. "Perhaps you should go home and help your mother lift bowls and wok instead," he added, sinking in his seat enjoying Ping's struggle as a form of entertainment. Ping solemnly disregarded Jing's attempt to ridicule. He was quick to learn that in this kind of setting, weaker men who attracted attention tended to be picked on… _a lot._

"Ping, do you hear me?" came Jing's incensed voice. He was indignant that Ping had the guts to ignore him.

Finally, someone with genuine compassion stood and helped the poor boy.

"I'll help," announced another man, immediately coming to Ping's rescue.

With minimal to no effort, a rotund man Shao recalled was named Chien-Po hoisted the vessel, and handed it over to Ping. Unfortunately, what could have been a smooth estafet, ended when the heavy load accidentally landed on Ping's toes. The boy let a pain filled shrill, while Chien-Po apologized profusely for his carelessness. The incongruous warble suddenly stopped before being transformed into a mocking guffaw at Ping's expense.
"I think you need the healer to see whether your foot is broken." Chien-Po winced as he rolled the load off of Ping. "My fault," he said, voice thick with regret.

"Hey, you were just trying to help," Ping replied, smiling faintly. Chien-Po extended his arms to take the load, but Ping prevented him.

"I got this," he said firmly before limping away, rolling the cask with him. The discordant voices resumed right after, blending together with the scent of alcohol. Shao glanced towards the far end of the clearing, where the crotchety royal advisor watched the entire exchange unfold. It was clear even Chi-Fu was indulging in the young man's brief time of distress.

The atmosphere returned to normal after Ping retreated to the kitchen to serve dinner. However, as soon as the boy emerged, skilfully balancing a tray with a few wafting bowls, Jing hovered right behind his unsuspecting victim with an air of malice.

"PING!" Jing yelled loudly in Ping's ear. The young man jerked and staggered backward, spilling the contents of his tray all over his comrades.

"Oy!" A man with a large tattoo hollered before pulling the hapless Ping by his collar precariously. He went on to point furiously at his wet lap. "It's only fair if you share the humiliation," he announced, his features contorted with rage. The congregation stifled a loud gasp.

"I… I didn't mean to," Ping confessed. "Someone startled me."

The man scoffed indignantly, neglecting Ping's explanation. He grabbed his beer and threw a generous amount in Ping's direction. His disparaging action incited a wave of laughter.

Shao felt the blood rise to his face, watching the assembly howl and hoot at the unfortunate Ping, who at the moment stood in the middle of a puddle of beer. The boy may have landed on his bad side but that didn't mean he would ignore his suffering altogether.

Meanwhile, Ping's assailant grinned appreciatively for the support, raising his now empty mug and indulging in a surge of satisfaction for his quelled vengeance. Where was Chi-Fu when the situation desperately needed his tyrannical reproach to restore order? Shao studied the Emperor counselor who was sneering quietly, with no intention of getting involved, mediating the tension or asserting his power to advocate the poor Ping.

In a brief wisp of introspection, Shao decided he had enough integrity and humanity to put his antagonism towards Ping aside and come to his aid. Clear with his mission, Shao cut through the clearing and marched over to the group.

Instantaneously, the soldiers mocking laughter sputtered into an uneasy chuckle when Shao squared his shoulders and raised his hand. "Enough now."

And those two words were sufficient to make that hulking culprit, Jing, shrink on his to him, Chi-Fu muttered some unintelligent curse that Shao suspected was never meant to be said aloud. "What a bunch of jabbering idiots."

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"You still risking to take a bath in the open air like this?" Ling stated his objection. He had grown weary of Mulan's womanly habit of taking a bath twice a day. Losing a head over body hygiene seemed to be an extortionate price to pay.

"I may act like a man, but I refuse to smell like one," Mulan replied, whistling cheerfully as she took her bathing equipment. Ling rolled his eyes at that.
"Don't worry. I'll be vigilant," she promised.

Regardless of some unexpected hurdles these last couple of days, overall, Mulan was quite content as she was, settling nicely into the routine. She was happy with the more challenging duties and welcomed the novelty of freedom in her role as a man. After a string of unfortunate events, she did not need further complications.

Unfortunately, the universe seemed determined to test her.

It was a quiet night, after a hot day working helping Chef Zhang inside the badly ventilated tent which felt more like a broth scented sauna, a well-deserved bath was next on the menu.

Unfortunately, it was also when the presumptuous prince came strutting out to the exact same spot, sporting his usual silk robe, acting like he owned the place. Which, technically, he kind of did, he was the Prince, the third to the throne after the Emperor himself. But did he have to look so smug and indifferent about it? That night, Mulan was certain the Prince had seen her in the pond's vicinity, but he pretended to be oblivious, nonchalantly stripping himself naked before plunging into the water.

After their odd first encounter—with him being bossy and intentionally pretentious in expressing his opinion—Mulan never wished to make any voluntary acquaintances with the haughty Prince. But now, he seemed to be intentionally resurfacing everywhere she went, even showing her a rare kindness by defending her against the brute—Jing, a few nights before.

Mulan swallowed deeply, watching the Prince's toned back ripple as he swam across the pond. He reminded her of Shang. Mulan immediately slapped herself in an attempt to shove off the inappropriate fantasy, feeling even more flustered than usual around him. She quickly picked another hidden spot behind a large tree, singing some tune to keep her head safely occupied.

After finishing his bath and covering himself with a comfortable night robe, Shao Wei prepared to leave. But his ears were taunted by an effeminate singing from the far end of the pond. He only remembered seeing a glimpse of Fa Ping before he dove into the water. Could that lanky soldier have enough guts to smuggle a woman into camp? Shao nearly burst out laughing at that thought, but there was only one way to find out.

Along the marshy place, Shao saw Ping step into particularly long-standing reeds to create the illusion of privacy as the boy undressed. He let out a blissful sigh—very untypical of a man, as the cool, calming water of the pond wrapped around his figure to his neck. Shao prowled closer and peeked through the reeds into the location where Ping had left his personal possessions. His eyes widened when he saw a strange object laying there.

A chest binding.

_Is he... —?_

Shao silenced the uncertain speculation. He was aware of the protocol and the implications if Ping's real identity was revealed.

Suddenly, everyone's mortal enemy entered the pond.

Chi-Fu.

Just about the last man who could handle this kind information with fairness and justice.

"Hi...er, Sir." Ping stammered, clearly caught off-guard. Subsequently, Shao lowered himself down
behind the dense shrubbery, inching closer to eavesdrop on the exchange.

"I...I didn't know you took a bath at...at this time too," Ping stuttered as he slowly backed away.

"Is there anything wrong with that?" Unfortunately, that sneaky advisor roamed closer.

"Oh... no, no." Ping waved his hand casually. "Of course not!" and deftly camouflaged himself behind a lily pad—that was a wrong move, because not only was his skin not green, it almost implied he was trying to conceal something behind the leaves. If Shao's conjecture was true; that Ping was a woman in disguise—that evil, well-connected counselor would be the first person that insisted on putting the blade to Ping's neck. Abruptly, the bitter nostalgia of a blade trailing across someone's exposed throat transpired in his mind.

Sensing the danger, Shao swiftly thought of a plausible distraction. He glanced to the set of arrows and bow that he habitually carried everywhere, a measure of precaution—as his defense teacher taught him. With impeccable accuracy, he aimed his arrow towards the tree stump closest to the pond, just so it was visible by all the parties to deliver a false warning of impending attack.

"Intruders!" Shao alerted. Run!"

It was not a lie, technically, since he was the intruder, but it made for an effective deterrent. Obviously, the coward Chi-Fu didn't spare any second thoughts for Fa Ping and immediately fled the scene. Ping only emerged when he was sure there was no one around.

And he saw it, even though he was aware that what he was doing was the furthest from honorable thing a man could do, more so for a prince, he had confirmed his suspicion.

Fa Ping was a woman.

Why did he have to know this? He berated himself. He was already embroiled in a far more dangerous deception between the Huns and his father, and now this?

Shao groaned into his palms, feeling unexplainable fatigue swallowing his strength. He plopped himself down by the bank, trying to console his discombobulated mind. It seemed like fate continually challenged him to defy the norms and orders all over again. Ping was truly nobody to him—why he had to go against the rules and risk everything, even his credibility, for a reason not very clear even to him?

Of course, Shao could opt to report his finding, but he was sure Ping had a strong reason to risk her life and masquerade as a man. Why had she disguised herself? What was her agenda? Was she sent by his father to spy on him and to find out his deceitful plan? Shao shuddered at the thought. But why would his father send a woman, more so, one that could hardly fend for herself?

His head ached so much from thinking that he thought it would burst.

"Chi-Fu," Shao beckoned the royal counselor who sat behind his bureau, a stash of paper mounting in slight disarray across its surface."'I need a little assistance from you."

"Always ready at your disposal, Your Highness," Chi-Fu replied politely, abandoning his work.

"Good," Shao forged a smile of gratitude. "What do you know about Fa Ping?"

Chi-Fu's brows drew together in unmistakable perplexity. Why would the Prince be interested of that troublemaker? But Chi-Fu was a lot smarter than to question the Prince's demand. Clearing his
throat, he pulled a bunch of scrolls, running through the list before reading them out loud.

"He is Fa Zhou's fourteen years old son, apparently here to take the place of his father." Chi-Fu handed him the copy of Fa Zhou's conscription. Shao studied the scroll but found nothing of a conspicuous trace of oddities.

"Anything wrong, Your Highness?" Chi-Fu prodded as a preemptive measure. Shao shook his head at that.

"Any other family connection you know?" he inquired further, placing the summon letter back into the canister.

"He has one sister, Fa Mulan, who married to the captain of this regiment, Li Shang."

*Interesting,* Shao mused. Although the conundrum was far than resolved, Shao's intuition had hypothesized the fact laid in front of him was of great importance.

"Chi-Fu, hand me all Fa Ping's daily schedule to the hourly detail," he commanded.

Chi-Fu bowed obediently. "Yes, Your Honor."

Mulan's first-week foray into the life of a man ensued with a lot of perilous hurdles. Thankfully her second week was relatively uneventful, mostly because she was consciously trying to distance herself from a certain clique that she felt frequently demeaned her and picked on her weaknesses.

To begin with, most of the men in her regiment were nothing like anything she had imagined—boldly poised soldiers with undefeatable fighting prowess like her father or General Li. In contrast, they looked more like clueless mobs in tin foil rather than warriors in battle armor.

However, after taking more serious consideration, she knew she shouldn't be surprised. The recruit consisted of many people indiscriminately selected regardless of their ability or strength. There were many different facades that she had seen, from an intimidating figure of a muscular man with a wild mane, an arrogant aristocrat, to a small, dirty looking street urchin, that appeared too weak and malnourished to even stand up.

With the absence of their appointed trainer, the male populace spent most of their time gathered in their own little cliques, playing Mahjong, gambling, getting drunk, laughing at dirty jokes or waiting for Chi-Fu's high-pitched tenor to bark some random order at them. She cringed every time she was reminded that if she wanted to be successful in her mission and put on a convincing ploy, she needed to act like one of them.

But her curiosity at the moment was orbiting around the mysterious Prince of Wei. Initially, Mulan speculated that a bunch of imposing men who were often found ganged around the Prince must have been his henchmen. However, as days passed, it was clear the Prince had practically no one you could call a friend. Those who were parading around him merely wanted to get on his good side, wishing in due time that they would reap a benefit of some sort.

According to Mulan's critical observation—The Prince, who everyone addressed as Prince Shao Wei, always distanced himself from the rest. He seemed to prefer to be isolated, detaching himself of any involvement in any social activity and discouraging any form of camaraderie. Mulan saw him every morning, running through his training routine with his sword, showcasing his fluid Kung Fu moves or sitting in silent meditation. Regardless of having arrived in the encampment weeks before, Prince Shao Wei remained an elusive, enigmatic creature to the rest of the regiment….and this in itself piqued Mulan's inquisitive mind - especially after Prince Shao Wei
unexpectedly came to her rescue. Perhaps... there was more to him than just the haughty, presumptuous noble that she saw on her first day.

"Thinking about that conceited prince again?" Ling's voice broke her stupor.

"No," Mulan responded blandly, even when her friends clearly knew otherwise.

Ling chuckled. "If you were an actor, I'd say I want my money back. That was hardly a convincing act."

Mulan had the right to despise him after the incident precipitated days before. But something else strummed her heart at the sight of the Prince, sitting, having his lonely meal near a makeshift fire a distance away from them.

"It's odd that a prince would agree to join a regime like ours," Mulan stated between bites.

"You mean because we are... pathetic?" Ling remarked bluntly lacking a more polite word.

"No. Perhaps we are hopeless... no, maybe...ehm— weak?" Chien-Po voiced his opinion while stirring the contents of the bowl in his hands. "Pathetic sounds very distasteful."

"Have any of you seen him training in the morning?" Mulan looked at her two friends.

"Yes, his fighting technique is impeccable, executed with grace and precision. His sword skills are some of the best I've seen in centuries," Ling acknowledged.

"And you are not even that old."

"C'mon guys. He is the Prince...a royal. Obviously, he has access to the best, most renowned teachers in China to train him," Ling quipped, outlining his logic.

"Yes, I know," Mulan intervened, a little bit impatient that her friends were completely missing the point. "But why did excellent fighter like him join a low-class regime like ours? Why not the elite Imperial Army? Or the exclusive Emperor Crusade? He has the skill to meet their criteria and all the necessary connections to get in."

Chien-Po halted his ravenous chewing, twisting his bushy brows. "Are you implying... that the Prince is here for...other purposes?"

"Oh geez, this is how gossip starts," Ling whined, forging a disgusted frown.

"I thought gossip is your middle name," Mulan teased, recalling Ling's exuberant narration about Shang's harsh-but-handsome persona.

Ling fabricated an irritated scowl but entertained the banter. "But, after hearing his exceptional testimony, you are looking forward to seeing our Captain, right?"

Mulan let out a deep sigh and answered in as roundabout a way as she could to mislead her friend's suspicions of her husband's mysterious persona. "What for? I am already married, it's too late to imagine such things."

"Not that I encourage disloyalty, but it's better late than never." Ling pulled an impish smile.

"And how should I explain that to my estranged husband?" Mulan challenged.

"Woah... wait, you don't love him?" Chien-Po gasped, looking perfectly horrified. In his ideal
"Sorry to break your perfect dream. But the reality isn't always as sweet as you wish," Mulan said.

Chien-Po shook his head. "Pardon my melodramatic reaction, but perhaps you could tell us what type of man you are attracted to?"

Mulan just shrugged. "I don't have time to think about men. Every woman must marry regardless of who they fancy."

"Well perhaps he died in the war, and you'll be his widow," piped Ling, beaming brightly. "It is something called a second chance."

"That's a reassuring thought, Ling, thanks," Mulan deadpanned.

He grinned, but his smile dissolved instantaneously. "In all seriousness, even when your interest is solely platonic, I promise I won't say anything to your husband about the Captain." Then he made an animated movement crossing his heart as a pledge of adherence, his face dead serious. It took all of Mulan's self-control not to burst out laughing, imagining Ling's reaction if he knew the captain and her husband they had allegedly plotted to cheat on were actually the same person.

"Why not one of these days, you try to strike up a conversation with the Prince and ask why he's stranded here?" Chien-Po suggested, steering back to the original topic.

"Why me?" Mulan asked.

"The Prince certainly has his eyes on you. He wouldn't have noticed Jing was picking on you if he had not been observing you," Chien-Po explained his perspective.

One accidental stumbling into the same team of seven (that's among hundreds) doing the morning exercise was an easy coincidence for her to accept. But a second and third time? How had he even found out her exact daily routine to the meticulous detail that he knew the exact timing when she normally took a bath? Plain creepy! Mulan suspected Chi-Fu was responsible for sending this man straight into her lap...metaphorically speaking, of course. Perhaps the scrawny advisor suspected who she really was and sent the Prince to secretly spy on her?

Truthfully, despite her curiosity of the Prince's motive, Mulan knew, the more she interacted with individuals outside her usual two confidants, the greater her chances of accidentally showing signs that she wasn't truly a man were.

"I don't think it's a good idea," Mulan sucked in air and exhaled slowly, she had a bad premonition about all this.

"Well, among the three of us, you are the one most eloquent with words," Chien-Po argued. "Besides, he looks lonely. A friend will do him good." They glanced towards the clearing, finding the Prince still sat there in solace, gazing an empty stare towards the sky. Mulan considered her options.

"Which begs another question," Ling interjected. "Why has Prince Shao Wei been watching you?"

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for such a great response to this fic! I can't wait to reveal the main plot to you. Some of you have voiced concern about the existence of Mushu. I have decided to bring him in, BUT there'll be a compromise - which in my opinion - will not alter the realism of this story.

Ok, Li Shang's fans… I hear you. He'll be back in the next chapter. (snippet will be posted in my Tumblr 3431jessica)
That evening, as usual, Shao sat in his usual spot, eating his lonely meal. Normally, he would welcome solitude—a much-preferred option rather than sitting with the bunch of noisy idiots across the clearing. But today, his appetite was cruelly murdered minutes ago when he found a secret message left for him inside his tent.

He stared morosely into the fire; the letter was still embedded his mind.

*Shao, we need to talk. The situation got out of hand. They knew our plan. Meet me, the northern border of Wei, by the river before sundown. Fate be damned, if someone apprehends us and kills us both, this shall be our honorable death — ALS*

The letter was written in a careful cursive, in Mongolian Cyrillic. Shao groaned into his palm, shaking his head. How could he make the right choice when there wasn't one?

*Darn it! How could they know our plan? Has Father been spying on me?* He thought. He grabbed the bottle next to him in haste, tipping the content ardently down his throat and enjoying the sudden burning sensation that momentarily overrode his anxiety.

His inner tirade was interrupted by a soft, almost effeminate voice.

"Hi," said the soft query from his back. Shao knew there was only one man… well, woman, with that falsely masculine undertone embedded in her voice.

"Drinking *alone*?" Ping merely stated what was obvious.

Putting his bottle aside, Shao glanced up briefly, before rolling his eyes and returning to his drink, enjoying the way it burned on its way down.

"May I join?" she asked again.

He sniggered softly, which indicated he wasn't in a mood to have a friendly conversation—If Ping ever thought he was friendly.

*May the gods have mercy on this girl's future husband. Not only is she socially impaired, but also stubbornly persistent too.*

Shao Wei didn't reply. He just flicked his eyes dangerously towards the lanky man…. Well, *girl.*
Ping shot him a reluctant smile that he supposed was meant to be a sympathetic greeting, but at the moment, it inappropriately stirred unwanted bitterness. Shao couldn't even discern why he replied to her friendliness with an arrogant scoff.

"What do you want?" Shao averted his face to hide his surprise at his own vehement recrimination.

"Er..." Ping was visibly buffeted by the accusation but seemed to tolerate his insolent treatment, only pulling in a sharp breath and exhaling it slowly. "Nothing. I see you eating or drinking alone every night, I thought I may...—"

With an arched brow, Shao merely responded with a rather curt, "I don't want your pity."

"It's not pity!" she exclaimed but quickly realized the sharpness of her voice. "Have you always been... a jerk like this?"

Shao couldn't resist laughing at the words she used. "Jerk?" he repeated. "Do you know that you could lose your head calling me that."

"I know."

"Then what is it?" he demanded, inching closer until he could feel Ping's warm breath spilling onto his skin. "What do you want?"

"Does everyone who approaches you must have 'wants'?" she reprobed, equally sharp.

"Yes, sort of." Shao sniggered, shaking his head in amusement from the combination of her astute remark and the unmistakable disdain gleaning in her eyes. He supposed he deserved such a look. "Now," he said in a serious voice. "...state your business before I lose my patience and order Chi-Fu to have you hang from that tree."

Ping's risen eyebrows now drew down into a frustrated scowl. "Look, listen..." she said, trying to sound patient even when the heat inside her head was visibly rising. "I see you train every morning. I am sure you are a great fighter, much more experienced than any of us."

Shao scoffed at her impertinence. "Sweet talk doesn't normally work with me."

"So I figure," she deadpanned. "Look, if you think I am one of those sycophants men who wanted to gain your favor, then your are dead wrong, Mister!"

"...and your point is?" Shao snapped.

"Have you heard the proverbs, strength in unity?" she prompted, moving to sit across from him.

Shao knew where Ping would drive her argument. One of his mentors in Chang'an, an accomplished general, had told him how a battalion bound by the ties of comradeship and trust fought much harder than one bound by professionalism—in which each soldier merely fought for themselves and not for the common victory.

Without so much a glance, he answered in uncaring and almost bored tone, "So what? I am not part of the team."

True to Mulan's prediction, the aloof Prince expressed no intention to get involved with the battalion. She smiled triumphantly, the Prince had bitten the bait. Here comes the bomb.

"Then why did you come here? We are here to train to fight together, to function as a single entity
against the common enemy, to be part of a team?"

Shao seethed at that, rising to his feet. "I have a mission, and it's none of your business. You are just one incompetent village idiot who is unable to fend for yourself," he rebuked. "You are a liability to your team." Gosh, Shao, you don't have to be that mean to the girl, do you?

"What?" Her scandalized expression elicited a chuckle out of him."Okay… okay…Listen," Shao paced back and forth, pretending to be friendly by throwing a friendly smile. "Everyone here… has their own secret," he proclaimed, smirking pointedly at her direction. "Let just say I have an excellent intuition that enables me to spy into everyone's life," he bragged. "Including yours."

Mulan's heart hit her ribcage hard at that. It was a bizarre turn for the conversation—Did the Prince know her secret?

Shao flicked a quick glance over the speechless Ping and caught something—a muscle twinge, a change of demeanor that had not gone completely unnoticed. He grinned mentally. I got you, Ping.

"If I were you, I'd leave now," he said candidly. "Before I reveal what I exactly have learned about you…. Fa Ping."

The next morning, a few warriors from Chang'an arrived in the encampment.

Mulan tried to hide behind her aphetic mask when she saw a familiar black stallion prance its way into the courtyard, causing a cloud of dust to rise in their midst.

With one swift, sure movement, the man dismounted, thudding footfalls advertising his presence. Without further command, the rest of the recruits assembled in a neat line-up.

Mulan stole a glance when she was sure the man wasn't looking, filling the gaps in her memory with his chiseled face, stoic facade and stern expression that had begun to dissolve into distant memory.

"Greetings soldiers. I am Captain Li Shang. I am here to train you to be the best warriors in China." His words were laced with conviction, and his charismatic face was filled with concentration as he swept his gaze across his latest recruits. Shang may be one of the youngest captains in the Imperial army; having raised speedily through the ranks; an experienced soldier, and a great warrior, but apart from that, he had no background in transforming a brawling mob into an efficient fighting force.

Mulan prayed that Shang wouldn't recognize her. She was banking on the fact that her feminine face was devoid of makeup and her skin darkened from the prolonged exposure to the sun.

Shang paced in front of them, assessing his latest trainees that, at the moment, looked far from satisfying. His sight fell on a particular lanky young soldier, Shang cleared his own throat when he realized he had been staring at the young lad a moment too long.

"You will assemble swiftly and silently every morning. Anyone who acts otherwise...will answer to me."

Mulan's heart was trying to punch through her ribcage when their eyes collided. She couldn't deny that the attraction had always been there. At first, it was all superficial; his muscular body, handsome features and his prowess in fighting… not to mention his broad shoulders and perfectly
executed man bun. But that was nothing more than the adolescent crush of a young, naive and inexperienced girl. She was just eighteen when they married. Obviously, the physical connection that they shared, despite not being based on love, had fueled her feelings into taking root, manifesting and growing into something deeper, something beyond physical attraction and lustful adoration. Something meaningful and lasting. Even when Mulan never openly admitted it with her own lips, her feeling towards him had morphed into something that had intricately become part of her very being…. had she grown to deeply care for him? She didn't want to believe that.

"You are dismissed!"

Mulan quickly tore her gaze away, fixing her sight on the dusty ground. Why would she even think about him? She reprimanded, completely annoyed with herself. She had promised to think of herself as a man, a son and a soldier! But thinking about Shang was something she could not escape, it was as natural as breathing to her. However, it was foolish to brood about something so comparatively meaningless as love and attraction when they were facing the threat of massacre and death.

"That young man," Shang heard Chi Fu's raspy voice as he shot a disapproving glare towards one of their youngest recruits. "He has caused unbelievable havoc since day one. I swear I have never seen anything like it. He might drive me into an early grave," he retorted sourly. "At first, I thought the Huns had sent the kid as a way to sabotage our army from the inside."

"I see," Shang responded phlegmatically, even when the enthusiastic voice in his head was hoping that the clueless looking young man would kill Chi Fu sooner rather than later. "He is still Fa Zhou's successor, I am sure the boy inherited some of his father's strength of mind, tenacity and ingenious thinking."

"Or perhaps simply deception and stubbornness," mocked Chi-Fu.

"I am sure I can deal with him."

"I want to see you try," Chi-Fu scoffed with undisguised skepticism and mockery. "I am sure that soon enough you will be asking your ancestors just what you have done in your previous life to deserve leading this regiment."

Even before Shang emerged from the tent, he registered a tap on the screen. "Captain Li Shang! Honorable Chi-Fu!" The man outside said in a quick, anxiety-ridden whisper.

"Yes?" Shang responded, feeling a terrible foreboding about this.

"It's the Prince of Wei… " the man heaved, wiping his sweaty brow with the back of his hand.

"Someone tried to poison him!"

After consulting with the physician, Shang concluded it was a confined case of food poisoning. After some quick detective work, all evidence led him to one culprit—chef's assistant, Fa Ping.

"He mistook the pig's food for bean bun paste," clarified Chef Zhang, looking somewhat amused rather than devastated. "Not only that, he nearly burnt down our makeshift kitchen in the process."
The Chef's entertained smirk somehow erased Shang's initial suspicion that the boy might be an arsonist or an assassin. Somewhere beneath that entertained/disparaging smile currently plastered across Chef Zhang's features suggested that Fa Ping regularly performed such accidental stunts.

The boy tried not to flinch under Shang's grilling glare.

So this must be the infamous Fa Zhou's son and his brother-in-law. Shang realized feeling his curiosity suddenly stir. The boy was nothing like he had been expecting, not that Shang had a great impression of him from the handful of times they had met. But skinny, with no Adam's apple and a teenager—over whom Chi-Fu was now fussing—was certainly not it. The boy had a petite frame, non-existent muscles, narrow shoulders and feminine eyebrows whose ends had a definite singed look to them. He didn't look much like Fa Zhou. He looked like... well, a bit like a catastrophically clumsy lunatic.

The next morning the training ensued. As circulating rumor had suggested, Shang's training regime proved to be brutal and exhausting, though effective in the grand scheme of things; showing an efficient leader hid behind the harsh exterior.

"Keep your hands on your sword and your heart to your country!" Shang proclaimed. Then he approached a tall wooden mast, dragging two metal weights with him.

"*This* represents discipline, and *this* represents strength," he appended as he selected a recruit and attached a metal weight to each hand. Yao, the unfortunate volunteer, could hardly stand with them and the ruthless captain was expecting him to climb with them.

"By the end of this training, each of you has to be able to retrieve the arrow," came Shang’s commanding voice, goading the soldiers into the challenge. "Consider it to be my seal of approval and a sign of graduation into the Imperial army."

Mulan had always had a short-attention-span problem. Her father had addressed this a few times when he caught her yawning while he droned on about certain battle techniques. But right now, her focus-ineptitude problem seemed to miraculously cease the moment Shang abandoned his shirt.

Mulan stole several glances when her husband wasn't looking. Shang was bare-chested, pacing about the courtyard glaring with a predatory stare that had her weak at the knees, for an entirely different reason.

She watched as Yao began to climb. The task was proving to be harder than it looked. With no firm grip available, Yao futilely fought the gravitational force that pulled him down. In his desperation, the guy even attempted to bite the mast to gain footing.

That evening, Shang sat despondently on the far end of the encampment, seeking to clear his mind after another fruitless day of training. He saw the post where he had planted his arrow mutely mocking him. He sighed heavily. From where he sat, Shang saw Chien-Po and a few guys his size trading punches and kicks. They were like oversized boys playing with dangerous weapons rather than efficient warriors with real fighting skills. Chi-Fu's objection over his father's promotion echoed in his head. "*He is too young to be a Captain."

No, no… he admonished himself. The Emperor’s Advisor's sharp tongue was the last thing he needed, but it was like an inescapable force. What if Chi-Fu was right? What if he was too young and inexperienced to lead a regiment? What if he was right about his hopeless trainees—that no matter how hard he trained them, they would remain a bunch of goons with mediocre fighting instinct?
Shang was here for other purposes too, but his first line of duty was to transform these men into a lethal war weapon.

"Before the battle of the fist come the battle of the mind." The wise voice of his father resonated in his memory, and Shang immediately felt comforted.

*I have to have more faith in my men, and... in myself.*

"Your soup is here, Your Honor."

"Just put it on the table. Who made it this time?" Shao asked.

"Myself, Your Grace," the man supplied. "I've already pre-tasted it to make sure there are no unpleasant surprises."

**You bet.** Shao bristled, pushing his body up from the bed that currently felt like a dead weight. Dismissing Chef Zhang, he propped himself against the wall.

Before falling despicably ill, the last few weeks of training were a mundane business for him, mainly because he had known, even mastered, whatever Li Shang was teaching the rest of the recruits. Now he was weak, bedridden, physically incapacitated to perform any strenuous physical activity, he had no choice but to fill his time with nothing but reading and thinking.

*All because of that idiot Fa Ping*, Shao thought ruefully. That harmless, delicate looking, soldier in disguise. The revelation that there was a girl infiltrating the camp kept plaguing him and filling his mind with atrocious scenarios of why she was here.

At first, he suspected that Fa Ping must have attempted a vendetta on him because of the bath time travesty a fortnight ago. She must have deciphered that he knew her secret, hence voluntarily decided to eliminate him to keep his mouth shut. But after seeing her clumsy attempt to catch a fish where she ended up catching Yao's toe instead, her tactical cheat in planting the tomato on the arrow before actually firing it, her catastrophic canon aiming ability that had turned Chi-Fu's tent to dust—her blunder of mistaking pig feed for bean bun paste wasn't that far fetched.

**Perhaps she is just plain stupid.** Shao ran a palm down over his face. He wished he had never discovered the information about Fa Ping being a woman, but it was something that he couldn't unsee.

*If that girl in disguise isn't Fa Ping, then... who is she?* Shao wondered, cogs and wheel turning over in his mind.

From his peripheral vision, he saw her. He took a mental note when the girl gawked openly the moment Captain Li abandoned his robe. She was turning bright red and looking positively abashed when the Captain touched her hand to correct her stance. It was no news that Captain Li was a handsome man. It was kind of natural for any girl to be irrepressibly flustered around him. Perhaps, if Shao was a woman, he would find Shang equally irresistible, especially knowing that he was married. Which spelled out experienced-in-bed. He nearly burst out laughing at his own ridiculous thoughts.

Suddenly, a revelation dawned upon him. His eyes darted towards a bunch of recruits who were still grunting and groaning under Shang's ruthless training regime. From his vantage point, Ping was there, drenched in sweat and breathing heavily. Despite her struggle to follow Shang's order,
there was an undeniable longing look in her eyes, as though… she *knew* him.

Yes, she *knew* him.

As soon as their business was done, the throng of Imperial Army soldiers left the camp. Mulan watched them as they were hoisted on to their war horses, with sashes and crests decorating their military uniforms, marching gallantly while holding their banner and ensigns. Mulan wondered if *they* would be that imposing by the end of their training. But, at the moment, she wasn't worried about training…

"You summoned me, Captain?" Beyond his calm, collected voice, Shang could see the recruit's tense shoulders and chagrined expression lurking underneath. Was he even breathing?

Mulan cringed mentally, preparing for impact. What she had learned in the past week of her husband’s inhumane training was that he would not thrift mercy for punishment. While she had no idea why Shang may have invited her presence, she was certain her demise was near.

"At ease," he commanded.

Shang saw his brother-in-law’s poised stature relax slightly, and a relieved sigh expelled lightly from his lips.

"Yes, Fa Ping. I wish to discuss *something* privately with you," Shang said tonelessly, visage grave and serious.

Ping looked apprehensive again until Shang reassured him. "Don't worry. You are not in any kind of trouble." The lines around his eyes eased when he saw how much the boy reminded him of his wife but then returned when he began to speak.

"I heard you are Fa Zhou's son. You must have remembered me. I am Li Shang, your brother in law." He paused, giving some time to assess his memory of the boy that he had met briefly on his wedding day and during Fa Li's illness.

Apprehensive that Shang would blow her cover, Mulan began to showcase all the display of masculinity that she had rehearsed with Ling and Chien-Po.

"Oh, of course, I remember you, Captain." Ping jutted his chest out, flashing what was supposed to be a cavalier smile before expectorating to his side. Shang's eyes widened, he didn't know whether he should laugh, cry or rebuke the young man for vulgarly spitting inside his makeshift office, burlesquing what he supposed was a display of masculinity. *Boy, Chi-Fu was right. This boy is... odd.*

Mulan immediately realized that the Captain was less than convinced with her false bravado of manliness. Clearing her throat, she feigned a low, husky voice. "And you were saying?"

Tentatively, she shifted her weight from one foot to another, finding his very close, penetrating gaze very unnerving. "Captain?"

"Ah yes," Shang immediately sobered. "I had received a report from Chi-Fu about your… *difficulty* in blending with the residents here, especially the Prince of Wei," Li Shang disclosed sternly.

Mulan knew which incident Chi-Fu had reported her for, not to mention she had accidentally caused that spoilt-royal-brat to miss his training because of severe food poisoning.
"I will accept any punishment, Captain. But I refuse to apologize for the altercation with the Prince of Wei on my first day. I had not done any wrong for advocating what is right."

This time, there was no masculine exaggeration nor feigned haughtiness, only a genuine conviction and confidence in his bearing as he drove those words home. Shang allowed himself to nod in acquiescence. He was aware of Chi-Fu's visceral inclination to entertain the influential people even when it meant embracing unfairness, corruption, and nepotism. So far there was hardly anyone inferior who dared to defy his command. Ping was the first, and Shang applauded him for that.

"Ok, points taken," Shang nodded. "However, aren't you a little too young to join the army? I remember your sister told me you are about eight years younger than her. That makes you… eleven?"

"She must have mentioned it wrong, Captain. I am fourteen this year. I am aware that the summon was for my father. However, he is disabled and still grieving over the untimely departure of my mother. I am sure you are aware of this, Captain."

Shang squinted his eyes and rubbed his chin as he appraised Mulan's figure from head to toe. Mulan's mind swam with panic as hundreds of voices practically screamed at her in her head. "I have a few childhood friends here who can confirm my age," she asserted further.

"There is no need to," Shang waved his hand.

Perhaps the saying “blood is thicker than water” was true, Ping was like Mulan's bespoke twin. He didn't just share an astonishing degree of likeness to his wife, but the boy’s defiance and unyielding personality matched her to a T as well.

"However, inside this tent, I am your brother-in-law, so if you encounter any difficulties, please do not hesitate to come to me."

Mulan wanted a moment longer listening to his rich baritone voice that seemed to echo in her head. Alas, their meeting was cut off by a polite cough from outside the tent. *Chi Fu, a man with a well-established reputation as the most intrusive interloper as well as the destroyer of a critically romantic moment,* Mulan berated mentally.

"I'm afraid I have other matters to attend to," Shang said, closing the meeting.

"Of course, Captain."

Mulan stood up and prepared to leave, only to stop at the sensation of sudden warmth as a hand pressed into her lower back. She quickly turned and was face to face with an earnest expression and dark brown eyes that she almost never saw of him. That was almost more startling. Shang offered a soft smile.

"I won't give up on you, Ping. So, don't give up on me."

His words stung her heart, although Mulan knew Shang didn't mean the words quite the way she thought of them, it didn't make the reality harder to accept. Mulan shrugged him off, feeling overwhelmed by their proximity. She knew, if she stared at those kind eyes one second too long, she would've burst into sobs.

The dose of fresh air outside the tent seemed to clear Mulan’s clouded mind. Once she had a firm hold on her emotions, she quickly replied.

"Captain, I appreciate your concern. I will try my best and do you proud."
"If you want extra training, I will be by the lake after sundown."

Mulan, once again, was left dumbfounded. It wasn't as though the training every day was not tiring and strenuous enough for both of them, but she'd be lying if the thought of having extra time alone with Shang wasn't appealing. But this was why she wanted to distance herself from the captain during the course of her training! It didn't take long for her to find herself completely at his mercy, yet again. Mulan had hoped that her physical transformation to a man in disguise would mean she would finally be free of the mental baggage that consumed her. She could deal with this at home, back where she played the role of subservient wife. Yet, here she was, feeling as though she were falling all over again. She needed to stop this nonsense, it was so unfitting in the nuance of war and death.

"Thank you Captain, but I think at the moment I can do nicely on my own," Mulan replied, bowing her head down and forcing the words out her mouth. Mulan dared not show her face as it would probably betray whatever confusing emotion that was currently tugging at her heart.

Shang rewarded her with the kindest smile she ever saw from him, and she was a new bride once again, feeling him embracing her with his strong, protective arms.

Darn it. Mulan cursed herself as she dusted her hands off on her trousers as he gave her leave to join her friends.

If Mulan thought she could deceive her own father, a famous war strategist, long enough to eventually allow her to complete her training, then she was wrong.

Two weeks after her ploy to leave her home without suspicion, Fa Zhou was preparing to fulfill his duty and represent his household on the frontline. He tidied the Emperor's conscription and went about retrieving his armor from the storage cabinet—it was then he discovered that the key was missing.

After spending many hours digging through the mess in the desk drawers and other places he knew he might have put it, his young son, Ping came forward and timidly admitted he had the key. Fa Zhou nearly had a cardiac arrest when he discovered his armor and sword were both gone. At first Fa Ping went on to say someone claiming to be an old colleague of his, had borrowed them forcefully while he was out. It took Fa Zhou another two weeks of research trying to locate the bogus vigilante before he realized that it was a decoy, a distraction that caused him to waste more of his time.

Then, his next finding confirmed his suspicion. After inspecting his summon letter, despite the impeccable strokes and the same emblem imprinted on the letterhead, he noticed the wax sealant bore a slightly crooked insignia. Other than that, he applauded the forged work that could even have riddled him into believing it was the original summons out of the Emperor's office.

And he knew just who, in his household, was capable of creating such a masterpiece. Sometimes, he wondered whether his decision to let Mulan pursue higher education and martial arts had actually been a wise decision after all.

After putting his eleven-year-old boy on the line of interrogation, Ping admitted, his sister had crafted the plan so that he didn't have to go to war. Fa Zhou swore he should've been more well-acclimated to his daughter's conspiracies, especially one that involved her rather gullible, naive little brother. Perhaps age and prolonged absence from war had turned his brain soft.

But now, Mulan had been with the regiment for more than a month…
He asked the walls around him. "Oh ancestors, what have I done wrong to raise her."

He had been indulgent in his own way to Mulan, and his mother had encouraged that. He had paved the way for her to become the woman she was today; a woman who actively sought independence, questioned her place in Society, challenged for fairness and would not hesitate to verbalize her opinions. Mulan's life would've been very different had she been born a man. But right now, as a woman, she had repeatedly created a scene and unwanted controversy.

But isn't that what people say? That the world is always filled with mysteries—conundrums of life, that eventually would teach them a lesson in due time? Failure and opposition are what makes us stronger. He remembered imparting those exact words to Mulan when she fell on her first horse ride. But, how could he honestly expect his daughter, an inexperienced young woman, to pull off the deception she had undertaken for the duration of a war? What if her real identity was discovered? What if her body was left on a battlefield, what would people say? A woman impersonating a soldier was a grave offense, and death would never erase that stigma.

"Stop borrowing trouble from the future, foolish old man," he rebuked himself and set to practicing his rusty martial art form to distract his mind. He grabbed his old bo staff.

Outside the window, the land looked deceptively tranquil under the light of the silver moon above. A thin mist had rolled up from the valley but had begun to dissipate as the night deepened. He remembered how he spent another moonlit night after an exhausting day—in the arms of his beloved, and his sight lingered on the sentimental memorabilia sitting in the alcove of his room. The picture of his wife smiled serenely back from the parchment, post amid a burst of soft lilac and pink background and dressed in a vivid yellow qipao, her favorite color. And a fond conversation surfaced to his memory.

It was a lovely autumn day and their little family together with Grandma Fa had just returned home from the temple. Mulan turned five that day, and their family had given their homage at the nearby temple. Grandma Fa was still at the family shrine, praying to their ancestor for her granddaughter's prosperous life and future full of blessings ahead.

Fa Li sat under the plum tree, watching her daughter exuberantly play about the courtyard. Mulan pranced into her favorite training spot, kicking her shoes from her soles, straight away before picking up the wooden sword and making all sorts of dramatic battle cries against some invisible enemy.

"I can't believe she is five and she... —"

"...can hold her sword better than her chopsticks?" Fa Zhou supplied, depositing himself beside her.

"That has me worried," she exasperated. "What kind of man would want to marry her?"

Her unmistakably worried expression made the entire scene funnier than it already was.

"Fa Li..." He shook his head, biting his lips to curb the rising laughter. "Mulan is just five. Don't you think it's a little early to think about the right suitor?"

That got her smiling."You are right," she said, snaking her arm around his and leaning on his broad shoulder. "Funny though, I have a feeling she will marry well."

That sparked his urged to tease."Even better than you?"

He heard her forging a fake noise of annoyance. "I don't know what you are talking about."
In between their dialogue, another small voice was heard.

"Now! Say you forfeit or I chop off your head!" Mulan declared in a pretentious, booming tone. She stood, wielding her sword menacingly at one of the apple trees. Fa Zhou recognized his old robe among the branches, and a faint trace of chalk on the bark made it look like a wounded man.

"Oh please spare me, General Fa Mulan!" Mulan announced again with a squeaky, fearful voice.

"Good! Now you better eat your green vegetables so you can grow to be as strong as me! HIYA!"

In that moment he couldn't control himself and burst out laughing. Fa Li slapped his shoulder lightly to remind him that his boisterous laugh had invited Mulan's attention. After the awkward episode of Mulan asking, "What's so funny, Baba?" and him trying to give her a vague answer without lying or hurting his daughter's warrior pride, Mulan returned to weave another fictitious tale of glory against the army of fruit trees.

"She is just like you, Zhou. Same stubborn look in her eyes, same fiery spirit," his wife said fondly. He feigned an eye-rolling deadpan at the mention of the word 'stubborn.'

"And I say this as a compliment," she amended, nudging him a little with her elbow, completely amused to watch a smile threaten to break his stern mask.

"I think your definition of compliment needs a little revisit," he countered, still donning a mirthless face despite the rising desire to laugh.

A feminine giggle escaped her lips. "No, I mean it. You are the best man I ever married. Not that I ever married anyone else."

"Not even that handsome bachelor that your mother said had delicious abs? What was his name again, Hong-Wei? Hong-Hei?"

"No..." She laughed harder before returning her attention to their daughter, who was still deeply embroiled in her own fantasy. "I managed to convince my parents I don't need a husband with nice abs."

"I need to thank you for that," he said, smiling warmly. They both sat like that in silence, breathing together, feeling each other's hands while watching their daughter in the distance. Yes, Mulan was the personification of their love, proof that their ancestors were well-pleased with their union, if only she was a boy...

"Thank you for refusing to take another wife who would give you a son," Fa Li suddenly said, breaking the silence.

He laced his fingers with hers, letting the warmth filter through his heart.

"Thank you for giving me a daughter, Fa Li-Juan. Somehow, I know... I can feel right here," he said, putting their entwined hands atop of his heart. "That she will make us prouder than any sons could."

His wife smiled warmly at that.

"However, I do worry about... about our family, our future..." he added after a pause.

Fa Li disentangled her hands from his, looking apprehensive. "What do you mean?"
"I am constantly involved in battles. Facing death and uncertainty is my daily meal. What if, one
day I... — "

A touch of her soft lips on his halted his words.

"Don't let fear stop you from living, Zhou. I know how much you love what you do," she
explicated. "And you are very good at it. Not to mention that this country and its people have
benefited from your skill and bravery."

He looked at her, and at that point he knew, he was an extremely lucky man. Her dedication had
transcended their loveless beginning. Her devotion and patience had covered so many flaws and
bridged so much brokenness. Her love surged beyond his expectation. She had created for him a
place he could call home — a sanctuary, a place where his soul found solace.

"Do you know why I fell in love with you?" he smirked at her. He could see his wife turning pink
to the tips of her ears and swiftly averted her sight back to their daughter who was just winning
another imaginary battle.

"You always know the right string to pull, the right words to say at the right time. And that's how
you've made a passageway through my iron heart."

His heart mellowed at once. Fa Li-Juan. Her smile was like a warm wave lapping and wrapping
around his tired soul. Her voice had soothed his aches and pains from war. But she was no longer
here, her memory was.

"Fa Li, help me to keep our daughter safe."

After a moment of retrospection, Fa Zhou stood up in front of the altar. Anger would do little to
repair whatever blunder his son had unknowingly embroiled himself in.

"Ping..." he breathed. The young boy emerged from behind the door, wringing his hands and
biting his lips nervously.

"Why don't you find a messenger to send my message to Master Shen, the ironsmith. Please tell
him to procure new armor and a sword for me as quickly as he can. I'll pick it up on my way to
Chang'an in about two weeks time."

With a reticent nod, the young boy departed with a regretful glance in his direction. But he stopped
at the threshold of the door.

"Baba..." he said, sucking in a breath before meeting his father's eyes. "I hope you understand. It's
not like Mulan is a rebellious delinquent. She had her reasons. And believe me, she was scared to
death to do this."

Some long dormant empathy stirred deep within in him. Fa Zhou smiled, wrapping his arms around
his son slowly. "I know, Son."

Two weeks went by quickly, and Fa Zhou's departure was at hand. By the moon gate of their
property, he bid farewell to his son and mother. Surprisingly, their exchange was a lot easier than
he thought it would be. There were hardly any tears, perhaps because everyone was more
concerned about Mulan's situation than thinking of the war itself.

"I'll go to her encampment and pass a message to Shang," he said. "I promise you that I will do
everything to keep her safe," he appended as he mounted his white steed.
A year ago, Fa Zhou might have been downright angry at Mulan's reckless resolution. But his wife's death, having touched the fabric of the veil...he had finally come to the understanding that there was so much more out there than just duty and survival. The death of a loved one could make even the most renowned hero humble and willing to accept the thoughtful sacrifice of others.

His train of thought was interrupted by a call.

"Venerable Fa Zhou, your servant at your service," claimed the messenger.

Fa Zhou smiled, pulling a few coins out and handing them to the man. "Thank you. I need you to send a message discreetly to Li Shang, the Captain of the regiment in Shandong. Please tell him to meet me in three days time outside his encampment, right after sundown. The meeting must be held in absolute privacy."

"Yes, Your Venerable."

Chapter End Notes

Note: Thank you for the amazing responses. I hope you enjoyed this chapter. What do you think Fa Zhou will say when he meets Shang? Will he tell him Mulan had disguised herself? Or would he stay quiet?

As for Shao Wei, he is a complex individual to understand. He was arrogant and sarcastic, but he wasn't an evil man. The main story will circle around the conspiracy among the royals and their relationship with the Huns. I hope you'll have fun guessing who the bad guy.
"Now the real training begins!" Shang proclaimed from the top of his lungs. The recruits visibly stiffened at his words.

"Let's start with warm up. Run the lap to the edge of the forest and back—ten times," he emphasized. There was an incongruous groan from the crowd, but no one dared to verbalize their protest.

"Today we will learn how to use a bow," Shang told them, gesturing towards a series of white circles on the trees he had prepared before the exercise. "The bow may be a weapon that appears trivial and easy to master, but it will reveal what kind of fighter you are."

"It will teach you to control your strength. It will help you to focus. It will train you to concentrate," Shang eloquently explained the lyrical philosophy behind the art. "To master archery requires discipline, precision, and devotion—which can only be achieved by relentless training."

He abandoned his robe, revealing his athletic figure. Mulan couldn't resist the urge to gawk.

"Observe!" he commanded. Picking up his bow, he prepared his stance and notched an arrow in one fluid movement; before notching two others as well.

She watched intently as Shang stepped up to three fruits precisely balanced on a tilted board. He stamped on the end of the contraption, sending his three targets into the air. Concurrently, he shot the three arrows towards the airborne fruits, spearing each one of them right at the center, pinning them against the circled targets on the tree. Shang's impeccable performance was applauded by a collective gasp of awe with a hint of envy.

"Start with one target," he instructed, pointing towards the direction of a stash of bow and quivers for his trainees to try. For the benefit of the trainees, Shang repeated the demonstration and firing another perfectly executed thrust. The three arrows sang through the air before meeting their targets, again, flawless and accurate. Shang made it sound easy. Heck, he even made it look easy.

The trainees picked their weapon and loaded it with ammunition, ready to strike.

"Now, focus!" came Shang's patronizing command. "...And let your intuition guide you."

Mulan followed his instruction and let her best warrior instinct guide her. Unfortunately, the only intuition she had right now was to eat. It well past the noon time.

Despite her best attempt, Mulan was still unable to hit the target circle (heck, she even missed the tree!)—let alone hit both the fruit and the target circle with a single aim. After countless disappointing tries, Mulan began to grow worried about failing the exercise and being sent home.

Her desperate situation led to desperate measures.

She speared the fruit on the tip of her arrow before firing, making it looked like she, at least, managed to hit the fruit, even when she was certain of missing the targets. She was so pleased with her cunning idea that she didn't feel a critical presence looming.
"Ahem!" a displeased throaty sound alerted her attention. Looking over her shoulder, she met Shang's rebuking glare. Mulan winced as she avoided his eyes.

"It's not me you're cheating, it's yourself," came Shang's acid retort. Mulan wished the earth below her would split and swallow her whole. "It's your life that is at stake when you can't defend yourself," he pointed out, and Mulan curled in remorse—she knew Shang was right.

"I...I'm sorry, Captain."

"Sorry won't make you hit the target, Ping," Shang chided sharply, his expression hardening. Mulan felt sudden chills traveling her spine. The expression and the voice brought back bitter nostalgia of their first quarrel.

"I guess hand-eye-coordination isn't my thing," Mulan said quietly.

He pursed his lips, and Mulan braced herself for another blunt word of rebuke. But his admonishment never came. Instead, he touched her arm to move her hand upward.

"I've heard you dueled with your sister and you beat her a couple of times. I am sure there is nothing wrong with your hand-eye-coordination. Besides, it was your stance that was messing you up," he explained, hooking the toe of his shoe on the front of her ankle and tugging it backward. "First thing, stagger your feet." His voice was still stern, but there was a gentle nuance to it. He carefully placed his hands on her hips, and Mulan's heart jumped to her throat before throbbing violently. "And square your hips."

Mulan swallowed hard. "Like this?"

Shang nodded.

He was so close to her that she could feel his breath on her neck. Mulan took a deep breath to calm herself, but her pulse continued to quicken as Shang held her hand in his, helping her to pull the string.

"Concentrate on your target, and then release the bow."

But how could she concentrate when Shang's bare chest was pressing against her back? Mulan felt her breath hitch with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. She released the arrow only to miss the target… again. Shang visibly resisted an urge to groan, Mulan stiffened at his disappointed frown.

Thankfully someone came to her rescue and broke the tension. Chi-Fu, entirely oblivious of the impasse, marched towards them—ignoring Shang's half frustrated, half dismayed countenance. Mulan had never been happier to see the bony counselor.

"Captain Li!" Chi-Fu beckoned Shang away from Mulan. She could see Shang's dejected sigh when the perpetual thorn in his side flashed his usual smug, toothy grin. "The Prince wants to see you."

"Keep on practicing, Ping," Shang instructed, half scathingly.

Mulan expelled a loud, heavy breath as she watched Shang's disappearing figure together with the babbling old man next to him.

"Your Honor, Captain Li Shang's here. May I come in?"
It was three days after the incident, Shao Wei felt he was finally resurrected from the dead. Thanks to Fa Ping and her apocalyptic bean bun—the Prince had completely missed the entire Imperial Army visitation.

"Please, do sit, Captain Li." Shao gestured towards the empty seat inside his tent. "Thank you for volunteering in doing this, even though I still feel your father's worry is a bit unwarranted," he said evenly. "I am a big boy. I can take care of myself."

While Shang couldn't deny the first sentence, he wasn't at all convinced with the second. Especially after seeing the state of Shao's tent. Robes, shoes, and underwear… sprawled across the floor. Atop of his bureau, a stack of scrolls piled haphazardly. A few bowls and alcohol bottles littered the far corner of his bed. And from where he sat, he could see diverse flora and fauna had begun inhabiting them as their permanent home.

"Please, just call me Shang, Your Honor," Shang requested politely, resisting letting his eyes excavate through the Prince's bachelor sanctuary.

"Nice to meet you, Shang." Shao grinned and sunk comfortably into his seat. "I understand you will be my escort during the course of war."

Shang's eyes rested on Shao's battle armor that was perched against his makeshift bed. Assessing from how shiny and undefiled it was, Shang concluded that the young noble hadn't seen much of the battlefront.

"Indeed Your Honor. Your safety is my father's priority and the epitome of my responsibility," Shang replied sensibly, keeping his tone as respectful as possible "...and the fact that you refused to..."

"Li Shang, people are dying in war, there is no running away from it—whether you are with an elite regime or a crappy one—it makes no difference. Anyway, you are more than welcome to perch your tent across from mine—if it will make you feel better."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

"...And please, just Shao Wei," he said, wringing his hands. "This is war—you and I are just men—we are equal," he said, pouring a bit of strong drink and offering it to Shang. Shang received it out of respect, even when he thought it was preposterous to get drunk before the sun was even halfway across the sky.

"If we are going to be joined at the hip, I would much rather we forget about palace etiquette," he admitted, tipping his cup and letting the alcohol burn down his throat. "Speaking formally tends to choke me."

Shang mimicked his action. "Right, Shao Wei." He lifted her glass and Shao Wei let the ceramic touch in a silent salute.

Shao smiled as Shang tested his name. Then they both drank deeply.

"I take it you'll be tailing me everywhere from now on."

"Yes, Your—...Shao Wei," Shang immediately revised. "But if my intrusion begins to feel like an invasion of personal space, please alert me. I shall withdraw."

"Don't worry, if you start to put a permanent dent on my mat," he said, looking pointedly at where Shang was seated. "I won't hesitate to kick you out," he said in jest.
"I understand," Shang nodded compliantly.

Considering Shao Wei had spent five years under General Li's tutelage, Shang knew very little about the young Prince of Wei. Shang’s knowledge was limited to rumor across the Imperial Army's circle, which the Prince had joined immediately after completing his training. And just like many other privileged bachelors, Shao Wei was well-known to be a party animal, seasoned playboy, and an opportunist gambler. However, encased inside his debonair, suave persona, Shao Wei was a character full of mystery. For example, Shang had no idea why Shao Wei relinquished his position in the prestigious Imperial Army and requested to join a low-ranked regiment and to bear himself under an anonymous title.

The two engaged in a light repartee, introducing their circle of friends and relatives. It was then Shao Wei revealed some minor details of his mission.

"I hope you are good with holding secrets," Shao said enigmatically. "Because there is one—in fact, two sacred places of rendezvous that I don't want you to breathe a word about to others." His tone was detached and sterile. It was impossible for Shang to deduce anything.

"First, is my exclusive toilet spot—where I have a moment alone with my conscience," he revealed. "The second one is the vegetable stall in the village nearby."

Shang had a question, but he held it back, feeling it wasn't his place to prod around someone else's private life.

*Why the vegetable stall?*

*Maybe the Prince has an unexplainable fetish for cucumbers?*

He immediately banished his inappropriate thoughts.

"As you wish, my prince."

Shao grinned. "Then, you are dismissed."

"Your soup."

A bowl made it onto Mulan's tray. She slowly tipped the contents into her mouth, mimicking the ravenous chewing from the male residence around her. Her ears tuned into the hustle and bustle, hearing snippets of conversation and smelling a whiff of someone's foul-smelling musk. Good grief, she had no idea when she would ever get used to this. She forced herself not to gag.

It was the usual dinner havoc around the encampment. As usual Mulan, Ling, and Chien-Po had tucked themselves into the table in the far corner of the clearing. Mulan watched as the crowd of recruits drifted from the table like shifts.

It was then someone entered her field of vision. Seated just opposite of her on the far end of the table was the Prince of Wei, who for once for some unknown reason, had agreed to join the rest of the troop for dinner. Perhaps her pep-talk with him a couple of nights ago did strike a nerve, or perhaps Shang lectured him on the importance of team bonding.

Mulan pried furtively, lowering her bowl to get a better view. Shang and the Prince of Wei were listening to Chi-Fu talk while waiting for their dinner to be served.

Mulan noticed the Prince's impressive built and physical contrast was stark among them. He sat a
few inches taller than most of the men at the table. Next to him and visibly following him like a 
shadow was her charming husband, Shang, who tried his best to hide his bored expression at Chi-
Fu's monologue. The creases in his brows deepened every time Chi-Fu said "what would the
Emperor do without me" line. Nevertheless, Shang still remained inexplicably attractive. His robes
barely concealed the taut muscles underneath—the evidence of years of training—and gleaming
light from the hearth exposed the uneven blemishes on his naked arm—his battle scar. Briefly,
Mulan entertained the thought of how much more handsome he would be without the frown on his
face.

Shang thanked the Chef as he was handed his portion. Meanwhile, the enigmatic aristocrat
pretended to look interested in the bland liquid inside his bowl, but his eyes traveled in her
direction with poorly hidden interest. No pun intended.

What is he thinking about?

"Well done with the soup tonight," praised Ling from behind her, snapping her out of her thoughts.
"This is what I call improvement," he added to the commendation.

Mulan stood up, collecting the dirty bowls and stacking them up on her tray. Unfortunately, she
was concentrating so much on balancing them she failed to notice Chien-Po's leg in her way.
Thankfully, her reflexes counterbalanced her misstep, and no bowls ended up on the floor.

"Oops, sorry," mouthed Chien-Po as he retracted his leg.

"Hey, no worry," Mulan said, rubbing the soup's spillage on her robe. This time no man dared to
comment or ridicule her epic clumsiness. "Chef Zhang is off today. So, I asked Chien-Po to teach
me a simple soup dish."

"Ah, this is nothing," Chien-Po dismissed humbly. "You did most of it by yourself."

"It's criminal how easily cooking comes for you," Mulan said absently.

Chien-Po put his bowl back on the table, grinning. "Well, I am a man with a hungry belly and a
vision. It couldn't work any other way."

Then, Chien-Po narrated his ongoing chef's training raptly. Both Mulan and Ling listen amusedly
on how Chien-Po seemed to find undercooked bean bun and bone left in a fish apocalyptic in
nature. He even made his voice dwindle to a dark crescendo when he said his teacher found a piece
of burnt garlic in his stir fry.

"He would have died of shock to hear you mistook the pig's pallet for bean bun filling," Ling
teased Mulan.

"...But, perhaps this should happen more often," he supplied before lowering his voice. "Even the
victim of your food poisoning seems to be a little keen on your cooking since he joins us tonight."
He cocked his head subtly towards the Prince.

"I doubt that's the case," Mulan replied. "Perhaps Captain Li threatened to decapitate him if he
remained a social recluse."

"True, our Captain can be unbelievably creative when it comes to punishment," Ling muttered,
recollecting that last week the entire battalion was asked to pick up the rice grains from the ground
after Mulan mistakenly hit someone, which led to a chain of outrageous punching frenzy.

Her eyes drifted to the pun in question again. To be perfectly honest, the Prince was equally
fascinating to her. He was full of secrets and mysteries, and gods knew how much she loved mysteries. Well, solving them. His handsome face was wearing a polite mask with a princely smile that looked so fake even Chi-Fu could have known. His dark, haunting eyes occasionally darted to her direction as he listened to some war veteran that had joined their dinner party that night droning (or bragging?) on and on about their first victory.

But suddenly her self-awareness alerted her to an intrusion. She cut her glance to the side and briefly caught Yao who seemed to share her focus on the same object of interest—but for an entirely different reason. It was something she couldn't exactly decode, but it wasn't an intrigued or appraising stare. It was more like a scheming glare with an unhealthy hint of antipathy. Yao quickly donned an inscrutable face and pretended to nod to the guy next to him curtly to top up his tea.

Mulan bounced her sight to the Prince again.

It had been a few days since the Prince suffered from food poisoning after she had mistaken the ingredients. Since then, Chef Zhang seemed to keep her away from the kitchen and Shang had kept her more occupied with training to avoid messing up with another dangerous experimental endeavor.

There were reasons why the Prince's existence provoked her curiosity. First, she had heard, from circulating rumors, that her own father and General Li had commended the Prince's fighting prowess and regarded his swords skill as the best in the region. According to Chi-Fu, General Li even dubbed the Prince of Wei as one of the most well-equipped royalty to bear arms. Mulan knew, from experience, that both men from her household were hard to impress.

And after one solid month of observing him from afar, Mulan concluded that the Prince was not here just to do business with Chi-Fu nor to be trained by Shang. He avoided the Emperor Councillor and spent his days training or meditating alone.

Reading him was not easy, but she concluded that he had other reasons for being here—a reason he was very clearly keeping to himself and a reason she wanted to know because whatever this man was, he could be dangerous.

Mulan entertained various ideas in her head. She could try to extrapolate it from someone else who may know the Prince back in Chang'an. She inconspicuously looked around, seeing who was where. Chi-Fu was sitting alone with a quill in his one hand, and the other absently creating a monotonous drumming sound.

Ok, here goes nothing.

"Sir? May I speak with you?" Mulan asked politely.

The man in question glanced up to identify where the question came from. When he recognized the source was Fa Ping, he fixed the young man with his trademark austere glare.

"Yes?" Chi-Fu sounded less than willing.

"Writing an important letter I see," Mulan said as a way of pleasantries.

"This is none of your business, Soldier," the man seethed. "What do you want?"

"Nothing," Mulan replied. "I just...I was just wondering what kind of important job an important man like you would do all night," she said, sugar-coating her words with a smile.
Chi-Fu processed that, and one particularly cavalier smirk pulled across his lips. "Yes, as you can see… I am here to give the Emperor a personally tailored report of the recruits' training progress."

"Ah, I am sure you are one of the most valuable assets in the Imperial Court," Mulan went on, bolstering Chi-Fu's swollen pride. She needed to tactfully extract the information without causing much suspicion.

"So you knew the Prince of Wei before he… ―?"

"Of course," Chi-Fu hollered enthusiastically when he saw the opportunity to share the story of his shining political career. "He invited me regularly for tea!" and he grinned smugly at her, and Mulan mentally cringed at the uneven, crooked exhibit inside his mouth. He definitely could do with a visit to the dentist.

"I even know his favorite food, his favorite tea… and -oh-," Chi-Fu continued to blabber. "...He loved to play Mahjong with beautiful ladies in the court and.―"

"Isn't the royalty supposed to be joining the Imperial Army?" Mulan interjected, she wasn't interested in the details of the Prince's private life. "What exactly is he doing here?"

Everyone knew this. Shao Wei was exempted to join the training, and it was quite clear the reason why. He was far more qualified than the entire regiment combined. But, if he wasn't here to train or to be trained, then….why was he here at all?

Right after the question left her mouth, Mulan detected Chi-Fu's mood instantaneously swing to its polar opposite—and the inhospitable frown returned to his face.

"I don't know," he shrugged uncaringly, folding his scroll and tidying up his quill. Despite the councilor's frequent spiteful attitude, somehow, Mulan could sense an unexplainable trepidation beneath his mask, especially the way he fiddled with his fingers; it suggested he was nervous.

"But… what if he knew some secret? Like enemy's plans or some crucial location? Or other strategic political information?"

"And that's exactly why we shouldn't know!" came Chi-Fu's incensed reply, Mulan jerked back in surprise. The man managed to compose himself when he realized a few recruits had flicked their heads to tune into the debate.

"Look," the old man gritted his teeth, indicating his thinning patience. "The aristocrats, the Emperor, and the Generals are the ones who decide the when and what we do. We are just the vessel of their wishes, the device in their hands. Whatever they will use us for—it is irrelevant to us."

Why is it irrelevant? Won't we perform better as a team if we're all like-minded and share the same goal?

She wanted to argue but decided to repress her combative desire and clamp her mouth shut.

"It's dangerous to know too many things, Fa Ping. You are still young and foolish," Chi-Fu remarked bluntly. "And for the love of the ancestors!—even when you and your antics annoy me like hell—I would hate to see your father mourn just because you poked your head around the wrong hole."
Mulan frowned, not understanding what he meant. "Forgive me, Sir. I don't mean to imply any disrespect," Mulan said, feeling as though perhaps she'd done more damage than she had good, considering the old man's scowl was still frozen on his face.

Before she could ask him though, the Emperor Councillor left, abandoning her with a hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Although their adversarial nature, this time, Chi-Fu's warning tone sounded more sincere and he never was. In fact, there was an undertone of fearfulness as he left.

If the Prince was not a dangerous person, why would Chi-Fu warn her off him?

"Captain, someone is looking for you. He is waiting by the northern entrance," relayed one of the recruits who were on patrol that day. "He told me to give this to you," the man reported, passing over a cloth parchment.

Shang deftly opened the message, a familiar signature and family emblem imprinted on its surface. He waved his hand, dismissing the man before marching out of his tent to the main entrance of the encampment. Approximately two weeks ago Shang had received a messenger who had informed him of Fa Zhou's forthcoming arrival.

He strode towards the point of rendezvous, wondering what kind of important matter had brought his father-in-law all the way here to discuss it with him.

At first glance, he saw the veteran stood without his battle armor. Fa Zhou was wrapped in his woolen robe because temperatures had gotten unseasonably cool as autumn approached. But on closer inspection, Shang spotted Fa Zhou's armory stored neatly in a sack around his horse.

The man led without any introduction or formalities as he addressed, "Li Shang."

"Father Zhou," Shang reciprocated in likewise manner. "Is there something you wish to discuss with me?"

"Only a family matter," Fa Zhou replied vaguely. "I heard the news from Chang'an. Congratulation on your promotion, Shang," he balled his fist and pressed it against his palm in a congratulatory way.

"Thank you, Father Zhou," Shang replied humbly, mimicking the action.

They went on to exchange a few pleasantries before Fa Zhou inserted. "I come here to send a letter to Fa Ping."

From under his satchel, he produced a scroll and a small linen sack. "Nothing urgent inside," Fa Zhou supplied. "Just a little paraphernalia I want him to have," he said. "Also, I've been meaning to pass this on to you, Li Shang."

The man produced a necklace from inside his sack. It was a simple stone locket strung onto a braided leather. The stone's surface was dulled with age, but Shang could see a 'yang' symbol engraved neatly on its surface. While on the opposite side, there was a fading depiction of a red dragon with a little drum on his hand, painted meticulously with exceptional attention to detail. It struck Shang as oddly peculiar for the dragon to hold an instrument, but he didn't want to break the atmosphere by asking silly, random questions.

"This is our family heirloom. My mother passed this down to me and my late wife, Fa Li. Now, it's
yours. I've given the other half to Mulan." Fa Zhou's hand wrapped his warmly as he passed the token.

"A happy marriage is about three things: Memories of togetherness, forgiveness of mistakes and a promise to never give up on each other." His voice was thick with melancholy. "Every soldier needs a place of rest, a place to call home. And I hope you will find those in Mulan, Li Shang….just like I found mine."

Shang was no novice in angst-ridden drama considering Li Yue's obsession with romantic poetry. But hearing the words said somberly by a soldier who had weathered through war and faced numerous deaths—it gave love a new perspective.

"Thank you," Li Shang smiled gratefully and looped the necklace around his neck, tucking it carefully inside his armor. And while its monetary worth might have been minimal, Shang knew he was holding a great treasure.

Fa Zhou invited him to sit under the trees as they chatted lightly about various training techniques and quoting some of the best battle strategies. It was when he mentioned the word 'progress' Fa Zhou brought up the subject of his son.

"How's Fa Ping's training going? And how are you acclimating to teaching your recruits?"

"Ping is...fine. He is making progress... slowly," Shang inserted the words carefully. "And teaching has been going...well, though..." Shang struggled to select the right words to describe the grueling weeks spent just trying to motivate his disinterested trainees.

Truthfully, after a few weeks of hardcore drilling, Shang did not expect many of his recruits to succeed. Not that he gave these bunch of clueless men the sort of bewitched trials that forced them to fail. He wanted every single one of them to be the country's finest soldier. But in his years of relentless training, he had never seen a bunch of men as hopeless as these. With every trial and failure, he had grown more and more resigned to making generalizations and assumptions about certain types of men who would make it to being a well-seasoned warrior and efficient fighter on the battlefield—unfortunately, most men in his regiment didn't fall into this category.

There must've been something on his face that spelled out desperation because he felt Fa Zhou's sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

"Li Shang. There is no bravery without fear. There is no success without failure," he said wisely. Shang nodded in agreement as he let Fa Zhou's judicious words sink in.

"Do you think Fa Ping will be fit for battle?"

Shang was frozen on his spot. For weeks he had been trying to answer the same question. To be perfectly honest, he could see nothing of the famous Fa Zhou in him. Shang felt an ultimate chagrin on the old general's behalf that such a great man had the misfortune of having such a son. Fa Ping couldn't seem to do the most menial task correctly. He was graced with the hand-eye-coordination of a drunken horse and phenomenal clumsiness that could cause catastrophic devastation in monstrous scale. Off the top of his head, he could mention a few times, such as when yesterday, he distributed a bunch of bamboo staffs for weapon practice. Shang discovered that Ping was absolutely terrible at remaining stationary when he suddenly decided to go on sweeping frenzy and nearly decapitated dozens of men around him because a bug accidentally crawled into his robe.

"I think he eventually will," Shang replied unconvincingly. A silent voice in his head didn't
elaborate that 'eventually' could be a year, or a decade...or a millennium.

For a son of a famous war veteran, Fa Ping had surprisingly delicate features, smooth hands with infuriatingly womanish mannerisms with a soft and timid cast that belonged nowhere near a battlefield. 'Pretty' would have been a better word to describe him. The boy was impossible to teach! Shang could see that Ping was trying hard, but the boy clearly had no talent whatsoever for soldiering and would be a liability to the rest of the troop if Shang allowed him to remain....worse, he might even be killed at war.

The war veteran stood mutely. Shang blamed himself for not being a better actor—he could sense Fa Zhou's skepticism radiating from his posture.

"I'll train him harder," Shang promised. "Just give him a couple more weeks."

Fa Zhou was silent for a while, trying to reconcile the complicated matter that was ramming in his head, a tug-of-war between his logic and his heart. With a loud huff, he articulated his resolve. "I trust your judgment that you know when to send him home."

"Of course," Shang replied quickly.

"Very well," Fa Zhou smiled complacently. But, within seconds his expression inexplicably hardened. "Shang, please keep my visit and this conversation as a secret between both of us. No one, not even Fa Ping, should know that I was here."

When the context of the situation was understood, both men bade their farewell and parted in their respective way.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry I haven't put in Mushu in here as I promised. The chapter get uncontrollably long and I end up had to split it into two. Nonetheless, hope you enjoy and please leave me a fave/kudos/reviews, many thanks!
The Royal Game

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To Mulan's dismay, the next day of training passed with no improvement whatsoever.

It was the day when the whole regiment went to explore the untamed thicket of the surrounding woodland as a part of their survival training. The journey itself was quite pleasant, but what awaited them wasn't. First, the recruits had to stand in the freezing cold current, attempting to bucket themselves a fish each.

*Trivial enough.*

But then Mulan realized that they were supposed to catch the slimy creature barehanded—let's just to say this was another test of precision, alertness, and speed.

And the only thing she managed to catch was Yao's foot (accidentally sending Yao underwater and nearly drowning him). Mulan embarrassingly put his foot down, profusely apologizing but only managed to get another unamused glare from him.

Only after giving a portion of her dinner to him for the entire week was her debt written off.

They walked back to the encampment for what they had thought would be a 'well-deserved-rest.' But of course, there was no such thing. Shang had taken a longer way to return to get to one particular part of the river where there was no bridge to traverse—instead, it was a series of flimsy looking poles sticking out from the water.

"I know you all want to go home," Shang said, a hint of an evil smirk tugging on his lips. "Anyone who falls into the river will have to repeat the exercise," he commanded. "This task will train you to combine balance, speed, and agility."

Mulan couldn't believe this cold-blooded instructor was none other than her husband. If he unraveled her inconceivable disguise, he would Kung-Fu chop her in half!

This time around, Mulan reaped the benefit of being the smallest in stature. Her lightweight and small feet meant she could comfortably keep her footing and conquer the obstacle with little effort.

It was Chien-Po who became the group's bottleneck. The corpulent man struggled not to lose his balance. As a consequence, he hesitated a lot and forestalled the rest of the recruits behind him. And that wasn't the only bad news. Chien-Po didn't know how to swim! Mulan heard his panicked yelp as he fell into the water with his limbs flailing frantically for help. Thankfully, Shang was swift to come to his rescue. It took Chien-Po a good dozen tries of crossing and falling before he got to the other side of the river without touching the water.

By the time the whole drill was over, it was already dark. They were all exhausted, bruised and hungry as their slavedriver Captain only allowed them to consume the fish that they caught for lunch and nothing else.

When the sight of their makeshift tents came into view, the recruits foolishly thought the day was over.

"Who said you were all dismissed?" His stern voice halted the men in their sluggish tracks."One
final exercise before we call it a day."

Shang's announcement was reciprocated by a collective groan which he cut off sharply.

"You think I did this on purpose?" Shang bristled. The men stiffened as their aggravated Captain's fist balled in fury. "War knows no rest, men! War knows no second chance!" he snapped. "The objective of war is not just to die for your country, but to live for it!"

The murmur of discontent immediately transformed to a sigh of contriteness as Shang delivered his speech.

Sensing his men had mentally bought into the deal, Shang wasted no time in explaining the next obstacle course. "We have to remain as vigilant during the night as we are during the day. Statistics reveal that a lot of instant victories were claimed during an unexpected ambush in the night," he said, anointing his arrows with oil before setting them ablaze. "As a soldier, your instinct may tell you to stay and fight, but as a sane person I would suggest you run."

The crowds were soon dispersed, and chaos erupted as their Captain entered a hunting frenzy mode, aiming his arrows very close to any hapless recruits.

Mulan managed to duck just in time as one burning arrow passed above her head. If her father knew that her husband nearly barbecued her alive, there would be a long, unpleasant lecture in order.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of Chi-Fu, standing amusedly watching the entire regiment roaring in panic, occasionally looking down at his parchment to take some notes.

"You must learn that running away can be a beneficial skill too," Shang told Chien-Po. It was obvious that speed and agility would never be his forte. He whimpered as the Captain removed the extinguished article and applied a cold solvent on his charred behind.

The past two weeks of physical drills proved to be horribly gruesome. And it was double the burden since Mulan was still learning how to conduct herself as a man.

Kung Fu soon became part of their routine. Every morning, the whole battalion was caught in a voiceless dance with unseen enemies as their reflective blades bathed in the sun's golden light.

Shang normally would lead the training, standing in front of the entire battalion to give a demonstration. His expression was dead serious.

Holding his perfect posture, Shang readied his stance before commanding an apprentice to launch their attack. Mulan's heart throbbed uncontrollably when witnessing how her attractive husband demonstrated his martial art fluency. His movements were fluid; swift as a coursing river, forceful as a great typhoon, and as strong as a raging fire.

"He is the perfect exhibition of strength and grace, balanced with precision and skill. Mulan thought dreamily as she watched his toned muscles stretch and flex under his tanned skin with each motion.

Effortlessly, Shang thwarted all the assaults directed at him.

Thank god he is shirtless.

Mulan almost slapped herself when these thoughts entered her brain and she found herself staring
completely inappropriately at her attractive commanding officer.

Mulan tried her best to emulate Shang's movements; unfortunately, her lack of strength and balance overshadowed her ability to win against a bigger opponent. And that wasn't the worst. It happened when the Captain beckoned her forward to be his next sparring partner.

"Fa Ping! Please come forward."

She could feel her body tense up immediately for many reasons.

"This is an important lesson on close body combat," Shang explained, "Protect your crucial body parts such as your head, your chest and your abdomen because failing to do so can make you lose the match… or, even worse, you could die," he said prophetically while twisting his neck to the side and pressing his knuckles until their joints gave a loud cracking sound. The recruits winced at that.

"Are you ready, Soldier Ping?"

Mulan immediately corrected her slumping posture, squaring her shoulders and straightening her spine. "Ready is my middle name, Captain!" she said in her best growly voice.

Shang wanted to laugh upon hearing the boy's retort but refrained from breaking the atmospheric grimness that he had created. He was waiting for Ping to launch his attack first, but he could see the boy hesitated.

"Ping, you can hit me as hard as you like, and you won't be punished for it," he promised, but Ping didn't look convinced.

"Are you scared?" Shang prompted kindly but firmly. He didn't want to be caught playing favoritism to his brother-in-law yet didn't want to scare the poor lad by punching him unconscious on his first spar.

"No," she replied unconvincingly.

Shang sighed. "Okay, if you refuse to go first, then I will," he said firmly. Shang made sure Ping was ready for him when he launched his attack. The young recruit managed to block his first punch successfully, and duck under his second one—covering his head with his hands.

Mulan looked up in the gap between her arms only to see her half naked husband closing into her space. She must have been charmed, enchanted… or whatever the word was, when she saw those delicious muscles flexing. If this was entirely different time and context, she could almost get excited about the prospect of getting this close to Shang.

It was then that Shang saw an opening and connected his palm to Ping's face. Shang was obviously being careful and only employed a fraction of his strength, but the force was enough to send the lanky boy hurtling towards the tree.

"Ouch!"

*Why the hell did he have to be so attractive?* Mulan thought sourly as she nursed the sore spot.

"You must stop staring at his abs, girl!" She could almost hear grandma Fa's voice in her head, rebuking her for her lapse in concentration.

"Ping!" she heard the concerned voice and subsequent footfalls of Ling and Chien-Po. Mulan
immediately raised her hand to halt them.

"I'm alright," she said while gradually collecting herself and struggling to get back on her feet. She staggered to her side but willed herself to approach Shang and held her battle stance. For a split second, she saw a glimpse of surprise and admiration in his eyes before they returned to cold and judgemental.

*Leave the war to the men, Mulan.* Shang's words resonated in her head.

She hated him for being right about her. She hated herself for not being strong enough, fast enough, skillful enough. She hated her limitations. She hated herself for being born as a woman who could do nothing to even dictate her own emotions towards the man who had been a distant, unfeeling husband.

One morning while practicing her routine outside in the hidden corner of the clearing, Mulan surreptitiously watched over her shoulder as two sweaty men engaged in combat not more than twenty feet away. This was certainly nothing new for her. In fact, she had often gone out as a child and watched her father with a few friends train or fight together while reading a scroll or munching on food.

But there was a mile of difference between openly watching men who were triple her age to sneakily spying on her own husband in full contact with a similar opponent. Both men were fighting with two types of weapons simultaneously, jumping at each other's throats and trying to find their adversaries' weaknesses and taking advantage of any opportunities to sneak in an ambush.

Whatever harmless, adolescent crush Mulan had for Shang before she decided to come in her father's place had turned into a four-headed, delusional monster now, threatening to break free at any time.

*But, even Ling agreed that Shang is irresistibly charming... and he doesn't even have ovaries*—that was her hormones talking again.

Mulan felt her heart race, both with anticipation and arousal, watching the raw power completely unleashed, in a manner he never did with her. Shang's movements were sharp, staccatoed with a lethal ambush at each end, while Shao's tended to be smooth and lyrical. This fight was different from the demonstrations Shang did with the other recruits, which tended to be very much one-sided. There was a rhythm to the fight. Both of them seemed to be keeping an internal tempo as they paced around each other.

Shao was a challenge. He kept Shang on his toes. It wasn't often that Shao won a match, but it was often enough that Shang didn't take victory for granted. And Shao, despite not being a soldier as long as Shang, was an astonishingly fast learner. He absorbed new fight techniques and information like a sponge and could expand on them without much instruction, which meant he sometimes took Shang by surprise.

At one particular moment, Shang managed to land a square kick on Shao's abdomen, sending him straight to the ground. But the Prince recovered with haste, standing and taking his stance then spontaneously changing his tactics. He immediately realized that Shang outperformed him in the strength department, but he was honest and clean with his attack. Manipulating Shang into believing that he was defeated and cunningly sneaking in an unexpected ambush would seal the deal. Within five minutes, their positions reversed and he had Shang disarmed. Shao grinned triumphantly at the captain.
"Expect the unexpected, Captain Li," he said with his sword still pointing at Shang's jaw.

"Point taken," Shang replied, taking a deep bow and accepting his defeat like a good soldier. "It was my pleasure to learn from you, Shao Wei."

"You fought well. I have to admit your raw strength and calculated brutality nearly beat me today." Shao offered his hand which Shang took gladly.

Mulan closed her eyes and fought for control. Her cheeks were hot both from the sun and the show proceeding before her. And oh, her badly sated hormones were roaring out for release! Now, she could understand why many married women had blindly dismissed the fact that their husbands may have gone astray to a brothel while they were serving in the army. Lust was a powerful, untamed force. It's when one feels that irrepressible tug, the curious pull that draws you toward another person with such a ferocious intensity; it went almost beyond the realm of self-control. It's the seductive sensation that sensually swept itself across the core when one identified the object of his/her affection.

She knew the attraction was always there, but her body seemed to understand this before her brain did.

Around the encampment Mulan had heard whispers about Shang, about how lethal and sharp he was, how smart and well-acclimated with war and battle strategy. People were starting to respect his name. Those who didn't respect it were the ones who feared it. She had kept her ears to the ground and heard it all, feeling a secret thrill that the same man had, in fact, shared a bed with her. But as much as she had heard about him, she had never seen him in action. That was being corrected quite thoroughly right now, and she was gawking—unabashedly—until Ling's sharp elbow landed right on her ribcage.

"Ping!"

She scrambled off her seat, head going into overdrive when she realized someone had spotted her drooling over two shirtless, sweaty men.

Ling grinned. "I see that you are watching our regiment heartthrobs fighting. Which one do you fancy? Left or right?"

Even though Mulan had no interested in embroiling herself with a palace romance, if Ling still delusively thought she had fallen for the Prince he might not dig up the truth about her relationship with Shang.

Mulan elbowed him back. "Shush, Ling. That is a dangerous liaison, you better not start gossiping."

"Speaking of the devil, Captain Handsome wants you in his tent right after the morning training," he said, grinning like a lunatic at the connotation his words carried.

When she didn't respond immediately, he repeated. "In. His. Tent...—imagine that." He waggled his brows in line with the naughty innuendos he wanted to deliver.

"Haha. Very funny," Mulan retorted wryly. "For the record, he called Chi-Fu inside his tent too. More than once."

Mulan headed to Li Shang's tent as she was told. Arriving there, she peeked through the gap in the entrance and her sight fell onto Li Shang's bareback.
He was doing a press up on the floor. He was exerting; lifting and lowering himself, grunting with his efforts as sweat dripped down his abdomen, muscles slick and shining, straining with each push.

"Oh, Hi Captain. Hope I, uh—, didn't disturb, um—, your activity," Mulan stammered when she realized she had been caught staring. How embarrassing! But she couldn't help it. Her eyes seemed to ignore all the commands her brain was firing at her.

She watched her husband's body, marveling at how beautiful it was; forged in fire and pain and blood; and something shifted inside her, clicking into place as she noticed the tightly-corded muscles of his neck, coated in a fine sheen of sweat.

"No, Ping. I actually have *something* for you," Shang informed. His expression was grave as usual. It was impossible for Mulan to decode what he had in mind.

*Something for me?* For the record, none of that *'something'* was ever anything good or pleasant. Mulan didn't dare set her hopes too high on this one. Had any of her stupid blunders caused her to earn this private castigation? Or had anyone else become the victim of her apocalyptic clumsiness without her knowing?

And that was when the killer of all romantic moments arrived. The sound of Chi-Fu's hoarse voice calling Shang reverberated outside the tent. If Mulan didn't know him any better, she thought the Emperor Counselor must have a vendetta against her.

"Wait here, I just need to finish my business with Chi-Fu."

While the Captain was occupied by the presence of the sniveling Emperor Counselor, Mulan methodologically studied the tent which Shang had intimately called his home away from his home.

The interior was very basic, consisting of a cloak, very few clothing, a stack of books, a spare helmet, piles of maps and rudimentary medical supplies. Everything was what Mulan expected from anyone on the battlefield. However, her eyes strayed and landed on a pile of papers next to Shang makeshift desk.

Her heart nearly stopped. The stack of abandoned parchment was filled with Shang's masculine strokes, reciting incomplete sentences and unfinished stories. Shang was a man of few words, finding that action was better suited to his non-verbose proclivity. Then, Mulan saw something poking from Shang's large sack. Mulan pulled the paper from its hiding place and opened it.

It was a letter. *Her* letter, to be exact.

Dang, how exactly did he do it every time? Every time she tried to nitpick an excuse to despise him, to be angry with him, he would turn around and do something that melted her heart without even trying.

She scanned through the letter, refreshing her memory of the things she mentioned to Shang weeks back. Despite their relationship and the appellative she used to address him as her husband, her letter was impersonal but polite, written merely as a formality that glossed over the superficial truth of their relationship. There was hardly anything sentimental inside that letter that made it worth keeping as far as she could tell, let alone spend such efforts to reply to it.

Then Mulan heard the sound of heavy footfalls approaching from outside the tent, approaching. Frantically, she returned all of the letters to their original position, however accidentally cluttered
the neat stack of scrolls by Shang's bed.

The canisters traveled in diverging directions all over the dirt floor. Hearing the clattering sound from his tent, Shang stormed in. His feet were greeted with numerous cylindrical contraptions. The momentum from his movement caused him to reel forward uncontrollably and crash into Fa Ping. The two of them landed in an inelegant heap, in the middle of the scroll mayhem.

Her hand made contact with his seriously muscled arms, briefly mesmerized by the magic of his touch. The same moment his head shot up towards her, the naked surprise evident in his eyes. He just looked at her for a few moments, before the surprise turned into a hint of amusement and ... embarrassment? *Impossible!* But hey, at least she had successfully erased that dead look on his face.

Shang gave his arms a push and got up with such athletic grace that all she could do was lay flat on the floor and stare for a while. The captain nonchalantly dusted himself off before offering her his hand.

"Are you alright?"

There was a tiny hint of pink on his cheeks.

*Is he... blushing?*

"Yes... yes, I am, Captain." Mulan spluttered, her heart commanding her fingers to accept his generous helping hand, but her head saying otherwise.

"Ouch!" Thanks to her catastrophic carelessness—she fell again, which was not impossible if your name was Fa Mulan. Fortunately, this time minus a gorgeous captain on top of her. Or was it, *unfortunately*? She grimaced and started to pull back her foot when she felt his hand, rough and warm, grip her ankle.

"Let me help," he said, efficiently examining her ankle. His finger pressure hit one painful spot. Her breath hitched, and she gasped out loud.

"Looked like you've sprained your ankle," he said, massaging the spot.

Mulan breathed in, trying to swallow. She would have been successful, but then his hand moved from her ankle, slowly up her calf and her throat tightened in a knot. The painful sensation progressively transformed into a soothing feeling that wracked through her entire body. Shang moved closer to inspect her. He was so close that she could feel his breath on her face. She instinctively leaned back to try to create a gap between them.

"I'm going to carry you to the medic tent."

"No, no..." Mulan shook her head, panicky. She didn't know whether her heart could survive another moment of intimate closeness without the risk of heart attack... or swooning.

"I can walk there on my own."

She tried to stand, but her ankle hated her for that.

"Ping!" A pair of toned arms captured her. The word of concern that exploded from his lips sounded much too good on her ears.

*His body feels the same*, Mulan remarked dazedly, even when the encounter was brief, she didn't
fail to absorb the same feeling as when his frame strained against her on their marital bed. She closed her eyes for a moment just to catch her breath, involuntarily inhaling his scent—a combination of sun, dust and hard work. She remembered the last time she felt this—this heady sensation of floating above a cliff, just getting ready to fall. She felt hot, feverish, unable to speak coherently and her inner-self quivering like jelly.

He seemed to remain calm and deposited her on the side of his bed. "Sit here, let me grab some ointment." His voice came out neutral and conversational, as though nothing had happened.

This time Mulan nodded weakly and submitted to his will. As soon as his rough skin pressed against hers, her heart resumed pounding in rapid beats. The room fell into glacial silence, but his touch had spoken of thousands of words she wanted to hear. Slowly, she stole a glimpse of him from under her lashes, just watching him methodically search for the nerve point, observing the scruff on his face that had gone without a shave for too long, watching his eyebrows draw together in deep concentration, and scrutinizing every hard feature on his face that she found strangely endearing.

But unfortunately, she wasn't the only person who had her eyes on Shang. A sniveling shadow of Chi-Fu emerged through the tent opening. He must've heard the ruckus.

"Captain?! Seriously?"

"Captain? Anything wrong?" But his sympathetic gaze transformed into a disapproving scowl at the sight of her.

Mulan was so lost, her brain struggled to remember what had happened a moment ago. She thought Shang's hand would halt its ministrations, now that Chi-Fu's suspicious glare was directly on him. But, she underestimated him perhaps. Shang just gazed back at the Emperor Counselor in a calm manner and spoke, his voice business-like, all the while brushing his rough fingers over her soft skin, driving her madder by the minute. "Fa Ping fell and sprained his ankle."

Chi-Fu's skeptical eyes turned to her, hands ready to take notes. "Oh, is that so?"—cue creepy, distrusting stare.

Shang saw vulnerable Ping cower under Chi-Fu's interrogative stare and his hackles were raised at the man's condemning tone. He immediately responded with a predatory glare that Mulan never wished to see again. "Are you implying that I made things up?" Shang could barely restrain his voice to stay within the thin layer of the tent.

He was glaring at the scrawny advisor, not even trying to conceal the murder in his eyes. Mulan thought of interrupting, perhaps singing a song or faking a cardiac arrest. Thankfully, the murder slowly drained out before she needed to intervene. His hand let go of her leg and came up to the table, cracking his knuckles. Stupid males and their testosterone having no appreciation for the weak hearted.

"I am sure you came back here not just to spy on me?" Shang asked him with his stern, accusative voice.

"Of course not," Chi-Fu smirked victoriously. "I just received another letter from General Li."

With a sigh, Shang stepped away from the boy, nodding silently to dismiss him and ushered the Emperor Counselor toward the exit to speak with him outside.

Admittedly, Shang was left a little bewitched by his youngest recruit. Okay, he might have felt an
unexplainable protectiveness towards young Fa Ping, but perhaps it was a big brother instinct. But he was sure the strange butterfly sensation he felt earlier had nothing to do with that. For a split second, he thought his lips might have touched Ping's forehead, but he could have just imagined that. For a boy his age, Ping was exceptionally effeminate. The look in his innocent, dark eyes and his shy expression made Shang feel a little dizzy.

What's wrong with me! He is your brother-in-law for goodness sake! Shang rebuked himself as he remembered the image of Ping, squirming in embarrassment as a blush rose beneath his sunburnt skin.

That night, Mulan sat on her bed, looking around to be sure the predominantly male resident of the tent was fast asleep before slipping her finger carefully to remove the tie around the parchment in her hands.

My Dear Daughter Fa-Li Mulan, it said in skillful strokes.

She was stunned in her seat for a moment, realizing her father had uncovered her disguise. For weeks she had been faithfully writing to him as though she were residing at the Li's family home, keeping up the illusion of her absence. And she did likewise to her mother-in-law, making her thinking she had been living with the Fa's.

Pulling a deep breath, she read the next sentence, one word at a time.

There is no right word to describe how I feel right now as I pen this letter to you; when I know that you wear my armor and bear my sword. I know you have made a choice. A hard choice—which I respect. But let me say a few words.

When I was young, your grandfather told me this, "If you see something wrong happening in the world, you can either do nothing, or you can do something."

I believe none of us are ever going to settle for the first option. It is not in our blood to do so.

….and that’s why I am not trying to stop you.

Whatever the outcome of your training—failure or success, defeat or victory, please remember that I will always be your proud father no matter what.

Beads of tears hung in the corners of her eyes and a sob clawed it's way up her throat. She could almost hear the deep, patient voice of her father behind every word that was written.

But war is more complicated than you think. I learned this the hard way, a long, long time ago. I wish I could tell you that there is one bad person to blame for every war. But I cannot. Because we are all to blame.

And whatever Shang has said to you before, please don't hate him for refusing to take my place—my duty to China is not his burden to bear. Shang is an honorable man who has gone above and beyond for his country. His job is to take good care of you...and it's your job to honor him.

Also, rest assured that your secret is safe with me.

I am sure there will be days when you are afraid and dismayed. Remember that we are in this together. That we are fighting for those who cannot. Do not let fear stop you from living... from dreaming....and from hoping.
Mulan, someday, when you are standing on the battlefront, you will see many deaths, friends and enemies alike. You will see the lives of the innocent, wasted and destroyed. However, you have to realize that you cannot save everyone in this war. That is not what you went there to do.

My dear daughter, it is my deepest wish that you return to me your fate was never in my hands to determine.

If the Gods are willing, we shall be reunited in due time. But in the meantime, this is a goodbye.

Until we meet again, my precious girl.

Your father,

Fa Zhou

Memories from when she had been a little girl flooded into her mind. Her father bringing her a new trinket from the village, smiling at the way she always tripped on the doorway, laughing when he tickled her into submission. Memories from her adolescence, how he used to shake his head fondly at her, ruffling her hair when she got annoyed, letting her use whatever part of his armor she wanted to play with, brought a small smile to her lips.

But her musing was rudely interrupted by a rustling sound inside her sackcloth. Reasoning that they were in the vicinity of the woods, and any poisonous animal could well linger and take up residence inside her bag, Mulan took a dry branch and poked the bag. A loud 'Ouch!' was heard.

She knew she shouldn't be pleased to hear that, but she strangely was. Well, because poisonous animal normally couldn't talk.

"What did you poke me for? Is that any way to welcome your sacred guardian?"

Mulan automatically scrambled to the edge of her matt. "Who… who are you?" Her frantic movements disturbed the two male residents next to her. Chien-Po grunted before turning his face to the wall and drifted back to sleep, but no such luck with Ling.

"Mulan," he said sleepily, "What's all the fuss about? Go back to sleep."

"Ling," she whispered lowly into his friend's ear. "Don't you see something? Or at least… hear something?"

Mushu began to laugh boisterously, Mulan was sure he would wake the entire tent, but even Ling didn't even seem to notice.

"What are you talking about?" The lanky man sat up, rubbing his eyes before looking around to check for any abnormality. "I don't see anything. Maybe you've been staring at Captain Handsome too long. You've begun hallucinating!" he joked as he laid his head back down on his pillow.

"Don't call him that!" Mulan was ready to smite her friend with her pillow for his blatant teasing when the creature interrupted her.

"Now, let's get out of here before the entire regiment thinks you're crazy," he offered. And for whatever unclear reason, Mulan decided to follow him, taking the sack with her.

They walked to the encampment border and slightly beyond to make sure no one could hear them (well, no one could hear her, as she had just established, no one could hear nor see the strange creature).
"But… Where? Why.—? I mean, what are you?" She gasped when reality struck her. "You are… a ghost?!

"Here's a hint." He threw out a necklace from inside the sack.

"Wait, you're you came from the pendant?" Mulan picked up the necklace and scrutinized its features. There was a 'yin' symbol on one side and a Phoenix painting on the other. There was no dragon to be seen.

She tilted her head and squinted her eyes, trying to correlate the picture on her pendant with the embodiment of what she thought was a red house lizard holding a coin.

"You are one very odd looking bird," she said, appraising the look of the creature.

"They weren't kiddin' when they said you were freakin' nuts," he said in faux annoyance, but the corner of his mouth ticked up with a small smile. "I've been called a lizard, snake, iguana, chameleon… you name it, but a bird? Did you get your eyes tested before joinin' the army?" the creature protested.

"Wait, what?"

She must've said that a little too loudly because the dragon immediately slapped his claws over her mouth to silence her. "Remember, you don't want your comrades to think you're talkin' to a tree."

Mulan lowered her voice. "Who are 'they'?" And how dare they called her freakin' nuts!

"Your ancestors, Girl! When your father realized you were gone—it took him two weeks, by the way, well done!—he prayed in the family temple, and your great great great great grandfather summoned the greatest guardian of all to come and protect you."

"That is a hell of a lot of greatness in one sentence," Mulan muttered in both bewilderment and amusement at the absurdity of the situation.

"Indeed. Therefore, let me introduce myself," he pounded his gong and then bowed dramatically. "My name is Mushu, the Amazing Dragon Chaperone...At your service," he bowed.

Mulan squinted as if it would improve her vision. "You're a dragon?"

"I am a dragon," the creature nodded proudly.

"Oh, sorry. I've misunderstood. I thought you were meant to be the reincarnation of the Phoenix on my pendant," she said, scrutinizing the engraving on the pendant that was suspended on a tan leather string.

"No, no… she is on a perpetual vacation. AWOL. So, I figure since Shang won't need my protection, I may as well protect you," he clarified.

Mulan wanted to ask how exactly the tiny dragon was going to protect her, but she had a more pressing question.

"You… you know Shang?"

"Of course! I am a mighty divinity. And as part of the yin and yang embodiment, one of my many jobs is to make sure your marriage remains balanced and harmonious."

"You are here to make sure that my marriage is…—" Mulan scoffed incredulously. "There is
nothing wrong with our marriage. Shang and I adjusted perfectly to domestic life. I cook, he eats. And then he works, I shop—"

"A workshop?" clipped the Dragon.

"Yeah, could be," Mulan crossed her arms and grinned smugly. "See?" she crowed. "We are living happily ever after! The end."

"Really? Then why are you here hiding away from your husband, masquerading yourself as a man?" the Dragon countered. "And don't you think a mighty deity like me didn't see how his subject was drooling over her own husband's abs while he was training?"

She stiffened at this and averted her face, hoping the Dragon couldn't see how red she was turning. "It's—...it's complicated."

"I bet it is," Mushu scoffed, rolling his eyes at her. "However, you are not the only woman who considers truth to be complicated." He shook his head. "Ladies are always so byzantine."

"Lame excuses are sort of an occupational hazard when living among men. Now, if you'll excuse me. I have some beauty sleep to catch!" she said half scathingly and stormed into the tent.

When she arrived back in her shared living space, she carelessly tossed herself onto her mat and pulled the blanket to the top of her head, earning another unhappy grunt from her snoring neighbors.

Perhaps this was just a dream. A bizarre dream about a mythical creature that worked as a love cupid—a defender of her marriage to a man she hardly knew.

She often wondered, what kind of person Shang was under the steel facade. He was harsh and distant throughout their relationship, and she was equally combative in her response. But her body…and perhaps her heart…had a differing opinion. Her body and heart made her want to be close to him, to touch him and to be cared by him, just like what he did in his tent earlier.

She barely knew him—but there was no question that she loved him.

After an hour staring at the distant point of the tent ceiling, Mulan was resigned to the fact that slumber wouldn't come to her that evening. Especially considering she had just been confronted by a mighty deity

…and thanks to her deal with Yao, the rising grumble from her stomach didn't help one bit. Note to self, swapping dinner for forgiveness is never a good idea.

Cursing under her breath, she marched out of the tent.

She noticed that Mushu came to join her, but she didn't want to start another conversation that would lead her into talking about her angst-filled relationship with Shang, so she pretended not to notice him.

With the moonlight to help her navigate through the dark, beaten path, Mulan walked into the nearby woods in search of something to appease her hunger. She found a wild raspberry scrub (or at least what she thought was. It's hard to identify anything in the dark), and popped the berries into her mouth unceremoniously.

She thought she had seen enough surprises in a day but then she caught a glimpse of a familiar athletic form beyond the thicket of the coppice by the river.
"Wait, is that the Prince of Wei?" she heard Mushu whisper into her ear.

"I think so."

What was he doing in the middle of the night? Was he hungry too? But knowing even Chi-Fu would willingly surrender his meal to the Prince, Mulan dismissed that thought as unlikely.

Scrupulously, Mulan prowled closer, carefully so as not to attract unwanted attention.

...And the Prince wasn't alone.

A woman was with him.

She was dressed in a dark-colored **deel** and an **ushanka** on top of her head. Her face was half concealed by a translucent veil, but judging from her apparel, she was clearly not Chinese.

She was one of the Huns.

Mulan observed quietly from a good distance. There was no way she could pick up the Prince's nor the mysterious woman's expressions. She was trying to read their body language. Shao Wei's back was addressing her, and with a glimpse of luck, she might have been able to see the woman's face. But in such dimly lit woods with a number of trees still between her and them, it wasn't a trivial task. Mulan admonished herself for neglecting her mother's instruction to eat plenty of carrots. Telescopic-vision would be handy in time like this.

And then something unexpected happened. The Prince of Wei pulled back his cloak and bowed in the manner of a nobleman acknowledging a position of authority. "Your Highness, it's been a while."

Beside her, Mushu gasped dramatically. "Holy ancestor! Is she... a **princess**?!

"Worse, she is the princess of the enemy," Mulan pointed out as the woman took off her veil, smiled and returned the Prince's gesture. "You sound ridiculous when you call me that, but it's my pleasure—my Prince," the woman reciprocated.

...And they are friends. Or perhaps more...

"How do you know this?" Mushu asked, and Mulan realized she must've spoken her thoughts out loud.

Mulan recognized the way the Princess looked at the Prince of Wei. It was that soft, longing look, full of emotion and hopefulness. It was the same way she looked at Shang.

She shrugged, "That's the beauty of human expression. People keep secrets, but their eyes cannot lie."

"Isn't it ironic that those words coming from you?" Mushu said in jest, but Mulan wasn't in a mood for banter.

**Is it possible that the Prince of Wei is a traitor?**

The words from her father's letter echoed in her mind. *War is more complicated than you think. I learned this the hard way, a long, long time ago. I wish I could tell you that there is one bad person to blame for every war. But I cannot.*

...Because we are all to blame.
However, her deep contemplation was rudely interrupted by the presence of a dark shadow looming above her. Large hands covered her mouth before she had a chance to scream.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late post! Hope you enjoyed the chapter. And this is where the main plot begins to unravel. Also, as you've noticed, that Mushu wasn't a visible, tangible creature as he was in Disney movie. He was just there as the voice of Mulan's consciousness (and to add a lot of sarcasm to the dialogue). Hope this approach will appease everyone. And also note the dialogue among the characters had been tailored to fit the rating, hence Mushu won't be as childish and comical as he was in the movie. He'll be one sarcastic dragon.

Mushu: "The relationship between husband and wife is very physiological, one is Psycho, and the other one is Logical. Now please don't try to figure out who is who."

Until the next chapter!
"Be quiet!" the stranger hissed, his grip around Mulan's mouth getting tighter as she fought for release. Mulan wasn't sure why she complied to her captor's command, perhaps because of the familiar way his rough knuckles brushed against her skin, or the comforting, masculine scent gently assaulting her nose at his proximity.

Sensing that she had stopped fighting him, her captor loosened his grip and turned her around to face him. She gasped.

**Shang?!**

"Ping, what are you doing here so late at night? Aren't you aware of how close we are to the Mongolian border?" There was a strange zap that traveled up her arm when their skin made contact; Mulan had to believe that it was nothing but coincidence because their hands had touched plenty of times before without that interesting reaction, during training, sparring and…. making love.  

"This can't possibly get any worse," she heard Mushu's half amused voice behind her ear.

"Please remember in the future that you're the one who said that," she told him quietly so Shang couldn't hear.

"Can you explain yourself?" Shang demanded. Mulan flinched under his penetrating glare.

"I...—" she sputtered, mustering her courage. **Well, what are you doing here too, Shang?** Regardless of her desire to question her captain, Mulan wasn't going to challenge Shang's authority. "I was just hungry." That wasn't a lie. She pulled items from her pocket that looked like fruits. "See—?"

If she hadn't been so overwhelmed with her own hormonal tide, she would've registered that the Prince of Wei and the mysterious princess had disappeared from view, swallowed by the dark landscape of the surrounding coppice.

After threatening Ping that he would face brutal retribution as the consequences of his action, Shang gruffly dismissed his brother-in-law and told the boy never to leave the encampment without gaining permission first.

Shang breathed out a disgruntled sigh upon entering his own tent. The letter from his father that Chi-Fu had delivered earlier still lay on his bed.

If it weren't for Ping jeopardizing his political espionage, he would've gotten a better idea of the identity of the mysterious woman who the Prince had met, or at least get a hint of the nature of their relationship.

No wonder Shao Wei had explicitly requested him not to chaperone him to his private spot in the woods that he claimed to be his 'bathing and toilet' spot which had now turned out to be a secret point of rendezvous. It all made sense.
Perhaps the woman he spied earlier with Shao Wei was a conniving Hun Princess and the Prince of Wei was the jackass who'd been complicit to her seduction—as his father often said, many mighty men had fallen helpless in the arms of a beautiful woman.

Shang sank into his bed as he contemplated his next move. He would definitely spy on the Prince again, and this time, he wouldn't let anything or anyone intervene with his mission.

The next day, Shang had invited his trainee for a hike to survey the new field for their training exercise. After the atrocious day Mulan had yesterday sparring with the Captain, she thought today was going to be a better day.

She was wrong. Very… wrong.

Perhaps it was the cold wind last night combined with another day of brutal training, Mulan woke up with an unpleasant soreness all over her limbs and she felt inexplicably nauseated. Dragging herself to get to the breakfast rush, she was welcomed by Ling’s and Chien-Po’s scrutinizing stares.

"Gods, you look like someone who was raised from the dead," Ling said in shock.

Mulan checked her countenance over the surface of her tea. The slight bruising around her eyes where Shang had hit her square during their sparring session had turned into nasty purple and black discoloration.

"I don't feel much different either," Mulan said, staring into the amber depths of her cup.

"Here, maybe breakfast will do you good," Ling suggested. "You skipped dinner last night. It's no wonder your stomach is upset." He offered her a plate of warm bean buns.

"Actually, I…—" Mulan opened her mouth to tell Ling about her encounter with the Prince of Wei but closed it quickly when she remembered who else she had met that night. She wasn't ready for her best friend to interrogate her about what other 'naughty' things she did with their Captain in the middle of the woods, alone.

"Thanks," Mulan said, pushing the bean bun into her throat without caring much about her womanly etiquette.

"Were you just about to tell me something?"

Before she could weave some cover story to cover her lies, the urge to throw up returned with a vengeance, propelling her into a nearby bush to empty the contents of her stomach.

She heard rapid footsteps as Ling followed right behind her.

"Ping! Are you okay?" Ling's concerned eyes scanned over her as he handed her another warm cup of tea. "I think you should tell Captain Li that you need to see a doctor."

"I'll be fine," she said, sighing gratefully when the warm liquid washed away the residue of the vomit that still burned her throat and abated the growing tide of nausea that pooled in her stomach. "Come on, let's go."

They quickly made a beeline towards the crowd of recruits, who began lining up into their training formation, and camouflaged themselves among the uniformly dressed soldiers. From the front, Mulan could hear Shang sternly barking out his orders.
"Don't rely on your weapon. Because there are times you will be out of arrows, or your bow will
break, or you will be without your sword or any other form of armament. But your body can be the
most lethal weapon of all. Use your fist, legs, even the skull of your head..."

Ling peered towards Chi-Fu and made a remark about the councillor's jagged array of teeth. "I can
see someone who has tried to use teeth as his weapon." Mulan bit down her chuckle, she must
admit Ling had an impeccable sense of humor.

"...—thus, it is crucial that we train our body to be the strongest weapon it can be," Shang said,
gesturing to a pile of baskets that he had prepared for the drill.

First, they were told to carry a load of stones balanced on the staff across their shoulder. The
journey was bearable until the trees that dominated the land became less, and the ground beneath
them took on the appearance of an unfriendly, jagged body of rocky mountains. The heat became
their mortal enemy as there was no undergrowth providing them with necessary shelter. Mulan's
limbs were still aching from the archery and the swimming drill, but giving up was not an option.
On top of that, she had a healing ankle that still throbbed painfully and a darkened eye as a result of
Shang's lethal punch.

Her father would've been furious if he knew Shang had caused that.

Then, the second problem came. The terrain became unbelievably steep and rocky. Shang attached
each of their waists with ropes and told the recruits to tether themselves in pairs to ensure each
other's safety.

Her limbs were covered in cuts and bruises from the climb. And the heat didn't help either. As the
fatigue and exhaustion took its toll, she began to lose her balance, dropping her pack and her staff
with a thud.

"Ping, you okay?" Chien-Po's voice came from below her. The man wasn't in any better condition,
supporting his own weight must've been a real burden right now.

"Ugh, not really," Mulan admitted, feeling her arms tremble from the load she bore.

"It's not a good idea to train on an empty stomach, and I told you to see a doctor," Ling
admonished. Mulan had been giving her dinner to Yao as a form of apology from drowning him in
her venture to catch a fish. "Your mind may be willing, but there is only so much that your body
can bear."

Mulan chose to ignore Ling's patronizing lecture because ahead of them was a devious looking
vertical cliff they had to tackle and down below was a gaping hundred meter drop into a ravine.
The thought of falling didn't do her any good, she huffed to coax her courage and energy.

Just as Mulan began to push herself up, she began to see black spots swim across her vision and her
thoughts began to feel hazy.

"Help," she managed to whisper as the edges of her vision began closing in. "Help me...—" And
everything went black.

"Am I... am I alive?" Mulan asked, quickly rubbing her eyes to restore her vision. She saw the
glimpse of her comrades looking down, but more importantly, Shang was there, looming over her
with a worried expression cast over his eyes. "Or are we both dead?" she corrected, realizing there
was no way the strict captain would ever carry such a soft expression.

"I heard you didn't eat dinner for the last couple of days in a row, and you skipped breakfast this
morning.” Shang's voice was restored to its stern quality. "Do you know how foolish that is? Our bodies are our weapons, Ping. Our best chance for survival is that we take care of it every chance we get. This cannot happen again!"

"I'm... I'm sorry Captain," she cowered under the towering captain. "It's just that...—"

"You better go freshen yourself up at the river," Shang interrupted. He didn't want to set the bad habit of allowing his recruits to earn his sympathy by throwing in random excuses. "Hurry, you are late for our next exercise."

Mulan dejectedly crawled away, her chest was burning with shame. She thought she would've been accustomed to Shang's imperious attitude and harshness ever since he married her, but that wasn't exactly the case.

From her peripheral vision, she saw Shang stand by the edge of the cliff with a bucket of water balanced on his head. Mulan could hear his instruction faintly across the distance. Something to do with balance and finding your center. Just to imagine how it felt like to stand where he was, made her stomach flip. She wet her face and gulped a generous amount of cold water, letting the coolness repel the dizziness and keep her nausea at bay.

But she didn't expect what came next. Shang readied his combat stance while a few men diligently picked up stones. On his command, the recruits began to throw the stones at him. Some looked like they were using the opportunity to take their vengeance for making them endure such a horrible hike. However, their magnificent Captain thwarted every single attack—spinning his staff skillfully to deflect them all. It was like watching an acrobatic demonstration.

"Now, who would like to try first or...shall I start picking volunteers?" His announcement was acknowledged by grim silence among them. In the best case—one would definitely suffer humiliation, and in the worst case—end up dead at the bottom of the ravine.

Even if she wouldn't score well in the actual drill, she could earn back Shang's favor by volunteering. Mulan steeled herself and took a calming breath before stepping forward to say, "I'll do it, Captain."

Shang gave her his spot, and Mulan tried hard not to imagine the deep crevasse that lurked just beyond the ground she stood on. Thankfully, balancing the bucket took all of her concentration and provided a real distraction not to think about her fear.

It took her a long while to stable the pail on her head, not to mention her top knot made the task more difficult than it already was. Unfortunately, her comrades weren't as patient to wait and already ensued aiming the rocks at her even when she clearly wasn't ready.

On one particular instance, Mulan saw one large rock coming right at her face and she ducked down to avoid. Her sudden movement resulted in the bucket flipping on her head, drenching her right to her toes. Even then, she didn't stop swinging her staff blindly from underneath.

By a little stroke of luck, even with the bucket still covering her field of vision, Mulan managed to dodge a few stones and send one flying right in Shang's direction. Thank goodness for his quick reflexes, that stone did no harm to him. When Mulan sheepishly peeked from underneath her bucket hat, the stone just rolled to the ground after bouncing off Chien-Po's shock-absorbent belly.

Shang mentally ran his palm over his face. He wondered whether he would ever see the warrior in
the young Fa Ping.

Mulan really thought that the descent would be more bearable than her journey up. They set off, and things were fine at first. However halfway through, Shang ordered the men to pack double loads in both their packs. Now she could really feel the weight was pulling her down.

She tried to ignore the visceral pain shooting through her back where the staff rested and concentrated on the road in front of her. But eventually exhaustion overtook her senses and she started losing balance. She began to feel dizzy again, but this time her pride prevented her from asking for help.

Eventually, when the strain became too much, she fell right in her tracks, this time with her consciousness still intact. Unfortunately, Ling and Chien-Po were nowhere to be seen and obviously were focused too much on carrying their own load to notice she had hit the earth with a heavy thud, but someone else did.

Mulan noticed an imposing shadow of a figure looming over her. When she looked up, she was greeted with Shang's displeased countenance which clearly spelled out how disappointed he was. He mutely picked up her staff together with her packs before she could verbalize anything.

She breathed out an air of remorse from her chest, watching Shang mount her load on his shoulders and jog swiftly to join the rest. Slowly she struggled to her feet and willed herself to follow the rest. Her muscles still ached badly, but it was nothing compared to her bruised pride.

Mulan tried not to cry as she reclaimed the distance between her and the rest of the men. Not once, but twice—she had failed. She purposely lagged slightly behind, keeping herself unnoticed to avoid questioning stares from the rest as to why she was walking without her packs.

A few long, agonizing minutes passed as Shang led the recruits through the treacherous landscape. Everyone was silent with just the sounds of heavy footsteps and rapid breathing to accompany them.

Mulan tried to remain unseen, alas, her stomach seemed to rebel on her idea to remain incognito and threw up its almost non-existent content noisily. She didn't hear the panicked rush of footsteps so, when she felt Shang's hand on her back, Mulan jumped, startled by his appearance, before groaning as her stomach heaved again. His hand was stroking her back in soothing repetitiveness. The sound of fabric rasping against the caress of his palm twined with the sound of her soft breathing was inexplicably calming.

"I think you are ill," Shang announced with his usual stoic tone but somewhere in his expression was worry while handing her a cup of water. Mulan frantically sipped it, fighting back the pit of exhaustion she felt prickling under her skin. Her armour was beginning to feel constrictive and uncomfortable next to her skin. She shifted restlessly. Her sleep was all messed up due to these long nights this last week and it was just like her to get sick when she was overexerted and tired.

"Ping, you are dismissed for the day. Have a rest and if you don't feel any better, please inform me or Chi-Fu."

Mulan nodded weakly, finding she had no energy to even argue when a few of her teammates began mimicking similar excuses in order to be relinquished from the training.
The training ended late in the evening.

She was reading inside the tent when suddenly she felt something alien stirred in her belly, rising the content of her stomach on the edge of her throat. And the musky odour of a bunch of sweaty men in the badly ventilated tent didn't help one bit. She swallowed back her nausea and focused on the scroll on her hand, but her stomach hated her for it. Without warning, a strong projectile launched from her throat with a vengeance, throwing the content of her dinner and whatever left from the lunch before. Thankfully she had anticipated that and moved away from the crowds.

She felt better after Chi-Fu gave her a portion of his medicinal herbal tea from his private stock, albeit begrudgingly. But even when her muscles begged for mercy and the blisters on her soles burned from too much walking, sleep didn't come easily to her.

Resolving not to disturb Ling and Chien-Po from their rest, she went out to get some air. She knew just the friend who she could pour out all her trouble to.

"Hi boy," Mulan said, stepping into the makeshift stable and patting his horse muzzle. "Are you sick of being cooped up in here? I'm sorry I haven't got a chance to take you out for a walk," she said regretfully. Shang's silent dismissal as he grabbed her packs still danced around her vision. It felt like a poisoned arrow was just pierced through her heart. Unwilling tears fell from her eyes, which she quickly wiped away.

The horse replied to her with a soft, understanding neigh, lowering his head as Mulan rubbed his mane affectionately. She must've sounded so tired and defeated to make Khan regard her with eyes full of sympathy.

"I miss home," she admitted. A vivid recollection of her father's aged face, her grandma's laughter, and Ping's innocent grin painted in her mind. It was such a contrast to the brutal drill, the mocking men and the sneering Emperor counsellor she had to face on a daily basis. But it was the thought of Shang's contemptuous countenance that reduced her to tears. She was desperate to earn his approval, his respect... his love — because she knew he would never accept her as his equal.

....let alone as his perfect bride.

The thought made her heart ache even more.

Shao Wei lazily dragged himself out of his tent. He had been postponing the task of taking his horse for a walk. Alas, because everyone else was training in the nearby mountain the whole day, no one was available to offer him a reprieve.

He could've done this earlier in the day when the sun was still shining, and he could bask in the warmth, absorbing the beauty of the landscape rather than prowling in the cold, dark night with nothing to see.

Okay, yeah, he shouldn't procrastinate any longer. Pulling his cloak closer to block out the cold, late-autumn wind, he made his way into the stable. It was then he realized that he wasn't alone. Another two-legged figure was present inside the stable. The distinct pixie-cut build and slightly effeminate movements helped Shao Wei to identify the identity of his subject.

Fa Ping.

Shao Wei sank closer to the nearby wall to avoid being noticed and watched the interaction closely. He saw the black steed lean his face closer as though offering his master whatever silent
"I know I need to hang in there. Failing the training is not an option. It's the only way to prevent Baba from going to the battlefront and Ping from becoming an orphan." He heard her tell the beast.

It took a few seconds for Shao Wei to let the information coalesce in his mind and, after stitching all the facts together, finally the revelation struck him. Fa Ping was none other than Fa Mulan. A daughter with boundless love for her family who had decided to face the unknown to preserve her father's life and ensure her brother's future.

He'd seen the way her face had fallen when Shang sent her away that evening. For the first time, he'd seen her as more than just a shy, clueless and awkward man in disguise. He'd seen a daughter—who was wounded that her captain had flagged her as a failure and disappointed that she had let her family down again. Also, the fact that Shang was her husband, having him reject her in the regiment couldn't be anymore hurtful. It made Shao wonder what sort of damage had been done to her with this whole arrangement. It was hard to pinpoint whose indiscretions had brought on her predicament.

A few minutes later, Mulan and Khan veered away from the footpath along the river, galloping to her secret spot where no one came. (And she was thankful Mushu was sensible enough to leave her alone).

Mist enveloped the sky, making the moon looked beautiful in its flaws, perfectly round and casting a slight glow upon everything it touched. The spot was hidden behind trees, bathed in moonlight and the grass was so thick it cushioned every step. The smell of leaves and raw nature was making her feel better. The noise in the training encampment was distant and quickly drowned out by the sound of Khan's rhythmic pounding.

Mulan halted Khan when she saw the wide, green expanse stretch out in front of them, tranquil and inviting. Mulan inhaled deeply as she enjoyed the picturesque surrounding. She dismounted from Khan and guided him to the pasture.

"Here boy, you may eat as you please," she said, smiling as she removed Khan's reins. Khan neighed happily before ducking his head and gobbling up the fresh grass. It must've tasted better than his usual dry hay and dry oats he had every day.

Meanwhile, Mulan deposited herself near the lake, watching its calm surface mirror a nearly perfect image of the snowy mountain ridges that seemed to expand infinitely into the distance. She closed her eyes, letting the noise of small crickets ensconce her senses. This was her peaceful place, away from all the chaos of her life.

Why Shao Wei wanted to drink the water from the brook at this unholy hour was a mystery to Shang. But Shang, being the subservient soldier that he'd always been, didn't question the absurdity of Shao Wei's strange request. Besides, the letter from his father a couple of days ago had raised his suspicions about Shao Wei and his possible involvement in a serious treachery against the Emperor.

His speculation made perfect sense if anyone recalled that Shao Wei's father, Prince Wei Zhang, was the second in line to the throne after the Emperor. While Wei Zhang may be a little too old to plan a military coup, it wouldn't stop him from influencing and conspiring with his oldest son to do so.

At the entrance of the stable, Shang caught a glimpse of his white stallion. "Hi Qing, I know it's
late… but I need your favor,” Shang told the horse.

Qing merely nickered, the low rumble from his throat indicating he was happy to see Shang whatever the reason. Shang raked his hand through the horse’s mane and smiled. "Sorry to trouble you. But this is the Prince’s order."

Before long, Qing galloped into the woods heading towards the clearing where Shao Wei had told him to go.

That was when he saw a flash of movement of what appeared to be a person lounging beneath a tree. His first instinct was to hide and he carefully prowled closer to check whether it was a spy for the Hun's army. But as soon as the silhouette stood up, Shang dropped his stance. It looked like a boy, and he was certain no Huns' guerilla was that petite.

Something in his brain clicked: it was Fa Ping.

And the boy wasn't lounging, he was reading something on his lap. Because, a minute later the boy stood in his battle stance, throwing empty punches and kicks at the nearby tree.

*He is reading a practice scroll,* Shang thought.

As he moved closer to the young boy, he gave no indication that he had noticed his approach. Shang berated Ping's lack of vigilance and surveillance considering the Hun army could roam through the area and ambush at any given time. Worse still, they could kidnap him to be tortured for information.

*Fa Ping.* Shang shook his head as he cited the boy's name. Fa Ping came in for training; with his impertinence, and his smart-ass attitude; causing trouble just by breathing. But as the training days ticked by, Fa Ping was proving there was much more to him than his unseeming appearance. He might be smallish, lanky and have none of the muscle density expected of a soldier, but his perseverance and tenacity were indescribable.

In correlation to that, Shang remembered how similar Ping was to his wife, Mulan, who was the opposite polarity to the traditional expectation of a wife—rebellious and stubborn. Perhaps this had something to do with the Fa genes, and somewhere in his brain he incongruously hoped that the kid had something more in him than just clumsiness.

"I didn't know you had a secret hideout," he said, repressing the natural touch of steel in his voice and trying to be casual.

"Cap...Captain Li!"

When the boy was close enough, Shang noticed his puffy eyes. Fa Ping had been crying. Even when he knew harshness was important to ingrain discipline, something deep inside him felt inexplicably tormented to know he was the cause of this pain.

"Please, just call me Brother Li outside training time. We are family after all."

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Even from the dimmed light of the moon, Mulan could see his sincere smile, she felt her body relax.

Narrowing her eyes in concentration, she threw her right fist at the tree and then her left before
Shang came around behind her and put his hands on her waist, causing her to pause as the air seemed to leave her in a whoosh.

"Keep your hips squared," he commented softly, turning her slightly and she nodded mutely as all of her focus went straight to the warmth spreading across her skin from where his hands were. "And keep your wrists straight so you don't jam them."

"Okay," she managed to get out and he lingered for a fraction of a second longer before dropping his hands and taking a step to the side. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw him flex his hands before balling them into fists at his sides.

She took his instruction and threw some more punches that landed more solidly, even though she doubted it would inflict any real damage to someone, it was enough to cause the corners of her mouth to flick upwards in satisfaction. This would definitely come in handy when the situation required it.

"Yes, like that," he remarked and she could hear the pride lacing his voice. Or was she imagining it? Nevermind. A little positivity wouldn't hurt.

Biting her lip to keep her smile from growing into an obnoxiously wide grin, she refocused on the cadence of her hits.

"What are you doing at this time night, Ping? Aren't you supposed to be resting?"

Mulan stayed quiet. She didn't want Shang's pity. His job here wasn't to look after his little, helpless brother-in-law. His job here was to hone and train her into a formidable weapon on the battlefield.

Sensing Ping wasn't going to speak to him, Shang prodded further. "Are you mad at me?"

"I…I'm sorry Brother Shang, I am just… a little homesick." There was half-truth in that.

"Is this your first time away from home?" he asked, taking the liberty to sit next to him and reclining there, loosening his sash and rolling his robe sleeves up.

"Yes, Si… I mean, Brother Shang. My mother just passed away a few months ago, and I've come here unprepared. I know I am still young, weak and unskillful, but I…—"

"I understand," he said gently. And there was again, a rare, genuine smile tugging at his lips. Mulan could feel her own lips reciprocating the notion.

"I remember your mother, she was wise, poised and beautiful. Just like your sister." He said the words with a matter-of-fact tone; one that you might use to state that blood was red and the sky was blue; but his earnest honesty sent a fluttery feeling rippling through her.

Mulan could feel the tip of her toes tingling with happiness. Shang thinks I am beautiful? But the voice of her rationale pushed back the sudden outburst of giddiness. For goodness sake, Mulan, he was just trying to be diplomatic, you are his brother-in-law after all.

Shang let out another rare smile, perfectly unaware that his unconscious grace and the power of his words just unleashed an onslaught of conflicting emotions inside Mulan's chest.

"Where the hell is she?!!"
"Shhh….Calm down, Ling!" Chien-Po nearly slapped his meaty palm across Ling’s mouth to silence his furious tirade over their missing comrade. His venture to the toilet had been abandoned when he realized Mulan was missing. By the clean arrangement of her bed it was obvious she hadn't touched it, let alone slept on it, and it well past midnight.

"Chien-Po, the Huns may have kidnapped her!" That is plausible, right?

"But… but why?" Chien-Po didn't seem to understand Ling's logic. "Why would a pixie-cut soldier with a feminine stature be an item of interest to a Hun soldier anyway?"

Ling shrugged and threw his arms up in frustration. "Hell, I don't know! I just… I just… —"

"Look, we'll find her," Chien-Po resolved quickly, trying to calm his friend who was hyperventilating like a fish out of water. "Now please, just calm down… because someone may hear your… —"

"She is heading towards the clearing south of the forest," a voice stage whispered from a nearby tent entrance.

"Your Highness!" Both men fell on their knee.

"Don't worry. I've sent Captain Li to make sure she is fine," Shao Wei told them.

She! Did he say 'she'? Ling was about to point out the wrong gender the Prince had applied to Ping's name, but Chien-Po's question deflected his intention. "What are they doing this late at night?"

"Who knows," Shao Wei replied with a mischievous grin. Ling swore the Prince knew something they didn't—because there was a hint of sexual innuendo in the way he was smirking at them.

"Training perhaps?"

At the point of rendezvous Shao Wei had directed them to, Ling and Chien-Po exchanged a look as Captain Li and Ping gravitated towards each other. Accepting a man's offer for training may not be the most efficient method to 'lure and conquer' a man's heart, but it seemed to work like magic in Captain Li's case.

"So, this is what the Prince of Wei categorizes as training?"

"Don't you think Mulan is a little bit more than charmed by our Captain?" Chien-Po prompted without shifting his eyes.

"I know," Ling replied, whispering. Even from the reasonable distance where they stood, Ling could easily tell how flustered Mulan was when Captain Li touched her arms to correct her stance. No wonder she hasn't learned anything yet!

"Alas, she is married," Chien-Po piped in.

The statement wiped all traces of amusement from Ling's face. "I dare not say this to her, but I fear the retribution of her jealous husband should he find out."

From years of their friendship, Ling had learned that Mulan was many things, but disloyal was not one of them. And Mulan had never come across as a temptress or seductress either. She would be the last person on earth that he could imagine capable of having an extramarital affair. Thus, her
interaction with Captain Li was completely out of character. He felt like he was missing some vital information here.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" Chien-Po asked as he glanced in Mulan's direction, watching Shang easily dodge her uncoordinated punches.

"I don't think she will improve. Especially when she hasn't stopped staring at him like a beguile maiden looking at hot, bare-chested man."

"She is a maiden looking at hot, bare-chested man. And the bare-chested man is touching her."

"It's supposed to be a punch, not a touch. Besides, Mulan is no longer a maiden, she is married, remember?"

"But you wouldn't blush and smile when someone 'punched' you. Right?"

"No. No. Of course not."

But there was no denying the look in her eyes, Ling could immediately tell that it wasn't exactly a platonic look. There was quite a reasonable dose of genuine affection. Having a harmless crush on an incredibly attractive man was one thing, but falling madly in love with a man that was never going to look at her in the same way...

Well, that was just reckless.

"Ah, the beauty is finally waking up I see." Mulan squinted her eyes, directly towards the source of the voice while her hands tried to shield herself from the violent tickling that had disturbed her ever-so-short-slumber. "I believe you owe us a big explanation," Ling said, crossing his arms and giving her a chance to recollect her thoughts. "Consider me generous that I'm just tickling you when I am perfectly capable of pouring a bucket of cold water over you instead."

"What do you mean?" Mulan asked, rubbing her bleary eyes to restore her foggy vision.

Ling scoffed, feeling slightly betrayed that his best friend had chosen to keep a secret from him. "I believe you were spending the night with…—"

Suddenly, a familiar, unpleasant sensation stirred her stomach and Mulan raised her hand to stall her friend, dashing out of the tent in a hurry. She heard their rapid footfalls approaching as she retched and heaved convulsively.

"You seriously need to see a doctor," Ling pointed out, completely forgetting about the subject he had wanted to broach earlier.

"I have no time for that," Mulan replied, wiping her mouth with her sleeve ungracefully.

"Forget about the real battle. How can you train like this? And what if it gets worse?"

"It won't. I'll manage," Mulan dismissed Ling's rhetoric stubbornly.

But it was Chien-Po who suddenly interjected, a look of unease on his face. "Mulan…" he said, pulling her robe sleeve so she was only a few inches away from him. Mulan was about to rebuke him for calling her by her maiden name when he continued,"Have you… have you missed something this month?" he whispered gingerly.

"Missed something? Like what?" Mulan stared at her friend who chewed his lower lip anxiously.
She really didn't like the fearful look on his face.

Chien-Po gestured vaguely to his lower abdomen parts. "You know…" he trailed off. "Su told me about this thing women have, and the early symptoms of—"

"Oh dear ancestor," Ling cut him off and sucked in air sharply.

"Are you suggesting that she may be… pregnant?"

Chapter End Notes

And I'm sorry for the cliffhanger...

Review are adored, kudos and faves are cherished :-}
"But, I… How could it be…—?" Mulan sputtered. Her mind rack havoc with all the thoughts, the consequences, and the implication should she really was... pregnant.

"Excuse me?" Ling rolled his eyes. "You know where a baby comes from, don't you, my friend?" he patted her back with mock sympathy. "More importantly you know how it is made!"

Well, it really didn't take a genius to make an intelligent guess on it. All the symptoms were there, the fatigue, the unexplainable appetite change, the nausea…—

A serious knot appeared to have formed, causing her internal organs to clench in displeasure and she couldn't fathom why. Shouldn't she be happy she was carrying the Fa-Li future heir? Isn't this the child she was so desired? Would Shang finally saw her as a dutiful wife… more so, his equal? And, assuming if the baby were a boy, she would be extending General Li's and her father's legacy for another generation. She could even hear Grandma Fa cheering, "Ancestor be praised, we have descendant!" chant while dancing around the kitchen. But no… not right now. Disguising herself as a man was hard enough—imagine, trying to hide her pregnant belly would be… well, impossible!

"I…—" She finally registered Ling and Chien-Po who still stood there, wrinkling their brows and tilting their head. They could be her best of friends, friends whom she conceded everything about. Well, almost everything. But at the moment, her mind and emotions were all over the place, and she needed time and space to process… this. "I had to go," she said quickly and disappeared before her friends could stop her.

"I heard what happen," Mushu said from his hiding place inside the collar of her robe. "Your ancestors weren't joking when they said you had a reckless inclination. If you don't want to be pregnant you should…—Hey, you are not listening!" he scoffed grumpily when Mulan completely ignored his existence.

"Are you done?" Mulan sighed.

"On the brighter light, you have a husband, girl," he consoled. "You have a home to go to."

Does she? What was home without a family if it wasn't just a structure? And what was a family without love and respect? All she could find in her home was tyrannical mother-in-law and her emotionally absent husband.

Mushu had taken her silence as a sign of disapproval, so he went on. "You can't stay here, Mulan.
Whether you like it or not. It's impossible. Besides, you don't want these people mistaken you for Chien-Po when they send you home."

If that was a joke, it wasn't at all funny. Not at her current predicament it wasn't. She couldn't risk losing an innocent soul at the expense of her mission. But could she really afford to abort her mission? In her mind, she imagined Shang's infuriated reaction if she revealed her disguise and the impending doom that awaited her at home when Li Yue, her mother-in-law, found out where she had been.

And yet, these were the easy worries, for neither Shang nor Li-Yue had ever cared about her. Truly. It was her father's disappointed face that would crush her defence to powder.

How would he react if he knew her foolish disguise? She was supposed to be at the Li's home, becoming an exemplary wife that brought honour to the Fa, and here she was - a terrible soldier even so terrible daughter. Mulan sighed dejectedly. She wasn't looking forward to having that hard conversation with her father anytime soon.

"Thanks for the cheerful reminder, Mushu."

Next morning came. Golden light diffused through the membrane of mist through the encampment. Mushu rubbed his bleary eyes before realising that almost the entire resident of the tent was gone and all their bed were vacated.

"Mulan, Girl! Wake up!" the Dragon hollered for the umpteenth time.

"Can you give me another five minutes?" came Mulan's sleepy reply.

"You have to wake up! You have Captain Handsome to impress, remember?!"

"Oh!" Her eyes jolted open and she leapt out of her bed like being possessed. She frantically grabbed her training clothes, ignoring his lecture about the importance of breakfast and simply mouthing "I have no time for that".

"Well, you would if you wake up earlier", Mushu grumbled. "Now now… remember, don't overexert yourself. Until you see the midwife… you shouldn't….—"

"Don't worry Mushu; I'm a big girl."

"Yeah yeah… things have been simpler when you were small," he tutted when Mulan found out she had worn her training trousers backwards.

A frigid wind blew from the tent entrance causing her to shiver. "Don't forget to wear one extra layer of clothing, the autumn coming to an end and….—"

"Mushu, I say I'm a big girl."

Mushu bit his lips. "Right you are."

Mushu's first impression of Shang— he stroke as someone who would not tolerate tardiness. But above all, he didn't understand why Mulan was so desperate to impress her husband: both as a man or a woman. Perhaps this was the way they made their relationship worked? Who knows.

Have you heard the phrase "opposites attract"? That was the first thing came to Mushu's mind when he saw Shang and Mulan. They were like oil and water. Mulan was clever, beguiling and
creative (with a slight maverick inclination to be perfectly honest). She was like fireworks, exciting and unpredictable. And Shang… he may be good looking, but he was as interesting as rice porridge. For the record, Mushu didn't find porridge particularly exciting. Shang was the most monotonous, dreary creature Mushu had ever seen. The things he said seemed all to be predictable and repetitive, and his reaction whether he was excited, happy or sad seemed to be always... tepid and bland.

And here he was, secretly watching Shang who was condescendingly barking the same order for hundredth time, yet, Mulan stared at him like he was the answer to all her prayer.

"Girl, you have to stop staring at him and queue for breakfast. Otherwise, you'll be left with none!" chastised the Dragon. Mulan realised she had been caught immediately tore her eyes from the glimpse of Shang who already started yelling instruction for the recruits to begin their warm up.

"I'm not staring at him! I'm thinking!"

"Really?" Mushu scoffed, half annoyed and half amused. "Just admit it. Captain Handsome is quite pleasant to look at. You don't have to feel bad to confess that you fancy him. He is yours, you know."

"It's not like I like him," she denied, slipping into her training robe. "I was forced to marry him,"

"You don't?" Mushu called out incredulously; his mouth fell into a dramatic 'o' shape. "And you persisted when you tell me you have a perfectly happy, loving marriage?"

"Our marriage is balanced and harmonious," she defended, "Besides, love isn't an essential ingredient in marriage. Shang and I are always civil to each other," which everyone knew was a big fat lie considering how they spent their first night as a married couple was by doing a sword fight.

"Right right—I totally believe you," Mushu rebutted sarcastically. He wanted to debate Mulan's stubborn reply, but he decided there was a better time for having such in-depth discussion.

"Ok, whatever. Now quick, let's go."

She was about to skip her breakfast when her stomach voiced its disapproval, especially after a night with very little food. Thankfully no sign of nausea on the horizon, so she slipped into the kitchen and greeted with the sight of deserted breakfast tent—save it for Chef Zhang who was washing the dishes. Just then, from the tent entrance, Mushu caught a glimpse of Shang abandoning his robes before leading the warm-up drill.

"Does he… always take off his shirt on every occasion?" Mushu said, tilting his head conspicuously to Shang's direction, right when he executed a particular movement that enhanced the tension of the fabric around his ass.

"Too hot maybe," Mulan commented nonchalantly, paying extra attention to the hard planes of Shang's chest.

"Too… What?"

And she seemed to realise underlying innuendo she implied and corrected. "When I say hot—I mean temperature hot, not figurative hot."
"I can see that," Mushu smirked mischievously, tapping his claw on his chin. "But you did think he is figuratively hot as well, right? I can tell from the way you can't stop calling him hot."

"Not again..." she moaned, but Mushu babbled on. "Mulan, my powers are beyond your mortal imagination. For instance, my eyes can see straight through your armor.—" His eyes moved towards her chest causing her to gasp, pulling whatever material she could find to cover the spot.

"Mushu!" She smacked him. The dragon made a distressed sound of shock.

"Jeez, I mean I can see right through your heart!" he said, rubbing the sore spot. Mulan glared at him. "Fine...fine, sorry. I was just teasing you. Ok, now quick, or Captain Shirtless will order you to clean the horses for being late again."

"Don't call him that, you can lose your head," she rebuked.

"Hey, I am a mighty deity. I can call my subject whatever I like," he chuckled. "Oh, this training could be so much fun after all," he chimed excitedly while his claws busy dispensing condiment into the porridge.

"Mushu..." she pleaded. "I know no one else can hear or see you, but, can you stop talking for a minute?" She already sat on the table and was ready to divulge into her breakfast as quick as she could but Mushu's constant babbling made her lost track of the situation.

Mulan, of course, ignored Mulan's wish, instead presenting the bowl of porridge decorated with eggs and a soya sauce. "I believe the word you are searching for is 'thank' and 'you'."

Chien-Po, can you now go and get some food supplies from the nearby market?" ordered Chef Zhang as he entered the tent where the recruits congregated.

After the initial discussion, Chien-Po and Ling had crafted a plan that discreetly would allow Mulan to go out of the encampment to see a healer for a checkup.

"I'm sorry Chef, I... —" Chien-Po faked an erratic cough. "I'm not feeling very well. But Ping is willing to take my errands." It was a bad lie, for ailment had almost no place in Chien-Po overtly-nourished body, but what's important was everyone else believed him.

"May I come with him, Chef?" prompted Ling. "I can help him with some heavy stuff that he couldn't carry." Mulan rolled her eyes and glared at him. The plan was for her to go alone but Ling seemed to have a different idea.

"I am quite capable of handling this myself, Sir," she addressed Chef Zhang. Despite her awareness of lack of benefit in strength department compared to her male counterparts, Mulan disliked some sexist remark and attitude that suggested that she was a liability to the team.

Ling exhaled at her punctuated answer. "I was only trying to help," he whispered to her. Seemed like his definition of "help" require a significant adjustment. "Remember...that?" he glared at Mulan's still flat belly and pursed his lips in response to her verbal castigation. "Heavy things aren't good for the...—" he stopped himself when he realised Chef Zhang was closely watching their exchange.

Mulan only replied by breathing loudly through her nose and Chef Zhang guffawed at the innocent banter, oblivious to the hidden meaning of their conversation.

"Appreciate your generous offer, Ling, but Ping won't be carrying those alone. We are feeding a
regiment, not a family," he snorted ungracefully between chuckle. "I'd say Khan is more useful than you right now, but if you wish, you can keep Ping accompany."

"Oh, thank you, Sir!"

Ling grinned at her cockily. Mulan knew the man wouldn't just give up the fight so she could let another exasperated sigh.

Okay, Ling could be annoying as hell, but deep down she knew her best friend was mortally worried for her. And sometimes she would have to thank the gods for a stubborn friend like Ling because, yes, sometimes she needed it. However, right now, she just wanted to be alone. She wanted to be alone when the midwife delivered the "bad" news, so she could cry or could laugh deliriously, scream or do other unreasonable behaviours without anyone questioning her logic.

But perhaps alone wasn't what she needed.

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Minutes later, the two recruits descended towards the horse stable to procure Khan and a wagon. Ling jotted down the list that Chien-Po dictated and compiled into a list of things to buy.

As they turned down one of the winding cobblestone roads and finally into one quiet alleyway far from the main street, standing in front of them was a small opening with a wooden sign plastered across the top. "Ms. Chua, Healer and Herbalist."

There was hardly words between them during the entire journey. Ling figured that Mulan perhaps wanted some quiet time to confront her thoughts. But right then when he saw his friend's afflicted face, he couldn't help but to place his hand on her shoulder in a silent pledge. *Whatever the outcome, I am here.*

He realised this wasn't the right time to be judgemental. These couple of weeks had laden Mulan with enough duress, and now she was faced with the bitter dilemma of choosing between her baby or her family honour.

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To say she was anxious was an understatement. As soon as Ling left, in the empty waiting room she felt a wave anxiety of what she was about to face. Fear that stroke her hardest left her off guard, overwhelmed her with its enormity.

"What are your symptoms?" asked the old woman who presumably Ms. Chua.

Mulan rattled off the things she was feeling while Ms. Chua told her to lay down on the examination table.

"So, you think you might be pregnant?" she asked again after she quizzed Mulan on her symptoms. She had a feel of Mulan's abdomen and recorded her vitals.

It was clear that Mulan was unspeakably tense that no words seemed to be able to answer a very simple question.

"Oh, unexpected I see," the old woman added to the silence, as he began mixing and grinding herbs on the bowl.

*Unwanted* may be the right word.

Thankfully, the old woman wasn't nosy enough to ask about why she was dressed in a man's outfit.
"Don't you use any form of birth control dear?" she said while busying herself grinding some herbal concoction.

Birth control, if such things weren't a myth in this era, had been largely limited to 'pull out and pray,' which had not boasted the best success rate and depended considerably on the willingness of obviously unwilling men. And of course, there was some horrible smelling tea that many women believed to prevent procreation to which Mulan had seen was nothing but pointless torture.

"No," she answered, not bothering to cover the rueful edge on her tone. She was dreading the consequences. Nine-month from now, she would become a mother. Was she even ready for this? She had just learned to be a wife, which she had failed miserably, and now how was she supposed to be a mother? To raise a child, to know how to protect it and love it?

"I initially thought it was something I ate," Mulan said tremulously. "But, I have been missing my period...so I...—"

Ms. Chua nodded understandingly.

Other women would be joyful, no doubt. Perhaps thinking of a sweet, but overly complicated way to deliver the delightful message to their husband, and imagining their husband would sweep them into his arms, peppered her face, her abdomen with kisses wet with tears of pure unadulterated joy.

But a child wasn't what Mulan had wished for.

She had wished for peace, so her father would be allowed to retire at home.

She wished her mother was still here. Alive. A mother that had been years becoming her rock. Her mother, with her calm smile and Chinese efficiency, who brew her tea and fetched warm towel—still, a classic triumph—and sat with her. Her mother with her practical wisdom and her bright smile that seemed capable of calming a treacherous sea.

The old woman seemed to read her mind well and when Mulan had calmed enough to hear it, she said, "Not everyone is meant to be a mother, I'll not lie to you." And she took her hand in her own, and continued soothingly, "But be not fearful, child. All you have to do is believe that you can do it," she gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "A child is a gift," she said with her warm, wrinkly smile, and wisdom that weaved on her aged skin. "He or she will make love stronger, days shorter, nights longer, saving smaller, a home happier, clothes shabbier, the past forgotten....and the future worth living for."

Mulan had stepped out of the examination room to collect her own urine sample that apparently required by Ms. Chua for further test. She could hear Ms. Chua was attending to someone else when she returned, so Mulan propped herself on the bench in the waiting room to wait for her turn. A woman, perhaps the same age as her, cradling something noisy and wriggly between her arms.

It soon became apparent it was a baby, who at the moment waving his angry fist demanding his will to be fulfilled.

"I know, I know," the young woman murmured as her baby's wails started to gain in volume. She settled her baby in her arms, discreetly exposed her breast and pressed the nipple into his mouth. Her son winced first then started to suck hungrily as soon as the first drop of milk touched his tongue.

And a few moments after, a young man in soldiers outfit, burst into the room.
"Here you are," he said, smiling down at the baby who didn't even bother to notice his father's presence. "Oh, Mei here is your lunch," the man told his wife, pulling two warm buns from his sack. "Char siew bun, your favourite."

"Oh thank you! By the way, can you give me his bib? Front pocket," his wife said distractedly. "There is also a white burp cloth somewhere."

The man obligated and carefully placed the small square of fabric underneath his son's chin then the cloth on his wife's lap. After the few first seconds of rapid suckling, the baby settled to a more leisurely pace, completely oblivious of his attentive parents who were observing him carefully.

"Feeling better?" the young woman cooed to the baby. There was something deeply satisfying to be able to appease your child and know you were giving him exactly what he needed, and it always was a special moment to watch the way a baby would gradually relax, his eyes first staring back at her then slowly drifting closed every now and then in apparent milk bliss.

"I think it's my turn now," her husband stretched his hands.

"It's funny to hear that comes from you, Liu Kang. A couple of weeks ago you were terrified of holding him. You know that he can't even bite you, he doesn't have any teeth yet," she goaded but handing over the sleepy baby into her husband's arm. "A man who can put down a Hun soldier is afraid of a baby. Unbelievable."

"Don't try to divert the conversation," the man replied in faux-annoyance, but the smile he had as he welcomed the sleepy baby in his arms was priceless.

"Here, eat your lunch before they get cold," he told his wife between rocking on his toe and humming some lullaby.

"He has to be burped," the young mother warned her husband.

"Yeah well, I'm a guy, I know all about burps."

She waited until her husband's shoulder was covered with the burp cloth before handing him their son.

"Woah. You're getting heavy, Son," the young man started to gently pat his son's back, while his wife seemed to stare, mesmerized for a few seconds, drinking the tender moment between two most important men in her life.

"I'll leave one for you. You haven't eaten since morning," the woman remarked while taking a large bite of her bun. She kept one of the buns back into the sackcloth for her husband. "Crazy how something as simple as having lunch now seemed like a special treat," she added. Uncaring for her womanly decorum, she polished her lunch in record time.

"Not that I would change it for anything in the world," her husband beamed to their son. "He's growing up nicely, isn't he? You'll be a strong boy that protects your sister."

"Wait…—what?" the woman paused, her eyebrows reaching her hairline, and a loud burp suddenly erupted from their boy interrupted the moment.

"Atta boy! Way to go!"

The woman laughed at the ridiculous pride her husband was showing before waving apologetically at Mulan who was caught watching in surprise as well.
"He is just five months old and you already think about the next one?" the young woman reprimanded her husband, "I still yet to lose all the baby fat from this pregnancy and I…—" she groaned as her palms rested on the curvy flesh of her lower abdomen. No matter how many pots of slimming tea she would drink, those few extra pounds didn't want to leave. Sometimes a woman just needed a little bit of time to accept that her stomach would never be flawless anymore—a lump of excess skin now clearly visible even though she knew it would eventually shrink. The stretch marks would hopefully follow suit.

"My love, listen. Your curves are there because you carried our child and gave him life. All I see when I look at them is how lucky I am that we get to share that. You and I are finally where we were supposed to be. They're as pretty as you in my eyes. And God knows I find you stunning, more so right now."

It was so stupidly sweet that Mulan's heart ached, which was ridiculous because they were strangers and people have babies every day and there was no reason for her eyes to swell with tears.

"Hold on," the man frowned as he sniffed the air. "Oh, awesome! Your son pooped so… you can have him back."

"Oh great, so now he is my son?" his wife rolled her eyes at him, before coming out of the waiting room with their baby, muttering something like."How can something so small poop so much?"

Her gaze settles upon the young man who stood by the door, his eyes watching the glimpse of his wife and son, and grinning like he was insane. Her heart skips a beat all over again as she wondered:

_A child will make love stronger.._.

A strange kind of fearful euphoria building deep inside of her. Could she hope? Would this child earn her way into Shang's iron heart?

Her own mother told her, her father was cold and distant to begin with. Until one day in spring when the plum blossom scent was hanging in the air—she was born in the early hours of twilight, entering the world with a loud scream. Fa Mulan weighed not more than a bag of rice, and in her mother's entirely objective opinion and despite her less favourable gender in Chinese society, she was the most perfect child in existence.

She was their gift.

Fa Mulan may not born of love, but she had brought so much love into her parent's life.

And so would her baby.

She felt warm tears cruising down her cheeks, in which she hastily swept away with the back of her hand.

"Excuse me," suddenly the young man, with half-eaten bread bun, reached out his hand with a linen cloth. "It may have milk stains, but I guarantee you it's clean."

Mulan blamed her tears on the pregnancy. And Mr. Liu was kind enough not to correct her.

Ling came to the establishment an hour later to find the place was filled with women and their relatives.
"Ling! Over here!"

Her best friend looked mildly surprised at how composed she was. She went in with a great deal amount of trepidation and came out as calm as a monk after hundred years of meditation.

"You have to pee on a bag of barley?" Ling commented dumbly after Mulan told him of the procedure and showed him a sack of grain she got to bring home.

"How could a bag of barley tell you if you are pregnant or not?" he whispered with a truly adorably awkward grimace when another patient congratulated him with zealous handshake and babbled a train of tips for expectant father—completely ignoring the fact that Ms. Chua had told them Mulan's pregnancy wasn't confirmed yet. But no one could blame them for the false assumption. Ling was the man that took someone else's presumably pregnant woman to see a midwife. But he quickly returned to the point he couldn't seem to move past. "But seriously, how could a bag of grain tell you?"

"It apparently could. If it grows, it means there is a baby inside," another patient, a woman carrying a toddler chimed in. She bit her lips to contain her smile when Ling's brows knotted incredulously. "You can try if you want." A trickle of light amusement radiated on her face when Ling's jaw dropped comically as she finished her sentence.

"That's…—no way!"

"You'll be surprised if it grew," Mulan entreated cheekily, hiding her smile behind a concealing hand when Ling's eyes bugged out.

Not knowing how to retaliate, Ling only let a long-suffering sigh. "And I wistfully thought you are the one who needed a moral support. I guess I was wrong," he said with a great amount of irritation.

"I'm sorry, OK? Old habits die hard," she chuckled.

"Good, I am glad you are feeling better," Ling deadpanned. "Too bad, there is no way this grain told us the gender. I need to know if I'm going to be Uncle Ling, Protector of Dainty Princess, or Uncle Ling, the Kung Fu coach."

Their friendly argument was interrupted when a woman, who was clearly in labour, was ushered into the premises. The wife was cool calm and radiant, a glorious force, even through contraction pain. Her husband, however, was a nervous, anxious, fainting wreck who was about to pass out anytime.

"Now," Ling said, looking like he had seen a ghost. "I would never envy any married men," he said, as the attention shifted and the woman's labour wail started to gain in volume. "I can understand why some men find the job as a eunuch highly appealing."

Mulan smiled indulgently at him. Her child would love Uncle Ling, she thought.

They resumed their shopping trip decoy right after visiting the healer.

As they turned down one of the winding cobblestone roads, they found an open shop that boasts a storefront of fresh fruit and vegetables, an orchestra of colour and rejuvenating fragrance of tangerines.

*The Mighty Dragon*, the sign proclaims in Mandarin, and then in smaller print, in both Hokkien and
The bell over the door chimed merrily as they stepped over the threshold, and Mulan found herself and Ling were the only patron in the store.

"Be with you in just a second!" a female voice shouted from the back of the store, in an accent that sounds extremely classy, muffled slightly by the rustling of something that sounded like boxes being shuffled about, and so Mulan took this time to appraise the store. It's a pleasant place, an array of freshly harvested cherry blossom on one corner among crates of vegetables, watermelon, tangerine and cherries, with enough light from the sales windows to stop it from becoming dull.

But she couldn't help but notice a stack of empty crates, for all that it did feature a display of abnormally vacant shelf, reflecting the difficult time the country currently had to endure.

"Sorry about that," the voice said from behind her, clearer now, and as she and Ling started to turn towards it.

The lady at the desk greeted them with a beatific smile. She was tall and willowy, with long, naturally waving raven hair that was currently cascading down her back. Her skin was porcelain smooth, free from blemishes. She seemed to be what many men often described as a perfect courting material. In short, she was beautiful, definitely way too beautiful to be a vegetable seller in a wet market.

"May I help you, gentleman?" she asked primly. The scent of expensive cologne filled the air making Mulan felt lightheaded. Even worse, Ling looked like he could faint anytime.

"We need a dozen of pumpkin," Mulan said, her eyes briefly jumped on Ling to make sure he wasn't suddenly dropped unconscious.

She swept a cursory glance to the crate behind her. "I'm afraid we are running out of pumpkins."

"What's next to the watermelon, isn't that… pumpkin?" Mulan pointed out.

"This?" the girl pointed at a pile of daffodil bulbs.

"No, next to it," Mulan directed.

She moved her hands before checking for their approval again.

"Yes," Mulan said once her finger hovered on the spoken vegetables. "We need twelve of those." Mulan stuck out of her finger and grabbed Ling's hand to show the extra two. "Could you work the best price for us? Every little discount will help."

"I may have to call my uncle," the girl informed them before disappearing behind the door.

"Is it just me, or I find it creepy we met a vegetable seller who seems to lack proficiency in identifying the difference between a fruit and a flower?" Mulan whispered suspiciously.

"Nevermind that, I am sure the father will be as charming," Ling replied dazedly.

But the man who appeared to greet them was remotely far from warm grin and gregarious continence. In fact, he had snappy, irritable attitude that Mulan sure could be damaging to his business.

"What do you want?"
"Twelve...er—pumpkin, Sir," Mulan pointed out.

"Maybe we should've stick with the usual vendor," Mulan mused when the man seemed to be busy counting his stock and scribbling something on the paper.

"No way, the previous vendor was selling us a pumpkin a size of my thumb! How can that feed the entire regiment?" Ling disapproved, right when the man gruffly shoved the paper on his face. "Here is the bill."

"This is hardly fit the budget," Mulan exasperated, looking at the list and comparing all the quoted prices. "Are you sure we can't negotiate a better price, Sir? This is for the soldiers."

"This is already the best offer I can provide. The food is scarce now. If you want to haggle the price just go elsewhere," the man snapped.

The girl who had been entirely silent, cleared her throat, and with her softest voice purred, "Uncle Yin, can I have a word with you for a moment?"

The man steeled, suddenly bit his lips and rubbing the back of his neck. There was a strange, powerful authority came from the girl as she demurely fiddled with the end of her braids and blinked in faux-innocence, "We'll be right back with you in a moment."

And Mulan wasn't at all surprised when they got discounted price of what they need and more.

"I met a girl today!" announced Ling proudly as they were peeling potatoes and pumpkin.

Chien-Po's mouth fell open, looking back at Mulan for confirmation and she paid him with an approving wink.

"No way...!" he wondered aloud, though he rubbed his hands in excitement and scooted closer. "Tell me about it!"

"She even gave me a discount!" bragged Ling proudly.

"She gave us a discount," Mulan corrected.

"Still, quite an accomplishment."

"I saw heart coming out of his eyes and all sappy," Mulan smirked at him. "Prepare to get jobless Chien-Po."

"With pleasure," he smiled broadly. Chef Zhang entered the tent and asking Fa Ping to help him making the fire, so after excusing herself, Mulan went off.

"So, how's the visit?" Chien-Po asked quietly when Mulan had disappeared from view.

"Apparently not confirmed yet," Ling said carefully after scanning over his shoulder making sure no eavesdropper around. "The old woman told her to wee on a handful of barley."

"Seriously? Are you sure you've seen a healer and not a dodgy soothsayer...or... witch doctor... —?"

"No," Ling replied. "I am sure she is in good hands. I've asked a few other patients."

"So when will we know?" Chien-Po asked.
"We will have to wait for another two or three weeks. But, I am quite positive. The midwife said all the symptoms were there," Ling explained.

"I bet she won't stop training, not until she knew for sure that she is preg...—," Chien-Po shook his head, gazing over the sight of their captain who was diligently doing a hundred press-up while waiting for dinner time. "I'm just worried something may happen before that. I just can't see Mulan finally came clean to Captain Li."

"You know it is a death sentence for smuggling a woman in here let alone a woman who was pretending to be a man, right?" Ling said in matter-of-factly tone.

"I know. But...however strict and ruthless, Captain Li is a good man. I doubt he is going to execute a woman with a child, right?" Chien-Po stated his reasoning. "It's just.... I don't see Mulan would ever explain her situation to Captain Li."

"Well," Ling said resolutely. "If she won't tell him—Then, I will."
Something that I can never have

Chapter Notes

Apology for any mistakes, this chapter is not beta-ed yet.

Ting Ting camped out on the kitchen, facing the veranda, painting her toenails while Tian was braiding her hair and serenading a tune.

"According to this, I'll marry a warrior," Ting Ting announced, alternating between sweeping the brush of vermilion hue on her nails and turning the page of the latest astrological prediction published by a famous astrologer.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah."

"Poor guy. He would have to cook, washes the dish and work super hard, so you can spend the time to do your nail and shopping," Tian replied with a glint of amusement. "Not to mention he would have to foot my salary too."

Ting Ting was not in the mood to banter as she did not engage with the retort as she usually did. Ignoring Tian's mock, she went on. "It says that this week will be my auspicious week to find lo...—"

"Hold on that thought," Tian said, jumping into her feet when she heard the familiar chime of the bell indicating someone had entered into the front shop. She pushed her head to take a peek between the curtain and said with an excited squeal, "It's the gentleman in armour that came last week! I bet he is coming for you; I swear I saw hearts coming out of his eyes when he...—"

"Shush, Tian!"

The two of them headed towards the front shop. As soon as hearing their footstep, the soldier snapped into attention.

"Morning, Ladies," he said, a little bit breathlessly. And from his stature, he couldn't be more than a few years older than her. He couldn't be categorised as handsome, but still attractive and his smile...well, it was kind of cute.

"Yes, how can we help?" Tian said primly. Next to her, Ting Ting gracefully flicked her hair off her shoulder, inviting all attention towards the pale column of her neck. Tian bit a grin when she saw the soldier's eyes darkened as they travelled up her collarbone.

"Do you know how to kill infatuation?" Tian whispered loudly into Ting Ting's ears. "Next time I'll come here with a cannon."

Realizing Tian's sarcastic retort, the soldier blinked and rubbed his eyes as though he was just woken up from a serious coma. "I...uh, I come to buy more pumpkin," he said, grinning awkwardly towards them.
"Are you sure you are here for the pumpkin?" Tian said in faux seriousness. "Not...anything else? Or shall I say... anyone... else?"

The soldier gasped, looking flustered and terrified like a little child being caught red-handed for stealing sweets. "I...—"

"Save your breath soldier. We all knew," Tian said between her laugh and batted her eyes towards Ting Ting in a manner she could only describe as suggestive. "I shall leave you two to deal with some... pumpkin business," Tian said with a mischievous grin.

"One more word and you can kiss your payday goodbye," Ting Ting hissed with fake outrage as Tian made her exit with a hysterical laugh.

"Sorry about my friend. By the way, I am Ting Ting," she said politely.

"Oh, uh... I am Ling. Such a...uh... pretty name," he stuttered, standing mesmerised. His eyes glazed over as though he suddenly slipped into a particularly pleasant daydream.

"Very...very pretty nail you have there," Ling said, twisting the hem of his training robe.

Ting Ting could only smile. Ling was so nervous it was acutely adorable. "Oh, thanks! You are the first one to notice."

"Am I?"

"Yes," Ting Ting said.

"Well... red is my favourite colour," he said quietly. "It's hard not to notice."

"I like red too."

"Really? What a coincidence!" He was positively beaming up at her as he spoke.

Feeling emboldened, Ting Ting went on and proposed. "I know this kind of forward for a lady to ask this, considering we just met a handful of time. But if you are free, would you like to join me for a cup of tea?"

Although Ling had politely implied that he was more than capable loading the pumpkin into his cart himself, Ting Ting still made an effort to assist him.

"So, here is the pumpkin. Is your encampment far from here? Because this they are quite heavy to car...—"

Their pleasantries were interrupted by a whirlwind of dust, clothes, and dark hair streaking into her shop, missing the garlands of onion and a crate of eggs by only mere centimetres.

"Please tell me if he is gone!" the man—though really, hardly more than a boy—said, thankfully managing to a stop, albeit a little on the tipsy side. He hid behind Ling, as though he was avoiding something... or perhaps someone.

Ling ignored the boy's plea. "Ping, what did I say about...?"

After making sure whoever in pursuit of him was not in view, the boy went out from behind him, sheepishly smiling. "Uh, sorry... am I interrupting something?"
"What do you think?" Ling said, crossing his arms and tapping one of his feet on the ground.

A trickle of light amusement running through her at Ling's long-suffering tone. Earlier, Ling had a chance to tell her a story about the brutal training he went through before facing the battlefront. He told her about the food ration, the strict schedule, the inhumane amount of physical exercise. There was nothing pleasant about it. However, during this time of trial, Ling had a handful of friends who kept him standing on his toes. Chien-Po and Chef Zhang to name a few. And there was Ping, his best friend, who accidentally provoked the entire battalion into a fighting frenzy.

"Call me Ting Ting," she offered pleasantly to the boy, and though she already knows the answer, civility is of vital importance in a first impression, "And you are…?"

"...Fa Ping!" he said with an adorable, lopsided grin.

Ping had lost one of his shoes, his man bun half loose, and traces of soot covering part of his face. "People call me Ping," he said between heave and brushing his soothed forehead, turning to Ling whose eyes comically bugged out from their sockets.

"Sorry, I know I shouldn't run but… there is a very large, burly man and his toes..—" Ping looked around and grinned smugly. "I think he lost me."

"Ping, save it," Ling interrupted with a sigh, and Ting Ting's amusement only grew at Ling's ultra-dramatic eye-roll.

"Pleased to meet you, Ping," she said, smiling. "You seems to be very young to be a soldier. How old are you?"

Ping slapped his own chest, coughed a few time before producing the most unconvincing masculine falsetto she ever heard. "Fourteen this year, Miss," he said, posture exuding false confidence.

Ling cleared his throat to invite everyone's attention. "As we were discussing, Ping, I am taking Miss Ting Ting out for a drink, just ten minutes…"

"I can handle the rest of the list," the boy chipped in quickly. He might be clumsy but was clever enough to conclude this "tea party" was more than a friendly social call. And most importantly, he wasn't invited.

"Okay, so you need to go and see Mr. Ping, the potter. Please double check the number of cups and make sure no crack in each one of them," Ling reminded as he gave the boy some money. "...And try not to burn and crash into anything while I'm gone," Ling said, sparing a look that Ting Ting could only describe as an exasperated big brother over his shoulder, which the boy returned with a half-apologetic, half-defensive.

"Look, Chi-Fu's tent was just the one time!" and he tripped on Ling's shoes, nearly fell back into one of the empty crates if Ling's astounding reflexes didn't catch him.

Ting Ting felt her smile grow only incrementally larger. She rather imagined it had been more than one time.

"You two go have fun," Ping threw a cheeky wink at them. "...And Ling, make sure the lady didn't have to pay," he added cheerfully, slapping a teasing hand down on Ling's shoulder as he exited.

Ting Ting thought she was doing quite well at battling down the laugh that wanted to escape her throat.
Then, there was a crash, and a yelp, followed by an angry yell, and Ling's exasperated, "Ping, what did I just say?!" echoed out from the room.

Ting Ting lost her valiant fight and succumbed to her mirth.

This had become a routine for a couple of weeks to come—Ling and Ping coming to town to do their errands and then Ting Ting would invite them for tea. Ping's answer had always been the same though. He said he hated tea and the smell of chamomile made him feel nauseous.

"See you two later at five," Ping said.

Ting Ting watched until Ping's petite figure swallowed among the mass of people doing their business in the market square and blended in into indistinguishable form. "He is an interesting chap," she said, tongue only partially in cheek as they head into the tea house.

Ling, in turn, took the opportunity to tear his eyes away from her face, because she just indeed noticed him staring, "The horse cart he totalled certainly disagreed. Our captain even suspected the enemy sent him to jeopardize us from the inside."

"Really?" Ting Ting said. He is undeniably handsome when blushing, she thought to herself. "But what can they do to him? Put him in jail so he stopped harming anyone?"

"D'aww..." Tian said from behind them. She had agreed to join them but prefer to sit by the porch, claiming she liked the scent of cold, fresh air. Ting Ting knew this wasn't true, but played along because Ling didn't know who she or Tian was just yet. "Ping is too cute for a jail."

Minutes later, they sat at the tea house, on the corner table, hands cradling matching little ceramic china, the steam of oolong wafted from them.

Then, Ling told a story about his embarrassing experience of losing a couple of teeth during training and his regret for cutting gym. The conversation drifted to the highlight of his rather poor sporting career, joining the village Chinese Football club only to got his shin fractured a week after.

Ting Ting continued to find it endlessly amusing. Ling was a great storyteller.

"So, when you get to know Ping?"

Ling leaned back with a deep exhale and a sentimental smile before he began.

He and Ping were childhood friends. They had a great age gap, but for the record, Ping always owned the latest gadget from Chang'an, his father would bring him when he returned. It only helped that Ping's house geographically laid right next to his. The last time he saw Ping was when the lad turned ten when he left the village and moved elsewhere with his parents.

They reunited as strangers, as men with stories and secret of their own. And as a man, Ling's life and concern were remotely different from Ping who was barely a teenager. But war had a strange ability to make family out of strangers, brothers out of friends, and after all, they'd been through together these couple of weeks, Ping was probably his best of friend and so he let himself be drawn back into this friendship.

Ling didn't say much about Ping's current family situation other than the reason why the young
man had decided to join the battalion in place of his elderly father—a story that she found deeply heart moving.

Ping didn't come across as how a soldier should look like, in fact pretty would be the right word to describe how he looked. Pretty Ping. And for whatever reason, she felt his voice somehow unnaturally low, almost like her after eating too much deep fried stuff the night before.

She knew Ling notice it too, but he was too much of a gentleman to mention it.

Then Ling told her about his training days, the endless hikes, the aiming practice, sword fighting lesson….and what expected of him when the training ended. It was hard not to think that he, and hundreds of other soldiers alike, were crafted into becoming a weapon of destruction.

And there was silence.

"I hate war," Ting Ting admitted finally. She truly meant every word, but he didn't expect Ling to understand the depth of it. Of course, the man didn't know who she really was. "I wish for peace. I am tired of hearing people killing each other for nothing. Don't get me wrong, I am grateful for soldiers, but I don't see how violence could solve anything."

Ling took a slow swig of his tea as though he was thinking.

"No soldier delight in war," he replied with unexpected seriousness, but there was no ire in his tone. "We were trained for it, yes, it is not war that had fueled us. It is for protection."

And after hearing such wisdom, she has no room for anything in her heart but…admiration.

"You're a good man, Ling. I know that."

And then, Ling twined his fingers together and then, to look up to her, with a pragmatic air, she found no way she could take her hand back.

"Once a great war strategist told me: True soldiers fight not because what they hate is in front of them, but rather because what they love….is behind them," Ling explained, with the most exquisite smile she couldn't help but to return.

...because what they love is behind them.

Tian was right, this week's horoscope seemed to be quite accurate. Ting Ting knew she could only hope.

"So….You fancy the lanky one?" Tian asked her with a hushed tone when they retreated back into the shop. She definitely noticed the giddy smile on Ting Ting's face as she cradled a small bouquet of osmanthus Ling had shyly given as they parted.

"Who's his name again? Ling...is it not?" Again Ting Ting didn't answer straight away. Her mind was drifted into the tea house where Ling...—"

"Earth to Ting Ting," Tian snapped her finger.

"W—what?"

"Yes, you...—," Tian repeated, jabbing her finger to Ting Ting's chest. "You like that Ling guy. I
"Who? Me? Fancy him? Ack. No," Ting Ting denied, trying to calm her racing heart that seemed to rebel in every reference of Ling's name.

Tian rolled her eyes. "Your blushing face said otherwise."

"Who is blushing?!" Ting Ting said with faux innocence. "We are…. We are just friends. We just met. I hardly know him!"

"Friends who hold hands and look into each other eyes," Tian snorted.

"He didn't hold my hand! He...he accidentally touched it. He thought it was his chopsticks!" Ting Ting said lamely.

"Oh, come on!" Tian snickered. "You don't use chopsticks to drink tea. I swear I can hear your heart pounding from out there."

Ting Ting shrunk at her seat, and Tian smiled. "But fear not. I think the sentiment is mutual," she said in a hushed tone.

"People have meaningless crushes all the time," Ting Ting replied. The worst feeling in the world was when you liked someone... and turned out he was just having an empty fling—superficial sense of admiration, nothing more.

Tian smiled and bid Ting Ting to follow her into her bedroom and shut the door behind them.

"He can barely speak to you. All he does was staring. And I just can see the stupefied affection spilling from his eyes. It definitely not just a meaningless crush."

"But many men in the court looked at me that way!"

"Many men who tried to betroth you knew you are an affluent royalty, but this guy… all he knew that you are a daughter of a vegetable seller who couldn't tell the difference between pumpkin and flower bulbs."

"Yes, naming the produce would've been my limit." Ting Ting chuckled, their pleasant conversation replayed in her head. "I am sure Ling wasn't at all skinny. It's an optical illusion. Besides, he has a great sense of humour."

"...said the girl who said it was merely a friendly chat," Tian teased. She laughed when Ting Ting turned red from head to toe. "It's hard to believe, really. You're living among many affluent nobility, handsome princes, wealthy traders and powerful politician… why a soldier?"

"Sorry to say that my feelings know no money, status or position. Besides, those royal brats are usually shallow, childish, insubstantial….. and uninteresting."

Tian nodded in contemplative understanding. "And are going to say anything about this to Prince Shao about this…. new friend of yours?"

Ting Ting shrugged noncommittally. "Maybe. When the time is right."

Tian cringed. "There won't ever be a right time for that. You know how insanely protective he is of you since…-" Tian chewed her lips, watching rising sadness and anger brimming on Ting Ting’s delicate features. "What I want to say is.....—There is no question that he loves you. I mean, he had
gone this far to hide you in here, travelled great length, pulled various connection to make you stay away from the grip of political demands and…—"

"If he loved me as he claimed, then he'll understand," Ting Ting told her firmly. "I'm tired of being men's property."

"I am just saying…—" Tian trailed off. She knew this kind of discussion would never reach conclusive ends. Ting Ting may look like a fragile rose in a glass vessel, but her will and wants were tougher than steel. "Talking of which, we haven't seen Shao for weeks," Tian mentioned, changing the subject.

"Yes. I heard he has a lot on his plate lately."

"Oh no, don't tell me. Is it a girl he took home from the bar two months ago has claimed she is pregnant with the royal heir? Or… he's overshot his weekly allowance in a gambling den?" They both laughed. Shao's irresponsible lifestyle had often provided necessary entertainment to them both.

"He cut me off if he heard us bad mouthing him. Ack. No. I can't survive without my nail polish provision!"

"Relaaax," Tian placated. "We all knew he is perverted and we still love him for it."

They both giggled again.

"So, what's his problem now? Has Chi-Fu been agonising him?"

"No. Much worse," Ting Ting said. "He said he has a personal-space-invasion problem after General Li assigned his son—Captain Li Shang—who had been watching him like an eagle 24/7. General Li was gravely concerned about Shao's safety and commanded Captain Li to follow Shao anywhere around like his shadow."

"Anywhere?"

"Yes. I heard there is no privacy, not even in the toilet!"

"Ugh. No. That's…. That's bad," Tian made a face. "But it may be a good thing. You know how many Huns want his head hanging on their wall?"

"I know," Ting Ting sighed into her tea.

"Isn't that ironic? After what Prince Wei Zhang did to General Li and Miss Xia many years ago? And now their son and Shao Wei…—"

"Well, General Li is a loyal man, that I know for certain. I don't think he would ever compromise his integrity over an old love affair," Ting Ting said. "And if General Li does have a personal grudge or vendetta against Prince Wei Zhang, I doubt he will cross the line and goes as far as harming the royal heir. Shao Wei has nothing to do with this mess."

"It is surprising that General Li hasn't chop your father's head off. He had plenty of chance to do so," Tian said. "No offence there."

"None taken," Ting Ting replied. "And given the way he treated me...calling him a father will be a compliment," she added grimly.
"Hey, I'm sure Shao's plan will work out this time. And things will return to the way it was." Tian soothed.

"No," Ting Ting shook her head. "I don't want things to return to the way it was. Court life is a poison," she said bitterly. "It is not a place to find real laughter or love. Everyone pecks everyone else for the slightest scrap of power. It's... It's a terrible place. I much prefer to be here, leading a peasant life in peace and simplicity," she sighed somberly to herself.

"Although the Palace is as beautiful and opulent as many had heard it recited in novels and poems, it is also a hard, cold place full of ambitions and relentless jealousies. It's nice to be here, to be 'Ting Ting, the daughter of the vegetable seller'. No one dictates where I'd need to go, what I'd need to say, who I'll marry... No one gives a damn about what I...—"

"Hey...hey," Tian rubbed her back comfortingly when Ting Ting emotion ran high. "You'll get there in the end. It's just...—It takes time."

"You must think there is something wrong with me," Ting Ting told her, leaning with her shoulder slumped. "Freedom. Yes. I am willing to trade it with my wealth.... my privilege or my life! Don't ask me why. Maybe it's the allure of something that I can never have."

"Sorry, I shouldn't...—I shouldn't burden you with my problem," Ting Ting looked over to Tian who was resting her head on her palm, eyes glazed with both burden and sympathy.

"Not at all," Tian replied quickly and rose to her feet. "I think I'd better help my father to write his report back to Prince Shao Wei. I can't let him wondering too long what has happened to his favourite princess," she announced, watching Ting Ting toying with the bouquet of osmanthus Ling had given her earlier.

"Of course," Ting Ting muttered but grabbed Tian by the hand as she walked. "Tian...—"

"Not a word," she promised. "To Prince Shao Wei, to my father. To anyone. On the Emperor's honour, not a word."

"On the Emperor's honour?" Ting Ting said, impressed. Tension left her body, and all her worry seemed to melt away. "Tian. I—... I like him."

Ting Ting honestly thought Tian would hoot, squeal, and tease her to no end like she usually did. But instead, Tian only looked over her shoulder, astonished at her frankness, then turned carefully and smiled. "That's wonderful. I am happy for you."

"Thank you. I owe you one. I promise you once I'm free from all this, I will reward you and your father accordingly."

Tian smiled, squeezing their clasped hand together in a gesture of reassurance. "Family owe nothing," she said simply and left.

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This morning a load full of gunpowder and rockets arrived together with an army of escorted convoy from Imperial City. Shang must've thought that his men were ready for the final stage of their training—learning to use and aim the weaponry on the targets.

Unlike arrows, rockets were dispatched in a limited amount, so the recruits had to learn to use it judiciously and efficiently. Unfortunately, it was easier to be said than done. First, none of his
recruits managed to aim the missile on its target, sending it on random direction that caused themselves more harm than the enemies.

Well, one of his recruits actually hit a target—not the desired target, but still, Ping lit the fuse and Ling, who was too eager to help, accidentally stumbled on it. In his panic moment to restore the position of the rocket, Ping set it upright, firing the missile to the sky and towards their distant encampment and went indiscriminately straight to Chi-Fu's tent, incinerating the whole thing instantly.

Shang couldn't filter his awe. The boy could be both lethal and accurate as much as clumsy and weak. Ping was certainly a very unpredictable soldier.

"He could decimate the entire country," complained Chi-Fu.

"He is still very young. Give him time to...—"

"The time that we don't have," Chi-Fu grumbled. "Captain Li, while I appreciate your long-suffering attitude towards your brother-in-law, I can't see this kind of treatment do him any good."

Shang throw himself on the makeshift bed, letting "yet another" apocalyptic episode of training replayed in his mind. He stretched his arms and grunted, feeling his muscle ached in an unpleasant way, adding towards his already foul mood after seeing the havoc his recruit had caused. Today was not any better than last week.

It would take a dynasty to make a soldier out of this mess. Chi-Fu's disdainful babble echoed in his head. Perhaps the bony councillor was right when he objected his father's decision to put him on promotion. He was too young, too inexperienced in this field. It wasn't the skill that Shang was lacking. It was the ability to motivate and encourage the recruits that he struggled.

Then, he remembered Fa Ping. The young man was clearly fallen behind his peer. In the beginning, Shang gave him the benefit of the doubt due to his young age and his comparatively lanky frame. Soon he realized he had singled out and compromised his hard approach.

He spared some of his time to spar with him in private. He let Ping go with only stern words after he was caught cheating in archery. He assisted him when he collapsed during the hike while he wouldn't say he would prepare to do the same should it was Ling or Yao who fell behind. And if Ping's blunder still sounded innocent enough, Shang had allowed the boy to get away after nearly barbecued Chi-Fu alive.

You liked him, that's why—said the voice in his head. You like him like a man to a woman would! You loved him, and you WANTED him.

No! That's...that's absurd! Shang ran both of his hand on his face and groaned frustratedly. He realised that this special treatment had to stop. Not only this behaviour had kindled his feeling for Ping to root deeper, but detrimental to Ping's overall behaviour. The boy needed to learn to fend himself! Shang wasn't here to babysit; he was here to turned the boy into a man—a soldier worthy of battle. In the real war, there was no playing the-protective-big-brother, there was no mercy, and there was no room for mistakes - and Fa Ping was simply a liability to the team and a danger even to himself.

Perhaps, perhaps I should just dismiss him... sending him home. Shang considered. But in all honesty, there was a part of him that won't let the boy go—a dark part of him that strangely wanted Ping to stay... and to be close to him.
Snap it you pervert! He is your brother-in-law! rebuked the voice in his head. Are you going to let him stay and watch him being butchered by a Hun, can you?

But what would you tell him? You'll tell him that he is hopeless and better to seek a career elsewhere? That's going to crush his soul!

His train of thoughts was interrupted by a voice in front of his tent. "Captain Li?"

"Chi-Fu," Shang greeted, opening the entrance of his tent. He didn't even bother to mask his irritation of having the old counsellor disturbing him this late. "Is there anything I can do for you this late at night?"

"May I come in Captain?" he said, his tone urgent.

"Of course," Shang said. "Please do sit." This is better be important, he muttered under his breath.

"This is about the Prince of Wei," Chi-Fu said quietly and scrupulously, which Shang never thought the prying counsellor ever capable to do. "He wrote me a note, saying he'll be gone for about a week for a meeting in Chang'an." He produced a terse note from inside his pocket that Shang recognised immediately as Shao Wei's—he had never seen such eloquent, formal strokes elsewhere.

Shang took a moment to read. There was no abnormality that perked suspicion in its content. It was just a polite information stating the address and purpose of his absence.

"Anything wrong with this?"

"Captain Li, I'd like to point out that we are on the strict order to watch Prince Shao Wei whereabouts," Chi-Fu said, a little vexed. "And that's the responsibility that unfortunately fell on you and I."

Well, perhaps he wants to go to see some street slattern and unwanted to be seen. Shang thought to himself. He is famous for relentless partying, cavorting with women, drinking and smoking, is he not? But Shang didn't say it out loud, knowing it would just raise a heated debate and further lecture.

"I understand. I'll go and catch up with him tomorrow morning," Shang said diplomatically. Chi-Fu nodded and seemed to be pleased with Shang's instantaneous compliance.

"Anything else?" Shang asked when Chi-Fu still parked himself on the mat in front of his bedroll, unmoved. "I have an early drill to run, and if you want me to catch up with the Prince, I might..—"

"Captain Li," Chi-Fu sounded inexplicably grim. "Have you saw Prince of Wei doing something odd lately?"

Shang gave him a blank look. "Odd? Like what?"

"Like sneaking out when you are not watching."

That hit him. The episode of the Prince's encounter with a foreign princess flashed in his mind. But Shang schooled his expression to his usual steely mask and calmly replied,"Why do you ask? Have you caught him doing something he shouldn't?" Shang baited.

"Well, I didn't. But Chien-Po saw him around eight weeks ago. He was in the Xi'an market doing our weekly shopping when he saw him."
Chi-Fu bristled at Shang's accusation. "Because there is a spreading rumour that Princess Wei Ting is still alive!" He snapped, slamming the piece of formal looking parchment on Shang's table. "I received this yesterday. One of the Imperial Intelligence spot her at the—"

"...Xi'an market?" Shang gasped, shocked and aghast as he read the report from the Palace Intelligence. The eighteen years old Princess of Wei had been mysteriously missing since last year. Some had speculated she was kidnapped by anonymous guerilla—Huns or Chinese no one knew, but no ransom demand had ever arrived. Further down the road, to avoid public outcry and abate relentless gossip, the Palace official had announced that the Princess had died of strange illness.

"Precisely," Chi-Fu took the parchment back and kept it under his sash. "She was talking to one of our soldiers when they did," Chi-Fu added.

Shang ran through his memory. He recalled Chef Zhang had sent two of his recruits to buy their weekly supply. Yes, Ling and Ping. Shang made a mental note to ask the two about this. After all, Xi'an was the closest village to the encampment—

A look of comprehension crossed Chi-Fu's face, which immediately overshadowed by fear. "Are you saying that the Prince of Wei is up to something—something that related to our missing Princess?" Something on the back of his mind was telling him this wasn't a mere coincidence.

Suddenly everything fell into its place. Shang realized what had brought Shao Wei to join the low ranking regiment, what had made him willing to endure uncomfortable lifestyle and pointless training with a bunch of men that never be his match. Because all this nonsense was just a decoy! An illusion that he had been crafting to mislead people from seeing his real motive and intention!

*But...why? Why would anyone like a Princess of Wei fake her own kidnapping? Shang's mind begged. Has Father known about this hence ordered me to follow the Prince closely in the hope he would eventually unravel some clues? Another thought occurred to him.

Just as he thought spiralled into a bottomless pit, another voice echoed in front of his tent and Shang dismissed Chi-Fu in a hurry.

"Ling?"

"Evening Captain. Hope I didn't disturb you."

Shang frowned when he realized the conflicted look on the recruit's face. "No. Is there...anything wrong?"

"Captain Li, I know it's late. But there is something you need to know—"

"Yes?" Shang turned, watching the hesitation on the recruit's face. "I...—This is...—This is about Fa Ping."

It was a long journey from Xi'an to Kangi, the village on the border of China that the Huns army had used as a base.

Hayabusa had been living in Kangi for the past three years, working together with the huge entourage of Huns warrior and serving as the loyal strategist for the Khan.
He was seven feet tall. His body was covered with hair. His head was part-shaven and his faces decorated with tattoos made with needles dipped in soot. Upon his broad chests were etched suns and moons and faces with writhing snakes for hair, his dusty backs adorned with bloody handprints slapped on by their comrades.

Despite his menacing look, Hayabusa was a familiar fixture in the Xi'an ever since the tension between the Chinese and the Huns thickened. But people of Xi'an itself had never treated the Huns traders and customers differently from Chinese. To them, they were equally beneficial to the capitalist economy of their little town.

Hunting and herding was the foundation of the Hun economy. Even after his appointment as the Khan's strategist, Hayabusa had been trading his cattle herd and widely known in Xi'an for his excellent bred horses. In return, he sought cloth, coins, weapons, and alcohol.

The sun slowly crept to the edge of the horizon when Hayabusa and his entourage made halfway through the journey. Occasionally, he nursed the sore spot on his toe—courtesy of a small, clumsy Chinese soldier who accidentally tipped a heavy clay urn to his feet. And walking nearly a day back into the Huns encampment did not give his sore foot any favour either. But he knew far better than confronting the timid soldier that stood no chance of in hand to hand combat against him.

"Do we need to stop, Master?" one of his soldiers asked conscientiously. For a young seventeen years old warrior, Attila was surprisingly observant and he seemed to have noticed Hayabusa's growing discomfort.

"No," he answered firmly. "I'm fine Attila."

"I can return to the market and capture that little urchin," Attila announced. "And you can have the privilege to watch the life drain out of him."

"No. I know we can capture and kill him—no big deal. But I don't want to shed a vain death without a greater purpose," he said to the young man. Attila tilted his head as though begging for explanation.

"I have a feeling our path will cross again—and maybe, that little soldier can be of greater use to us."

"But Master, what if that prick reported us to their leader? And I am sure General Shan Yu..."

"Yes, I know, General Shan Yu would just finish that stupid Chinese boy on the spot where he stands. He tends to be light handed on this kind of thing," Hayabusa clipped him. "He even will flatten the market to the ground if that needed to be."

Attila hummed his agreement. Shan Yu was renowned as a formidable enemy to the Chinese because he possessed massive, possibly even super-human strength that made him a hardened fighter and a lethal combatant, armed or not. He could break down a barricaded door with minimal effort, climbed and smashed through a rooftop with ease, and simply sliced massive pillars to shreds with his sword. Yet even then, it cannot quite do justice to the man whom his trembling Chinese enemies dubbed 'The Scourge of God'. Shan Yu adopted the nickname with alacrity and a sardonic grin. He relished it, as befitting a man whose military brilliance was matched by a savage sense of humour.

But his strength and brutality sometimes could work against him as he tended to act swiftly without much thinking, and for that, the Khan had appointed Hayabusa—a much calculative and crafty thinker of the two.
"Sometimes we have to consider our move carefully—to lose a small battle and win the war. After all, I am appointed to be Shan Yu's strategist for a reason. Yes?"

Attila fell silent. Hayabusa's leadership was matched by his cunning intellect. In addition to having the idea to scale the seemingly-impenetrable Great Wall with grappling hooks, he was able to infiltrate the Palace of Wei and poisoned Prince of Wei's most notable and influential consort—the mother of Prince Shao Wei, the only heir to the Wei's throne. He did so to instil fear to the people of Wei and to make a point, that to the Huns...losing is never an option.
The night wore on, long and silent. But not for Shang. His mind was actively replaying the Ling’s narration. But was it even possible? Ping was so young… innocent...and he was hardly came across as a person who…—

"Captain Li!" Shang was barely asleep when Chi-Fu was back rapping his tent entrance and harassing him with his throaty yell.

"Captain Li! Captain Li! Wake up!" Chi-Fu blustered, upbeat. "Let me introduce you," he barged in without caring that Shang was shirtless.

Shang jumped out of his bed, rubbing his eyes, dizzy and confused. Then a stench of alcohol and coffee hit him. No doubt Chi-Fu had been binge drinking while brewing his plan all night.

"This is Miss Meihui," Chi-Fu said, signalling the person to remove the hood from her head while Shang, still dazed, frantically tried to put on his robe back on.

"Wha-what?" Shang's brow jumped to his hairline, aghast. He was nearly speechless—Chi-Fu took a woman to the camp full of males? And into his tent? "I— I don't get this," he choked. "I have never called for..—It must've been a mistake!"

"Captain Li, I know you are married. She is not… —Not for that," Chi-Fu laughed, the rice wine made him delirious. "She is your accomplice."

"Accomplice?" Shang blinked, suspecting Chi-Fu alcohol-addled brain was barely functioning.

"Yes. Accomplice. Remember, our plan?"

Shang's sleep-deprived head finally caught up with him. "Your plan," Shang corrected, remembering Chi-Fu had returned to his tent again after Ling had left and babbled until past midnight about his scheme. The old advisor had been crafting a plan that Shang would disguise himself and went undercover as a traveller from the south who was seeking job opportunity in Xi'an.

"I'm afraid I don't require anyone, Chi-Fu. I am not an invalid. I am perfectly capable of holding myself in a busy marketplace," Shang said flatly. "And by the way, I would like to remind you that this encampment is out of bounds for women—" he glanced at the girl and back to Chi-Fu, glaring. "...By death penalty—order of the Emperor."

Chi-Fu snickered, low and throaty. "Captain Li, let me remind you. Yes, the Son of Heaven was the one who signed the rule, but I—underline that word—was the one who made them. And...look at you!" He ran his skinny finger, pointing up and down Shang's figure. "You think you are not noticeable and blend in well with majority of other people?" he scoffed. "Now...you tell me, in this encampment alone, apart of the Prince of Wei, who is as tall, strong and...—"

"Handsome...able-bodied...," Meihui butted in. When both men looked at her questioningly, she just shrugged her shoulder. "...I am just pointing what's obvious."

"Thank you Miss Meihui," Chi-Fu scowled at her before turning back to Shang. "What I mean is,
"You don't look like another average, normal people."

"As if you were," Shang muttered sarcastically. Thankfully Chi-Fu was too engrossed with own thoughts to be able to hear him. "And how can Miss Meihui here can help me to get less... less tall, muscular and handsome?" Shang said, crossing his arms.

Chi-Fu blew an impatient breath through his nostril, mumbling something intelligible to himself before gaining his prideful posture. "So, Miss Meihui will pose as your sister, girlfriend or whatever, so that at least people will be less suspicious."

"Less suspicious," Shang parroted, rolling his eyes.

"Think about this. Why does a man like you wandering around, alone in the market full of women doing their weekly shopping? Most other men your age are wielding their swords in the battlefield," Chi-Fu demanded. "And I bet you won't even know what to buy!"

Shang fell silent. He quietly admitted Chi-Fu did have a point. He eyed both Chi-Fu and Meihui respectively. "Then why don't you go to spy on the Prince instead of me? It will be a far better arrangement since I don't have to abandon the training."

"I...—" Horrified look fell on Chi-Fu's face. Just as I guessed, Shang smirked inwardly. He was just a manipulative coward who wanted the credit without getting his own hands dirty. "I can't... I have to be here if the Emperor suddenly summon me."

Summon your ass maybe—Shang thought sardonically, but he held his silence, not wanting to disparage the councillor and made him looked ridiculous in front of an outsider. "...And does Miss Meihui has no objection taking part in this espionage?" Shang asked.

"No. I've discussed a method of payment that will be sufficient for her," Chi-Fu replied with a mischievous wink that made Shang's stomach churn. Meihui blushed furiously. "She only needs a small favour from you, Captain."

This made Shang felt uncomfortable. "Favor from... me?"

"Don't worry, her wish isn't difficult to fulfil, I assure you," Chi-Fu grinned, displaying an array of crooked teeth. When Shang stepped backwards and looked a little unsure, Chi-Fu pressed on. "You want to solve the puzzle of our mysterious Prince, don't you, Captain Li? Granting her wish is a small price to pay for a bigger good. Yes?"

Shang drew a sigh. "Why are you torturing me like this?"

Chi-Fu laughed. "Because I can."

Mulan yawned as she made it back to the reporting post. She was on the final round of her patrol that morning. The dusk broke in the sky, and the fog still covered the ground like a blanket. Ling was trailing a distance behind her. Suddenly she caught a glimpse of Qing, fixed on the willow tree by the banks of the river, a good distance away from the encampment.

Is Shang about to go somewhere this early? She thought. Her curiosity carried her to Shang's tent, which was pitch a reasonable distance away from Shao's. But by all means, both tents were at the far corner of the ground, away from the noise and cacophony of the communal tent and training field.

Chi-Fu appeared and already calling out with his throaty voice outside Shang's tent door. It was
clear Prince of Wei was gone, or otherwise, he would have scolded the old councillor for disturbing his peaceful slumber.

And then something unexpected happened. And a woman, in her twenties, come out of his tent. She looked like she just woken up from her slumber, hair still everywhere and her sleeping robe was poorly secured.

"Miss Meihui, how's your sleep?"

"Not very long, but surprisingly very good," she said politely and flushed when she realised Chi-Fu had already donned in his formal wear. "I am a little late, am I…? Captain Li…—?"

Her statement caused Mulan's body to react. Captain Li…—? Did she…—? She felt panicked, short of breath like the ground around her swallowing her whole.

"Oh, you mean Captain Li? He is an early riser. He has waited on the training field for you," Chi-Fu said, giving her a meaningful smirk that felt like a stab to Mulan's heart. "Take your time to primp up yourself. Your man can't see you when you are like this… can he? We'll see you when you are ready."

*What is she doing there…—? And most importantly, has Shang…?*

*No, said another voice in her head. Do you really want to know?*

And for the first time in her life, Mulan felt something hot, ugly, scorching in her chest, rising up her throat, burning her eyes. Surely, she can't be jealous of the woman, can she? Mulan was unwillingly sleeping with Shang given the chance. Why was she having such a visceral mental response now? *Why?* She demanded, clutching her hand on her chest. *Why do I feel this way?*

The answer bubbled at the edge of her conscious mind until the utter panic drew it back down.

Mulan ran into the nearby coppice, kneeling by the edge of the brook. She took a generous scoop of water with her palm and splashed her face. The coldness of water seemed to appease the piercing pain in her heart, but only to have it stung harder the next seconds.

*Has Shang…cheated? The twisting feeling came back again until she thought she was about to die.*

*This has to stop! She commanded. Stop! Stop! You foolish girl!*

"Ping!" Ling's voice echoed in the distance.

Mulan took a few deep breaths and gradually stood. She looked at her reflection at the surface of the water, steeling her face until no sign of distress was visible. She breathed and tried to find her centre. Calm...calm...calm, she chanted to herself.

"Yes?" she said without meeting Ling's eyes.

"Are you coming to the sparring practice?" Ling said from beside her.

"Of course, I'll...I'll catch you up later."

Thankfully Ling went past without further questioning. Once she felt she had reined her emotion, she went to join the others at the training field, where all the men gathered around the circle, watching the spar. Shang was already there, leading the warm-up. And then he announced that he needed a few volunteer and Mulan suddenly saw her chance.
Shang had forced himself to lead the warming up and join the recruits to run a full circle across the circumference of the encampment although his sleep-deprived body was begging him for rest. And sharing a tent with Chi-Fu didn't help him one bit. That man snored like a wheat grinder. It's no wonder that he had stayed single!

After the warming up, he commanded everyone to stand in formation while he stepped forward, abandoning his robes. "Let's begin our training by demonstrating an example of unexpected ambush. Imagine if you were walking alone, and suddenly a few Huns guerillas attacked you from unknown directions. You have no weapon, except one that you happen to hold on your hand. And what would you do? I will need five recruits for this exercise."

Five volunteers stepped forward. Shang was surprised to see Ping jumped in front of the queue with no hesitation. Considering the boy had just finished his shift of long night patrol, he could only imagine the similar kind of exhaustion and sleepiness that were eating him. But Shang wasn't about to prevent him from joining the drill.

The stage was set. Chef Zhang picked up his flute, while Shang sat cross-legged on the ground, closing his eyes and listened, waiting for the attack. The flute was a favour to them. It dulled Shang's well-trained hearing. Without it, they won't stand a chance.

One man came from behind him, Shang swiped his leg and elbowed his gut as the poor guy fell on the ground. Two men climbed the trees and jumped on him at once, Shang caught each of their legs and angled them to each other's face. Another man came from his front, but flip over last minute, trying to pile drive him. Shang simply moved away.

Suddenly, Ping was upon him like a wall of fire.

He charged at him with ferocity. Like he meant it. Shang was shocked, but recovered quickly, blocking all his punch and kicks.

"Good Ping, good," he said, hoping to placate him, but it seemed only making the boy angrier. He swiped at Shang, attempted to hit his vital organs, growling. Shang blocked, and Ping swiped at him with his other hand, the force of rage behind his strike.

*Ping! Stop! What happened to you?* Shang looked at him with befuddlement and grunted when one of Ping's punch hit his gut, but Ping didn't slow down one bit, as though he was purposely ignoring him.

*Ok, you asked for it.*

Shang waited patiently for a chance to strike. And finally, when Ping was about to deliver a powerful punch, Shang managed to catch his fist with one hand and grab his collar with another. He picked the boy up, throw him to the ground face first. And before Ping had a chance to recover, he twisted the other arm behind his back and planted his heel on the name of Ping's neck, pinning him immobilised at the ground.

The crowd cheered, and after a moment Shang released the boy.

"Great energy, Ping, excellent!" he said. Ping rose to his feet and saluted him without meeting his eyes.

"You'd all take the example from Ping's relentlessness," Shang said to the direction of the crowds.

"Yes Captain," the rest chorused.
"Now we are going to learn hand to hand combat with both of our hand tied."

Mulan could hear Shang's voice as the training went on. She crawled to the back of the crowd as soon as Shang dismissed her, hand nursing the spot where she landed right on the hard ground. She knew challenging Shang on a spar was a risky move and could have a serious, detrimental effect should she was really pregnant, but at that moment at the time, her brain was like clouded with haze of anger and jealousies that she couldn't think straight.

*Oh, stop being such a child,* she chastised herself. *What if nothing happened between them last night? And what if this was Chi-Fu's order? You know what he's like.*

"Now, I will need another volunteer. How about you Yao? Please come forward." Shang's voice rang behind the cheer of the crowds. "Jing, please take the rope in the weapon tent."

Mulan was wiping her cheek with a wet cloth when she happened to capture the sight of Meihui, concealing herself behind the trees as she watched the spar from a distance to avoid attracting unwanted attention from the recruits. She was wearing a dark-coloured cloak, but Mulan could still see her face. Her delicate hand flutter over her heart, her eyes sparkling, her face flushed, looking at the men in combat with enough admiration and desire that could melt an iceberg.

The twisted pain on her chest was back, but Mulan found she couldn't look away. She watched as Meihui gasped in her small worried-tinged voice when Shang got punched, or cheer with absolute adoration as he concluded the match.

Mulan was so engrossed in observing Meihui that she didn't realise the sparring session was over and Shang came over. Meihui saluted and paid him with a gratuitous smile that reached far into her eyes. Shang returned her smile.

Mulan was taken aback. Shang had almost never smiled. It was almost like a rare commodity. That unpleasant twisting feeling began a new.

"That was an amazing performance," the woman told Shang a little breathlessly.

"You saw your man?" Shang asked, his voice loud and smooth and cut perfectly through the silence.

Mulan gritted her teeth. *Your man?* she nearly shouted. *Did he just call himself 'your man'?*

Meihui nodded, blush spreading to her ear. "Yes, of course, I could hardly take my eyes off him!"

"I bet you do," he said, throwing her another smile.

The two were talking, and Chi-Fu came interrupting. "Are you two ready?" The old man rubbed his hand together expectantly. Meihui nodded and glanced briefly to Shang who picked up his stuff from the ground. Chi-Fu grinned, his tobacco-stained teeth looking ugly. "So, let's the show begin."

Chi-Fu, Shang and Meihui talked and headed to the back of the encampment where Qing was. Mulan couldn't hear what they said without getting noticed, but she got the idea by watching their wordless gesture.

She peeked between the gap on the nearby shrub, careful not to make any sound that would trigger Shang's cat-like hearing. Chi-Fu handed him two sacks, one of which Mulan recognised as Shang —she had packed it right before he left their home. Shang helped to secure their belonging before mounting himself on Qing.
"Uh, how do I...—" Meihui looked at the towering beast. Her hands clutched tightly on her chest, looking fragile and terrified. It was clear to Mulan that the girl had no idea how to ride a horse, she was even afraid of one!

Shang ran his fingers on Qing's mane affectionately. "Don't worry. She won't bite."

Meihui seemed to relax at his reassurance. Shang signalled her to come close and patted Qing on her side. Meihui took a few careful steps, cautiously touched Qing's pelt and she laughed in amazement once her finger made contact with her fur. "She is... so soft!"

"I groom her every day," Shang said simply.

"You two better go now to catch up with Prince of Wei," Chi-Fu announced.

Suddenly the look of something akin to uncertainty cascaded over Shang's face. "Venerable Chi-Fu, are you sure you can...—?"

"Captain Li," the old man said with a dose of irritation. "I've been working with men way longer than you. Trust me. I'll keep them busy and out of trouble while you're gone."

Shang considered his answer. He was still completely unconvinced, but he also knew he had no other choice. "Fine," Shang resigned and turned his attention to the woman. "Miss Meihui do you need...—?"

"Some help? Yes. Yes of course."

"Placed your foot on this stirrup here, and I'll help you up," Shang told her. And then he stretched his hand. Meihui did as she was told, and Shang pulled her up with his strength and mounted her in front of him.

"Better?" he asked, sensing Meihui was still a little petrified.

"I...—" she stuttered. "Don't worry. I will be. It's just I need to get used to being this... high."

Suddenly a buzzing bee startled Qing and caused the stallion to jerk forward. Surprised, Meihui lost her balance, and it was down to Shang's excellent reflex that saved her falling out of her grace.

"Oh!" Meihui yelped.

"Yeah, pulling the dainty-little-lady's card thing. Very clever. Mulan thought ruefully.

"Don't worry he got you," Chi-Fu chuckled amusedly and turned to Shang and said in faux-seriousness. "Captain Li, will you make sure you returned Miss Meihui to her parent's house in one piece?"

Meihui laughed as she thanked Shang and Shang seemed to pleasantly enjoy her company, pulling her closer to him, securing her in between his arms.

Mulan suddenly felt as though she been thrown into the ground again, twice as hard. Something about Meihui sitting between Shang's arms, about his gesture of protectiveness, about the delicate way he smiled at her...that made Mulan breathless and shaky with anxiety. She stepped away from the shrub, her breath ragged. Panic, sadness, rage, all came to her at once.

She raced through the limit of the encampment unto the woods and to the clearing where she usually spent her time alone.
Mulan arrived on her usual "contemplating" spot and sighed in relief when she found no one there. She stayed there, sitting by the tree for hours, skipping her lunch... and perhaps her dinner. She had no idea where and why Shang was going. She only got a hint that he would be gone for more than a day, as the size of his bag suggested, spending his time alone with Meihui.

Yes, Meihui seemed to be a sweet, peace-loving girl with a small voice and gentle smile. She probably dabbed rose oil behind her ears and perfumed the sheets, and danced with fans, wore beautiful lingerie, and went limp at his touch... and Shang probably loved it!

The hysteria rose in her again. The pain and agony were like a thorn in her flesh. She was surprised by the intensity of it.

Mulan turned her attention to the pebble underneath her feet. She took one large one and threw it to the water with all her might. The stone bounced and leapt before sinking into the water with a satisfying thud. The action seemed to release part of the sadness that strangled her heart.

Isn't that great? Finally, you have a reason to truly hate him! said the unspoken voice in her head.

You feel this way because you love him! Admit it! Replied another. You love every inch of him! Gods, the memories still tinged—the memories of his hard, muscular body pressed against hers. Although it had been weeks since they shared a bed, those nights seemed to have imprinted themselves like a tattoo in her mind. But once the physicality of sex and the intimacy of his touch were no longer readily accessible to her, it became clear to her that it was Shang's heart she desired.

Oh, you foolish girl! You are wasting your time! He will never appreciate you. A girl like you will never be his perfect bride!

Mulan massaged her temple, attempting to drive the contradicting argument away. She resented Shang for wanting her to be like other women—subservient and obedient. It didn't make any sense. Shang spent his life crafting warrior! He should love a brave, strong-willed woman—not a pampered, dainty ornament that had no understanding in the world of men.

"Hi Girl! I've been looking everywhere for you," greeted Mushu who suddenly transpired out of nowhere. "Ugh, what's with that sour face?"

"Nothing."

"Liar," he said. Jumping to the ground in front of her so he could see her face clearly. "Tell me. What's eating you?"

When it was clear Mulan wasn't going to tell him, Mushu pulled out a crystal ball out of nowhere and mumbled something foreign.

"You can...—You are a fortune teller now?" Mulan marvelled, finding herself sidetracked from whatever agonising stab she had been experiencing.

"Oh, you just knew?" Mushu said cockily. "I came from a long line of a creature with a gift of sight!"

Mulan crossed her arms and eyed him sceptically. "Is that come together with a gift of talking nonsense?"

"Fine...fine, it's mostly bullshit and cold reading," Mushu admitted. "But the odd thing I was quite often right! Now, tell me, isn't it Captain Handsome that caused you this profound torment?"
Mulan didn't answer, but the heavy sigh and her slumping posture did.

"Oh... so I am right. Again," Mushu said, clicking his tongue. "Care to share?"

After minutes of persuasive cajoling, Mulan finally cracked and told the little deity everything.

"Well, don't arrive at any conclusion just yet. The woman might be... might be...—"

"Sleeping with him?" Mulan deadpanned.

"No. I mean—Look, Chi-Fu was there too. What if that woman related to him and not Shang?"

"Do you really think that even possible?" Mulan scowled."Mushu, she is third of his age!"

"Hey, are you sayin' old man aren't attractive? I am thousands of years old and I...—"

"She came out of Shang's tent!" Mulan cut him impatiently, more suspicion and jealousy piling up, poisoning her mind. By now all she wanted was finding evidence that Shang was indeed the cheater her mind had extrapolated him to be. "What else can that be?"

"But...but Shang didn't come out from his tent with her, right? Wait—what's that bruise?"

Mulan quickly obscured the assaulted spot with her hand. "It's.... It's nothing." But it was too late, Mushu was all over her.

"Oh, dear ancestor! Who did that?" Mushu exclaimed as he checked. When she just pursed her lips, he gasped. "Did... did Shang did this?"

"It was...—" Mulan buried her face in her palms. "It was my fault. I was having a serious go at him at the spar. And he...—," she sighed. "He was just defending himself."

"What? You'd challenged him at the spar? Oh, dear Guan Kim, you can get yourself seriously hurt! And what if the baby...—" Mushu slapped his claws to his head. "Your ancestor would never forgive me!" He went with his worry-induced babble.

"But it does feel good when I managed to punch his gut just now," Mulan mumbled to herself.

"Please remind me, don't ever make a woman jealous," Mushu mumbled while giving her bruise a closer look. "Man, this will leave a mark for weeks!"

"I'm fine Mushu, it's just a scrape," she said, anger and hatred were gone in exchange for deep sorrow. "I just.—I don't understand," Mulan sighed, sounding defeated. "Why he actually like to be around... around... a feminine nonsense."

"A feminine nonsense?" Mushu's frowned. "Mulan, that girl is just being... a girl!"

That rubbed Mulan's frayed nerves. "He was smiling at that girl, Mushu. Smiling!"

"Is that wrong... To smile?" Mushu looked even more puzzled.

"You are aware that Shang thrifts his smile to the important occasion?" Mulan bit back.

"But the girl smiled and thanked him! What do you think he supposed to do? Give her an ugly frown? It's called being polite!"

It was a fair point, but Mulan—twined in the feeling of Shang's betrayal—wasn't about to back
down just yet. "He can just say 'your welcome' and walk off!"

"Are you for real?" Mushu threw his arms in the air. But the feeling of pity came upon him to see Mulan, curled under the ancient tree, hugging her knees with her arms, looking small, hurt and broken.

"Girl, I think you are overthinking things," he rubbed her shoulder in a soothing motion. "I know I may be outrageously dense and outright insensitive," Mushu said, trying to enlighten the mood. "...But having female acquaintances don't automatically conclude a man is having an affair."

Okay, that may be right. Logical and undeniable. But on the other hand, Mulan could not completely rule out the possibility of such thing from happening.

"I don't get it," Mulan said resignedly. "He is a soldier. He spent his life training and crafting men to be like him, eloquent in swordfights, excellent at horse riding, precise in aiming. He loves engaged in physical combat and any sort of confrontation. So why he…—why he resented me for having the same passion as him?"

Mushu rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You see… when Shang married you, he wants you as his wife, not a sparring friend. He had plenty of those here… in the training ground or battlefield. Shang wants you to fulfil other needs….—other needs these men couldn't give him. He doesn't want you to challenge him. He didn't need someone who could throw kick, punch and spar with him. He had done that here all week."

Mulan crossed her arms, "Ah. Got it. He wants a girl who will sate his sex demand and clean the house all day."

"That's not true, because if it is, most men will only marry two type of women—a whore and a housemaid. Dare I say your mother is neither of those, and your father loved her for it," Mushu elaborated.

"Your point is?"

"You see… most men—not all men—but most, want to be needed."

"Needed?" Mulan snorted with a heavy amount of sarcasm. "The last time I told Shang I need him to take the place of my father in the war, he scolded me."

"That's because you don't need him. You want him to take the place of your father," Mushu pointed out. "Think about this, have you see your mother asked your father to help her pick the laundry? Babysitting you and Ping? Or carrying heavy groceries? ...She asked and made a point that she needed him. It may be just petty housework—no big deal, but even little things make your father feels like he is a superhero! He makes her happy! Every man feels damn proud to make a woman happy. So at the end of the day, she is smiling and glad to see him and wants to feed him and take him to bed."

"What about a woman who is capable and can make herself happy?" Mulan balked.

"That's great. I mean some guys are really into that. Believe me, when your ancestor summoned me, I am rather amazed at your self-reliance and independence. But for a traditional guy like Shang, he might think…—if she can do what I do, then what does she need me for?"

"But I am not my mother!" Mulan said bitterly "You'd think that Shang would at least respect me for who I am and not wishing me to be a helpless damsel in distress that would plead him for help in every situation."
"Nah. Girl, you don't get it. Shang didn't despise you for who you are—it's just… he needs time to understand that you are not like any other girl. He needs assurance that although you are a capable woman, you still need him in your life," Mushu said softly. "You see….many men, especially old-fashioned one like Shang, want to be respected. They want to feel they are the one in control, the one who made decisions. Challenging him a spar or a sword fight isn't the way to win an argument with him."

"So, a woman who knows how to challenge a man in a sword fight would never be a perfect bride, is that it?"

"Wo wo wait… —since when is this conversation turning into a discussion about sword fight? It's about having room in your heart for another person, about having some need that the other person can fulfil. You see, you are clever, brave and beautiful, Mulan—I am sure many men, even Shang and his parents can't deny that. That's why they picked you! But before Shang married you, how many men have asked you out or see you more than just a friend material?"

"I…—" Mulan began. Her eyes widened, and she found herself unable to answer.

"Checkmate."

Mulan gnawed at Mushu's words. Most of the time the foreign deity was speaking with joke and sarcasm, but no, not today. Her mind turned over…and over…and over again, slowly unravelling the puzzle.

*Men didn't want strong, capable woman? Is that it?*

Then why her father raised her to be the complete opposite of what most men would want? Her mind sat uncomfortably in her mind, hot and angular and nonsensical. She went numb.

*Man wants to be needed.*

Perhaps Shang's intent had been to confuse her to such an extent she suffered an existential crisis? But….why?

*Maybe so that he can have a good excuse for having an extramarital affair.*

Mulan would lie if she said she didn't hate Meihui. She knew that there was hardly any evidence to accuse Meihui had seduced Shang or tempted him to commit something immoral. But her mind couldn't help to fill the blank even though it couldn't see any proof otherwise!

The worst of it was because Mulan could see why Shang could have fallen in love with this woman. The way Meihui spoke coyly to him, praised him, blushed in his presence...perhaps made Shang felt like a god! Meihui was beautiful, soft-spoken, dainty and fragile like a rose. She needed a man, a big and strong man to protect her, to help her with her heavy grocery, to help her climbed on her horse and prevented her from falling.

While she? She was likened to a wild orchid—grown freely in the forest, cared nothing of the world. She was strong, resilient and self-sufficient. She would fight for her survival and her existence and owed nothing to no one. But evidently, many men had valued the fragile rose that would wither and die without constant care and protection far more than the tough, sturdy wild orchid.

She looked forlornly to the sky and shouted. "Oh, why do I care?" she asked herself. *It's not like we are married out of love*, although she knew, somewhere deep in the small, hidden corner of her
heart part of her did—the part that wished one day Shang would return her sentiment entirely. Yet, the love she felt was accompanied by an equal hatred, revulsion, all mixed together in a basket of useless, energy-sapping emotion that she could do little about.

*You deserve this, foolish girl. He is not the first one to lie. You are.* She thought ruefully as Ling's words about her coming clean flashed on her mind. Yes, she was the first one who carried a double life and lying to Shang, to her father, to his family...she was lying to them all. If there was a rift forming between her and Shang, Mulan should blame herself for it. Perhaps none of this mayhem would've happened if she stayed obedient at home and maybe became blissfully unaware of her husband's duplicity.

Mulan looked into a distance, towards the direction of where Shang was heading. The sun painted a golden hue in the late autumn sky. For a moment she considered taking Khan and raced to catch up with him, to apologise and told him everything.

…but she didn't.

*It's too late for that,* she thought. If she had lost him. She had lost him long ago.

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"I know I've said this, but let me said it again. Thank you for allowing me to watch my Yao sparring," Meihui said as she and Shang rode Qing to Xi'an. They made a stopover by the roadside to eat their lunch before continuing the journey.

"I'm glad I could help," Shang said, biting into his lunch.

Meihui smiled but suddenly looked a little troubled. "You won't tell him a word, won't you, Captain Li? If my parents knew...—If Yao knew what I did...—"

"Not a word," Shang raised his free hand as a sign of solemn promise.

"Thank you. I just...—," Meihui sighed in relief. "I know I just met him once... but I," she shook her head, chuckled to herself. "I can't explain it...—I just missed him, you know, being in training and war and all that. I haven't seen him for eight weeks and oh! I don't know how long more my heart could take it if not because of your generosity." She sighed again to the imaginary point on the road, giving it a dopey look.

"It's a win-win trade," Shang said simply, a little taken aback with the intensity of this woman's love to a man she barely knew.

"So, if I may ask...how do you know Venerable Chi-Fu?" Shang asked carefully. He was pretty certain the story of Chi-Fu salvaging a nearly homeless family was a heavily edited version.

"Oh, you see... my mother was a daughter of the Royal Treasurer, a noblewoman if you liked. She was betrothed to someone of equal status and of a similar background, but my mother decided to marry my father, her childhood friend who was just a shoemaker."

"Oh..."

"And then...her family disowned her and all her siblings cut ties with her. As a daughter of a rich man, my mother had never learned any real skill for survival. She was designed to marry a man who will make providence for her and her family...lavishly," she said, dejected. "Our family fell into deep poverty, and in this great time of need—my mother considered a desperate measure as far as begging outside the gate of the royal court. This was when she met Chi-Fu, who recognised her familiar face."
"So, Chi-Fu lent her some money?" Shang deducted. He couldn't hide his disbelief.

"Given," Meihui corrected. "Maybe it was out of pity, may be out of passion, I don't know—nonetheless, we are living comfortably now—thanks to him."

Shang fell quiet. He had never seen the selfless, charitable side of the old, naggy councillor that had caused him nothing but trouble.

"How about you?" Meihui returned. "Chi-Fu said that you are married."

"I am."

"Is she from around here?"

"No. But our fathers were close acquaintances."

"Oh, what an excellent match! Both of you must inherit a good breed," Meihui complimented candidly. "Who's her name?"

"Fa Mulan, the eldest daughter of Fa Zhou."

"Fa Zhou? You mean the great war-strategist Fa Zhou?" Meihui said, impressed. "I know him.—I mean, who didn't know the Tiger of China?"

Shang nodded. He had to admit when his mother first came home and enthusiastically shared the news—it was all sounded perfect—too perfect even. It's almost like a match made in heaven.

"She must be remarkable!" Meihui gushed. "Just like her father."

You have no idea, Shang scoffed had never spoken those words out loud but the million emotion that played across his face did.

"Sorry, did I say something wrong?" Meihui clearly puzzled by Shang's reaction. "I mean, coming from the similar background, she is one of a few qualified women to understand your daily challenge as a leader, right?"

"True…" Shang considered. "Although her stubbornness can often be a trouble sometimes," he blurted out.

"You mean you rather have a girl that only speak whatever things you want to hear? Even… a lie?" Meihui said, her small, soft voice suddenly sounded harrassed and agitated.

"No, no… that's not what I meant," Shang said, slightly surprised with her sharp reaction. "I don't want her to sugarcoat the truth or telling me a lie. All I want is her obedience. Submission. Is that too much to ask?"

This time Meihui nodded and let a dainty chuckle in response to Shang's exasperated plea."Oh… a 'yes-sir' girl will bore you to death, Captain Li. What so interesting about a woman with no opinion? You'll die or boredom."

Shang rolled his eyes. "Try me. I think I'll rather die of boredom."

"Pardon me if this sounded patronising. I know stubbornness can be off-putting. But stubborn also means persistent, tenacious, and never wanting to give up. Stubbornness can be very trying but it is also an amazing attribute." Meihui explained.
"Amazing?" Shang deadpanned.

"Yes. Tell me if I am wrong," Meihui said sagely. "But a stubborn woman like your wife is usually fierce with her feelings and when it comes to things and people she loves, she's all in."

Shang fell silent. His mind recollected every instance how Mulan diligently rehearsed all the womanly etiquette prior to their wedding. He could tell that graceful elegance didn't come naturally to her. Nonetheless, her determination and hard work finally won her perfectionist mother-in-law's stamp of approval. That in itself wasn't an easy feat. And how Mulan vehemently argued him to take the place of her disabled father. She was undoubtedly fierce with her feeling and willing to do anything for the people she loved!

"Perhaps...—Perhaps you are right," Shang relented. From the first day he saw Mulan inside their bridal sedan, he quietly admitted that Mulan possessed some indescribable attributes that he found appealing. He just couldn't figure out what it was. Was it her affinity to challenge him? To speak her mind in earnest?

"I was just... —it's just complicated," he resigned. "I just can't understand her at all."

"It takes time," Meihui placated. "But having a stubborn woman means that she's stubborn about you. And if she loves you—she will love you, no matter what. Just like I was with Yao." She reached her neck and gasped in surprise.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh! I think I've lost my engagement necklace! It must've dropped inside your tent when I was sleeping last night."

Shang rose from his seat, patting his trousers and took Qing's reins. "Don't worry, we'll get it back."

The next day Mulan kept herself busy to prevent her mind wandering off to where Shang was. Unfortunately, it was a futile effort considering there were not many things to do while clueless Chi-Fu left in charge.

The old councillor obviously knew nothing about training. Therefore, in order to keep the soldier occupied, he allowed them to go to the Autumn Fires Festival, set nearby on the foot of Wudan Hill, with the promise everyone returned back to the encampment before midnight—a condition that accepted by the recruits with delight.

"What do people do in Autumn Fires Festival?" Mulan asked aloud when she sat together with other soldiers during meal time. A few recruits exchanged meaningful glances and chuckled quietly until one of them took a pity on her and replied. "It's a festival to basically enjoy the last bit of warmth before winter took over."

"You should come," said Wu, one of the men with a beard, over his shoulder. "It'll be fun!"

"Big party all tonight until morning!" Chen added.

"That's sound tiring," Mulan said, considering a good night sleep as a rare commodity these days. Why these men found sleepless night enticing was beyond her.

The two men looked at her and chuckled.
"There will be drinks, laughing leaf, magic mushroom, music…—"

"—…and women," Wu pointed out. "Come with us, Ping. It'll be fun!"

"Fun?" Mulan wondered aloud.

"Fun for us, men!" added Chen, smirking pointedly.

"Yes," Wu laughed heartily when she gawked and blushed realized the hidden meaning behind his words. "Oh, Ping. You are so innocent!"

Mulan wondered why she had never of such festivities.

"Consider this is the last indulgence we'll have before the war," Chen said, slapping her shoulder in a friendly way. "I'll show you around, don't you worry."

Mulan considered her option. Under normal circumstances, she won't join this kind of gathering. She could imagine Ling's testy response or Chien-Po's aghast gasp if they knew where she was heading or what kind of company she ran into. But Mulan was still bitten by Shang's betrayal that she made a concession to allow herself to do anything that took her minds off him.

"Okay, I'll come with you."

An hour later, Mulan and a few other recruits set out in a good cheer towards Wudan Hill. About a mile into the clearing, they could hear pounding drums and smell of smoke from a distance away. They were soon joined by more crowds of people from all sort of life: merchants, farmers, prostitutes, bandits, performers…and even a few Huns. One man, in particular, gave her a queer look. Mulan decided to keep her distance.

"Where all these people come from?" she asked gingerly.

"Many places….—Ah, you don't want to know," replied one of the men who happened to stand closest to her. Despite his ragged look—tousled hair that looked like hadn't been washed for months and his spiralling tattoo on the calf of his leg and notorious looking scar on his right cheek—the man was extremely cordial. "Just enjoy the party and do whatever you like, because whatever happens in Wudan, stays in Wudan."

The gathering was nothing short of awe-inspiring. By the centre of the clearing was an enormous bonfire spitting smoke and embers towards the moon. People in various state of inebriation and undress danced around the fire.

Mulan observed. Most of the girls she saw were either prostitutes or performer or something in between. She didn't see anyone normal—like a girl that came with her family or her husband—and it all soon became apparent to her: these people were poor, homeless or criminal, or anyone who didn't want their identity known. From the crowds gathered here, one would easily get an impression that China was a huge underclass in which Mulan had little awareness. However, they seemed happy—laughing, drinking, and dancing. The mood was infectiously cheery.

It was then the stark reality stung her and she began to feel out of place, stunted. The rest of the world was just out there, dancing before her eyes, beating with life, and what had she been doing so far? Cooking in the kitchen until her back broke, living with snappy mother-in-law whose only objective was to grind years of womanly conduct into her skull, and for what? In pursuit of what...?
Was it her husband's acceptance? His affection?... His love?

Whatever it was. It's something she could never have.

How much of the world had she missed out living as this kind of woman? Enslaved by emotion and bonded by the empty hope of love?

The thought put a resolve in her pace. Tonight would be different.

Tonight she would taste life.

The last ray of blazing sun dipped into the depth of horizon. Up in the sky, the star threw a party. The night was chilly but the spirit was high. Mulan saw as her compatriots sat around the table, putting their gamble and sipping their laughing leaf. Then was a few men approaching her, perhaps not in an entirely right state of mind for mistaking her as a woman, but Mulan didn't care.

They looked like soldiers from other regiments, charming, tall, dark and handsome in whom she had every reason to be interested—but it did nothing to her. In fact the more charming, attractive and muscular, the less she liked them.

One of them gallantly offered to get her a drink, which she refused by politely said she had an upset stomach. Albeit looking a little on the tipsy side, the man took her refusal well and soon was found swooning over a bunch of voluptuous dancers who invited him joining to the beat.

She was soon forgotten.

*They were all the same,* she scoffed quietly. *All men are the same, like Shang.*

"Hey," a voice behind her grunted. "Sweet boy."

Mulan glanced back over her shoulder. Her heart nearly stopped when she realized it was the Huns man she saw a couple of days ago in Xi'an market. She recalled sending the man on a wild goose chase after accidentally dropped a big clay pottery on the man's toe. Worse, she could see a few of his compatriots lingered around the bonfire, gambling and smoking.

"Y-yes?" she said, putting her tone a pitch louder to obscure her trembling voice.

The man laughed, looked at her up and down and shaking his head. "Now, I totally didn't see this comin'."

"Don't see what?" Mulan braved herself to ask. Despite his burly built like a stereotypical Huns, the guy spoke with surprisingly eloquent Chinese.

The Hun man ignored her question, went to grab his beer pint and drank deeply. "You breakin' bad or something?" he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I mean… most men are here for the girls, gambling and drugs—I know that. But you?" he burst out laughing. "You can be one of those girls."

Mulan's hackles rose. "What I'll do here is none of your business," she bristled.

A surprise and a flick of admiration flashed on the man's eyes. He almost admired this little Chinese boy for having the nerve to answer him like he did.

"I know you," he told Mulan. "You are the Chinese soldier in the market!"
"I…—I didn't…—" Mulan had inched away, preparing her swift exit.

"Look," the Hun man said again. "If you need spy work, come to me first, okay? Good money—I promise," he said with a smirk. "You can spend on betting, drinking… or girls."

It was Mulan's turn to be surprised. "You… you are not going to call your clan...to…—I don't know…—kick my ass or something?" she said dumbly.

"Ain't no benefit in kickin' your ass, Sweetheart," he scoffed. Mulan could only gape at him and the man laughed. "Don't believe me don't you? Here," he said, tossing a coin to one of the guys with a cartload of bottles. "The drink is on me."

"But…—" Mulan sputtered.

"Name's Hayabusa. Talk to me first, 'kay."

Her brain seemed to stop functioning, so she only managed to say a weak, "Y-Yes Sir."

He laughed again. "Ain't call me Sir. I'm not your boss," and he stood and left.

Mulan watched the man walked away, overcome with the weirdest feeling of acceptance she ever experienced.

"Your drink!" The bartender, a man with an earring pierced on his nose, handed over a rustic looking wooden bowl as he took the coin Hayabusa tossed earlier. Something putrid and green danced inside, but Mulan hardly noticed. Her head swam, racing with train of thoughts. Did she just met one of the Huns soldiers and he offered her to …—that was just absurd! Did that man think she will dishonour her country for petty financial rewards?

Nodding in grateful silence, she accepted the drink and sit obediently on the dirt as though she was under a spell, that was a few steps that she didn't feel.

"You'll love it," said the bartender, showcasing his smile and a few missing teeth.

She sipped her drink. It tasted strange—no, in fact, it tasted horrible, repulsive! But there was something in it that drew her to take another sip and another…

From a distance, she saw a few of her compatriots, joining the undulating crowds by the fire. Tongues of energy emanated from their skin. Somehow she could see how the music connected them all. The thumping rhythm suddenly sounded like a soothing lullaby in her ears.

She slowly looked up and saw the star twinkled in the sky, they rays extended and retracted as though breathing. She reached her hands towards the sky, tracing the constellation, and felt her digits touch something warm and fuzzy like she grasped into the depth of an entire universe in her hands. Just like when Shang hugged and cuddled her to sleep.

Shang….

A bubble of darkness rose within her and suddenly she couldn't breathe. She fell to her knee, gasping as though her chest had been pierced with an arrow.

"Agh… no!" she cried.

"Hey," a man said. Mulan recognised him, but no name came into her mind. But it hardly bothered her. The man looked friendly anyway and his hand was equally soft and warm.
"Is this poison?" she asked him. "Wait..! Do that usually move? I mean… can...can it moves?"

"What moves?"

"The snakes... on your skin," Mulan pointed out at the tattoos that spiralled out of the man torso all the way up to his neck and part of his face.

He laughed. "Cos not Sweetheart. But everything's movin' when you drink that! Don't believe me, check your toes!"

Mulan looked down. She gasped in surprise when she saw the ground beneath her feet was transformed into a thick mass of cloud. Soft and fluffy—swirling around in a folding prism of musical light. She was just about to enjoy the amazingness when she felt her balance was lost and she was about to tumble…—

"Easy there, Sweet Boy," the man said.

"Oh, thank…—thank you, Sir," Mulan said. And despite a few ugly thoughts of Shang still nagging somewhere in the back of her head, she felt curiously lighthearted.

"Hayabusa… 'member me?" the man smiled. "You seemed to enjoy yourself. Mind if I join?"

"Oh no..no..Please do," Mulan laughed, didn't understand why she sounded more delirious than she intended to be.

"Try this. Even better!" Hayabusa said, offering a cigarette to which Mulan had no idea what to do until he demonstrated to her. She mimicked his motion, putting the pipe into her mouth, inhaling the smoke deep into her lungs.

"Ack…" she spat out. The scent left a trail of acrid taste in her tongue, her eyes began to water and she felt an overwhelming desire to retch. "This…—what is this? Bleugh! It's horrible! Ugh!"

Just as she was about to assume Hayabusa was playing a joke on her, a wave of pleasure hit her, passing over her senses like a thin membrane of pure joy, and she was swept off, forever into the night and into the stars. Her feet become nothing but a wisp of smoke, a blessed release from the confine of her emotion and dilemma, a release from being her! She laughed with joy. Hayabusa joined her and together they danced.

She felt wondrously enchanted, like an insubstantial spirit watching the gathering, loving every song she heard and every person she saw.

"Ah… I have never seen things this beautiful," she gushed.

"What is?"

"Everything!"

He laughed, spinning her for a twirl. "I bet nothing sort of like this in your encampment."

"No. It's nothing like this."

Hayabusa chuckled. "Aye, you are one bad boy. Come here to party all night."

The guilt crept to her chest, clawing its way up to her throat. Although Mulan felt her act was—in some way—justifiable, other parts of her condemned her deliberate intention of breaking the rule out of selfish needs to soothe her aching heart.
"Just for tonight," Mulan told him, taking another puff and sighing in relief when the smoke once again dulled all the bitter reality around her. "I just need sometime to...—Oh, nevermind," she waved her hand, wilfully deflecting the shadow of Shang and Meihui and whatever they might to tonight to pollute her mind.

"Perhaps he is leaving me...—" she whispered, accepting her fate.

"Who is?" Hayabusa raised his brows. Mulan slapped her stray mouth, it was not the details that meant to be spoken out loud.

"Its...—I mean everyone is leaving...—as in away. Yes, they are all...—gone."

Hayabusa tilted his head but seemed to be buying her lie. "That's what I am guessin'. When the cat's away the mice will play," he smirked, knowingly, Mulan smiled back, playing along.

"So tell me, who are these cats, huh?"

"Venerable Chi-Fu....Prince of Wei.... our Captain...," she gritted her teeth when the image of Shang returned, spreading like disease contaminating her senses. This time she snatched the cigarette out of Hayabusa's hand with eagerness. She took a deep breath until a wave of pleasure billowed.

"Prince of Wei you said?"

"Yes," Mulan replied, the image of Shao Wei in his red cape and looking perfectly out of place in the regiment full of underprivileged recruits made her broke into another train of delirious laughter.

"One night of fun won't do any harm," Hayabusa commented, returning her smile and offering her another dose of his cigarette.

"Exactly," Mulan approved, taking another puff. "Oh....!" she marvelled as the world around her burst into colourful fireworks. She looked up into the sky, strewn with stars along a rich milky path—the path that led into a dimension she had never seen, deeper and more enduring than she ever recognized.

"This is... amazing," she drawled, felly an overwhelming feeling of comfort, happiness and trust.

"I know right?" Hayabusa nodded in agreement. "Talking of which. Where is your encampment?"

Attila was sitting on the far side of the hill when he captured the glimpse of his mentor, Hayabusa, by the lake, dancing mindlessly with a young Chinese soldier in his hands. The scene looked absurd to him, but he was certain Hayabusa wasn't drunk or intoxicated. His mentor was far more careful to let his guard lose in a place invested with a throng of bandits, pickpockets and criminals around.

Attila prowled closer and hid behind the shrub. He clicked his tongue softly, making his presence known only to Hayabusa. A few minutes later, his mentor joined him, ducking behind the coppice with a big smile on his face.

"My instinct is right," he told Attila. "Thank goodness you didn't kill that dirty Chinese urchin," he said while scribbling something on the parchment from under his sash. "Here. Inform General
Shan Yu to assemble the army," he instructed, handing the message to Attila.

"Tell him—In a fortnight, Northern Wei will be ours."

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? Do you think Mulan will find out the truth about Shang and Meihui? Do you think Shang will eventually figure out his wife was under his nose all the time? And... how will Mulan hid her pregnancy as the months passed? All will be revealed soon.

This is my longest chapter yet. Review and fave are cherished. Thank you for reading :-)


The chilly autumn rain pounded the earth that evening, just as Shang and Meihui concluded their journey. Arriving in Xi'an, they stayed in a motel closest to the market square, posing as a pair of siblings from overseas looking for a little fortune and opportunity to trade.

The room was small, the decoration was spartan and lacking furnishing with just a single tatami bed and small pillow—very unfavourable sleeping arrangement considering Shang couldn't (well, he could… but his pride wouldn't) let a woman sleep on the floor. While they could well afford to rent two room, Shang worried it might raise some suspicion. It didn't make sense for him to sleep in a different room alienating his sister. So, he left with no choice.

"Captain Li, you can take the bed. I have enough good night sleep last night," Meihui offered when she saw Shang struggled to get comfortable, curling in an awkward position on the dinky corner of the room.

"No, I am fine Miss Meihui. You go ahead and sleep."

"You are fine?" she chuckled. "You are sandwiched between the wall and the bed with not even an inch of space to turn. I think your definition of 'fine' needs some adjustment."

"Yes. But believe me, I've been in worse," Shang said stubbornly.

Meihui rolled her eyes. "You know…You don't have to act tough all the time. Even the mightiest warrior have to accept help from weaklings sometimes," she said and burst out laughing when Shang gaped at her. "Oh, I was only joking. Of course you…—Mr. Tough Guy—You go ahead and sleep and enjoy the cold floor while I suffer the luxury of this warm, comfy bed."

"Thank you," Shang deadpanned, although couldn't help to hide his smirk at Meihui's banter.

The floor was cold, slightly damp and the corner of the room barely could contain his large frame. But Shang's aching body really couldn't care any less. He sighed contentedly as he laid on its hard surface. The coldness of the floor felt like a force that seeped into his muscle, undoing its knots and helped it to relax.

The next day they rose early and combed the entire market from north to south. And for once Chi-Fu was right. Meihui helped him navigate through the crowd and assisted him to stay natural and anonymous in the crowd. He could pretend he was talking to her when clearly his attention was elsewhere.

By late afternoon, Shang began to see the enormity of the task at hand. Xi'an market was filled with hundreds, if not, thousands of stalls. There was exceeding number of people coming in and out. Without any clues or specifics, looking for a man in the place this busy was like trying to find a needle in haystacks.

And he was right.

Three days passed without any progress. The longer it took to track the Prince, the more frustrated Shang became. Why were there so many people, stalls and alleyway? There were at least five main
arteries that branched into countless smaller back alleys should the Prince wish to conceal himself.

Shang began to fear the search would be fruitless until days later and all the hassle of taking Meihui and abandoning the training would be nothing but a waste of time!

*Oh, you fool. You shouldn't have listened to Chi-Fu and allow your curiosity get a better of you,* rebuked the voice in his mind.

He should've stayed and stayed focus in training his recruits….or perhaps allowed himself to speak to Ping about his strange behaviour during their spar instead of leaving things unresolved between them.

He should've…—

*There is no use of regrets.* The voice inside his head admonished. Shang exhaled loudly. Frustration and regret sliced through him.

Just as he was about to give up all hope, something caught his attention.

"Ms. Chua—The Healer", the sign said.

He was ill. Ling's voice echoed in his head. *Well, I suspected he was.* Ling pressed a paper into his palm. Shang had limited knowledge in herbal-remedy, but he was certain the dosage prescribed on the paper was meant to last for months, if not a year. *Healer Chua,* the scribbled on the bottom was signed. *I saw Ping sneaking there as we went to the market. I got curious. And then I saw this inside his sack.* Ling explained. *I trusted you are a man of good heart and integrity, Captain,* he said as he folded back the paper. Shang nodded. He understood that Ling had trusted him with a great secret that possibly would ruin his friendship with Ping forever. *This will remain between us,* he had promised.

"Hey, are you alright?" Meihui's voice snapped Shang out of his stupor.

"I...—" Shang quickly tore his eyes from the sign he had been staring for a minute or so. The question was running through his mind like a wild horse. "I...I'm fine."

"*Fine?*" Meihui narrowed her eyes.

"Yes, I was just thinking about..." Shang frantically looked for an idea for a convincing cover story. A book stall appeared on the corner of his eyes gave him just the idea. "I am looking for a gift for my wife," he said. Which wasn't strictly a lie, he was thinking a lot about what Meihui said a few days earlier about him and his stubborn wife. About why he failed to understand and appreciate her quality and zealousness. Perhaps, he should make an amend and initiated the first move to fix their strained relationship. He figured a gift would be perfect.

"Oh?" It was clear Meihui didn't expect such thoughtfulness came out of him, which stung a little, but he let it slip. There was a bigger elephant in the room to address.

"My wife loves to read. Books will be..."

"That's an excellent idea!" Meihui cut him and elbowed him on his side. "Then what are you waiting for? Go and find the most romantic tale that will melt her iron heart! Be careful though, some of those romance flicks can be outrightly graphics! Although not a bad idea for you and your wife to reenact." Meihui muffled her laughed when Shang turned red.

"I... I better get going."
"Shoo…Tough Man!" Meihui let a dainty chuckle.

Shang zipped through the crowds while his eyes trained at the sign above the healer's door.

*Is it serious? incurable?* Shang thought. *Is it….terminal?*

Shang came to the door and knocked. A young lady brown robe who appeared to be the receptionist welcomed him.

"How can I help you, Sir?"

"Hello, I'm sorry. I just want to inquire. Is there a patient here by the name of Fa Ping?"

The ladies went inside to check her records, leaving Shang to peruse the almost full waiting room. There were a few men but mostly women of all size and way of life. Upon closer inspection, it was clear that Ms. Chua wasn't an ordinary healer.

She was a midwife.

*Has Ping... Has he impregnated a woman?!* The fourteen-year-old boy who had claimed coming here to defend the honour of his family….and had ended up between the sheets?

Shang could suddenly feel the sting of anger, disappointment piling up around him.

*I know your son is a very capable man, General Li. But Li Shang is too young for such responsibility.* Chi-Fu's belittlement resonated in his ears. The old counsellor was always trying to find fault and discredit him in every opportunity that he possessed. If that old man knew not only he had let Ping slipped from under his surveillance but also giving that boy a chance to commit sacrilege act, that would be the end of his career.

*How dare he! HOW DARE HE!* Shang thought furiously. *He was barely performing in the regiment and was spending….wait. No. Wasting was a better word! Wasting his time messing around with women!*

When the receptionist came out to inform him there was no patient with such a name, Shang was already gone.

____________________________________________________________________________________

Mulan woke up back inside the communal tent.

Her head hurt like hell.

She rose a hand to her head and the movement makes her dizzy. Her raging hangover told her she was either drunk or drugged last night.

Part of her instinct said she should at least told Ling or Chien-Po. But what should she tell them? That she was out there wasting herself with a bunch of strange men hoping would taste a little thrill of life? That she was trying to lessen the ache of her broken heart? What broken heart? Was she ready admitting to her friends that she was irretrievably in love with a man who would never, could never reciprocate her feeling?

Mulan sighed.

There was no memory other than she had joined with a few men to that extremely wild party in Wudan. Another part of her was relieved because whatever had happened last night couldn't be good.
Thankfully none of Mulan's comrade who had taken her breathed the truth. As they said, what happened in Wudan, stayed in Wudan.

Instead, one of the recruits, Wu told Chi-Fu they had spent the night doing harmless fun at the nearby village—whatever that implied. Chi-Fu seemed to care nothing about it and didn't question them further, and instead, passing them a long list of food to buy for General Li's visit. Ling was too busy telling Chien-Po about his latest romantic encounter with Ting Ting, an astoundingly beautiful and well-mannered girl. They, too, didn't question her absence last night when Wu said she was with him and other men, and they were all stayed up late playing mahjong at the bar.

Mulan groaned as she struggled to sit up. She considered going back to bed. There was no Shang, no training. No one would scold her for lateness or for lack of discipline. But her bladder clearly had a different priority.

Forcing herself to stand up, Mulan headed towards the river. On the way, she passed through Shang's tent which located on the far end of the encampment.

She heard a ruckus, and a shadow stormed out of the tent.

Another woman?

Mulan knew she wouldn't like whoever she saw coming out of Shang's tent—whether he was there or not—but she couldn't help but to look.

No. It's not a woman.

It was Yao, cursing and swearing profanities as he stomped out of Shang's tent. "You bastard!" she heard him screaming. "How dare you take what is mine! MINE! One of this day, I will make you pay! I swear!"

Ling trotted slowly behind Ping, Chien-Po and a few other recruits, feeding his sight on the dust under his feet.

"Ling, pick up your pace!" Wu scolded from his front.

"If you walked at this rate even all the women would've left the bar!"

"As if women would be interested in him," said a guy to Wu's left to which Wu shushed him with a laugh.

"Don't mind them," Mulan whispered gently.

"I second that," Chien-Po added.

Ling sighed and looked up at the sky which already turned dark by the time they arrived in Xi'an. Due to the sizeable purchase, Chi-Fu had sent a larger entourage to carry out the mission.

In a couple of days, General Li would visit the encampment to monitor their progress and selected those who would join Captain Li to the front line. While Ling took pride if he were to be chosen, it also could mean his life would be at stake.

As the time neared, Ling grew more melancholy. What if tomorrow were the last time he could see her? What if he found her with another man after he returned from war?

Unable to bear the secret any longer, Ling turned to Chien-Po, someone with a similar situation
with him for a counsel.

"The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone," his friend told him. "You should tell her before it's too late."

Ling thought it was wise. Should this war end him, he didn't want to hold any regret of things left unsaid.

When Chi-Fu sent a group of them to Xi'an, Ling saw his chance. He immediately arranged a small gathering in their favourite tea house. The owner of the teahouse, Mr. Wang, graciously agreed and refused Ling's payment when he expressed his intention to book the entire room to themselves.

"That day happens to be my birthday, why don't Ms. Ting Ting played her erhu for me and we consider it done-deal," Mr. Wang said. It was an offer that no one could refuse.

When they arrived, the first pile of snow was ensconced outside the establishment. But the back room of the tea house was delightfully intimate, a small room with a fireplace, just as Ling wanted.

"Are you sure sitting on the floor will be a good idea?" asked Mr. Wang. "It's a little colder than usual, and the temperature plummeted once the sun is gone. You have been on your feet the whole day; I feel bad to let you sit uncomfortably."

Ling looked around the establishment that was already packed with people. There was no place for them to sit on the mat, taking note Chien-Po would likely to take two or three spaces at once.

"I'm sure after a long journey everyone would appreciate just about anything. Thank you, Mr. Wang," he assured.

"I'll prepare the tea then," Mr. Wang smiled.

"That would be appreciated," Chien-Po bowed before he took a seat. A few other recruits huddled in front of the fireplace while Ping huddled to Chien-Po for warmth. Ling understood they had no time to waste and gestured to Ting Ting to start.

Ting Ting took his cue, taking a tiny sip from her ceramic cup and started tuning her erhu. All conversation stopped, everyone watched her do this. After a moment she became aware of the sea of attention fixed on her and looked up sheepishly.

"Shall I…. start?" she said, confidence draining from her feet.

"Well, we didn't come here to watch you tune… we want a song," Chien-Po said, chuckling and exchanging meaningful glances with Ping.

Ting Ting's cheek reddened, looking undeniably bashful. They all gushed with "D'awww" and laughed.

"We're going to stare at you without mercy then," another recruit teased.

"Ok… fine. I am not the best, but I hope this will do."

She drew her bow across the string. Within a few notes, she had all of them enchanted, eyes mesmerised while beautiful melody was twisting around them. The fire from the lantern flickered from all around them as the Milky Way burst into view above, whirling across the sky like a diamond in the sea.
Ling glanced at Chien-Po, who had his chubby chin propped on his hand, smiling with a dopey look on his eyes. "I see what you mean, Ling," he said softly.

"About what?"

Chien-Po sighed and gestured towards Ting Ting with his eyes. "This... she is...—This can't be helped."

"I know," Ling shook his head. "Some days I can hardly believe it."

"Believe what?"

"She is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen and I will make her mine," he said, pulling a jade pendant out of his pocket. "I managed to sneak and bought this just now."

Chien-Po gasped. "You are going to propose her? This soon?"

"Idle fantasy does not make a relationship," Ling said. "Besides, pretty girl like her won't hang around that long. I have to act swiftly and cease the opportunity."

"You are right," Chien-Po agreed. "If she said yes, I take it you will be asking her parents for her hand."

"I know it's only been a short while, but I...—" Ling closed his eyes, like thinking deeply. "I have never been so sure in my life."

"You are one lucky man," Chien-Po grinned goofily.

"I am."

A beautiful serenade filled the air. Ling sighed with delight. Perfect would be an understatement—to be here, with his friends, and his beautiful enchantress was weaving her spell all over them. What could be better? Even if he never made it out of the war alive, this would be a final bouquet of the memory of her, something that he could pin closed to his heart as he faced enemy's spear.

When the song finished, everyone clapped. Ling took the chance as a perfect moment to dedicate the jade pendant and offered the words he had rehearsed thousand times over last night. The crowds burst into another cheer.

To his dismay, there were no tears of joy. There was no hug. No acceptance. And no misty eyes as Ting Ting accepted his gift. She looked shell-shocked. Petrified even.

"Oh, you two look so cute together!" Tian gushed, suddenly materialised out of nowhere. "...but I'm afraid the cuteness had to come to an end. We have to go now," she said, tugging Ting Ting's hand with a force, giving the girl barely a chance to respond.

"Sorry, urgent family matter," Tian said to no one in particular.

Ling, assuming the explanation was directed to him, nodded and smiled understandingly although sting of disappointment sliced through him.

"See you soon," he said with his eyes fixated to Ting Ting until her figure disappeared from view.

Most of the recruits went out of the establishment still rather mystified by Ting Ting's enchanting
play. All, except for Mulan and Chien-Po, who obviously knew how much Ting Ting's unexpected response had crushed their best friend.

"She didn't say 'no',' placated Chien-Po.

"And she actually accepted your gift," Mulan pointed out. "That's a good sign."

Chien-Po hummed his agreement. "Give her some time until the reality sinks in."

Ling sighed, defeat still evident."But what if she said no?"

Mulan frowned at him. *Like it matters what she said? You can marry any girl as long as her parents agreed. You can deal with her as you pleased and treated her as your property! As your possession! Just like Shang did to me. She wanted to say, but she bit her words.No. Ling was a far more dignified man than someone who will force his will to a helpless woman just because he can.*

So Mulan swallowed her own emotion and smiled at her friend. "If she is the woman worthy of your love, she won't say no."

A dose of warm tea and beautiful song did do wonders. Feeling rejuvenated, Wu, acting as the team-leader, divided the group and delegated each team with a portion of Chi-Fu's long shopping list before the day concluded.

"Let's go," Mulan said, dragging Ling with her. "We have a couple of hours before the market completely shut." She hoped keeping Ling busy would take his mind off Ting Ting.

Thankfully, it didn't take much cajoling to lift up Ling's spirit. After minutes into the task, he began to tell embarrassing stories, crack lame jokes and laugh at them.

It was until…

"Is that… Prince of Wei?" Mulan whispered, urgently tugging Ling to lower down. The Prince of Wei was seen wearing a plain two-piece robe, but his exceptionally muscular, taller than average stature distinguished him from the assemblage of peasants, making him an easy target to spot. The Prince was seen skirting around the marketplace watchfully towards the edge of the square.

"That can't be. He supposed to be in Chang'an for some important meeting; I saw it on the schedule sheet as we signed out our name from Chi-Fu's attendance list," Ling confided.

"Then, why is he….here?"

They were briefly staring at each other, trapped at their own bewilderment.

"Watch out. He is heading here!" Mulan warned, shrinking underneath the shadow while Ling whistled some cheesy romantic song as though it made him totally inconspicuous.

Thankfully, Shao Wei seemed to be totally oblivious of the invasion of his personal agenda, proceeding to head towards his destination.

Both recruits cunningly camouflaged themselves and blended into the crowds. After inspecting their surrounding, they prowled and approached the nearby wall furtively, making sure the Prince didn't notice their presence.

Mulan strategically hid behind an umbrella seller, standing an earshot away from the Prince to eavesdrop, while Ling stood further away.
"You are late!" A girl with a thin pink veil obstructing her face admonished warmly. Her finger flicked her lustrous, long hair in unconscious grace. Mulan thought she recognised that voice but the cacophony around her made it impossible to make a conclusive judgement.

The Prince grinned. "I had to look presentable for my princess, no?"

Laughing, the girl shook her head. "You always look handsome," she flattered, her finger brushing the Prince's arm fondly.

_My Princess?_ Mulan questioned the intimate way the Prince addressed the girl. The faint shadow of her crimson lips curled upwards, flaunting her disarming smile. At the moment, everything about her was screaming 'love interest' right atop her head.

_Wait, if this girl is the Prince's potential romantic interest....then, who is the mysterious woman in the woods?_

Then, Mulan remembered the story Chi-Fu shared. As a young man, Shao Wei's life had been defined by the latest party, the latest drunken binge, the latest string of nameless women… Although he was studious, witty and never took his responsibility lightly, he'd run fast and far from any hint of commitment, especially when it dealt with the subject of choosing a wife.

There were more people festering the place, so Mulan moved away to avoid unwanted attention. Constantly focusing on her target, she prowled behind the clothing stalls and stood next to one of the customers, pretending to be passionately interested in one of the garment. It was then she noticed Ling was no longer with her.

Mulan crept closer so she could have a better view of the Prince. He took out the content of his sack: a box of delicacies, a woven cashmere throws with gold thread, and a few other stuff Mulan couldn't exactly identify but looked that they may have cost the world.

"Spying again I see," said the voice that nearly made Mulan yelp.

"Mushu!" she hissed.

The dragon grinned, "Miss me I see! So, have we lost interest in Captain Handsome and spying someone else? Mm…?"

Mulan rolled her eyes and returned to the object of her interest. The Prince was still regaling the mysterious woman with his gift. But someone seemed to capture the Prince's attention. A beggar, sitting about a stone throw away. He was poorly clothed — his garment was minimal, dirty, and ragged. He sat cross-legged, slightly further from the entire commotion, shivering mildly from the incessant early wintry breeze. Next to him was a tattered, large linen bags that probably held his entire belonging, and a small tin was placed on the ground not far where he sat.

"Wait here," he said to the girl. He zipped quickly and returned without that expensive blanket in his hand.

"I hope you don't mind I've given that…—"

"Shao!" the girl admonished. "You know I have countless cashmere throws."

"Do you?" he said, blinking his eyes innocently.

She rolled her eyes. "You gave me a dozen of them on my birthday and I haven't even had a chance to use them yet!"
He shrugged, brow raised. "And your point is…?"

"I have enough blanket," she said, pointing to her shoulder that was wrapped neatly in a modest-looking material. "This works just fine."

"Seem like you acclimated well to the life of a peasant," he said in jest.

The girl gave him a faux-annoyed glare. "War will eliminate anyone. Rich or poor. Nobility or peasant. Your words, not mine."

"Relax, I am only joking," Shao smirked, flaunting his flirty smile as he encased her with his arms. The girl sighed, melting in his touch. "Not terrible to be honest. There is a hard aspect of it, but mostly… I enjoyed the friendship and freedom it's offered."

Mulan couldn't exactly hear most of the conversation, but at least she could watch the interaction between the Prince and the girl with relative ease. However, after minutes watching the exchange, Mulan decided it's time to come closer and decipher what they were truly discussing. When she saw her chance, he slipped and crouched down behind a stack of the crates full of pumpkin, listening.

"And oh," the girl interrupted herself. "I meant to tell you about something," she said, somewhat reluctantly. "Uuh, someone actually…—"

"Someone?"

"Yes."

Mulan crept closer but accidentally pushed one of the crates, and one pumpkin fell with a heavy thud. She cringed. "Shhh…" the Prince swiftly covered the girl's mouth with his hand.

"What….what happened?" the girl whispered, sounding half-terrified, half-perplexed.

"Someone is watching," he replied, clearly looking agitated. Mulan froze where she stood.

"But I suppose you are aware you can't hide me here forever, aren't you?" the girl said again. Mulan dared herself to peek through the gap between the crates.

"I know," Shao sighed, wiping a hand across his face, suddenly the tiredness looked so profound in his eyes. "But, you have to understand, this is the only way… I won't let him do this to you, treating you like a mere property and giving you up to that man!"

"But Father might be right; this may be the only way to…—"

"No!" Shao said adamantly, grabbing her by her arms. "You have to understand the only man that can protect you is me! Understand?"

"I…—" she choked. "Ouch…"

He suddenly snapped from his tirade and loosened his grip. "I'm...I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted," she said understandingly.

They just stood there, staring in silence for a minuted or two. Until the Prince began, "You trust
me, don't you?" he said after clearing his throat. "I am the only person who can protect you from all this. As long as I live, I won't let him touch you. Do you hear me, Ting Ting?"

Wait, Ting Ting?! Mulan gasped. It took her a minute to peruse the girl's semi-concealed appearance to conclusively deduced that indeed the girl was the same Ting Ting that she knew.

*Is she, his secret lover or something?*

A terrible thought struck her.

What if she was with him for money? Shao Wei had unlimited resources in that aspect. Or probably he was blackmailing her? Forcing her to be his sex-slave or some sort? But no. Those exchange didn't look...transactional. In fact, it looked far too genuine...and mutual.

"Holy cow," Mushu's voice piped in her ear.

"Ling wouldn't like this," Mulan whispered back.

"But you risked everything! Shao, please... just send me—send me away. To Japan or somewhere remote," Ting Ting implored.

"No. I have devised another plan. Altan has agreed to help me."

"The daughter of the Huns' leader? Didn't you hear yourself? You are going to form allies with the Huns just for...—No. I object," she tore herself from his arms. "I know you meant well, but if anyone discovered your ploy... you'd be accused of an act of treason. And the Emperor will have you executed as a traitor!"

"He wouldn't dare!" he snorted.

Ting Ting just pursed her lips, seeming to be entirely unsurprised by Shao's pretentious declaration. "When the sword is on your neck, it'll be too late for regret."

"We'll see about that," Shao replied with a smug smirk. "I'd say if there is one with fine sword-skill as I to one duel with Uncle Xiongnu, he would be the one who ends up six feet under."

"This is a serious drama." Mulan felt Mushu's breath tickling her ear. "I need some crackers and dumpling to watch this," he added.

"Shush Mushu!"

Her voice triggered Shao's instinctive reaction of scanning his surrounding. She forgot that only she could see and hear this annoying deity.

Mulan felt her presence was definitely unwelcome, carefully inched away from the behind the crates and into the crowd, while Mushu, pantomiming a slicing motion on his own neck and grinning mischievously.

Mulan sighed but choosing to selectively disregard him.

*Does Shao Wei has a personal vendetta against the Emperor? Is he really planning to form allies with the Huns behind everyone's back? Who is "him" they are talking about? That's serious food for thought. Which was probably why she didn't notice the sudden movement to her left until she collided with a strange man, falling to the ground on her hands and knees."

"Ouch," she moaned, feeling the scrapes on her palms. She got up and caught her balance and
looked up. A man. Well, a gigantic man stared back.

"I…—" she stuttered, taking in his huge, imposing structure and his mean tattoos that covered his entire arms and neck.

"Oh dear Guan Kim, not again!" Mushu moaned. "Do you ever use those eyes of yours, Girl? There are there not just for accessories you know?"

Mulan ignored Mushu's mocking and concentrated on the impending doom that currently staring indignantly at her.

It wasn't clear to Mulan whether the man was Chinese or Huns, a bandit or a soldier. What she knew was: he was the biggest man she ever saw. And If she thought giants only existed in a land of fantasy and fabled legends, today, she believed they were real.

"Hey!" he roared like a hungry predator, swinging his sausage hands in her direction. His smile was sinister and Mulan could sense his agitation leashed inside his athletic body. While she knew the civilised way was to admit her clumsiness and apologise but her survival instinct told her to run.

"Come here you, Buckethead!" The man screamed.

"Run! No… left left… no! Look out!" Mushu commanded, holding desperately to the tip of her collar. "For the love of Fa ancestor, please use your eyes this time."

"I am trying!" Mulan said between her heave. "Can't you shut up so I can concentrate?"

Unfortunately, in her haste of keeping her eye to her back and making sure she kept a distance with the infuriated hooligan, Mulan forgot to keep her eyes in front until she hit another concrete chested man who she imagined would be just as scary. So, when the man grabbed one of her hand, her defence reflexes automatically fired her other free hand to hit the man square on his face.

"Ouch!"

Wait, she recognised that voice. Slowly looking up, she saw the profile of Shang, rubbing his nose. Her first instinct was to touch the assaulted spot on Shang's face, but that would look...wrong in so many angles. So instead, rubbed the back of her neck and grinned sheepishly.

"Cap… Captain Li, Sir, I… —I'm sorry, I didn't see you there," she stuttered, wanting to sound as sharp but ended sounded like a student giving a lame excuse of forgetting his homework to his teacher.

"So much of using those damn eyes," Mushu grumbled into her ears.

"I guess he didn't know that you want to ruin his handsome face deliberately," Mushu commented, which perhaps contributed to Shang's current dazed look and his failure to respond to her direct attack on his nose. "He will have a crooked nose for the rest of his life—no longer able to participate in any form of duplicity, is that your jealousy sated now?"

Jealousy?

And that was it. That twinge of twisting feeling rising its ugly head. But before it spread, she saw Shang swiftly picking up the scroll that must've been accidentally knocked off during their struggle. Her eyes may be useless at spotting obstacle on the road, but they didn't fail to capture
important details. The scroll had an intricate gold seal and purple ribbon wrapped around it. On the tip of the silky material, it's spelt out. *To my wife, Fa-Li Mulan.*

Had he…. Had he bought her a…._gift_?

Her jealousy was zapped instantly as though it was killed with a double-edged sword. The remnant was only a feeling of remorse and guilt. Surely, a man convicted of extramarital affair won't bring his wife a thoughtful gift, won't he? Had he been thinking about her? Had he…_missed her_?

"Ping! What are you doing here?" Shang's voice snapped her from her mental monologue. There was a deep scowl etched on his face that immediately shattered her romantic fantasy.

"I… shopping, er...Ling, and…—a man. Run and…—I hit…—" Those were the only explanation she could verbalise. Shang raised one of his brows, crossing his muscular arms looking perfectly unimpressed with her fragmented, nonsensical excuse. Hell, he was still handsome. How could that even possible? It should be a crime to look hot even when he was angry, no?

Thankfully, despite the randomness of her sentence, when Shang saw a large man stomped and yelled questions to a passerby, he immediately acknowledged what must've happened and understood the grim trouble she was in.

He pulled her roughly aside, blending into the crowd and into a quiet back alleyway behind the shops. She felt his arms tighten around her fractionally before he let her go, allowing her the much-needed distance between them.

"You better have a good explanation about this!"

She looked up at him and watched in fascination as the surprised and shock slowly melted away, transitioning into bone-deep anger that could have scared anyone else. No. Not her.

"I told you! I was just helping Ling to shop!" Mulan just tilted her chin up in defiance and watched the anger spike higher.

Shang only returned her look with his signature "perpetual stare of death" and raised his brows in challenge to what she said. "And?"

"And I…—" she realised she shouldn't spy on the Prince and despite her discovery, she wasn't planning to tell Shang just yet. It was a dangerous allegation to accuse Prince of Wei without conclusive evidence. Amending her reply in her head, she swallowed back her words and decided to take a sudden passionate interest at her boots.

"This will have consequences," he growled through gritted teeth, answering her silence.

Mulan kept her eyes trained on her feet, and only answered a weak "Yes…. yes sir."

"It seems like I won't be able to accompany you to the market anymore," Mulan grounded out as she shifted a pile of horse dung, courtesy of Shang after being caught in the market earlier that day.

"You gave up on me already?" Ling whined, brows knotted in faux annoyance. "What kind of friend are you, Ping?"

"But you are looking oddly cheerful for a person that scoops horse dung," Chien-Po said, drumming the table with his chubby finger. It was the comment Mulan chose to pretend didn't hear. The recent discovery about her husband and how wrong she was of accusing him of infidelity
had made her felt indescribably relieved and elated to the cloud nine. Even shifting horse dung felt like shifting gold at the moment.

"I know her curve and looks are to die for, Ling. But I ain't gonna scoop any more crap for you. Doesn't matter how gorgeous, respectable and of excellent-descent Ting Ting is," Mulan feigned an exasperated sigh. A really fake exasperated sigh.

Ling snickered, passing a bottle of rice wine, purposely skipped Mulan and let Chien-Po had a double go at it.

"Hey!" Mulan whined when Ling simply swatted her waiting hand.

"No wine for the P-lady. And until we have the confirmation of those barley seeds, I ain't gonna let you drink. Not even a sip!"

"And you just stood there watching the P-lady doing this?" Mulan gestured towards a pile of fresh manure with her shovel. Ling chuckled and shook his head. "Unbelievable! You are worse than Captain Li."

Ling ignored that, unceremoniously taking the bottle back from Chien-Po and took another big gulp.

"I am glad I had a chance to meet Ting Ting," Chien-Po said between gulp. "She is smart, good-looking, respectable, polite. An exact opposite of the brainless twits your mother asked you to marry previously."

When Ling gave him a blank look, he went on with his statement. "Have you forgotten? The one who has uneven teeth and blatantly demanded your family heirloom as her dowry," Chien-Po reminded him. "She is a gold digger alright. Thank god your father still have a brain and refused her parent's offer straight away."

Ling coughed and gasped. "You mean Zhen Mei? You... you still remember?"

Chien-Po laughed. "How can I forget? Especially when her name literally means beautiful and innocent!" He guffawed harder causing his belly to jiggles. "Now, that's my friend what I called tragic!" he paused, easing his laugh. "Although, thinking about it... it was my mother who introduced her to your parents."

"So much of a friend you are!" Ling waved his accusing finger at him.

"Hey, you should thank me!" Chien-Po chastised him. "I broke my arm and you ended delaying your wedding for ten weeks to help me around the house. Otherwise, you may end up marrying a pregnant woman!"

"You were nearly betrothing a pregnant woman?" Mulan turned to Ling who sat horrified at the memory.

"Long story," Ling cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Apparently, a few months before, she was on the way to Chang'an hauling some exquisite handmade jewellery for sale. Her father was an excellent stone craftsman. Why had he sent his daughter on this unescorted journey far north will be a story for another day," Ling coughed.

"And?"

"Seeing the sign of snowy blizzard, she made this unanimous decision to alter the route and crossed
the wilderness to save time," Ling continued. "A group of bandits sensing the smell of money in
the air decided to follow her. Thankfully, a warrior who happened to travel in the opposite
direction came to her aid, however, ended up losing all his belongings and his horse in the process.
So, they ended up stuck in a cave for weeks due to the snow, with only each other for warmth... and entertainment."

"Woah," Mulan said, completely awed.

"Saved the Princess, claimed his prize," Chien-Po chimed in as Ling closed his story.

"But any man will do the same. So I have no beef with that dude," Ling stated levelly.

"Wait, you mean? You'll bang her too given the situation?" Chien-Po said, both shocked and
amazed... and perhaps a tiny bit envious.

Ling's face turned red. "Yeah. I'm gonna have to say yeah. I am going to say no. But yeah..." he
said, rambling a bit due to wine.

Mulan turned to Chien-Po. "Chien-Po, how about you?"

The man considered the situation. "Does she... wants to—, uhm, reward me?"

"Let's assume for a second that she wants to," Ling butted in, tipping the rest of the bottle to his
mouth.

"Does she still have this crooked teeth?"

"Ack. No. Let's pretend she is a beautiful princess with perfectly pristine, well-aligned teeth. Shiny.
Like a mother of pearl!" Ling lured.

"Like a princess will give me the time of the day," Chien-Po muttered.

"Chien-Po!" Ling groaned, getting impatient. "You are killing me here. Just answer the damn
question like a normal man!"

"Like hell you will know what is normal."

"Answer. The. Question!"

"I told you, I would if she wanted to. But if she's a princess, she probably doesn't. A peasant like
me doesn't even exist to those girls."

"I am sensing issues here," Mulan said, watching both semi-inebriated men having a fierce
argument about a fictional situation involving banging a fictional princess with fictional pearly
teeth. Which was a wrong move, because suddenly both men turned their attention to her. "Ping, would you?"

Mulan fell into thoughts and finally said. "Is she... cute?"

Both men suddenly fell silent, eyes bulging like a bug.

"Seriously?" Ling said a little too loudly that Chien-Po covered his mouth. "Now, I didn't expect
that coming."

"Geez, I guess we've learned something new about Ping today," Chien-Po said, still sounding
incredulous.
"We... ugh," Ling pinched the bridge of his nose. "Ping, we've been friends for decades, and you never told me that you...? Man! What else did I miss?"

"Oh no no no. It was a joke!" Mulan said, laughing.

"Hell no. I am sure spending weeks with naked men have done funny things to you, Pretty Ping," Ling said, making a circular movement with his fingers on the side of his head. "Watch out cute men...and women. Here comes Ping..."

Chien-Po laughed tipsily. "I am glad I am not single."

"You are single," Ling jabbed his skinny finger until his large friend flinched.

"Am I?"

"Yeah," Ling said. "Until you are officially married to Su, you'll say you are single."

"Oh!" Chien-Po retorted thoughtfully. "But I am not cute right?" he whispered to Ling before carefully stealing a glance at Mulan with the corner of his eyes.

"Oh dear ancestor, either you two are demented or there is something inside that rice wine," Mulan said, pointing at the empty bottle which was labelled "eL-eL" on it.

"Who is eL-eL?" she asked.

"Lanky Ling," Chien-Po chuckled and waved his stubby finger drowsily towards Ling.

"It was the name Ting Ting gave me," Ling said proudly. "Creative right? He called me Lanky Ling," he added, slapping his own chest in a masculine manner. "This is a gift from her weeks ago."

"And you think calling you that is a... compliment?" Mulan raised her brow.

"Her admiration is undeniable," he said dreamily.

Mulan felt her heart sank. After spending the entire day building Ling's hope back up, how could she break the unpleasant discovery about Prince Shao Wei and Ting Ting?

"Maaaaan!" Chien-Po slurred. "No wonder you seemed to be a magnet for... an... unique kind of chick!" It was clear unique wasn't the first word that popped into his mind.

"She said she isn't good with names. So she has to make interconnected points to help her brain to cope," Ling tried to explain.

Mulan cleared her throat, easing into the bad news. "What if. Just an 'if'. What if someone wants to betroth your beloved Ting Ting?"

"Someone?!" Ling turned his head so suddenly Mulan thought she heard his bone cracked.

"Whoa, calm down. Remember just an "if"; she tried to assuage his shock.

"Why would she want this someone?" Ling nearly yelled.

"Maybe...maaaaay be he is rich or handsome!" Chien-Po slurred and laughed tipsily when Ling glared dagger at him.
"Are you saying I am not handsome?" Ling sounded insulted.

"Oh, gods..." Mulan immediately regretted the notion of trying to reason with two inebriated men.

"Well, if he is rich, good looking and powerful, she won't be able to decline even if she wanted to, right?" Chien-Po insisted.

"Soulmate won't discriminate against looks and wealth," Ling sneered. "And I am quite sure such man with those qualities doesn't even exist," Ling shook his head sceptically.

"Of course. Like a...a...a prince, for example. Powerful. Handsome. Rich. A fictional prince," Mulan emphasised, seeing her chance to clarify the truth inconspicuously.

Ling considered for a moment. "I am sure if it is love, she'll choose to elope with me. And we'll live happily ever after. The end!"

"Yes, and having a prince wanting to stick his sword through your guts for the rest of your life," Chien-Po chuckled.

Mulan nodded approvingly. "You won't live an easy life abhorred by a powerful man with eyes and ears everywhere."

"Clearly a prince will use his power and charisma to suppress the helpless victim," Ling commented. "But I won't let her go. With love everything is possible," Ling said stubbornly.

Mulan wanted to disagree. In this scenario, Ting Ting, despite her delicate frame, didn't look like helpless victims at all. She was the first to throw her arms around him. And the way she smiled and fondled his arms, the affection seemed to be mutual.

"Love can't feed your hunger, can't pay the bill. I hope you are aware of that," Mulan reminded him.

"Hey thanks, that's so supportive of you," Ling said dryly. "I am quite certain that Ting Ting is my soulmate. She is the woman who is meant for me. I can feel it right here...," he gestured at his heart. "...straight away when we met," and sighed dreamily.

"I am with you," Chien-Po said between hiccup. "Su and I are soulmates too."

Mulan fell into thought. Yes, she used to believe in those dreams—a dream someone who had her name engraved in his heart. It's the one person who knew her, and accepted her, and believed in her before anyone else did or when no one else would. But now...?

"That's a myth," Mulan shook her head signing her disagreement. "There is no such things as soulmate. You two haven't married yet...that's why."

Soulmate was something whispered about at sleepovers, that little girls dream about with childish romanticism. Those dreams die with age and dawning reality, just like what she experienced with Shang. Despite the positive shift of their relationship today, Mulan believed fairytale ending was only a fictional tale—a figment of author's imagination. There was no love, only two pragmatic people who tried to be realistic and practical about building and sharing a household together.

"Ok, why don't we bet," Ling challenged. "If we still madly in love even way beyond our wedding day, you will have to clean my shoes!"

"Ugh, I may need surgical masks to deal with that," Mulan joked.
"But if you lose," Ling grinned evilly. "You have to compliment Captain Shirtless in front of us."

Mulan gasped. "What?!

"I saw you by the hill with him. You were all moon-eyed by Captain Tall, Dark and Handsome." He ended the sentence with mischievous brows waggle. "But don't worry, I promised never to tell your husband. What's in the camp stays in the camp."

Mulan pressed her lips together to repress any indication of emotion from showing. Thankfully none of her friends witnessed the visceral response she had at the sighting of Shang and Meihui. There would be questions to no end. "Ling, Captain Li and I are just...friends."

As the words just left her lips, a glimpse of Shang followed by Chi-Fu paraded in front of them. It was the usual sight: the old councillor babbled mindlessly while barely interested Shang was putting his best behaviour by not yanking the man's tongue from his mouth.

Thankfully for Shang, one of the recruits had asked for a quick spar practice with him and Shang, despite his bad-mood, couldn't afford to say no.

So Shang shed his shirt and took the training sticks.

The other guy didn't quite have Shang's height or leanness; instead, he's squarely built, all solid bulk and flat panes of muscle. And scars. Mustn't forget the scars. Mulan had learned a lot about scars since she met Li Shang. They're important.

They watched as Shang shifted his stance and brought the sticks around, managing somehow to flip the other guy up and over, so he landed hard on his back.

It had to hurt, but the man just lets out an "Oof" of lost air, then smiled good-naturedly at Shang—who again, still his broody self.

"I do wonder what Captain Li was thinking right now?" Ling said suddenly, making Mulan jumped on her seat.

"He is incredibly broody for incredibly handsome man," Chien-Po piped in. "If he smiled just a tiny bit more, I am sure many women would swoon on his feet."

Suddenly Ling turned to her and prodded, "Tell me—if suppose you were single—is Captain Li your type?" he said a little too loud.

"Shush, Ling!" Mulan hissed in alarm, glancing toward where Shang was sitting, wiping his sweaty brows. He was bare-chested, stony expression as usual. Well, no. In fact, he looked annoyed. The line of creases between his brows looked vicious and deep, making his serious expression far more terrifying than usual.

"I swear. I bet he is taking his robe on just to take it off again—in front of everyone," Ling scoffed.

"I will be stripping off naked if my body was half as good as his," Chien-Po remarked while Ling nearly spat his drink for the second time.

"Thank god you are not," Ling made a gesture of worship to the heaven.

"But he has the appropriate physique that will turn your inner like jelly," Chien-Po supplied, eyes still admiring Captain's Li undoubtedly sculpted body.
"Oh dear, you too?" Mulan said with a fake surprise, while Ling was laughing out loud.

"If you want. But you may be more interested with my fiance, Su," Chien-Po bantered back.

"Oh. My giddy aunt," Ling shook his head, wiping the tears of mirth on his eyes.

"For crying out loud, you guys. I am going to bed," Mulan announced. She admitted it was refreshing to have these two idiots with her.

"Yeahhh...?" Chien-Po drawled. "But with who?" Both inebriated men clinked their empty bottles together and burst into laughter only to stop when they saw a glimpse of Yao, stomping indignantly into the communal tent.

"What is his problem?" Ling lowered his voice.

Chie-Po grinned smugly. For once he had defeated Ling in the gossip-hearing department. He signalled both of them to come closer.

"I heard that he found his fiance's necklace at Captain Li’s tent," he shared.

"He….What?"

Chien-Po lowered his voice even more. "Meihui, his fiance. Chi-Fu told Yao earlier to clean up Captain Li’s tent, and he found her necklace on his bed. And someone else saw them leaving together. How on earth he managed to sneak a woman into this den of men is another mystery, but imagine that: On.His.Bed!"

"Oh," Ling leaned back, absorbing the story with his alcohol-addled brain. "I wouldn't be surprised if Captain Li will lose his balls one of these days."

Both men fought a grin while Mulan tried not to say anything.

It was past midnight when Mulan heard a ruckus on their communal sleeping quarter, only to find Chi-Fu gloating at the tent entrance and shouting with a loud voice.

"Fa Ping," beckoned the familiar nasally voice. Mulan looked up and saw Chi-Fu sending her a dirty look. "Captain Li wished to see you in his tent. Now!" he said gruffly.

It was obvious he hadn't forgiven her for her undeliberate incineration attempt even when Shang pointed out that she was generally a threat to anyone around him.

"His arrow went straight to my tent!" Chi-Fu exclaimed, retelling the misfortune that had befallen to his tent. "How can you say it was unintentional Captain Li?"

She remembered Shao Wei who was happened to be there, was laughing profusely.

"I'm sure it's nothing personal, Fa Ping just has an indescribable talent of surprising us all," Shang said again, this time didn't bother to hide his satisfied smirk. It was one of those rare days she saw him smiling. Is that it? She thought. Shang would only smile at her stupidity and carelessness? Did he enjoy watching her humiliating herself?

Her internal battle was drawn to a sudden halt when she saw Shang approaching. She wondered what brought him this late at night, only to find the Captain wearing his grim mask on with Khan on his hand.
Her blood ran cold. She knew that this meeting wouldn’t be without repercussion.

"Fa Ping." Shang’s voice was decidedly neutral and devoid of emotion. "I’m afraid there won’t be further training for you," he explained, in the kind of absolute tone that Mulan had come to detest.

"Excuse me?" she said. Part of her was sure it was just a joke, until Shang unceremoniously handed over Khan's reins. That was when reality struck her like lightning.

Shang sighed heavily as he saw Chi-Fu ushering the young boy from the communal tent towards his.

Shang had made peace with himself about Ping’s scandalous behaviour—whether it was indiscretions, a one night stand or it was soberly planned. Ping’s future as a man and his sexual adventure wasn’t his business to meddle.

The boy is old enough to join the army hence was old enough to make a conscious decision about his personal life. Shang told himself. Yes, his job here was to shape Ping into a soldier worthy of battle, not policing the boy's moral conduct. His principle may not be Ping's principle, and he was in no place to judge. The area beyond the training camp was the territory he should never cross.

But it didn't make his job any easier. For the last hour or so Shang had been battling with himself what he should do with Ping.

Just assess his ability objectively, said the inner monologue in his head. Do you think he is a man worthy to bear arms?

With the last year or two of his life having been consumed with this relentless war, Shang knew with horrifyingly explicit detail exactly how brutal battlefield really was. It may be a place of victory and freedom, but it was also a place of death and defeat. And after weeks of training, it was clear that Ping bore no future in the war.

You should send him home.

The rational part of him recognised that made sense and was completely valid, the irrational part of him, on the other hand, wanting Ping to…—

Are you having a second thought now? Part of him rebuked. Why do you want that boy badly to...stay?

It was the question Shang himself was trying hard to answer. But as a creature of logic, he went with his rationale. Therefore, he took Khan's rein and called Ping to meet him behind his tent.

"Please understand that I did this for your own good," Shang said, after delivering the bad news. "I appreciate all your dedication and hard work…In my own term, I wish to keep you—I really do," he added, schooling the best steely facade on his face. "However that would be a selfish thing to do. Because…” He swallowed his own emotion, which was weird. He had dismissed countless recruits before and he had never felt any dismay other than disappointment that they had failed. Thankfully, his stone-cold expression that he had honed throughout the decades seemed to cover his brief emotional lapse.

"The last thing I want is for your father to bury you than you to bury him. You are still very young, Fa Ping, there are plenty of things ahead of you. Now… pack your things and go home," he said, with artificially cold, unsympathetic voice.

"But…—"
"There is no but, Ping," he said firmly. A little bit of annoyance seeping into his voice.

"Is this because of what happened in the marketplace? Or...or to Chi-Fu's tent. I swear, Captain it was an accident... because I...—"

"I said it's over!" He had managed to keep his voice from elevating past Ping's loud voice into yelling territory.

"Brother Li, please!" The boy was trying to remind him of their blood connection. "I can't go home, you know what my father will do. I can't let it happen," he pleaded. Shang could see Ping's chest shook in an attempt to curb the emotional sob that threatening to unleash itself.

And I couldn't let you stay here to mess around with women, Shang thought angrily. He took some time to regulate his breath before continuing, "Neither can I let bad things happen to you! You are my brother-in-law, Ping. I don't want your life became a worthless sacrifice that had no value. It'll be foolish if I let you into the battle when I know you are going to die," he argued. It was a sensible statement.

"It's nothing personal," he said again, forcing his voice to be cold and unfeeling. "Some men are not designed for battle. I much rather sending you home now, than sending words of bereavement to your father. Now please, just go home."

That moment he could see angry tears hanging on the young soldier eyes as Ping snatched Khan's rein from his hand.

Chapter End Notes

I am terribly sorry for my lateness in updating this story, life happens and I found it hard to find the time to write! As usual, all grammatical mistakes are mine. As some of you have eagerly mentioned that you can't wait to see Shang's reaction to the pregnancy: unfortunately that won't happen really soon. At the moment, I am planning to gradually unravel the main plot and kept the romance as the subplot of the story.

Also, for the benefit of those of wasn't familiar with Chinese kingdom, in this story (and for simplicity sake), I assume that China had united as a single large kingdom with Forbidden City as its capital. Northern Wei is assumed as one of it's autonomous province with Prince of Wei as its leader.

While I know this story has a lot of flaws and shortcomings, faves, follow and comments are much cherished.

Thank you for reading.
"You said you want to talk?" Shao said as a way of greeting as Shang paid him a visit right after he arrived that evening from what everyone thought was a journey from Chang’an. And being the clever crook that he was—Shao Wei obviously had carefully taken a different route to avoid anyone's suspicion.

"Do you have time?"

"Of course," he said, pointing at the empty seat in front of him. Shang bowed politely before taking his place.

"Shao, I'm not a man who likes to probe on someone else's business, but I've been left wondering for weeks. Why did you come here to train with a low-class regiment while you are offered a place in the Imperial Army?" Shang worded his sentence carefully.

Shao unceremoniously plopped himself on the settee as he considered his answer. "Oh, humility is a mark of a true hero," he grinned, clearly crafting his answer to tease Shang.

Shang observed him. Regardless of the fact that they were living under austere condition. The Prince was still dressed in a suit that Shang knew cost more than what he made in a year. His robe impeccably pressed, tailored to fit his tight figure to perfection. Series of opulent looking gold embroidery running through the trimming of his trousers. A whiff of expensive cedar wood mark his presence, and his face was glowing with success and prosperity — a perfect representation of Chinese royal’s beneficiary.

Yeah, humility personified. Shang thought sardonically.

"Why did you ask?"

"Just curious," Shang said, subtlety hiding his true intention of digging the truth out of him. "How's your meeting in Chang'an?"

"It was fine," Shao Wei replied coolly. "Just usual political discussion that will bore anyone to their death."

"Nothing else?"

"No. Why?"

"Oh well, it's just... — I was in Xi’an to buy weekly supply, and I thought I saw you,"
Shang said, putting a pause and observed the Prince's reaction. Shang decided that maybe, even when Chi-Fu's plan of catching the Prince red-handed was a total failure, he still could bait the Prince into confessing.

"Aren't you meeting... someone there? A woman?"

"You saw me? With a woman?" Shao guffawed. "I am surprised the article is singular. Should've been 'women' if you knew me well."

Shang refused to deviate from the subject. "So you really were there then, in Xi'an," he affirmed. "Which is... a complete detour from Chang'an, am I right?" he pressed on.

"Oh, that," Shao laughed, still completely unfazed and collected. "I was staying the night there to pay regards on my late aunt. Her dust was rested in Hoching temple outside Xi'an."

Shang was certain the Prince was lying through his teeth, but he patiently listened to the cover story Shao weaved because he knew he had no proof to say otherwise.

"So, this woman you are meeting...?" Shang began. "Is she...—"

"She is just a friend," Shao said quickly. And before Shang fired another question, Shao craftily shot him back. "Shang, tell me. Have you ever been in love?"

Shang blinked, completely didn't expect such topics to be brought up.

"In all due respect, I believe emotional attachment makes one weak Your Honor," Shang said, keeping the subject impersonal.

"So, no one you can say holds a special place in your heart?"

"No," Shang said firmly.

"Not even your wife?"

Shang was dumbfounded. Why would the Prince suddenly mention his wife?

"My personal feeling is not out for public scrutiny," Shang retorted plainly. "But let me tell you that having a woman in your life doesn't equate love. I am sure you are much aware of this fact."

Shao Wei barked out a laugh that was far louder than appropriate. "You made marriage sound like torture."

Shang cleared his throat. "I might be a husband, but I am a soldier first and foremost. The only dedication and loyalty I swore are to the country and the Emperor," Shang said with conviction, but a strange, alarming twist strangled his chest.

Shao let out a mirthless chuckle. "I see."

Weeks ago, Shang would feel annoyed at the man's impertinence and audacity in making a sarcastic remark about his personal life, but his irritation quickly wiped out when he remembered Chi-Fu's story of the Prince's unfortunate life. Shao Wei had lost his mother in his teen together with his nursing maid....and then lost his only sibling nearly a year ago. Perhaps this was Shao's mechanism to cope with his loss, he
thought. Now Shang could only feel pity, a pity he would never dare to vocalise.

But Shao's subsequent inquiry quickly dashed whatever Shang had on his head. "Is that why you are fond of Ping?"

"Fond?"

"Yes... fond."

There was a hinted innuendo with the way Shao said the word. Shang practically growled in his frustration. "I can't believe what you are suggesting there, Your Majesty."

"Well, a nobleman like yourself could take more than one mistresses," the young prince added. "Too bad Ping isn't a woman."

Shang's frown deepened, he had no idea where the prince planned to take this conversation into.

"Are you suggesting that I fancy a romantic relationship with Ping?"

"Maybe?" The Prince said cunningly with rhetoric. "I can see you have a soft spot for the boy."

"What?" Shang's hackles rose, but he quickly reminded himself of the appropriate social decorum. He was dealing with a prince after all.

"Shang, relax..." Shao patted his shoulder good-naturedly. "Every man is allowed to have a wild dream. A fantastical imagination. It what makes us...men!"

Truthfully, Shang didn't know why he still entertained the Prince's ridiculous interrogation into his private life. If he was indeed attracted to Ping, why would he discuss the finite points of what it was like to harbour a physical attraction to another man with a stranger? Shang shook his head from irrational daze. He can't even properly love a woman he already married to, let alone considering pursuing someone else.

"But don't worry, I am the man of integrity," Shao Wei chuckled, clearly amused with Shang's displeased expression. "Your secret is safe with me. I won't breathe a word," he promised.

"As long as you did what I tell you to do."

"Captain Li?" Chien-Po said, breaking Shang's daze. He was sparring with Ling, and the lanky man was sandwiched between him and the ground, grunting helplessly but refusing to surrender.

"Oh! Um. Yes, very good Chien-Po," Shang said whatever came first to his mind.

"Er, but Captain... I tripped!"

"Oh!" Shang could feel his face burning in embarrassment. He shuffled his feet in apparent nervousness. What had he been thinking? He exhaled and swiftly rebound his expressionless don't-mess-with-me' facade.

"Yes. Well. Try again. Let see," he said to Chien-Po. "While the rest," he shouted to the crowd,
"Please run fifty laps until lunchtime."

A confused murmur erupted, but no one dared to voice their thought. Shang just huffed and left them.

Shang really couldn't understand why he couldn't focus on his training that day. He spent the majority of his life doing the exact same routine every morning. But right now... he couldn't find his concentration.

Was it because of the bitter exchange between him and his brother-in-law, Ping? Had he played favourites? Had he developed a soft spot for the young man liked the Prince conjectured?

No. That couldn't be.

If there were any feeling towards Ping, it would be something akin to sympathy... and perhaps a hint of pity.

Despite Ping's incapability, it was selfless of him to come as a replacement for his elderly father. But it was also foolish of him to think that he wouldn't die to honour his family and China when he couldn't even strike a target, aimed a cannon or caught a fish.

Then, you don't need to feel bad dismissing him. You've done the Fa favour.

But the look of brokenness in Ping's eyes. The shock that slowly transformed into resentment.

It was the same look as Mulan when he refused to go in place of her father. There were tears of disappointment leaking from her eyes. The wound she struggled to conceal. The bitterness and secret she tried to hide from him.

It was the same look as his mother, Li Yue, looked at him since he was...-

Shang shook his head to curb the useless, energy-sapping emotion at bay. His mother had nothing to do with this.

He knew he shouldn't feel this way. Towards his mother. Towards Mulan... or Ping.

He had never been attached to anyone in this context. Not even his father, the sole figure that he thought sincerely with his heart to be the closest person to him. Shang was groomed to be a rational man, who was taught that emotion would make ones weak and susceptible to intimidation. Emotional attachment to someone would blunt his sharp decision-making ability and cloud logical judgement.

He did what he supposed to do as a good, responsible leader—protecting his soldier from vain, meaningless death. A good leader didn't use his feeling, but rather—his head. And rationality, he had saved the Fa the only heir to their names. Yet, he felt awful like he had violated some sort of moral order for causing such agony.

He sighed through his nose as Ping entered the deserted courtyard, rubbing the soreness out of his shoulders and cracking his neck. Shang made a face. Okay, it seemed quite bad-ass for him to do it, but for a boy as young and skinny as Ping to crack knuckles, his neck and other bones in his petite frame, he was starting to see why that turned off a lot of people. He made a mental note to rein that bad habit of his.

The black ring around Ping's eyes and the bloodshot redness around his pupil spoke volumes about how the young boy may have spent his night. Shang was guessing he didn't sleep well last
night—well, perhaps didn't sleep at all!

Maybe you should speak to him, set the record straight once he calms down.

Shang revealed himself on the back of the clearing. Ping didn't take notice of him. He must be ignoring me, Shang thought ruefully, especially after not so pleasant dismissal that certainly bruised that little soldier's pride.

Shang shook his head and gave up on his own training, instead opting to watch Ping as he began his morning routine. He began with gentle and fluid, tai chi moves—one of the exercises that he excelled. Shang should've been jealous that Ping was a lot more graceful that he would ever be, but he was so enraptured by the twisting of his hand, the gentle sloping of his back and the fluid of his arms and legs to really felt anything besides...

Wait, what was he thinking?

His eyes widened with that dangerous epiphany. Was he... attracted to Ping? Was the Prince right about him? Was he fond of Ping in a non-platonic sense?

Shang bit back a laugh. Attracted? The thought was delusionally absurd! Ping was a man, and Shang, despite the majority of his days spent with a throng of testosterone driven bunch, was quite certain he was straight inside out. There was plenty of occasions he met a rather effeminate man like Ping and he was positive he had never felt any lustful urge as a man would to a woman. But somehow, he had seen Ping as though... as though, he was... a woman!

Is that even possible?

One particular incident where he invited Ping to his tent to retrieve a letter from Fa Zhou surfaced in his mind. As it began to seep into his memories once more, objectively he was able to see that perhaps his affection towards Ping that day could have been construed as less than platonic.

I did not just think of that. He watched the young warrior for another moment before gagging at his own thought. You are sick! You are a married man... a seasoned warrior! You are the one supposed to set a good example for him!

But there was nothing wrong with a look... the relationship between men are prevalent in a context of battlefront where they deprived of women. Yes, men, even the mightiest warriors, were still creature with needs... carnal needs... right?

Hell with the carnal needs! Just...just snap out of it!

Now that Shang was off on that sobering thought, he realised if his thought were spoken out loud there was more than the social controversy. First was obviously his father's reaction to any perceived advances on his part that would make him regret to even think of it. And then Fa Zhou would kill him. His father-in-law, perhaps, would tolerate if he took a second wife, but bringing a man in his household? More so his youngest son? He would murder him, and feed his corpse to the birds.

Shang shook his head and returned to his silent training.

Before his current assignment, Shang was aware of spreading rumour surrounding the death of
Consort Shin-Ye, Shao Wei's mother. Many years ago, she was found poisoned together with a few of her handmaid. There was obviously a great furore in the harem after her untimely death. She was one of the most prominent and powerful figures in the Wei Palace and the most favoured by the current ruler of Wei—Prince Wei Zhang, Shao Wei's father—because she was the first and only concubine to give him a male heir to the throne of Wei. Plotting such a murder would guarantee public humiliation and capital punishment to whoever convicted.

The head of Palace's security managed to capture the mercenary who committed suicide immediately after being apprehended. But everyone knew, this man was only a device on the hand of more powerful man—the real mastermind of the crime.

Henceforth, there was a lot of speculation: most rancorous rumour was suggesting Consort Shin-Ye's infidelity, while some suspected she was blackmailing one of the royal nobility and had to pay a hefty price. In any case, to preserve his family's good name and the Palace's reputation, Prince Wei Zhang immediately closed the case and threatened all the member of his staff that they would face brutal torture if any dared to spread the scandalous gossip outside the Palace wall.

But the story that had since forgotten with time after the years lapsed, was now brought back to attention after Princess Wei Xiu Ting, Shao Wei's sister, died after a strange illness in recent months—another enigmatic death within the harem to which no one dared to inquire.

However, those with connections and who rubbed shoulder closely with people beyond the Palace wall suggested that this was no coincidence. The princess was supposed to be given to Kaidu, the Khan of the Huns, to wife on her twentieth birthday. Whether she had committed deliberate suicide, kidnapped or run away, no one knew. But as the result, Wei Zhang's failure to fulfil the political allegiance incited the tension between the Chinese and the Huns.

Chi-Fu testified that he was one of the groups of person who heard the first-hand account of the tale. Shao Wei told him that he believed his father was involved in the tragic death of his mother because she was obstinately objecting to her daughter's betrothal to the leader of the Huns. Chi-Fu obviously had never shared this story with anyone outside the royal circle, fearing horrific consequences.

But then he met Shang, a young captain with nonexistent political agenda, an unsophisticated man who had no inclination to the gossip-spreading routine. Thus, he relayed the story to Shang.

"You don't believe me, Captain Li?" Chi-Fu scoffed when Shang regarded him with an incredulous look after he ended the story.

For a person who had lost two closest family member, seemed like Shao Wei had an uncanny ability to move on from things, things that would normally leave people scarred for life. However, Shao motives to join the low ranked battalion with inexperienced recruits had stayed unknown.

"It's not that. I mean, while I can believe the to death cases may be related, but saying that Prince Wei Zhang himself was involved in the death of his own consort...," Shang shook his head. "Chi-Fu, that's a serious allegation. You need to watch out your tongue."

"You are terribly snarky Captain Li. That is his son's speculation, not mine," Chi-Fu pointed out. "I am merely a vessel of his thoughts."

Just before Shang managed to get any words out, an imperious bark got louder outside their fabric barrier.

"I don't care that I haven't any appointment with the Captain. I am the Prince."
"Wait! Your Honor!" One of the recruits obviously tried to explain that Shang was currently occupied, but too late…. the Prince barged in, flashing his dashing posture that would make any maiden swooning on his feet.

"Captain Li," he addressed.

"You are dismissed!" With a single wave of his hand, the soldier who was initially barring his access fled—a solid proof of the man that exuded power.

"At your service," Shang bowed reverently. "Your Highness, what brings you here?" Shang was trying to be polite.

"Is that true that you've dismissed Fa Ping from his post?"

"Yes. It was because…—"

"Silence," Shao Wei snapped and lifted his hand. Even Chi-Fu was left frozen on his feet. "I know the reason. You don't have to waste your breath explaining that to me." There was a hint of annoyance surrounding his voice that Shang had no idea why. It irked him somehow that the young nobility behaved patronisingly as though he was responsible for all his recruits.

"However, I demand you to reverse your decision and…—"

Shang flicked his gaze that previously had been trained on the ground, looking at the Prince in disbelief. "What? But why would I…—"

"Silence!" Shao barked, and Shang could only grit his teeth in silence anger. "It is my power as a Prince to overturn your decision, Captain Li," Shao Wei strongly put an emphasise on Shang's position contrasting it with his.

"Yes, but I won't dismiss any of my recruits if they can prove themselves worthy to bear their armour!" Shang finally managed to spit the words out. Shang knew they were hardly friends despite Shao Wei's invitation to call him intimately by his first name, but he had never seen the Prince so worked up like this before.

"He will be worthy of his armour, just give him two weeks," Shao announced.

"But, we don't…—"

"Do as I said," Shao cut him in, tipping his head towards Chi-Fu who frantically recorded their exchange on his notes and nodded his silent approval.

Shang could only grit his teeth. The Prince was the type of guy that turned everyone he met into yes-men who were desperate to please or to form alliances. Shang didn't want to make himself into the number, but he immediately found himself cornered.

It's been a couple of hours Mulan sulked on the corner of the tent, refusing anything to eat nor drink. Not to mention, she had spent the entire night outside the tent, pondering in grief. She ignored the train of question Mushu was firing about why Khan was outside and her belonging that already packed haphazardly into her sack.

Yes, Shang had dismissed her. This was her chance to return home without expounding her impersonation, yet strangely, she didn't feel happy or excited or anything remotely positive.
Instead, she felt like a total failure.

And Shang, the only person she thought would understand, had lost faith in her. However, deep inside—especially after failing him twice in the same day during the hike, she knew she was just buying time.

Some men are not designed for battle. Shang's words rattled around in her head. She knew Shang was just being plain and honest about her ability. It was her failure that earned her such treatment. But it got her thinking whether he would give her the benefit of the doubt if he knew the boy he wished to keep was the wife he had left behind?

But it didn't make the pain felt less painful. Why were his words of dismissal became the thing that finally broke her down? Why did she let his sparse and empty words defined her? She had been beaten, mocked and insulted in various occasions, but she had steeled through them all.

"How long am I supposed to watch you wallowing?" Mushu pleaded.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said, shoving more stuff into her bag with a gusto.

"Okay," Mushu said carefully. "But if you leave...your bed will be empty. Ling and Chien-Po will notice, then Chef Zhang will look for his little kitchen boy. And that gossipy Chi-Fu and they will...—"

"Yes, I know, but can we not talk about it now?"

"Sure, but where are you going?"

Mulan gave him a look."Is this your not talking about it?"

"Ok fine. Fine. Sorry," Mushu lifted his claws trying to placate her. "But can you at least tell me what's going here?"

Mulan pulled a long sigh before saying this weakly, "Shang dismissed me."

"He...—What?"

But the dragon's surprise swiftly turned to confusion. "Then, what's that long face is for? I thought you want to see your family. You told the Captain you missed them! You should be glad that both you and your father are spared to face the war," he stated his logic. The bewilderment in the Guardian's voice was evident.

"Yes, I do miss them, but...—" she trailed off, and Mushu scratched his head.

"When men said women are impossible to understand, they ain't joking."

"It's not like that," Mulan breathed. "My father will go if he realised I've been disqualified and terminated from my training... and he...," she swallowed, imagining how angry and disappointed her father would be if she returned. "He won't forgive me. I am a disgrace to the family. If I came home, I will only tarnish his reputation and defame his good name."

"Think of the brighter side, you've grown stronger since. Soon your abs could rival Shang's, and you don't have to stare at his... you can stare at your own. Besides, you may... or may not...have something else to think about," and then drops his gaze briefly to Mulan's midsection and lifted an eyebrow in unspoken question.
Oh yeah, that! Dang it! Her eyes automatically coasted on the open sack of barley, sitting on the corner of her bedroll. As two months went by, there was still no sign of germination, which was great. She might have one less problem to think about, but now… she was dismissed, the result didn't really matter anymore.

"You see, perhaps your dismissal wasn't all a bad thing! You can stop this lie once and for all and return to your normal—womanly life."

Mulan rolled her eyes, "Are you done?"

Mushu ran his claws down his face. "Look, Girl. Sorry for the harsh words. The truth is, we're both frauds. Your ancestors had never sent me. They don't even like me. But you risked your life to help people you love. I risked your life to help myself. At least you had good intentions."

But intentions would not save her father from battle, won't help her to win a war and won't proof anything to Shang.

She ignored Mushu's exclaim of "Hey, where are you going?" when she marched out of the tent to do her morning Tai Chi and figured out it would help her to relax her mind.

Mulan supposed to head home that afternoon, but the dawn of General Li's visit had caused her departure to be postponed. Apparently, Chef Zhang needed an extra hand in the kitchen, and she was given an extra day to hang around the encampment to help up with the washing.

When the work was done, she prowled quietly, leaving the crowds, avoiding to engage in any sort of conversation with people. The last thing she wanted was for any of them to know that she was terminated prematurely from her post. While her mouth could keep the secret under wraps, she was worried that her expression couldn't. Besides, she wasn't ready to face Shang and looked at his disappointed face again. No, not yet.

So, instead, she borrowed Ling's ruan and sat on the hill that was overlooking the encampment.

From a distance, she could see the rest of the team was embroiled in pleasant shenanigans after Chi-Fu decided to have an elaborate banquet to welcome General Li. Mulan had never been fond of drinking, but for once she was thankful there was some strong drink provided tonight. She sighed in relief as the alcohol burnt her throat.

And her eyes caught a glimpse of the Prince of Wei in his lavish robe and the episode of what happened last night transpired.

She ran to her usual spot by the river and sat, with her knees pulled up to her chest, tears soon joined and quietly fell down her cheeks. She hadn't cried since she left home, ever. Not a single tear fell when she was mocked, beaten, exhausted and bullied.

Of course, it was stupid to think Shang was different than any other men — a man that
someday would accept and respect her as his equal. Mulan knew the impossibility of it, but her desire of his body had blinded her to his fault. Yes, the physical pleasure of their union had seduced her heart entirely and made her still falling in love with him despite her knowledge.

The pain was agonising that the thought of battlefront felt to be a lovely respite from the world of dishonour and betrayal.

"Fa Ping?"

Mulan saw the glimpse of… Prince of Wei?

How the hell he found her there?

Oh well, not relevant. But of all time to have a breakdown, why it had to be now? Of all the times to allow those walls around her heart to crumble into dust, why did he have to come to witness it?

She heard his footsteps approaching and then depositing himself next to her. Mulan shifted when he got too close to her liking.

"I wish to have some privacy if you don't mind," she said sharply.

If he was bothered, he hid it well. The man held up his hands in a conciliatory way, trying to be the calm adult in this exchange. "Relax, soldier...I just want to make sure you are not doing anything stupid."

A warm cup of tea made it into her view. Mulan would've been touched by the Prince's sympathetic gesture until he revealed the reason of his pity. She accepted the cup quietly without looking at him.

"Sorry, don't mean to eavesdrop, but his tent right across mine. I'm sorry for what had happened," he said.

Mulan pretended not to hear him even when his words evoked the terrible nightmare that had strangled her for many days to come.

"Captain Li has dismissed you, didn't he?" the Prince repeated, responding to her silence.

Screw you all, males! Rebuked the internal voice in her head. She sniffed, turning her face away and standing.

"What do you want?" At the moment she just wanted him to leave, but the Prince did the exact opposite.

"Ping..." he said more firmly, putting a friendly pat on her shoulder. "I can help you."

She didn't say anything, but the Prince had seen the question on her face: What did you say?

"I. Can. Help. You," he repeated. "If you managed to pick that arrow from the mast, you have a good argument to stay."

Confusion painted on her face, which was natural given the context of the situation,
why would he offer to help her anyway?

"You are not the only one with someone you hold dear." He gave her a polite nod, the heat in his eyes belying the politeness. "Consider my offer, Fa Ping. This may be your last chance to hold your family's honour."

He stood up and prepare to leave, briefly watching her waged war within herself.

'Someone you hold dear', Mulan's mind replayed the scene she witnessed between the Prince and Ting Ting.

He may be a snobbish royal, but at least he was willing to risk everything for someone he loved, Mulan thought. Even when he will betray his country…—

"It's an honour for a man to defend their country." Shang's word lashed out in her mind as if rebuking her short-sightedness."Your father knew his place! And it's time for you to learn yours!"

I guess you are right about me, Shang, she thought gravely. I am just a useless woman after all.

Mulan wiped the tears that she didn't know was there. It seemed like her days would always end in guilt, tears, and an empty bottle of whatever she got his hands on first.

She decided not to dwell on her disappointment and picked up the ruan. She strummed the bow and coaxed the instrument to play just a few decibels louder so that the sounds of it shrill soared over the sound of the happy chattering in the distance. It was almost loud enough to drown out her thoughts about Shang's dismissal.

"Mind if I join?" Shao Wei said from behind her as she was taking her first sip right after finishing a song.

"Oh, I thought I you'll be busy enjoying the banquet?" Mulan said, not meeting his eyes to hide her surprise. What was he doing here?

"Yes and no. I've eaten all I can and so I thought I'd come over here. I hope you won't take this the wrong way but you liked sort of alone over here. Where is Ling, Chien-Po?"

"Oh, they are helping the rest to cook an extra meal. Apparently we consumed more than we intended to. I think ration and austere measure is thrown out of the window for today."

"I take it the Chef hasn't really trust you to enter his kitchen again, has he?" The Prince sounded serious, but a faint smirk was evident on his face.

"Yeah, sort of forbidden area for me now. Too bad, because I began to enjoy cooking and making people sick in the process," she said. "He figured that washing the dishes perhaps a safer alternative for everyone."

The Prince bit his laugh at that. For once, Mulan saw how sincerely jovial he looked. Without his permanent sinister scowl and his sharp, sarcastic tongue, actually, Shao Wei was quite a pleasant man to be with. Had his meeting with Ting Ting had anything to do with this?

Mulan looked up at him, words on the tip of her tongue, questions she wanted to ask him. She wanted to ask him who was Ting Ting and what his relationship with the Huns Princess? Why had he come to join the regiment and… plenty other question that made her head spinning. But she wasn't supposed to have overheard what she had overheard and saw what she had seen. So instead she settled with an awkward grin.
"I'd say you need to make Chi-Fu really sick, or perhaps you can set his tent on fire one more time. I began to grow weary to his constant meddling," he added, his smirk grew exponentially in size.

"I'd bet Captain Li will agree with you in a heartbeat," she replied, trying to sound neutral as she mentioned Shang's name.

"Speaking of which," Shao steered the conversation, his demeanour turned serious. "Is that true Captain Li is your brother-in-law?"

"Yes. That's...that's right," Mulan said, a little anxious with the direction of the conversation.

"How much do you know him?"

Mulan gulped quietly. "Not much, he wedded my sister not long ago. Apart from that, I hardly know anything about him apart from how ruthless he is."

"Captain Li Shang," the Prince said with a chuckle. "Who guessed one could be both handsome and capricious?"

Mulan bit her lips and answered his banter with a forced smile. Her mind flew to the conversation they had earlier that day.

"Your Honor, what do you mean when you said earlier that you could help me?... And most importantly...why?"

"Fa Ping!" As if ordained by divine intervention, Chi-Fu appeared from behind the trees, waving his hand impatiently to attract their attention, only to succumb in a deep blush when he realised he was caught yelling in the presence of the Prince of Wei.

"Your…. Your Honor, my apology, I didn't…"

Shao Wei interrupted him by raising his hand and firmly cut in. "State your business Chi-Fu."

Chi-Fu looked at him sheepishly, clearing his throat as he bowed."Right… of course, Your Honor," the counsellor obeyed reverently, before turning his sour face to Mulan. "The Captain wants you. Now!"

Shang drew a heavy sigh as he finished counting three hundred press-ups. He took his towel and propped himself against the tree. The rest of the encampment was enjoying a short break, a dinner, to welcome General Li's visit. He should be out there, having fun and engaged in meaningful conversation with his father, but he found out it was impossible to take his mind off his recent exchange with the Prince of Wei.

"It is my power as a Prince to overturn your decision, Captain Li."

Why the hell the Prince wanted Ping to stay? It was no news that Shao Wei was a man of many secrets, but Fa Ping was far too young and naive to be involved in all sort of dirty politics. Or...is he embroiled in something more intimate? Like... trading sex with... Shang pinched the bridge of his nose, driving his incredibly presumptive thoughts away.

Whatever it was knew he could do nothing but to obey.

So, begrudgingly, he asked Chi-Fu, who dragged the young soldier who was in the middle of his dinner or drinking or whatever it was, looking somewhat confused and anxious as though he had
run into serious trouble to be dragged out of his meal.

From his tent entrance, he saw Shao Wei lingered outside his tent, shedding his robe and preparing to run his own drill.

The Prince grinned towards his direction as their eyes met and nodded in pleasant agreement.

Mulan trained her eyes towards the ground as she approached Shang's tent to conceal any puzzlement, anxiety and bitterness from showing. Hundreds of scenario of why Shang suddenly summoned her ran through her mind. None of which positive—perhaps just another mock on her mediocre fighting ability. Yes, Shang's words were still burning on her ears. He might be right that she would never make a good soldier, but…

She wanted Shang at least to know—to know this part of her secret. She wasn't a wife with sterile obedience to her husband. She wasn't just a useless woman—even when he thought she was. She was a fighter—a fighter who lived within her principles and who could make her voice be heard…. even when her end was humiliation and defeat.

And even when Shang would be utterly distraught by the revelation, and she potentially running the risk of him divorcing her—she needed him to know who she was inside.

"Sir?" she said, marshalling all her courage to speak up.

"Fa Ping." Shang sounded testy but was shirtless, as usual. "So, do you know why I call you?"

"No, Sir," she answered. She was genuinely confused by all this, but a large part of her awareness was taken up with the mental fight not to stare at Shang's chest.

While just a stone throw away, the Prince wiped his bare muscular torso that was currently dripping with sweat, smirking smugly towards her direction.

Damn these shirtless men. How was a girl supposed to concentrate when they walk around like that?

She shook her head, trying to shove the unwanted distraction at bay.

She closed her eyes and breathed. "Captain Li, before you say anything. Please let me speak up."

Meanwhile, in Forbidden City...

"Your Majesty the Son of Heaven," addressed the doorkeeper, "Your Highness Prince of Wei is here."

The Emperor dipped his head signalling the guards and everyone else in the room to leave.

Wei Zhang strengthened his spine and schooled one of his jovial countenances that he usually wore to public gathering before opening his arms in a friendly embrace. "Eldest Brother Xiongnu, it's been a while. Hope I find you well. I am sorry that I…-

"You're late," his brother accused, clearly sounding unimpressed.

Wei Zhang had no defence, considering the invitation was from the Emperor himself, and he'd meant to be here a good hour ago. He glanced back, but all his councillor had abandoned him to his fate. Wei Zhang lifted a hand to stay his brother's diatribe and said, "My transport had—"
"Safe it, we have a matter of greatest importance to address," Xiongnu interrupted, walking closer and stopping just inside his personal space. They hadn't spoken face to face since the failure of Wei Zhang's ill-advised liaison with the Huns. But since the stability of their relationship was one of the main ingredients in China's political cohesion, they had remained civil and responded to each other in writing to retain the facade. It was until last week, Wei Zhang received an invitation to meet his estranged brother, no doubt for a matter of greatest importance.

"We have reason to suspect someone within the family is involved in political espionage." The Emperor suddenly turned towards him. "Your family."

If Wei Zhang knew his brother well he wouldn't be at all surprised by his recrimination, especially many years ago, their relationship was tainted with similar disagreement. But still, he took a moment to process.

"My brother, in all due respect, you can't just point finger at my family without any concrete proof," Wei Zhang responded, trying to be polite even when his brother's words shredded him.

"Once there is a wise man said: people give up their lives for many reasons. For friendship, for love, for an ideal. And people kill for the same reasons," the Emperor chuckled mirthlessly. "What other proof should I give you? I knew from the start that your dangerous liaison with the Huns was because you want this throne. My throne. Your daughter was just a puppet—a decoy, even your brainless wife could see that. If it is not because those little hiccups that turned your peaceful treaty into a war, I suspected one of those Huns might have killed me!"

Wei Zhang's expression turned from anger to condescension. "Be far from me what you've said! I may want your throne, Brother. But to conspire with the Huns to eliminate you? Never!"

The Emperor just stared at him, tilting his head and lacing his fingers as he sat behind his mahogany bureau.

Wei Zhang sighed, "You know me since we were kids, Brother. I may not be the most compassionate nor noble leader, but laying a finger to plot against my own flesh and blood?" He shook his head. "That's not me. I just hope establishing Chinese ties with the Huns will earn me your approval to give your daughter to marry my son. Nothing else."

The Emperor fell deep in thoughts. "Fine," he said, but his expression was closed off. It was a fair reasoning. He had no male heir, and by marrying his eldest daughter to his own nephew, they would keep the line of succession within their family. "But how can you explain this? How conveniently Princess Wei Ting had died a week before her…—"

"It was an unexpected crisis. I told you that," Wei Zhang interrupted, his tone sharp. "You want to say all this war between the countries was down to my doing?" he scoffed. "My daughter's death is a tragedy to my family!"

The Emperor rose from his seat. "Master Peng of the Imperial Intelligence who is heading the investigation has obtained some interesting evidence," he explained, "...and while we don't know exactly who was the mastermind or how he did this, but we know Princess Wei Ting is still alive."

"She is….what?" Wei Zhang needed a second take on that.

"She is still alive," the Emperor confirmed. "Our spy saw her. Thanks to the crafty work of someone who clearly has an interest of keeping her out of the political betrothal," he cleared his throat. "And when I heard your dear son refused to take his place as a part of the elite regime, who could not wonder why? You honestly think this is a mere coincidence?"
Swallowing his flare of irritation Wei Zhang gave his brother a short nod. "Okay, what's the plan? Shall I call Shao Wei and ask him...—"

"No," the Emperor declared. "I've sent the imperial army to neutralise the situation and brought in both Prince and Princess at any cost."

Wei Zhang halted mid-step, turning on his heel to face him. He should try to school the expression on his face, but that seemed like too much effort for the moment. He probably looked murderous. Or like-an-angry-bull in his son's parlance. He glared at his brother. "Excuse me?"

"This is a very delicate matter, Wei Zhang, and I, as the Emperor would...—"

"He is my son," he countered. Loudly. "You've sent soldier to...to arrest him? Are you suggesting, without firm evidence, that he is the one..."

"You're wrong," the Emperor answered, raising his hand in a placating manner. Considering the circumstances, Wei Zhang was sure he's misreading the calm look on his brother's face. He couldn't possibly be happy about this, and then continued, "I am not suggesting anything. But if my eldest daughter were to be married to him, Shao Wei wouldn't just be my nephew, he would be the future emperor, and thus it is my best interest to make sure he is clear from all allegation."

And Wei Zhang must be imagining the note of satisfaction in his tone. "This union was your idea."

Wei Zhang opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. If he was surprised at the idea of political espionage, he was absolutely stunned at the Emperor's assertion that his son could be a part of it. All these kinds of twisted plots were normally his forte. Shao Wei may be a clever, witty young man, but his brain was stuffed with relentless party, women and gambling to care too much with position and power. The suggestion was so absurd and wrong that he didn't even know where to start. "Brother..."

"I've contacted Master Peng," the Emperor said. "His team would report to us in about two weeks time."

With that, Xiongnu gave him the cold smiles and turned towards the double door, heading out of his office with more than his usual grandeur.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience waiting for me to update this story. Hope the next update won't be this long. It's been fun writing this story and I hope you all enjoy this too. I know you all wonder when Mulan will tell the truth and why Shang was such a jerk in this fiction - rest assured I tie all loose ends. I know the plot moves kind of slowly, but I feel it is important not to rush the story.

Review, fave and follow are cherished. And a snippet of the next chapter will be posted on my Tumblr 3431jessica. Thank you!
Frustration.

Frustration and anger of an intensity Shang didn't know it was possible to feel.

As the seconds ticked by his anger sliced through his bones like blazing hot metal. His breathing was so heavy, close to choking him.

Right now, Ping was in front of him. The boy had been taking a great interest on the tip of his shoes.

There was a grim pause.

Shang wanted to spat out of the ire out of his heart and out of his mouth, pouring all his frustration of the Prince unreasonable request. But no—he reasoned. Ping might be weak and clumsy with capital "C", but the boy didn't deserve to be a victim of his tirade.

After a long silence, Ping lifted his countenance and looked like he had a big confession to make.

"Captain Li, before you say anything. Please let me speak up."

Ping's voice was firm, inviting no argument. Shang lifted his eyes to meet his gaze as Ping watched him. But Shang didn't have time for another drama, so he just cut it right to the core.

"Save it for later Ping. I have more important and urgent matter to address," he announced, swallowing strings of curses that were surfacing every time he recalled Shao Wei's brash call. "I receive an order to overturn your dismissal."

He paused to observe Ping's reaction. The boy's eyes grew wide. Clearly, he didn't expect this coming.

"However, as I said to you a few days ago, it will be foolish to send an unequipped soldier to war to die a vain death. Therefore… —," he turned and looked at the boy square in the eyes. For a second he thought Fa Ping was going to pee himself. "You are given two weeks to prepare yourself. If you can retrieve the arrow from the mast," he said, pointing to a direction of the pole outside his tent. "You are joining me to war, but otherwise, you are free to go. Understand?"

He heard Ping draw in a quick breath before he asked, his voice small. "Really?"

"I repeat," Shang said, trying not to sound snarky but he couldn't help it. He reiterated what he said in what he hoped as less judgemental tone.

Ping bit his lips, perhaps having so many questions about why and who had overturned his decision.

"This is your last chance to defend your family's honour," Shang told him in closing. He didn't want to engage in this pointless discussion any longer. "Now, you are dismissed."

Mulan left Shang's tent with more confusion than satisfaction. She had expected to deliver a similar
blow by admitting to him the liberating revelation of her identity. She had anticipated a heated argument that left Shang as bitter and disappointed as she was. But she was left blindly dumbfounded by his announcement that she lost her ability to speak.

Nodding absently, she left Shang's tent. That was a few steps she didn't feel. Everything was surreal. What had just happened?

As she walked away, she caught a glimpse of Prince of Wei, flashing another smug smirk and gave her a thumbs up.

A moment of realization enshrouded her.

It was him—He was the man who had overturned her dismissal.

And talking about the Prince of Wei, this wasn't the first time he had saved her from a fickle situation. But the same question remained…. Why?

Shao basked in warm satisfaction as he watched the exchange from a distance.

"I receive an order to overturn your dismissal," he heard Shang start to talk, in a gruff, heavy voice, frustration dripping in his tone. Ping seemed wanted to dig more information or even telling him something important but Shang silenced him with his glare. His hands on his waist while Ping watched him with that perplexed expression on her face. They were staring into each other's eyes but still...that silly man didn't even recognise his own wife!

At first, Shao didn't quite understand Shang's visceral reaction to his initial request. But after putting much thought about it, he inferred that all was rooted down to Shang's unconscious jealousy. It almost as if his eyes were blind, but his heart could see through Ping's disguise all along.

He wondered whether Shang would show any territorial or aggressive behaviour if later on, he found favour and closeness with Ping… especially since he knew one of Ping's secret which Shang didn't.

Shao grinned. This will be fun. He didn't expect this kind of thrill would fill him.

It was strange how Fa Ping had captured his attention. At first, it was the boy atrocious bravery in confronting him during his squabble with Yao.

Ping had not missed his surveillance since, and he knew the boy was equally curious about him.

Right then, Shao had suspected that Ping was working for the palace intelligence, sent by his father to spy on him. The fact that the boy was Fa Zhou's son certainly fitted the bill. But after witnessing for himself how Ping caused a brawl, almost drowned the other recruit and unintentionally poisoned him with pig's feed (yes, he was convinced it was a genuine mistake after witnessing regular accidental stunts), Shao decided that Ping was harmless.

But Ping definitely wasn't an ordinary boy by any definition. This Shao very much realised when he unravelled the secret of his identity.

As much as Ping wasn't as strong as any other man, Shao firmly believed he (or shall we say 'she') could outthink them all, just like she did right now—deceiving the entire regiment, her family, her
commanding officer…. and her own husband.

Shao unfolded that Ping had never dreamt to be a novice soldier—only a woman who was desperate to save her father.

And then he had a plan—a plan that would give this woman the honour she had coveted as a reward of executing his plan.

The plan to assassinate the Khan.

Shao smiled like an idiot imagining the Huns' surprise if they discovered his undercover assassin was a pixie cut girl with non-existent muscle.

But he wasn't planning to put an innocent girl's life at stake. She would need to be trained, to be equipped with the necessary skill to complete the mission and turning this sweet bean-bun loving girl to a lethal weapon.

"Is it even ethical?" Ting Ting's objection resonated in his head.

"You potentially send a girl to her death and deprive her father of his daughter!" Ting Ting demanded unwaveringly when he told her about a girl named Ping who he met during his fictional meeting in Chang'an and had agreed to join him on his mission.

"As much I hate your philandering habit, I much rather you're taking a girl to your bed than to the nest of the Huns and…—"

"And letting Father marry you to that old murderous thug?" he confronted sharply, which he regretted as soon as he saw evidence of hurt in her eyes. Well, she did have a point. But what else should he do? His initial plan with Altansarnai to quietly ambushed the Huns encampment and murder the Khan had been unfolded. Worst still, as a punishment, Altansarnai was forced to marry Shan-Yu, the Hun's general who far more suited to be her father than her husband. "What do you expect me to do?" Shao nearly shouted, feeling the guilt and desperation creeping all over him.

"Look, I know this is an impossible situation. You know we can't save everyone. But you have to see a bigger picture. We are trying to save countless soldier and our country from peril," Ting Ting said. "My unwanted marriage is a small price to pay."

Shao shook his head. "No. I'll have to try. This girl is unpredictable, unconventional and can be outright crazy at times—which all can work for our benefit," he proposed. "She just needed a little improvement in her fighting…..and….and her acting department. " Yes, because at the moment, Ping would turn pink everytime Shang shed his shirt off. That couldn't possibly be acceptable.

"So?" Ting Ting raised her brows to tell him she was less than convinced or sympathetic for that matter. "How do you plan to train this scrawny and unsuspecting girl into a lethal weapon?"

"I…—" He was about to explain himself when he felt eyes on him—on them. He froze before scanning discreetly above his shoulder and pulled Ting Ting away to the other side of the wall.

"Wait here."

"What is it?" Ting Ting whispered in alarm.

"We've been watched."

As planned, the next morning when the rest of the encampment had gone for a long hike, Shao
summoned Ping to began her training.

One hour into the warm-up, he watched with concealed admiration on the girl's sheer determination to complete her set of one hand press-up. Even though he could tell from her strained expression and the amount of sweat dripping on her brows of the sheer difficulty of the task, the girl refused to stop and told him that having strong arms would be a soldier best defence. He always thought that women should never join war because they tend to romanticise the situation with their hearts instead of thinking logically with their heads. Ping certainly didn't fall into that category.

"Your Honor, can I ask you something?" she asked him once they completed another set of drills. "Have you challenged Captain Li's decision to dismiss me?"

"Is that important?" he retorted back uncaringly.

"Yes…—Well, no. But for the sake of my curiosity. I wanted to know why," she persisted.

"You know what, Ping. You need to be less distracted and concentrate on your task," he replied her evenly and pointed at the set of bow and arrows as a cue.

"But…" she raised her voice, still primed from a fight, but Shao aborted her intention to dig a truth out of him.

"Remember, you only have two weeks. That was our deal."

She opened up her mouth to reply but close it again.

"Now, shall we start?" he said, eager to change topics. Given no other choice, the girl could only nod.

Shang was an experienced fighter—this Shao knew. And as a strong man himself, it was natural that Shang's training regime emphasised so much in visceral physicality and raw muscle strength. But that was where the mistakes lied. Ping wasn't a man—and she could never be as strong, as robust as a man… no matter how many hours of training Shang would put on her.

So, he determined to train her differently.

"Fire!" The Prince tossed the fruit into the arrow, and Mulan aimed and fired quickly. The arrow whizzed through and hit a tree, completely ignored its real target and she groaned in frustration.

"That was close, try again," he encouraged.

She set herself up again, and he threw another fruit. Her shoulders slumped when she missed again, but she picked another arrow.

"Watch me," he said, smoothly threw three, not just one fruit, in the air and aimed his arrows right on them. He smirked and pretended it wasn't a big deal when three subsequent arrows whizzed and pinned all three fruits right on its target mark on the tree.

"How do you make this look so easy?" she asked with a mix of admiration and disbelief.

He just grinned cockily, and she rolled her eyes.

"May I?" he said, and with the finesse of a tiger, he had lifted his bow up and over her body, pressing the weapon against her back to keep her cocooned in his arms. Then, he'd somehow
managed to fire with the same level of accuracy he always exhibited despite having her holding the weapon.

"See that?"

She nodded. She found it easier to listen and absorb Shao Wei's instruction. There was no skipping heartbeat, no flushing cheek and no… distraction.

"Now, you try," he encouraged. "Remember, straight back, square your shoulder, lock your eyes on your target, and let the bow sing! Don't overthink it," he advised, tossing another target.

Thinking was Mulan's superpower, but this time she just let herself feel. Feel the way her muscles tightened as she drew the bowstring back. Feel the vibrations of the string as she released it. Feel the rush of satisfaction as the arrow sunk into the flesh of the fruit and they pinned to the tree.

"Well done," she heard Shao's praise from the side. She was still gawking at her own shot. It wasn't a bull's eye, but it managed to stay within the boundary of the circle. She felt recharged—confidence and courage multiplied—as if her inner warrior just being unleashed within. She had never known that having a platonic teacher did really make this much difference in her progress.

Another hour into the training and she had amazingly improved her aiming consistency. "At this rate, you'll be taking Captain Li's title as the best archer in the regiment!"

Mulan was quite sure anything the Prince said would never happen by the next millennia, but she enjoyed for once, someone had faith in her. It made her felt valued. "Well, thank you," she replied.

"Ok, now let's do a spar," the Prince said, dropping his weapon and inviting her to do the same.

When they stood in front of each other on a fighting stance, she saw her chance to press him the same nagging question.

"Let's make a bet," the Prince proposed. "If you can beat me in this spar, I will tell you why I decide to use my power and reverse your captain's dismissal. But if you lose," he paused and grinned. "You have to take my patrol shift next week."

Fair enough. Mulan nodded.

"You start," he commanded, to which Mulan didn't hesitate. She threw a hard punch at his vital places, but Shao had seen all of them coming and dodged them easily. When she stepped forward to launch another punch, he caught her arm, twisting it, practically breaking her posture. Mulan yelped in pain, feeling her arm bent in an unnatural position and Shao let her go.

She landed on her left arm with a crunch. Thankfully, her wrist wasn't broken even when it was painful. But something in her aching more than her wrist—her pride. Her sweet victory earlier was soon forgotten. All she remembered was an unpleasant memory the night Shang challenged her and won.

With anger, she gripped the earth underneath before pushing herself back up.

"Anger wouldn't make you win the spar, Ping," he told her patiently.

"Then, what should I do? I've trained myself as much as I can!" she said frustratedly, her head drooped to her hands. There was only so much she could do with her body. She had limit.
This was her limit.

"Soldier Ping, do you want to go home?"

It turned up; Ping wasn't a bad student at all. Rebounding from her defeat, she put another two hours into trying to break his defence and she finally managed to hit him square on his jaw, making use of the fact that she was a lot shorter than him and swept her foot to make him fall.

"Darn!" The word exploded from his lips but strangely tasted good on his tongue.

"I'm sorry! I don't...—Are you...are you hurt?"

"Don't worry," Shao said, picking himself from the dirt. "Bring that dinner to my tent and I'll forgive you for ruining this handsome face of mine."

He laughed when Ping rolled her eyes."Now you just have to repeat that a couple of hundred times and you'll be good to go," he smirked. "The punch I mean, not the eye roll."

She pressed the heel of palm to her forehead, "Baby steps."

"Yes," he agreed. "And you're doing really well for only having been thrown into this a few hours ago."

"Thank you," she shrugged, "I've always been a model student... So, it gets me a little bit when I couldn't do something that looks trivial to other. But I promise you, I will keep on trying."

"I believe that," he said with a grin.

"Believe what?"

"That you can do anything more than other recruits if you set your mind and soul upon it."

Shao saw the momentary surprise in the girl's eyes disappear beneath her focused expression as she wiped her brows. "I will not let you down, Your Highness."

"Please, just Shao Wei. And what I just taught you is a concept about using the enemy's strength against him," Shao explained. "It's basically a feminine philosophy."

"Feminine philosophy?"

"Yes. Think about it. Man, a yang, normally blunt, strong and hard. To apply this concept, you must have yin sensibility—receptive, soft and flexible—like a woman."

He didn't miss the way she was stiffened at the mention of word "woman", but he didn't wish to address the matter today. They have more important things to achieve.

"I know you yelp like a woman and shirked like a woman," he said, trying to repress a knowing smile. He knew at some point today Ping had forgotten to employ her really fake masculine timbre. "But that's not what I meant. In hand to hand combat, you will need to know when to step back...and not charge forth like a man would."

"You are actually not so bad of a teacher!" The half astounded, half relief smile on her face was priceless.

"You sound surprised," Shao pretended to be a little annoyed. "A good teacher merely explains. A
great one…—" He presumptuously rubbed his own chest. "...inspires."

She shook her head, laughing. "Yeah, well. I am… Inspired!"

"If you continue to be this good, we can let out Topless Captain eat his words," said Shao with a solid conviction.

She winced from both hearing the nickname Shao had given Shang...and his wish for Shang to eat his words.

"Shao Wei, I have never plan to prove him wrong. It's enough that I can stay to complete the training."

"I see you have a soft spot for your brother in law, Fa-Ping," he said, slapping Ping's shoulder in a manly way. "But men love to humiliate each other. It's what we do."

"They do?"

He guffawed when Ping seemed to take his words seriously.

"I'm only kidding, Ping. But!" he pointed his hand dramatically. "I'll make him constantly keep an eye on you—for the right reason."

"Did you just wash and fold my washing?" Ling asked, seeing Mulan crouching on the floor with a few buckets filled with filthy water inside.

"I'm glad you noticed," she said.

"And I smell this productivity came with a string attached."

"Uh, where did you get that idea from?"

"Don't tell me you want me to accompany you doing that market decoy again to visit the Healer," Ling told her. "Listen, the training only going to get harsher by the day, and it will not be good for you and the…—"

"Actually about that," Mulan cut him in. "You don't need to worry because I won't be training with you guys anymore, because… the Prince of Wei will be training me. Privately." She deliberately paused to see her friend's reaction to such news.

"Is this... for real?" he said in shock.

"You hear me. He'll be training me."

"I disprove!" Ling reacted sharply between gritted teeth as soon as she told him what Prince of Wei's offer.

It was Mulan's turn to be surprised by Ling's acrid reaction. "Ling, I know you don't like him since...—"

"I have never said that!" Ling tried to repress the furious edge on his tone but the way he worked the dough with a gusto may have given away the clue.

"You did! Do you think I didn't see the look on your face when I mention of him and Ting Ting?" Not long after Ting Ting silently refused his proposal, she had finally decided to tell Ling about
what she witnessed in Xi'an. It made perfect sense how Ting Ting responded to him that day now given the context. Ling said nothing, but vicious frown on his forehead did.

"This is not about Ting Ting!" Because it truly wasn't. He just wanted to keep his best friend and her presumably unborn child out of harm's way that he had to scheme a backstabbing game behind her back. This was not the result he wanted.

"Gah, given a chance perhaps you'll chop his balls!"

"No. I won't!" he snapped.

She raised her brows and gave him a meaningful look.

"Ok, yes. Perhaps I will. But….Ting Ting had nothing to do with this, I swear!" he said. The anger he barely contained was almost visible.

Mulan sighed, "You have nothing to worry about. He is so different from Captain Li's brutal traini...—"

Ling felt like his head about to explode. How could he explain his good intention without admitting he was the true mastermind of her dismissal?

"Look," he interjected, finally getting a hold of his emotion. "I know you are very serious about joining the war and agreed to be trained by an expert is a good thing. But, don't you see that the Prince is a dangerous individual. Don't you say you saw him talking to a Hun Princess in the woods?"

"Yes, I know, but...—"

"I had a bad feeling that he is deeply involved with the enemy," he tried to explain his reasoning. "And that in itself is an act of treason." That was partially true.

"I thought it was your idea that I spoke to him, to befriend him!" Mulan's persisted voice interrupted his stupor. She crossed her arms around her chest.

"That because you didn't tell me about that Hun Princess!" Ling defended. "Who knows he had plotted to kill gods know who. People had said about his reputation. He wasn't a clean, straight lace man. He is known to be quite rebellious in the court."

"That makes us two," Mulan muttered, her expression softening. "Look, Ling... The truth is. Captain Li had terminated me," she confessed.

"What? He...—he did? But...—Why?" Ling gasped, trying his best to fake his surprise reaction.

"Well... he said I wasn't ready for battle. And sending me will be a foolish move, because the chance for me to return alive is almost, well...—None. So, he is being a responsible leader, he felt he had to send me home."

"He had a point there. Then... why are you upset? Isn't that a good thing that you can go home without having your father being sent to the battlefield? You better go home before anyone found out your...secret."

Mulan sighed, "Ling... you know my father. If I went home with Shan-Yu's head, yes... perhaps my father would not insist to go, but if I was sent back home because of my incompetence. How could a man like him accepts there is no male in his household representing them in the
frontline—especially when the Emperor had specifically requested this?" she said, throwing her hand and running them down her face. "And...I'm just not even a wife material, let alone becoming a mother. Even my parents had established that my cooking skill was close to non-existent." She stopped before continuing with a quiet voice. "I just want to be accepted... to be who I am."

"You mean being in a front line slaying the Huns is who you are?" he said, his voice no longer indignant, and the tension slowly drained from his stiff shoulder. In fact, he sounded sad.

"Ling...—" she sighed. "Look. there is something odd happened. Captain Li reversed his decision to dismiss me in one night. I mean... I am quite certain Prince of Wei had a part in this, but the question is... why?"

"Hmm..." Ling tapped his finger against his chin thoughtfully. So, that cunning bastard was playing his game, ruining his plan. "Did you ask him why?" he said, trying to sound as neutral as possible.

She shrugged. "His answer was as vague as can-you-please-stop-asking-it's-none-of-your-business," she paused, frowning a little.

"Well, I think we all need to dig the truth out of him," Ling said.

"Because if you won't, then I would."

"Your Highness...?" Mulan asked him carefully when they had a small break between the drills. It had been another hard but good day in her training. And as usual, she had progressed far more than he expected and continually astounded him with her ability. Suspecting he was in a good mood, she was ready to poke this sleeping dragon with a stick. "Why did you offer to train me? I mean...—Why? Why did you want to help me?"

She pretended not to hear him taking a deep, loud breath or see him pinching the bridge on his now. "You are persistent with capital 'P'"

Mulan gave him a noncommittal shrug, "It is wrong if I want to know?"

"Ping, you tell me. Is it wrong for a soldier to help his brother in arms?" he retorted back, this time a lot more pleasant and no longer steely. "I may be smug and cocky. But I am not a heartless man, Ping." He patted a spot next to him as they sipped their drink and sighed in relief when water cooled their throats.

"I have heard that you are here in exchange of your elderly father."

"You... you knew?" Mulan looked at Shao Wei, measuring in the man's expression. The Prince's countenance was betraying nothing as he nodded after a moment. "Chi-Fu told me, and so here we are," he said with a little smile. "I want to give you a chance to save that family honour."

That was not the answer she expected. Especially after the first impression, she got when she first arrived at the encampment, watching Shao Wei's indifferent exchange with Yao.

"Happy now?" he said with a teasing smirk.

"Happy?" she repeated.

"Yes. I figure how to sate that curious mind of yours." He turned to meet her eyes and tapped the side of his nose. "My legendary intellect isn't just empty words. Seeing is believing. Now, let's do a
little diversification by trying combat with sword, I heard it's your speciality," he said.

Satisfied with the Prince's answer, Mulan obeyed without much hassling. She walked across the beaten path towards Shao Wei's tent to retrieve his sword.

His private tent was no bigger than Shang's, however, his belonging was about ten times more. His plush bed had nearly eaten up most of the floor space which at the moment covered by robes, belts, hair tie, bottles and what Mulan recognised as men's undergarment.

Five minutes into rummaging through his belonging, it became apparent to her that the task of finding two, distinctly shaped and rather large metal object wasn't as easy as it seemed. Shao Wei clearly had an excessive number of clothing material, shoes, books, and countless number of scrolls among other training weapons like nunchuck, rods, spear, and dagger. And the fact that normally he had to depend on his servants to organise and tidy them up didn't help one bit.

But thankfully, with a little bit of perseverance, she managed to pick a pair of swords under his bed. And a tattered large piece of paper caught her attention. It doesn't look neat or formal like any other scroll that scattered around the room. In contrast, the paper looked like used paper and the strokes looked rushed and clumsy.

It was an unmarked map of a building or more like… a palace. And there was a short note written in Mongol underneath it, signed by someone with initial "A".

Mulan hand trembled. Whatever information she failed to decipher in those careful cursives of Mongol language must have held a vital information that the Prince had kept it.

Fearing that the Prince might grow suspicious if she spent too much time just to locate two swords, she rushed back to her training spot.

"Found my sword?" he asked between his press-up.

"Yes... of course," Mulan retorted quickly, schooling her feature to what he hoped was an innocent expression. Perhaps the Prince will fillet her alive if he knew she was snooping in his tent.

"You seemed to have a lot of things in your tent. Are you sure you need all of them for war?" she said. It was more like a statement than a question.

Shao laughed at her confused and disbelief voice. "Of course, I can take whatever I want where ever I want. I am the Prince!" he supplied, arms on his hips before returning his attention to his sword.

Mulan dismissed his decadent undertone. "Then, why did you try to take Yao's sleeping spot on the first day I arrived?"

"For fun," he sniggered as he gave his blade a rub with a silk cloth.

"For fun?" she parroted. Shao exposed his teeth. Mulan thought if one was being generous it might perhaps be called a smile, but it lacked any of the joy or mirth really required for such an expression.

"Yes? Life here is so mundane, I need some… y'know… spark," he replied, moving on to work on his arrow.

Mulan watched the Prince's hand move diligently to sharpen the weapon. The sound of metal grinding sang in the air.
"You seemed to create more enemies than friends in this encampment."

The Prince lifted his mouth in a smile and dodged Mulan's remark with a swift retribution. "I'm glad you notice that," he replied sarcastically. "However, if you keen to hear another version of the story, is that Yao was the one who picked the fight with me."

That struck her. "What? What do you mean?"

"Don't you notice that his bag and belonging wasn't even on the tent? The bedding spread there was for me. Concerned that the Huns will spot me easily if I stayed in my 'exclusive' tent, Chi-Fu had ordered someone to secure a spot for me in the communal tent. Alas, some dim-witted brute tried to interfere."

Mulan's jaw dropped at that. She had never suspected what had happened. She immediately felt awful for misjudging the Prince without hearing his account. Perhaps he wasn't a spoilt or a traitor her mind had conjectured him to be.

"Why did he do that?" she asked.

Shao gave her a vague shrug, addressing the imaginary point in the sky. "No idea. But...—,"
suddenly his expression hardened. "I don't need a friend here."

It was perhaps down to her skill reading the same hard expression of her warrior's father that Mulan was able to see a flash of melancholy in the Prince's eyes.

"I...I'm sorry," she immediately felt bad. "You must miss some familiar faces in the royal court. Friend and all that."

"I wished," he scoffed. "They are probably pleased if I were dead here, except for my father," he shook his head. "And that is just because I am the only heir to his throne."

Apparently, the Prince's relationship with his family and friends in higher place weren't any better than here. "Ugh," Mulan cringed, she immediately realized she might be overstepping an unseen personal boundary. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to poke about and..."

Clearing his throat, the Prince quickly put his friendly mask on. "Don't be. Born with silver spoon always comes in a package. Good and bad. You have to survive both. The right friends in the court are a necessary evil at times," and he turned to her. "You are lucky you have good friends here—real friends that stand by you no matter what. And such incredible father figure too," he said, sounding both sincere and wounded. "It's no wonder you want to keep his honor—you want to make him proud."

And Mulan knew he was right. She still remembered right after her mother passing, her father placed a family picture on his desk. Attached with it was a little note. "Today, be thankful and think how rich you are. Your family is priceless, your time is gold, and your health is wealth."

It was perhaps a note to himself, but it had spoken volumes about his amazing character. While many men became bitter as their mourned their passing loved ones after the plague swept the country, her courageous father decided to be thankful and cherished all the time he had left on earth.

"However, I think I owe you an apology," he suddenly said. Mulan blinked. Her 'what?' was silent, but he could read it across her face.

"I said I need to apologise," the Prince said, biting the side of his cheeks. "I know you didn't know
the full story back then, but there is no reason why I did… I should've treated you the way I did when you decided to side with Yao.” He let a loud exhale. "You are right, maybe I am making enemies more than friends."

"Hey. I'll be your friend," Mulan said, without much thinking.

The Prince's brows climbed unto his hairline, and Mulan immediately amended. "If...if you wish, of course. And that incident with bean bun, completely unintentional. I swear I have no intention whatsoever to harm you. More like….my lack of culinary expertise, I apologize. I always struggle in the kitchen. Washing dishes may have been my limit."

He looked surprised for a beat.

"You will regret that," he said, but a warm smile laced his lips.

Shang sighed heavily when he found Fa Zhou's letter to Ping among the stack of daily mail delivered to the encampment that day.

He had been avoiding the boy since his dismissal and the Prince's bid to take him under his wings. It made him feel like a bad person. A villain even.

He walked to the courtyard in the hope he could send someone else to deliver the letter. An emptiness greeted him. The place was deserted. Seemed like the compulsory morning marathon had dragged past dinnertime.

"Darn," he muttered, having no choice but to search and find Ping himself.

It was hard at first to find Ping and the Prince since Shang had no idea where they went and how far into the forest they had gone to train.

But as an experienced soldier, Shang had an excellent skill noticing a faint boot mark on the grass or disturbed branch or scent of sweat as a sign of human presence. The trail he followed led him into a clearing and he sensed their presence growing even stronger. He slowed his pace, creeping through the leaves until he saw a flash of movement, one of them was pinning the other on the ground. He heard a cry.

And it wasn't Ping's cry. That sounded like….a woman.

Were they…—?

"You okay?" he heard Shao's rasp.

"I'm… I'm fine," replied the feminine voice, heaving from… whatever exertion she was doing as well.

"I think… I think I heard someone." And Shang froze.

A shudder crashed through him when he realized what the Prince could've been doing. He looked around in panic, loss for option. He certainly wasn't going to come crashing out of the bush during that, but what should he do?

He supposed he should go away and come back in what….? Ten minutes?

Ten minutes is crap, he thought, completely aghast by his own heckling. He heard footsteps approaching. Oh lord, he had to escape this horrid awkwardness. What if the Prince found him
But, what if she were an enemy spy, entrapping the Prince to endanger him? Even to kill him.

But no, from her heaving, it sounded like the woman was in an equally vulnerable position. Shang nearly slapped himself by then. Not only he was hearing this, but he was also analyzing it.

He had to confront them, he decided.

"Your Highness," Shang emerged from behind the bush. There was no woman, it was only Ping. And there was no fun sexy time….only a spar. Shang sighed in relief. Nevermind even if Ping sounded like a woman, at least his clothing was all still intact and modesty secured.

"May I borrow Ping for a while."

"Of course," the Prince said, throwing a coyest smile towards a confused young man who was half covered in dirt. "He is all yours."

"Thank you for today, Your Honour," Ping said finally, bowing. Another glance exchanged between the two didn't go unnoticed by Shang's eagle eye.

"Don't mention it Ping. It's my….Pleasure. We have a… great time together," the Prince replied, seemingly enjoying Shang's change of demeanour from stern to code red. "Don't forget to return him back to me," he said tauntingly.

When the place was deserted with the departure of Shao Wei, Shang instantly felt relaxed and annoyed all at once. He didn't like the way the Prince was looking at Ping, it was wrong in so many levels. It reminded him like the way a man would look to a woman, with full of desire and earnest affection.

And it reminded him of how Ping looked at him, with genuine adoration embedded in his shy smile. Yes, that look belonged to him! Only him!

No, wait! What the hell?

Shao Wei laid on his back on the grass, watching the constellation dancing in the cold night sky. It's been a couple of days since he taught Ping…and the boy… no, girl actually, continued to astound him in many ways possible.

Including her sincere offer to make him her friend.

For a beat, he didn't know how to respond. She regarded him with her kind, sympathetic stare, completely oblivious on his device to use this training as a method to utilise her to meet his end. And this kind of unexpected sincerity had thrown him off-balance.

Shao balked on the last thought but decided it was prudent to execute his initial plan. Losing friendship over some difference in principle, political debacle or simply betrayal, were nothing new to him.

But he couldn't afford to lose his sister, his family and his country.

Dusk fell on the vast lands where the encampment was laid. After two days of a gruesome trek to
the mountain, everyone was allowed an early night to get the rest their body coveted.

Yet, an hour before midnight, Yao still tossed and turned on his makeshift bed. Even extreme fatigue and tiredness couldn't bend his stubborn mind to give up its fight. He hadn't been sleeping well since the night he found his fiance's necklace inside the Captain's tent.

*Maybe you and Mei aren't meant to be. It's a good thing you find this out before you walk her down the aisle, he thought.*

*No, rebuked another voice in his head. Mei isn't that kind of cheap girl. You know that for a fact. There has to be another explanation.*

*Like what? Like she wants to leave you? Hell yeah, and you still think there is room for competition...-

"Shut it!" Yao scolded, awaking Chien-Po who slept a few paces away from him.

"Man, are you alright?" he asked, rubbing his sleepy eyes.

"I... I'm fine. Sorry," Yao squeaked.

 Damn you and your martyr complex, said the voice again.

*No, no, it must be him. It must be him that forced Mei to...-

He exhaled heavily as he squeezed his eyes, fearing another unpleasant possibility.

*Yeah, let's skin that stupid Captain alive! Gut him like a fish! Turn him into a rug! Make him feel pain! raised another voice.*

"Screw him!" Yao balled his fist, thankfully Chien-Po didn't seem to hear him this time.

How could this happen again to him? He had lost—not just one, but two—precious women in his life, to two almost identical looking men. Ok, maybe not identical, but Shang and the Prince of Wei coincidently had a lot of superficial similarities. They were both tall, strong and handsome. Although their personalities were miles apart, but they were both powerful people who had connections in high places—both were influential figures who could bend anyone at their will.

This was how the world run. The rich and powerful would use their authority to commit a shameful crime and let the poor and helpless to endure the consequences.

Yao reached into his sack and pulled a tattered picture, edges were torn and stained with age. The pure smile of his sister was looking back at him. His heart ached as he looked back to that day...

*Baba, it'll be fine. I am always good with kids," Mochou implored. "I've taken care of Yao since he was in diapers. And boy, everyone knew what kind of difficult kid he was," she nudged him teasingly.*

*"Hey! Watch it!" Yao protested and Mochou grinned at him.*

*"You are always cute when you are angry," she chuckled, reaching out to his cheeks and pinches them.*

*"Ouch," Yao yelped and glared at her.*

*"See? How can I not love that cute little angry face of yours," she laughed. "If Mama were here, I
am sure she'll agree with me."

"Mochou….It's not because I don't trust you," their father said patiently. "I know you've done well to help me raise Yao all these years, but serving in a royal palace is nothing like what you used to. You have no idea what the young Prince of Wei and their family are like."

"Spoilt rotten I'd say," piped Yao, who had heard numerous gossip about the heir of Wei's antics. "Someone told me he was once ordered the entire Harem to celebrate the lunar festival in the middle of winter. That's what I describe as a true royal pain!" His older sister just rolled her eyes and ignored his remark.

"Mochou," their father continued. "You are already eighteen. Why don't you go to the matchmaker, find a good man, marry him, have children together and be happy? It's time for you to think about yourself and your future and..."

"And abandoning you and Yao?" she cut him, not impolitely, but her words sounded sharp nonetheless.

"That's not what I meant. I mean...—When you leave this house to marry, that doesn't mean that you are forsaking us."

"I know it doesn't. But I won't be able to focus on building my own household until I know that all yours and Yao's needs are taken care of," she explained her rationale. "Prince Wei Zhang has promised such a good pay for the successful candidate. I mean, how hard to please a spoilt brat could be? Think about this, if I worked for her, I will be able to send you money for your medication and Yao's schooling, perhaps even saving a little for our own house," Mochou said with enthusiasm. "I am fed up of renting this tiny place."

"Mochou....—"

"Please at least let me at try. It is only for a couple of years until Yao graduated," she pleaded, to which the old man unable to object. His daughter had a fair point, this job could be their ticket to a better life. "...and I'll give you the kind of life and happiness you deserve, Baba."

The old man smiled and pulled his only daughter into his arms. "You already did."

Months later, Mochou's fervent diligence had brought her to the attention of Prince Shao Wei's mother, the most powerful woman in the Harem. Impressed with Mochou's character and determination to please, Consort Shin-Ye appointed the young woman as the head of the chambermaids, leaving Mochou in charge not only her children, but also her belongings and her secrets.

For months and years, those promise and hope of better life seemed to be alive. Mochou wrote them letters weaved with amazing, new experience. She told them of the expansive riches she had never seen before. And Consort Shin-Ye had showered her with gifts, delicacy and of course….money was flowing generously every month. Until one cold winter day, Yao and his elderly father received a letter bearing a bad news of his sister's fate.

After the sudden death of Consort Shin-Ye, the bereaved Prince Wei Zhang ordered to imprisoned all the chambermaid that had stepped into her court that day. The Consort, who died unnoticed during the night, was suspected to be poisoned. Being the main person in charge of the housekeeping, Mochou was undoubtedly on the firing line and was condemned to be executed for her carelessness in preventing such tragedy from happening.
To make the matter worse, the family wasn't even allowed to pay her the last visit, bidding her farewell, let alone questioning where was the justice in what appeared to be harsh and unfair punishment.

There was no funeral for her afterwards, in fact, they had never seen her body since. His father was distressed, thinking he had failed his daughter by letting her die pursuing their dreams. Heartbroken and inconsolable, he died a year later.

It was hard for Yao not to be bitter or consumed with hatred. If there was any salve to his wound was to finally have a chance to give these people who had shattered his dreams a lesson.

But, what kind of lesson that wouldn't eventually backfire? He mused. It would be risky, but he won't give up the fight. He had done so much hassle to enter the regiment simply because this would enable him to meet one of the royals he abhorred.

Looking through the gap on the communal tent, he watched as the sun began to rise, bathing the horizon with golden hue. And there was Chi-Fu, pattering with Chef Zhang around the courtyard with a note on his hand towards Captain Li's tent.

And this gave him one great, despicable idea.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for updating so late! There is a lot happening lately and I was just forced to push my writing down from the list of priority. Hope you all still enjoying the story. However, the good news is I write the entire plot to the end (to remind me, since it took ages for me to update) and it panned out to 40 chapter plus epilogue.

Remember that by this point none of the characters had a full revelation about each other's secret. Mulan didn't know that Shao Wei knew her secret, and while Shao Wei knew who Mulan was, he didn't know she might be pregnant. On the other hand, Ling who wanted Mulan to quit the training (for obvious reason), didn't know Shang was Mulan's husband. There is a potential twist of the story: first, Hayabusa and his knowledge of where the Chinese encampment was, and now there is Yao (who had a motive to hate both Shang and Shao Wei). I know everyone is still wondering about Mulan's pregnancy, but all I can say that this will be revealed in due time.
Forgive me for such a late update. I was caught up with work and life in general. My husband has been away, and I was left to fend two children with a hectic schedule (and I still have day job to do!) As a gesture of apology, I've written a reasonably long chapter to fill the gap. Note that this chapter is not betaed and I haven't had the chance to reproof it properly. I hope you all can still enjoy the story aside from the grammatical error.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mulan didn't know how long she had been training that day. What she knew was the sky was dark, and the stars already dance across the horizon, creating the best painting of cosmic imaginary. Truth be told, she enjoyed Shao Wei's training so far especially in comparison to Shang's hardcore regime. Shao Wei took time in explaining the technicality and philosophy behind every technique and turned all their training into fun competitions (he certainly could appreciate Ping's competitive spirit). It was almost like playing a game with real weapons than it was training.

"May I borrow Ping for a while?" Shang emerged from the edge of the clearing.

"Thank you for today, Your Honor," Mulan bowed politely as Shao Wei dismissed her for the day.

"Don't mention it, Ping. It's my pleasure. We have a great time together," Shao replied her and flashed an unnecessary coy smile that had overshot the threshold of simpering. She returned the smile with a far more neutral one.

"Don't forget to return him back to me," he said tauntingly to Shang. She knew it was a very bad joke, but anyone who knew Shao Wei would have dismissed any seriousness in the notion.

"Letter for you," Shang pronounced rather curtly when Shao Wei had left the vicinity. She unrolled the letter, mentally noting that Shang's sharp gaze still trained on her.

"Ping..." He crossed his arms and added, rather unnecessarily: "Please be careful with the Prince. You don't know what he is like."

And you don't either; she chastised him inwardly, her combative spirit was suddenly awakened. Thankfully a much more polite "I know what I'm up against, Captain," was what came out of her mouth.

"If I were you, I'll take the advice, pack up and go home," he summed up.

Did you really? Said the voice in her head. If Shao Wei was hubristic, she could say Shang was a similar annoying kind with a slightly more aggressive variation.

"It's for your own good," he added bluntly.

That fleeting moment she really wanted to jab him on that bare, muscular chest of his and yelled at him but she couldn't summon the nerve—not because she feared his punishment nor physical retribution, but because she recited her father had taught her to respect the man in charge. In this
playing field, Shang was her captain and her commander first and foremost.

Swallowing her irritation in a loud huff, Mulan unceremoniously folded the letter back and stashed into her pocket. "I appreciate your concern, Captain. But I can take care of myself. And also, thank you for the letter. Good night."

"What's his problem?" Mulan grumbled as she left.

"Whose problem?" Mushu piped from behind her collar before jumping to the table in front of her to brew a pot of tea.

"Him," Mulan darted her eyes towards the direction where Shang's prominent shadow still out there, standing, perhaps equally vexed by the exchange."He was so snappy… so broody… so...so bossy."

"Well, he is technically your boss," Mushu offered unhelpfully.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Mushu," she scoffed. "Can't believe he has the nerve to bring it up! Is it once not enough? Even as a man I am not free from him!"

"Do you want to be free of him?" Mushu retorted back.

"What do you think?" she deadpanned.

"Careful what you wished for, Girl," Mushu said, clicking his tongue. After observing Mulan's so-called 'misadventure' in love with her parent's chosen husband, Mushu knew there were sparks between the two—more than any of them willing to admit.

"Is it too much to ask? Is it wrong for a woman wanting to do what she thinks is right?"

"I'm listening," Mushu said, propping his head with his claws. He voiced his objection when she grabbed the gin bottle that was lying around but immediately changed his mind. Everyone knew she didn't normally drink to excess, but after all, if her male counterparts were any indication, the army was supposed to be the time to expand one's repertoire.

"Only a sip," Mushu warned, and she didn't protest.

A sip it was, but it had a nice effect of making her lightheaded and loosen her tongue. Before long, she had launched into cracking monologue about how Shang's total ineptitude of empathy and how he had become one constant obstacle she couldn't escape from.

"Okaaay," Mushu slurred when Mulan took a breath to pause. "Did it occur to you that he has his reason to send you away? A reason that you don't know, maybe?" he said between the sip.

"No," Mulan snapped almost immediately. Even if he did try to explain, she didn't care. She couldn't believe him, not after what he did.

"When he dismissed me, I asked…. no, I pleaded with him. Mushu...I begged! I begged earnestly for him to let me stay. I told him why I was here. I tried to reason with him but he…"

"...won't listen?" Mushu finished for her, pouring her a cup of tea.

"Isn't that what men want? You said men want to be needed! To feel superior! To feel they are….gods!"
"Calm down," he said, pushing the ceramic cup towards her. The gin bottle had since disappeared, and Mulan accepted the tea nonchalantly.

"Just sit here… inhale…. exhale….and count to ten, and repeat."

Surprisingly without much indignant protestation, Mulan relented. She sat down and did exactly as she was told.

"I know you are upset," Mushu said soothingly. "But you know Shang isn't the most persuasive of all men, and… the method of his speaking isn't that compelling. Remember this?" he raised his own cup. "Shang did try to make you tea," he added softly. "Although his tea was worse than dishwater, but Isn't that speak of something?"

Mulan fell quiet. She remembered during the mourning period of her mother's untimely death Shang was there, taking care of her, offering to do menial kitchen work that he, in the end, caused more chaos than actually helped (she struggled to stomach the tea he made). There was never sweet words, no flower bouquet, no kiss on her forehead, and no romantic surprise dinner. Shang wasn't a sentimental, touchy-feely kind of husband, he never was.

"Or think this another way. Wouldn't it be easier for him to let you stay? To let you… march to the battlefield without having to argue and confront you? To let you… die?" Mushu looked at Mulan's guarded expression for a moment before continuing. "Shang may not be a flower type guy or hugging type guy… but that doesn't mean he is incapable of love. In fact, he cared deeply about everyone in his family…..and that's including you!"

She may not agree with Mushu's assessment one hundred percent. But for one thing, he was right. Shang may be lacking of romantic bone in his body, but it didn't warrant him as a dreadful man.

"So the same question remained," Mushu said, breaking the silence.

"What question?"

"On whether you really begrudge him for sending you home? Or… for being Mr-Know-It-All? Or…is there something else?" he replied glibly. When she raised one of her brows, he added carefully, "Like perhaps….you wanted to stay, not just for your father…"

"What are you trying to say?" Mulan stared at him, scandalised.

"I know you love your father. That, I don't doubt one bit. But isn't there something you want from everyone here? Especially from….Shang?"

And there was a sudden shift of vibe. Her tone became less defensive and more sounding like defeated.

"I…. I don't know."

Numerous candle illuminated the massive chamber, reflecting the intricately spread woven tapestry among the wild animal skin. Blades, arrows and headpiece of fallen heroes encompassed the surrounding wall, disclosing the proud history of the greatness of the Huns Warrior. The Huns fortification may be nothing to rival the architectural feat and the flashiness of their Chinese counterpart. But it wasn't because they couldn't afford to, more because they chose not to. They had been a nomadic hunter for generations, roaming freely from places, never tied down to land, property or possession. They were accountable to no one, bowed to no one, and lived as they pleased.
In the centre of the colossal tent, surrounded by warriors and guards, was the throne of the Khan.

"My Khan." Hayabusa fell on his knees when he arrived a respectable distance from where Khan Kaidu was seated. Eyes respectfully trained on the floor under his feet.

"Arise," the Khan declared. "So, what have you brought me this early in the morning?"

"A good news, My Khan," he replied, keeping his tone reverent. "We managed to obtain our enemy political secret."

The Khan's faint nod was enough to warrant that he wouldn't want any audiences to listen to this.

"I found the location of one of the Chinese training encampment," Hayabusa continued when the Khan expressly indicated that he was permitted to speak in front of selected few. In the room were Batu, the chief of spies, Timur, his fellow strategist and Sukh, Shan-Yu's half brother.

The Khan tilted his head, noticing the 'and' was coming.

"The heir of Wei is one of the residents there," Hayabusa continued, jerking his head knowingly towards Atilla. The young man paid knew he had to speak and act carefully in front of such crowd. He proceeded with a solemn salute before ceremoniously presenting a hand-drawn map for the Khan to scrutinise.

"You mean Prince Shao Wei—the Emperor's nephew?" the Khan inquired, but his eyes had not left the scroll on his hands.

Hayabusa nodded. "Yes, Your Highness."

"A peasant training camp?" the Khan read the inscription in disbelief. "Are you sure about this, Hayabusa?" And the Khan was not the only sceptics in the room. The general murmur erupted among his compatriots.

"Positive. I let the witness testify," he replied deftly. He had thought beforehand that it was much more conceivable if someone else testifying the story of his achievement than hearing it came out of his lips. "Atilla?"

The young warrior bowed again reverently before speaking.

There was once a saying: The value of credibility often correlated closely with the amount of details one's heard. So, Hayabusa remained silent when Atilla launched into a meticulous detail of their accidental meeting with a pixie cut soldier and how his mentor had managed to cleverly bait him into divulging this secret without realising that he did.

"Last week, I was spying the Chinese encampment to confirm the accuracy of this intel. And it is as much accurate and true," Atilla summarised in closing, glancing knowingly towards Hayabusa as though giving him a silent credit for his guidance.

"So you saw the Prince of Wei there?" Timur inquired, narrowing his eyes. From his periphery, Hayabusa could see Atilla's knuckles went white as stone, even when his expression betraying nothing.

"You know that Atilla has a good set of working eyes," Hayabusa decided to intervene, glancing over his shoulder towards Batu. "Otherwise... a respectable warrior like Batu wouldn't have recommended him to me."
Batu scoffed silently, and Timur breathed loudly through his nostril, knowing he had played him.

"But that's impossible!" Timur impugned. "Why would a royalty like him joining a low-rank training camp?"

Hayabusa chose to ignore the mock in his tone. Even when Shan-Yu was the Khan's favourite warrior, in term of direct rivalry, it was Timur who often became his torn in the flesh. The man was young but sharp as razor and quick wit as lightning. He was undoubtedly clever, yet no less cunning and deceitful when it came to discrediting him.

"And what benefit will I gain by telling a lie?" Atilla said, his repressively calm voice carried a dangerous undercurrent with it.

And if, in the end, the Huns gained the upper hand from the unintentional act of espionage by a drunken soldier, this would be history and the highlight in Hayabusa's storied career. Unlike Shan-Yu (which he thought somewhat impetuous in his doing), he firmly believed that blood and sword weren't the answer for everything. But the Hun warriors were never famous for their perseverance in waiting and much more interested in reacting impulsively according to the situation. Thus his wait-and-see methodology often went unappreciated.

"Maybe because the Chinese knew we weren't going to suspect that he is there," Batu conjectured.

"That's a possibility," the Khan contemplated, although knowing the Wei's Princes, no one would be able to think what kind of bribe Wei Zhang had employed to persuade his selfish, self-absorbed, party-animal boy to adopt a life in disguised as a simple, lowly citizen. If safety were the issue, he would prefer to be restrained inside a golden cage in the comfort of his home than to wander freely under the stars.

Hayabusa, on the other hand, had his own theories about this, but he won't just breathe out his thought aloud without thinking of logical explanation.

"It's a shame we can't just go and ask," Timur whispered jokingly to which Sukh sharply chastened him.

Once upon a time, the Wei and the Huns used to be in a good term, assimilating and coexisting side by side. The tension began about two decades ago as the new Emperor— with a novel ideology of uniting China—raised to the throne. He had conquered many minor kingdoms and embraced larger ones with the promised of a better future together.

It was known to the Huns that Emperor Xiongnu had always keen for both Chinese and the Huns kingdom to unite under his rule—the condition which subtly implied the colonisation and invasion and perhaps slavery to them. Since his coronation about two decades ago, the Chinese Emperor had been plain in his intention and applied physical confrontation to those willing to challenge or question his intent. In contrast, Prince Wei Zhang, his brother, was inclined to use a more peaceful solution and proposed both kingdoms to embrace each other under the ties of political marriage. To support his cause, he had bestowed his own daughter from his favourite concubine for the Khan to wed—an idea that was fiercely opposed by a handful of his direct family, including his only son, Prince Shao Wei.

While they were intrigued as to what the other end of the bargain was for Prince Shao Wei, it was Sukh who had read between the lines. "Are you suggesting that we assassinate the Prince?"

"We can't drag this war forever," Hayabusa reminded him. "The Emperor of China had performed countless attacks against the defenceless civilians, banished our citizen from their territory and
dealt with our people disrespectfully."

"To which we retaliate with the same action," the Khan added duly.

Hayabusa had anticipated the Khan's inconspicuous resistance towards his plan. Many years ago before he raised in power, Khan Kaidu and Prince Wei Zhang used to share quite an intimate friendship. Although the relationship had deteriorated when Wei Zhang accused a Hun spy of being responsible for the death of his favourite concubine, the Khan had no direct, personal vendetta against him.

"That's true, My Khan. But we can't just keep on even out the odds. In war, you can either become the winner...or die losing," he said in earnest.

Although the Khan was proven to be equally brutal in his way of reciprocating the ruthless method wielded by the Emperor of China, he still had a fraction of integrity to the value of humanity of whatever surviving friendship he had left with the Prince of Wei. Therefore, the suggestion of plotting serious malice against the Prince of Wei's only son—seemed to be violating the Khan's book of conduct.

"My Khan, how long more we let these Chinese fooling us with their empty promise?" Hayabusa went on to sell his idea. "If we wait. We only wait for them to win!"

"I rather die than live in bondage," Batu seconded.

"I'm with you," Timur chimed in a gusto.

The Khan's paused, nodding and stroking his bushy beard as he perused the map and digested the plan. Despite his verbose approval, his hesitation was clear as day.

"My Khan, we have to think about years to come. About the future. Our kingdom's future," Hayabusa urged, sensing the Khan's mind was still tormented with this cowardly plot to sneak and murder an unsuspecting victim purely because of his birthright. If there were a time and place to kill such a man, in his mind, there had to one a fair duel between them.

"I believe Hayabusa has a point," Batu stated his opinion, glancing towards Sukh who seemed to equally deep in thought. "This is a golden opportunity we can not miss!"

_We've beheaded so many Chinese before. Adding one to the number won't make such a difference, would it?_ Hayabusa wanted to say. Eliminating Prince Shao Wei was not only sending a warning signal to their adversary, but also eradicating the Chinese throne from its roots. But he knew he couldn't make such blatant, definitive statement.

"Think about this: The Emperor and Prince Wei Zhang are already in their fifties. They won't be around any longer," Hayabusa carefully expanded his logic. "We must act quickly before Prince Shao Wei took a wife and bore more successors."

"You've won me this time," the Khan capitulated, offhandedly handing the map back to Atilla.

Hayabusa bowed humbly even when his soul basked in a feeling of warm pride. Often times, it was Shan-Yu who received all these direct praises for all his heroic deeds slaying the Chinese, while he, as a strategic advisor who held more passive role, was only given the credit when his plan had aided Shan-Yu earning the victory.

"Atilla, tell Shan-Yu to prepare two thousands...—"
"That won't be necessary, My Khan," he said quickly. He couldn't let Shan-Yu claimed the triumph over his ingenious success. No, not this time. "Five people would suffice."

"Five hundred you mean?" Timur added, in a voice that border on correctional.

Again, he refused to respond to the young man's usual derogatory tone. "It's five, Your Honor," he affirmed.

"Are you sure about this, Brother? This is a mission we can't afford to lose," Sukh voiced his thought.

"Yes, just five best archer will suffice," Hayabusa confirmed before explaining that he had sent spies to monitor the patrol rota around the said encampment. "I'll take Timur besides Atilla if no one objected. Having excellent young blood will definitely increase our success rate," he added. It was priceless to watch Timur's change of expression from surprised, nonplussed to full on affronted.

"Sound like a good plan," the Khan agreed while Timur only scoffed a displeased hiss.

"Well thought!" even Sukh marvelled.

And Hayabusa couldn't help himself to preen a little when the Khan stared at him approvingly in front of a few of his fellow warriors as he marched out of the tent.

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After Shao Wei offering her free private training, Mulan had done her little research of Prince of Wei. Everyone knew he'd been an A-list celebrity before, more famous for his bad behaviour than any redeeming characteristics.

Further digging on him during the writing of that first article, she'd found a mixed bag of opinions about the heir to the Wei's fortune: women seemed to think he was charming but dangerous and capricious. And men were envious of him, it seemed, but no one obviously dared to admit it out loud.

Shao had been studiously flip. He'd downplayed his obvious grief, cracked jokes, brag a lot... and made it clear that he wasn't interested in letting the reality of his private life slip. Apart from the list of these 'winning' traits, Mulan had learned that Shao was actually a nice person.

"So the gossip was true? You seriously dated two women at once?" she said when Shao told her the usual boastful story about two sisters who came close to killing each other after figuring out they had been courted by the same man unknowingly.

"That's what the headline said," he confirmed rather proudly.

Of course, Mulan didn't always trust the news broadcasted by tabloids. The number of false rumour and fake news publisher made for their own financial benefits were astonishing. And many others were glossed and embellished so much to the point of untruth.

"Is that prohibited?" he gloated. "They are just... women."

"Didn't they confront you about this?"

"No," he answered tersely. "Who dared to question the whim and wants of a prince?" he bared his teeth in a smug grin. "The peril of the blue blood."
Mulan wanted to slap that smug smirk off his face and gave him a piece of her mind, but she tried to consider the argument objectively. Serious or not, a prince like him was allowed to sleep with any women of any age, any status, single or even widowed—if so he wished.

"No. Of course, you can sleep with anyone with breasts," she replied bitingly. As much it chafed her, she saw that it wasn't entirely Shao's fault. Those women perhaps wouldn't mind being objectified by a prince who practically owned China.

"Thank god being an asshole isn't contagious," she tilted her head towards him and added. "Although at second thought it may be hereditary." There was no doubt the Wei's household had been famous for treating women as an object of amusement and pleasure. Nothing new there.

Unperturbed, he laughed at her blunt sarcasm.

"Listen, there is only two kind of women. One that swoons openly and ones that are showing indignation but deep down is madly in love with me," he winked towards her, but she failed to see the implied humour behind his words.

"You never liked any of them?" Mulan demanded. "I mean… like like. Not just like."

"I *like* women, but I also like baijiu, I like my comfy bed or eating spicy dumpling," he quipped easily.

"Is that how you compare your feeling towards women? To alcohol and food?"

He laughed again. It was the gesture he often used when trying to mask a more subtle display of emotion. "You are very sharp, Ping. I *like* you."

"Seriously," she pressed on. "You have no women in your life?" The question about Ting Ting and the Huns Princess she saw communing with him was already on the tip of her tongue.

He sighed, scrutinising on nonexistent dirt under his well-tended fingernails. "I am trying not to be emotionally invested in infernal things."

*Unbelievable*, said the voice in her head somewhat disappointedly. Perhaps because in her mind's eye, the royal family his father had loyally served was far more noble, dignified and virtuous than a shallow man who was speaking to her right now.

It must be something in her expression that made him suddenly fell quiet, before answering in more guarded tone, "If there is a woman worthy of my attention….is my late sister."

It was not a model answer she had anticipated, so Mulan was left speechless.

It was a known fact that Wei Zhang, the ruling Prince of Wei, although was only blessed with one son, had his harem full of women who gave him countless daughters. Among those, one was lucky enough to share Shao Wei's royal blood.

"I'm sorry about what happened to her and your mother," she expressed sincerely.

"She should be eighteen this year," he sighed deeply. "I've bought her a fine silk ruqun for her birthday. She would've looked beautiful in it."

Mulan squeezed his shoulder in sympathy. She had lost a family member before. She knew how bitter the loss, grief and helplessness felt like. "I'm sure she would."
"You have no idea," Shao shook his head. "A young man like you will drop dead to see how beautiful my sister is."

"I must have seen her before," Mulan recited from her memory. "I went to the Palace of Wei with my father three years ago for Lunar Festival celebration. She was there, wasn't she?"

He seemed to consider his answer before flashing that annoying signature phoney smirk. "Really?" he said. When Mulan raised one brow at him, he went on, "I'm extremely protective around her, especially around a single man. Because unlike me, my sister is very serious when it comes to love."

Mulan could only roll her eyes. "Unlike you, huh?"

He laughed as though all his sorrow a minute ago was long forgotten. "Yes, for me women are only…." He paused, seeking for words. "Diversion from boredom."

"No wonder you are still single," Mulan quipped crisply.

"Ouch! That's hit a nerve," he retorted with false wariness.

"Good for you," she quipped.

"Hey! You know what? They said sarcasm is a metric for potential," he told her. "If that's true, you'll be a successful individual someday. Perhaps a captain… or a general!"

She knew it was only a satirical retaliation of her verbal jab. But she couldn't help laughing at the banality of the fantasy. On her own daydream about her future, on the rare occasion when she permitted herself the luxury, even such setting would be impossible. Everyone knew, in the world where women are a second class citizen, the only successful ones were those sitting behind her husband's pedestal.

"But if you are interested in going on a much easier route. I still have a half dozen of available stepsister in a prime age to marry," he exposed.

"It must be quite something to live in a palace like yours," Mulan responded, imagining how Fa Ping could ever charm his way into joining the life of the court. She didn't quite expect this verbal banter to be amusing, despite how unserious it might be.

"Yeah. I mean it does come with countless servants, free massage and sex at your door," he guffawed watching the blush spread on her ears. "But harem is not for everyone. Can you imagine a bunch of women living together fighting for a fraction of my father's affection? All in the name of love. Like hell! No one loves my father… well, except maybe Ma, who he fed. —"

"Wait, who is Ma?"

"His stallion. My father never goes anywhere without him; they are inseparable."

"So, you said the only person, well creature, that cared for your father truly is….his horse?" She couldn't decide whether between pity of disbelief.

"Ironically, yes. The rest is just playing the game to gain power and position."

This time Mulan made a face. "I bet there isn't much peace in there."

"No. Certainly not. But all women in China knew, being in a harem is the ticket to a comfortable
life. *Lavish* life. A little discomfort of fighting over the affection of an influential man by scheming a little mischief towards each other is a small price to pay. My mother is no exception," he admitted.

"Your mother?"

"Died many years ago—As you may have heard," he said neutrally. "She used to be my father's favourite concubine… for all the obvious reasons," and Shao gave her a suggestive smile.

"I bet she was all…," she swallowed,"...very pretty." Mulan wanted to say *seductive*, but too shy to say it outright.

Shao laughed deprecatingly. "You don't want to know. I heard them doing things even when the chambermaids were around, literally watching them. But hey, no need to be ashamed if you are performing above and beyond average!"

"Ugh," Mulan closed her eyes, trying to shake off the mental image. "You sound, you know… —," she blushed and cleared her throat. "I mean...experienced."

"Ah," he let a throaty chuckle, reaching for a bottle of rice wine. "Give me some credit. I am the Prince of Wei after all."

"I didn't know that part of the legend," Mulan replied, watching him tipping the bottle and unceremoniously wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"I bet he is experienced too," Shao pointed towards Shang's tent with his eyes. Mulan froze for a second, before convincing herself that it was just a coincidence Shao had mentioned him.

"How… how do you know that?" she said, trying to sound unaffected. Oh well, she had the firsthand account of his level of competency on that department.

"He is a soldier, Ping!" Shao chuckled, slapping her shoulder in a manly way, offering her the drink to which she refused politely.

"What about being a soldier?" she couldn't conceal her confusion.

"Have no one told you? Not even your father?" When she stared at him, blank and perplexed, he laughed again. "Every soldier will have a story of their…first… —" he faked a cough continued. "But don't worry… you are in a good hand with me, because I will make every woman in the country worship you."

Mulan choked on her own saliva at that. "I am sure that won't be necessary."

"Ok, let me tell you of my first. But promised me don't tell anyone...it's kind of not good for my reputation."

She crossed her heart, eyes wide. "Warrior vow. Ok, now spill."

"During my first year of training, a group of us was sent in aid of a village near Hubei that had been raided by bandits one winter. There was perhaps ten of us, we split ways into pairs to clear up debris, finding survivors and evacuating the injured. Then, we spotted this farmhouse with broken windows and decided to check. Long story short, my comrades went and took a couple of wounded workers to the nearest healer leaving me alone to patrol the area and making sure the situation remained neutral. Then, while they were away, I heard writhing noise from the neighbouring building, apparently there this one lady that sprained her ankle… I went in to help her, and she was
very….—eh, grateful."

"Grateful?" Mulan repeated, still not quite understood the context.

"Well, there was no one else but her. Other her neighbours had either evacuated or taken to the healer to be given necessary medical attention, and for the fact, I knew they would be gone for days! Because the closest healer is about one day journey on horseback, let alone on foot," Shao chuckled at the memory. "I carefully dubbed myself as a soldier, not a prince, but she was still very grateful and made me dinner, and we exchanged story. She was no means the prettiest girl I've seen, but quite attractive and pleasant to look at. So, when she said I could stay while waiting for my comrades to return… I couldn't say no—So there I laid on the couch on her living room, but it got very cold at night and there was only one working fireplace —in her bedroom… so she said why don't I…"

"Oh dear ancestor," Mulan groaned into her palm, face burning like the campfire.

"That's not the scandalous part," Shao piped with a big lopsided grin that Mulan never thought was possible. Was he insane to be proud of this? But again, he was drunk.

"Is not?" Mulan looked at him, gathering herself and bracing for the scandalous part.

"No. Because a week later, my comrade returned — while we were drinking tea and nibbling dumpling in the living room—and one of the previously wounded guy came in, helped himself with the tea and dumpling and kissed her cheek and said something like—sorry for leaving you a week, Darling. I missed you. And turned to me—Oh, hello soldier, this is my wife, Ching, I hope she has made you feel at home while I'm gone… and oh yes! thank you for accompanying her and attending to her sprained ankle."

"My...What?!" Mulan nearly screamed, aghast.

"Exactly!" Shao chuckled into his drink. "She was calm, collected…. and warmly threw her arm around him and said 'Oh Honey, this is Shao, he helped with my ankle, so I made him a dinner and bla bla blah blah. And this clueless guy just shook my hand and said thank you for taking care of my wife, thank you for massaging her ankle, thank you for this… for that... so I can't help but just to….keep my mouth shut and just...smile. Gratefully. Even though mentally, my jaw must've been hovering over the floor."

Mulan bit her lips to restrain her laughter. "I can't imagine what her reaction if she knew she had been banging on a royalty for a week."

"Hell, I don't let that slip," he shook his head. "So, in my confused daze, I managed to mouth 'Nice to meet you sir, and thanks for the sofa madam,' and she smoothly patted my shoulder and said 'anytime soldier' and handed me my bag… even wash, fold my underwear clean and perfumed it!"

Mulan convulsed in giggles.

"Glad you find this amusing," Shao told her, pretended to be offended.

"Sorry," she gasped.

"That's when I learn the allure of a man in uniform. You can be the ugliest man possible, but in uniform, you'll suddenly transform into a hottest, most irresistible creature ever walked the earth!"

"I wonder how many bachelors had she offered her sofa," Mulan thought aloud.
"I don't have a chance to ask. But by the way she glance at me when her husband wasn't looking, she had made perfectly clear this had gone exactly according to plan." He shook his head again, incredulous. "...and I was just a victimised male with no choice but to play along."

"Victimized?" Mulan scoffed. "Sounds like you've learned leaps and bounds since then."

"Every man will have their first. Not that any of them in their right mind would be comfortable sharing this kind of story with another... man. Let me tell you a secret," he whispered before launching into a brief graphical monologue on women's erogenous parts.

"I think that's enough lesson for me for the night," she told him, mentally congratulating herself for the best staging a keen, appreciative facade instead of gagging. "I don't want to have wet dreams."

Shao chortled. "That bad?" and placed the almost empty bottle next to his feet.

"I think even Chef Zhang, who has hard of hearing..." she turned directing her gaze at the busy chef not more than a stone-throw away. "...was about to come and lecture you about decency," she added.

"I'd have bought him a bottle of wine," he winked cheekily and lulled his voice into Chef Zhang's throaty tone and said, "Oh, what did you say just now Prince of Wei? Porn? What porn?"

"This is the principal of power abuse and nepotism," he added faux seriously while emptying the content of the bottle into his throat. "And... the essence of politics."

Mulan felt her mouth twitch as she tried to restrain her smile, pretending to return her focus on her Kung Fu scroll.

"So, is any of the rumour about you are true?... Of you being uninterested in holding the throne and more interested in partying, gambling and such?" she asked, this time a little more seriously. There was no condemnation in her tone, only curiosity.

She didn't miss how his shoulders seemed to have tightened.

"You can't believe everything you hear," he replied, unexpectedly sounding a little harassed." If you've got to spend your whole life looking over your shoulder, wondering if the people that claim to love you really love you, or if they want your power and the conveniences of wealth, I've learned very early to wear a mask and..." he sighed. "Nevermind. Let me just surmise that this crown is more of a curse than a blessing."

"Sorry," she squeaked, feeling decidedly culpable for such a blunt question. She just came to know the extent of strain that the mantle bring. "I don't mean..."

"I know," he said "That's why, among many people here I didn't try to make a connection with anyone. Because I know they won't understand. Well... maybe Captain Li will. He is one of a few who knows what it meant by positional exclusion and leadership loneliness."

Mulan nodded understandingly at that. His reasoning made a perfect sense, yet, she didn't see such friendship formed yet between the two.

"I know my bed here a bit cramp, the tent's wall is too thin, and the weather is too cold for my liking. Our compatriots were rather noisy and borderline useless in training. But to be frank, I am not looking forward to returning to my palace anytime soon," he told her. "I like it here."

Me too, she thought in her head, thinking what kind of life she had returned to when the war was
over. It was kind of bizarre for liking her sweat-scented communal sleeping tent and tolerating all sort of men's disgusting, unhygienic routine, but she savoured the aspect of freedom this new life had offered.

"What about you? What will you do when all this…" he made of circulating motion with his finger. "...is done?"

"Hmm...returned home, get married... I guess?"

"That's it?" There was no derogation of any kind, but her hackles went up anyhow.

"Any problem with that?" Her tone was harsher than she intended it to be.

His grin widened, and suddenly Mulan felt her stomach churned in the most unpleasant way. "Recognise this?" he said, pulling a familiar bag from under his stool.

"Hey! What are you doing with my bag!" she leapt to her foot to snatch the item but Shao had anticipated this and blocked her with his arm.

"Give it back!" she yelled, kicking and hitting him profusely, but Shao managed to catch even deflected all her frantic attack single-handedly. Mulan soon realised that he was far more superior than her in the strength department, so she had to outthink him.

"I will return it once... Owww!" The pain that stung his arm made him drop the bag, rubbing the bite mark on his sleeve. Mulan saw the window of opportunity to grab her bag and run. But Shao's warrior reflexes had foreseen this and tugged her by her robe, and pinned her with his arms.

"Let me go! You crazy royalty!" she struggled, her chest heaving. His hand manacled her wrists, trapping them behind her back, holding her in place against his big body.

"Oh no you don't, not after biting me!" Shao said, caging her in against the tree.

Mulan pound at his chest but he didn't budge, looming over her small frame. She narrowed her eyes. "Or I'll shout," she threatened.

"And your beloved captain will know your secret too?" She choked on air and starting to cough, feeling as though lightning bolt struck through her chest travelled to her toes. Does he know....—?

"W-what?" she faltered. She hoped it was the alcohol talking.

"Y-You think I have eyes for him?" Mulan said, fighting the blush that crept on her cheeks. She couldn't afford Shao Wei to think that Fa Ping, had a severe, accidental crush on his brother-in-law. That sounded wrong in so many levels.

Shao had to struggle to keep a stoic, impassive face as he interrogated the girl. But he would lie if he didn't admit he was enjoying this little torture and seeing Ping's half flustered, half-terrified face.

"Do you?" he bounced her rhetoric. "Tell me, how many times have you meet Captain Li Shang before joining the army."

"Twice," she said as precise as possible. "On my sister's wedding day and my mother's funeral." Just enough detail to be credible, hopefully, forgettable but believable.

He raised one brow at her while rattling the sack and objects falling out of it: necklace, quill, parchment, panties...
He stopped there and gave her a questioning look while waving the distinctly looking feminine underwear in front of her.

"I...er... into...crossdressing," she stuttered, still feeling obliged not to surrender her secret without a decent fight.

He rolled his eyes mockingly and gave her a 'Really?' look as he pulled a second item—her chest binding.

Mulan winced. "Oh! Thats—" Her brain racked havoc in panic search for a good excuse. "...A very serious cross-dressing." She bit her lips sheepishly. She knew it was doubtful Shao bought her pathetic pretext, but she couldn't just succumb without trying.

"Aha!" A victorious smile graced his lips when he fished out a sanitary towel out of her bag. "Just as I thought," he pronounced.

"Please!" she pleaded, even though she knew it was a futile effort.

"I thought the daughter of infallible warrior like Fa Zhou would have a more visionary purpose in life.... Not just pleased about becoming a housewife."

The rest of his sentence was like meaningless syllables in her head. She could hear them but was unable to think any clever retort. She cracked eventually and sighed in defeat.

"B-but... I mean—.—How?" she strangled, wondering what may come next. Would Shao reported her to Shang, or worse... Chi-Fu? Would they humiliate her by executing her in public for her deception?

"I have my ways," the Prince answered. He didn't seem angry. Just satisfied, and a lot soberer than he'd been earlier. "Any particular reason for playing this ruse?" he said, pulling the conscript out of her bag.

Mulan lifted her chin, refusing to feel bad about the things she needed to do to make her life work. "I am here to do the right thing for my family," she said firmly.

"Right thing for your family?" he echoed with a slight mock. "I take it you haven't consult Captain Li, your husband. Oh, wait! I bet he doesn't even know!"

She really wished she could slap him. But of course, she couldn't because firstly, he was the Prince of Wei and it's kind of slanderous to slap a royalty. Secondly, there would be endless questioning tomorrow if the mark of her palm imprinted on his cheek. Thirdly, he had a point—Shang would kill her (even figuratively) if this big mouthed aristocrat broke his silence.

"Guys can be real assholes," she answered, flashing a pointed glare at him.

"That's a very colourful language for addressing your prince!" he said, pretended to be affronted.

"Suit yourself," she retorted curtly. "A man like you won't understand."

Which was true, generally. Her non-privileged life here in China, where she had been fated to live a subdue obedience and accepted the title as someone's property, stood in contrast to his—a life full of promise and freedom. How could she expect him to understand anything about her life?

"Ok, apology," he said, dropping all his theatrical mime. "I'm sorry if that hits a nerve. I tend to joke a lot—some sort of...—hum, coping mechanism. Heh. I guess bad habit hard to break."
She looked up to him. There was a brief moment of fragility in his expression, and she knew he was admitting something rather personal.

Intuitively, she confided. "I am just a girl who wanted a little control over her life," and hoping he'd understand what she wouldn't let herself explain.

"That's sound more honest than I expected," he said, smiling. "But I'm genuinely impressed. You've mastered deception and espionage in the world where no one keen to see women succeed at either. All things considered, you can be a great help for your husband."

"Yeah, the problem he won't ever let me," Mulan deflated in her seat, her anger subsided. "He even reprimanded me for practising my sword-skill."

Shao tilted his head, "Seriously?"

She sighed, "He just wants me to be an exemplary housewife."

"That's a shame," Shao said, "if I had you in my life, housewife or not, I'll let you do whatever you'd like."

He grinned when her cheeks reddened.

"Anyway, you aren't exactly cut out for that kind of mundane, domestic adventure of sitting at home chained to the stove kind of wife. It's a waste of that brilliant brain-cell of yours."

"Well, thank you," she replied, slightly lightheaded from the unexpected compliment.

"Shall we resume the training now?" He stood up, dusting his trousers while Mulan still gaped at him.

"Hellooo?" He waved his hand in front of her face, smirking amusedly. "I said let's. Resume. Our. Training."

"But.. how about…—?"

"About what? Your panties?" He feigned an innocent face. "You can have it back after a hundred push up."

"Yes. No… I mean—Wait…—what? Hundred? HUNDRED?!

He laughed and slapped her so hard on her shoulder she fell, and her face nearly came in contact with the ground. "Sorry, sorry," he hastily offered his hand. "Honestly, the stunt you've pulled was so convincing that I often forgot who you are," he lowered his voice. "Seriously, you should consider a career as a con man. I'd bet you'll make big bucks."

Mulan accepted his hand but glared dagger at him.

"Don't worry; I am a man swore to secrecy," he said, made a motion like zipping his mouth and crossed his heart. "I won't even tell Captain Handsome even if I ever saw his wife—in all her glory—naked by the stream."

"You... what?" Hot flush travelled from her head to her toes.

"How do you think I know you are a girl?" he said plainly. "It's a full moon night, and you are right there, hogging on my bathing spot."
"But...You should've...—"

"Look away?" he cut her in. "Listen, little lady! I am still a man with a set of good, working eyes. Gazing on unclothed women was like... breathing. It happened naturally, no man can resist," he defended, and Mulan felt like she wanted to melt and disappeared into the ground.

"So, ready for hundred press-ups?" he joked, offering his hand again to help her stand.

"Maybe after I'm finished dying of embarrassment," Mulan mumbled, accepting his hands.

Ever since that day, when Shao Wei had followed her to the kitchen to help her carrying the dirty dishes. He even bought her two brand new scraping brush and gloves. She protested that her bare hand would suffice but he insisted: "No man will appreciate a wife with rough palm."

Mulan didn't doubt that was the case for Shao Wei, who had never experience the excruciating privation of poverty, to appreciate the sentimental meaning behind a woman's sacrifice.

Nonetheless, he had joined her twice a day, washing the dishes by the river where she could tell him stories about her domestic struggle without the fear of beheading. Even though this decision could be potentially catastrophic, but it had given her a curious sense of serenity.

Perhaps because Shao treatment of her had never changed regardless of his knowledge about her gender. It made her feel accepted.

Not only that, the boastful prince had been a surprisingly pleasant tutor and sparring partner, she had found out. He was extremely patient, very easy going and full of positivity. Despite his smug attitude and inclination to brag, never in her training he ran out of words of encouragement—didn't matter how terrible she was at something, he always had something good to say.

"Let me take another load," he offered after placing one large load of dirty plates. Mulan caught the sight of his arm with a twinge of guilt, that her teeth mark imprinted on his arm was still flowering.

"That's need attending," she told him without looking.

With the tail of her eyes, she caught his mischievous smirk. "I want to ask you to kiss it better, but I think that invariably gets me into trouble," he humoured.

Mulan could only shake her head as she continued to wash.

"Mulan, are you sure this is a good idea?" Mushu whispered into her ears. The deity had been mostly silent these couple of days presumably because he had nothing useful to say.

"What do you mean?" she whispered back, trying to make sure Shao Wei didn't notice her talking to an empty space next to her. The last thing she wanted was for the Prince to think that his new friend needed psychiatric help.

"Don't you think this is rather... intimate. You and him. Alone?"

"Two men are often alone washing dishes by the river, Mushu," she chastened him.

Mushu's brow twitched. It was the expression he often displayed, she'd noticed, when trying to mask his irritation of her stubbornness.

"Shang might not take it too kindly if he knew the Prince was currently flirting with his wife."
Especially given the nature of his…"

"It's his fault that I ended up having to train with the Prince," Mulan stated bluntly.

"But he looked like peeing on you when you did your sparring with the Prince. Figuratively, of course," Mushu said. When Mulan answered him with a frown he went on elaborating. "You know, the way males predator marked their territory and property."

"Are you saying Shang is a predator?"

"No, I'm saying you are his property," Mushu clarified, clearing his throat.

His property. It didn't sound any better to her ears when he said it out loud than when she heard it in her own head. She really hated this conversation and how it picked at every insecurity she had about her domestic position right now, even if the entire virgin population of China thought Shang was a good catch.

"That's flattering," she answered him rather curtly.

"If Shang is a predator, I don't know what he is," Mushu glanced towards the Prince of Wei who just left to take another load of dirty dishes from the tent. "Just by the way he teases you I know he had years of philandering under his belt."

"Oh, so you are siding Shang," she said, couldn't help to sound a little vicious.

"I'm not anyone's side. I'm just giving a perspective that you seem to lack!" he bit back.

Mulan groaned loudly. "He was just helping me with the dishes, Mushu, did you call that flirting? Washing dishes won't hurt anyone."

Mushu pursed his mouth. "And it also doesn't hurt that he is handsome, smart, ...happen to be the third man on the throne of China and….single!" He crossed his arms in front of his chest. "He even had a gut to ask you to kiss it… —"

"Shang doesn't know that," she cut him quickly, not keen to hear it again out loud.

"Mulan, he is practically spending the whole day with you!" Mushu demanded.

She rolled her eyes and muttered, "As if he is noticing me."

"Hey, listen. In the land of men, an ugly woman is queen!"

"I take that as a compliment," Mulan snorted. Admittedly, Mushu's colourful aphorism was rather clever, but she wasn't going to voice such praise aloud.

"Unbelievable!" Mushu fumed and stepped out of her sight.

"Hey, where are you going?" she said when she saw Mushu marched towards the direction of Shang's tent.

"I probably should warn him, because your dance card now includes a handsome royalty."

"Mushu!" she yelled in attempt to stop him. "Shao is not on my dance card! I couldn't even dance!"

She was just finishing the last chapter of war stratagem and decided to conclude by doing the little
mathematic equation scribbled by her father at the back of the page when she felt his eyes on her. Glancing up, she frowned at the way he was observing her, or more exactly what she was writing.

"Hum, is there something wrong?"

Shao Wei gaped at her. "How the hell do you do that?"

"Do what? This?" she asked, pointing towards the scroll with the tip of her quill. "Math?"

"No, reading explicit porn," he snorted at his friend incognizance. "Ping, of course it is math!"

"I am wounded that you think I can't do math," she countered, rolling the scroll and drained the cup of tea next to her.

"Well, yes! It took you five minutes to finish this, and even though I don't have algebra, thank God by the way, I know it's not supposed to take only five minutes to complete!"

Mulan blushed as she shifted on her seat. "My father always said math is important. It helps you build a bridge, build a castle and...win the war."

"Math also can be related to sex," Shao quipped. "You add the bed, subtract the clothes, divide the legs and pray you don't multiply. Your father's word, not mine."

When she gasped, aghast, he laughed. "I guess the witty Fa Zhou knew how to ignite my interest in mathematical equations."

"He taught you...that?" she inquired in disbelief.

"...What? Sex?!" He waved his hand, "No, no. Only advance military tactics and war concepts, plus... a few weeks of practical hand-to-hand combat. In exchange, I've shared my vast experience of pleasing women in bed. Your mother needs to thank me on that."

"How I am not surprised," she deadpanned. "But, all things considered, you are not a bad teacher yourself."

"I suppose I am lucky, to be born with an outstanding privilege when it came to the best tutor in the country to bring me where I am," he said. The unexpected humility his admittance carried sounded odd in her ears. She guessed this was the rare moments when he spoke of the truth.

"I think my father knew what kind of great things you are capable of," she answered him, reciting her father's tale in her head. Yes, Shao Wei had never been a keen student. But the young man had a quick, analytical mind and capacious memory that had enabled him to learn many things with little effort. Unfortunately, he had always been impatient in his learning and a bit too woman-crazy to move into fulfilling his side of the bargain. It was no wonder if he had been notoriously infamous for his slacking—actively seeking for short cut and quick patch as the solution to his problem. By the time he'd realised the true value of his schooling, it was over.

"Well, he wasn't wrong about my capability in bed," he said, replying the banter. The humour in his voice had returned. "But..." He turned to her without missing a beat. "I am not wrong about you then—apparently you are a genius! It's in your blood!"

"Hummm..." she hummed, mildly annoyed and mostly amused with the way Shao Wei steered the conversation away from him. "My father said so, but he might be extremely biased."

"The classes at school must be way too easy for you."
Mulan winced. "Yeah, a little. I do take a few other classes after school for fun. Like this one," she gestured towards a few other scrolls littering the ground.

"War strategy classes? Practical algebra? Statistical probability?" Shao spelt out loud.

"Among others."

"War strategy classes. For fun?! You're taking War strategy and algebra classes… for fun?!" His eyes flashed with a strange mix of admiration and a pinch of sarcasm.

Again, she shrugged, not really knowing what to say. "It's like playing xiangqi, I guess? It can be entertaining… and a good way to spend your spare time."

It was almost comical to see Shao Wei's bushy eyebrows disappeared into his hairline, staring wide-eyed and jaw slacked. But he quickly gained his princely composure and nodded sagely. "That's an… unconventional way to spend your… spare time."

"You mean sad?" she implicated.

"I was trying to be chivalrous and polite," he grinned, appreciating how she was able to read his mind. "Although I regret my previous immature attitude towards learning, I still think spending your spare time on studying feels a like wasting valuable brain space. Why would you want to swim against the strong current when you could afford to climb out the riverbank and walk?"

"Maybe," she shrugged noncommittally. "But it's different though. You are studying with the hope that someday you will apply what you know… while I…—" she trailed off, she was not here to discuss her domestic dilemma. Clearing her throat, she continued, "You are designed for greatness, Shao. Someday, you'll lead this nation….and do your father proud."

"Greatness? You are the first to say that," he sniggered deprecatingly.

"I mean… I know you are not that keen on the idea of… throne," she said carefully. "But you have all the right quality—assertive, confident, driven. Being a leader suits you." And when he didn't respond right away, she then added. "Ok, perhaps not as Emperor as yet. Maybe a General of Imperial Army." It was not unusual for the direct relative of Emperor or his predecessor to hold an office in the army. Consider it as a good place to start and exercise power for the future throne.

Shao Wei paused, looking at her and laughed loudly. "Me? General? No, no, no," he shook his head, tilting his head towards the training ground where the rest of the regiment were doing their drill.

"Captain Li is a better candidate than me. He is far more charismatic, discipline, hands-on and experienced in the battlefield. You agree with me, right? He would make an excellent leader… Nice on the eyes too," he said with fake awe and a phoney smirk plastered on his face. Mulan didn't quite notice he was teasing her until he said, "Especially when shirtl…—" He couldn't finish his sentence and ducked behind the rock to avoid a few stones she sent his way. "Sorry, I was joking," he laughed, waving the tip of his cape as a white flag.

"Not funny," she said as she crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him.

It was clear her snarky answer didn't deter him. "Consider this as my generosity in offering voluntary love advice: occasional gazing, blushing and smiling considered as ineffectual flirting technique. Men don't get that."

Like what the hell you want me to do? Walk up to him and ask if he wants to bang? The voice in
"Not helping!" she berated him.

"You have to step up your game! Do something bolder! Something more noticeable and daring!" he said with enthusiasm.

"Yeah," she snickered. "...and get massacred by Chi-Fu if he found out the boy who nearly incinerated him alive was actually a woman no less the wife of the Captain he had disagreed to promote," she told him bluntly. "And then when Shang realised who I truly am, he'll hate me even more."

He squatted closer, "You don't honestly think he hates you, do you?"

While she knew Shang had made efforts to reply to her letter and bought her souvenirs, those gestures were hardly warranting any depth of love or meaningful emotional connection. Perhaps he was just trying to tolerate her or at least being a civil or responsible husband. After all, Shang was a man of duty before anything else.

"Listen. If it isn't because of my grandma accidently..." she made a quote motion with her finger, "bathe Mrs. Li with a pan of sweet-sour soup, I won't be Shang's wife," Mulan explained.

"So you think all this is an accident?" he quipped. "Because as an outsider, I can see the chemistry between you two are so real. That's incredible considering Shang saw you as a man," he remarked, chuckling. "I think this is your destiny!"

His humour was responded with the most unimpressed gaze it deserved. "Destiny huh?"

"There is no accident. Often, a person meets his destiny on the road to avoid it," he said sagely.

"Destiny is not written for us, but by us," she impugned.

"True. But once destiny guides you to certain someone, it's up to you to hold on... or to let go. Have you not heard of opposite attraction?" he said again. "The cunning...and the gullible. The dreamer...and the pragmatic. A woman of vision...and a man of action. The beauty..." he tilting his head towards Shang. "And the beast," and turned to her.

He laughed hard when Mulan pinched his arms. "Ouch... ok ok, very pretty beast."

She released him and his grin widening. "If you let me help you, I can prove that he," pointing at Shang who was demonstrating a set of Kung Fu moves with his usual calculative, performative grace. "He is equally attracted to you more than he ever dares to admit."

Mulan scoffed softly but letting him continue. "Most of the women in my palace would die for that chance staring at the unobstructed view of Captain Tall, Dark and Handsome. The ultimate embodiment of focus and ferocity... even when he is a bit emotionally constipated."

"Emotionally what...?"

"Constipated," Shao said levelly, "But still, I noticed it does little to discourage you to stare at his abs when he... —"

"Shut up!" She breathed loudly from her nostril. "One more mention of his abs, I'll skin you alive."

Shao grunted when she jabbed his side with a powerful punch. But his smile sharpening.
That night, Mulan laid on her usual spot to sleep, laid among their minimal belongings and covered on spare rags for comfort. Next to her was Ling, who capriciously sandwiched between her and Chien-Po. The tight-fitting arrangement which normally felt like a tribulation in the summer month had become a blessing as the weather turn frigid and cold. In fact, Ling unashamedly pressed against Chien-Po side, cuddling him for warmth.

And like many other days, they chatted of the highlight of their day.

"The big hurdle is you agreeing to do me this monumental favour," Ling told her as she adjusted the position of the fabric to cover as much surface of her body to retain valuable heat. "You can pretend to be my sister and..."

“What? Accompanying you as your sister?” she practically hissed.

“That’s the only way she’ll open up to you. Girls normally tell secrets about the man they fancied to other girls.”

Mulan clicked her tongue at him. “You know that’s a very bad idea. If I owned two head, Captain Li is going to chop them both.”

Ling pouted. "If I became an old bachelor, that would be entirely your fault!"

“I don’t think she didn’t like you, Ling,” Chien-Po shared a piece of his thought. “She didn’t give you a definite answer. That’s to be exact.”

“Agreed. Silence could mean yes,” she piped in.

“Stop telling her, show her!” Chien-Po said enthusiastically. When Ling just raised his brows, he went on. “Kiss her!” His voice that was only a pitch to loud received a resounding rebuke from the resident next to him whose slumber was interrupted. Chien-Po profusely apologised.

“Have you not heard? Kiss is a lovely trick designed by nature to express something when the words are not enough.” He was definitely whispering this time.

“Whatever,” Ling said. “My point is, I am hesitating. What if she was just having a fling? I can understand if she didn’t feel the same. We haven’t spent much time together apart from a few minutes here and there. Isn’t that too careless and a bit convulsive to warrant something like intimate like a kiss?”

“Hell, I went straight into sharing a bed with a man I didn’t know. Forget about the introduction, forget about the kiss. Surprise! The reality of life!”

Ling looked at her thoughtfully and Mulan realised that was a bit tactless of her to be lecturing her love-stricken friend on the pitfalls of matrimony.

“Worry not,” she hastened to assure him. “You and Ting Ting will be different.” She hoped.

Chien-Po nodded, agreeing. "And... considering we are going to die, may as well enjoy that as much as you can.... Right?"

“So, you want me to dig about what exactly?” Mulan returned the question.

When Ling didn't immediately answer, Chien-Po beat him to it. "He wanted to make aware if he
had any competition in pursuing her." And he mouthed 'Prince of Wei' to which everyone was reminded how the Prince and Ting Ting become all too up-close and intimate to warrant something labelled as platonic.

“Well, if that handsome creep had hurt her, I will remove his balls with a meat cleaver,” Ling placed a piercing look towards Mulan. “Your idea.”

“That’s very specific. And very graphic. But at least you still acknowledge that he has balls,” Chien-Po pointed out.

“...and handsome,” Mulan added. “Apparently the mystery of attraction and chemistry aren’t just skin deep.”

“Yeah,” Chien-Po sighed dreamily.

“The kind of love we find blossoming amidst war,” she teased him.

“Speak for yourself, Lady. I’ve seen you with someone lately. What’s the deal?” Ling probed.

Mulan shook her head. “I told you before, I don’t exactly have time for this conversation.”

“Oh come on Mulan,” Ling whined. “I am perfectly sure you are not this obtuse. No harm of discussing such things with us,” he addressed innocently. However, a brief impish smirk he exchanged with Chien-Po, conveying a silent message she understood all too well.

They knew her secret crush.

Mulan’s cheeks heated because unfortunately, describing what type of man she found herself attracted to would immediately implicate Shang; and even the slothful Chien-Po wasn’t so dense to presume she was talking about someone else. While she trusted Ling’s implicitly, particularly with this kind secret, but they were bordering on a discussion she wasn’t ready to admit, not even to herself.

“No... I don’t think it is wise to divulge unnecessary detail of my imaginary extramarital affair,” Mulan replied, pretending to be unnerved. “It would be scandalous if the world knew who the person is.”

When Ling’s eyes widened with apparent realization, Mulan felt mentally cringing preemptively at whatever her friend had discerned. “It is the Prince, isn't it? He suddenly grew rather close to you since he began training you.”

“Woah!” Chien Po gasped. “This is utterly crazy love-chain saga! First Ling and Ting Ting, then Ting Ting and the Prince, and now….you?”

Ling cleared his throat. "Don't worry, as much as I dislike him, I won't impress my negative sentiment on you. Everyone is entitled to their own feelings."

“Geez, apparently you are woman enough to attract bad boys,” Chien-Po said, amazed.

Mulan instantly felt relieved that her friend's assumptions continued to be so far from the truth. But were they? While Ling was incorrect in his assumption of who she loved, she did genuinely like Shao Wei. The boastful, arrogant prince, regardless of his pride, was manly enough to apologise and correct his behaviour, thus earning her respect.

She smiled mostly to herself. “I like the Prince...”
Ling prompted after another beat of silence. “I am sensing a ‘but’ is coming...?”


Ling visibly steeled at her words. It had reminded him of years in the past of their spectacularly failed romance. Mulan was a friend—a very good friend. The kind of friend who would drop everything in a heartbeat to do whatever he needed. The kind of friend that could see beyond his weaknesses and less-than-hunky stature. And there had been a few sparks in his part, especially after knowing her intimately since they both toddlers that he had thought that a relationship was worth a shot. But now, Ling counted their friendship surviving their amorous relationship among his great blessings in life.

Because rare as it is true love, true friendship is rarer.

Apart from the night when Shao Wei discovered her deception, the rest of the week was pretty much uneventful. Thankfully, Shao Wei had never breathed or hinted anything of a kind to other people, even when she had explicitly told him who in this encampment had known about her true gender. She was relieved the plot twist had finally ended.

Ling and Chien-Po had long gone, snoring coherently in a strange harmonising rhythm. Sinking into her makeshift bed, she ruminated Shao's words about her relationship with Shang.

Was it possible that they were meant to be together?

Was this fate...

Or was it destiny?

No, she thought to herself. She never believed in destiny. She believed actions and decision were the elements that drove one's path. That destiny wasn't a fixed thing, it was something ones created. But what if Shao was right: there was no accident. That she was meeting her destiny on the road where she thought she could avoid it. That despite her bitterness, her attraction towards Shang prevailed.

But how could she be attracted to someone who constantly contending her opinion? Shang had always challenged, questioned, and opposed everything that she wanted. How could she possible found this...endearing?

Yes, she was a stubborn idealist, and her unique circumstances to be born as a woman had amplified her trait even more. As a woman, she might seem weak and delicate on the outside, but her resolve was made of steel. Shang, on the other hand, was loyal, subservient and no-nonsense kind of guy. He was programmed to follow orders and submit to higher authority. He appeared strong from the outside, but fragile on the inside.

Shang was yin to her yang. He was her opposite, the person who would make her...complete.

Her silent thoughts were interrupted by a distant shout. "We need help!" was blustered from a distance away and Mulan's heart stopped in her chest.

There was Shao Wei, half-carried, half-walked Shang into the clearing. There was an arrow sticking on Shang's chest, blood dripping unto his armour, his shoes, on the ground... and everywhere.
And that's a chapter! Now, I've been watching a few of Korean/Chinese rom-com where the protagonist always started off as the enemy of the man/woman they eventually date/marry. So why people find a man/women who disagree with them attractive? I think you can attribute that to the phenomenon of dynamic tension. It is boring to be with the person who sees the world entirely the way you do and agrees with you on everything. It is natural for a person to be attracted to another intelligent person who challenges their worldview. Most exciting relationships have a partly adversarial basis. A certain amount of conflict is erotic, and you can see this depicted in literature and art all the time. Do you agree with me on this?
And Shao unrepentantly told the story of how stunning was his mansion in Japan.

There was cacophony of panic as Shao Wei shouted a string of command, getting the infirmary ready and fetching the village doctor. But she couldn't hear them all. Her feet felt like steel, and her head was stuck in a thick cloud somewhere. All felt so surreal until Shao Wei shouted at her, "Ping! Don't just stand there! Prepare the infirmary. Hurry!"

She'd seen someone hurt, obviously, during training—but her experience of war had never involved a real weapon and blood….or the possibility of death. Realising the fatality of the situation, she jumped to the task and set up the surgical table ready for the patient.

"What happened?" she asked as Shao helped Shang up to sit on the edge of the operating table and she hovered nervously.

_No. He couldn't die. He shouldn't. Not now._

"We were attacked," Shao said. Ling and Chien-Po had immediately offered their help, standing by the door waiting for the next instruction.

"By who?" she said automatically, paying Shang a worried glance.


"The Huns?" she repeated, shocked. "They are… —they are here?"

Shang's eyes went past her to Shao Wei, and he spoke up. "We were patrolling the perimeter, me, Shang and three other guys, and suddenly there is…." he pointed at the half of the projectile that still stuck on Shang's flesh, "...This is Hun's arrow. From the shape and design, I can tell."

"Your Highness, we've called the doctor, but… but he won't be in for another couple of hour. He is attending another critically ill patient in the village as we speak," reported one of the recruits.

"Oh!" Mulan gasped in horror. Suddenly, the muted grey and white colour scheme stood out in contrast to the amount of blood splattered around them. She just realised a grim truth that she could lose her husband tonight.

_Dear ancestor, please don't let it be tonight; _she prayed.

"Well," Shao said, remarkably calm as he turned to Mulan and a few men who were standing on the door. "Seems like we have no choice but to do it ourselves."

"Wait! What?!" Ling and Chien-Po chorused from the threshold of the door. Shao ignored that, turning to her, eyes coaxing her to calm down.

"Get that off him," Shao said, gesturing at Shang's armour.
Mulan obeyed, stepping close to Shang and trying hard not to catch his eye as she undid his armour and his clothes. It was hard to see him like this, bleeding and in pain.

He let out a painful groan when she pushed the metal armour off his wounded chest. She tried her best to be gentle, leaning in close to slip it down his arm. But there's only so much she could do to minimise his pain, the wound was deep and removing the tight-fitting metal forced him to move his arm, causing fresh blood to seep from the gash in his skin.

"Sorry…." Sorry for my stubbornness, sorry that I've lied,... sorry that I can't be a good wife to you…

Shang just looked at her, he didn't say anything but his eyes told her he was fine and she should continue doing whatever she was doing.

She leaned around the other side of him to strip the armour the rest of the way off, and he let out his breath when his skin was finally free of metal constriction.

He was not wearing much underneath. But then, she had seen the view before. She tried very hard not to notice anything but the injuries which needed attention.

The wound was deep, and by the precise way the arrowhead managed to penetrate in between the tiny gap of Shang's armour, she could tell the assailant was an experienced archer.

Shao touched the part of the arrow that was still protruding. He mouthed something to Shang and then pulled the projectile with sudden force. Shang's body jerk and he gasped in pain. Shao grabbed his hands firmly as if helping him to channel his agony.

"I can't promise the next few minutes will be any better, Captain," Shao said, noticing droplets of perspiration appeared on Shang's skin as he concentrated on keeping the level of pain under control.

"It's better me than you," Shang rasped between rapid heave.

Something about Shang's words and his nonchalance sharing touched her.

It was such a simple, short declaration, but it spoke of a deep, profound reflection of Shang's true character. This was the facet of his personality that she had rarely seen: a quiet, dignified conviction and unending loyalty. There were reasons why his men had followed him to battle, respected him as their leader, trusting him with their life…..and that wasn't just down to his skill and dedication.

It was because his heart was on the right place.

Mulan's heart clenched in her chest. While it suffered greatly when Shang dismissed her, it also swelled with pride knowing she was betrothed to one of the bravest, noblest warrior in China.

Meanwhile, Shao Wei peered closer, taking inventory of other bumps and bruises. He immediately confirmed Shang had not sustained any other serious injury.

"This will need a lot of stitches," Shao announced after Shang's pain seemed to be abated. "Have anyone stitched someone before?"

"I stitched my own underpants," Chien-Po admitted rather shyly. "Because no one sells my size." His admission would've been funny if not sweet if it were given in the non-life-threatening circumstances. "Hardly a ringing endorsement, I know."
"I stitch my rooster pet after my mother slaughtered him for dinner," Ling admitted absently.

"I said *someone*—preferably still breathing and stayed that way," Shao reiterated, a little annoyed.

"I stitched before," Mulan finally said. The truth was, she had stitched herself before when she fell from her horse and managed to cut her knee. She was so afraid her father would forbid her to ride Khan, so she decided to take the matter into her own hands. She had to use Grandma Fa's sewing kit and her father's stash of wine to patch herself up. In summary, it wasn't a pleasant experience.

"In the cupboard, top shelf," Shang suddenly rasped, and she crossed to the cupboard and retrieved the needle, knife and thread. She took care by disinfecting them in alcohol before leaving the kit on the table.

"Is there anything you can't do?" Shao said as she applied the alcoholic fabric over Shang's chest and inserted the thread onto the needle. Shang winced when the antiseptic stung his opened nerve, but he was visibly more relaxed as he was a few minutes ago.

"I mean math, war strategy...and *this*?" Shao whispered. She looked up to see an impressed look on his face.

"I'm not a good cook, remember?" she told him. Meanwhile, Ling and Chien-Po were already summoned by panicked Chi-Fu to help patrolling the encampment perimeter for trespassers.

"Heh," Shao chuckled, "You can't be worse than him," smirking to helpless Shang.

"Thanks," Shang objected, obviously conscious and listening, "I have chosen to leave the cooking department to the women. There's a limit to what you can do with a dead rabbit."

He was talking in full sentences again, so she took that as a good sign. She only really worried about him when he's silent. Or monosyllabic.

When she stuck the needle to his flesh, Shang grunted, trying to keep still.

"Do you have any local?" Shao asked, obviously perceiving Shang's discomfort.

"No," Shang said immediately, but Shao ignored him, looking to Mulan.

"Local?" she asked a little too loud. She fought to hide her reaction to all the blood that was already dripping onto the table underneath the surgical table.

"Local anaesthetic," Shao explained, "or some other kind of narcotic?"

"I said no," Shang hissed.

"Don't be a child," Shao chided, "A man in pain can't be trusted."

"Tie me down then."

"For stitches?" Shao shook his head. "This is an army infirmary full of supplies, why put yourself through it?"

"I don't like the side effects." Because even Mulan couldn't imagine Shang being all lose tongue and loopy.

"Fine," Shao turned and rifled through the medicine cabinet. After a few minutes not finding what he wanted, he marched outside.
Meanwhile, Mulan assessed Shang's wounds. They're not as wide as sword cut, but the puncture especially could do with numbers of stitches.

"Did you see them?" she asked, trying to distract herself but her eyes stay fixed on the wound in his chest. It gapes red, his skin rent and split.

"No," Shang replied. "But I suspect there are a few of them."

The wound looked painful. An arrow must hurt when it sliced into the skin.

Mulan considered the entire rationale of the situation. Shang was only a captain, not a general with a power to move the battalions with just a single command. Eliminating him would only provoke the Chinese, but not weakened them. Then, why shot him?

"I am not their target," he said, causing her to pause. "A man with a skill to aim an arrow from a distance to fit between my armour's tight gap could kill me in just a shot. And...he could've lathered the arrowhead with deadly poison to ensure the victim's death. But he didn't."

Mulan hummed her approval and resumed her ministration.

"I saw the Prince one night with a Hun woman," Shang confided, his breathing and speaking were visibly easier now that the pain had receded. And it seemed, losing that much blood wasn't such a big deal for him.

"You're there too. I know you saw them," he said.

Something in his expression dampened her usual reflexive defensiveness. Mulan found herself unable to deny Shang's blunt incrimination, so she nodded weakly.

"He must have allied with some of the Huns," he added. Shang went on and elaborated that out of his concern for Shao's safety, he wrote to his father right after the sighting. "My father told me: Shao was a close friend to Princess Altansarnai back in the day. He said he wasn't at all surprised if they are still in touch."

A vague image of the initials 'ALS' on the hand-drawn map she found in Shao's tent blitzed through her mind. Although the days when she thought Shao was a traitor was long gone, she had never solved the conundrum of who the woman was.

"There is a rumour that Princess Altansarnai is leading a guerrilla movement against the Khan himself."

"You mean she plans to overthrow her own father? To...to kill him?" It was hard for Mulan to think anyone would have the nerve to betray the man that raised and nurtured them, but again, as Shao mentioned, even simple filial relationship in royal setting could often be complicated.

"She may not be the very person who will smite him with her sword," Shang quipped, "But that doesn't mean she won't assist someone else doing it."

Mulan could perfectly imagine Shao would stand up for such challenge—especially considering he had vehemently objected Wei Zhang's idea of giving his sister as the Khan's Khatun—not that plan would materialise now since his sister had died—but the context gave him a strong motive to behead the Khan.

However for Altansarnai to betray her own father and to assist a political enemy, there had to be a more logical explanation than a mere platonic connection.
"Captain, do you think… there is something more than friendship going on with the two of them?"

"In the past, there were suggestions that the two of them will tie the knot. But the Khan wasn't keen on the idea of marrying off his daughter to a man who was best associated with gambling and drinking. He has chosen Shan-Yu instead," which made a perfect sense. Shan-Yu was the strongest, most ferocious Huns warrior who had proven to be loyal and able to defend the country's interest in comparison to a handsome Chinese party animal who cared nothing for the Huns and had never stepped his foot in the battlefront.

But again, sometimes love had no compass, no helmsman. You couldn't simply direct and control it at will. And despite the unfavourable situation, Altan had chosen Shao over her own flesh and blood, her countrymen, even risking her own life.

The look of realisation came over Mulan's face as all the dots were connected.

"You think… Shao is the real target?" she said, horrified with the revelation. "The Princess…. She was trying to warn him..."

"It's a tactic," Shang agreed.

"Have you told him?"

"Of course," Shang quipped swiftly. "But he didn't buy such theories. He said the Hun Princess isn't an avid archer."

"She would have sent someone else," Mulan tossed the idea.

"He said if Altan wanted to warn him, she would've done so in writing, not with an arrow."

"What if something happened to her which prevented her to write."

"Whatever it is, his life is in danger." Shang sighed, somewhat disappointedly. "But he is in denial. And this could potentially harm him, and without me watching over his back..."

"I will cover for you," she said without much thinking. "I mean… I know I am nowhere as competent as you, Captain, but if you let me stay…"

The sudden grip on her shoulder stalled her words. Looking up, she could only see Shang stared at her. "Ping, I know I've said harsh things to you. But I hope you understand why I do what I did. Why I send you home."

The whole setting gave a completely different message to what she heard barely a week ago. She had come to a complete realisation of Shang's selfless wish to save her from the hellish blood battle ahead of them.

"You are still young, Ping. I don't want you to waste your life."

She nodded absently while trying to contain the tears that threatened to fall. Because finally, she knew one of the many reasons she wanted to stay.

Because loving some was never a waste of time.

His hand was still on her shoulder when Shao Wei came back, to which Shang retracted immediately.
"We are ready." Shao laid out medical supplies on the bench beside him. Admittedly, she was a little stung by Shang's detached response, but she understood that professionalism and self-restraint were qualities that embodied in him.

Shao also held out a long thick rope, and Shang methodologically tied one of his wrists, then secured it to the table. He nodded to her to do the other, and she did so. Her fingers were a little shaky thinking of what she had to witness next.

"So...," Shao said conversationally, "I decided you were being an idiot."

And with that he plunged, grabbing Shang by his jaw and empty the content of the bottle in his hand, giving him no option not to swallow.

Shang immediately turned angry, elbowing him by the gut.

"Bastard!" He snarled. "Shao Wei!"

Mulan stepped back in shock of Shang's unfiltered tirade.

"I didn't want drugs!"

"You weren't thinking straight!" Shao said calmly, dusting his trousers as he stood up. He was standing outside of Shang's admittedly very limited reach. "...so I made the decision for you."

"I don't like the drugs!" Shang yelled, "How could you?"

"You've met me, right?" Shao chuckled, arrogantly unperturbed. Shang pulled against the rope, cursing and snarling. Shao ignored him, but when one particularly vicious twist causes more blood to flow from Shang's chest wound, he called Mulan to step in.

"Your turn to fix him."

Shao wiped his forehead with his sleeves. He was sweating profusely. He didn't realise restraining Shang was a lot of work until his strained muscle told him so.

He didn't see why Shang had to be so stubborn and chose to suffer over losing his sobriety. While he knew the pain was often inevitable, suffering was often unnecessary. But seeing how well Mulan coped with her obstinate husband, he thought it was a good time to leave.

And his eyes caught the glimpse of Chi-Fu, rushing from the direction of his tent.

"You are back. I've been searching all over for you, Your Lord Highness," Chi-Fu said, bowing.

"Oh, I was in the infirmary."

"Yes, I heard. Captain Li isn't it?" and the old councillor made a face, a really fake pitiful face that Shao ever thought possible. "About three months ago, I told him there was an archer while I was bathing. And guess what? Captain Li dismissed me for being paranoid. Now, look at him!"

Shao pulled a most convincing discerning face when Chi-Fu went on to give an expansive chronology of the events. He never planned to disclose the truth that the anomaly Chi-Fu had experienced was, in fact, his creative way to protect Fa Ping's real identity.

"I've left all your letters on the desk—as requested," Chi-Fu said.
"Thank you," he said, quickly moving past the old man and into his tent. He immediately found a few parchments, but not the one he was hoping to find.

"Honorable Chi-Fu!" he beckoned the old man who came rushing back into his tent. "No letter from Ms. Shu Qi?" which was a codename for Ting Ting.

"No," Chi-Fu replied, eyes searching for truth. "Dare I asked: Is she the new girl you've dated?"

Shao was sure the gossipy councillor wouldn't miss noticing the regularity of those letters. Tabloid could've tipped him a handsome reward to buy a cheap, romantic column material.

"Maybe," Shao smiled sweetly. "We met not long ago before I was sent to this battalion. We are off to a bumpy start." He lied through his teeth. "It took me a while to see she wasn't like any of the girls I courted before. There is something special about her." And he looked up to gauge Chi-Fu's reaction. From the twinkling of his eyes, he knew the Emperor's counsellor had bought his story. "I will inform you if this engagement is turning into something more fruitful."

"I'm all ears," Chi-Fu said, looking particularly pleased with himself.

After such a dramatic turn of events, Shang had suspected nothing short of anticlimactic would likely to top up a wound in his chest. And the next morning, he was proven wrong.

"You want Ping to escort you to Hoching temple?" he said, raising a sceptical eyebrow at the Prince when he announced he was leaving that afternoon to a temple outside Xi'an to pay respect to his late aunt.

"Yes, any problem with that?" Shao shot back with his unusual cavalier smirk that rubbed Shang's nerve. Next to him, Ping blinked in quiet surprise.

"Your Highness, may I pointed out that Ping is not ready for this kind of assignment. What if someone attacks you? What would he know what to do? No offence, Ping," Shang said, addressing the boy who appeared dumbfounded.

"Are you really concerned about me… or there are...other reason," Shao countered, his lips ticked upwards with a seditious smile Shang knew all too well.

What the hell he is implying? "I beg your pardon?"

"Captain Li, look at you," he said with a tone that Shang could only be identified as patronising. "You are injured. You might be stronger and undoubtedly a lot more imposing than Ping, but without your usual strength and agility, your impressive body is nothing but a decoy."

Dear ancestors, why he is so infuriating. "My wound is healing fine, Your Honor. Therefore I… —"

"I don't believe you understand me right, Captain Li."

His tone was agreeable, but Shang knew it was a command when he heard ones. "I understood fine, Your Honor," he replied, pleasantly enough, but with a hint of steel behind it.

Shao stepped closer, crossing his arms. "No, I don't think you get it. You seem to be under the impression that I'm making suggestions."

A low but distinct cracking alerted him to the fact that he was gripping the training stick so hard,
that it was on the verge of breaking. Taking a deep breath and chanted some inner peace mantra, he eased the stick and placed it on the ground. "In all due respect, I am much rather you pick someone else," Shang said politely.

"Are you saying Ping is incapable of defending me?"

"That's not what I meant!" Shang said a little too loud. Cutting his gaze to the side and gave Ping an apologetic look he hoped the boy would understand. Ping just stared blankly at him.

It took Shang a couple of seconds to collect his usual calm composure. "What I meant: he needs more time." The time that we don't have.

He thought that Ping was going to be offended at his lecture, but he didn't. In fact, Ping looked like he was ready to crawl under the table, biting his lips with nervous energy watching the dire situation deteriorated…. And likely to end in disaster.

"No, I still think Ping is the best man for the job," Shao said, this time his expression was closed off.

Is there anything this guy wants besides a punch? Shang's inner monologue expressed. But Shang knew better than digging his own unmarked grave, so he settled with other strategies.

"Do you forget about this?" he gestured towards the thick bandage on his chest. The blood no longer seeping through the dressing but the mark would be a permanent reminder for months to come.

"Someone wants your life!" he spelt it out for his own benefit, and boy… that felt good.

So good.

Mulan watched the exchange silently. She decided not to say anything because any comment could potentially swing the pendulum and create the impression that she was siding with one of them. While she thought Shang was right, alienating Shao would have a profound effect—what if, out of annoyance, he decided to tell Shang about her secret identity?

And why the hell he suddenly wished to go to Xi'an? Mulan had never believed praying to the spirit of his late aunt was Shao's only agenda. The man wasn't even religious! He wanted to do something else there. Something urgent.

Minutes passed, but neither of them backed down. Shao impaled him with a dire look (that Shang chose to ignore) before adding. "I don't have time for this! Tomorrow, before sunup we're leaving. Feel free to tag along if you wish."

Shang didn't say anything but his jaw is set in his most stubborn expression. By this point, he knew it was fruitless to argue. He was foolish to believe that he could at least beat some sense into Shao's skull.

Next day, she got ready early. She had arranged to rent a rickshaw since people normally would recognise they're soldiers from their stallions. She told Shang about her plan, and strangely enough, he agreed without much debating. A tepid nod was as far as an approval she's going to get, so she quickly fetched the Prince of Wei from his tent.

"Good plan, Ping!" Shao praised when she told him of her plan. "I like smart men," he complimented in most suggestive way possible, even dared to pretend that the temperature was
bothering him, so he had a reason to put away his robe, only to put it back on again—a mocking homage Shang's shirtless penchant.

Mulan didn't know whether she should blush or lob the Prince's dimwitted-head. It was both teasing and flirting to some extent, but mostly flirting.

Maybe Mushu (although she resented his sardonic little barb) was right about him.

"You are overly generous, Your Honor." She gave him a disdainful sniff. From Shao's mischievous grin it was obvious he did this out of purpose to draw Shang's reaction. And this was where Mulan hoped Shang had a drop of emotional perception and not so callous of the trap lying ahead. Unfortunately, the ever so gullible Shang remained oblivious and bit the bait.

"You should be used to compliments," Shao said again. She could only see amusement on his features. Shang, in contrast, seemed on edge.

"Not really," she admitted. "But it's always nice to get one. Thanks," she said with a pinch of sarcasm.

"Are you two done?" Shang interrupted, crossing his arms a little more tightly. And Mulan absolutely did not notice that it did really great things for his biceps. Nope.

"Well then," the Prince said, ignoring the thick cloud of jealousy that formed on the top of Shang's head, "lead on Captain." He stepped up beside Mulan and diligently opened the door for her, making sure Shang observe him. "We are mere soldiers live to follow."

Shang did that thing where she thought he's grinding his teeth. "Fine," he snapped, walking off.

Shang knew how to drive a carriage. He also sped.

In fact, he sped at a breakneck pace that Mulan could only applaud as astonishing considering one: Shang didn't have four legs. And two: he had recently been injured. But she knew better than to point that out and became the receiving end of Shang's death glare (just like he did when she offered him help to haul the transport).

The silence during the carriage ride was a little oppressive. Shang was aggressively focused on the road while Shao looked out to his side, watching the landscape zipping by. Shao looked untypically serious, too serious for a person who stared at trees, mountains and lakes.

She wondered if either of them had noticed the tension or if it were just her imagination. These things were often her imagination. But fantasy or not, travelling with two stubborn, polarising males was a very bad combo.

But at least the fact that Shang was speeding meant he was healing well. And that was good news.

"Oh, that looks like Japanese pagoda!" Mulan exclaimed, trying to break the tension in the air. But with Shang's current mood and Shao's mischievous intention, she only made it worse.

"You'd like to travel?" Shao said, making up Shang's shortcoming as a conversationalist. "Me too!"

"He has a mansion in Japan," Shang pointed out, a little sarcastically.

"Ah yes! It's my father's favourite place to spend his winter with his wives. Imagine, solitude and snow and open fire," Shao quipped, playing along. "I will let a room for you. No...no. A suite!"
Then, shifting the topic, Shao babbled relentlessly about **onsen**; Japanese outdoor hot bath where traditionally people used it completely unclothed. Hygiene reason, he dubbed. Shao even dared cracked a lewd joke of it being a fabulous place for couples to get intimate, which met by her contemptuous silence it deserved.

Shang’s expression was unchanging, yet still pulling the cart at a pace that probably broke a few speeding regulations. He even managed to miss a noodle cart by a hair length. Whether it was down to luck or skill, Mulan didn't want to know.

The grim silence resumed, and this time Mulan made no effort in breaking the tension.

Shang did try to respect everyone's personal space, but Shao didn't have the same inhibition.

Shao flustered her in an entirely different way to how Shang flustered her.

Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that around Shang she flustered herself. But Shao flustered her all by himself and she didn't quite know how to respond to that.

Although Shang was undoubtedly attractive, she had a fling with a few men before.

But the way Shao paid attention to her and encouraged her was different. He treated her as if she should be used to this kind of appreciation and she was not. Or at least, not from someone like him.

As a rule, her past crush had been sweet, young, sensitive guys, generally fond of board games or into literature. They wore linen robe (never appear shirtless for sure), spending most of their time reading in the garden and drank tea. All were smart, a little shy, and somewhat socially… unaccepted.

Just like she was.

It took her by surprise when Shang came into her life—a confident and competent man with a physique to match. And then came Shao, who was symmetrical in term of confidence, looks and ability, but own opposite character of Shang's cold, withdrawn persona.

But it's Shang that had captured her heart. If there's anyone she wanted to kiss and slap at the same time, it's him.

However, at the moment, she had no idea the direction Shao was scheming with his constant goading.

Thankfully they arrived at the restaurant—their first stopover—before the atmosphere turned into something… ugly.

They entered via a back door. The owner establishment clearly had an extensive experience handling a high profile clientele, because within seconds they were ushered to a private room, far from the peering eyes of the outsider.

Shao was sporting a plain linen robe, a pair of baggy trousers and coordinating hobo bag. But despite adopting peasant like appearance, dozen of curious glances from the casual observer still followed him. Shang was right, Shao Wei, as the most controversial figure in China would need more than just herself to fend him as his bodyguard. Suddenly, she felt immensely grateful that Shang, regardless of his disapproval, decided to tag along.

They sat around a square table, Shao, of course, purposely sat next to her to which she could only protest silently by breathing loudly through her nose.
Minutes passed in silence.

Shao leaned one elbow on the table, the other rubbing his perfectly angular jaw in deep thought, while Shang coolly flipped through the menu. And the entire effect was like they were in some sort of live-painting session for unattainably beautiful men against everyday backdrops.

Somehow she wasn't at all surprised when not one, but three, very attractive looking waitresses with a voluptuous figure and equally alarming hemline, appeared to take their order.

As usual, Shao Wei was very accommodating and effortlessly charming towards them. "Hi, ladies!"

"Welcome our Lord Highness Prince of Wei!" The women giggled daintily, exchanged a few meaningless pleasantries that could only be defined as an excuse for further flirting. One of them, an energetic conversationalist with pouty lips, even dared to prop herself against the Prince's shoulder, the exposed flesh on her leg was pleading him to touch her.

And Shao Wei wasn't the only target (or shall we say—victim?)

Although looking disturbingly grave (which could be reinterpreted as seven orders of magnitude in smouldering scale), no one could deny Shang was a rare specimen of masculine beauty. It was hardly a surprise when there was a blatant attempt by one of the girl to woo Shang. She latched on his arm and leaned desperately close to the point she could've sat on his lap! Thankfully, Shang coldly ignored her as if he was plainly unaware of her unsolicited attention. Mulan didn't know whether this was a tactical move to deter aggressive pursuant, or Shang found the duck bathed in hoisin sauce far more appealing—whatever it was, she was grateful.

In contrast, Shao welcomed all the attention, quirking his lips, flashing his playboy smile and muttered something along the line 'usual order' to which Mulan didn't want to know to what extent.

She remained captivated with the interaction around her until one of the girls, who wasn't as pretty but certainly decorative, threw a simpering smile right on her direction, and Mulan's pulse spiked. What if she tried to touch on her? Worse—kiss her? Should she pretend to be sick? Or maybe coughing out blood and fell unconscious on the spot? Thankfully, Shao dismissed them all before she had to resort for something dramatic.

"So… would you like to stay?" Shao asked her after ordering the food.

"What?"

"Japan," he said again, ignoring the fact there was another party on the table. One that particularly keen to dig his eyeballs with his chopsticks. "It has fifty rooms, south facing veranda, spa, hot springs! I promise you it'll be memorable." He turned his best-beseeching eyes on her and Mulan winced when one of the waiters, who came in to serve the tea, quirked her brow at them. It was a very careless comment made by someone who was clearly a tabloid magnet.

Thankfully, before he could extract her answer, the food arrived, ten different plates of it.

"We can't eat all this!" she said, but Shao waved her objections away.

"It's what I always did," he explained. "One of everything."

"Must be nice being rich," she said, undeliberately thinking of the mansion in Japan.

"Occupational hazard," Shao muttered somewhat smugly. "Maybe after the war ended we can talk
more about… *Japan,*" he added, voice between smoky and velvety but loud as though making sure Shang could hear the suggestive tone he was delivering.

Shang stayed on the edge, but seemed like he had employed another coping strategy at Shao's constant boasting and flirt. He folded food in his mouth, noiselessly and efficiently.

To avoid another mention of Japan, Mulan steered the conversation towards other….more pedestrian topics. She began by asking Shao about his extensive wine knowledge and politely included Shang by asking his favourite kind of tea concoction.

"Here, Ping, you eat before this gets cold," Shang said, scooping a portion of braised tofu with his chopstick and into her mouth. So she did, and her slight embarrassment at the intimacy of the motion was swiftly overtaken by full-scale mortification when she couldn't help but moan a little at the divine taste of it.

She opened her eyes to see Shang ever so close. His expression was unreadable but intense.

Mulan blinked and Shang jerked and leaned back, slightly flustered, while Shao nearly swallowed his own chopstick in an attempt not to laugh.

"Sorry, braised tofu is my weaknesses," she said. That was a heinous lie, *Shang* was her weaknesses. That tofu was a complete cover-up.

"So is my wife," Shang said ever so candidly and used the same chopstick to lift a chunk to his own mouth.

"Your wife, huh?" Shao, the eternal pot-stirrer, grinned, stealing a knowing look towards Mulan. If he'd been a dog, his tail would've wagged.

Responding in kind, Mulan kicked his foot and hoped Shang didn't hear a muffled thump came from under the table.

The weather turned sour as they head into the mainland. On the road, the high winds and rapid temperature drop had transformed the porous tarmac and wet snow into a slippy deathtrap. Xi'an was merely one hour away, but Shao had mercifully called it a day and checked everyone into a nice, cosy accommodation that fitted his standard of royal comfort.

"Ugh, what with that sour face?" came Shao's teasing voice from behind her shoulder as she was unpacking her bag. "Hey, I have something in my bag that will help to drown your sorrow…—"

"It's not that," Mulan sighed, getting tired of Shao constant needling.

"Can't believe you actually reject a Prince's hospitality," he said, in the most theatrical disbelief voice. "There are a bunch of girls who are dying to have a drink with me."

Mulan sighed exasperatedly. "Shao, why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

Mulan shot him a dire look. "I'm sure you are perfectly aware that you are pulling Shang's leg."

"Pulling his leg? Whatever for?"

"Shao, everyone with eyes could see you are trying to rub his nerve in many ways possible!" she shot back. "I mean… taking me to bunk in that mansion in Japan? Seriously?"
Shao crossed his arms, "Any other accusation?"

"You obstinately wanted to take me on this trip, and… and that simpering smile, that wink… —"

"Oh come ooon, I'm just creating competition," he defended, still with the innocent tone.

"What?" She gasped, horrified at his admittance.

"Men loves competition; it makes them feel challenged," he pointed out.

From her experience, challenges normally invited conflict and conflict bred catastrophe. "You are playing mischief on purpose to… to..." she punched him on his side. "You dumb, Prince!"

Shao clapped a hand to his chest, eyes pleading like an injured dog who had been abandoned by his owner. "That's a deplorable accusation coming from you, Fa Mulan. How can you be so heartless?"

"Don't make me ruin that handsome face of yours!" she said, not without certain fondness.

"Oh, please don't! I'm just a hopeless royal pain who nobody wants," he said, still retaining that very fake pitiful eyes. "I only want to help."

"Help? You called that help?" she snorted. "Let me remind you that Shang sped like a lune and nearly killed us all by driving us into a wall."

"Uh-huh," Shao waved his disagreement finger. "He was about to drive us into a noodle cart."

"Which is parked by a solid, nearly half a meter thick stone wall!"

He shrugged unrepentantly. "I've told him to slow down. It's not my fault if he didn't listen."

"Curse you and that mansion in Japan!"

"You'll regret saying that. It's extremely beautiful. Imagine the spa—an excellent place to relax, rejuvenate and restore your feminine allure," he said, gleefully remorseless. "But I've made my point."

"You are trying to kill us to make a point?"

"Well, if you die. At least, you'll die happy knowing his secrets," he shrugged easily and mimed a motion of scooping the air with imaginary chopsticks and into her mouth. She slapped his hand and collectively ignored his fake scream of agony.

"Although, thinking about it. I am surprised he didn't go on a rampage mode, tossing some guys around, busted through walls, causing quite a stir," he added, rubbing the red spot on his hand.

Considering Shao's creditable deceit of drugging Shang against his will and seeing today, countless times Shao purposely provoked him, Mulan could picture that sort of destruction could happen. She had the same impulses at Shao's relentless jabbering. That man could be quite a troll sometimes. So she was left astounded when Shang was holding his temper although... barely.

"May I humbly point out that the same challenge will give one perspective—a point of realization that a logical creature like Shang often lacked. Like today, I think he got the idea."

"I'm going to shower," she declared, preparing to leave. She didn't have any desire to entertain this obnoxious conversation.
"So," he said, trailing behind her as she was heading down to the corridor. "Shang apparently like men. *Damn,* I owe Chien-Po fifty yuan."

He dodged with remarkable agility and precision as a shoe whizzed by his head.

They arrived in Xi’an early that morning and Shao insisted he needed to make a quick trip to procure praying incense before heading to Hoching.

Shang might be a simple-minded man, but he could smell trick when he heard one, so, putting aside his absurd envy, he told Ping to tail the Prince while he was finding a space to park the rickshaw.

He managed to track them down fifteen minutes later, staring at the empty vegetable shop in the market square.

"What happened?" he inquired both men. His immediate assessment concluded the place had been left abruptly: one of the show windows was still unhinged and the haphazard way the crates were stacked. Some still have pumpkin and watermelon in them.

Ping stared at Shao Wei with that pointy look while jerking his head toward Shang. But Shao Wei remained silent, expression hard, liked Shang had rarely seen of him before.

"You have to tell him if you want us to help you." That stern scolding surprisingly came from Ping, who folded his arm and appearing terribly unimpressed.

Shao Wei only sighed deeply and handed him a parchment as an answer. "Found left inside," Ping supplied, pointing at the windowsill.

Shang accepted it. Inside, it's written:

*SHAO, HE WANTS YOU*

Shang couldn't say he recognised the variation of that handwriting from anyone he knew.

From the delicate stroke, it appeared to be written by a woman, although he wasn't sure. However, he could tell that this particular letter was clearly rushed—setting a tone of urgency. His eyes fell to the bottom of the scroll, past the clumsily written message and landed on the signature. And his frown deepened.

*Don't look for me,*

*-Ting Ting-*
To be A Better Man

Chapter Notes

Shang began to trust and understand Shao Wei, while Mulan disclosed to Ling who Ting Ting really was.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shao directed them to the closest tea-house in the vicinity. Mulan immediately recognised the establishment; it was the same place where Ling took Ting Ting for their dates.

The owner immediately recognised her as Ling’s friend and amicably accommodated them on the corner table away from the peering eyes.

Shang was intensely focusing on the thoughts running in his head, while Shao Wei didn't look particularly interested in being the target of his firing line. While she? She was still entangled in a bitter sense of betrayal. How could Shao not tell her this while she had told him everything? This was not how friendship works!

Escaping from awkward tension, Shao Wei stood up and declared he would get everyone a cup of tea and went off to the counter to order.

---

SHAO, HE WANTS YOU

I'm sorry I have no opportunity to write properly to you. But I know you'll eventually found this letter.

Tian saw a few men from the palace asking for me around the town. She believed they knew I am still alive... and you hide me here. He is coming for you, Brother. We all know what he wants.

Whatever you do, don't look for me.

-Ting Ting -

Shang observed Shao's countenance as the man plopped himself on the vacant seat in front of him. He'd seen several of Shao's masks before now, how expertly he would hide behind confidence and smugness and charisma, but this might be the one of a rare moment that he took them off, no pretence at all. Although Shang was often labelled as emotionally insensitive, the hint of anxiousness behind Shao's usual cool facade when he looked at the abandoned vegetable shop was undeniable.

"So, you come here to find her?" He could see Shao's enthusiasm dimmed as they returned to the topic.

There were a pause and a long exhale. "I haven't heard anything from her for two months," Shao supplied. "I thought... it will be a good idea to check..." he shook his head and sighed.

"So, how long have you hid your sister here exactly," Shang enquired, folding back the parchment that he had skimmed for the umpteenth time.
"Half a year," Shao said with a quiet, paralysing sadness.

"You know that sister's death... I mean, disappearance, was the catalyst of this war?" Shang said again, trying not to sound judgemental. "The Huns doesn't take it too kindly when we broke our promise."

Ping had remained oddly silent, and all matter of usual goofiness seemed to disappear in exchange of baleful look. Shang was not the most observant man in the world, but it's clear as day that Ping was not fine.

"Ping, are you...?"

"I'm fine," he snapped before turning to Shao, calm but dangerous determination on his face. "How could you keep this away from us?"

Shao Wei immediately acknowledged the accusation was directed to him. "What? I am not! I am being economical with the truth," he defended.

"Seriously?" Ping scoffed.

"Anyway, It's none of your business if I hid my sister somewhere."

"Hell yes if you are a poor farmer somewhere in an uncharted part of China!" Ping replied, voice escalating. "But you are the Prince of Wei! Your saying and your action decide the future of this country! By that, I mean every one of us!"

Ping's anger was logical given the context. There were undoubtedly many men: son, father, husband or brother who were forced to march into war. They had become a likely victim of a political dispute...or to simply fulfil a selfish agenda of their leader.

"I am trying to protect her!" Shao replied, equally incensed. "Wouldn't you all will do the same thing if your siblings were forced into marriage you know going to torture them to their grave?"

"That's not your priority! You should've done something to protect your country! Your subjects! That's what good leaders do. And look at what you've done now? You let these faithful men—men who vowed to die to protect you—marching to their own demise, while you perhaps, had remained blissfully drunk and insulated from real life responsibilities!"

"So what if I am not a good leader!" Shao nearly screamed. "You dared to condemn my unwise decision without even considering how hard it is to be me!"

Ping rose up from his seat, "I'm sure there is a better way than faking her death! Ones that don't cause war to start!" he stubbornly insisted. "You should've stayed away and stayed that way!"

By then, Shao looked perfectly offended. "What do you think, Ping? Did your father not tell you the same thing when he received his conscription? Tell you to stay away? I bet he even said that he would be glad to die for China," he replied crisply. "Did you also do nothing about it?" And he scoffed, loudly. "Oh, I forgot. You actually took his place."

Ping looked overthrown by Shao's furious indictment. Because deep down everyone knew, there was no way one could reason love. No one could measure the depth of one's affection and the sacrifices one's willing to do to keep their loved one safe.

"Okay, listen," Shang interrupted between the firing lines by slapping his massive palm on the table. The sound of jumping ceramics caused both parties to halt, staring at him wide-eyed.
"Thank you very much," he said when their attention was on him.

Shang knew there was something between Ping and the Prince, something he didn't know, but he won't let personal issue between them diverting their focus from more important matters at hand.

"Shao, do you have any idea who was looking for you? I mean...who is he?"

Shao let a disgruntled sigh, "Uncle Xiongnu."

"The Son of Heaven? The Emperor himself?" Shang couldn't help sounding sceptical. "Why? I mean... he could just summon you to his palace to have a friendly conversation?"

"He must have suspected that you are the mastermind behind this ruse," Ping spoke up, although a lot more sympathetic and apologetic. "But I am sure Ting Ting is somewhere safe; thus she had left this message to warn you."

It was entirely probable that Ting Ting had seen her pursuant beforehand and ran into hiding somewhere.

"Help me to understand this. Why did you fake your sister's death?" Shang asked. For once he didn't believe that Shao helping his sister escaping unwanted marriage was the only reason. There was another reason, a more important reason.

The Prince looked stricken and lost and almost unbearably sad. "To protect her having the same fate as my mother," he admitted. "It's my mother last wish was for me to take care of Ting Ting, because she is my only sister."

"What does this have anything to do with the Emperor?" Shang inquired, curiosity peaked.

"No one should know," Shao said. "It'll be a great scandal."

"Go on. Try me."

"The real author of my mother's murder wasn't the Hun spies or any highly paid foreign mercenary. Is was him, the Emperor."

"W-what...?" Shang was sure he wasn't the only surprised-party on the table.

"It's no news that my uncle has this obsession of uniting China and other kingdoms around here under his wings. I am sure you're aware of that," Shao said.

Shang nodded. He had been sent to a few minor invasion all across the continent; therefore he certainly knew what Shao meant.

"Truth be told that my father has the same ambition, but with a different method—political marriage."

"Since they were young, uncle Xiongnu had always been the clever, assertive, and bold one between the two. And naturally, as the oldest son, he had more leadership practices in exercising power and authority to prepare him for the throne. Despite their character differences, my father was very loyal to him and looked up to him like he was god. He admires uncle Xiongnu liked no one else."

"But who can blame him. My grandfather was assassinated by a felon from a minor kingdom who disproved of his method of ruling. Back then, my father was barely ten. Uncle Xiongnu was forced
to grow up prematurely and stepped up to the role as the first man of the country. His success had both inspired and overshadowed my father ever since."

"My mother was a woman given by the Uygur kingdom for my father to wed. She was beautiful but very opinionated and hard to control. My uncle had never liked her."

"So, when my mother voiced her disapproval over my sister becoming the Huns Khatun - my uncle saw his opportunity to ruin my father's friendship with the Khan."

"The Emperor killed your mother and…―"

"Yes, framed a Hun mercenary instead," Shao continued. "The allegation obviously caused a strain between the Khan and my father's relationship. He tried to salvage it by offering me to wed Altansarnai, to which the Khan refused point blank. Our political allies with the Huns deteriorated that point onwards."

**Well, who wants to wed their daughter to a delinquent prince especially when you are already a princess on your own right? Shang thought in his head.**

"Does your father know about this?"

"At some point, he knew. But he was far more infested trying not to disappoint his brother that he is willing to overlook his crime."

"He is not… angry to your uncle?"

"No. Often times it was my uncle who always accused my father saying that his alliance with the Huns was an effort to overthrow him from the throne."

Shang nodded thoughtfully. He had heard rumour of Shao Wei's future engagement to the Emperor's eldest daughter; perhaps this was Wei Zhang's way to earn his brother's good side.

"Have you speak to anyone else about this?" Shang inquired, head still spinning with this unpalatable truth.

"No."

"Not even my father?" Shang knew above all men. His father was not just a wise man, but also a man of integrity and secrecy. He thought his father might have deduced some of these plots himself, hence sending him to be Shao's wingman.

Shao's expression shuttered, and it's like he's suddenly a shell of the man who'd been sitting there.

"Who will believe me? I spent a lot of years being a selfish asshole, and I hurt a lot of people. And the majority of it ended up in the tabloids. That's a hard image to shake," He cleared his throat, turning his teacup in little circles again.

Shang nodded sympathetically, partially because he was absorbing the story, and the rest because he had nothing useful or distantly comforting to say.

"It's okay. It's my own fault." Shao shook his head minutely, a sad little smile on his lips. "My reputation is well-earned. *Deserved.* I am an easy man to hate." His voice is low and soft and full of regret.

For a brief moment, Shang felt he understood why Shao had been embroiling himself with women,
alcohols and gambling; why he had been avoiding politics and any notion of the crown. If this was how he experienced power: a life full of lies, betrayal and backstabbing, it's no wonder if anyone would run away from it.

"I am just trying to be a better brother. A better man," he sighed. "And I guess… I failed."

This time, the silence between them was sincere and confessional. Somehow Shang could relate to whatever Shao was saying, perhaps because deep down, he was struggling a very similar kind of battle: to be a better man. A better husband.

"...And I'm sorry that I challenge your advice earlier about taking Ping with me."

Shang didn't react to that, or at least he tried. To be honest, he was not proud of the stab of jealousy he felt with that odd closeness Ping had with the Prince.

"Anyway, whether you'll believe me or not, please keep our conversation between us," Shao said in closing.

Shang nodded quietly. He remembered how happy his mother was every time his father brought her a souvenir from Forbidden City. But suddenly, the glittering glamour and extravagant shine of the palace life lost its charm.

"I'm not as perceptive as my father when it comes to judging people's character, but I can tell you are a good man, Shao Wei. And this is not a compliment," Shang told him. "It's the truth."

"Oh." It was clear that wasn't the model answer Shao Wei had expected him to say (which perhaps had been obvious recalling how many time he had dispassionately replying his request).

"And I believe you," and that silenced him further.

For once Shang had felt a strange connection to the man whom background and persona was nothing symmetrical to his. Shao Wei was one of the most complex, sophisticated man he knew—but at this moment in time, Shang almost could say he understood him well enough to read his mind.

"Leave it to me to find the whereabouts of your sister. Now we need someplace you can hide."

Shao hummed his gratefulness, "Thank you."

Their conversation was so intense that they didn't realise Ping wasn't there anymore. Both men looked over various direction, but no sign of their comrade.

"Talking about Ping," Shao shifted the topic, recalling the two weeks deadline from Ping's reassessment was almost due. "I hope you agree with me to give him one more shot. He is a little eccentric, I know, but doesn't mean he isn't capable of greatness."

As much as he favoured Ping, greatness wasn't exactly the word that came to his mind. So, Shang decided not to say anything... but unfortunately his sceptical exhale did.

"Li Shang, you can't expect a bird to fly when you pin its wing," Shao reasoned. "You have to give the boy a chance to let him be who he is. Only then you'll see him soar."

Shang knew the outset that he shouldn't promise anyone anything. As a leader he was bound to make unpopular decisions, his father had forewarned him of this, including defying the request of a prince. But he wasn't in the mood of confronting Shao's usual wheedling. On the other hand, he
didn't want Shao Wei to think he had grown complacent just because Ping was his brother-in-law.

"We'll see about that." He decided that was as much as diplomacy he could offer. Shang stood up and gathered their belongings and trying not to overthink the strange friendship Ping forged with the Prince. "Now we have to find Ping and….—"

And speaking of the devil, there was a shriek of panic coming from the back that halted their conversation. Moments later they witnessed Fa Ping, walked timidly with a rather well-dressed man trailing behind him.

"Is this boy with you?" the man said, countenance immediately turned pale when he realised who was standing in front of him. "My Lord Highness…. Prince of Wei...I'm sorry, I didn't...—"

"Any problem?" Shang didn't waste any breath and jumped in to inquire.

"Oh, nothing serious," the man clasped his hand and amicably gave them a bow. "It's just your friend here scared my wife and other female patrons of this establishment when he got into the wrong toilet."

All Shang could do was to let a deep sigh and massage his temple.

Agreement was never a noun that came easy for them, Mulan had discovered. When it came to discussing things with Shang, whether as Ping or Fa-Li Mulan, they bound to argue, debate, which in time normally expounded into something more sinister like verbal lashing to much rarer physical confrontation.

So, when it took them less than five minutes to agree on a suitable place to hide the Heir of Wei, confusion rolled in.

"So, you agree we should just leave Shao Wei with Venerable Yen's family?" Mulan reconfirmed.

"He knew both our fathers well, and he used to be an outstanding member of palace advisory and currently serving as Xi'an city treasury," Shang repeated what Mulan had told him. "I am sure a man on his rank knew how to treat royalty, and more importantly, keeping him safe."

"My father told me the man had proven to be discreet and honourable in his conduct."

"Fair consideration," Shang nodded as a sign that he trusted her judgement. And with that, they packed their things.

Three of them arrived at Venerable Yen's residence in good time. Everything was as Mulan expounded to Shang, vast garden surrounded by bamboo forest, pathway paved by walls of magnolias and a large fortress-like home with countless servants. Well, she managed to mention everything but one thing—Xin, Venerable Yen's sixteen-year-old daughter, who at the moment was said to have a game of Komi with a bunch of other girls.

Even as much their disguise went, and even when they tried masking their mission to be as low key as possible, when there was a charming prince on the tow, there was no escaping of women's attention.

Upon arriving, they were being ushered to one of the living room and waited for Venerable Yen. Shao Wei had used the opportunity to polish his appearance and had requested the use of one of their bedroom so he could change to his formal attire.
Left with the-ever-not-so-conversationalist Captain, Mulan decided to entertain herself by staring at various paintings on the wall. This was just the beginning, from the opened window behind them, Mulan could hear a bunch of girls outside, talking.

"Oh my, it is true… His Lord Prince of Wei is here! I saw him just now walk into the powder room!" she heard them said in a hushed tone.

"Xin, how could you not tell us your father is inviting a royalty for lunch today, we could've donned a better dress!"

"I hope he is much more handsome than the painting…" said another. "Hey, does your powder room have a window. Who knows we might catch a glimpse of him with… lesser attire." And her voice was swallowed by high-pitched feminine giggles of her friends.

"Wait, look at the other guy on the table, the tall one, with the red string on his man-bun. That's my friend… is gorgeousness redefined."

"Oh… oh, you mean the quiet one with the ridiculous jawline?" the other blurted out, then clasped a hand over her mouth. Until lately, Mulan couldn't comprehend women's fixation over the angularity of men's jaw. After she married Shang, she knew.

"Oh gods, have you checked out his arms? That biceps…begging me to feel it."

Shang immediately tensed. Although he'd been introspectively aware of his good looks, he never got used to hearing people objectifying him. He tried not to fidget, but Mulan could see a slight blush crept on his ears..., and it was by far the dorkiest thing she's seen him do, but it somehow makes him seem more human and relatable and, yes, more attractive.

"He seems nice….and handsome, (like a Disney prince or something…!) even when the way he looked at the table is a bit… aggressive."

Shang flashed them a withering look towards the group, which unfortunately, to the eyes of a group of inexperienced damsels, disdain could wrongly misinterpret as passion. His attention was responded with another high pitch glee followed by a muffled discussion before one of the unfortunate girls from the group timidly making a beeline into the room.

"State your business," Shang said like interrogating an enemy spy: precise, short and deadly. The girl, who probably only a few years her junior, was visibly shrunk under his glare. Now Mulan knew why General Li and Li Yue never attempted to matchmake Shang with a normal, ordinary woman with a non-military background.

"I said: State. Your. Business," Shang repeated a pitch louder when the girl didn't immediately answer.

Mulan squinted at him irritably, but the insufferable idiot took no notice whatsoever.

"He meant: What can we do for you?" Mulan rephrased, trying to restrain herself from rolling eyes at him.

"I'm Xin," the girl managed, stealing an abashed glance at Shang who was still shooting a murderous gaze at her.

"Oh!" Mulan promptly stood up and bowed politely. "Ms. Xin. Thank you for allowing us to set foot on your property. We are just waiting for your father. Meanwhile, is there anything you want from us?"
"Oh, it's nothing really, I just wonder if I could..." she gulped when Shang narrowed his eyes, which perfectly complement the dire look on his face. Instantaneously, her verbal ability went on from stuttering to a complete halt, which was understandable, Shang's intense stare could be both terrifying and arousing in equal measure.

"You're saying...?" Mulan encouraged.

"I'm sorry if I..." Then Xin looked over towards the door and went even more rigid. "Is...is that really...?"

When Mulan followed her gaze, she had a little concerned the girl might pass out. Because, okay, the-handsome-and-most-desired-bachelor-in-China, wrapped in all his princely glamour, was gracefully glided toward you with a friendly grin on his face? That's a little brutal.

"You are looking for him?" she enquired. The girl remained unresponsive.

Shao reached the table and placed a pot of tea and three cups down in front of them. "I told the housekeeper I would take this to you two myself," he told her and Shang, and Xin made a little choking noise as she craned her neck to stare up at the Prince. At least that's mean she was still breathing.

Xin waved awkwardly at him. And there was a moment when Mulan something else flashed in Shao's eyes before he regained composure.

"Hi, I believe we are yet to be introduced," Shao said with that obscenely wonderful charm and all the genetic blessings.

"This is Ms Xin, Venerable Yen's daughter," Mulan interjected, because she's pretty sure Xin was still non-verbal at the moment.

"Oh yes...she's also a great fan of yours," she added, unnecessarily. Admittedly, she found the girl's flustered reaction quite entertaining. She mentally slapped herself for indulging over the girl's duress.

Xin nodded frantically before bowing. "I'm sorry to disturb but I... I can't..."

"Don't worry, you are not in any sort of trouble," Shao said in an incredibly patient, kind tone and oddly non-sexual. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Oh no no. I'm just glad I finally met you—in the flesh, I've read so much about you in tablo—... I mean...news," the girl admitted after finding her voice.

"The honour is mine too," Shao said. "In fact, we may have a good acquainting time this couple of days."

"Oh, I didn't know My Lord Prince is going to stay..."

"Yes, I'm sorry for this little... impromptu arrangement. I hope my presence didn't cause so much inconvenience and distress on your part," Shao said smoothly. And before Xin managed to breathe any polite retort, he added, "In fact, I have a gift for you," and he pulled out his silk handkerchief out of his pocket. "It doesn't come with a box, but it's new," Shao said, placing the item on the girl's trembling hand. Although, used would've been a better souvenir.

"Consider it as my expression of gratitude for letting me stay," he said, reaching over and patted her hand in a totally platonic, comforting kind of way.
She made a little squealing sound and a universal movement of fanning herself when she found out the gossamer material had the royal emblem embroidered on one of its corners.

"Thank you," she managed to mouth, bowing ever so deeply. "I will take good care of it."

Before Xin neatly tucked the treasure inside her purse, Mulan managed to see a small gold embroidery on the edge of the material: "Ting Ting"

That late evening, arriving back in the encampment, Mulan was doing her rounds of patrol. She was undoubtedly tired, but she was in a better spirit after apologising to Shao for her mercurial mood and blunt accusation.

She knew she did the right thing not to leave the matter between them for another week, even when Shao just grinned and told her he'd be sad missing all the 'fun' and 'comfort' of the encampment. He even managed to insert a line of uncouth tease to her to 'enjoy having Captain Shirtless for yourself'. The restoration of his sense of mischief meant things had returned back to normal. But it wasn't all joke and humour, Shao Wei—that killer of good tidings—also reminded her that if she didn't practise harder, Captain Handsome would likely to send her home.

"You are one clever girl, Mulan," Shao had told her. "I know you have your own reasoning and reservation about why you are in this encampment. But China could do with one more soldier, especially one with a great mind like yours."

She sighed to herself. How could Shao see things in her that she couldn't see it herself just yet? When she questioned him, the crazy Prince only quipped: you are holding the mirror the wrong way. Before you can see potentials in others, you have to be able to find it within yourself.

Did she possess any potential? Any promise of success or some kind? At first, she thought she did, not until Shang's dismissal decimated every single inch of her confidence she had left in her.

*Shang...*

From a distance she saw him sparring with a few soldiers, watching them halt in their movements, sheen of perspiration glistening on their skins.

He stood in his stance, mouthing some inaudible instruction. His impressive back muscles were flexing in a way that made her mouth water, the scar on his shoulder beckoning her to feel it. She swallowed and fisted her hand. Lusting after her husband was the biggest irony any wife anywhere could think of.

Realising who she had been staring, she quickly shifted her eyes together with her mind to the person next to her, Ling, who was humming a cheerful tune—which by the forceful timbre of his voice and tense posture of his shoulder, the song had miserably failed to radiate the happiness it should.

"Hey, what's wrong?" she said softly as they walked, patrolling. Chien-Po is trailing behind them.

Ling shook his head. "Nothin''

"Ling, what do you mean nothing? Hey. I wasn't born yesterday, kay? Now, spill."

Ling hesitated but decided to share the truth.

"I was… I went to see her," he said, almost unheard. "While you were gone."
"Her?" There was only one feminine subject who could cause Ling that level of edgy restlessness. "You mean…"

"Yes."

"You did?" she gasped.

It was a dangerous move. Anyone who was discovered leaving the encampment without permission was rewarded with punishment which involved public humiliation, or worse, beheading. It was a surprise to her that Ling, the sweet, noodle-loving man would pull such a stunt.

"You know how dangerous that is?"

Ling sighed heavily. "It's my only chance. Tian and her family are moving…—."

"Wait," Mulan grabbed his shoulder, practically halting him. "She told you that?"

"Yes?" And he handed a letter. Inside, there was a map, followed by a short note that Mulan had decided to skip because it sounded too personal for her to know.

"There is a hut on the edge of the woods," Ling beat her to the question. "Tian just said their rental was terminated prematurely," which Mulan was sure just a cover-up to avoid further inquisitive questions.

"Can I share this information with the Captain?" she said, motioning towards the map.

Ling shrugged, not understanding the context of the situation. "Sure, but… why? Why would he be interested in Ting Ting's whereabouts?"

"Because Ting Ting is…" Mulan hesitated. She could feel the spirit of animosity emanated from Ling every time the Prince made it into view. And during their chit-chat session every dinner, she tried to used the generic word 'he' to address him because Ling's face would turn like a lemon for each reminder that a person name Shao Wei did exist.

"Promise me you won't freak out."

Ling's turn to gasp, but immediately bracing himself. "Okay…" he said with baited breath.

"Ting Ting is Shao Wei's sister. Princess Wei Xiu Ting."

Meanwhile, in Mongolia...

"So Asanthi missed the target?"

"But that's impossible! She'd never missed!"

"Seeing is believing," Timur scoffed sarcastically. "I told you not to bring that Chinese woman…!"

"Watch your mouth!" Batu said warningly, he eyed Sukh who had remained despicably silent throughout the exchange. He knew his friend had as much confusion and disbelief of what just happened, especially considering he was the person who had endorsed his wife faultless aiming ability.

"The Chinese would've executed her if it wasn't because someone decided to make a profit and sold her to the Huns instead. Now tell me, who hated the Chinese more than a girl who was
betrayed by her own countrymen?” Batu argued.

"You can't turn a cat into a tiger,” came Timur quiet grumble.

"Once a traitor always a traitor."

Asanthi sighed as she listened to the male voices arguing incessantly about her failure.

*You can't turn a cat into a tiger.*

Although many years ago it was the ruling Prince of Wei who had imprisoned and nearly executed her unjustifiably, she never planned to settle any score with anyone. Was it weaknesses to absolve his sin as though it never happened? Was it a shortcoming not to feel intense animosity towards the man that had ripped her family apart? Perhaps Timur was right, she was way too placid and docile to be a warrior, she reflected.

*Once a traitor always a traitor.*

That remark cut deep to the core of her heart. She had always view Mongolia as her home far away from home, and these Huns fighters were her family. She had always alluded to the notion that she was welcomed here.

*Well, I guess not,* she thought ruefully in her head.

Admittedly, her life in captivity was a good one, although it wasn't started that way.

One of the Huns, Batu, the Chief of spies, had bought her as a slave from one of the Chinese officials, initially deemed for a gift to his wife.

But Asanthi was proven much too clever to just in charge of cooking, sewing and herding the cattle. With her mistress' permission, she spent her spare time reading, learning to speak Mongol, to ride a horse and to hunt.

Batu was the first to acknowledge the streak of brilliance in her when Asanthi when he took her hunting for deer one night. She had no difficulty whatsoever tracking and aiming the animal despite the fact that it was a moonless night. Keen to prove her ability further, she asked her master's permission to join the annual hunting contest held by Princess Altansarnai. She managed to win it by taking down more than a dozen wild hare in under an hour—a record that even hard to establish by an experienced hunter.

After her astonishing accomplishment, Princess Altansarnai took notice on her, and later on, decided to pay a handsome amount of money to Batu's wife in order to take her under her wing.

Although she had gained favour from one of the most influential royals, Asanthi's life wasn't all bed of roses. Her rise to fame had ignited the feeling of rivalry, and a few Huns inner circle weren't at all pleased when she knew Asanthi was born Chinese.

To cut the story short, she had to endure another physical assault when someone broke into her quarter, threatened to cut her limbs.

After the incident, Princess Altan had been adamant that Asanthi had to learn some form of self-defence, which in time led her to Sukh—a man who agreed to train and groom her to be the Princess' personal guard.
During this period of training, it was no surprise when Asanthi captured the heart of her mentor, who later on offered her hand in marriage, to which she dutifully accepted.

Asanthi had never expected this, but her life gradually became sweeter since.

Contrary to Asanthi initial speculation, the Huns warriors weren't barbaric, bloodthirsty bunch. In fact, quite the opposite, they were a crowd of a civilised, witty and skilful hunter who was very efficient and knowledgeable in what they do. More so, as a woman, she was never treated as a second class citizen. She was given equal opportunity to learn, train and to fight just any Huns male would. It's no surprise if she soon moved up the rank and became one of their best archers.

And Sukh, her husband, despite sharing Shan-Yu's burly, ferocious look, deep down was a gentle and reasonable man.

She recalled the time of Datong war, she made her first kill with a small dagger. Her victim was a young man, perhaps a commander in his battalion, couldn't have been older than twenty-five. He sneaked up from behind her and she had no choice but to defend herself. Although it was done in the heat of a battle, her heart still conflicted with guilt realising she had robbed one precious life. He could've been someone's father, son... or brother.

"Mo Chou," she recalled Sukh called her gently. "Killing someone in the battle doesn't make you a killer. We might not like what we do, but we do what we must," he said after a moment of silence. "Besides, this man didn't die in vain. He died a hero."

She knew Sukh was right, but his assurance hardly reconciled her feeling of remorse.

"Let's erect a little shrine and pray for his soul," he suggested, while stroking her back as she cried inconsolably, her hands still stained with blood. "But first let us find some water. There is no use in punishing yourself with his blood as a reminder."

Somehow, her husband knew what she was thinking. Most of the time Sukh was hard, stern and discipline, but when the chips were down, he pulled the words from his heart. It's his unexpected sincerity that made a true impact on her. Perhaps this was how the universe imparted its infinite wisdom, to show her that these Huns, just like her fellow Chinese compatriots, were just... people. People who were capable of sympathy and humanity.

"My Lord Husband," Asanthi greeted as she saw her husband entered the room, closing the door behind him to muffle the sound of discord argument outside.

"I believe you owe me an explanation," he said, not unkindly.

She immediately obliged. "Although I've told you I never believe avenging anyone would do any good, I have no qualm killing the Prince of Wei," she said, putting the most sincere voice. "It was an assignment that I didn't take lightly."

Sukh nodded contemplatively. "There is not a moment that I doubt your loyalty to the Khan, but I want to hear your account before arriving in any conclusion." Why didn't you miss the intended target?

"My dear husband," she said imploringly. "It was an error on my part. They are both very much alike in built and stature."

It was only a half-truth. Her mistake wasn't the shot, nor the target, but to agree with a love-stricken woman who had vowed to protect a man who was their mortal enemy. Not that she would tell her husband that of the Princess. It was not her story to tell.
Sukh fell deep in thought. While he knew it was dark and the said Captain was of the similar stature with the Prince of Wei, he hardly believed his wife, who was an abled archer with excellent vision, would make such a juvenile blunder.

"Did something distract you?" It was the only possible explanation.

Asanthi swallowed the knot on her throat. Her husband apparently was much more observant than she credited him for.

"More like someone," she said, this time sharing the truth.

Sukh took a seat next to her, indicating he was listening. "Go on."

"I saw, my little brother—Yao."

Chapter End Notes

And that's a chapter. Next one will be posted in less than a month time :) a lot shorter chapter though.

So Ling had been sneaking up visiting Ting Ting, who for whatever reason, decided to divulge her secret location. It's interesting to imagine Ling's shock knowing the girl he fancied was no other than a princess, more so, the sister of the man he loathed. On the other hand, do you think Shao will allow his only, beloved sister to date a commoner?

This chapter described a breakthrough moment between Shang and Shao Wei. They finally could relate to each other on personal level.

Also, highlighted here was Asanthi, who was actually Yao's presumably dead sister. On the night of the mission, she saw those men patrolling and accidentally saw Yao as part of the group. She might have forgiven then entire Wei clan for the unfair treatment she was receiving, but what happen if Yao was the one who held grudges and plotting revenge?
My Son, Li Shang,

I understand fully your request for me to go on the frontline as a representation of the Li family. I agree with you that Ping may be not ready for battlefront, and sending him to the frontline could be an unwise decision. I support your settlement in taking his place to represent that Fa household.

I pray the spirit of our ancestor will be in our side as we defend the freedom and dignity of our people.

Until we meet again,

Your Father, Li Jiang.

Shang was alerted to the sound of iron weights clinking together. He seethed that someone dared to disturb his short, needy rest after a long night playing catch up with hours of missed training.

Emerging from his private quarters, Shang swept his gaze. The tents are a dusky peach in the light of dawn, the sun still below the distant hills. At first, he can't quite see who it is that's climbing the pole in the middle of their camp, a black silhouette against an indigo sky.

Gods, for once, let it be not Fa Ping again? Shang berated himself as he approached to inspect the ruckus, hoping that his brother-in-law hadn't embroiled himself in much trouble this early in the morning.

"Fa Ping… Fa Ping!" the men chanted.

"You can do it!" Ling's high-pitch voice hollered.

"Way to go Ping!"

"One cheer for Fa Ping!"

Word spreads, and soon half the men stand outside their tents, watching their unknown comrade drag himself upward, inching toward the arrow that's sat unmolested for so long. Finally, the sun breaks over the hills, spilling into the valley. The soldier on the pole pulls himself into its reach, and a gasp escaped Shang's throat. Even from this distance, he can see the set of Ping's jaw, the rivers of sweat running down his temple and the muscles standing out from his neck.

The young man had proved him wrong. Despite the prejudice of many people around him, Ping had risen against his challenge and won.

Shang could only smile as he folded back his father's letter and stashed it into the pocket of his robe.

Perhaps, he shouldn't have rushed into writing to his father at all.

"See you later Ping!"
"Good job!"

"Well done!"

A few other recruits patted her back as they went past. She laughed, indulging in the moment. "It's nothing. You all can do the same, credit to my teacher," she politely crediting Shao Wei.

"Whatever. You did great!"

"Yeah, that was awesome!"

She knew her giggle was somewhat undignified, but nobody care. All men did a lot of undignified habits anyway (like burping, spitting and farting) so at the moment, Mulan didn't feel too embarrassed. "Thanks," she said, by no means sounding presumptuous.

She let herself stare at the retrieved arrow in her hands a while longer, smiling until her face hurt. Yes, being unfamiliarly very far from the ground made her feel dizzy, but her dizziness quickly placated by the adrenaline rush from her phenomenal accomplishment.

*Let Captain Shirtless eats his words.* Shao's word resonated in her head, alternating with the whoop and hoot of encouragement and praise as she replayed her success in retrieving Shang's arrow from the top of the mast. But, no. She had no desire to proof Shang was wrong anymore. Although she couldn't deny there was a great feeling of satisfaction seeing Shang's disbelieving expression as he emerged from his tent. There was undeniable pride in her having to accomplish what Shang thought impossible but there was also a sense of happiness that he smiled proudly on her victory.

The news of her to be the first recruit to pass Captain Li's notorious standard went like wildfire. It was no surprise that the Prince had immediately aware of her recent unprecedented success.

"Congratulation, Fa Ping. You are the first soldier to grab the arrow from the mast," Shang said, handing her a scroll.

Was that unguarded pride in his voice?

"It's down to yours and Prince of Wei's training," she said humbly. "But, thank you."

"Yeah, why did you actually fool us and pretend to be absolute incompetent?" Chef Zhang said presumptively as he passed by, pulling a large crate of vegetables before disappearing behind the tent.

Mulan just smiled, basking on the strange warmth that spreading on her chest while her hand working to open the letter. It was then her eyes caught the Prince of Wei lavish insignia on it.

"That's was quick...," she muttered to herself.

Shang cleared his throat. "He actually left it with me prior to his departure."

"Oh!" It seemed like Shao had more confidence in her more than she knew.

As suspected, Shao's message was brief. It was a short congratulation and a note on the end.

*Every man dies, but not every man really lives. Thus, live to the fullest.*

Mulan smiled. There were rare moments when the unforgivably psychotic prince could impart the wisdom of the universe in a very few simple words, this was one of them.
"Ping..." The voice caused her to look up, stashing the scroll into the pocket of her training outfit.

Shang took off his robe and picked up some bamboo sticks. "It's still early, do you fancy a quick spar?"

She immediately felt heat travelling up her face, heart pounding hard.

In order to cover up whatever strange reaction she was having, she held up her fists and held her stance and lulled in her most masculine voice for theatrics sake. "Is this a rematch?" In a non-sexual way she thoughted in her head, averting her face and pretended to throw empty kicks to hide her reddening cheeks. Why he had to be shirtless for heaven sake?!

"I think you can handle me now," Shang smiled amusedly. "Just imagine this is a fight for life. Don't hesitate to attack me."

Mulan took a big, fortifying breath. "Okay."

She held out her hand and Shang gave her one of the bamboo sticks.

She tested the weight of it in her hand, surprised at how much lighter it felt than she thought it would be. That could probably be partially attributed to her increased strength, and partially to the excitement which was flowing through her veins. When she hoisted it overhead and sent it slamming into the trees around them, the sound of a loud thud echoing in the air, she felt the tiniest bit of that frustration simmer away.

Following him over to the centre clearing, she planted her feet and raised her stick, "Ready?"

"Remember to vary the speed of your attacks to keep your opponent guessing."

She nodded and they began to spar. This was a part of her training that she had come to enjoy, especially now that she wasn't a total disaster at it.

"If I was actually trying, I would have you on your back in five seconds and this would no longer be a training exercise," Shang argued when nearly a minute past and she hadn't even attempt any meaningful attacks.

Mulan raised a teasing eyebrow, "Oh rea—"

The next thing she knew she was, in fact, lying on the ground, with his stick across her neck and his sweaty body hovering right over the top of her. Their eyes locked and it was like one of those moments in a sappy romance novel, unsurprising as her life had basically become some wild fiction plot as of late, and if things went as they typically did in the romance story.

What if, he kissed you? Said the voice in her head. Mulan froze. She didn't know what she should do, what she wanted to do. This had all happened so suddenly and she wasn't prepared.

So you've let him defeat you? Just because you think he might... kiss you? rebuked other part of her consciousness.

Suddenly, the reality of losing the battle dawned upon her. So she bounced back to her heel and stepped into her fighting stance. "Not yet, Captain," and raced towards him again with a sequence of blows.

But for every punch she threw, every swing of the weapon she made, Shang deflected with ease.
As the spar wore on, Mulan began to tire and her movement became sluggish. It seemed that Shang had decided that he was going to see Ping's capability and his limit, so he played defensive and tried to wear him out. Realizing that she would have to conclude this fight quickly, she formed a plan.

Oh yes, that feminine philosophy Shao had taught her.

She internally grimaced at her own ploy. It's dirty, but a fight for life was a fight to be won. Then she put her plan into action.

"Ouch!" Mulan yelled a fake pain as she grabbed her left shoulder. It was nowhere Shang had struck her—which was entirely purposeful to send him a signal this injury was outside the combat plan.

"Ping? Are you..." Shang fretted and let his guard down for a split second. Mulan felt a little guilty for making use of Shang's caring inclination and extended her leg and kicked him right on his nose.

"Ah!" Shang brought his hand to his nose with a scowl, nursing the exact spot where Ping had accidentally hit him a couple of weeks ago. The kick wasn't at all lethal, but enough to make his whole face went numb.

Caught in own surprise for an unexpected victory, Mulan could only watch Shang who was still holding his nose with a pained expression as though the pain ricocheting to his skull.

She wasn't sure which one took the beating more, his nose or his pride.

"Captain Li...Are you okay?" It took her all her extra brain cell in her head to remind herself not to comfort him more than a comrade would. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

"No I'm fine," he reassured. It took him at least one whole minutes before he could form a functional sentence. "You fought well, Ping. I like your approach. A warrior should never hesitate in battle. You can't outmatch my strength, but you outthink me," he praised her.

"Girl, you just busted up his nose again," Mushu broke in. As usual, his timing was impeccable.

"...which I might have been told was his best feature!" he reprimanded. "But man, he does have quite a nose, doesn't he? I mean—that thing has never even bleed! Wait, have you check that's it is real?"

"How do I suppose to know?"

"You are his wife! A wife should know her husband's best asset!"

"That's ridiculous. His eyes are his best feature," she cut him off dismissively before freezing, an intense blush growing on her entire face.

Truthfully, Shang had never been vain about his astonishingly handsome look (in contrast to the gregarious prince who seemed to seek them), he seemed to regard the generous attention from the fairer kind was down to his achievement and his military status.

"What about my eyes?" Shang questioned, completely baffled. Mulan winced awkwardly, he knew Shang didn't like some noisy praise in any form, no matter how positive it was. Next to her, Mushu grinned like a loon.

"I... I never said that. I mean...Uh. Yes. Your eyes... is n-nice, but I was talking in a very neutral,
impartial way."

"Yes, one second she hates you, another second I can see hearts coming out of her eyes. One minute it looked like she wants to lob the training staff on your head, another minute she may want to kiss the teeth out of your skull!" Mushu told Shang as though he could hear him.

"Oh," came Shang's equally awkward reply. "Anyway, good spar Ping," he said before closing the match with a bow and even dared to give her a smile. A Smile!

"Mulan, did you see that? He smiled! The man you thought only capable of a static face actually can smile!"

Mulan shushed the Dragon, but Mushu prattled on. "His eyes or nose, for the record, in the realm of men you could've been potentially ended up married to, he is not a bad catch," he said squarely. "I mean, look at those abs. I'd have six wives if I had those!"

"Which thankfully you didn't have. Because I hate to see my spiritual advisor becoming one of the lecherous jerk," Mulan retorted.

"A six pack abs man whose having six wives isn't lecherous. It's called blessed."

"Still a jerk," she debated.

"Fine, blessed jerk. Whatever."

Shang watched as Ping animatedly bowing his thanks and waved towards the other recruits who were chorusing words of praise to him.

Ping was a mystery. One second he could look timid and terrified, like a puppy in a thunderous night. The next second he could be the wittiest, most maverick and insane person he ever dreamt recruiting.

While learning martial art techniques required real, organic talent, the perfection of such combat essentially needed a raw power and precision—in which could only be attained by practice, and that what Ping relentlessly doing every night. The training wasn't a great success at the beginning, Ping fell and nearly injured himself until Shang lost count. But the fiery determination in his eyes and his spirit of perseverance propelled him to keep on repeating the exercise until he finally succeeded.

But it wasn't down to power that made Ping potentially an infallible opponent. It was his creativity that caught him by surprise time and time again.

Shang couldn't deny that Ping had an innate talent of thinking outside the box, one that surpassed many experienced soldiers, including, he admitted resentfully, himself. Still, he was nothing if not proud, and took comfort in knowing that when it came to fundamentals, he was still his superior by a significant margin.

But despite his sudden success, Ping remained humble, and openly encouraged other people to do better than him. Ping's positivity was infectious and allowed him to fight for what was important to him, which, he noticed more and more, tended to focus largely on his friends and family.

And that's included him, his brother-in-law... who perhaps, Ping had secretly admired.

As much as Shang dislike attention, he couldn't deny the flickers of adoration as the young soldier
watched him bare-chested, moving fluently with the staff in his hand. It was short-lived and instantly hidden behind a flustered cough, but Shang still caught it. But that wasn't why it was bizarre. Deep down, not only Shang allowed such innocent devotion, but he also welcomed this feeling and felt somewhat like a badass hero in front of his adoring fans.

And unlike with his other comrade, Shang didn't feel a threat of masculine rivalry with Ping. In fact, quite the opposite. He felt protective and possessive around him. Like when they were sparring this morning.

Unsurprisingly, Ping was on the ground within minutes of their spar, but that didn't deter the boy. Not only Ping was persistent, but he had a unique ability to perceive the weaknesses of his opponent.

Like the way Ping knew that he cared a great deal of him.

Finally, after tiring twenty minutes, Ping executed his calculative plan and incapacitated him, even managed to land a lethal punch on his nose!

And no, Ping really didn't hold back when he delivered that punch.

"You fought well, Ping. I like your approach. A warrior should never hesitate in battle. You can't outmatch my strength, but you outthink me." Shang supposed his eyes must have widened with curious awe as he rubbed a fresh bump on his face.

"Thank you, Captain," the boy replied a little sheepishly, perhaps still thinking manipulating enemy's weaknesses were considered an unhonorable victory.

"You should be proud," Shang told him. "You are improving leaps this week."

"These past weeks, Shao—...I mean, the Prince and I spent almost the entire night practising," Ping admitted.

"The entire night?" He surprised himself how he disliked the idea. Shao's bad habit in overwriting his authority certainly had created tension between them. But deep down, Shang knew what he had labelled as irritation and annoyance could be just a mere excuse of a feeling he himself tried to deny - blistering jealousy.

Was he lustful of Ping?

"Yes, but still not nearly as good as you," Ping said, breaking his pondering. "You literally incapacitate me within the first minute. I have never seen that technique!"

Shang tried not to get the boy's compliment getting to his head, but it was hard not to beam at his gushing praise. "I can teach you if you want."

"Really?" Ping's face lit up in excitement. "That would be great! Could it be… tonight? Maybe after dinner? Only if you are free of course."

Shang sighed. How could this naive young man become a weapon all at once? But at least, his heart was in the right place.

"Yes, of course."

After Ping retrieving his arrow from the mast, he had no more qualm of letting the boy joined the
war. Except for one nagging thought of Ling's revelation of Ping's medical situation.

"I see that your wounds heal nicely," announced the healer once he checked on Shang.

Dr. Di Tan was the appointed Imperial Army physician that had been contracted by Shao Wei to assess every recruit's physical condition before they're heading for the battlefront. And as a result of this exercise, Shang was able to address his concern about Ping's health discreetly.

"So everyone in this encampment has passed the test?"

"Yes, everyone. No health issues. Short term or long term," Di Tan clarified.

"No exception?"

The old man shook his head, smiling a little mysteriously. "Is there someone that concerns you?"

"No...oh, no," Shang was caught off guard. Although he had reason meticulously that sending Ping home was for the best, he felt oddly bereft at the idea of having the boy absent. So, when Di Tan was able to confirm—contrary to Ling's testimony—that Ping was actually in a good health, Shang was left feeling unwittingly relieved.

"However, you, Captain—You, on the other hand, I saw that your blood pressure is a little bit elevated. Are you experiencing great pressure lately? Or has something bothering your mind?"

*That's very perceptive of him*, Shang's thought. In fact, he'd been experiencing unexplained tension, insomnia, inability to focus and ..—

"Do you experience unexplained anxiety? Fatigue... or even... territorial feeling?"

"Me...?" Shang asked, intrigued.

"Yes, you know... like you perhaps became overly obsessive and protective of something...?" Di Tan elaborated. "Don't worry. This kind of anomaly is very common among men in this kind of setting because this artificial male-only environment tends to amplified our inclination to compete even more. You see, men are, by design, a territorial creature."

"Maybe?" he rasped, digesting the sobering thought. "Why?... Is that relevant?"

"Let me put it the other way. Is this thing that you are protective about... does this affect your mood and your ability to concentrate?"

"Ugh, yes." In fact, the feeling had rooted deep like an anvil chained to his leg that only came off when he was at the encampment and saw Ping, where he could quietly admire the tenacity and ferociousness that came out of his little form. Yet the enticement he felt followed by equal revulsion, all mixed together in a bag of energy-sapping emotion he had no idea what to do about.

"Did you try to address this?"

"I...—" Shang stuttered, finding no way to explain his absurd romantic fantasy. "I can't."

Di Tan blinked owlishly as though had troubled understanding. "You can't?"

When the healer wrung his hand and silently urging to elaborate, Shang finally capitulated. "He is my brother-in-law," he said with shame-tinged voice. "I don't know why... I became so..." he bit his lips, turning his face away. "Possessive around him," he admitted, finding himself losing all his usual controlled, performative composure under the doctor's scrutiny.
"Have you feel this way to anyone else before? You mentioned you have a wife, yes?" the healer asked understandingly. And for once, Shang was relieved there was no judgemental tone in his voice even after hearing the extent of his scandalous dalliances.

"Not, I haven't told her yet," Shang said, fermenting a massive headache every time he remembered about his rebellious wife and all of her possible reaction. "I haven't told anyone." Although he had a strong suspicion that his action spoke louder than words. He considered this fantastical dalliance slanderous, even to his own brand of gallantry, which was considered modern compared to his father's time.

"Do you love your wife?"

"I…" he blinked, finding himself overthrown twice. "I….I don't know."

"Okay. But given the circumstances she was in grim danger or serious threat, would you sacrifice yourself for her?"

"Without second thoughts," Shang said without hesitation.

"I see," the doctor said vaguely. Di Tan recognized the battle inside his patient's minds when he saw one. So he turned to his desk, appeared to busy himself with paperwork.

At first, Shang thought that he was a man who cared less about his family happiness and just played it out superficially for the public to see, but as the time went on, he realized he didn't like the sombre, heartbroken look in Mulan's eyes. He wished to make her happy.

"So… I guess, I do?" Shang managed to articulate after collecting his thoughts.

"Have you ever told her that?"

"No," Shang replied. "My relationship with her is…. complicated."

"You see," Di Tan said after a contemplative moment, analysing. "I don't think you truly desire your brother-in-law the way you think. His semblance to your wife had awakened a series of emotion that had been lurking underneath," he said, clearing his throat as he paused. "Although, it's not unheard of for a man to favour more than one spouses. It's perfectly possible to find emotional connections with another spouse in the absence of the other."

Shang just stared at him blankly. Didn't quite believe the result of his health assessment. "Are you saying, I am a polygamist?"

"That's not for me to decide. All I am saying is: Sometimes, when our affection isn't allowed to be expressed freely, they can twist and bend into things they are not," Di Tan said serenely.

"You desire to love and to be loved. But you are not allowing yourself, and this feeling began to fester and grow in a strange way it did not belong. Sometimes when we long for a certain person we couldn't have…. Or we thought we couldn't have, well… our emotions settled with what we think we may be able to get."

Shang took a long, deep breath, mind twisting and turning violently. "So… what should I do?"

"When you get home, you should tell her…. Or even better, show her. Don't delay," the old man advised. "Time is a fragile thing, Captain Li. Because today you may have something that you might lose tomorrow."
The next evening, Mulan was surrounded by her closest friends. Shao Wei had come to specially congratulate her in person, and not even Shang bothered to lecture him on the importance of his safety.

"Only one night," he promised. "And I'll return to Venerable Yen's place. You don't think Ms. Xin won't let me leave without saying a proper goodbye, right?"

Shang could only roll his eyes in response.

And as a homage to Mulan's unprecedented victory, Ling had decided to try his hand on the distant world of culinary art. Just say he was inspired to try something outside his comfort zone.

"So, how is it?" Ling squatted closer, clasping his hands expectantly as he served the dinner for everyone.

"It's uh..." Mulan began. "Different..." she said, gazing towards her friends around the table. Shao Wei on her left while Chien-Po and Yao right on the opposite side.

"Very different," Shao piped up. "It's a very interesting take on chow-mein," he said, scooping some up on his chopstick and letting it slip back to the bowl.

There was a strange shift in their friendship after the night Mulan retrieved Shang's arrow from the mast. Her victory didn't just inspire the whole encampment to train harder, but it had strengthened their friendship, anchoring them, unifying differences—even Ling who initially sceptical about Shao's true intention (among other negative adjectives he might feel for him)—had decided to give it a shot. (Mulan suspected it had something to with prospective brother-in-law syndrome).

"I told you I have never cooked before!" Ling aimed his aggressive chopstick at Shao. For a split second, Mulan thought about Ling's threatening line. This would be an auspicious night if she had to witness her friend emasculate a prince with nothing but chopsticks.

"Cooking rice may have been your limit," Shao said, unfazed. "...Or washing rice sounds more like it."

"Geez,... I am trying to do something special and this is the thanks I've got?" Ling replied, but his voice carried no malice.

Chien-Po gave a big, over the top, cloying. "Awww..." and the rest instantly joined in, making a comically huge fuss over sulking Ling.

"Stop... stoppp, I ugh...—can't breathe. Guys. GUYS. Staaaappphhhh!"

"Such a royal pain," Ling grumbled audibly. But Shao was busy regaling Chien-Po, his new benchmate which happened to be equally passionate about Tan Xiang wine.

"I've calculated exactly 104 ways to eliminate this dimwitted aristocrat, should I run them by you?" Yao whispered to Ling lowly. Their friendship had kindled during the night after Ling received the shocking revelation about Ting Ting's true identity. Although he didn't share it out loud, perhaps Yao had sensed the growing tension and dislike between him and the Prince.

"No thanks," Ling exasperated, observing the Prince who remained incognizance as he laughed and joked with Ping. He couldn't believe his bad luck, how could the universe let him love a woman with such narcissistic, annoying brother?
"Well, if you change your mind just asked," Yao said, smirking.

"Ok, so what's for dinner?" Mulan chimed in, her stomach grumbled.

"Sorry, my stomach didn't agree with this cooking," Shao Wei said again to no one in particular but Ling had a nagging feeling that was directed to him.

"I think we still have some left over stir fry cabbage from lunch," Chien-Po said. "But we still need to prepare the rice."

"I'll make the rice. I guess," Ling said, inspiring a chorus of fake pitiful "Awwww".

"Scrapes him off the ground?" Shao asked after Chien-Po animatedly narrated Mulan's unprecedented victory against their captain. "You must have really done a number on him," a hint of pride simmering in his eyes. "Captain Li was beaten by a pipsqueak? Now, that's news!"

"I take that as a compliment," Mulan replied wryly. "However I did a trick on him."

"Win is still a win! War is not a competition, you won't be disqualified for winning unfairly," he said. When sparring, Shao had taught her to give her all, even to the extent to use every single dirty trick on her feminine arsenal to gain the upper hand.

As everyone had witnessed, Shao Wei was an excellent trainer. He challenged her, but never belittled nor patronised on repeated occasions when she didn't come up to scratch. Shao was difficult to impress, but he gave credit when it was due, and advice when needed.

"I witness it myself," Chien-Po testified. "The regiment should throw you a parade."

Mulan shrugged, "Oh, you know me. A real ass kicking extraordinaire."

Chien-Po laughed. "Sure you are! However, you should avoid his nose next time. I heard it is his best feature."

Shao Wei silently marvelled as he watched the amusing comical interaction among friends. He had never seen anything quite like it in the court. He had learned long ago not to expect unconditional friendship from anyone. In the court, even some people who shared blood ties had their own goals to focus on.

Chien-Po and Ling, despite their individual quirkiness, seemed to be good men. In this environment, Mulan seemed to be comfortable on her own skin, unafraid to show her true personality, cracking jokes and laughing freely.

Fa Mulan was not at all what he expected. As a prince, having been raised by the perfectly coiffed environment, his default setting of women had always been beautiful and agreeable, who had no voice on their own. Meeting an opinionated, full of personality woman like Mulan was definitely a rare sight.

Fa Mulan was a woman with her own right. She cared little about fashion and loved doing maths and beating him in the game of chess. But mostly, he just liked seeing that look of pride on her face whenever she mastered something new.

He was glad her relationship with Shang seemed to have improved with time, but it was Ling who seemed to be the closest man to her heart, the friend she chose to harbour all her secret
with—which strangely irritated him.

He felt immediately guilty of his unjustifiable envy because he had no real claim to her.

Weren't they just friends...?

Shao figured that after all the time they had spent together they could be considered friends, which he was grateful for, but lately, it felt like there was something else…. simmering. Lingering looks and casual touches that lasted just a little too long. It was entirely plausible that he was imagining it, and there were so many logistical issues to them ever having anything between them.

"Your Highness…" A warm elderly voice halted his stupor.

"Oh, Dr. Di Tan Please come and sit with us," he invited.

The old man adjusted his spectacle, smiling and bowing politely. "Oh no, I am just about to return back to Chang'an. But I wish to speak to you in private."

Shao excused himself and went to the edge of clearing far from the danger of curious eavesdropper.

"This is about the woman soldier you told me earlier," Di Tan explained, eyes unwittingly gazing on Mulan's direction.

"I appreciate that you've been very cooperative and discreet about her," Shao told him.

Di Tan responded with a small smile. "Unfortunately, she wasn't as cooperative as me."

"Oh, I am sure." Shao could only imagine the girl's resistance during the health check fearing her identity left exposed to the world.

"But I'm managed to convince her somehow," Di Tan assured.

"I'm sorry if my request caused you some grief."

Di Tan smiled knowingly. "You are just being benevolent and wise as you usually are, my Prince. And I truly understand your concern, heading to war is a serious matter for everyman, let alone a woman."

Shao nodded at the old man's kind words. Di Tan was a handful man inside the court whom he trusted, for obvious reasons. As the only heir to the Wei's throne, there had been several attempts to poison him. Most were unsuccessful, but there had been a close call. And if it wasn't because of Di Tan's vast knowledge and experience, he would have lost his life long ago.

"So, is she in good health?"

"Indeed, my Prince."

Even in just a few short weeks, her body had started to transform. The softness was starting to disappear and in its place were muscles, just beginning to show their definition. Seemed like her months of physical conditioning began to bear its fruit.

"However, not only she is physically fit," Di Tan said, glancing over his shoulder.

"She's also pregnant."
Note: Sorry for the delay in publishing this chapter although it was ready about 3 weeks ago. Carrying on from the previous chapter, after deciding to send Ping home, Shang must have written to his father about taking the Fa's place. But since Ping had passed the training with flying colours, Shang had no excuse to allow him to join the war.

Shao Wei had become the first person to confirm Mulan's pregnancy. Knowing this, he might want to tell Captain Li not to send her to war - but that would be odd since he was the person who had stubbornly insisted otherwise, even to the extent of training her to pass the test. What do you think he might do?
oh, so sorry for such a long wait! Exams were undoubtedly my biggest enemy (second to procrastination). Anyway, without much ado, here it comes. Happy reading :) and let me know your thoughts, prediction and comments afterwards.

Shang opened his eyes to the distant sound of rushing footfalls outside his tent. Even from his deepest sleep, his soldier senses had been honed to detect the slightest movement and any form of danger. He looked through a small rip on the tent roof, watching the constellation twinkled in the night.

"Captain… captain!" panicked voice of Chi-Fu echoed as he barged before Shang had time to grant him access.

"Venerable Chi-Fu," Shang greeted. His spine straightened reflexively, and his voice automatically took the air of authority. "I want to emphasise that while you are here on my father's command, you still have to respect the boundary…..and my privacy."

The old man scoffed, "This is very important!"

"Well, it better be," he muttered.

"Someone stole the emperor seal from my tent!"

Shao twisted and turned on his large bed. Despite the ultra-smooth silk spread courtesy of Venerable Yen, a warm furnace to fight the cold wintry night and premium goose feather blanket, slumber was nowhere in sight. His thought drifted to Mulan every passing minute, about her possible fate and situation. What could be worse than a woman posing as a soldier when she was pregnant and alone?

It was unsettling.

*She has her husband,* offered a voice in his head. *And, ultimately, this whole charade is her choice. You've done all you can!*

*But you are her friend!* Chastised the other.

*For heaven sake, of all your problems... you decided to think about this one.*

*This is not your plan for her. Your plan was for her to kill the Khan. This is why you've trained her. Have you forgotten?*

He hadn't. But how could he?

*Ah! You liked her. Admit it. Of all beautiful virgins, you had fallen head over heels on a married woman? How pathetic. Imagine what your father will say if he heard a prince your calibre had reduced himself to assist a sloppy wannabe out of her own screw-ups. All in the name of lo...—*
No. No. He couldn't have been besotted by a married woman. All these random thoughts, concern, attention, kindness were just…guilt!

Yes, people said that generosity was a sign of guilt; perhaps this was true. But what had been genuine remorse had slowly morphed into sympathy, and sympathy bred into something else.

Shao sighed loudly, burying his face under his pillow and groaned, "Why should I care?!"

He wished he had a gut to walk straight to her and told her everything—of his scheme, his dilemma, her pregnancy…..his concern for her.

What would she say? How would she responded? He wondered.

Yes, Mulan was graced with sharp minds and keen intuition, but she was also unbelievably unpredictable and down-right stubborn (which he quietly admitted had given her more endearing value). Given a scenario of a new problem, only gods know a kind of crazy plan she might be brewing next. And then she would land in a deeper pit than she already was.

But even Shao knew his reasoning was only an excuse for concealing an ugly truth that was laid within: a cowardice part of him was afraid she might never forgive him for using her. Yes, he was a snake. A liar who dressed his conniving motive with seemingly noble deeds. He was a deceitful chauvinist pig who had betrayed her in one of the worst ways a man could treat a woman.

Okay, if telling her is not an option… or at least, not now. What about telling Shang?

Everyone knew that he, the Prince, had been so adamant to let Ping joining the army despite Shang's unfavourable response. He had 'employed' his power (or abuse would be a better word) to overturn the situation to his will. Now that the boy had passed the ultimate test, what kind of acceptable excuse Shang would accept in order to relinquish Ping from his post?

You are a good man, Shao Wei. And this is not a compliment. It's the truth.

A couple of weeks ago, subduing Shang to his authority would've been easier. But now, he won't risk their newly forged friendship. Shang might be a perfectionist and morbidly serious in a matter of soldering, but Shao had an honour of witnessing the more 'softer' part of the otherwise stoic captain. Behind his iron mask, Shang unexpectedly had been more accepting of others' flaw than he. Perhaps because he hadn't been born to privilege, into expecting all his whims and wants to be fulfilled.

Despite his screwed-up life (and argumentatively incriminating Shang of favouring Ping in a way that was inappropriate) Shang had come to respect him, siding him and trust him as a good friend would.

In Shao's own assessment, Shang might be a little too naive for putting blind faith in him. But Shang was always a simpler man than him and a better man at heart. It was Shang who had breathed a hope that he could be a good man. And even if he weren't a good man… not yet, Shao wanted Shang to believe that he was not a power-thirst ruler or hypocritical as other politicians. How would Shang respond if he knew he had been kept in the dark for months about Ping's secret identity? About his plan to hone her to kill the Khan? No doubt it would destroy his initial faith in him, but more importantly, what would he do to Ping? Would he… disown her? Divorce her? Or worse….punish her?

It was an impossible situation.

And telling Ling wasn't a good option either. Although the lanky soldier was undoubtedly Mulan's
closest friend, Ling was far too inquisitive and impetuous. There was no way he could ask Ling favour without expounding her secret in its depth and length. And then the man would have rattled a noisy concern if he discovered the truth of her conception. Chien-Po, on the other hand, had a more quiet and calm inclination.

"I will send an update to you every week, My Prince," Chien-Po had promised him, although curious bafflement clouded his eyes he asked no questions. He knew royal order was meant to be obeyed, not scrutinised.

"Thank you," Shao had said without elaborating further. He had done all he could, but he couldn't shake off the foreboding feeling that lingered on his head.

He feared something bad was about to happen.

Something really bad.

"So….Someone broke into your tent?"

"Well, what do you think?" Chi-Fu replied wryly. Both men stood by the threshold of Chi-Fu's tent inspecting the havoc whoever culprit had created while rummaging through the councillors belonging.

"And I just had my tent rebuilt and my new clothing purchased after the incident with that beloved apprentice of yours incinerated everything."

Shang chose to ignore Chi-Fu's sarcastic comment about Fa Ping's blunder in accidentally aimed the cannon at his tent. He should have counted himself lucky he wasn't baked alive. Right now, they had a bigger problem than a stray cannon.

"And you said nothing else was lost besides the Emperor's seal?" Shang inquired, trying to stay focused even though the desire to insult the councillor was growing by the minute.

"Correct," Chi-Fu confirmed. "That stupid bandit even dared to vandalise my belongings," he said, picking up one of his robes that sporting muddy footprints all over it. "You must round this man up, Captain Li. We can't have little thief running around the encampment, stealing random things from the soldiers when they are out in the field."

Whoever the rogue was, Shang knew he wasn't a bandit. Bandits stole finery and riches and so far, there was no such case. They've been out here for months and Chi-Fu was the first and only victim. Looking at the evidence laid before him, this 'thief' had ignored all of Chi-Fu's expensive belongings and went straight for the seal.

An object laid abandoned on the foot of Chi-Fu's bureau caught their eyes. Bright gold and red silk fabric.

"Isn't that…?"

"Prince Shao Wei's hair tie," Shang concluded, perusing the object in his hand. No one in the encampment had such a decorative, hand-woven silk ribbon that perhaps cost as much as a farmer's annual income.

Chi-Fu gasped. "Is that mean he is…?"

"No. I don't think Prince of Wei is the culprit. He has been absent this couple of days. He hasn't
"But he is the only one with motive! Have you not heard his difficult relationship with the
Emperor?" Chi-Fu insisted. "Having this seal will allow him legalising unlawful decree, passing
unfair law... and...and...—"

But if anyone knew Shao Wei, he wasn't a careless person who would leave a blatant trail like
muddy footprints and hair tie left astray in the crime scene. After all, he was the man who had
fooled his own family and the entire country over his sister's fake death.

"Someone must've framed him," Shang thought out-loud.

"Seriously? But, but....why?" Chi-Fu retorted back.

It was the same question Shang had asked himself. But, who knew? Shao admitted himself that he
was an easy man to hate. It was entirely possible someone may hold grudges against him without
him knowing. Shang recounted Shao's trolling mischief that had irked him on various occasions.
Not to mention he was insufferably arrogant. Even Shang, given the time and space, would be
framing a destructive vengeance over him. However, now understanding Shao's life tragedy had
left Shang felt unwittingly sympathetic towards the man, protective even—not that he would admit
that out loud.

"Why did you carry such a valuable item to this camp?" Shang cleverly steered away from
the question. "You should've known the risk," he said, putting his best condescending voice for better
effect.

"Huh? I thought…. I thought I may…—" Chi-Fu spluttered at the unexpectedly vindictive
statement.

"You may need it on the battlefield? I doubt it," Shang rebutted, staying polite but sharp.

"But...—"

Shang didn't interrupt the Emperor councillor again but gave a look that suggested he want silence
and Chi-Fu immediately clamped his mouth shut.

But that big-mouthed councillor was a hard man to please, this Shang knew. Although he might not
dare to report this incident back to Chang'an fearing his own ultimate dismissal, nothing could stop
the old man from spreading untrue gossip about the Prince roundabout the encampment, worse,
selling the rumour anonymously to the tabloid. Therefore, to solidify the Shao's innocence, Shang
had suggested searching his tent.

The tent was on the condition Shang had predicted. The air was musty and stagnant liked it hadn't
seen the light of days. The bed was damp and cold, even spiders and critters began to build their
empire among some of Shao's belongings. After rummaging for nearly an hour, the search came
into a negative conclusion just as Shang had predicted.

"So, what do you suggest, Captain?" Chi-Fu said, now sounding untypically desperate. Shang
could only imagine what kind of punishment awaited him if the Emperor learnt of his negligence.

"If this man is after the Emperor's seal, he may not be just an ordinary thief. He must be someone
with a political agenda. I believe you know that a group of guerilla is moving through the precinct,
right?" Shang said. "And I am sure you are fully aware of what kind of damage they can inflict," he
added when his previous statement didn't inflict the appropriate level of fear in Chi-Fu's face.
"But, Captain... there are a dozen men on patrol! If there is a Hun sneaking in, someone would've seen him!" Chi-Fu argued, which was right. After the lethal assassination attempt, they'd installed more armed soldiers patrolling the vicinity. And for extra protection, Shang had installed few extra recruits to guard Chi-Fu's and Shao's tents—an extra precaution if anyone managed to filter through their first defence. "Besides, the Huns won't be so thoughtless to attack us with the same method twice. Don't you think so, Captain?"

"Indeed," Shang replied, glancing through the gap in the drapes at the front of the tent. The entire encampment was still fast asleep. "The culprit must be one of our own."

A week ago a half battered man arrived in their encampment unholy hour in the morning.

"Is...is this Wuzong training camp?" he asked, before failing to stand.

They took the man to the infirmary, resuscitating him. Despite his half swollen face and blue reddish bruise on his left eye, Mulan immediately recognised the man. He was Chun Yi, her neighbour from back home.

"My son's village," he sputtered. "It's under attack. Please... please help."

Moments later, Shang assembled a small team carrying medication, food and water in the hope of finding some survivors. Mulan found herself trailing behind him into a dark, scattered forest that eventually led them to an uncharted village by the river outside Jinan.

It was clear that there was some kind of incursion hours ago in that place. The team trudged through the killing zone, smouldering remains of houses that had been wrapped in a thick blanket of ashes, the air was sour and eerie. Bodies of unarmed civilians, bathed in their own blood or charred with heat.

Mulan didn't know how Shang, or any soldier for that fact, had to stomach so much death without having any disturbing thoughts. What she saw today was clearly going to haunt her for a long time.

Suddenly a faint crying was heard.

The tightness in Mulan's chest lessened slightly at the sound. A least there was one survivor. Whether the cries were from physical pain or emotional trauma she wasn't sure, but either way, it was heartbreaking to listen to.

Shang stopped in the middle of the clearing, and headed to one of the houses, carefully opened the door that was barely hanging on its hinges. The living room was small, covered with cinders and seared furniture, the floor was scorched and covered with ashes. The turmoil of emotion began to take form inside him, something very different from his usual stoic and proud gentility until Mulan turned to call him.

"Captain?"

And the controlled composure fell back on his face. "Fetch the medic bag, we may have found a survivor."

When he lifted the charred table, Shang came face to face with a shaking three years old that looked too afraid to really move. Shadow of fear clouded his eyes, curling to the far end of the corner.

Wearing his softest voice and gentle smile, Shang tried to calm the frantic toddler to accept his
"It's alright, boy. We're gonna be okay."

The sound of a groan had him turning and facing the woman who had been trapped under the beam of the roof. The weight of the roof must have crushed her, and judging by the size of the pooling mass of blood, she didn't have much time left.

Out of instinct, Mulan reached her hand through the opening and grabbed the woman's hand that she probably didn't know was shaking. "Ma'am, just hang in there. We are getting help!"

A tug of hand was her answer. Her grip was surprisingly strong for a woman who nearly had given up her place in a mortal world.

"No," she said, still clutching Mulan's hand in hers. "Please, just... Just promise me... to take good care of him.....Will you?" she said between rasp, gripping her hand a little tighter. "He is all that I have."

"What's his name?" Mulan quoted absently, while her mind was struggling to escape from a fog of emotion and panic.

"Wentai. Chao Wentai."

"We will," Shang interjected, assuredly. "I promise I will give him a good home. You can rest now," he said despicably calm as he took the boy with him.

"Be brave, my son," the woman said as she laboured her last breath.

With a new wave of sobs, Wentai strained against Shang's powerful grip, thrashing violently like a wild animal, desperately stretching his little arms as far as they could go trying to reach his mother. "Mama! Mama!"

Mulan laid on his bed, unable to sleep. As soon as she tried to close her eyes, the image of hell and death dancing across her darkened vision. Wentai's pained cries filling her ears, and his pitiful wail resonated through the desolate ground as Shang extricated the unwilling toddler from his dead mother.

It was the most emotional goodbye she had never wished to witness.

What the Huns did to the defenceless Chinese civilians was brutal. But in war there was no right or wrong, there was no moral compass, and mercy was a symbol of weaknesses.

The Chinese soldiers weren't all that different. Shang had told the recruits time and time again, they would have to hunt their enemy down, they would have to kill, they would have to live knowing there was certain death intact to their name. There was no need of remorse, Captain Li cited—because whether they were the Huns or the Chinese, these warriors were nothing but tools moved by forces greater than they were. They were here to live as fighters and die as heroes.

But burning a building with a mother and little child in it? Mulan could've sobbed at the inhumanity of it.

Stop looking at the dead, see the living. Shang had told them on the way back from the ill-fated village. None of us can change the past, but we can do a lot for our future, for our freedom!

It turned up being ready for war was more than just passing the training. It was also a mental battle
to be able to endure whatever they would be forced to see or do, including interrogating, torturing, or even killing. War was the only occasion when murdering other beings didn't violate any rule in the book of moral code. And she didn't know whether she was ready for it.

Rushed footfalls and loud orders stalled her thoughts.

Shang appeared on the tent entrance, sweeping his authoritative gaze. "Wake up! Everyone strip off their clothes! Surrender your bag to be checked!"

The general murmur erupted among the sleepy recruits.

"It's the middle of the night, can't we…?"

"What's happened…?" Chien-Po asked between his yawn. "Is there anything wrong, Captain?"

"Recruits! You've heard your order. Tardiness will be punished accordingly!" Shang announced firmly. Next to him, Chi Fu flashed his sinister smile, baring his crooked, uneven teeth.

Hearing their Captain's command, the troop expeditiously stripped their clothes and surrender their possession, this time their eyes were downcast and differential. The mood in the tent became grim and dreary.

"What are you waiting for, Ping?" Chi-Fu shouted at her, shaking her out of her daze.

Mulan felt her courage wilted under the old man's grilling stare. "You heard what Captain Li said. What are you waiting for? Strip to your underwear! Or… you have something to hide?"

She suddenly felt sick.

Would this be her end?

There was orderly commotion outside the courtyard of the Forbidden Palace. The assemblage of young, fine men in armour, positioned themselves in perfect rows while other procuring food and ammunition supplies for the journey ahead.

"Are you sure we need this many people and ammunition to fetch Prince Shao Wei, Master Peng?" one of the men said, staring at colossal teams of war horse and ammunition.

"Honorable Feng, my experience as an intel told me that we have better prepared more than less. We don't know whether the Prince will show resistance or has any allies in the encampment. And even if Prince Shao Wei submitted peacefully to the invitation, it is still a potentially perilous journey to escort him back to Chang'an, we are moving very close to the border of the enemy territory."

"Master," Another man stepped forward, saluting him.

"Lieutenant Wong," he said, returning the gesture.

"We are ready to depart. I've asked a few soldiers to comb through the forest of Xingyang. I think we knew the suspected location of the safe-house. It shouldn't be difficult to take the Princess into our custody."

"Remember, we must capture her unscathed."

"Understood," The man saluted him again and nodded.
As soon as his subordinate left to their designated task, Peng raised his sword and exclaimed to the contingency with a voice of authority. "To Wuzong camp!"

Shang paced around the tent, eyes inspecting the recruits as they methodically undressed into their underwear.

"I steal it," admitted a voice.

Ping? Shang couldn't believe his ears. Of all the men, how could it be him?

"Most impressive," came Chi-Fu's satirical sneer. "This is a slanderous crime. Captain Li, I demanded him to be put to death," Chi-Fu said without giving a chance for Ping to defend himself.

"This is by no means a crime worthy of capital punishment," Shang immediately objected without much thinking.

"But you set the example and send a message to the entire regiment that you won't tolerate such crime!" Chi-Fu asserted with his familiar disdain.

"We don't need to waste a life just to send the right message!"

"I know you won't…," he said knowingly, as though wasn't surprised at Shang's point-blank refusal. "Now tell me. Is it because Ping is your brother-in-law you feel you have a right to show loyalty to Fa Zhou… or because of other reasons?"

Damn. He knew.

Shang felt oddly cornered by Chi-Fu's pointed question but found no right answer.

"Ah, I take it silence is a sign of affirmation," Chi-Fu sneered when Shang remained silent.

There was no denying of how he had favoured Ping recently, but Shang didn't want everyone in the encampment had an impression that his favouritism had him blinding to this fault. The old councillor was playing a game and trying discrediting his integrity in front of his regiment.

"There is no other reason. I am simply stating what deems reasonable," Shang said levelly although his heavy breathing might speak otherwise. Mastering his anger wasn't easy, but Shang determined not to please Chi-Fu by giving the Emperor's advisor what he wanted. He had reminded himself that a respectable, judicious leader would never let emotions clouded his judgement.

"According to the imperial decree, anyone who showed any treachery intention will be indiscriminately executed," Chi-Fu spelt out. "Except the man has a strong proof that he has been framed, to which we would take the matter to the High Court of Justice to be investigated, of course. But your brother-in-law admitted his crime out loud. There is no need for a trial."

Shang stared at the boy while his head running with hundreds of different thoughts. Was it really him? But why? And most importantly…. How could he, of any man, executing his own brother-in-law, the very person he was supposed to protect? His mind went blank.

Adjacent to Ping, Ling whispered to him pleadingly. "Ping, please…don't do this." Followed by Chien-Po's distressful sob. Both men seemed to be equally overthrown of Ping's revelation. Ping was famous for being unpredictable, but even Shang couldn't believe Ping was capable of this level of deceit.
Ping only responded with a weak, dispirited shake of his head. "It's for the best." And he stepped forward, readily surrendering himself to accept his fate.

"Good boy. You really know your place," Chi-Fu said with a voice that bearing nothing but sympathy. "Although you've burnt my tent before, rest assure this is nothing personal." Yeah, sure it was.

Shang opened his mouth. He was ready to antagonise the old councillor and rationalise Ping's innocence only to realise hundreds of timid yet curious gaze was trained on him.

He ran through his train of thoughts again, just to come into the same frustrating conclusion. There was no alibi. There was no proof. Ping was guilty until proven otherwise.

Fine. Shang let a long, heavy exhale. He would think about plan B later, but for now….

"Justice will be served. Ping shall be executed tomorrow morning."

She was moved into the empty tent next to the stables, away from the rest of the encampment. Her wrists were tied to the rafter with the rope that was hanging above her. She had been standing for hours and her legs were begging her for mercy.

Be thankful at least you are not hanging upside down. She recalled her father told her a story of a criminal who had been left in such a position in prison to inflict further suffering. Or laid on a bed of nails that slowly dig into your flesh...

Her pondering was interrupted when she heard heavy, padded footfalls. Then followed by a silhouette of a large, bulky figure.

"Chien-Po? What are you doing here? You… you are not supposed to be here," she said, fearing a similar kind of sanction fell on him.

"I don't care," he retorted, surprisingly curt. "Sorry," he squeaked when he noticed the surprised look on her face. "Bad mood," he said as an explanation.

Both of them fell silent as he removed the ropes from her wrist. She slumped to the ground expelling a sound of relief, her legs thanking him for the respite.

"Chien-Po…?"

No answer, but he didn't stop his ministration, preparing a bit of hay so she didn't have to sit on the cold, half-frozen ground.

"Here." He said placing a bowl of something and a cup of herbal tea without meeting her eyes. "Your lunch."

Usually, she would've teased Chien-Po that It was a little too generous to be called lunchtime since the sun already hovered above the horizon. But no, this was not the right time for cheerful banter.

She carefully opened the lid to reveal its content. The tantalizing smell of tofu dressed with honey and garlic sauce filled the room. As far as her last meal, this was probably the best she could hope for.

"Thank you," she said, smiling as she took a pair of chopsticks from his hand. Although she was desperately hungry, she restrained herself from inhaling the contents of the bowl in one go. This
was her last meal, after all. She had to relish every bite.

They sat in silence as he watched her chewing her food thoughtfully. By then he had the courage to lift up his face, catching her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mulan..."

She paused, chopsticks halfway between the bowl and her mouth. "Chien-Po, what are you talking about? This is not your fault."

"I know," he said, ungracefully wiping any semblance of tears with his sleeves. "But, still..." he let another undignified snort. "There is something you need to know."

And the next thing he told her was the least expected plot twist of all.

"So Yao did this? But...why?"

Chien-Po responded with an unfamiliar growling sound rumbled from his throat instead of from his belly. "He wanted to settle a score with the Prince and Captain Li."

Shang? Mulan raised her brow at that. Part of her was curious about which part of brutal training that's worth this kind of revenge. Not that it mattered now.

"Ling is giving Yao a piece of his mind as we speak," Chien-Po explained, "But he would see you first thing in the morning before sunup."

Mulan gave him a sombre smile. Ling was unbelievably sweet and loyal. Shao was right, she was very lucky. "He doesn't have to. I don't want anyone else gets into trouble for sneaking into seeing me."

"We'll see about that," he replied, producing a small ragged cloth from inside the depth of his pocket.

"Is this...?" she reluctantly unrolled the poorly folded fabric on the palm of her hand.

"For you," Chien-Po said tersely. It was a note from Yao expressing his apology. Whether he had done it under duress or sincere remorse would remain a mystery, but at least he had a good conscience to admit to his crime and ask for forgiveness.

"We have to report him," Chien-Po added, staring at the half-eaten food. Mulan couldn't help but noticed a frown of disdain on his face. It was very much unfitting to the gentle, lighthearted giant in many ways.

While this 'little prank' may have caused Shao temporary defamation or Shang a little argument with Chi Fu, it would cost her her life.

"No," she said, adamantly.

"What?"

"Chien-Po, he apologised!"

"But you'll be...—" he swallowed the word, unable to say it.

"If you do... Chi-Fu is going to execute us both!" she insisted. Of course, there would come a question of why she had falsely admitted to the crime she had never done.
"What is the use of that? Listen, China needs as many defenders as she can get. Don't add to this foolish death."

They traded a brief gaze. And Chien-Po sunk destitutely in his seat, finally accepting the fact that escape was way beyond their reach. Yes, this was unnerving.

"You know what, you can make a better soldier than me," he told her. "There is no way I can beat the Captain the way you do."

Mulan chuckled humorlessly at Chien-Po's attempted to lighten the mood.

"But you took the arrow from the mast," she reminded him. After her precocious method of employing the weight to her benefit in climbing the mast, others, Chien-Po included, had tried various unconventional method in taking down the arrow.

"I still can't believe Captain Li actually accepting the fact that I broke the mast instead of climbing it."

"Not many people can do that bare-handedly," she smiled at him. "You will make a fine soldier, Chien-Po," she reassured. "Not just because of your amazing strength, but more importantly because of this…" She took his large hand and placed it above his heart. "Su is lucky to have you."

"I suppose she is," Chien-Po replied with a hopeful smile. They sat in comfortable silence she drank the tea slowly. It was rather thoughtful of Chien-Po to make her favourite braised tofu as her last meal.

"But one thing I'm glad of," he said, breaking the silence. "You don't have to watch me… or any of us…. die on the battlefield. Because I am never good at goodbyes."

Mulan nodded, sitting closer to him, body pressing against his side for warmth. "Neither do I."

Then the reality struck Mulan like a thunderbolt, that she may never see her family again. Her grandmother and her brother, she hadn't even told them a proper goodbye.

And Shang? Would he mourn over her when he learned the unspoken truth of who Ping really was? Or would he be angry, feeling betrayed and insulted? Or he would be thankful to be extricated from this unwanted marriage to an unruly, disobedient wife. Perhaps he would find someone else far more compliant and dutiful than her. But what if he really cared for her more than bedroom companion or championed chef?

And her surviving father….would this means she destroyed his hope of witnessing her building a happy family?

Guilt and remorse assailed her, tugging her heartstring and shredded it to pieces. As disquieting and upsetting the thought was, she had to put on a brave face. There was no use to cry over rice that had turned to porridge.

"Chien-Po, could you…. do me a favour?" she asked, forcing a calm voice. He turned to her, brow furrowed as though he could sense what was coming.

"Please, don't tell my father that I never make it to the battlefield….."

"Mulan……," he pleaded, tears glazing his eyes.

"...And please buried me here, personally…. " Because she wouldn't like anyone else to know the
sad story of a girl who had failed to save her family's honour.

By then Chien-Po was sobbing.

"And please keep Ping's true identity a secret from the rest of my family. Can you promise me?"

"Mulan, I can't!" he choked. "Not like this! I can't let your name be lost in time, cursed as a nameless thief and forgotten by those who loved you!"

She stared at him, half disbelief and half angry at the fact he didn't understand the extent of the shame and humiliation she had brought to her family. But how could he? Chien-Po was a man, a man who had never had to conceal his identity in order to do what he thought was right.

She was about to expound a long lecture about her less than ideal life, about her husband and her in-law's expectation, and about what her parents' dream of honour when she finally became the wife she ought to be. But the broken look in his eyes made her swallowed back those words.

"Chien-Po," she said carefully because she knew this man cared deeply for his friends even beyond the grave. If anything, he just wanted something to remember her by, a commemoration of their short-lived friendship that hopefully would make this sobering pain of loss abated after her departure.

"I much rather die a nameless thief than a woman who had brought disgrace to her family..." she said resignedly.

Never in her nightmare she imagined the disappointment and shame if her father knew she died this way, being accused of embezzling the emperor's seal and executed for her fraudulent claim. This wasn't the ideal depiction of how to end her military career would be. This wasn't how she'd pictured her story ended. In her version, she would return home as a filial daughter and an esteemed soldier.

But it seemed that whether she was a woman or a man, she could never bring honour to them all.

Shang returned to his tent not knowing what to do. He threw himself on his bed, closing his eyes and breathing in deeply in order to calm his chaotic mind. But peace was nowhere to be found.

He marched outside, spent a while hitting the makeshift training post, redirecting energy and force he exerted, hoping for some of it to siphon his growing frustration—but mostly he felt hollow and numb.

If he had dismissed Ping two weeks ago this wouldn't have happened. If he disregarded Shao's order to give Ping a second chance things would've been different.

This may have sounded ridiculous coming out of him, but the event that had transpired today would be imprinted in his memory far deeper than any war he ever fought.

He landed one particular bone-shattering hit, and the fragment of the destroyed training post exploded in the air. "Ping, why does it have to be you?!"

The trees around him gave him no answer.

He paused and looked down to see red all over his training pants. His knuckles bled, but he felt nothing. He was still lost in thoughts, in what-ifs. Had he selfishly chosen his own career and reputation over Ping's life? Should he have swallowed his pride and directly breached Chi-Fu's
The image of the frightened Ping flashed across his mind, but more so, he looked… sad, like a man who had seen his beautiful home burnt up in flames. It was hardly a surprising reaction.

Despite his astronomical clumsiness and his legendary talent of starting a racket, the young soldier's mind was a lot more mature than his age. The boy had shown an admiring show of filial piety to face the war for the sake of his father and his respectable loyalty to die to protect the honour of his family—in which, after unbelievably crazy plot twist had come to a satisfying ending. Well, almost…

Then, why ruin it now? He didn't get it.

And why would Ping frame Shao Wei, a man who had graciously trained him? And if his ultimate goal was to hurt the Prince, why took the seal? There were myriad other more ingenious and less risky way to inflict suffering, pain or even death. And the two were close. Ping had every chance to cause the Prince bodily harm anonymously. To think it simply, a drop of arsenic would do the job and his crime would likely remain untraceable forever.

So what was happening today didn't add up. There must be an explanation for this!

*No, Ping can't be executed,* he decided. He won't do it—he couldn't.

He didn't care if Chi-Fu or the entire regiment would consider his dalliances to be the most shameful scandal in the millennia. He was so ready to take the blame. Because guilty or not, if Ping died, he wouldn't be able to live with that.

Altan had never thought she wished to see Shan-Yu, her husband to be, that morning. He was normally could be easily found inside the training yurt, eating with the other warriors or tending the warhorses, outside in the clearing.

But that morning, he was nowhere to be found, and so was Khurdan, his horse and Anchin, his trustworthy eagle. She knew he wasn't hunting because half of the Huns warriors were also absent from their usual spot.

*Where could he be?*

Seeing him wasn't particularly a cherished thought, but at least Altan had her peace when she knew he wasn't out there invading cities or burning some villages down.

"They departed early in the morning," Asanthi told her, speaking about her husband's absence.

"Did he tell you where he went?" she asked, unconsciously holding her breath.

Asanthi shook her head. "He went before sunup," she said, stirring the pot of broth over the fire.

"…. And he took his sword with him."

"Fa Ping?"

*Ling?* Mulan thought, rubbing her eyes oddly with her bound hands. Unbelievingly, she had fallen asleep into a deep sleep on the hay Chien-Po had piled earlier. Exhaustion compounded with a belly full of braised tofu definitely had an uninhibited sedating effect.
"You are awake," the figure said, moving closer. With a startled gasp, Mulan sat upright, eyes blinking rapidly as she soaked the incoming silhouette in disbelief. It wasn't Ling.

"Cap... captain Li?"

Shang stood a few paces in front of her. In his hand were a sack and blanket.

"I figured you must be cold."

Truthfully, Mulan predicted that Shang was going to try to find Ping, after all, Ping was his soldier, and a good leader would care about his people. But she didn't expect Shang to be kind, in fact, she was expecting his angry reproach for bringing shame to his regiment.

"Thank... thank you," she croaked, not knowing what else to say.

He deposited himself next to her, watching her as she twitched uncomfortably.

"I know you didn't do this, Fa Ping." His voice was gentle, very unlike his usual imperious, dictatorial tone he used earlier that day. "Will you tell me what happened?" His eyes begged for response.

*Oh no, not this conversation,* her heart pounded sensing the direction where the talk was heading. She had hoped Shang behave like his usual stoic self. She wished he would be furious. Those would have been easier to deal with than *this.*

"What do you mean, Captain?" She dared herself to look at him, praying to god that she won't lose any composure or inexplicably blurt out any confession.

Shang shifted his gaze to his own clasped hand before turning back on her, this time with a more commanding tone. "Ping, can you tell me why you *lied?*"
Chapter Notes

Just realised I forgot to press, "publish" and this chapter had been sitting on my doc manager for a week. Thank you for those who had reviewed and asked about my well being. I'm fine, however, due to tight, pressing schedule I was only able to write a little bit at a time. I'm still in a lookout for a native speaker to beta my chapter, but I'm aware even if I can find anyone it would potentially make the chapter to take longer to publish. Anyway, thank you for everyone's review, follow, kudos and faves... They made my day!!!

"I…” she breathed.

Mulan considered the prospect. Was she ready for Shang to know the truth? Would he have no qualms about executing her if he knew who she was? No doubt Shang would be furious, that was expected, but even with his wrath, Shang wouldn't be able to kill her.

But what was the option? His option. Perhaps he would send her to prison and divorced her. Her secret would be out there, and she would have to live knowing how she had deceived her husband, dishonoured her family, and shattering their dreams apart. No, she couldn't possibly live like that. Death was a sweet escape.

"If you can tell me, I may be able to help you," he encouraged. But his words of assurance hardly stirred her grieving soul. She wasn't afraid of dying. She was terrified to cause unnecessary torment for people that cared for her—the shame, the humiliation…. the dishonor….

"Now, tell me, why did you lie?" he said again.

"I will tell you why, but you have to promise me," she said tactfully. "After I told you my secret, you must execute me. Right here, right now."

She could tell Shang was trying to maintain his usual collected composure, but the sudden hitch in his breathing had given away a clue. "Ping! You know that I…—"

"I'm not saying another word until you promised!" she stated persistently. "Now. Promise me."

He balled his fist and made an aggravated sound, but there was no anger in his eyes, only frustration and… sadness.

"Look…” he said resignedly. "I just don't want to see you die this way."

What she had suspected would lead into an intense interrogation only ended in a conclusive sigh. "And your father…”

"Please don't tell him," she interjected, holding him firm with her eyes. "It will destroy him."

"Yes, about that," Shang drew his breath slowly, "I traded my place with him. I will represent the Fa family…. I... I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier."
And before she had a chance to process that, Shang continued. "Here, for the journey," he handed hardtack he had packed earlier. "It should be enough for a few days journey. Your horse is outside, waiting. Don't come back."

She blinked in disbelief. Had he… set her free? On the cost of what? His reputation?… his military career and maybe… his future?

All of her "why" was unspoken but Shang seemed to read it all.

"Look. I've failed you and your sister once," he explained. "And I….—I can't….I can't myself fail again." Even if it would cost him the world.

She felt like he had just disembowelled her with the world's most beautiful sword. Her composure collapsed and the memories from months back flooded her mind. She used to bitterly resented him—an emotionally crippled man who was unable to grasp the abstract concept of emotion and empathy. She thought he didn't care about her family and her. But now, every day, she discovered a new revelation that Shang wasn't merely cold and unfeeling man she thought he was. Underneath that steely fortitude and authoritarian expression, he was capable of benevolence and compassion. Shang was a man with kindness, integrity and principle, and she should be proud to call him her husband.

"Here, you drink this. It'll help you to calm down." Mulan felt Shang sympathetic hand on her shoulder and over her a small canteen from inside the tack. Subsequently, she realised she was drowned in choking sobs.

"It not supposed to turn out like this, not one bit! She scolded herself. A soldier should never cry!

She just shook her head in despair, hiding her countenance fearing he may recognise the woman that she was.

Eventually, she restored her breathing and wiped her face ungracefully with her sleeve. "No Captain, I can't," she pushed back the tack into his hands with the remnant of her resolve. Why did she have to witness Shang's soft side right now, on the climactic end of her life? Now was the wrong time and place to fall in love.

He stepped back. "You are as stubborn as your sister," he said, giving her an unimpressed look. "You won't tell me why you lied….and you won't leave. What do you want exactly?" It must have been very confusing for him since he didn't see the full picture.

"Captain..." she braved himself, knowing that she may never have a chance again because she won't let him do this. She couldn't let him sacrifice everything for her, even when it meant she would have to die a scheming scoundrel. But loud rattle of the door beat her to it.

"Ping!!...Ping!" With that, the door swung open, revealing a heaving man like he'd run a race of his life.

Shang gasped, eyes wide. "Shao...Shao Wei?"

"Did I… interrupt something?" Shao stared at Shang, whose expression growing from startled to disbelief.

Mulan was still trapped in her own shock and not quite believe what had happened.

"I did… did I?" Shao chuckled. Admittedly this lunatic prince couldn't make 'intervening with your
Captain's business' thing a new habit.

Shang made a sound of exasperation. "Your Majesty, with all due respect, how many times should I tell you, you shouldn't be here. It is not sa...—"

"I can't let you execute Ping, can I?" Shao defended, only to notice Khan's curious head peeking from the ventilation hole and a sack full of supplies in Shang's arm. Shang didn't say anything, but his condescending stare did.

"Oh!" Shao flustered, realising his false accusation. "I thought... I mean, Chien-Po never said..."

"I shall handle it from here," Shang said in a commanding tone. "You have to return to Venerable Yen's place. Now."

"Ah ok, sure. Good...good plan, Captain," he said, glancing towards her direction before whirling on his heels. "I'll...ah. I will take my leave." It's odd to watch Shao Wei exiting and obeying Shang without further argument. Usually, these two territorial creatures would choke each other's throats every time they discussed anything.

Shang's attention returned to her as he picked the tack. But she stayed firm on her resolve.

"I'm not leaving." That stopped Shao on his track.

"You what?" Both men chorused.

"I can't go," she told them. "I won't go."

"You mean you rather...die?" Shao, the verbose one between the two said.

"I mean...—"

"This is insane," he cut her, laughing sarcastically. "You are unbelievable. You know that?" he jerked his head towards Shang, signalling him to give her the pack. "No. Shang is right. You must go."

"I can't let Captain Li takes the blame," she stated firmly.

"Ping..." Shang was about to voice his argument, but Shao beat him to it.

"Can't you stop being so stubborn? Can't you see? We are just trying to help you!"

"NO!" she snarled back, holding her staunch posture firmly. "I don't want your help! Not from any of you!"

"LISTEN!" Shao barked at her assertion while trying his best not to accidentally articulate the real reason.

Next to him Shang made a fist with his hands, opened and closed them the way he did when he was trying to hold control of his mounting frustration.

"SILENCE, you two!" Shang cut them off.

"NO!" she raged. Why did they behave as if this realm were regulated strictly by powerful men? "Can't you STOP commanding me telling me what to do?!"

Shao bristled. Her steadfastness could be endearing and annoying in equal measure. He made a
march towards Shang, who was still gaping after experiencing Ping's rare outburst. Without a word, Shao yanked the bag out of his hand and stalked towards her with a universal gesture of superiority. "If your prince told you to go, then you go!" He was forcing the bag into her grip, so hard that she nearly stumbled backwards.

"Hey!" Shang was ready to jump to intervene. But Mulan raised her hand to halt him.

"You think you can boss me around because you are a prince!" she snapped back, casting the bag at his feet with gusto. "Well, let me tell you My Lord Highness, this is not a hostage situation. Why should I listen to you?"

Shao's eyes flew open wide. Anger radiated from them. "Because if you don't, I will tell him...everything," he hissed, pointing his finger towards Shang who was now looked completely lost.

"I..." that rendered her speechless. Her blood ran cold. Her fear crystallised. She forgot he was holding her card — all of them. The room fell silent.

Shao exhaled slowly, allowing his energy to retreat. "Look," he said with seriousness and despondency she had never seen of him. "You have to go," he repeated, voice no longer escalating. "Don't... don't make me do this. Please. I beg you." Because he didn't enjoy blackmailing her.

Torrents of objections flew on the tip of her tongue, but Shao was one of those who knew her secret. He knew everything... and perhaps more. He understood her situation, her troubles. Was there something he knew that she wasn't that caused him to be so insistent?

Mulan swallowed hard, trying to hold her own feeling of violation. She didn't say anything, but her melancholic gaze towards Shang gave away her unspoken thoughts.

Shao seemed to have caught the battle in her heart, picked up the bag from his feet and handed to her, gently this time. "I will make sure Captain Li isn't in trouble," he whispered in a low voice to make sure Shang couldn't hear him. "I promise."

Suddenly, the sound of a massive explosion interrupted their exchange. Shout and panic footsteps followed. Shang was the first to run to the door. He briefly assessed the situation before announcing. "We must go. The encampment is under attack!"

Another explosion rattled the ground, followed by a loud 'crack sound'. She heard Shang's shout and Shao's desperate call. She looked up, but it was too late because everything went black.

Mulan walked through the moon gate and into the garden, gazing over the nearby river and rolling hills which she had become familiar with every day of her life.

"Home sweet home," she whispered to herself.

Since she became a part of Li's household, her life had never been straightforward. Despite the regimented routine and numerous domestic tutorial, she had failed to follow even the simplest, most basic instruction.

Mulan let out a deep breath. Despite her mother-in-law's stern guidance, Mulan found unquestionable submission was impossible. It was no wonder Li Yue told her mother that she had a daughter with an attitude problem.

Mulan looked up to the old plum tree in the centre of the garden. Its skeletal limbs waved gently in
the wind. That tree had watched her grow up, watching her crawled around eating dirt and bugs, witnessing her first step, her first day at school, her graduation... and then her first day as someone's wife. Since she was small, Mulan knew she was different. But it was her first time in a long time she wondered who she was.

She knew her fate had dictated her to be a wife, a doting daughter who brought honour to her family. But after a few weeks married to Shang, she wasn't sure she could accept that destiny anymore.

"It seems like this place is the spot for lost soul lately," proclaimed a raspy, unrefined voice.

Mulan jumped. Her grandmother stood by the entrance of the moon gate, holding a dimmed golden lantern. Despite the lack of speed and plethora of years, the old woman had never failed to surprise.

"Perhaps not lost, but...searching," she added, guiding herself to a space under the shadow of the plum tree. "What trouble in your heart, my dear?"

Mulan sat next to her. "I...nothing much Grandma. I am just..." Her sight fell on the little altar with her late mother's photograph perched on it. A fresh stick on incensed, perhaps her father's, was there. It's been a long, hard week.

"I miss her too," her grandma said. "We all do. It's only been a couple of days. We're all still grieving."

Suddenly the thought of losing her father dawned upon her. No, she couldn't let him go to war, to his death. But if Shang weren't going to help her, she had to handle this herself.

"I want to stay here for a while," she unwittingly blurted out.

"You are not returning to the Li?" Her Grandma said disbelievingly. "Are you sure your husband would allow that?"

Mulan shrugged uncaringly.

"Oh. I see..." Grandma Fa nodded sagely. "Let me guess. You're having a problem with him."

She was caught off-guard with her grandma's candidness. "No. No... I am... I just want to take care of you, Father and Ping." Which she realised was a lame excuse. Everyone knew Grandma Fa's age was just a number. She was an abled woman, just like any other in her twenties would. Even with the departure of her mother, all the housework was still meticulously attended. Mulan must thank her for inheriting that perpetual vigour and agility.

"Between you and me, I don't think the kitchen stand any chance of not getting burnt," the old woman chuckled. "Now tell me this marital problem of yours, heh?"

Mulan usually jested and broke satirical joke with her Grandma to get her point across, but in the dawn of her mother's passing, the context seemed a little too inappropriate for that. "We are just... just incompatible. We are like water and oil. Impossible to agree on anything," she shared, deflating in her seat.

"You think we made the mistake of picking Shang for you?" Grandma Fa met her eyes with a hint of smile.

Mulan was surprised at her grandma's point-blank forthrightness but trying her best to look
unaffected. "I would never question yours and Baba's choosing."

"Of course…Of course, you wouldn't," she said, turning her face to the distant hills. Then she glanced at her from the side of her eyes. "Not on the surface of course."

Mulan didn't know how to reply to that, but she couldn't deny it.

"For someone with a vibrant personality and inner life, you are too concerned about what can only be seen on the outside," her grandma said. "But if you be patient and look deeper, with your heart...you might see something different."

"Are you saying to follow my heart and simply... forget about pleasing everyone?" Mulan said, half disbelief with what her grandmother was suggesting. "But how am I supposed to be bringing honour to our family? To Baba? To our family? Isn't that my duty?"

"Ah," the old woman smiled knowingly. "You fear of disappointing your father."

Mulan exhaled. "Perhaps becoming a wife is not my path...."

"Mulan..." Her grandmother took her by the hand, her eyes searching. "You are our greatest honor....whether or not you see yourself as a wife... a daughter... or as anyone worthy of it. And your ability to love far outweigh any image of failure you carry in your mind. But you doubt that..."

Mulan said nothing but her knotted brows did.

Her grandma responded with a soft chuckle, releasing her hand. "Since when you become this serious?"

Maybe Shang's broodiness was contagious, who knew.

"Look at this," Grandma said, picking up a plum from the tree and bit into its flesh to reveal a dark stone inside. "The plum is soft, easily bruised. But you may see that underneath, it is as strong as you are. It just needs something.... Someone to bring it out."

Impossible! Shang could never be that person, she thought. His refusal to take her father's place jumped to the forefront in her mind; how much he had reduced her. Was that who she was now? A woman who could only beg for her husband's mercy?

She cut her eyes to the side, feeling the slice of disappointment sting through her heart. "I don't need him, Grandma. I don't. I am not weak." She could not prevent her voice to climb with her emotional riot.

"Mulan," said her grandmother's patient voice. "Relying on your husband doesn't make you weak, my dear."

"But..." The story was already on the tip of her tongue, but she remembered her father had explicitly told her to keep the news about the conscription to herself in fear of driving the poor old woman to her early grave.

She bit her lips, swallowing the conflicting words and buried them far beneath. "It certainly will be easier if Shang weren't born with temper," she decided to say.

Instead of returning her somberness with further sobriety, the old woman laughed. "You think your father isn't born with one? You should see what he did to a man who tried to flirt with your mother."
Mulan blinked. "He... What did he do?"

Her grandma’s eyes twinkled. A mischievous smile brightened her ageing face. "You will have to ask him. It isn't my story to tell."

"Ugh," Mulan pouted, extracting another raspy cackle from the old woman.

"Mulan, my dear," her grandma said, running her fingers through Mulan’s raven hair. "Do not resent anger. If a good man has anger; it just means he seeks justice in the world," she paused like she was collecting her memory. "You will understand this someday if you allow yourself to see the quality behind his temper."

Mulan was certain, for once, her grandmother was wrong. But she wasn't going to antagonised her grandmother who was in the middle of parting her wisdom, that would be a blatant disrespect.

"How do you know that Shang is a man with good qualities?"

Grandma Fa faked a surprised gasp. "Isn’t that obvious?" she said, standing up and rolled her sleeves and do an imitation of a man showcasing his muscles.

"No. I mean the quality that isn't obvious when he is shirtless," Mulan protested, and her grandmother laughed.

"Dear... dear, I'm sorry. I'm just messing with you," she said, letting her chuckle abate. "The honest answer to your question is: No. I don't."

"You don't?"

"No. But..." and she plopped herself back to her seat. "I've heard what kind of hard-working young man he is. I've witnessed the level of self-discipline and maturity that he had demonstrated. And I've heard of his valiant deeds to the country. Of course, we don't know what he will be like as a husband, but we hope his favourable character extends to his home. Your home."

It was only had been four weeks since they exchanged their vows, but the crack in their relationship was already showing. "Too bad that I'm not a domestic goddess like Mama... who could change..."

"Mulan." Her grandmother frail grasp halted her. "You are a good daughter..." she said, staring right to her eyes. "And someday, you'll make a good wife. A great woman. Perhaps even better than your mother or I. But I'm not the one you have to convince of that."

"You sound so... so sure about this," Mulan said, not knowing how to respond. What if she only disappointed her beloved grandmother even further?

"We all have important roles to play and places to fill in this life," Grandma Fa said, looking pensively towards the sky. "And we don't always know why the universe placed us where we are. It took me months and years to understand mine. To comprehend my experiences, good or bad, as I journeyed through life, preparing me for a greater purpose."

Mulan wasn't entirely sure she would be as patient and accepting to that kind of fate, but she stayed reverently quiet.

"And someday, you might find that you must be there to help Shang. You must be there to save him, just as he will save you."
"Grandma…—"

"Ping! Piiiiing!"

Something cold and wet brought her from the realm of unconsciousness. "Sober up!" said the voice.

She blinked and rubbed her eyes. A familiar face made it into view. "Wu? W-what, what happened?"

"The Huns are attacking us," he said, looking at their surroundings. The tent where she was detained earlier had collapsed to the ground. Something sharp seemed had snapped the ropes that were holding the structure. Thankfully, whatever had fallen had not crushed her in the process.

"Something must have hit your head," Wu said, accessing a bump on her forehead with his hand. Thankfully none of the supporting beams was anything heavy.

In the proximity, she saw his comrades had one part of his shoulder cop missing in replacement of gashing laceration.

"You are injured," Mulan pointed out, looking at the red, angry wound.

"Nah… it's just a bit of a burn. I'll be fine. Fire arrow could be a little nasty thing," he said. "Good thing it didn't land on those things," he glanced towards the cart that was laden with boxes of firecrackers from the celebration when General Li visited them. "It's way too early for celebration," he added dryly. "Anyway, you must go."

Her mind quickly caught up with the train of events. "Where is…?"

"Captain Li is taking the Prince somewhere safe," and subsequently her hearing registered the distant background sound of yelling, clashing metal interfered by sporadic explosions. Shang must have told Wu to look for her.

"Ping!" Wu tapped her cheek roughly. "Focus!" he gestured to the tree where she could see Khan struggle on his rein that was tied on the tree.

"The gods must be on your side today. Try to stay alive," he said, rummaging through the debris to extract the bag that Shang had packed earlier. "I figured you might need these to defend yourselves," and he threw a sword. "Captain Li said this is a spare one for you."

The sword was old. There were a few marks, and dents but otherwise it was absolutely arresting in details and craftsmanship. The scabbard was etched with leaf pattern and on the hilt engraved a faded singular character, "Honor". Perhaps it was Shang's first sword or a family heirloom; she didn't know. But the gesture of giving Ping his family treasure was more than enough to provide additional sentimental value.

"Now get out of here before the Huns flattened this place to the ground," Wu said again, preparing to leave.

"But I….— Wait!" She managed to grab his arm.

"Go now!" he said, shaking off her grip with forced defiance.

"Wait….Where are you going?" she protested.
Wu didn't answer that instead unsheathing his sword. His expression turned hard as he observed the blade in his hand. "Head to the south exit and through the river. It's the safest way out."

"No, let me…"

"Go and don't come back," he told her without meeting her eyes, not wanting her to detect that fleeting moment of despair.

And Mulan was left alone, wondering why she felt at odds with herself.

Mulan found herself standing there, stunned. Wu was right; the gods and the spirit of her ancestor had given her another chance to see the light of day. But how could she run away while her comrades were, literally, marching to their death?

She was entirely sure the Huns was here for the life of the Prince. After all, they'd attempted that once. She looked around and listened. Sound of metal sang in the air and cacophony of battle cry radiated from all sort of direction. Where should she begin to look? Nonetheless, she did the one thing her intuition told her to do.

The frigid winter air outside began to bite into her skin under her only training robes. Thankfully, without much effort, she managed to scavenge a pair of furry cape, boots and matching hat out of one of the Hun's fallen soldiers.

She took Khan and headed towards the now abandoned stable. She thanked the ancestor when she found Qing, Shang's stallion, still there, albeit in a distressed state. She calmed the beast, rubbed his mane comfortingly and gave him some water before imploringly whispered to him. "Get us to Shang. He needs us," she patted the beast. She hoped Qing's animal instinct would prevail on her human shortcomings.

Scenting the air, the steed led them to the site of the source of the commotion.

"Wait here," she told both beasts, leaving them loosely tied to a tree behind a nearby bush. She crawled forward to observe the extensive clearing in front of her closer.

She squinted, trying to decipher the shapes among the cloud of dust. The Huns were fighting furiously, swinging their weapon with all the ire their fist could dish out. From the outset, she could see the depleting number of the Chinese army. It was only a matter of time that they would meet their end.

And there she saw it, the Prince of Wei was right in the thick of it. Next to him, Shang defended him valiantly, holding their ground and acting as a human shield. Mulan saw blood running through Shang's sleeve, but Shang didn't care one bit. He stayed focus to the task at hand, like a shepherd warding over his prized flocks from the hungry predator.

Something inside her was burning like an ember. Suddenly her Grandma's words about finding her purpose came vividly on her. She wasn't here to save her own life…..or her family honour. She was here to defend her country! For the people she loved!

And the fact that the Huns had just sliced Shang's arm on the side just made it personal.

She grabbed her blade (Well, Shang's blade...It did have a nice ring to it). Her brain's cooking a plan.

It would be foolish to come out there alone and hoping single-handedly slain a multitude of armed,
well-trained Huns warrior. She needed a better plan.

Suddenly she remembered…..

The firework cart.

Shang genuinely thought this would be his last fight. Not that he minded. He had always envisioned dying in battle-field with the last remnant of his comrades.

A sudden rapid explosion was heading towards his direction, followed by random colourful blasts.

From the thickest of the smoke, a pixie statured Hun warrior riding on a black horse… followed by a white steed. They were charging towards his direction zealously.

Shang grabbed his sword tighter, readying for whatever demise ahead. But as the silhouette approached closer, he recognised the warrior. He was no Huns.

It was Ping!

Mulan watched as the cart behind her sending series of loud sound and smoke. The startled Huns horses jumped in surprise and threw most of their riders on the ground. There was a brief moment of panic as numerous beast became uncontrollable and ran towards direction against their owner's command.

Her plan had worked.

In retrospect, Mulan considered with a little dismay as she revisited the situation, the Chinese army perhaps would still perish. But even when the plan didn't incapacitate the Huns, it would hopefully give Shang and Shao Wei enough time to slip off the sight of distracted Huns, so she thought.

But the Huns was determined they won't let their target slip through their fingers and a few had mounted back on their horses.

She urged Khan to catch up. One of the Huns leapt from his horse, trying to dodge her off Khan, but her horse turned away right on time, causing him to fall and trampled on the ground.

From a distance, she saw the unmistakable silhouette of two men riding a stallion. Dozens of Huns with their revived beast were already flocking behind him, aiming their weapon.

No. She wouldn't let that happened.

She took an arrow and began firing towards the Huns who were still in hot pursuit, unwilling to let go of their target. Two men fell, but the rest seemed to disregard her presence and remained focused on the task at hand.

Then, she spotted one that barked order towards others.

Shan-Yu.

With his fur-covered armour, he looked like a monster came out from fabled legend told by her grandma.

With one calculative move, Mulan released her arrow, hitting straight on the thigh of Shan-Yu's horse. The beast fell with a tragic cry, but what important was his passenger could no longer catch-
up with Shang and Shao Wei.

But her joy on her little victory was very much short-lived. One of the Huns with spiralling snake
tattoos on his torso halted his beast and offered it to Shan-Yu. He looked familiar, she thought, but
with overly amped brain capacity, she couldn't remember where she had seen him.

As she ran past, the man stared at her for a second before a look of recognition fell on his face. He
gesticulated furiously towards her, screaming towards the crowd of Huns on the chase. "Attila!"

The man with the beckoned name gave no rebuttal but immediately detoured his horse and head
towards her instead, eyes full of killing intent. Mulan automatically steered Khan away from him.

Seeing his new target fled, Attila reached into his pocket for stones and catapulted them towards
Khan's face. The startled beast futilely tried to avoid the incoming projectile and threw his master
in the process. She landed face first. Her mouth tasted the dust.

"I never thought you are the feisty one in your group," Attila jeered, dismounting from his horse,
levelling the fight.

He could've landed a lethal assault while she was recovering from the fall, but the young warrior
had chosen to honourably waited until his opponent was entirely ready for the duel.

"I take that as a compliment."

Standing up to accept the challenge, Mulan drew her sidearm, brandishing Shang's blade.

This was it, the moment of truth.

Attila jumped forward and attacked her first with his spear. She sidestepped and trying to match his
attack by swinging her sword only to miss him completely. He grinned when she tried to thrust the
sword again at him. He deflected it with ease, even managed to disarm her when he swept his
weapon with one powerful stroke. Mulan fell on impact, her sword flung in the opposite direction.
It was then she realised that the blade in her hand was far too heavy for her to meet her optimum
speed.

"Ah, empty-handed now," he sneered, watching a moment of alarm flashed in her eyes. "I'll end
this quick, I promise."

"I want to see you try," she hissed, remembering the desolate village and the orphaned child the
Huns had plundered.

He leapt towards her, aiming his maniacal weapon straight for her neck. She shrieked but managed
to roll away last second, fumbling backwards in panic as he repetitively leapt at her, trying to slit
her throat.

With each miss Attila was growing impatient, hastening his speed and ferocity as he tried to catch
the moment when his opponent's guard would drop.

As Attila thrust his spear forward, Mulan stepped behind him and through a small, brief opening
managed to kick the spear out of his grip. They were both weaponless. Now the situation was even,
or…. nearly.

Screeching fury at the unexpected defeat, Attila spun in place so he was back in the close quarters
with her. She tried to escape, running towards the river bank where a few large old wooden boats
were left harboured there. They exchanged a few close hand-to-hand combats until he successfully
landed a punch on her right chest, his eyes grew wide knowing what he had touched underneath.

"You are a woman!" he seethed.

Mulan unwittingly screeched on the insolent touch. She smacked his hands with equal force, and something around his wrist accidentally snapped on her fingers. One of the charms engraved with Chinese characters rolled on the ground.

"Can't be worse than you—a Chinese man in disguise," she replied, clutching her bosom and recovering from the humiliating encounter.

"I'm a genuine Huns, their warrior's blood is running through my veins," he announced, clearly wasn't concerned about his indecent act.

Mulan shook her head, fascinated with the level of delusion. "Warrior doesn't kill…"

"You think your Chinese compatriots are far more honourable than us? If I didn't kill you I bet they will," he cut her off, throwing a few shurikens from his pockets towards her. She only just managed to block them when she picked up a plank of wood to shield herself. Her distraction gave Attila enough time to run forwards, snatching a stray, old knife that must have belonged to the fisherman of the now-abandoned boats.

He pointed the knife at her, causing her to take a few steps back. "You are quite stubborn for a woman."

"Thank you for the enlightenment, but I won't give up that easily to a traitor," she spat back, holding her fighting stance even though she felt like a cornered animal waiting to be slaughtered. "I wonder what your mother will say if she knew what his son has become."

Her words seemed to hit a nerve. He stopped, lowered his hand, clenched his jaw as he held his temper, just barely.

"You know nothing about my mother and what those Chinese vermin did to her!" he lashed, eyes narrowed with animosity.

"Among all the wicked...vile things they've done.....they should've let her die. But no, they let her live... to carry the shame—the shame of giving birth to a bastard child," he recounted, his disdainful voice now breaking.

She found herself pinned by his stare for a moment, stunned by the brutal honesty of what he had just revealed. The hurt and bitterness were palpable behind the spite that was oozing out like a sulphurous cloud. She couldn't even start to imagine the kind of torture, humiliation and scorn that poor woman had to endure. It was an awakening insight.

"I...I'm so sorry," she breathed, feeling almost like a metaphorical canon was just being aimed at her. And who was she to strife with this man after what her people had done to him? Could she honestly resent his vengefulness and labelled him a traitor?

"Sorry won't console the dead," he grounded, regaining his combative ferocity. "But this one will!"

Feeling insulted, Attila darted after her, leaping and bouncing off the part of the ship in an attempt to come at her at every angle.
"Blood won't bring her any peace!" she argued, rolling into the lower deck to avoid being skewered alive.

He didn't respond to that. Instead, charging towards her with renewed determination. If he had been on the right state of mind, he might have heard the cracks and the groan of the moving pole.

But he didn't until it was too late.

A shadow loomed over him. Attila looked up, to see one of the main mast of the ship falling towards him as sure as death itself. But Attila was no coward, he closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable. His mother's face waited for him behind his lids, her soft smile, her sad eyes, haunting him. I'm sorry, Mother...

"Look out!!!" A sudden yell filled the air. His eyes snapped open, only to see that only a second before the enormous wooden structure could hit him the woman soldier he tried to kill had shoved him aside, accidentally embedding the knife in his hand into her own flesh.

Mulan heard a slash underneath her before she felt it.

Gasping in pain, she dared herself looking up to him. She wondered how many breaths he would allow her to have before he finished the job.

"You fool!" he seethed, pulling out the knife. Her body jerked from sudden white pain that sliced through her being.

"Promise me you'll dispose…my body… into t-the river," she managed to say.

"You think that way you'll die a respectable death? Remembered as a hero?" he spat. But the venom had left his eyes in place of something else she couldn't decipher. He used his knife to cut rags out of his sleeve, binding the material against her abdomen.

And he left her there. Perhaps to die a slow, agonising death…. Or perhaps waiting for his comrade to discover the corpse of the woman that she was. But no, the battle was not over yet, she couldn't die! Not until she was sure the Prince and Shang were safe.

The blood began to pool around her legs, but she refused to look at them. *It can be fixed later,* she thought. *If there is later.*

She heard the world around her buzzed in the distance, noises and various voices melting into the background. Mulan wasn't scared to die; she had just escaped death and didn't have time to even care about it anymore. But she was afraid of her family… her people, what this war would do to them.

"Ping!" Ling's barely steady, high pitched voice alerted her. She squinted her eyes, struggling to keep her consciousness intact. In the background, she could hear his rapid yelling and incoherent dissonance.

"Ping....Oh gods!" If it was even possible, his voice trembled and stress line taut his face.

"Ling?" she rasped, staring at him puzzled. "How do you…"

"Find you? A Hun's… he... " he said, struggling to form a coherent thought. "You're going to be
fine. Please, stay with me." There was a strange pleading edge that Mulan had never heard of him before.

"Ling...?" she said, voice almost a whisper. Her question was answered by a piercing pain in her side, from her blurred peripheral vision, she could see a pool of blood forming where she was.

"You are...—" he gulped, unable to continue. "Breathe slowly! The help is on its way!" he repeated, letting his own words consoled his worry.

Her world went dark for a few seconds before Ling's panic scream brought her back. She suddenly realised the grim reality ahead.

Death had never felt so real, so close and so.... imminent.

"Ling," she said with the vestige of her strength, guiding his hand to the hilt of her sword. "Please give this to my father. Tell him I'm... sorry...."

"Please....!" Ling pleaded. "Please don't say that!"

"No... listen Ling. I just wanted to say.... thank...thank you." Her voice broke, and she could feel the tears resurfacing. It wouldn't be long before emotion and fatigue consumed her. She had to get this out fast.

"Thank you for always... be...—being there.... for me. Thank you.... for being my friend and...and for protecting my secret. You're like... l-like a brother to me, Ling."

Her thoughts fled to her family, how would they react if they had to face two deaths in the same year. And… Mushu, how she wished she had a chance to thank him for his company during her dark days.

"But, Captain Li Shang...he is comi...—" Ling's voice faded off as tears fell rapidly from his eyes.

She gasped as Ling said his name.

"He is ... he is getting help, Mulan." Ling exhaled heavily trying to keep the sob at bay. "The Huns... they-they've left. We are safe! Don't...don't leave us yet," he said, silently wiping away the drops sliding down his cheek with the back of his other hand.

Did he say, the Huns had left?

Mulan smiled. Regrets suddenly evaporated like morning dew under the heat of the sun. There were no words adequate to express the kind of relief that she felt. But there was a closure to be made, a chapter to be closed—before she's gone.

"Ling," she breathed. "Promise me; you'll tell Shang. W-when he comes—will you tell him...that he is always in my mind," she paused to take a breath and gathered her thoughts. "Please tell him to forget about me, to....move on, remarry a-and.... live a...happy life."

Ling's eyes flew open in shock. Connecting the facts and the words she uttered, he finally saw the picture that was concealed before. "He is your...?" he choked.

"Ling..." her voice brought him back. "P-please?"

The man in front of her seemed to wilt with every word she uttered, desperately trying to hold his resolve and composure to remain steadfast. Mulan forced herself to keep staring at him. She must
extract that promise out of him!

"Mulan…" With a shaking hand, he lunged forward and hugged her. The walls were merging together; her eyelids become heavy. She gripped his shirt weakly and tried to speak, coughing on air instead. The shooting pain was making her feel more lethargic.

"I'm…. —" Her voice cracked and her teeth chattered at the inability to say goodbye. ".sorry, Ling."

Soon, the edges of her vision were starting to darken. She readied herself for the end.

Mulan didn't exactly know what happened after that. Her consciousness seemed to slip in and out of oblivion.

The next thing she felt was warm, calloused hands scooping her off the ground and trapping it between his hands and the metallic surface of his armour.

Opening her eyes, Mulan was surrounded with a gleam of white. The air was thick with herbal, antiseptic odour. The sounds of clanging metal armour and battle cry was replaced by subdued conversations, rustling fabric and worried stare.

"Ping," said the soft baritone from directly above her. Even with her blurred vision, she could well recognise his profile—his sharp, chiselled jaw, and his firm but warm voice.

Even though she was momentarily distracted by the hard muscle, she could still feel the steady staccato of his heart as her hand moved with the rises and falls of his chest.

"Captain…?" she uttered weakly. And if she were to die, right here, right now, she would die contented in the cradle of his arms.

"It's ok. We've got you," he said, placing her carefully on the infirmary bed.

It's only meant to be a statement of assurance, Mulan got that. But when she looked up to meet his eyes….she saw sympathy and earnestness, and in that moment it feels like something more. Something like support and protection…..and maybe intimacy.

As if it was magic, his touch calmed her and, more importantly, returned her breathing to something that was considered more normal. His voice was like a life is what drew her out of her unconscious state, amplifying her will to survive.

From her peripheral vision, Mulan could see Ling, Chien-Po and two men, one with silvery hair, pointed hat in grey robes which she suspected must be the healer. He had a polite smile on his face, the one he plastered on in front of the patients that masked concern. The healer said something to Shang in hushed tones before returning to his medical bag to mix some concoction. For a few contemplative moments, Mulan wondered whether Ling had relayed her last message, but the lack of questioning look nor perusal on Shang's side confirmed that Ling hadn't told him anything. Not yet.

"This is going to hurt," the healer said, as though preparing her mental. Well, everything already hurts, Mulan thought ruefully. Shang must have sensed her unspoken fear and came to the rescue. Again.

"I am here." With unconscious thought, Shang began rubbing his idle thumbs across her cheeks as though wishing the gesture would lessen her anxiety. The fact that he was only smearing the blood
on one of her cheeks and getting more on his fingers never crossed his mind.

"The weapon was old and corroded to the point that part of it disintegrated," announced the healer. "I will try my best to remove any unwanted residue and prevent further infection."

Large hands crossed her field of vision where she was staring.

"Sorry," Chien-Po whispered as he began tearing the abdominal part of her clothing for access.

Mulan knew exactly what and why he was apologizing, but faced with no other alternative, she could only capitulate quietly, hoping that Shang was too distracted to even register what he saw—That there was never be Ping, only a daughter with a mission to prevent her father from dying.

"Get me hot water," the healer said. Both soldiers left the surgical area in what could only be described as a scurrying fashion.

A new wave of pain distracted her attention. The healer was cleaning the abused skin around the stab wound. It looked red and angry.

"Here, hold my hand," comforted Shang. And his clench on her hand tightened, and the touched brought her back after her momentary zoning out.

"Thank you," her tone obviously alluding to what happened not a minute ago.

The healer was occupied inspecting numerous surgical tool on his tray. He gave no read into his emotions, only muttering a solemn discussion with another man that Mulan concluded as his assistant. His associate quietly relayed information, barely speaking above a whisper towards Shang. Shang's facial expression gave no sign of anything out of the ordinary, but the slight tightening of his jaw betrayed that.

After another moment into a secretive discussion, Shang returned to her bedside, pulling something from under his pocket - a bottle of strong drink, and offered it to her. "This will help you."

Mulan was too weak to argue, but Shang could see it just by decrypting the questioning frown between her brows.

"You trust me, right?"

Shang held in his chuckle as he saw Ping suppressing the urge to roll his eyes at him. What did he expect? She didn't really have another option now, did she?

He propped her against his chest, slowly helping her to drink, before tearing a piece of his red cape and place it into her mouth. "You can shout, crush my hand, punch me if that helps," he said again.

That was when it became real. She was a casualty of war, bleeding profusely after enduring enemy's assault.

She could feel his body tensed, as though bracing for impact… and then the pain came piercing, suspending her from her thoughts. The surgical blade excavated deeper into her flesh, making a neat incision to uncover whatever left of the weapon that embedded itself into her abdomen.

Mulan felt her vision darkened once again and her own roar filled her ears as whatever the healer was doing on her wound, she desperately squeezed and tugged for Shang's hand to channel the pain.
And then everything went black once again.

The battle seemed to end as soon as it started, even then they'd lost nearly a third of their men. There would've been more severe damage if it wasn't for Ping who managed to incapacitated Shan Yu's steed and bought them more time to escape.

Whether it was down to luck or not, but the Imperial Guard's timely arrival had managed to make up the regiment's lack of real battle experience.

Ultimately, it was Princess Altan's sudden appearance on the scene with her troops that forced the rest of the Huns army to retreat home. She had bravely put a blade on her own throat, urging Shan-Yu to adhere to her request to let them go. But Shan-Yu was no fool, he wasn't afraid of losing his bride. Her proposal was rejected point-blank. It was then she upped her offer and surrendered her right as the heir of the throne. It was an expensive offer. She had promised him a place of absolute control on the future of her land and her people….and her fate. It was a foolish...careless and unnecessary sacrifice, in Shang's opinion.

Don't be such a hypocrite, you wish you could do the same, but you are lacking courage... said the voice in his head.

Looking down, Shang stared at his hands that were still bathed in blood: Ping's blood mixed with his own.

This is insane, he thought to himself, knowing that he should not be there that second, living and breathing. Not after he was surrounded by hundreds of fully armed Huns warrior with no feasible plan of escape. Lucky was such an overstatement. And if it wasn't because of Ping...

He heard Ping groaning softly as the effect of the drugs began to wear off. Outside, Shao was speaking with a few healers fetched from a few nearby villages to assist the injured.

Shang could tell Ping's agony, but the soldier seemed had regained his resolve to survive the ordeal. A blade may have paralysed him, but nothing would kill his warrior fighting spirit.

The only thing Shang could do was keep his hold on Ping and remind the boy that he would be okay…. and that he wasn't alone, a comfort he wished he had had himself many times over.

After an hour that felt like forever, the hubbub around the medical tent dwindled into peaceful hushed tones. At the sound of rustling fabric, Shang turned his attention towards the tent's entrance.

Shao stepped in.

"How is he?" He was trying to sound composed, but the biting the bottom of his lips had spoken otherwise.

"Stable but the critical moment still ahead of him," replied Shang. "He lost a lot of blood. Part of the dagger was broken inside his abdomen. The healers had done everything they could."

Shao Wei balled his fist and strings of profanities flew from his mouth. "It should've been me!"

That was a quick reminder of the unusual closeness between Ping and the Prince. It was when the ugly, green jealousy began to bloom on his chest. He couldn't disregard his sixth instinct that alerted there was more to their relationship than merely just casual friends. At least from one of them, it wasn't.
But why would he care? Was he mind if one of his soldiers had landed in the spotlight and made it into the Prince's favourite list? Or was he jealous knowing this unlikely hero had found shelter and comfort with a man other than himself?

Shang remembered his father's wise counsel, that even seasoned warriors could be drawn in by a beautiful face; lose themselves in delicate limbs, silky skin and of sheets of ink-black hair.

No, Shang was determined not to fall into the same trap. Besides, Di Tan had cleverly explained the logical reason for his extreme possessiveness around Ping.

"Thank you for your prompt help providing with the best care he could possibly get," Shang said, mastering his inappropriate impulse. "You have saved his life." He placed his hand on Shao's shoulder, a gesture of gratitude and comfort.

"He saved us," Shao exhaled slowly, allowing his wave of emotion to dwindle. And they thought they were the one who could save Ping from the execution. "If...if he dies, I would....."

"But Fa Ping is a strong soldier," Shang soothed. "He'll be alright."

"Yes, yes...of course," Shao nodded, smiled past him and looked into his own hands. "Sometimes I forget, Ping had just defeated dozens of Huns."

The moments of battle flashed in Shang's eyes, and suddenly curiosity peaked in his head. "Although, I didn't know Ping have mastered the art of aiming moving target on horseback in a short period of time."

Shao chuckled. "That clumsy boy can be an instant genius at times. He is indeed a fast learner. Although, I strongly believe... the main reason he could do it that particular instances were because..." He paused and regarded him with his eyes. "...because he was so desperate to save you."

Saving me? Shang almost wanted to verbalise his disbelief, but he figured that was out of his usual performative and cold character to question such petty points.

They turned his attention back to the half-conscious Fa Ping. But before any of them could get in a word, a barrage of voices got louder outside their fabric barrier.

"Captain Li," the man saluted.

"Chef Zhang," Shang returned the gesture. The man looked distressed, face as white as a ghost. "We were... cleaning up the debris outside, and we... we found this," he said, handing in what Shang recognised as his bag.

"Thank you." Although Shang had no real attachment to worldly possession, he was glad his personal paraphernalia wasn't perished in the fire or trampled by horses.

The old man still stood there as if waiting for something.

"Yes?" Shang raised his brows at him.

"Captain... you may. You may wish to check what's inside," he said, sounding oddly disquieted.

Shang didn't need a second take and immediately tore into his bag. An unfamiliar object rolled out to the floor.
It was the stolen Emperor's seal.
His Equal

Chapter Summary

And this is how Mulan get to know Shang in the way she has never imagined before....

Chapter Notes

Happy Chinese New Year! I'm sorry that I've left you guys in suspense for longer than necessary. Life had been very busy and this fiction had been suffering the consequences as the result. Nonetheless, I hope you'll enjoy this chapter.

I wondered whether everyone's here excited about Mulan live-action? Let me know on the comment section below :)

Shao watched quietly as Shang perused the seal in his hand, disbelief look plastered on his face. Who might wish to frame him for such a crime?

And how did the Huns found the location of the Chinese encampment where he had secretly trained? Not to mention the timely manner of the arrival of the Imperial Guard on-site. Was this entire drama just a ruse devised by someone mightier than any of them?

"It's no secret that we are friends," Shao began. "And what normally happens if a prince befriended army officials? Well, normally nothing… but everyone knows that I abhor my ruling uncle and came here to join a low-rank regiment with no logical reason whatsoever, so where does that leave us?"

Shang tore his gaze from the seal and looked up to him. "Are you saying you come here to meet me so that together we can plot a mutiny?"

"Well...I need someone with the power to move the soldiers. And you… you need an experienced politician with connection—a figure with established credentials and authority on your side." He chuckled openly when Shang's frown deepened on the word "credentials".

"I know… I know. Look, I'm working on it, okay? But the point is: Unless you are an established general…. that seal would've been meaningless to you. But imagine what that can do in my hand. It's no wonder if Master Peng is here to resist potential vendetta."

Shang fell into deep thought. "What has Master Peng told you?"

"Not much," Shao replied. "He said the Emperor had requested my presence to accompany Princess Ming Zhu, his oldest daughter on a journey to the north next week."

"When the country is torn by war?" Shang couldn't filter his incredulity. "But... Why?"

Honestly, Shao had no answer to that. But this wasn't the first time his cunning uncle made a
strange, tactical request. "I don't think that is the real reason."

They fell silent, each with their own thoughts.

"What if Venerable Yen has a part in this?" Shao bounced the idea.

"You mean he reported to Chang'an that you were in his house….and then you...that… that's impossible. He is a good man! He had sworn to secrecy on this matter!"

"Good is a relative word," Shao argued.

"But he would've told Master Peng to apprehend you in while you're in his custody," Shang disagreed.

"But I will know that he had a part in this—that he is the mole! I don't think he wants that."

Shao watched as disbelief and disappointment fight in the captain's eyes. Clearly, such suspicion had never crossed Shang's mind. "I... I guess I never think that way," he admitted.

"Don't underestimate the lure of wealth and power, Li Shang. Nothing is impossible when men are lured by money and position," he said. "I've heard a father who sold his only daughter for them."

"I..." Shang could only sigh as he stared outside the tent. Master Peng and a few of his men were busy assisting the wounded. One second he was their enemy and the other second he was their saviour. This ambiguous situation seemed to disturb him greatly.

"So...you think he has other hidden agenda?"

"I can't say for sure," Shao replied.

"But why send a great army just to fetch one man?"

Shao had his theory, but he wasn't ready to embroil Shang further into the royal scandal just yet. "I'm not at liberty to discuss it. But something very odd is happening and I'm not sure why Forbidden City had done this. I will be on my guard, and I suggest you are too. I want you, and anyone related to you, your close friends and family, to be on high alert while I'm gone," he said. "And that includes Ping."

Although it seemed like Ping was merely collateral damage of whatever transpired today, Shao didn't want to take his chance.

"I want Ping to sleep in your tent and stay with you all the time. You hear me?"

Shang, bless him, although he didn't say anything, the surprise, bewilderment and slight embarrassment had overwritten his usual warrior-like blank face. "Is...is there a need for such...precaution?"

Shao, the better actor of the two, forced an impassive, grave countenance even when he was laughing and rolling his eyes internally. "If you are not used to playing nurse, I will ask Chien-Po to change Ping's dressing..."

"It's not that I..." Shang trailed off, cheeks reddening.

"Do you have any problem sharing a bed with him?" Shao inserted.

Shang flushed further, averting his eyes. "No. No of course not... it's just..."
"I'm sure he doesn't pick his nose on the bed, spit at random occasion or snore—an important tent-mate criterion," he added, glossing over Shang's impropriety with unrelenting control over his own seriousness. "Also, put on a double patrolling rota, I want everyone in the encampment on high alert. We are not sure who is our enemy or friend here."

"Yes...yes, of course," the young captain replied, somewhat hesitantly.

Shao felt he couldn't leave him unsure.

"Li Shang..." He placed a firm hand on the Captain's shoulder. "As much as Forbidden City are concerned, you are my right-hand man. And if I were planning to depose the Emperor, the first and foremost thing I need is a firm military backing. And that's you," he repeated. "You could easily make it into their wanted list without you knowing. And then your loved ones could be their leverage."

Shang's mind was like an open-book, crazily simple and naive. But he wasn't stupid. He knew Shao Wei and how this clever Prince in his implicit subtlety was trying to persuade him to pick a side.

"But I am never planning to…"

:"I know," Shao cut him. "Look...Three generations ago, my great-great-grandfather had paid a mercenary to assassinate his eldest brother.....and the paranoia had never left the monarchy since," he shared. "My uncle certainly wants to prevent the tragedy from happening and has done necessary precaution to subdue any form of notion of rebellion or sign of threat to his throne, no matter how small. You and I are no exception."

Shang fell silent, perhaps thinking about the probability (or improbability) of him colluding with this young, reckless prince and betraying the trust of the leader he had vowed to serve with his life.

For a person with vast experience rubbing shoulders with the people of the court, Shang's evaluation was oddly simplistic. He stereotyped that noblemen were always good and bandits were always bad—which wasn't true. But again, Shang's binary approach was what made him a dependable soldier and more so, a trustworthy friend. He saw the world in black and white. He had his principles and lived them.

"But the Son of Heaven has no son," Shang contended, "You are his only family and successor...surely he won't...?"

"Shang," Shao said, patiently. He understood it wasn't easy to forsake the faith to a man who supposed to have the nation's interest at best. And among many subservient commoners, Shang must have been one of those who had followed the Emperor not with fear, but with his heart.

"I know there are hard things... that I've told you. And I don't wish for you to simply... believe me just because we are friends," Shao told him. "I want you to wait, to see things for yourself. All I want you to do know is to be careful and vigilant of all things," he said sympathetically.

"But when the truth prevails, we have to learn to take the world as it is, and not as how we want it to be."

It was a new day in the encampment, and right after the ambush, the situation was without routine and could describe well by the word: chaotic. In Men were shifting new material to build new tents, unloading food and medicine that was graciously provided by the villagers around the area, and clearing the debris from the attack.
But it wasn't all gloom and dread. Although they had successfully deterred the Huns, the Chinese army had sustained a sizeable loss.

After a discussion with Master Peng, Shao agreed that he would come to Chang'an to meet his uncle as demanded by the Emperor's Writ. But at the moment his priority was to give as much support to the resident of Wuzong camp—a wish that Master Peng found hard to argue nor contend.

With the royal business aside, Shao could concentrate on the conundrum that had been plaguing him like a disease: Who exactly this culprit who had his hand on the seal, framing him and damning Shang in the process.

Although all men in the encampment generally feared him, there were few that he noted emanating the aura of resentfulness in his presence. So, decidedly he planned to interrogate them one by one.

"Ling," said as he entered the almost deserted communal tent.

The man glanced towards him but barely acknowledge his existence and resumed his ministration. He was writing a letter.

"I believe someone may have planted it inside Captain Li's bag and trying to frame me for it." Shao disregarded Ling's disrespectfulness. "While death by strangulation won't be on my menu due to my high status and position, I suspected someone desperately wants to humiliate me."

There was a spark of annoyance in Ling's eyes. But he said nothing to comment on his haughty announcement.

"Why are you here?" Ling returned, somewhat insolently.

"To find out the truth."

"Why me?" Ling challenged, looking riled by his implicit accusation.

"Hold your thought. And let us step back," he said with a smooth, professional shell that he wore like a second skin. "Let me remind you that I... am the man who had called the best healer in the area to save your best friend and.....adding handsome gratitude for keeping her secret under wraps."

Ling blinked in total shock, as though a sword had cut through his chest. The quill in his hand fell from his grasp. "You... you knew?"

"Longer than you thought I would. She was sloppy enough picking up the same bathing spot as me."

He snickered when Ling's jaw dropped dramatically. But given all the extremity of the news, it was an anticipated reaction. "Ah, sorry to disappoint you. Although you may think of me as a scumbag—many people did—but as obnoxious as I am, I don't just spread damaging rumour without understanding the consequences," he explained, but Ling must have been so gobsmacked to react that Shao continued again. "Now...I want to know who exactly had done this mischief on me and Captain Li. Something in my instinct told me that you do."

"What?" His last statement brought Ling back from his shock. "You...you think I framed you?!" he snapped, rising from his seat.

Shao crossed his arms. "Do you?" he said with a despicably calm but dangerous tone.
Ling's mouth twisted. "Look, I may dislike you from the start. But I…. I'm not like that cowardly prick who would commit a crime and put the blame somewhere else," Ling expressed, nose flared. He looked away from him, involuntarily cracking his knuckles and said to himself. "But boy, it felt good to punch him."

"Him?" Shao repeated. "Him you said? You knew?"

He watched the wet panic and anger fight in Ling's eyes for a moment before realising his blunder. "No… I mean…"

Shao stalked towards him. "Tell me," he commanded.

"And why would I?" Ling glared at him furiously. Shao loomed over him but the stubborn man refused to back down and stood up on his toes, futilely trying to match his height.

"You might be a prince, but I am not afraid of you!"

Well, fear wasn't exactly what Shao wanted of him.

"Fine," Shao said, stepping back to rethink his strategy of squeezing information out of this man. "That's too bad because I also came here to bring you this." He passed a parchment from his pocket. "I thought we can exchange a bit of… secret," he said, as he watched Ling unceremoniously unrolled it.

"T-this…this can't be happening!" Ling looked like a man who had been repeatedly shot on his head. "This is …impossible!"

"Oh, so you knew about this?" Shao concluded, seeing Ling's reaction, grabbing back the healers note after Mulan's surgery and stuffed it back into his pocket.

"No... " Ling shivered, balling his fist. A semblance of tears emerged on the edge of his eyes. "No, I don't. But we...I did suspect it. And I... tried to warn her… many times over." Hurt was clear in his voice. "And...and then Chien-Po told me that he found her asleep the night before her execution… that's when I thought she might…" He let a frustrated sigh, allowing his regret to dissipate. "Anyway, it's too late now."

"Where are you going?" Shao said when Ling dragged his heavy steps towards the exit.

"I must tell her."

"Don't..." Shao said firmly, grabbing him by the shoulder.

Ling spun on his heels, emotion back on the verge of spilling. "Your Highness, with all due respect she deserves to know!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Okay fine! But how will you break such news?" he said, voice escalating. "How would you address a mother who saved the world... but unable to save her own child? How? HOW?"

The lanky soldier didn't say anything, only cast his crestfallen gaze to empty bed space adjacent to his where Mulan usually slept. It could've been worse. He could've lost her too.

Shao sighed, allowing his emotions to dwindle."We will offer her…. our condolences. In time. I
Offering condolences sounded horribly like pleading guilty, he found. Wrenchingly difficult, but it was a necessary gesture. He wondered how her reaction would be. Would she blame herself? Would she cry inconsolably? He dreaded her tears. He dreaded her disappointment and regret. But what he dreaded the most was for her taking her leave from the battlefront, retreating from this familiar realm into the solitude of her home….walking away from his life….and into the different world he couldn't follow.

After Ling named the culprit of the missing seal's mystery, Shao was keen to meet Yao and gave him a piece of his mind (and maybe a good punch), to which Shang, knowing Shao's fiery temperament, refused to give the Prince access to see his recruits.

One good, valid enough reason was: because Yao was one of the unlucky victims of the Huns' ambush.

Standing outside the recovery tent, Shang turned to clarify with one of the healers but none of them seemed to be available, scurrying around in hurried pace. He persisted to follow one of them until his eyes caught a glimpse of a familiar figure.

Meihui.

She was wearing a simple ruqun with warm palettes that complimented her dark, raven hair. But the false cheerfulness of the colour she was wearing seemed to fail to lighten the mood. She was seated by a bed. Her head bowed, her body slouched forward.

She gave a startled gasp when she noticed he was standing there.

"Captain Li," was the first thing she said, saluting him. And she immediately took notice of the bandage on his shoulder.

"It's nothing serious, just a minor wound," he said, waving her anxiety away. "How did you get here?"

"Oh… Chi-Fu let me in," she said. So, apparently that grumpy councillor still had a heart somewhere. "He said I can't stay long. But I can see… him," and her glazed eyes unwittingly fixed to a figure on the bed.

Yao was unconscious, propped in sitting position, with bandaged covering most of his figure almost beyond recognition.

Shang took the empty seat next to her, examining Yao's condition further. His burn was extensive but thankfully wasn't lethal. Sadly, however frivolous the damage was, the scar would stay as a reminder of this day for the rest of his life.

"He is in a good hand," Shang soothed. "And I'm sure he will want to recover quickly… for you."

Meihui only nodded weakly, tears sprang anew. "One of the men…. said…the Huns were firing fire-arrow. One of them caught the ammunition supplies and exploded. He stood nearby...Unfortunately…” she said, wiping her eyes on a sodden handkerchief.

"But he will heal," Shang consoled.

She shook her head, looking at her own hands. "I know it is selfish. But when I broke the
"Wait, what...?" Shang interjected. While Shang had rationalised one or two things that triggered Yao's resentment towards Shao, he couldn't think of any of himself.

"He knew I came here... months ago," she told him. "He found my necklace in your tent."

Shang blinked towards her, eyes wide. Of course, he would think...

"Oh sweet ancestor," he groaned, running his palm down his face. "Did you?"

"It's not... it's not like that," she cut him. "I explained to him everything. And he seems to be... fine," she said, wiping her eyes again. "It wasn't... it was after a while ago. He said that you were almost get killed by a stray arrow while patrolling..."

Shang only let a slow exhaled at the memory of his own calamitic experience. "And...?"

"...and he said, what if..." she hiccuped several times in rapid succession, pressing her closed hands to her lips until it subsided. "He gave me the whole speech in his letter about why we shouldn't wait anymore. That we should get married. At first, I agreed, because I'm afraid of losing him... but that's...—it's not a good reason to get married, just because one of you might die suddenly."

It struck Shang as a perfectly fine reason, but he supposed it was his wartime mentality showing.

"I told him to wait until things calmed down. And I promise to wait for him. And...and then... he was terribly upset. And then we said some things, terrible things.... and we just never..." She sighed. "I thought we'll work it out. It seems to stupid now..."

Shang closed his eyes. It was common knowledge of men who kill each other out of jealousy or slit their own throats to escape the sorrow of rejection. Perhaps Yao was trying to do just that?

She reached out to take Yao's limp hand, stroking it. "If he...dies... I would never forgive myself."

Meihui's last sentence resonated in his head. It was like staring through a mirror and seeing the reflection of the tension in his own domestic situation. He left home knowing he had hurt Mulan's feelings deeply. So, what if he were to die suddenly?

There was a pause as both of them looked at the man who laid listless there, part of his face and neck riddled with angry burn marks. He was still recognisably the same Yao, but the threat of death had given life a better perspective.

"Tell him," said Shang.

Meihui looked at him blankly.

"When he wakes up, tell him everything you've told me."

She looked at the form of her beloved, before looking at her own hands, sighing. "It's not a good time, he is hurt and...and...—"

"Do you still love him?" Shang wasn't even sure where that question is coming from. He was not a person who normally had unfiltered thought straight from his heart and through his mouth.

"Y-Yes," Meihui replied, almost in a sob.

"Tell him that, at least. I am sure he'd like to hear it."
Meihui said nothing but leaned to Shang's shoulder as though sheltering herself from buffeting wind as she cried. Shang pressed back sympathetically and wondered whether he was trying to convince Meihui or himself.

Shao spent the last hour before departing to Forbidden City with Chien-Po—just eating and talking pleasantly. Chien-Po was a more-than-passable as a royal chef, which was an extraordinary compliment remembering how difficult it was to please a prince. But then Chien-Po said something flippantly about always having to cook for himself as a kid. Then he was just sad.

"I'm sorry to hear that,' he said sincerely.

"It's fine," Chien-Po waved his pitiful concern. "What doesn't kill you will make you stronger," he quoted. "I mean…I don't mean to brag, but my dissatisfaction of eating raw cabbage had propelled me to try my hands in the kitchen. And it had turned out handsomely since then."

"You know," Shao said, talking with his mouth full just like an unmannered peasant would. "Apparently your skill in battle is as legendary as your skill in cooking," he complimented. "Although I can see that culinary prowess has gone a little bit out of hand." He poked Chien-Po's belly with his chopsticks causing the man to flinch.

"A shared sentiment, Your Honor," he said. "It is said that man's happiness is reflected on the size of his girth," and he smiled, patting his belly. "I expect this to expand when I marry Su."

"And here I thought women are the only one who can have babies," Shao teased. "Someday when she is pregnant, your belly could be brothers."

Chien-Po blushed at the remark. "I...I guess it's a little too soon to talk about babies. We haven't sought counsel to fix a good day for a wedding yet."

Shao chuckled, shaking his head. "Sometimes…. I envy you, Chien-Po."

"How so, Your Majesty?"

"I mean… your life… so simple, yet, so… so sweet."

"I know," Chien-Po smiled. "I am thankful every day that I…—"

"Your Highness!" Chef Zhang heaved as he halted in front of them. "It's… it's your sister. Princess Wei Ting… she is injured."

"Ting Ting!" Shao barged into his tent. His sister sat on his unmade bed. She looked pale, paler than he ever remembered seeing since the night their mother died. She wrapped his blanket around herself, gripping them tightly and cocooning herself as though it was a wall that capable of protecting her.

Ling sat with her. He was nurse-maiding her with a cup of warm tea.

"It's ok, you are safe now," Ling cooed. He sat close to her and Ting Ting didn't seem perturbed. When they spoke, they looked deeply into each other's eyes, voice just slightly above whispers. Ling touched her, on her shoulder, her arm…. Her thigh! And she didn't even startle or flinch. Odd. Very odd indeed.

"What happened?" Shao said, perching himself on the edge of the bed.
"A group of men surrounded our house," Tian told him, she was sporting blood-soaked rags on her right arm, but she looked fine. Shao concluded there was some physical confrontation when Ting Ting refused to be removed from their safehouse.

Shao pinched the bridge of his nose. The Imperial Guard, of course. They must have tried to take them both under their custody.

"We managed to escape…. and ran into the woods….and met a group of bandits. We told them we have nothing… but, they were trying to…" Tian stopped herself when she saw the Princess' hand trembled. Ling returned by tightening his grasp in a warm, comforting manner.

Shao looked at the half-torn sleeve of her robe, her messy hair and smeared makeup.

"They seemed to be part of the rebel group. I couldn't quite tell," Tian continued. "One of them recognised Princess Wei Ting immediately. We almost didn't make it here if it weren't because we met Ling and a few of the men along the way. Thank god for his fast thinking we managed to escape unscathed."

Ling didn't seem to register the praise. "Chef Zhang asked me to replenish the food supply from the market," he said simply, turning to Ting Ting. "I would never let anyone touch you like that again."

"Oh!" Shao's eyes widened, rushing to kneel in front of her, scrutinising her injury even more. His blood boiled just imagining what kind of vile things those bandits were trying to do to her. "Are you… are you okay?" He wrapped one of her hands, encasing it with his as a gesture of comfort and protection.

"Do I look okay to you?" Ting Ting said to him, voice hoarse.

"You don't," Ling piped in, voice firm but comforting. "But you don't have to worry about them anymore. They won't come after you again."

"They're dead?" Ting Ting said almost too quickly, and Shao could hear the desperate dichotomy in that urgency.

Ling only answered her question by wrapping his hand around one of hers and quietly said. "I've told Jing to take care of them. I am sure whether he'd done…it won't be pleasant."

She made a strange sound between weeping and laughing. "You are my hero."

"Hey, today I got to perform my new Kung-Fu technique," Ling chuckled, miming the action of slaughtering invisible enemy.

Shao scoffed lightly. "Send them to me, and I shall make them incapable to assert their masculinity on the fairer kind ever again."

Ling's confused stare invited Tian to elaborate. "The Young Prince Shao Wei had done a castration on two person before." She smirked with deep satisfaction. "Simultaneously no less."

Ting Ting laughed again, giving Shao's hand one last squeeze and released him. "Thank you," she said, wiping her eyes. "You are the best brother anyone could have."

"You are the extraordinary one in this room. Not every person had the courage to face this kind of fear every day. This kind of threat," Shao stroke her cheek. "And you will heal."
Ling put his hand on her thigh, again.

"She is the bravest person I know," he said, giving her the look Shao Wei knew all too well because Mulan gave it to Shang all the time. And Ting Ting smiled back at him.

Shao cleared his throat, shifting their attention from each other.

"Care to share what's this?" he said, pointing his finger back and forth between the two of them.

Ling hastily moved his hand from her thigh. Ting Ting sighed, reaching for Ling's hand and took it firmly in hers, and turned to Shao with eyes that bordered on defiant.

"Seriously?" Shao's felt his brain was fried. He was pretty sure his eyes were twitching too. Ting Ting and Ling…. And LING? How in the world? He would have been less surprised if she'd announced a relationship with Yu Tao, the son of the noodle maker whose often parked his cart in front of the palace. Despite his family's financial troubles, at least he was good looking (and had a complete set of teeth). But Ling? Skinny, bumbling Ling whose only strength was to tell jokes!? What on earth...

"You...you two? How... for how long?" he tried not to choke on his words, but they were stubbornly stalling on his throat.

"A few months now," Ting Ting said. Shao turned to Ling, glaring daggers at him.

Unable to deny the accusation, Ling averted his eyes.

"So... you and him...—" Shao turned back to his sister, pointing his finger accusingly at Ling.
"You and HIM?"

"Yes, big brother. Me and him," Ting Ting confirmed.

Shao turned to Ling, narrowing his eyes. "You are seeing my sister...? Behind my back?" before turning his attention to his sister.

"Him?" he asked Ting Ting again as though he would want to hear a different answer.

"Hey!" This time Ling protested.

"Don't you Hey me!" Shao snapped back.

"Stop being ridiculous! Both of you!" Ting Ting exploded before she fell into a coughing fit. Ling immediately moved his attention to the threatening spectre of the angry prince to Ting Ting, retrieving a cup of water from the table and rubbing her back comfortingly.

"You okay?" he said, voice turned gentle and patient. Ting Ting accepted the cup, sipped it, wiping her mouth and nodded.

Seeing this, Shao felt the fire of wrath that was burning in his chest withered and died. Whatever kind of picture that he had envisioned of the kind of man, a kind of worthy man his sister may end up with—some good looking, educated nobility, appropriately her equal—or at least some strapping young man, a fierce warrior, who could protect her day and night with his strong arms.

But those... those weren't the kind of man she needed, and until a few moments ago Shao hadn't understood why. Until he saw the genuine affection in Ling's eyes, his protective touch—it suddenly clicked. Ling may not be her equal in the social ladder, in wealth... nor in looks. He may
not even be the strongest man who could protect her when danger arrived, but he certainly was in his heart.

Any man who—his sensitive, hurting sister—would choose to help her face the demons of her past and her fear of her future would have had earned a solid place in her heart, and who was he to judge? Or to cast aspersion to something….someone that rare?

He sighed, letting his thoughts dissolved into memory.

Seeing Ting Ting recovered from her fit, Ling turned to Shao, and with an admirable amount of fearlessness began. "Listen, Ting Ting and I—"

Shao held up his hand. "No, Ling. It's alright. I… I understand. Apology for my unwarranted outburst. I am just… surprised."

"Look, I love her," Ling debated, still primed for a fight.

"I know," Shao nodded. "I can see that."

"Of course it is," Ting Ting answered for him and planted a wet, waxy kiss on Ling's lips. Shao nearly fainted at the resigned casualness with which she performed it, like he wasn't even there watching them like there was no one in the world but two of them.

"You looked like you are about to die, Brother," she said and giggled daintily.

"Uh, no… I am… I am fine," Shao said, calming his own palpitation after witnessing the intimacy that he felt he should never be a part of. "All right then. You better get some rest."

"So are you," she told him, smiling with her tired eyes. "Good night."

"Good night," he said and let himself out, though he found himself lingering outside the tent entrance, ears perked up to capture any strange noises from his sister's tent. What if they…?

After a long moment, the lanky soldier stepped outside the tent. When he turned, Shao was there, waiting.

"Ling..." he greeted with a firm whisper.

Ling stepped back, clearly surprised. "This is not the preamble of another confident crushing pep-talk is it?"

"No," Shao said, taking Ling a few paces away. "Ling, you know that my sister has a lot on her shoulders."

"Is this... about her marriage to the Khan?"

Shao nodded weakly. "She was adamant that she will willingly surrender herself should the war not concluded within a month."

"Yes, she told me," Ling admitted. After the kidnapping attempt, Ting Ting had told him everything, including her arranged political nuptial, which became the very reason why she couldn't accept Ling's proposal back then.

"If she wished to go, she is free to go."
Shao gave him a look. "What? You...what?" Unwittingly he gripped Ling's shoulder and demanded. "I thought you love her!"

"I am," Ling struggled a little to put an ease to Shao's death grip."But loving someone doesn't always mean you can be with them."

Shao blinked, processing that.

"You've seen what happened in the encampment a few days ago. How many soldiers were killed, how many injured... have you ever stopped and asked yourself... Why?"

Shao shut his eyes, a flash of memory of Mulan with a gaping wound on her stomach. He knew he could stop this war from happening.

But he didn't.

"The blood that was spilt today was not only because of the action of those Huns, but also by the indifference of those who pledged to protect us," Ling stared pointedly at him in silent accusation.

"What are you trying to say?!" Shao bristled. "We'd won!"

"We might have won today, yes. But victory at the expense of others... is no victory at all!"

"So what is your suggestion? To surrender to the enemy's want and whims like a pathetic?"

"That's not my point... I..."

"A man can lose a love interest..." he hissed." But he could never lose a mother and a sister." And he stalked towards Ling, pointing his finger on his chest. "Listen, I just want you to know you're courting the sister of a man who performed castration on two men at once," He said in a calm yet dangerous undertone underneath it. "You stay aware of that and we'll be fine."

He could see Ling's adam's apple jerked as he swallowed, and in a moment of hesitation he said, "Staying aware Your Lord Highness."

"Good," he said and strolled into the communal sleeping tent.

"I asked you once if you liked the captain, you said no. I let it go but I've seen you with him. There's something more there, something you're not telling me."

Mulan sighed and ran a hand through her hair and told herself perhaps now was the right time to be honest with her best friend.

"Shang is my husband, Ling."

"He what?!" Ling thundered. His eyes flashed, jaw set. "Are you kidding me? Why wouldn't you tell me this before? He is...And you...Agh! This is.... this insane!"

"But I have to do this to keep my father alive. You...you must understand."

"In the expense of what?" Ling continued to glare. "If you were to succeed heading to the battlefront, are you going to reveal yourself to him? And tell him that you are carrying....his child?"

"No." The pronouncement stuck in her gut.
"War may kill you both!"

"Or it may not," she replied stubbornly. "I fight to live, Ling... not to die."

"You will regret this!" Ling ground out, whirling on his heel like the drama queen and storming out.

"Wait! Where are you going?" She ran behind him.

"To let the world know the truth," he replied without looking.

"No... Ling, wait! You can't...."

Her words stalled by a piercing pain on the side of her abdomen. Looking down, she saw a pointed blade jutting out, blood dripping down her leg.

Mulan felt her eyes tickled by stray sunlight from the gap on her tent. Her instant reaction from the dream was to touch her stomach. Her finger was greeted with a thick layer of bandaid.

It is only a dream, she consoled herself. If she was pregnant, she was sure she had lost it. Perhaps her incognizance of the fact was a blessing in disguise because truthfully, she had no time to mourn the loss of her own child when the country was mourning its fallen soldiers.

She witnessed how their regiment fell fast to their knees. If it weren't because the Imperial Army intervention at impeccable timing, they all would've been dead within minutes.

But how did the Huns know about the location of Chinese encampment? Was someone involved in political espionage and sold information to them? And why the Imperial Army came all the way to protect a low ranking regiment that held no value and importance?

She could make some educated guesses, but the actual reason didn't matter, though, because the attack that morning, whatever it was, turned out to be what had saved her life from the execution.

She could've run, but instead, her instinct told her to stay put. To defend her country, even when it meant death.

During the surgery, she vaguely recalled Ling and Chien-Po's incessant rant...and Shang, he didn't speak much but, yet the worried look in his eyes exuding a kind of heart-warming concern from him that surprised her.

The only bad news was: now more people knew who the Captain really was to her.

That's a problem for another day.

She sighed, savouring the familiar sound of her teammates outside bickering about breakfast and who's turn to wash the dishes.

She waggled a little bit out of the blanket, stretching her arms to shut it while berating herself for not closing the tent properly.

Her hand didn't quite make it to the tent entrance though. Instead, her knuckles brushed something solid, warm, breathing and textured very much like flesh.

The more alert she grew, the more she realized that there was actually something laying across her, pressing her down. It was painful but oddly pleasant at the same time—a strange sensation indeed. Slowly, she pulled her own arm out from underneath her body and reached up to her lower
midsection (thankfully miss out her wound by a finger length), where a good deal of the weight was pressing. The weight was across her legs but she was starting to get a bad feeling so she decided to go with the midsection first. She felt with her fingertips and found… warm skin. Arm with hair.

*Oh, sweet ancestor.*

A sudden epiphany reminded her that this wasn't her tent, this wasn't her bed and that definitely not Big Brother, her dog—because he wasn't this… *bare*, neither was Ah Meng, her faithful stuffed monkey. Not unless Ah Meng had grown to six foot tall and turned into an athletic soldier.

Then a fuzzy memory of listening to Shao and Shang came over her. Yes, Shao had insisted Shang stay with her every night until he satisfied she was properly healed.

If she didn't spontaneously combust, that was. His shirtless body always making her flashback to THE NIGHT. Yes. It warranted capitalization. And she was pretty sure he was using psychological torture to break her, flaunting his wonderful abs and sea of scars in front of her eyes. In fact, a couple of days before the ambush, when she had gone to the clearing to find Ling and instead, finding Shang performing martial art, sweating and glistening and defying gravity. And after watching entranced for a few minutes, she had turned and hightailed it out of there before she did something stupid.

Mulan hadn't thought he had seen her, but that night he had been particularly, well, flashy, in stripping his robe while she pretended to work on her forms, and she knew in her bones—had her friends seen her at that moment, he would tease her to no end. Closing her eyes, Mulan slumped down the bed, removing that image from her head. This was actually a really bad situation. She couldn't wake up next to him like this *every* morning. She would literally evaporate.

Her bladder beeped its morning signal and she sighed.

Mulan shifted a little and there was an answering rumble that she felt through her ribcage. The weight over her shifted too and his scent filled her nose. Dang, he smelled wonderful. Of course, he did. There was no mistaking it, Captain Li was cuddling her. And she'd been cuddling him right back. Worse… he was very close to naked. Mulan remembered she'd claimed that his wonderful muscles didn't really do anything for her but maybe she'd just been looking at the wrong muscles. And the amount of exposed flesh Shang had displayed right now made her pledge to forget the x-rated image of them making love together impossible to accomplish.

"Good Morning. Earth to Mulan," said a very unrefined voice that seemed to emanate from the far corner of the tent. Then, something red flashed across her vision.

Mulan blinked suddenly, disoriented. "Huh?" before her wound reminded her of the sudden movement. "Ack…!"

"You must be in incredible pain," Mushu made a face but his voice was nothing but unsympathetic.

"Only when I sleep," she said with a grunt. "...And move."

"...and breathe," Mushu added, seeing Mulan's face contorted when she inhaled deeply.

"Oh yes, breathing a little unpleasant. But I'll manage."

Mushu pinched whatever people may consider 'the bridge of his nose' and shook his head. "What were you thinking, girl?" This time the worry in his voice clear as a bell.
"What do you think?" Mulan said sourly, trying to shift Shang's weight from her body without waking him up in the process. "I am trying to get up!"

Shang grunted, and she froze where she was.

"No… I mean a few days ago. You nearly get yourself killed!"

A few days ago? Was that how long she had been out?

"Nearly," she emphasized in a whisper, and Shang stirred again. She waited until his breathing steadied back to rhythm and began to ease herself free from his cradle, which clutched around her waist like iron bands. She lingered around to make sure he stayed asleep, and her gaze unwittingly fell on his profile.

He was one of those disgusting people that still looked attractive even in his sleep.

"Hold on," Mushu said, glancing between Mulan and the pile of muscle snoring lightly next to her. "Are you… is this…?" he pointed his claws between Mulan and Shang. "Is this a permanent arrangement?"

"Of course not. I am just here so he could take care of me while I am injured." She gestured towards the thick bandage on her side. "...Temporarily. Mark my word."

"I see…" Mushu drummed his finger on his chin.

"What?" Mulan raised her brow when Mushu gave her a thoughtful look.

"I'm still amazed by his obliviousness. I mean, among many other, he is the only one who haven't figure out who you are."

Mushu was right. But Shang was always a simplistic, unequivocal thinker. It was no surprise when it came to detecting suspicious situation he would not smell carcasses until he saw one.

"So, is it going well? No husband-wife fight? No makeup kisses?"

"We are not sleeping together, Mushu," Mulan clarified, clearly couldn't appreciate his humour. "I am crashing on his tent, there is a big difference!"

"Difference being…?" The Dragon smirked complicity.

"I am sharing his tent, staying in his bed, but not sleeping together. Sleeping together connotes something else…something deeper… and more, more intimate."

"Like the way he cuddles you?" he said, wagging his brows up and down. One particularly impish grin spread across his face.

"He didn't have to know that," she berated. "For heaven's sake Mushu, he was asleep! It's no one's fault we ended up in…. Awkward position. This sleeping mattress barely even fit his size!" Well yeah, awkward and compromising.

"Hey, who are you talking to?" said the sleepy but undeniably masculine voice that could make her heart stop and race at the same time.

"G-good morning, Captain!"

"Morning," he slurred and smiled at her and Mulan tried not to think about the domestic intimacy
that she experienced that moment.

"I was about to get up, go to the toilet, and change...and move my...things," she stared at her pack unwittingly.

"You are moving to...your tent?" Shang said, sounding incredulous and maybe a little... *disappointed*?

Mulan winched. "I thought I might... I mean, I don't want to disturb your sleeping arrangement or...—"

"You can stay here. You are not a bad tent-mate."

"Oh?"

"You don't snore, you didn't smell nor have a personal hygiene problem..."

Yes, she wasn't spitting at random occasions, picking up nose in bed and such, not like other *men*.

"I didn't know that is part of being your tent-mate criteria," she blurted.

"And she is willing to be cuddled too," piped Mushu.

She glared at him, in which Mushu could only grin satisfyingly back.

"Do you need help with..." he gestured towards her clothing.

"Oh... no, no, no. I think I...ack," she winced from the sudden movement.

"Easy there," Shang helped her to sit in a more comfortable position.

"Thank you," she flustered a little bit.

"I suppose I left you to change," he said, flashing a little smile at her. "Don't hesitate to call me if you need some assistance."

She watched as his back exited the tent and sighed. How could she stop her feeling from him? After spending time and being around him with such close proximity, how could she be expected to handle that?

Of course, she won't tell how she felt for him. She *couldn't* tell him. She couldn't admit that this would blur the distinguishable line between fantasy and reality so much. That she always dreamt of the days he would fall asleep next to her again, smiling at each other's eyes and feeling his soft breathing against her skin.

But what if he knew who she was? Will he.... Kill her? Left her?... Divorce her?

She sighed, decidedly at peace with her decision.

*Perhaps, some secrets are better left untold.***

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That evening, the encampment was holding a special celebration marking their victory against the Huns.

It was nothing fancy, just a couple of drinks among friends by the large bonfire in the middle of the
clearing. Even Shang himself, who normally abstained from such indulgence, decided to join in.

When Ping, the difficult young soldier under his own first real command turned into the bravest and most brilliant, it was hardly worth noting that everyone's eye had been turned. The boy was no longer quite pretty. His features were still delicate, but his new confidence firmed them and banished the girlish softness. Instead of fear or embarrassment, determination shone from him, making every line of his face and body as graceful and strong as the brushstroke of a master calligrapher.

"Ping, you did amazing!" Chien-Po gushed giddily as he cradled his bottle of sorghum wine, courtesy of the Prince of Wei from cooking him dinner the other night. "You came charging at those Huns with a cart full of fireworks! I mean…. That's a… genius."

Shang helped to prop Ping up into sitting position by stacking a few cushions, but his hand stayed behind Ping's back. Nobody dared to comment on this.

From the corner of the room, Wu chuckled. "For a split second, I thought you might actually want to die."

Shang shook his head, this time not a sign of rebuke or disapproval, but disbelief. Ping had escaped the death penalty only to jump into a suicide mission. What was he thinking?

That day the Shang had seen many things for the first time, some things he would never have believed possible. How a young boy was capable of boundless heroism and staggering destruction in equal measure. Perhaps being half crazy was not a bad thing after all.

"I am not afraid to die," Ping's voice broke the silence. "I know fully well what war entails. What I'm afraid of losing is… all this." He stared at his friends one by one.

"Before I came to this regiment, my life was a boring routine. And then… then I met you..." he said, earnestly staring at...him.

Shang's eyes widened, perhaps the drug was talking.

"...All of you, I mean..." Ping amended immediately, looking embarrassed. "I am not afraid of dying. What I'm afraid of is losing you all," he repeated. "You are all my friends."

Shang took a deep breath. He had stomached so much death in his career that he had taught himself not to grow attached to his comrade. He thought of them as assets, tools that existed to aid him to win the battle. He valued his soldiers, of course, but not in the same way Ping clearly did. To Ping, they were all family.

His family.

The tent-sharing arrangement had lasted for a week.

And as his tent-mate, Mulan saw another facet of Shang's life that she otherwise wouldn't see.

Like the second night when Shang returned from his own training very late to the tent with bruised and cuts on his hands. She had pretended to be fast asleep, only to wake up again to observe him. She waited until his breathing was long and even before daring herself to take a closer look.

Shang's marred skin was nothing new to her, she had seen the first night they were together. But if anything, she had expected him to bear most of these heroic marks in the battlefront, but apparently
most of these scars came from his own practice. It was obvious that Shang was very serious about
his own training, perhaps too serious for his own health.

The following day things began to return to normal. Even when she was already awake, she took
pleasure in pretending to be asleep only to watch him begin his day in a very systematic fashion.

He normally woke up, doing his meditation before methodically tidying up the side of his bed and
his desk that he had left haphazardly the night before. She consciously shut her eyes tighter as he
removes his trousers and changed into his training outfit. He exited the tent briefly to freshen up
and perhaps quickly change Qing's water at the stable.

She couldn't help but smile when she heard him hummed the 'white snow in early spring' melody
while running his comb through his damp, raven hair. Sometimes, he noticed that she was already
awake and greeted her casually with "morning soldier" without halting his ministrations.

She could get used to this. It was both warm (and unsettling, in a nice way) to be treated like a
friend, a compatriot... as an equal. She wouldn't have it any other way.

At home, Shang would immediately leave the bed without a word. In turn, Mei Lan would come in
to help her with her hair so she could look her presentable while serving Shang his breakfast (As
her mother in law had pointed out to her, her duty was far beyond than making a hospitable home
and drawing her husband a warm bath).

During lunch or dinner, normally her mother in law dominated the conversation, while Shang
appeared detached and only nodding or humming agreement out of politeness. Mulan was allowed
to speak, but only if she was asked. Their interaction was rigidly dictated by old-fashioned
decorum whereby a woman of her rank was expected to respond in the most subjugative, respectful
way possible to her elder. She had learned to swallow her own words, silenced her opinion, and
replied to the question according to the model answer given.

But what she resented the most was every time Li Yue praised of her decorative appearance as
though she was a porcelain doll displayed fully for ornamental purposes. However, she learned
only to respond with a wordless sycophantic smile. It was a life full of lies where nobody could be
themselves. It's no wonder that Shang looked somewhat distant and uninterested, as though he was
living with a stranger.

It almost felt like a new kind of prison.

When she decided to get out of bed and out of the tent, he was already outside, doing a series of
single-hand push-ups while warming a pot of porridge he saved from the night before. This way he
would have utilised his breakfast time far more efficiently than queueing with the rest of the
recruits. By the time she was done with her own breakfast, Shang was already waiting in the
middle of the clearing, preparing his lessons. By then, the guarded mask fell back on its place.

Whenever the regiment had a brief break time for lunch or dinner, Shang would take his portion
and find a quiet place to eat while reading his Kung-Fu scroll. Then, he would retreat into the
clearing early to prepare for his next lesson. At night, he would end his day with another series of
press-ups before taking a bath and head down to bed. It would be interesting to know if this
impressive level of discipline and orderliness were an innate part of his character or was it imposed
by the regiment.

"Can you please sleep with him so whatever strange arrangement you are doing makes an ounce of
sense?" Mushu protested when another week nearly ran by.
She was so ready for bed, it was midnight and Shang was still nowhere in sight. Not that she would wait for him, she rather not.

"Sleeping together doesn't have to be sexual, Mushu. It can be platonic."

"Only in your world, Mulan. In the rest of the world, if you are sleeping with a hot no-shirt-captain, and your own husband, there would be a long list of non-platonic things to do. Not to mention… he secretly has a great smile."

Not just great. He had an incredibly sweet smile, she had learnt, to which she could practically feel her heart respond to almost involuntarily.

"In my current world, we are male compatriots."

"Compatriots who spent almost the entire day together, not to mention he rode Khan with you this morning! As if cuddling you in bed not enough," Mushu snorted.

"He wasn't cuddling me, Mushu. I told him I want to take Khan for a little stroll after a week stuck in his stable and he refused to let me go alone!" she defended, although she was secretly thankful that he did.

The ride back to the encampment didn't take long and she felt a little bit cheated to be honest because Khan was a little disobedient around other people riding on him and there was something incredibly sexy to see a man's strong, steady hand handling the rein, the muscles on his forearm moving swiftly under his skin.

"Let's go through the logic again," Mushu retorted. "Didn't you say he sleep in half nude? Because if he is, this seemed to be a missed opportunity."

Mulan huffed. "Mushu, if you are trying to get a carnal update from me you'd disappointed because the closest to carnal things I did this week is to steal extra bean bun because I was desperately hungry."

A heavy sound of approaching footsteps suggested someone had returned.

"Whatever," Mushu said, patting her cheek coyly. "Anyway, have a nice sleep. Sweet dreams. Sleeping together related dreams. Please update me with the sanitized version in the morning."

"Shut up Mushu," she muttered and he laughed.

"My Princess, dinner ready."

Altan nodded appreciatively while her eyes still trained on the map in her hand. "This is our plan," she recalled Shao told her. "I am not giving up on your country or mine. Even when it means I must betray my own family."

"But I couldn't kill my own father. Neither you… you won't behead your own Uncle... would you?"

"Are we still planning to go ahead with that?" Asanthi's voice brought her back.

"I'm not sure, Asanthi," she replied honestly. She hadn't received any further follow up now that Shao was forced to return to Chang'an. There was a good chance he would be detained there for good if the Emperor found out what they were plotting.

"If you don't mind me saying this, My Princess," her handmaid said carefully. "I think it is not wise
to… to follow a man that clearly struggled with his own demons."

Altansarnai sighed. How she wished her mother was here to offer a piece of her thoughts. Shao was a broken man… but so was her father after losing her.

They'd been out on a mission against the tribal group in the north of Mongolia for nearly a month. Then she heard the news about her mother.

"I'm sorry," her father whispered as he tucked her to bed that night. Armour still laminated with blood.

His heart was shattered, she knew this. Among the women he called his wives, her mother was one that he loved, the one he cherished.

"Whatever for, Father?" She tried for an incredulous smile.

"I should…. I should've fought harder. I could've saved her. It's just..." He turned away, not wanting his daughter witnessed the weak man that he was. It must break him even more knowing she didn't have a chance to say goodbye.

Do the dead remember? Would she then breathe a benediction upon them from heaven?

She would, wouldn't she? But would that be enough?

"No...no," she could only swallow her own tears. "I'm sorry too."

Her father didn't shed a single tear on his dear wife's burial. But that day part of them had died too, being carried away and buried together in the depths of the earth. A few years down the road, she'd decidedly took upon the mantel and joined the regiment in order to find closure of her loss, while he, losing the touch of love, had led a singular life dedicated for power and dominion.

"I guess I have my demons too, Asanthi...." She recounted how much blood had tainted her hands since, all in the name of peace. "I never lose them, I only learn to live above them."

Her handmaid slowly looked up to her, reaching for her hand. "You may think you are not a good person, My Princess," she whispered, "But you are good to me."

She nodded her gratitude.

"By the way, I have news to tell you. My father and I had agreed on a date for Shan-Yu's inauguration and….my matrimony," Altan said levelly, although there was a small pause before she said matrimony because honestly, it repulsed her just to imagine being Shan-Yu's Khatun and become a helpless woman under his rule. And she was under no illusion as to how Shan-Yu would likely to treat her after they're married. Altan felt her body recoiled at the thought. Humiliate her? Torture her? Or even….rape her? Who knows?

Altan felt her stomach churned uproariously at the thought of her upcoming matrimony, of her laying with this despicable, obnoxious beast, but she couldn't be openly afraid, not in front of her friend who had been clinging on every strand of hope on her.

"Oh," was the only response from Asanthi, but the sadness and pity in her eyes were undeniable. "I hope the gods will be merciful to you."

"I hope so," Altan replied weakly. She was almost certain she needed far more than mercy. Everyone knew Shan-Yu's brutality and lack of compassion was down to his principal. He stoutly
believed that compassion had led great men to their fall. And everyone knew that her father wanted to teach her a lesson for her insufferable rebellious attitude. And giving her to be betrothed to his most valued General would ensure his unconditional loyalty to him, and perhaps… making use of Shan-Yu's indomitability to tame her arbitrary stubbornness. But forcing Altan wedded the man she hated so dearly was a punishment that harsher than death!

"If I were a virgin, I would've offered myself in your place," came Asanthi's soft reply.

Altan's eyes misted, touched by Asanthi pledge of adherence. She still remembered many years ago when she took the lost, terrified maiden under her wing. How she had been her best friend, sister even, to her.

And how can I let you suffer redeeming the things that I've done? She wanted to say. For selfishly choosing a man over my own country? There was a deep, aching sorrow sliced hot throughout her, but with a brave voice, she said instead, "I am a warrior, Asanthi. A warrior will never let her comrade suffer," she chided, firming her tone to hide her shaking voice.

Of course, there was a brief thought of escaping - running away to her freedom in a foreign land. Altan was sure Shao Wei would welcome her even if she would have to stay hidden from the world forever. Despite a good chance of succeeding, she crossed off the plan realizing his father would turn his army to his brother and sister in arms, torturing or killing them all methodically until they cracked and told him her hiding place. "And should anyone die, that would have to be me."

Altan was surprised and strangely pleased that the thought of death didn't strike her with paralyzing fear, in fact, quite the opposite, it was a liberating thought. "Perhaps universe thinks unmerited daughter like me deserve this kind of penance for defying my father."

"You can't do that!"

Altan jerked back a step, not anticipating her friend's tirade.

"I'm sorry if I... sounded too presumptuous, My Princess," Asanthi quickly apologised, but her trembling shoulder had expressed her quiet fear. Altan sometimes forgot that Asanthi was a warrior too, and she could smell her fear rolling off her in waves. "But I can't see you live like this..."

"Fret not, my friend," Altan tried to placate her friend. "I still have a plan," she told her primly. Although deep down, she knew it was a slim chance for her plan to be successful considering her army was far inferior, smaller in number than her father's. Nonetheless, the fighter in her refused to let fear clouded her judgement and bow to defeat. Not yet!

But there was another plan. A plan that would cost less number of lives and bear a minimum risk to her followers.

Determinedly, she took her sword, her pack, the map and grabbed necessary travel supplies before heading to the door.

"Princess, where are you going?" Asanthi rushed to her side.

"You'll see," she said, still rapidly gathering her supplies. "You are in charge while I'm gone."

"W-what?" Asanthi's eyes were wild, panic and confusion melted together. "I... I can't. I'm not..."

"Asanthi, you will make a better leader than me. A person who has known power all her life may lose respect for that power, but you... you know the value of strength and knows compassion," she
said. "And I'm sure Father will accept all of you with no grudge if I've succeeded."

Asanthi shook her head. "Princess… where are you going exactly? Let me go with you."

She stopped by the door, looking into the starless, infinite night before revealing her last mission.

"I'm going to assassinate the Emperor of China."

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