

Chenting, in the Land of the Dead

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In the end, the only job that presented itself was the governorship of a remote province in the land of the dead. Chenting was the name of the place, and the scholar and his concubine Ah Lien talked of it often as they lay entangled in their sweaty robes after lovemaking.

It would be a place of fields, he said. The peasants will farm rice and raise oxen. The air will smell a bit like the smoke from the fake money that is burned to give one influence among the dead; but it will also be rich with perfumes, the scents that only dogs and pigs can smell in this world.

No, she said. It will be like distant Tieling, where the fields lead up to the mountains, except that the mountains will never stop but will go up and up; and snow will blow like dust across the fields, and the sky will be the purple-black of a thundercloud's heart or a marten's wing. And it will be lonely, she said, and held him tighter, pressing her face against his neck.

He was dying; they both knew that. The man with the eyes of smoke, the man who had come to tell him of the post at Chenting, had said so.

"But I'm waiting to hear how I did at the examinations!" the scholar had said to him. "I was hoping for a position, ah, somewhere."

The man bowed again, as he had at the start of the conversation: as before, the bow seemed both perfunctory and punctilious. "And well you might hope. Hope is the refuge of the desperate. But let me be candid here. You're poor, and can't afford the bribes or fees for anything better than, let us say, a goatherdship. And this governorship in Chenting, in the land of the dead, is available immediately."

The scholar stroked his chin. "But I'm not dead."

"You will be soon enough," the man said. "It is as certain as, well, taxes."

The scholar frowned. "Are there no other candidates for this position, that you're looking for a living man to fill it?"

"As I have said, you will not live for much longer, making this point moot. "

"Are there other dead candidates?—Or soon to be dead," the scholar added.

"Well, yes, there are always candidates. But I expect you could get it." The man with eyes of smoke made a gesture like two coins clinking together.

"But—" the scholar began and stopped. "I must consult."

The man bowed yet again and left.

"Well?" the scholar said to the empty room. There was a soft brushing of fabric and Ah Lien glided from behind the patched screen with the painted camellias. She was better than he deserved, the lovely Ah Lien, with eyes as narrow and long and green as willow leaves—better than he could afford; but her birth was common and the eyes were considered an eccentricity for a woman in her position.

"You heard." He said. A statement, not a question. Of course she had heard: she was one ear, he was the other.

"Chenting," she whispered. "In the land of the dead. When must you leave, my lord?"

And that was that. There was no choice about his dying, only about his position in the scheme of things after his death, and both knew it was better to be a dead governor than a dead scholar.

But he lingered for a time with her, and they talked often of Chenting.

The governor's palace, he said, will be built of white stone and then plastered over, so even where the plaster has cracked the walls glow like bleached silk. And the roof is covered with ceramic tiles the color of daylilies. The gardens are countless enclosed roofless areas, each filled with hanging baskets containing small pines whose needles chime when one passes.

No, she said, the gardens are cold and abandoned. Winds blow through the empty rooms, and sometimes one sits by an unglazed window, watching the patterns made by dead leaves blown in the air.

It can't be like that, he said. It must be as I see it.

If it is, she whispered, summon me to your side and I will go.

They had already decided she couldn't accompany him. The man with eyes like smoke had said nothing of her, and Ah Lien was understandably reluctant to die. She loved the scholar dearly, but she had aging parents to consider, and an ancestral shrine to tend. Still: she was willing.

His death when it came was a comparatively simple one. He coughed a bit as the winter began to take hold. Ah Lien held him close and warmed him when chills shook him. Then they talked of Chenting.

The bedrooms of the governor's palace, he said, and he paused to catch his breath. The bedrooms have braziers of porcelain shaped like horses, and each horse bears a silver saddle on its back, and each saddle holds a fire of charcoal. The smoke that curls up smells of sandalwood and jasmine. And the bed is soft, covered with silk, with pillows carved of black wood. And the pillow book there has positions we have never imagined!

No, she said, the beds at Chenting are cold and narrow and hard, made of wheat husks in hemp bags. The smoke smells of funeral biers, but the fires are cold and colored the blue of foxfire in the marshes at night. "Do not leave me, my love," she said.

"I will send for you," he promised, and died.

When he awakened in Chenting he was amazed at first at how well he felt. There was no pain, no trouble breathing, no aches from holding a brush too tightly or walking in new shoes. And Chenting was everything he had imagined and more. The fields were lusher than he had expected, and seemed to be near harvest. The air smelled as rich as he had dreamed. And he had much money to spend, for Ah Lien had sold her hair ornaments to buy paper money, and burnt it so that it would follow him.

He missed her and wanted her beside him, and since Chenting was warm and beautiful and not like the cold visions she had predicted, he sent a message to her. "Come," it read. "I have seen Chenting and it is as fair as I envisioned. The birds are the colors of flames, and their songs are sharp as the crackling of fire. Come be beside me." He sent a messenger off with an entourage, to show her the honor she deserved.

The messenger returned. "She is coming," he said.

Many days later, the entourage at last arrived, brilliant with tassels, loud with flutes. The governor of Chenting straightened his cap and calmed his heart, and descended the red stairs leading to the courtyard where his entourage milled around the sedan-chair he had sent for her. He brushed aside the chair's gold-thread curtain. "Ah Lien—" he began.

For an instant he heard Ah Lien sobbing, and then that was gone. The sedan-chair was empty and silent.

The governor of Chenting stormed and raged and ordered great punishments for the entourage, who had failed to keep her safe. But even as he wept and cursed, he knew what had happened.

He had found Chenting just as he had expected, a place where an old man's pains were eased. But she had imagined another Chenting, a place where youth is irrelevant and even beauty is lonely. He didn't know the Chenting she had gone to, but he knew it was not his.