

Master Guzi

Long ago in imperial China, there was a great Taoist monastery atop a mountain. Numerous were those who came from all over China and beyond to visit this most ancient, sublime and holy place. Yet these pilgrims did not journey this far only to pray at its holy shrines and marvel at its magnificent silver-tiled roofs. Most of all, they came to meet its master, the famed Guzi. For it was known that whatever they wanted, master Guzi could give it to them. Each day, pilgrims arriving at the monastery waited for their turn to enter the Great Hall, kowtow before the master, and tell him what they desired. Guzi took careful notes so that after dusk, he could go to his great bronze pot and spend the night producing it all: a potion to cure any ailment of the body or soul, a sword to cut through steel like flesh, a mirror to reflect one's true self... In the morning, pilgrims were enchanted to receive packages nicely wrapped in red silk containing exactly what they had asked for. The only thing the master would not give others was the immortality elixir, which he produced only for himself. For a thousand years, he had never once failed his reputation as the greatest of alchemists. He was also praised as the most generous of souls, for indeed he never accepted any payment for his services. Over the centuries, rumors sometimes spread that this apparent generosity was hiding something sinister, but they were quickly ignored by the overwhelming, grateful majority.

Quite far from this monastery, far southeast in a small village of fishermen called Shenzhen, is where our story begins. One day, a young man named Lin was playing erhu (two-string violin) on the village square, while his friend Niu, the prettiest girl in Shenzhen, was singing along. Lin enjoyed practicing music in his spare time, dreaming that someday, rather than becoming a mere fisherman like his parents, he'd travel to distant lands living off his art. But whatever talent he had was eclipsed by Niu's voice, so powerful it sent chills to sailors many miles out in the sea. On that particular day, however, our two friends shared a common misfortune. While playing a high note, Lin broke one of his erhu strings; the next moment, Niu broke her voice. At the sudden silence, all heads turned to the two unfortunate musicians. Niu blushed and fled the embarrassing scene. Lin followed her as she ran to the banks of the Pearl River. There, she sat in the gloom under the old stone bridge and buried her crying face inside her long sleeves. Lin knew this bridge was Niu's usual refuge from the storms of life, but he didn't understand why she was reacting so strongly to simply breaking her voice. After some hesitation, he said:

"Niu, listen, I'm sorry I played such a high note... But it's not such a tragedy, you know? My mother can prepare you an infusion and..."

"Keep your stupid infusions..."

Niu coughed horribly. Her voice was ghastly feeble, especially over the river's thundering flow, yet Lin could clearly feel her despair and anger, so he didn't dare to try comforting her again. The surrounding seagulls laughed at his awkwardness.

"It's happening again...", Niu whimpered.

"What is it?"

"My voice... Didn't I... tell you... what happened... when I was born?"

"No, I don't think so."

"I didn't cry out... I was stone mute..." (She coughed.) "So my mother... She took me to... to that monastery..."

She was interrupted by coughing again, but Lin didn't need to hear the rest of her sentence to guess which monastery she was referring to.

"Then I wouldn't worry about it", he told her, "because the cures master Guzi makes generally work for life."

"Not for babies!" (She coughed.) "I had a very grave disease and now... now it's creeping back. I need master Guzi again."

"Alright, then I'll go with you! I'll take the occasion to ask him for unbreakable strings. But how far is that monastery? I've heard it takes forty days to get there, maybe even more... We need to ask our families for enough money to make such a long trip. I'll ask mine, and you'll ask yours!"

Lin had expected his grandparents to oppose a long list of objections to his request but, to his astonishment, they accepted quite easily. After Lin had thanked them deeply, his grandfather added: "Before you go, however, you must promise us two things."

"Anything!"

"First, when you come to master Guzi, show some filial piety and ask if he can produce something for your family members as well. For us, for your parents and for your little sister. We will each think about it and tell you what we want before you go. You must bring back all of it without fault! Second, as the whole village will be rumoring about how you are traveling alone with Niu, you shall marry her on your return. Her family is one of the richest in the village, so she'll pay us a decent dowry!"

Meanwhile, when Niu made the same request to her own grandparents, her grandfather refused upfront, answering with that refrain she was all too familiar with: "If you got married, you wouldn't have any need to sing." Yet the grandmother retorted:

"But what kind of man would want to marry a mute woman? With what voice would she lull her children?"

"Her natural beauty is enough for her to marry a rich man, and not have to lull her children herself."

"You say her beauty alone is enough for a rich man to demand her hand, eh? Well then, if she had her beautiful voice too, she could surely marry into the aristocracy!"

"Maybe", the grandfather conceded. "I suppose the potential return is worth the investment. But Niu, promise us to be careful on the road, especially towards Lin."

A few days later, our two young friends departed from Shenzhen with far more money than they'd hoped for. They had both been quite embarrassed to receive all these paper banknotes from their grandparents' frail hands, wondering if they too, once they become old, would treat their own grandchildren like mere investment tokens. As they were walking side by side, making their way to the closest imperial road, the two travelers looked quite asymmetrical: while Niu was only carrying a small bag of spare clothes for the trip, Lin was loaded with empty bags to be filled by the presents for his family on the way back. Once they reached the large, well-paved imperial road, they paid a transport which quickly drove them northward to the Grand Canal. Along that great man-made river, they sailed through many cities larger than they'd ever seen, like ten thousand Shenzhens. Where the Canal crosses the Yellow River, the disembarked and took the winding road through the mountains towards the monastery. Even on the steepest slopes, to their astonishment, the road was nicely paved, thanks to generation after generation of rich pilgrims paying to keep them maintained for the comfort of their own pilgrimages. Numerous were such good roads, converging from all China to the monastery like spokes to a hub. Numerous as well were the inns to be found along these roads, profiting from the constant flow of pilgrims. As they drew close to their destination, however, Lin and Niu realized they had already spend almost half of their money, and couldn't afford the inns anymore. They had to sleep on the pavement and wash in streams cold as ice. When Niu undressed herself to bathe after each hard day of walking, she always looked around a few times to make sure Lin wasn't furtively watching her. Yet some part of her wondered if she actually wanted to be watched. If only Lin could also wash himself everyday, she thought...

Finally, a dazzling light! The monastery's halls and shrines, crowned with silver tiles, shone bright under the morning sun. After passing the gates, Lin and Niu were separated: one to be bathed by male servants, the other by female ones. How good did hot water feel after such a hard journey! Only cleansed of all outside filth could they be admitted into the presence of the master. They waited for the best part of the day, walking in circles around the marble esplanade and chilling with

every gush of mountain wind. Others were also waiting for their turn to enter the Great Hall: a junior provincial official, a merchant from the imperial capital, a barbarian khan from the northern steppes... Lin was too anxious to speak to anyone, and Niu had fully lost her voice for many days already. At last, after the sun had ran most of its course and begun painting the silver tiles in warm orange, their names were called. With their hearts beating in their ears, they carefully climbed the steps and walked into the Great Hall. Inside, the sheer simplicity of the decor startled them. The large room was completely devoid of ornaments and furniture. This emptiness only enhanced the presence of master Guzi sitting at the center, making him look like a giant, like a great statue of an ancient sage. His brush, his ink pot and his piles of paper also seemed monumental, in their own way. Lin and Niu kowtowed, sat on their knees and lowered their gaze, waiting for their prestigious host to speak first.

“What a pretty couple you two make!” (He laughed.) “Know that I cannot give you any kind of aphrodisiac before you are married.”

As the master expected from his joke, the two faces in front of him were blushing as red as setting suns.

“Mister Lin, lady Niu”, he continued on a serious note, “I am now listening to your wishes”.

“O venerated master”, Lin began shyly, “may I request you things not only for me, but also for my own family members? I hope to observe the teachings of Confucius on filial piety.”

“You may be aware that Confucius was a personal friend of mine, back when we were fellow disciples of Laozi. That was centuries before your great-grandparents were even born!” (He laughed.) “I agree that whatever is for one’s family members must come before what’s for oneself, so I shall gladly accept your request.”

The master took the family wish list Lin handed him, and read it with amazing speed.

“I see. Mister Lin, to be able to produce these things, I will need to gather some information about your family.”

At that moment Niu politely raised her hand, worried that her own wish be forgotten as she couldn’t speak.

“But your potion is already ready, Lady Niu”, the master said, smiling as he withdrew a phial from the folds of his robes to hand it to the astonished young woman.

“How... How is it already ready?”, Lin couldn’t refrain from asking.

“Oh, it has been ready for thirteen years already. When lady Niu last came with her mother, I took care to produce a second dose, for when she’d come back. And here we are.”

“Why not giving it to her mother back then?”

“For the pleasure of seeing lady Niu again, and to prepare for her a more proper treatment once I have the necessary data about her.”

“But... If you had this phial on you... How did you know she’d come today?”

“Mister Lin, nothing is said or done around this monastery that doesn’t reach my ears. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I would like to be the one asking questions. As we are already talking about lady Niu, let’s start with her. Last she came, she was a suckling baby. Now, my information about her is far outdated. With updated information, I might be able to cure her voice ailment for good.”

Lin now gazed at Guzi’s huge earlobes with fearful amazement. He startled as the master said:

“Mister Lin, I will need your help for this. Lady Niu may drink her potion now but her voice will not return before nightfall, so you will have to answer for her. I will be asking simple questions. To start with, what is her favorite meal?”

Lin took time to think. He didn’t know why Guzi needed that kind of information, but he was afraid to disappoint Niu if he gave a wrong answer. After all, to fulfill his promise to his family, she was to become his wife...

“Shrimp dumplings !”, he declared.

He took a brief look at Niu who, thankfully, seemed to acquiesce.

“Very interesting”, Guzi said before continuing. “To whom does she usually go to buy those dumplings?”

“Yongyong.”

Another good answer! Lin now felt a soothing gratitude towards the master. Thanks to him, he could show Niu how well he knew her. Guzi asked ten, twenty, thirty other questions and Lin proudly gave as many correct answers.

"That will be all for lady Niu, the master said. Now let us take care of your family, mister Lin. To make it easier for you, we can start with the family member you are closest with. That would be your little sister Hua, isn't it?" The master didn't wait for Lin to acquiesce before asking his first question: "What is the time of day when she is most likely to go see her lover?"

"Her lover?"

"Of course! His name is Moyang, if I'm not mistaken"

"Moyang? How do you..."

"You haven't answered my question. It will take a long time to go through all your family members, so let us not waste any."

"Well... Now that I think of it, she does sometimes slip away at dusk."

"Good. And how long ago did she have her last..." Guzi cleared his throat and rephrased his question as: "When was she last tired and moody for no apparent reason?"

Lin cringed. The exercise had gone from fun to quite embarrassing. Yet how could he refuse to answer a venerated master? And if he didn't answer, Guzi would not give him anything and his promise to his family would be broken. Lin gulped, took a deep breath and kept on answering all of Guzi's questions about his family members, from his sister to his grandfather. When it finally came time to provide information about his own person, Lin was suddenly quite at ease talking about himself, forgetting his earlier doubts.

"That was all the information I needed", Guzi concluded. "All your orders shall be ready tomorrow at dawn. Mister Lin, you are a virtuous lad and you have my gratitude for answering all my questions so thoroughly and diligently. Therefore, you deserve that I give you something extra. Because your little sister is pregnant, I..."

"She's pregnant?"

"Yes, and I will produce for her a balm against the pain of birth-giving. Apply it on her belly, and her baby boy's delivery shall be painless."

"Her baby *boy*?"

Guzi simply smiled as if it was all obvious.

Niu gasped in amazement as she followed her assigned maid into her room. A large bed, a splendid mountain view and even running water... It seemed too luxurious for a girl from a remote village.

"Your journey must have been so hard", her young maid said, "that such comfort is the least we can offer you. Now please stop blushing and start smiling. You must look so pretty when you smile."

This compliment of course had Niu blushing even more. She had drunk her potion, but was too shy to use her restored voice. The servant kept on talking while making the bed:

"I briefly saw mister Lin as you two were leaving the Great Hall. He looked so grave and gloomy. I'm worried about him. I hope he is not victim to spleen. Should I ask master Guzi to provide him an anti-spleen potion? It would cure him instantly."

"Don't worry, he wasn't in a bad mood before we came here. I don't know what happened to him. Surely he'll get over it."

"I'm happy to hear that. Are you two best friends?"

"I suppose we are, yes. Why?"

"I'm just asking. He is quite handsome, in my opinion. Maybe you should marry him."

"Marry him? I don't know..."

"Why not? Don't you like him?"

"I guess I do but... He's a bit strange sometimes. And I wish he was cleaner..."

"Well, I suppose we could say the same about most men."

The two girls giggled with complicity. The servant finished making the bed and asked:

"Can you tell me more about mister Lin? I'm just curious, you know, about boys from other provinces..."

"Well, he..."

"DO NOT ANSWER HER!", boomed a masculine voice.

Both girls screamed as they saw Lin bursting into the room, angry as a storm.

"Mister Lin, this is the women's quarters!", the maid shouted, "Please leave!"

"No, you leave! Go away!"

The maid ran away. Once the were alone, Niu blurted:

"What was that? You scared us!"

"Don't you see what the maid was trying to do? Everything you'll tell her, she'll repeat to Guzi! He did imply that everyone here is his spy..."

"Well you were the one spying on us just now."

"I just wanted to make sure you didn't reveal anything too personal. My own assigned servant was also trying to ask me questions about you... I'd understand if Guzi needed to know just a few general facts about us, but this... this is too creepy!"

"You are the one being creepy here! Unlike you, master Guzi needs all this information to do all the good things he does. What's the problem this that?"

"How did he know my sister is pregnant? And that it will be a boy?"

"He wouldn't be the great master he is without having some superior faculties to the rest of us, would he?"

"Superior enough faculties to know every single inhabitant from our small village? That means he must know every single person in all of China! Not only that, but he knows each of us even better than we know ourselves apparently: I'm sure my sister still doesn't know she's pregnant. And I had no idea that she and Moyang..."

"Everybody in Shenzhen knew they were into each other, except you! Perhaps if you stopped seeing your little sister as your baby doll... Her femininity bloomed early and she's a woman now, whether you like it or not."

"Sure... But how come Guzi knew about it from ten thousand miles away better than me from the same home?"

"You don't know as much as Guzi because you're not an immortal master like him. It's simple. Now please stop this embarrassing feat of jealousy and go away."

"I'm not feeling jealous; I'm feeling worried! Aren't you also worried that Guzi knows everything about everyone in China, yourself included?"

"I don't worry about it at all. Why should I? *I have nothing to hide.*"

Lin never had time to reply as two large male servants came to drag him away.

Lin did not try to resist as he was brought to the office of the seneschal, the officer in charge of leading the monastery in its day to day affairs. He was a wrinkled elderly man with a beard as long as his years, looking just like the masters of old. Lin stood straight and defiant, bracing himself for a severe rebuking, but he was in no way prepared for what the old seneschal was about to tell him.

"I have very little time to worry about troublemakers like you this evening, for tomorrow morning the emperor is coming."

As soon as he heard the word *emperor*, Lin bowed down and all feeling of defiance flew away like a flock of birds at the sound of thunder. One did not talk lightly about the Son of Heaven.

"I see you are a well mannered lad after all", the seneschal said. "If you wish your bad behavior to be forgiven, you are welcome to help us prepare the arrival of the Son of Heaven."

"It would be a most undeserved honor!"

"Good. My secretary shall find tasks for you to do until sunrise. You can go now."

Lin had reached the door and was about to leave when the seneschal added:

"One more thing, young lad. In my sixty years of service here, I've seen a few other brash pilgrims like you questioning our methods. I never understood why you'd worry so much about us collecting your data. Even if you had something to hide, it wouldn't matter: our archives are written on special encrypting paper the master makes himself, and protected behind doors the master has made so that only our sworn personnel can open them. So your calumnies are completely baseless. But let me

warn you: while the emperor and his court are here, anything you say against the master will be your last words.”

Lin spent the night climbing up ladders to hang garlands and banners wherever the secretary pointed his finger towards. Only once the morning sun spread its light upon the monastery could the exhausted Lin rest and admire the result of his night’s work. The golden flowers on the garlands seemed to be blooming anew, and the dragons sewn on the banners seemed to be flying away with the morning breeze. It was the most beautiful sight Lin thought he’d ever behold. There was a setting worthy to receive the emperor! Feeling content with himself, Lin finally allowed his resting mind to plunge back into the cold water of the previous evening’s memory. *I have nothing to hide.* When Niu said this, it sounded right, because she was too pure and well mannered, but did he himself have anything to hide? He had never lied, never stolen, never disrespected his family. Perhaps he had, one or twice on the road, thrown a quick look towards Niu bathing naked, but the branches always hid everything anyway. He felt a little bad about it, but comparing himself to all the great criminals roaming around China, he decided he indeed didn’t have much to hide. Then, he concluded, perhaps Niu was right after all. As he reached that conclusion, there he saw Niu stepping out into this yellow paradise. He thought she looked just like an empress. As she saw him coming towards her, she took an instinctive step back.

“Oh, Lin, it’s you? What is wrong with you since yesterday? Now you look like you haven’t had any sleep at all.”

“Because I haven’t. Everything had to be ready today for the emperor’s visit.”

“The emperor is coming today?”

Niu’s first instinct was to dabble her hair and dress. She wished she had time to make herself prettier, but now a horn was being blown. Curiosity overtaking them both, they ran together to the monastery’s walls. Once atop the crenels, they gasped in amazement at the sight of the nine hundred horsemen, five hundred infantrymen, ninety elephants, and myriad of servants, eunuchs and concubines enshrining the one emperor of China in the most magnificent of caravans. To the two young peasants from Shenzhen, the notion of a godlike being chosen by Heaven to rule the civilized world was now taking full shape before their eyes. They kept gaping in utmost fascination at the spectacle until they were urged to come down from the walls before the caravan would pass the gates, as no one could stand above the emperor and his court – especially not two peasants. Along with everyone else in the monastery, they kowtowed as soon as the emperor entered the monastery’s ground. In the middle of the prostrated crowd, Lin could not resist the urge to raise his head and take a furtive glance upwards to see the emperor. The Son of Heaven, as he now could see, was much younger than he’d expected, perhaps almost his own age; his gait, though majestic in his yellow silk robe, was quite hasty. Indeed the emperor wanted to see the master most urgently. So let us now leave our two young protagonists for a moment to follow the emperor as he entered the Great Hall.

Guzi kowtowed before the emperor, who in turn showed respect to the master by letting him speak first.

“To what do owe the honor of the Son of Heaven’s visit? Does he wish a remedy for his bellyache?”

“I only ever told my closest eunuch about my bellyache; that you nevertheless happen to know about it isn’t a surprise, master Guzi. That is not the purpose of my visit, however. But I am sure you already know the real reason I came here.”

“I do know it indeed, but I prefer having the pleasure of hearing his imperial highness explain it with his own words.”

“Fine. I have come here to tackle the rebel warlord Yaoyin. He has gathered an army of ten thousand men to terrorize all China. Like a snake hidden in the grass, he strikes then disappears. He is nowhere to be found, yet everywhere at once. After he has made an raid in the North, who knows if he’ll strike the East, the South or the West next? If Yaoyin marched his men on open terrain, visible to all, my armies could attack and vanquish him, but he is too clever. He always uses the

cover of forest, jungle or fog. I tried sending spies, but Yaoyin knew how to neutralize them. So now I turn to your assistance, master Guzi. Tell me his whereabouts, so peace can be restored in China.”

“I am most sorry, o Son of Heaven, but I cannot reveal his whereabouts.”

“Don’t you know possess information about every one of my subjects?”

“I do, but I cannot share it. Personal information must remain private.”

“We are speaking here of the greatest criminal in China. His right to privacy means nothing against his victim’s right to safety!”

“I praise his highness for willing to protect the people, but I have sworn never to reveal any personal information I gather. It is a vow I’ve kept for a thousand years.”

“As you say, master Guzi, you haven’t left this monastery for a thousand years. From the top of this holy mountain, all of China could burn and you wouldn’t feel the heat. As we speak, villages are in flames, men are being massacred, women are being violated... Don’t you care about the Chinese people?”

“Before me, where his imperial highness is sitting today, peasants, merchants and even indigents are sitting on other days.”

Hearing these words, the emperor waddled on his cushion as if the fabric had become rough and itchy. The master pretended not to notice this uneasiness as he went on:

“In recent days, many have come to ask me for protection against Yaoyin’s raids, so I gave them invisibility blankets and unbreakable fences. This is how I save people: not as a spy, but as a master alchemist. If we want to stop Yaoyin for good, I can create glasses that let the eye see through the deepest forests, jungles and fogs. Once that rebel cannot hide anymore, he will be swiftly found and defeated.”

“Can you produce these glasses now?”

“His highness may not wear them himself, for an emperor does not lead troupes on campaign. Instead they may be worn by his loyal generals. Thus I would first need these generals to come here and provide me with some personal data to help me produce glasses adapted to their sight.”

“By the time my generals come here, what if my provincial governors start swearing allegiance to Yaoyin? He’s a better commander than all my generals put together. With the support of a single province he would be able to defeat my armies and...”

The emperor paused, seeing in the master’s eyes that no such arguments would make him break his vow. After all, here was a man who had lived to see many dynasties rise and fall... So the emperor decided to try swaying the master by another method:

“You are being a hypocrite, master Guzi. Don’t you think I know how this monastery makes money? Behind closed doors, you are selling people’s personal data to merchant guilds! If you never ask for money for your services, it’s not by generosity; it is in order to attract more people here so they can provide you with more lucrative data. So, if Yaoyin’s data is for sale, why don’t you just tell me the price?”

“The data we sell are anonymised and about groups of people, such as whole regions, villages or neighborhoods, so merchants know which products are in demand where. We have never sold data about any named individual...”

“Master Guzi, I have come all this way to give you a simple order. If you disobey me, I’ll have to conclude you are a supporter of Yaoyin, and you shall be beheaded. I’ll leave you the rest of the day to reconsider your choice. If at sunset you still persist in your disobedience, your head shall fall before nightfall.”

The emperor stood up and slowly started walking towards the exit, expecting a reaction from the master. Yet the master remained eerily calm and silent, as if he’d been threatened by a small child. For the first time in his life, the young Son of Heaven felt he wasn’t being feared. Astonishment quickly lead to an explosion of anger. He turned back to the master and finally broke completely from his imperial composure:

“Old fool! Decapitation would be too honorable for a scum like you who defends bandits and disobeys his emperor! I happen to have in my possession a precise map of the monastery, which

includes of all its secret passageways and exists. I also have thirteen hundred soldiers with me. That will be enough to block all the ways out of the monasteries and putting it to the torch for you to burn with all your corrupt monks.”

“Your imperial highness, this monastery is a holy pilgrimage site and its sanctity is revered well beyond the borders of China. Would you want to be remembered as the emperor who burnt it?”

“I don’t want to be remembered as the emperor who was usurped by Yaoyin either!”

“Please, your highness, do not use fire...”

“If all of China shall burn in a civil war, I want you to burn first.”

“Mercy! Mercy!”

The emperor felt contempt as he saw the ancient master throwing himself at his feet. He had thrown the table aside and ink was spilled all around him like a blood pool.

“I’ll tell his imperial highness everything he wants to know!”

“Decapitation didn’t scare you, though. Why do you mind burning alive, then?”

“Well...”

As Guzi mumbled a non-answer, the emperor pushed on with a wry smile:

“Tell me the truth. Does your immortality elixir have a flaw?”

“Yes... Yes it does. It is made using the spirit of the Yellow River. As long as the river flows, so does the blood in my veins. Thus, I am like water. Decapitation is nothing to water: separated drops can merge back together. You can stab me in the heart: water isn’t affected by blades. But fire... Fire is water’s opposite. Burnt, the river spirit would escape from my body and leave me to die.”

“Even the great Guzi fears death, then. Very well. You did say you’d tell me everything I wanted to know, didn’t you?”

While this was happening in the Great Hall, a servant came knocking at Niu’s door. The young woman had been busy styling her hair in many different fashions and couldn’t decide which would be the most pleasing to the emperor’s sight. She hurried to curl her hair back in a timeless fashion and opened.

“Lady Niu?”, the servant asked. “You are being summoned to see the chief archivist.”

“The chief archivist?”

“Yes. The seneschal is too busy at the moment, so he let the chief archivist take care of your case. Please follow me.”

Feeling quite excited, even though she didn’t know why she was being summoned, Niu followed the servant to a blue-tiled building behind the Great Hall. There, the servant grabbed a torch and they spiraled down and down in a staircase cut into the bedrock. Getting dizzy from endlessly spinning in the dark, Niu finally asked:

“How deep does it go?”

“Oh, my lady, it goes much deeper than this mountain is high. Working here requires some strong legs. But worry not, we are now only going to the first level below ground. Ah, here we are!”

As they stood before a massive stone door with no handle, the servant said:

“Lady Niu, would you mind opening this door?”

Surprised at the request, Niu put her hand on the cold pane and pushed. Nothing. Embarrassed, she tried pushing as hard as she could with both hands. It didn’t move the slightest. The servant then laughed and, pushing with a single finger, opened the door effortlessly. He explained that this was a joke the monastery personnel often played on visitors, as they could open the archive’s doors when even the strongest man in the world could not. They now stepped into a large room so high the torchlight didn’t reach its vaulted ceiling. The shelves covering the walls were carved into the rock just like the room itself, filled with parchments and bamboo scrolls. As if he had heard the question inside Niu’s head, the servant answered out loud, his voice echoing through the cavernous room:

“These are our oldest archives, dating back from a time when paper hadn’t been invented yet. It is from the third level downwards that our archives start being stored on paper.”

At the other end of the room, a small door led them into to a second, similar room. They continued straight to a third and a fourth room. Niu noticed each room had doors on their four sides, and she

tried to picture the endless grid of underground archives sprawling all around and beneath her. The indoor smell was becoming stronger the further they went, and so was the echo from their steps. Finally, after the fourth room, they entered a small round cabinet filled with ink bottles, brushes and abacuses. In the middle sat the chief archivist, a shaggy middle-aged man. He took a good look at the clueless young woman standing before him, lifted a few sheets of paper from his desk and said: "It is a great pleasure to finally meet you in person, lady Niu of Shenzhen."

"Do you know me, sir?"

"Well, I have spent the whole morning analyzing your data. And I must say I'm not disappointed with the results. First of all, after compiling your data along with those of all young women currently alive in China, it appears that you stand among the one thousand most beautiful."

Niu now blushed a charming shade of red, so the archivist felt it necessary to nuance his conclusion: "Of course, beauty is a subjective metric. This result was obtained using the average from all the imperial concubines selected during the last fifty years as the standard. In any case, this means you are at least worthy of becoming a concubine."

"Oh... Am I truly?"

"And that's not all I've found about you! It also appears your voice ranks among the five hundred strongest in China. You lack any formal training, but your vocal range is exceptionally wide and the potion master Guzi gave you probably improved the overall quality of your voice. Therefore, I concluded with near certainty that you are the singer with the highest potential in China."

"I am most flattered by your words, but... how can you say this, if you have never once heard me singing?"

"I did hear your data sing, and it was delightful!"

Niu now caught herself fidgeting nervously. She only half understood that strange talk about data, but something about it was unsettling her. It was as if an eye was staring, beyond her clothes and even her nudity, into the very depth of her being. Yet this sensation, she found, was also warm and gratifying. She felt seen, understood, valued for who she really was. This made her blush with a mix of modesty and pride.

"I did not summon you here just to share my findings with you", the chief archivist went on. "As you'll be aware, the emperor is currently our guest at the monastery, and we wish to offer him the most pleasant stay possible. This is not only a matter of paying the Son of Heaven his due respect; if the emperor grew displeased with us and stopped coming here regularly, the common people would grow suspicious and would stop coming as well. Therefore, on behalf of the seneschal, I am asking you if you would accept to sing for the emperor today during the feast. You shall of course be remunerated in consequence."

"I... I cannot refuse such an honor."

"Good. I was sure you wouldn't refuse, given what your data reveals about your personality, but I still needed your voiced consent. This servant will now lead you to the imperial orchestra. You will be rehearsing with them until the banquet begins."

After the emperor's arrival, Lin had come to the seneschal to offer his help in preparing the banquet, but the busy old man declined. Instead, he sent him to the baths to be washed. As Lin finally relaxed in the warm water, his fatigue caught up to him and he went to sleep afterwards. When the gong calling the guests for dinner woke him up a few hours later, he was amazed to find a fancy costume in his room – along with a note to give it back after the feast. The warm, sweet smell from the kitchens was filling the whole monastery. All over the Great Hall esplanade, warmly colored by the setting sun and many lanterns, dozens of round tables had been disposed and already covered with appetizing starters. As Lin approached timidly, a servant lead him to his assigned seat. A small paper on the cushioned chair even bore his name. Though the servant swiftly removed that paper so he could sit, Lin remained standing next to his chair for a moment, not believing he indeed had a seat on this sumptuous banquet. Sure, his table was on the edge of the esplanade, well away from the central table where the emperor would sit; nevertheless, attending the same banquet as the emperor was more honor than a peasant could hope! A few other low-born pilgrims were already

sitting around the same table, but none dared touching the jewel-like food yet. Lin tried making conversation with his right neighbor, a peasant lad his age, but he only spoke strange patois he did not understand. The chair on his left remained empty but for a paper bearing Niu's name. Everybody stood up. The musicians started playing some glorious notes as the emperor made his proud entrance, followed by master Guzi, the seneschal, the chief archivist and a few high officials from the imperial court. Once they were seated around the central table, the banquet could begin in earnest. Steamed camel hunches, grilled bear paws, sea turtle legs... The dishes were delightful, on the limit between oddity and refinement. From the stage, the imperial orchestra played rejoicing melodies while the dancers moved like water and wind. Yet Lin couldn't enjoy these pleasures, too preoccupied by Niu's absence. His imagination had already diagnosed her with a thousand different diseases when a new voice arose from the stage. He raised his head, as did everybody else. Her voice became the only voice in the monastery and the mountains around it. Even the servants stopped to listen. The lad next to Lin, who had seldom even heard music before, was hiding his watering eyes behind a towel. Niu was giving a novel tone to a classical song. Lin had often played it with her, but so accompanied by the imperial orchestra, it was something else entirely. When her performance was over, everyone slowly started moving and talking again as if woken up from an enchantment.

Under the cover of the renewed chatter and animation, Niu left the stage and came to sit at Lin's side, looking quite exhausted. A servant immediately came to serve her hot, steaming shrimp dumplings. She ate them with such ferocious appetite Lin held back his congratulations for later. So tired and hungry she was that she didn't notice the court official who stood up from the central table until he'd arrived just behind her, followed by a eunuch. Niu stood and bowed before the official, whom the eunuch introduced as the most honorable minister of the Music Bureau, charged with the preservation of artistic excellence in China. The eunuch wished to talk to the peasant girl on behalf of the minister, but the minister insisted that no buffer of that sort was needed for such a noble voice.

"O Lady Niu of Shenzhen", he said, "I wish to express my admiration for your singing performance. The Music Bureau craves talents such as yours. I have been told that you never had a formal training, but I have trouble believing it. You did have a teacher, didn't you?"

Impressed, tired and blushed, Niu couldn't find the words to answer. Fearing the prolonging silence would become too embarrassing, Lin stood up, bowed and said:

"Lady Niu is with me. We came together from Shenzhen. If I may answer on her behalf, I'm afraid she never had a teacher."

"Well, this is most surprising. Imagine, then, to which new heights her talent would rise with formal training! The Music Bureau can provide her with the best teachers. I am thus formally proposing her to join the imperial caravan back to the capital. I would take responsibility over her. She would be granted the honor of living inside the Imperial City and would have all her needs satisfied by servants."

"O honorable minister, if I may yet again answer for my friend Niu... Your offer is most generous, but we must return to our families in Shenzhen. I am currently the one responsible for her, and I wish for us to return home after this pilgrimage."

"You may wish to return home, but lady Niu may wish otherwise. Why do you want her to come back with you?"

"Well, I made a promise to my family."

"And what was this promise?"

"I promised that... that on our return... I would marry her."

Lin had been bracing for Niu's stinging, shocked look. He had hoped to hide this promise from her until their return, but before the minister, he had no choice but to tell the truth. The disappointed minister wished them a safe journey home and went, leaving the two youths to sit back down in awkward silence. Niu turned her head opposite to Lin and peered into the distance, while Lin plainly contemplated the merry faces of the other banquet guests around them. At the central table,

he saw the Music Bureau minister relating their dialog to the emperor. For a heart-stopping instant the Son of Heaven looked towards Lin, their eyes made contact, and the emperor's displeasure sunk like a claw into Lin's soul. The young man shivered as cold sweat trickled all under his ceremonial dress. He kept on looking at the emperor, fearing he'd order him executed and Niu taken by force. But now master Guzi was saying something which made his highness smile. Then the chief archivist added to Guzi's point, and his highness seemed pleased even more. Lin could only guess they had spoken about Niu.

The next morning, Lin and Niu were kindly asked to leave the monastery. They were told that, though under normal circumstances they would have been welcome to stay for as long as they needed for prayer and resting, the few rooms not already taken by the emperor's court had to be made readily available for new arriving pilgrims. Furthermore, the emperor had decided to extend his own stay by a whole month. Back on the mountain road, Lin walked under the weight of the many silk-wrapped gifts for his family, panting as he struggled keeping up with Niu. She was walking too fast, but he didn't dare telling her to slow down, or tell her anything else to that matter. They'd walk like this in silence, one behind the other, for many long days. Sometimes they felt like talking to each other again, but an inn clerk would ask them whether they were married, or an old couple on the road would comment what a charming couple they made, and their awkward shyness would grow back stronger. All this while, the image of master Guzi and the chief archivist reassuring the emperor was replaying in Lin's mind. What could they possibly have told him about Niu? The impression they were being followed often crept through Lin's spine, but whenever he turned to check, the road behind them was clear. This went on and on until one evening, Lin stopped in the middle of the road and looked around anxiously. Niu walked many yards ahead before she noticed Lin wasn't trying to keep up with her anymore. She turned around and shouted to him:

"What are you doing? Aren't you hurried to return home? After all, you want to... You know..."

"Niu, I think we are lost."

"How can we be lost?"

"We must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. Our usual road was blocked, but I was damn sure this one also led to the Grand Canal. By this evening, we should have reached it already."

"I trusted you to take the right path. Now night has almost fallen, and there are no inns in sight. What do we do?"

"I suppose we'll have to sleep in the open."

"No, I'm not doing that again! Not when I could have been sleeping in my own villa in the Imperial City! Is that how you want to treat a fiance? If you want to marry me, well, treat me better than this!"

"Please stop shouting now! You might attract wild beast, or..."

Lin and Niu barely remembered how they ended up tied at the back of galloping horses, their heads sunk into itching rough sacks; neither could they tell how much time they spent forcibly driven to unknown, dark horizons. Dizziness filled their skulls and thirst burned their throats. Their abductors didn't speak much. One of them once tried groping Niu, but was caught and chastised by the others. Lin guessed these were no mere ordinary brigands interested only by booty, otherwise they'd have killed him and raped Niu already. In the shaking haze of his mind he began assuming those were the emperor's men... When someone finally pulled the sacks from their heads, they found themselves on a small prairie surrounded by deep jungle. It was a moonless night, but a few fires were lit and they could see a camp of loose tents sprawling around them. Lin and Niu struggled not to vomit. A man looking like an officer was inspecting them like cattle. He grinned and told the others that the emperor would be interested in seeing them personally. Lin and Niu exchanged a fearful look. They waited. Lin managed to keep his composure in the face of his abductors, but Niu started to sob, mumbling she wished to go home. Suddenly they were being hit in the back, and someone barked: "Kowtow before the emperor!" Everybody kowtowed. Face against the ground, Lin and Niu heard a voice saying:

"Stop with that kowtow circus! I can't bear seeing people kowtowing, even when it's before me. I may be the emperor, but you're all wasting my time with that silly posing."

As Lin and Niu looked up again, they saw a huge armored man. This man, who was apparently the emperor here, looked down at them with his mean eyes. The battle scars across his face looked terrifying in the dim firelight.

"I've been told these two were picked on the road back from Guzi. I need to thank this old man for being an endless source of booty! Now let's see what we have here..."

And that emperor began unpacking the red silk.

"What's this junk?", he asked.

"These are unbreakable erhu strings", Lin answered. "They belong to me!"

"Sure, they're useless anyway so I'll let you keep them. What else... Oh, it that a remedy for something?"

"That's a balm against the pains of giving birth."

"Useless again! Couldn't you have asked Guzi for unbreakable shields and creams against sword cuts?"

"Go ask for them yourself, Yaoyin!"

"Oh, that's a smart lad we've found here! You guessed my name right, but you shall refer to me as his highness, for I'm the emperor."

"That's strange. I've seen the emperor back in the monastery, and he looked nothing like you."

"That brat has lost the Mandate of Heaven, so his rule is not legitimate anymore. Now Heaven has chosen me to become the emperor."

"This jungle looks nothing like the imperial palace, though."

"Well, I still have to take my palace from the illegitimate brat."

Yaoyin stepped closer to Lin and looked him straight in the eye.

"I like your guts, lad. And you have the brains, too... You know, I hate those uptight scholars and officials who think they're so superior just because they've read dusty, old books. Those parasites are a waste to society, don't you think? For my imperial administration, I want honest and sharp men like you. So join me! In time, I might make you a minister."

"Well..."

Lin thought quickly. If he refused, he knew he'd be executed; if he accepted, he'd become a traitor to his true emperor and face execution if the rebellion failed. It was a choice between dying now and having death hanging by a string above him. He did not want either, so he replied carefully:

"The role of the emperor is the protect his subjects. We are but two humble pilgrims wishing to return home. I am sure his highness would..."

"Stop this. Your emperor is offering you a position by his side. You must give him an answer."

"Well, I am most honored but... We just wish to go home."

"Which is the insignificant village you call home?"

"We're from Shenzhen."

"Never heard of it. What do you think the life prospects of a peasant from Shenzhen are, exactly? If you're born a peasant in Shenzhen, you die a peasant in Shenzhen. We pretend like China is a meritocracy, but we all know that only the rich have the time and resources to study for the imperial examination. If you want to truly rise in this world, you must make your way up by force. But while I'm fighting to take my rightful place as emperor, I want to let others rise in my tracks. It's your only chance. Either join me now or die a peasant."

As Lin heard this reasoning, part of him was tempted to seize the offer. For the first time, and perhaps the last, he was offered to rise above his native peasant condition. He felt like a bird who'd never thought of trying to escape his cage, but now someone had left the door opened. He imagined flying away, traveling the world as he'd dreamed, buying his family a great mansion with many servants to take care of his grandparents, and becoming the husband Niu was hoping for... Yet as he looked at the brutal figure of Yaoyin, he couldn't accept him as the key to his dreams.

"I'd rather die a peasant than helping countless other peasants to die for your ambition."

“Well then, you’ll be executed before sunrise. I hope you enjoyed your short life as a useless peasant. And who is this pretty woman? Oh, now that I see her up close, I think I’ve never seen such a beauty! Is she your wife? No? Good. She’ll become my concubine at once.”

As Yaoyin grabbed Niu, the young woman shrieked and threw a desperate look at Lin.

“Don’t touch her!”, he shouted.

“Or else what?”

Yaoyin and all his men laughed at Lin’s powerless silence. The young man bloodied his wrists trying to break free from the ropes, but alas there was nothing he could do but beg as his screaming friend was being taken away... Then a sound swept through the rebel camp like a strong wind, while fewer and fewer voices were heard all around. Then, it became too silent. The men around Lin drew their swords and nervously turned in all directions. Death came to them all the same. Dark shadows appeared behind them all at once, covered their mouths and stabbed them. Lin braced for their knife as well, but instead, after a few interminable moments, he heard heavy footsteps and the clattering of armor. He opened his eyes and saw a general approaching, followed by an official. This general looked eerily similar to Yaoyin, almost like his twin, though with less scars on his face. The official counted the bodies and listed each of their names.

“Were those the last rebel scums?”, the general asked.

“Yes my lord”, the official answered.

“None survived, then?”

“None.”

“Good. The emperor will be pleased. There hasn’t been such a flawless crushing of a rebellion since the world was made! Oh, and here is our good mister Lin of Shenzhen!”

Lin’s mind still hadn’t caught up to the situation, so he plainly asked:

“You know me, my lord?”

“Well, we did follow you for the past two weeks, though I must admit you look more handsome from the front than from the back! I am general Weixin. The Son of Heaven entrusted me with crushing this rebellion. I must apologize that in the process, you and lady Niu had to serve as our bait to lead us to Yaoyin. We knew he’d sent men to ambush pilgrims, so we blocked the road you should have taken to be sure you’d fall into his trap. But don’t worry, given the analysis of your abductors’ personality, nothing bad was likely to happen to you on your way to here. And now we’ve come your rescue.” He drew a dagger. “Let me untie you myself...”

Thus untied, Lin stood and followed general Weixin around the ravaged rebel camp. Dead bodies were laying all around. Only Yaoyin’s life had been spared.

“Ah, Weixin, so it was you!”, Yaoyin said with a defiant grin as they passed near him. “I never thought you could defeat me. Congratulations. Now tell me, how did you find my camp? How did you know how I’d arranged my defenses?”

“Why would I tell you?”, Weixin answered.

“I’ll die defeated, but at least I don’t want to die an ignorant fool!”

“You’ll die screaming, that’s for sure.”

Weixin and Lin walked on and found Niu wrapped in a warm blanket, crying. She had two kind-looking ladies sitting by her side to comfort her. Weixin explained to Lin that when planning his attack, he had recruited these two female healers because he had anticipated Niu would need support after having been nearly violated. Lin cringed. Sure, he had not been killed and Niu had not been raped, yet he could hardly feel any relief or gratitude. Something wasn’t right in all this. He actually wished Weixin had answered Yaoyin honestly, for he too had those questions.

The next morning, Weixin insisted to guide the youths from Shenzhen around his army camp. He showed them the higher officers’ lavish tents, the stables, the dismountable watchtowers, the cooks preparing food... Lin noticed unusual armored chariots pulled by nine horses each, but the general did not explain anything about those. At the end of his tour, Weixin told them that while most of his army would bring Yaoyin to the capital to be executed, he would personally lead a detachment to escort them both safely back to Shenzhen. He called this a compensation for their earlier ordeal, and

a token of the emperor's gratitude. Niu thanked the general with warm tears, while Lin's thanks were polite only. On the first day of marching, Weixin invited the young man to keep him company in his chariot. The general liked to recall past battles and laughed at his own anecdotes. The next day, Lin was once again welcomed at Weixin's side. Feeling more confident, he asked the general about the strange armored chariots, and whether they were related to his victory over Yaoyin. Weixin gave an evasive answer, and the remaining days, he never asked for Lin's company again. Lin couldn't find friends among the soldiers either, and Niu would spend her time in a special chariot with her two healers. Everyday he plainly stared at the horizon, waiting for home to appear. At last, one afternoon, there was the smoke rising from Shenzhen's chimneys against the glimmering Pearl River. Weixin set his camp at a short distance from the village, and let Lin and Niu run to their respective homes. Lin's his parents were away fishing at this hour, but he was greeted by his grandparents. Both his grandfather and grandmother looked quite pale and worn, though they tried to cover it with a smile. Lin was proud to tell them he had brought back everything they had asked him for. His grandfather asked him to unpack those presents now, impatient to drink the potion against gout Guzi had made for him. Lin opened one of his bags, but paused.

"Where is Hua?", he asked.

"Your little sister is upstairs in her room. She is... Well, she is bed-stricken with illness. You shall see her later. Now please give my potion."

Lin was worried about his sister but, to obey his grandfather, he plunged his hand into the bag and grasped what, from touch, he guessed to be the phial of the anti-gout potion. He unpacked it... It was not a potion phial but a balm pot. And on that pot was written: *For Hua. Balm against the pains of childbirth; apply on the belly during labor.*

"You knew!", the grandfather exclaimed in anger. "You knew Hua was pregnant, and you didn't tell us!"

"I didn't know! Master Guzi is the one who told me she was pregnant. Before that, I was ignorant of it at all, I swear!"

"You are lying. How could master Guzi have known? We have never told anyone about it. Since we discovered she is pregnant, we've locked her in her room and told everyone she is sick."

"You've locked her up?"

"Of course. We want you to marry Niu, but if Niu's family learned about Hua, they'd never accept a marriage offer. Now, though, I come to wonder if you are worthy of such a bride. I thought you were a loyal grandson, but you hid the truth from us. You disappointed us.

Lin tried to tell his grandparents about master Guzi's massive data collection, but they didn't believe him. Giving up on defending himself, he hurried upstairs to see his sister. As soon as he unlocked the door and stepped inside, Hua threw herself into her brother's arms. They spent a long moment hugging and crying. No words needed to be said. Lin could feel his sister's swollen belly against him, as well as the tiny feet kicking inside.

"I won't let them lock you up", he finally said. "Look how pale you are! You need to see the sun, and so does your baby. Common, let's go outside!"

"But grandfather said that if people knew about the baby, our family would be covered in shame. I can't go outside."

"Where is Moyang now? This situation is his doing too. Does he know?"

"I don't think so. The whole village thinks I'm sick. Moyang did try to visit me several times. I heard his voice downstairs. But grandfather has never let him see me."

"Well, Moyang does loves, doesn't he? Then just marry him!"

"It's not that simple. You know how wicked Moyang's father is. If he knows we desperately need this marriage to save our family's honor, he'll ask for a huge dowry which we can't afford. We have no choice but to wait until I give birth, but what will happen with the baby?"

"Don't worry, we can give it to Yongyong and his wife, and ask them to pretend they found it in a basket that washed up on the shore. They always have wanted a child, and our family is on very good terms with them. I'm sure they will accept raising your son as their own."

"But it's my son, not theirs... Wait, so it will be a boy? How do you know?"

Bang! Bang! The siblings startled. Someone was knocking hard at the front door. Lin went downstairs and slid the door ajar.

"Hello again, mister Lin", general Weixin said. "Would you please open this door and let us in?"

"My lord... It would be an honor to receive you... but... why all these soldiers?"

"Your little sisters is upstairs in her room, isn't she?"

"I don't know..."

The general grabbed the door and slid it wide open, letting the soldiers pouring inside the house.

"As you might guess", he explained, "she is under arrest."

"Under arrest? She hasn't done anything wrong!"

"Are you so sure about that? She violated the emperor's law by making a child out of wedlock."

"Since when has making a child out a wedlock been a crime?"

"The emperor established this law just a few weeks ago, and made it retroactive."

"Why would he do that?"

"You see, we can't let more bastard babies be born. Data analysis shows that bastards are twice more likely to become outlaws. Less bastards means less criminals the likes of Yaoyin roaming around China. You do want less criminals to roam China, don't you?"

"Found her!" said a soldier dragging Hua by the hair. The poor girl kicked and shouted, but she might as well have fought against the water while drowning in the wide ocean. Weixin took an upright posture, as if the situation required solemnness, and declared:

"Lady Hua, you will be held in prison until you gives birth; then, you'll be whipped a hundred times and your son will be made into a court eunuch. The emperor is indeed most generous."

Hua's eyes turned to her brother like someone falling from a height would reach for a rope. Lin knew he was her only hope. He thought quickly.

"Lord Weixin", he said trying to keep a dignified composure, "as Hua's older brother, I bear the responsibility over her actions. I knew about her affair with Moyang, and yet I did not prevent it. It is therefore I who should be punished instead of her."

This only achieved making Weixin laughed.

"Ha! Look at this sweet pious brother, taking responsibility for his little sister! That is worthy of a tale! Except we are not in a tale, and we know for a fact that you were clueless about your sister's affair until you learned about it from master Guzi's mouth. Not only are you lying, but you are proving yourself an unworthy brother: by shielding your sister from the consequences of her own actions, do you think she'll grow into a better person? I used to think the nuclear family was the foundation for civilization to rest upon, but now I realize it is the opposite. Petty loyalties to siblings and parents only fester lies, secrets, irresponsibility and division that rot our society away. The great Chinese nation should be our one family, and the emperor our one big brother."

"In what kind of family does a little sister get whipped for her mistakes?"

"The kind where little sisters learn to behave. Enough talking now."

As they dragged her out of the house, Hua started kicking and yelling again. She feared the baby might get hurt. The soldiers replied that no harm would come to her if she just stopped resisting.

Hua's screams had faded into the distance, leaving a heavy silence in the house. Lin started weeping, but his grandfather came and hit him in the face:

"This is all your doing! You've told everyone your sister was pregnant, and now we pay the price for your loose tongue. I hope you feel shame for betraying your family."

"I didn't tell anyone. You heard the general say it: I didn't even know about it until..."

"I'll have none of your excuses. You shall be punished in due time, but for now, we must worry about your sister. Put on your best clothes. In one hour, we shall go and beg the general for mercy."

So they went. The grandfather had not drunk his potion against gout, making the walk to the camp slow and painful. They were allowed inside the camp, and told to wait outside Weixin's tent. While they waited, Lin saw a servant running towards the armored chariots. He opened one of them with a large key, climbed inside and took out a few sheets of paper which he brought to Weixin's tent. A

few moments later, they were admitted into the presence of the general and humbly bowed before him. The grandfather (who had forbidden Lin from speaking a single word) then started listing his family's history of piousness and loyalty. He recalled how his father had died in battle fighting for his emperor; he listed all the donations he had made to various temples throughout the years; he mentioned that not a single member of his family had ever broken the emperor's law until now... Weixin cut him here.

"Are you sure about that, old man? Is your memory starting to erode away?"

"Despite my old age, I think my memory is still good, my lord."

"Then surely you do remember the years you spent as a pirate, don't you? Let me refresh your memory: after your father died, you joined the crew of the most notorious pirate king of the day. Your most notorious feat of arms was raiding no less than three ships carrying tribute to the emperor. Unfortunately for you and your pirate king, the admiral of the imperial fleet at the time was my own father. He had the excellent idea of loading vessels with explosives, and disguising them as treasure-carrying ships. The pirate fleet fell right into the trap and blew up. I was watching from the shore as a little boy, and even at such distance it was the most impressive spectacle I've ever seen! My father caught and sunk the few ships that escaped the explosion, but somehow you slipped through, made it back to Shenzhen, and decided to live the rest of your days as a simple fisherman. Do you remember now?"

Lin had never seen his grandfather trembling like this. He would have never believed a word of this wild piracy story, but his grandfather's speechless reaction revealed it wasn't a complete lie.

"Your granddaughter will not be released", Weixin concluded. "For now, I shall close my eyes on your criminal past. However, if you decide contest the emperor's law again, you won't be met with any mercy."

Lin had to hold his grandfather on his shoulder to help him stumble home. They didn't talk. He tried to picture his grandfather as a pirate... It seemed so wild! Once they had returned to their house, Lin helped his grandfather sit down and brought him his potion. The old man lifted his hand but, instead of grabbing the phial, he hit his grandson harder than the last time.

"You damn shameless brat! Not only did you tell people about Hua's pregnancy, but you also talked about my own past! How could you?"

"I didn't know about it either! Have you really been a pirate? You told me you were a simple sailor."

"That's indeed what I told you. Only your father knew the truth. He must have shared it with you, and you then went around China repeating it to everyone you met!"

"I'd never do such a thing!"

"Of course you did! Who else could it be?"

"It must have been master Guzi..."

"That's it! You betrayed our family, you refuse to apologize and you disrespect your elders, so I don't consider you worthy of being my grandson. You're not anymore welcome in this house. I won't change my mind. And don't stay in Shenzhen either, lest I see your shameful face again. You have until tomorrow evening to pack up and say farewell to your parents. Then, go away and never return."

Under the cover of night, Lin approached the camp with furtive steps. He knew the camp's layout well, so he could find his way to the armored chariots even in the dark. On his back, he carried a bag filled with as much oil and firework powder as he could gather. He hoped it would be enough to burn all the documents sheets stacked in each chariot, along with all the secrets and dreams and intimate thoughts written in them. These chariots were cages where they had locked up people's shadows, and Lin had come to consume these shadows before they could consume anyone else. He stopped to look up. The soldier atop the nearest watch tower was peering away. He walked on. A short distance from the limit of the camp, he stopped again. The night was too calm. Instinctively, he stooped, grabbed a fist-sized rock and threw it forward as far as he could. Where it landed, two soldiers leapt in ambush from behind crates.

“Do you see him?”, said one.

“I don’t”, the other said. “What must have been a bird. It’s strange the lad is not here yet. Look at the moon: now is the exact time we’ve been told he would come. Let’s wait for him a little longer.”

The two soldiers sat back behind their respective hideouts, and Lin hurried back home. Even if he tried again the next night, he knew they’d probably predict it as well. They just had to look at his data shadow mirroring his every moves.

The next morning, Lin decided to walk around Shenzhen and forge one last memory of his native village before he left. He passed the main square and remembered all the songs he’d sung there with Niu; he filled his nostrils with the savory smell of grilled shrimps coming from Yongyong’s kitchen; he watched the fishermen bowing to the shrine of goddess Mazu, praying for her protection before going to sea... He sighed, musing that life in Shenzhen would go on without him... Yet an certain feeling made it hard to believe it would be the same life was before. He rubbed his eyes, looked around him again and indeed, something felt uncanny. This was not the same Shenzhen where he had spent all his years. The main square was too clean and silent; the fishermen were bowing too mechanically; even Yongyong’s shrimps smelled too sweet. Around him, no children were running around shouting and playing stupid games. The men and women of Shenzhen walked by with a measured gait as if it was their wedding ceremony, and greeted each other very politely as if they were addressing the tax collector. Lin hadn’t had any sleep and was filled with sorrow, yet he realized with horror that he too was now grinning and walking upright like another doll in this porcelain village. Judging by the few houses with their door still gaping, Lin understood Hua’s arrest had not been the only one. Everyone understood it. After losing his sister, his family and his home, Lin now realized something else was being taken away from him, something vital. He felt the urge to run away, and thought he must save Niu from this hell. As fast as he could while keeping a contrived gait, he rushed to Niu’s house. Instead of knocking, he quietly sang that melody which they’d used since childhood to call each other. He waited. And waited. He sang again. At last the door slid just wide enough to reveal Niu’s eyes, shining like beads of obsidian.

“What are you doing here?”, she asked.

“Niu, here you are! I’m relieved they didn’t arrest you too!”

“No, why would they? Now please go away.”

“Are you available now?”

“I said you should go away. Please.”

“Wait, we really need to talk.”

“Please, Lin, don’t stay in front of my house. Someone might see you.”

“It’s not normal that you have to fear that! Listen, I’m leaving Shenzhen and...”

“Me too. I’m also leaving Shenzhen.”

“Really? Let’s go together! Niu, wait, please...”

She had shut the door. Lin lingered, and held back his tears as he sang their melody on a minor key. Niu opened again slowly.

“Lin, because it’s you”, she whispered, “let’s talk one last time. Under the old stone bridge after nightfall. We’ll go separately. Make sure you’re not being seen as you go.”

“Alright, but...”

The door slid shut again.

Lin waited in the gloom under the bridge, listening to the black water’s loud whispers. He was sitting on the bag that contained all the belongings he’d take with him in exile. He stood up as soon as he felt Niu’s coming towards him.

“Niu, listen to me”, he started hastily. “There’s a ship sailing tomorrow at dawn for the Southern seas. I have enough money to pay for both of us to be on board. We’ll be able to explore many different kingdoms and see where we want to settle down eventually. We can’t wait any longer.”

“Wait, what are you talking about? Did I just hear you say you want me to get on a ship with you to some barbarian realms? Have you lost your mind?”

"You said you wanted leave Shenzhen too, didn't you? I think all of China has already turned into the same hell as Shenzhen, so we need to leave the country altogether."

"No, you misunderstood me: I'm leaving Shenzhen tomorrow to go to the imperial capital. I've received a letter from the Music Bureau. They've invited me to..."

"Don't go! You'd be jumping straight into the tiger's den!"

"How dare you tell me what to do? You must be jealous of my talent. I'm going to become the greatest singer in China. This will surely allow me to be accepted as a concubine. And then... Perhaps the emperor will decide to marry me, and I'll become the empress!"

Lin had a joyless laugh. He picked a pebble, threw it hard against the river.

"How convenient, isn't it?", he exclaimed. "My family gets dishonored, preventing your family from accepting me marrying you, just in time for the emperor to claim you! What a coincidence!"

"What are you implying? I was invited by the Music Bureau because of my talents, and your sister was arrested because she violated the law..."

"A law which the emperor made right after discovering your talent! That creepy tyrant destroyed my sister's life just to make sure he could get his hand on you. Don't you understand that?"

"How dare you insult the Son of Heaven? You should be grateful he saved us from Yaoyin!"

"Yes, after he used us as a bait to find him. Yaoyin was about to rape you!"

"But he didn't, because we were saved! And I feel honored we played a role in stopping that monster. So should you."

Lin didn't know what to reply. He wanted to save Niu, but she didn't want to save herself. He threw another pebble that ricocheted on the water. On her side, Niu thought her friend's silence meant he had started to hear reason, so she decided to push on.

"Yaoyin won't be the only criminal brought to justice", she continued with enthusiasm. "Now that emperor can know the identity and whereabouts of any criminal, he can arrest them all swiftly. Isn't that wonderful? Soon, there won't be a single criminal left roaming in China!"

"So you're saying my sister is a criminal? Love and carelessness were enough to make her a criminal?"

"Well, she did violate the emperor's law."

"And if the emperor decides it's a crime to have a very beautiful voice, would that make you a criminal too?"

"Don't be ridiculous. *I have nothing to hide.*"

"No, I don't believe that! With Guzi's data, the emperor can predict all of our slightest thoughts and actions. Haven't you seen how polite and contrived people in Shenzhen were today? They act like automatons because they are afraid of committing the slightest infraction."

"How is that a bad thing? I've seen that our village is cleaner and safer, and that made me quite happy."

"But we're not automatons, we're humans. You are perfect to me, but you are still a woman of flesh and bones. You may try turning into a porcelain doll, but porcelain breaks easily, and the emperor will eventually find a crack on you."

"How can you be so sure of that? If you're worried about all this, it means that unlike me, you do have something to hide, don't you?"

Lin was about to reply with more counterarguments, but suddenly he felt the urge to agree.

"You're right", he sighed. "There is something I've been hiding. I love you. I want to spend my life with you. I don't care if we have to keep running away, as long as we're together."

"Lin... Oh... You're not serious, are you? Listen, Lin... You are a good friend, but my destiny is greater than running away with you to unsafe barbarian realms. Soon I will be living in the Imperial City, and then, perhaps, I'll even be living in the Imperial Palace."

"And what if the emperor decides ambition is a crime?"

"You're being ridiculous! The emperor's law is fair and square."

"At least until his men come knocking at your door to arrest you."

"I'm tired of this silly debate. If you want to leave China, then go without me! Just know that in those barbarian lands, you won't find safety."

“But I’ll find freedom. And I prefer freedom.”

THE END