

Prompt: Write the tragic death of a hero preceded or succeeded by the birth of a villain.

Qin closed her eyes as her last breath issued forth from her lips, her final heartbeat echoing through her mind like a temple gong. She had done all that had been asked of her and more for a hundred and one years, a hundred and one of the most prosperous and peaceful years the Three Kingdoms had ever known. Her title of Holiest was well earned, and there was little doubt that her dynasty would be a testament to the unity of the Kingdoms. Thus she died without regrets, save that she would not see her sons continue on the good work she began.

"Ah, but what if you could?" She knew immediately who the voice belonged to: Trickster, her ancient nemesis and patron spirit of discord. "What if you could be there to see through their eyes? You certainly have the drive to remain as a dynastic spirit, to watch over them through the veil. I can assure you none would judge you for it." As always, Trickster sang to her in her own voice while clothed in her own form, a single point of colour and noise in a sea of black and quiet.

"You would have me resist the cleansing of my soul? Reject my reincarnation and deny a mother her child?" Qin turned her gaze from Trickster. "You seek merely to torment me with visions of my family and no way to interact with them, nothing more."

Trickster laughed the way she used to laugh in her youth. "You think so little of me? I come to you not to further our rivalry but to congratulate you for a game well played. Every one of my schemes you quashed, every trap avoided. In all honesty, I've not had such fun in centuries!" The spirit wandered through the void into her field of vision casually, as if merely out for a garden stroll. "Perhaps the songbird requires richer seeds before she comes to perch? I imagine you've heard at one point in your long life the whispered rumours of dynastic spirits with the power to influence their descendants, not merely observe through their senses. What if I told you they were not mere rumours?" Trickster offered her a grin not of malice but of genuine amusement. "Imagine how much more good your sons could do with you by their sides. Surely a little guidance couldn't hurt?"

Qin felt the familiar tug of temptation and the equally familiar desire to reject it. She'd become quite adept at it after countless decades of dealing with Trickster, and yet this time felt different. Her whole life she had denied herself all but the most basic of pleasure, but now that she had died things were different. *What harm could come from accepting just this once? Haven't I earned this final gift?* She thought to herself for a fraction of an eternity before responding. "Very well. I have but one condition, that I be allowed to rejoin the natural cycle of souls at a time of my choosing."

"So it shall be." Trickster placed a thumb over each of her eyes to brush her eyelids. Instinctively she recoiled, opening her eyes with a start and quickly becoming overwhelmed with the flood of images that followed. She saw her body lying in her bed, once from the right and once from the left. She saw her grandson looking at her as she played a children's game with him, and she saw her granddaughter doing the same. She saw through every eye in her dynasty, her twin sons and five grandchildren, and she heard the myriad sounds of the world she left. As Qin reeled from the sudden influx of sensation, she heard her own voice one last time. "You were a worthy adversary, Holiest Qin. It was my honour to spar with you these long years past. Rest well." Trickster's words held a note of melancholy as the spirit bid the legendary hero farewell.

...

Qin's plan had been to observe and guide her dynasty for only a year or two to keep the balance during what she was sure would be a brief period of uncertainty following her death. Crisis after crisis soon forced her to re-evaluate. First it was a drought leading to a minor famine, then an increase in banditry as remote towns struggled to maintain the prosperity they had grown so accustomed to. No sooner had the rains returned than an arranged marriage fell apart, straining the peace between kingdoms she had worked so hard to create. One by one the cracks in her perfect world began to spread, and one by one her sons ignored them.

She kept her influence subtle, unwilling to compromise the freedom of mind of her own flesh and blood. She limited herself to errant thoughts and whispered messages in dreams, hoping to coax her sons into action. For a while they listened half-heartedly, providing solutions that were temporary at best. In time, the twin sons of Holiest Qin grew to resent their mother's influence and took steps to limit it. Talismans were crafted and occult rituals were performed to exorcise whatever spirit had blighted their bloodline, never knowing that it was Qin herself watching through their eyes.

She watched as her sons used her name to command authority and evade responsibility. She watched as they each became an advisor to a king and slowly wove a noose around the third king's neck. She watched as the third kingdom lashed out in desperation, burning the treaty she wrought to fuel the fires of war. She watched as the alliance of the Three Kingdoms split entirely, brother turning on brother as paranoia grew in proportion with greed. She watched as her life's work spanning nearly a century crumbled to ash mere years after her death, and she wept.

By the time the first of her sons died the tears had stopped. The Tyrant Sons of Qin now numbered only one, the survivor wrapped in a veil of mystic protection such that no spirit could penetrate it. Her grandchildren had no such protection, however, and it was almost comically easy to orchestrate her second son's death at the hands of his own daughter. Qin desperately tried to convince herself that ending such a cruel man's life was an act of heroism, but her arguments felt hollow and contrived even to herself.

When her granddaughter ascended to her father's station and proved to be a perfect fit for his iron fist, all of Qin's reservations about overt methods of manipulation melted from the heat of her rage. She had devoted her life to bettering the world, denied herself even so much as a day's rest, sacrificed all she had and more for others, all to be repaid with betrayal and deceit. As the war yet raged amongst the kingdoms, Qin began making plans for the subjugation of her wayward dynasty. Those who accepted would be rewarded, while those who resisted would be culled. *One day*, Qin vowed to herself, *one day I will bring peace again.*

...

Dao waited patiently outside the room where his wife would soon give birth. It was an inauspicious night with the foul portent of a new moon looming in the sky, wrapping him in a darkness only barely kept at bay by the light of his torch. He could only pray that nothing unforeseen would happen, that the madness that plagued his parents would pass him and his child by. He muttered silent prayers to any spirit that would answer, begging for health, for protection, for anything that could

possibly ease the painful process going on behind the nearby doors. All that was left was for him to hope it was enough.

“Ah, but what if you could do away with the theatrics and know for certain?” Dao recognized the voice immediately – his own. He whirled, illuminating by the light of his torch a face he had only ever seen on the far side of a mirror. “What if I were to offer you more than mere protection for you and your family, but a life of plenty and comfort?”

Dao staggered back, trying to make any sense of what was happening. Who was this stranger who so perfectly mirrored him? How could he reply to such an offer? It wasn’t until his mind had cleared that he realized he was already responding. “We both know such an offer is beyond you, Trickster. Surely no man would fall victim to such a blatant lie.”

The figure before him wavered, its flesh rippling as its form shifted to that of a young woman. Now it was Trickster’s turn to stare at Dao with amazement. “Impossible! It cannot be you, clearly this is some form of sorcery! Or perhaps a disguise, but it cannot be you! It cannot!”

Dao’s lips once again formed words without him, twisting into a cruel grin. “But it can, my dearest Trickster. Surely you cannot be surprised that your final trick worked as intended? I watched my life’s work fall to ruins, my dynasty topple under the weight of its own corruption, and yet you are surprised when I confront you for it? You’ve won, Trickster. Have you no desire to savour your victory?”

“This is no victory of mine! I intended for you to watch your sons fail, yes, but never to this degree! Do you truly believe even I could be so cruel?” Trickster lifted their hands into the torchlight, noticing for the first time the countless bloodstains dying both forearms a deep crimson. “Dear friend, what have the years done to you?” The spirit whispered breathlessly, their face a perfect mask of horror.

“How ironic, then, that your greatest triumph was not yours at all.” Dao felt whatever being was puppeting him force him into a sneer. “In some ways I suppose I must thank you, Trickster. Without you, the lessons this past century has taught would forever go unlearned. And what lessons they are, what wisdom they hold! Never before would I have guessed that man was so unfit to rule, that true harmony grows only from the point of a sword.” Dao’s throat choked out a harsh approximation of a laugh. “I think it time that I return my soul to the land of the living, as per our arrangement. It is good fortune indeed that my great-great-granddaughter should be born on the hundredth anniversary of our pact, is it not?”

Trickster’s eyes shifted between gore drenched palms and Dao’s hideously distorted smile, shock still written across their stolen face. “Holiest Qin, what has become of you? How could you even consider such a thing?”

“Must you still call me that? I hardly think Holiest is a fitting title for me after all these years.” Dao’s face began to ache as his smile widened further. “If you must title me, I would much prefer Eternal.”

In the room beyond and in the formless void, a pair of eyes opened for the first time.