

## Cloud Fortress

In the ninth month of the siege, suicide was made legal for women and the elderly.

In the thirteenth month of the siege, brothers killed each other for the flesh of their parents.

Today was the first day of the sixteenth month. Dorje stood guard against the wooden battlements at the top of north eastern tower, just out of the shade. This shouldn't have been his job, but it had long passed the point of station meaning more than ability.

The sun was nearing its height and it was time for the last patrol of his watch. He stepped down the winding stairs of the tower, holding himself up by the wall pressed against his right hand and the spear grasped in his left, stopping by each balistraria to reapply the glue holding the arrows in place and each balcony to adjust the helmets on the scarecrows so the straw would not be caught in the light.

Chime greeted him from the walls on his last step.

"Good work, Captain." She bowed, and held out her hand for his spear.

"Please, my lady." He bowed in response, holding out his empty hand. "Allow me to see you to the battlement."

She did not fight him, she never did, and placed her hand in his. "Thank you, Captain."

Chime had to ascend the stairs sideways, as the leaves in her boots took up more space than her own two feet. Dorje, now supporting the weight of two, no matter how small his second might be, understood what it was like for every step to be pain. But, even in this moment, did not dare to imagine what it would be like to be her.

At the battlement, he handed her his spear, moved over an empty gunpowder box for her to stand on and sat down, resting against the merlons.

“Will you not return to the barracks, Captain?”

“I am too tired to walk,” Dorje spoke true. “So I will rest here for a moment first.” Dorje lied.

With someone there who would wake him up, he was a little less afraid of the shade and the cool restful winds. And yet, with Chime on the top of the walls, a handful of steps closer to army of a hundred thousand waiting just beyond, he found it difficult to relax.

“My lady.”

“Your orders, Captain?”

“If you get too tired—” he turned to her.

“That is okay, Captain. Please, get some rest.” She smiled, but did not meet his eyes.

He continued looking at her, studying her, noticing how—despite being twice his age—her face still betrayed a childish complexion even with her hair tied around her chin and how—even with the coat of vellus hair standing on her arms—always smiled whenever she spoke.

The second time they met was sixteen months ago. The first time was many years ago. He wondered if Chime remembered that time. She smiled at him that time, too, with the same smile that did not reach her eyes.

It was right after the northern campaign during the first rebellion. Dorje was made captain then, after his predecessor had fallen. As was his new responsibility, he made the rounds on the march back, visiting the families of those he once knew.

He knocked on Chime’s doors with a case of silver tael tucked in his arm.

“Good morning, my lady, I am the Captain of the Rear, representing the Northern Subjugation Forces. We were unable to recover his body.” He had handed her the case in haste as he realised he had not yet learnt what words to say or the order in which to say them. “Your

son martyred himself in service of the empire, my lady. We will remember him always as a hero.”

“That is good to hear.” She received the gratuity with both hands. “Though I would prefer if he had come back to me instead.”

He remembered how she smiled at him as she said that.

And he remembered how he felt her watch him leave.

For the first four months of the siege, he avoided the street on which she lived. In the following months, when the civilians were only given grass and barley, he would stop by just before the sun rose and leave his rice ration by her door. Nine months in, when the women were first divided into those who would fill the ranks and those who would be eaten by those who remained, he argued for her to join the younger, taller women on the walls on basis of her seemingly good health despite the conditions.

When they met on the walls, he could no longer avoid speaking to her. But in all this time, she had never once brought up anything but the present and the future.

Dorje was not sure for how long he closed his eyes, though he knew he did not sleep. When he opened them again, Chime was still standing over him, on that gunpowder box, with the momentarily empty valley reflected in her eyes. He wondered if Chime wanted to speak to him about her son but did not bring him up or if she preferred those who found peace to be left to rest.

The angle of the setting sun revealed a fresh bit of moss in the crevices. Dorje’s fingers were thinned enough for him to pick it out by the roots offer it to Chime.

“My lady.”

“No, thank you,” Chime said. “You should have it.”

He knew she would relent if he asked again. But maybe she, too, knew things worse than hunger. And maybe, if the burdens of guilt and hunger must be shared, it would be better for the heavier to fall on him.

Brushing it against his fingers, he placed it in his mouth and rubbed it against his teeth with his tongue. Upon realising how dry and hollow it was, he wondered if he should have left the dirt on or if it would have not made a difference.

“Your men are worried about you, Captain.”

He knew. His retinue, or at least the few that remained, cared more about him than themselves. There was a period of time, after the colour white was banned as if the rebel scouts could not see the unstopping pillow of yellow smoke or the acrid smell of burning flesh, when he could not keep track of how many was no longer with them. It felt then like standing over the cliff and hearing the air calling you to jump, being unable to mourn properly or even remember who it was that he should have been mourning. Now that was easy to tell who had died by simply counting who had not, that feeling still did not leave.

“Your men refuse to eat flesh on your account, Captain,” Chime continued. “I am not in a position to question your decisions, but I would like to know why if you are willing to share.”

He would have preferred if the men would eat as he spent his nights wondering whether to count their deaths as their own responsibility or his. But, at the end of the day, they were soldiers, and soldiers followed by example.

“My lady, I am afraid of the contempt of my ancestors should I partake in such a sin,” Dorje answered. “I am more afraid of that than I am of death.”

“You must forgive me once more, Captain, but what do you believe your ancestors would think if you chose death over life?”

Dorje looked up, but despite the clear skies, could not see the heavens nor the expressions on those who resided there. He had been taught which are virtues and which are sins in the eyes of the ancestors, and what counts as a virtuous death beside what counts as a sinful death, but they were, nonetheless, people he had never met.

The first of his retinue to die did not succumb to illness, give in to starvation or fall in battle. He was killed for a misdemeanour, as he had intended. It took some weeks after the ban on white for all punishments beside execution to be removed. Military doctrine teaches that an army that gives too many rewards has loyalty problems while an army that deals too many punishments has supply problems. But one does not need to be well read to see what is in front of them.

When all the corpses had been eaten but before the civilians began to be sacrificed, he wore white one day so that others could survive without the sin of murder. Dorje knew how the ancestors of those he had saved would meet him in the heavens, but could not imagine how his own would meet him nor how they would the ones he saved when their time comes.

“My lady, I do not know.”

“Do you have children?”

“No.”

The following silence was only a few seconds, maybe less, but it was too much to bear, even more than the hunger.

“I married after returning from the first campaign, but was called again to serve in the second before we had a child.”

“So, captain, it is possible you could have a child.”

“Yes, I suppose that is possible.” It was not something he had thought about and he preferred to continue not thinking about it, but it was no longer possible. He could have a daughter or a son, he could not deny it. And, if he did, they would be there in the warmth of the Riverlands, without feeling the encroachment of fear and hunger but with a father they have not seen and may never see. Dorje felt genuine unabated anger. He did not know to which it was responding to.

“How—” he had another chance to stop himself, but, this time, chose not to take it. “How are your children, my lady?”

“My second son passed the exams last year and moved the capital.” She smiled. “I have not heard from him in a while, but I hope he is doing well.”

“It is good that he is not here, my lady.” He looked up at her, looking for if the response to her omission can be found in her expression. But she showed her only the one expression he had ever seen. “If only you could be there as well.”

“I do miss him, Captain, but the knowledge he is safe is good enough.”

“But surely, living within the capital’s defences—”

“Do you know, Captain, what it means to be a parent?” She interrupted him for the first time since they met. “It means to be proud in a moment when a stranger would be envious.”

Dorje closed his eyes and thought of the child he may or may not have. He tried to imagine that they did exist and that they were well-fed and protected in the arms of their mother and his wife. He tried to feel proud for them. But his blood ran just as slow in his veins and the wind bit just as deep into his neck.

“I hope that I can meet my children one day.”

“But, Captain, why would you not? If not this year, then surely the next.”

“I find it difficult to count the remainder of my life in years, my lady.”

“You mustn’t think like that, Captain.”

Dorje opened his eyes to see Chime crouching down and meeting his eyes on an even plane.

“Those kinds of thoughts should be left to those who have already lived.”

But Dorje also knew that those kinds of thoughts were a constant in the minds of the soldiery. In the fields, when armies met, men would throw up and shit themselves in the days without battle. Then, in the days preceding a battle, when they have already become accustomed to facing the enemy all day before standing guard all night surrounded by the moans of the sick and the hanging bodies of captured deserters, they no longer see a difference between dying in battle today and dying of another reason tomorrow.

“Captain?” Chime’s voice brought him back once more.

“Yes, my lady?”

“I apologise, Captain.” He noticed she was now sitting on the box. “But I cannot get up, could you please help me?”

Dorje rose more easily than he expected and picked her up into his arms. Somehow, she with the spear in her hands, felt lighter than just the spear itself.

“Please, take a break, my lady.” He laid her in his spot against the merlon. “I am feeling well-rested now, I can take the rest of the watch.”

As Dorje reached to take back his spear, Chime took his hand into both of her own.

“Wait for a moment, Captain. I hope you do not mind me saying this, but I believe that if you were to choose to live, your ancestors would be proud and your descendants would be grateful.” She released his hand. “That is all I had to say. Please, do what you must do, Captain.”

As he took the spear, Chime's fleeting warmth still lingered on his fingers. And, for the first time, he saw on her face a smile that reached her eyes.

Unable to find a respond, he moved the box aside and took up his position on the north eastern watchtower, held up only his spear.

"My first son died a hero," Chime said. "Though I would have preferred if he had come back to me instead."

When she said those words, Dorje did not look back. But he wished he did. He would have wanted to know exactly when it was she closed her eyes for the last time.

That night, the soldiers for whom it had been the longest since they last ate gathered in the temple and Dorje saw the golden plaques of the ancestors for the first time. Chime's body, cleaned and coated in aromatic oils, laid upon a stone altar in the centre of the sanctuary. As the priest entered the sanctuary, he bowed to the body and reached into her white robes to retrieve one of her wrists.

The soldiers knelt before the altar and beneath the plaques, tied their hair up in a white bandana and pressed their foreheads to the floor. One at a time, they raised their heads to receive a cup of blood from the priest.

When it came Dorje's time, he rose without opening his eyes.

"Tonight, the faithful gather to honour the sacrifice of a virtuous citizen of the empire."

Though the priest was before him, Dorje found it hard to hear his words and could only think of the white-clad soldier who had chose the death of himself over the death of others and had even allowed his commander to deal a legal punishment rather than have anyone be forced to commit murder. All in the fortress were thankful for his actions, whether by the sustenance he



provided them or merely for the way in which he took their place. But he must have had children and, even if he did not, he must have at least had parents. They must have preferred if he had come back to them, rather than dying a hero.

“Lady Chime, clanless, mothered a warrior, providing security for the empire, and mothered a scholar, providing prosperity to the people, now provides once more.”

Dorje thought of the Chime’s second son and whether or not they would ever meet. He wondered if they would ever meet. He would want to thank him for the sacrifice of his mother as he was no unable to thank her directly. But he would also not look him in the eyes, as no matter the manner in which his mother died, he would, too, certainly have preferred if she had come back to him.

“We, the ones you have saved, accept the gift of life.” The priest led.

“We, the ones you have saved, accept the gift of life!” Dorje and the soldiers chanted in response.

“We, the ones you have saved, pledge that we will honour you as our mother and our descendants will honour you as their ancestor and make sacrifice and offering in your name.”

“We, the ones you have saved, pledge that we will honour you as our mother and our descendants will honour you as their ancestor and make sacrifice and offering in your name.”

Dorje and the soldiers chanted in response.

“We, the ones you have saved, receive the blood of the mother.”

“We, the ones you have saved, receive the blood of the mother!” Dorje and the soldiers chanted in response, lifted the cup to their lips and drank the blood.

As they waited at the foot of the temple steps, Dorje noticed how some of the soldiers would occasionally rush to wipe the drool from their chins and bite their lips and how others

would be unable to stay still, searching their mouths for another taste of blood. As the smell of burning flesh wafted from the inner chambers into the courtyard, he found it hard to remember Chime's face through the hunger. When plates of roasted meat were placed before each of them, only a few rushed through their prayers while the others skipped them entirely. In the moment when Dorje raised the meat to his lips, he could not remember Chime at all.

When the meat passed through his throat and he tasted blood on his tongue once more, his life returned to him alongside the memories.

He looked to the heavens but a sheet of clouds hid what lie beyond the skies.

Dorje hoped, briefly, that the clouds would part so that he may give Chime the thanks he was not able to say when they were together on earth. Yet, in the same moment, he also hoped that the clouds, which hid the heavens from him, would also hide him from the heavens, if even just for a moment, so that the ancestors would not be forced to share in his shame.

But if the clouds were not enough to hide this damned fortress from the blessed land, may Chime receive his gratitude and may the ancestors find some way to be proud of the decisions he had made.