

# Fire in the Lake by Chris Roberson

## Wood-Dragon year, 21st year of the Yongle emperor

From his courtyard, the late summer blooms already closing their delicate petals for the night, Jurist Xi San could see a pillar of smoke rising to the northwest of the city, sign of some distant fire past Kunming Lake. Having finished his evening meal in accustomed solitude, Xi sat beneath the open sky as the sun began to set, packing his long-necked silver pipe with tobacco. It was cheap, foul-smelling stuff, but it served to calm his spirits, and settle his thoughts.

Xi had smoked halfway through the first bowl, eyes lidded, his arms folded across his chest, when a polite cough from behind disrupted his meandering reverie.

“Good evening, Fai, sister’s son,” Xi said, without turning around.

“Uncle, how do you always know that it is me?”

Xi opened his eyes, and repositioned on his bench, to face the boy standing at the courtyard’s entrance. In the boy’s features, Xi could see reflected the countenance of his sister, dead these many years, though in the boy’s eyes were something of the spark which lit his late father’s eyes.

“It could be due to something no more complicated than the simple fact that you are expected to present yourself to me at the appointed hour, every evening,” Xi said, “and as this is the appropriate time, it is only reasonable that it is you who approaches.”

“But couldn’t my studies delay me, or one of your servants precede my coming on some household business, by a matter of moments?”

“One might assume that I trust my nephew to have learned the importance of punctuality, and the need not to try an old man’s patience through tardiness. Or one might recall that the household servants are forbidden from entering the courtyard of an evening, save for matters of the utmost importance.” Xi allowed a gentle smile to spread across his face. “Or, one might simply realize that having lived for so many years in a young man’s company, an old jurist might have come to recognize the pattern of footfalls his beloved nephew makes in crossing the flagstones.” Xi smiled broader, and motioned Fai to sit on the stool before him. “It is good to see you this evening, sister’s son. How go the course of your studies?”

Fai arranged himself on the stool, tucking the hem of robes beneath him, and bowed from the waist, reverentially. Fai had been studying for some years now for his imperial examinations, and only weeks remained before he would take his xiucai-level exam. If he passed, and was awarded the title of “flourishing talent,” it would be the first step on a lifetime career in the imperial bureaucracy. If he failed, he could take the examination again, but each time he didn’t pass would decrease his chances of ever advancing in the emperor’s service.

“With the help of the tutors you have graciously provided, Uncle, I feel that I am receiving the best possible advantages. Still...” The boy paused, his voice trailing off into silence, as an expression of doubt crept across his face. He seemed, in that moment, so much younger than his twelve summers, and Xi could not help but remember the small child he had welcomed—reluctantly, albeit—into his home those many years ago, when he had been District Magistrate in Sichuan province, long before he came to live in the Northern Capital. Parents lost in a fire, the soot of which still seemed to darken his tearstained cheeks, the young Fai had looked at Xi as a drowning man looks at a beach, his bloodshot eyes hungry for safety and security.

“You worry whether your performance on the examinations will reflect your education, or whether you

will betray the expectations of myself and your tutors alike?"

The boy could only nod, his lower lip caught between his teeth.

"Do not worry, sister's-son," Xi said, gently. "Keep what you have learned close to your heart and the words of your tutors in your mind, and you will prevail. I have heard more learned critique from your lips of Confucian law and logic than in any number of juren-level 'elevated persons' I have encountered, through my many years of service. I am, after all, a jinshi-level 'presented person,' and your grasp of ethics impresses even me."

The boy fidgeted on the stool, nervously.

"Uncle, may I stand? I find that my limbs have too much energy to them this evening to sit still for more than a moment."

Xi puffed on his silver pipe, and nodded, indulgently.

"My thanks, honored uncle." Fai stood, bowed again, and began to pace the length and breadth of the courtyard.

The sun had now dipped so low that it was almost hidden beneath the western horizon, the sky pinked and streaked with clouds painted orange and blue by the fading light, while in the east the stars began to shine, faintly.

Fai stopped in his courses at the edge of the courtyard, facing the eastern heavens.

"Uncle," the boy said, pointing overhead, "do you note that red star, there in the east?"

"It is the one called Fire Star, is it not?" Xi answered, absently.

Fai nodded. "One of my instructors told me, in our recent sessions, that Fire Star was associated with judges, magistrates, and governance."

"I have not heard of that before now," Xi allows. Then he added, with a wry smile, "I wonder if the association is due to the fact that Fire Star reverses its course from time to time, if I recall correctly, traveling backwards across the sky for a span of days before turning once more and resuming its prior heading. Perhaps your instructor means to suggest that magistrates and judges are likewise inconsistent in their thoughts and rulings, yes?" Xi smiled broader and, drawing deep on the silver-pipe clutched between his teeth, chuckled deep in his chest.

Another polite cough from the courtyard's entrance sounded, and Xi and Fai both turned to see one of the household servants standing at the threshold.

"Your pardons, Master Jurist, but an imperial messenger has arrived with an urgent summons. Your presence is requested immediately at the Forbidden City, on a matter of the highest importance."

Xi set his pipe down on the bench at his side, and rose to his feet.

"You will have to pardon me, sister's son. Return to your studies, and we will discuss these matters further, tomorrow evening."

Fai bowed, low, and followed the servant from the courtyard. Xi arranged his robes, and tried to divine what possible use the imperial palace could have for a lowly District Magistrate.

#

Before the sun's dying rays had vanished entirely from the western sky, Jurist Xi lingered at the southern Meridian Gate, the least of the Forbidden City's five entrances, beneath the cloud-scraping Five Phoenix Tower, the easternmost entrance through which the imperial ministers entered the palace. Had he tried to enter through any of the others, reserved for the royal family or the emperor himself, Xi would have been clapped in irons at best, executed on the spot at worst. Passing through the shadowed tunnel, the light of the plaza of Supreme Harmony just a tiny crescent of brightness before him, Xi shivered, feeling out of his element.

There were guards at the far side of the Meridian Gate, and standing between them were two men, who waited on Xi with barely disguised impatience. One was a eunuch of the Household Department, round and hairless, wearing simple robes that brushed the flagstones, his shaved head bare. The other was tall and slender with wispy mustaches, wearing the formal robes and ruby-topped court hat of a Confucian scholar, a courtier of the first rank. The two men seemed polar opposites, yin and yang given flesh. One tall where the other was short, the other slim where the other was round. Their manner, too, seemed divided into light and dark; the eunuch was all nervous energy, shuffling and ill-at-ease, his eyes darting at every sound, while the scholar kept his hands tucked serenely into the sleeves of his robe, his eyes narrowed and steady, his expression closed.

"Your pardon, honored sirs," Jurist Xi said, bowing from the waist as deeply as protocol demanded, his eyes on the ground. "But is it permitted to know what offense I may have given?"

His head still lowered, Xi looked up from beneath his brows at the two men, who cast quick glances at one another before answering.

"Offense, District Magistrate?" said the eunuch, a confused expression on his round features.

"Yes, honored sirs," Jurist Xi answered. "Having spent the majority of my years of service in the far provinces of the empire, it has been this one's honor to serve as District Magistrate in the Northern Capital these last two years. Leaving behind those farthest and most benighted hinterlands, it is my honor now to serve at the pleasure of the emperor in the shadows of the imperial palace itself. But in all that time, this one has never yet been summoned to the palace. One only imagines that one has given offense."

The eunuch and the scholar exchanged looks, the meaning of which escaped Xi.

"No, District Magistrate," the eunuch said, a slight smile playing across his full mouth. "You've not been called to the Forbidden City because of anything you yourself have done, but because of a service you have yet to perform."

"A service?" Xi asked.

"Yes," the Confucian scholar answered, his tone level but severe. "There has been a crime committed. That is the purview of the Magistrate, is it not, the investigation of offenses and the meting out of punishments to the guilty?"

"Yes," Xi answered, bowing his head slightly in response. "But why call upon lowly District Magistrate, since the palace has its own guards and investigators? The Embroidered Guard, the secret policemen of the Eastern Depot, have as their charter the expressed job of safeguarding the emperor. Why not make use of them?" Xi paused, and then quickly added, "Meaning no disrespect, of course, honored sirs."

"The case does not involve the emperor," the eunuch said, his gaze flickering to the north as he spoke, where the pillar of smoke perched over the distant mountains.

“That is,” the scholar added, raising his hand, “not the emperor that was, and not directly.”

“Could you offer some . . .clarification?” Xi asked, confused.

“All will become clear in time,” the eunuch answered. The round man turned and began walking towards the inner walls of the palace, motioning Xi to follow. Xi fell in step, the scholar walking a few paces behind.

Crossing the plaza, they passed next through the Gate of Supreme Harmony, skirting around the imperial hall to the west, then towards the Palace of Heavenly Purity and the Hall of Earthly Peace to the north beyond. As they walked, Xi cast nervous glances around him, his eyes not large enough to take in the grandeur of his surroundings. Few men of his station had seen the interior of the recently constructed palace, and fewer still allowed to roam so far within the inner reaches. The palace seemed fresh made and new, though construction had begun in Fire-Dragon year, eighteen years before. The emperor had only taken permanent residence in Wood-Dragon, seven years since, and if not for the sections routed by fire some time ago, now being rebuilt, the Forbidden City would look as though it had been completed only the day before.

So distracted by the sights was Xi that he scarcely noticed the scholar begin to speak.

“There are shifting allegiances and conflicts within the palace walls,” the scholar had said, his voice low and conspiratorial, his eyes narrowed on the eunuch’s back. “All involved thought it . . .best, to have the matter at hand investigated by someone from the outside. Someone without . . .loyalties.”

“This one’s loyalty is to the emperor,” Xi said, quickly. He was not sure whether he was being tested, or allowed a confidence, but wasn’t prepared to take a chance.

The scholar regarded him for a moment from beneath his brows, and then nodded slightly.

“Well said, District Magistrate,” the scholar finally answered, his tone level, giving nothing.

“If this one is permitted to ask,” Xi said, after a moment, “what *is* the matter at hand?”

Up ahead, the eunuch came to a stop, tucking his arms in his full sleeves.

“Here,” the eunuch said simply, indicating the ground before him with a flick of his eyes, as though afraid to point or to look too long on the scene.

There, within the Imperial Gardens, in the shadow of the Pavilion of Ten Thousand Spring Seasons, a fat man lay face down on the ground.

Coming forward to stand beside the eunuch, Xi looked carefully at the scene, taking in every detail. The fat man was on the ground with arms spread at his sides, his legs folded one under the other, as though he had been tripped from behind and fallen face forward. The back of his head was concave where it should have been convex, his thin black hair matted with blood, that was pooled in an already congealing halo around his head. His skin was cold blue and lifeless, suggesting some hours had passed since the incident had occurred.

From his vantage point, Xi could see only a portion of the man’s left profile, and did not recognize the man’s features. His garments suggested a story in themselves, though. The color of the fat man’s brocaded sleeves was a shade of orange called “apricot yellow.” It was reserved for the exclusive use of the heir apparent.

“Is this . . .?” Xi paused, having trouble formulating the question.

“Yes,” the scholar answered, his eyes downcast. “It is Zhu Gaozhi. Next in line to the throne after the emperor Zhu Di and, as of this morning, ruler of all the Middle Kingdom.”

“I...I am confused,” Xi said, forgetting all etiquette in the dizzying moment.

“Word reached us in secret,” the eunuch answered, glancing at Xi, “just before you arrived this evening. The emperor died this morning on the road back from the Mongolian campaigns in the northwest. Zhu Gaozhi was his successor, and died before ever learning the throne was now his.”

#

Jurist Xi began his investigations early the next morning, leaving home for the Forbidden City before his nephew and servants had even risen for the day.

There were many in the palace whom a District Magistrate could not directly address, and whom he was forced to approach with much kowtowing and genuflection. In fact, there were some whose stations were so far above that Xi could not look directly at them. By the end of the first day of his investigation, his ancient knees were sore from kneeling so often on the floor, and his forehead felt frozen after being pressed time and again after the chill stones before some high ranking official.

So far, from these inquiries of those in power, he had learned very little. Whether he spoke to the Eunuchs of the Presence who managed the emperor’s toilet and bath; or the Confucian advisors who influenced imperial policy, whispering blandishments behind screens; or the servants of the Imperial Mothers, the wives and consorts of emperors past—none seemed willing or able to share anything of substance, anything that might identify who had ended the life of the fat princeling.

Jurist Xi returned to his humble apartments that evening, taking his evening meal in quiet silence as he always did, smoking a bowl of inexpensive tobacco in his long-necked silver pipe as the shadows lengthened, contemplating what might follow.

A familiar fall of footsteps and a polite cough signaled the arrival of his nephew, and Xi absently motioned the boy to his stool with a wave of his silver-pipe.

“Good evening, Uncle,” the boy finally said, to fill the silence that lingered between them.

“And a good evening to you, sister’s son,” Xi said, between puffs on his pipe. “I apologize if I am distracted somewhat, but my thoughts are...elsewhere.”

“If it is not too impertinent to inquire, Uncle, what office did the Forbidden City require of you, last evening?”

Xi chewed momentarily on the mouth of his pipe before answering. “It is perhaps impertinent,” he said, “but I will answer, after a fashion. I have been asked to investigate a somewhat...delicate matter.”

“For the emperor himself?” the boy asked. “That is a considerable honor, Uncle.”

“An honor?” Xi repeated, thoughtfully. “Perhaps, sister’s son. But there are times when I miss the simplicity of the outer provinces. Did I ever tell you of the time a sheaf of fifteen notes of currency became thirty, and then forty-five, in front of my very eyes?”

“No, Uncle.”

“It was when I was District Magistrate in the province of Sichuan,” Xi said, his eyes lifted to the heavens as his thoughts drifted back over the long years. “A poor grocer headed to the market to buy vegetables,

and on the way found a sheaf of paper money. When he counted the money, he found fifteen notes worth five ounces of silver and five notes worth a string of one thousand copper coins each. Out of this sum he took a note, bought two strings' worth of meat and three strings' worth of hulled rice, and placed his purchases in the baskets he carried on a pole across his shoulders. Then he went home, without having purchased the vegetables his mother had sent him to purchase."

Xi paused, taking a deep pull from the pipe, and then continued.

"When he returned home, his mother asked him why he had no vegetables, and he told her about the fortune he had found. His mother did not believe anyone could have lost so great a sum, and accused him of stealing it, instead. When her son insisted he was innocent, she demanded that he return the money. He should go back to the place where he found the sheaf, and see if the owner comes looking for it."

Xi's nephew shook his head. "That was foolish of her to say, wasn't it, Uncle? Surely the money belonged to whomever had the most recent claim on it, and having lost it the previous owner had relinquished any claim to the sheaf."

"That is one interpretation," Xi answered, "and while a valid one, it was not the mother's, and so did not motivate what was to follow." Xi knocked the burned embers from his pipe, and began to refill the bowl from the tobacco pouch he pulled from the inner folds of his robe. "In any event, the grocer took the notes back to the place he'd found them, and in due course a wealthy merchant came looking for the money. When the grocer handed over the sheaf of notes, bystanders urged the merchant to reward the grocer for finding his money, but the merchant was a miser, and refused."

"He refused?" Fai asked, horrified at the thought. "Then he was lying."

"Perhaps. But more germane to our story was the manner in which the merchant lied, if it was in fact lying. 'I lost a sheaf of thirty notes,' the merchant said. 'Half of my money is missing.'"

"But the grocer had found only fifteen notes," the boy said.

"Precisely. The grocer objected, and the merchant argued, and after the argument raged on and on, the pair was brought before me, the district magistrate, to try."

"What did you do?"

"First, I questioned the merchant alone. Then, I questioned the grocer, and found that his answers seemed to bear the ring of truth. Then, I sent for the grocer's mother, and questioned her in private. Finally, I had the merchant and the grocer each submit written statements to the court, outlining their version of events. Still, the merchant persisted that he had lost thirty five-ounce bills, and the grocer swore that he had found fifteen five-ounce bills."

Xi paused, lighting his pipe from a taper.

"'Very well, then,' I said, 'the sheaf the grocer found is not the sheaf which the merchant lost. These fifteen notes are heaven's gift to a worthy mother, to sustain her in old age.' I gave the grocer and his mother the money. Then, to the merchant, I said, 'The thirty notes you lost must be in some other place. You should continue to look for them.' And the merchant went away, cowed and ashamed."

Fai laughed, clapping his hands together, merrily. "Well done, Uncle."

"Thank you, sister's-son. At times like the present, there isn't much I would not trade for a simple case such as those. Now, you'll have to excuse me, but my current obligations require additional rumination, and so I'll wish you a good night's rest. Study well, and we'll speak again tomorrow evening."

“Good evening, Uncle,” Fai said, crossing to the courtyard’s entrance, bowing low, and then leaving Xi to his quiet contemplation.

#

The next morning, he returned to the Forbidden City by the Meridian Gate, a different strategy in mind.

No longer would he wait on the pleasure of the high and officious. From this point onwards, he would direct his attentions to the lowest ranked of the palace society. The subalterns and couriers, the scullions and sweeps. The eunuchs who fed the garden fish in the garden pools and polished the floors in the Hall of Supreme Harmony to a mirror shine, the servants who paraded the meals to the royal family through all the watches of the day and night and the low-ranking priests who rarely paused in their orisons. From all of these, the most low, the unnoticed and underfoot, Jurist Xi slowly pieced together an image of the truth, gathering together one small element at a time, until the whole was spread before him like a mosaic.

#

Xi sat on a low stone bench, just beyond the walls of the Imperial Garden. It was early afternoon, the sun overhead just past its zenith.

“So you were not aware the emperor had died the afternoon the body was found?” Xi asked the eunuch who tended the topiary in the garden.

“No,” the gardener answered, impatient to return to his duties, worried that the neglect would allow his creations to grow out of true. “We were told the emperor was returning from the campaign in Mongolia, and were making ready for his arrival, but it was not for several hours more that the first riders arrived from the march, with the news the emperor had died in his sleep.”

Xi rubbed his hands together, palm to palm, trying to tease a fleeting idea from the back of his mind.

“So you were the first to find the body?” he asked.

“Yes,” the gardener answered with a sigh, his eyes flitting back to the garden beyond the low wall.

Xi thought back to the scene two days before, the fat man laying face down in a pool of coagulating blood, the sun receding in the west across pink-dappled skies. The body was cold, but the blood at the back of the neck had not yet fully clotted. The murder had occurred no later than midday.

“You work in the garden all day?” Xi asked, turning slightly from the waist, admiring the well-shaped hedges and crenulated trees.

“From the sun’s first appearance until nightfall,” the gardener answered, proudly. “I rarely stop for meals. In fact, I’ve worked for the last week without ceasing, in preparation for the emperor’s return.”

Xi narrowed his eyes.

“And yet you were elsewhere at this hour two days past?” he asked.

The gardener looked confused for a moment, and began to shake his head. Then, seeming to remember the content of their discussion, he quickly redirected the shake into an eager nod.

“Yes, yes, of course,” the gardener answered. “I was called away by a representative from the Household Department for a few moments. Some question about the feng shui of plants kept in the Hall

of Mental Cultivation, as I recall.”

Xi held his hands together, palm to palm, as though he'd caught a fly between them.

“Curious,” he said, innocently. “That seems more within the purview of a Taoist priest than a gardener...if you will excuse my impropriety in mentioning. Are you often called on such tasks?”

The gardener regarded Xi closely.

“From time to time,” he answered.

Xi rose quickly, and bowed a fraction from the waist, nearly the bow given to an equal, shaded slightly towards deference.

“This one is grateful for your time and patience,” Xi said, and then turned and walked away, his hands held tightly together, fingers laced.

#

That evening, after his simple meal, his silver pipe held to his lips, Xi reviewed what he had learned thus far.

When Gaozhi was killed, no one knew the emperor had died. So who benefited from his death? His own son, Zhu Zhanji, or his brother, Zhu Gaoxu, either one of whom would be the likely next candidates for the throne. Of the two, the dead man's son was away on the steppes on the fringes of the empire, on a long hunting expedition. He was a man who preferred the wilderness to the intrigues of court. Gaoxu had been in the capital city when his brother was killed, but witnesses placed him at a festival in the hour the murder had occurred.

What of other factions within the palace? The eunuchs, who held all the administrative and most of the high military positions under the old emperor, seemed eager to begin the coronation process, and put Gaoxu on the throne as soon as possible. The Confucian scholar-officials, who made up the balance of the administration, were blocking this appointment, delaying the proceedings wherever possible. One or two of the Confucians had floated the notion that the son Zhanji was the more proper choice for the throne, as his father had technically died after becoming emperor, but this position was not supported by all of the Confucians, many of whom suspected the dead man's son of collusion.

Xi was in the midst of trying unsuccessfully to unravel the knot presented by the mystery, the pipe held between his teeth, his eyes closed tight, when he felt a touch on his knee.

“Uncle?”

Xi's nephew Fai sat in his accustomed place on the stool before Xi, a look of concern on his features. He had entered, crossed the courtyard, and sat upon the stool, all without Xi noticing. After a long time waiting, apparently, he had tapped Xi's knee, to rouse him.

“My apologies, again, sister's-son. The vexations of my current office are many, and I find myself lost in my thoughts on the subject, more and more. It is a...complicated matter.”

“An investigation, then?” Fai asked.

“Something like that,” Xi answered.

“Perhaps there is some crucial article of fact you have not yet uncovered.”



Xi nodded slightly, puffing on the pipe, breathing out thick clouds of smoke which rose to obscure briefly the stars winking to light overhead. "Perhaps," he allowed, after a time. "But I think it more likely that this is a quandary too complex to be solved at a single stroke, as much as I would prefer it were otherwise."

Fai frowned, thoughtfully.

"You put me in mind of simpler times, though, sister's-son. Did I ever tell you about the time he solved a murder case with a single word?"

Fai shook his head. "I don't believe so, Uncle."

"The case involved a merchant who was about to go out on a selling trip. The merchant had hired a boat and, having loaded it with the help of the boatman, waited for his servant to arrive from the house. He waited, and waited, and still the servant did not appear." Xi drew the pipe's smoke deep into his lungs, and exhaled another cloud to obscure the heavens. "The boatman, meanwhile, could not tear his gaze away from the fine, expensive things the merchant had loaded onto the boat. If the merchant were out of the way, the boatman reasoned, he could keep all of these fine things for himself. So, when the merchant's back was turned, the boatman struck him from behind, killing him. The boatman weighted down his body, and sunk it deep into the murky river."

"So it was murder!" Fai said, breathlessly.

"Without question. But if not for what came next, it is possible no one would have known. You see, the boatman then took the merchant's fine goods, and carried them to his own home. With them safely secreted there, the boatman went to the merchant's house. He pounded upon the gate, calling for the merchant's wife. When the wife appeared at the gate, the boatman explained that the merchant had never arrived at the boat. The merchant's wife sent her servants out to look for her husband, but they found no trace of him. The boatman, then, suggested that the merchant must have been waylaid on his way to the boat, and all of his fine goods stolen by thieves."

"He lied," the boy said.

"Yes, sister's-son" Xi sighed, and shook his head slightly. "You will find, as you make your way through life, that people lie more often than philosophers and judges might prefer. In any case, the merchant's wife was suspicious of the boatman's story, and reported the matter to the local constable, who in turn informed the county officials, who then interrogated the boatman, but produced no new evidence. Finally, the court reached me, the district magistrate. All of the involved parties came before me, including the boatman, the merchant's wife, and her servants. I sent out all but the merchant's wife, and had her give an exact description of the events of that day. She explained that her husband had left in the morning, and that sometime later the boatman had knocked at the gate, and that before she could open it, the boatman cried out, 'Mistress, why has your husband not come to my boat, after so long a time?'"

"That is what the boatman had said?" Fai chewed his lower lip thoughtfully.

"Yes," Xi said, smiling slightly. "And I think perhaps you understand just how he undid himself with the first word he spoke."

The boy shifted excitedly on his stool. "I think that..."

"Hold a while" Xi raised his hand. "I'll finish my tale, and we'll see if your thoughts accord with me own. Once I had heard the wife's testimony, I her out, and called for the boatman. When questioned, the boatman gave a statement which agreed in all particular's with that of the wife. I then called in all of the parties, and ordered the boatman arrested for murder, as he had just confessed to the crime. The

boatman objected, asking what confession he had given.”

“When he called at the merchant’s house,” Fai said, eagerly, “he asked not for the merchant, but for his wife.”

“Precisely,” Xi said, smiling proudly. “Very good, sister’s-son. In answer to the boatman’s objection, I said, ‘When you knocked on the door of the merchant’s house, you addressed his wife, not him. Even before the gate had been opened, you were sure he was not still at home. How else could you have known he was away, unless you had seen him with your own eyes?’”

“And so with that one word, ‘Mistress,’ the boatman proclaimed his own guilt!” the boy said.

“Yes.” Xi sat his pipe beside him, and folded his hands in his lap. “Would that my current investigation could be solved so easily.”

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The next morning, in the palace granary, amidst towering pillars of flour-sacks and casks of millet and grain, Xi found an ancient eunuch who had served the royal family since the days of the late emperor’s father. His fingers were permanently stained with ink, his shoulders hunched from sitting all day at his task, recording in his ledger the flow of victuals into and out of the palace stores, and his eyes were cloudy and dim, but his mind was clear and his tongue was sharp, and he was happy to have any audience, District Magistrate or no.

The ancient eunuch, whose name Xi never learned, listened with bare impatience while Xi rattled off a few questions about his investigation, and then waved his ink-stained hands in front of him, as though warding off foul spirits.

“These intrigues,” the ancient eunuch said, his voice high and piping. “They are nothing new, but pale shadows of what has gone before. All things tend towards decay and chaos, and treachery is no exception. Everything was grander in former days, even the darkness.”

“Might this one ask...” Xi began, and then the old man waved him silent with an impatient gesture.

“Know you, how the emperor Zhu Di—son-of-heaven and may-he-reign-ten-thousand-years—came to the throne originally?”

Xi didn’t see it necessary to point out that the late emperor seemed unlikely, at this juncture, to reign another ten days, much less ten thousand years, but held his tongue. He shook his head, and seeing that the old man had made no indication that his blind eyes had seen the gesture, answered simply, “No.”

“Listen, then,” the old man said. “This is what went before, in times past. This is what many fear might come again, whispering in the dark corner of the palace like frightened little girls.”

“What do they fear?”

“Purge, reprisal, siege, and the threat of civil war.”

Xi leaned in close, and listened as the ancient man told a tale of hidden history, in his sing-song piping voice.

#

Before the late emperor Zhu Di came to the throne, the Confucian advisers of his father Zhu Yaunzhang

advised against favoring Di. They said that it would cause a rift between the old emperor's other sons, and plunge the country into civil war.

Yaunzhang named his grandson Zhu Yunwen as his successor. Worried about the capabilities of his grandson, the old emperor launched a campaign in his final years to rid the empire of any who might later pose a threat to his successor. Fifteen thousand civil officials and loyal military commanders were executed in the mad emperor's purge.

However, Yaunzhang had not ordered the execution of his own sons, especially his beloved Di. When Yaunzhang had died, Yunwen ascended to the throne. Yunwen then ordered the execution and assassination of his uncles, the princely sons of the former emperor, seeing in each of them a threat. Within a year, seven of the eight were dead, the only one left living the craft Di, who feigned madness, running through the streets screaming obscenities, stealing food and wine from strangers, sleeping in gutters. In warm weather he'd huddle near stoves, shivering and complaining about the chill. But it was all a ruse, to deceive Yunwen into thinking he was harmless while he marshaled his forces.

In time, Di gathered his strengths to him, his sons and loyal military commanders, and made a bid for the throne. He called his nephew Yunwen a dupe of treasonous advisors, and raised an army against him. Lost campaigns followed, and a siege of six months, but in the end Di was victorious, largely due to the cooperation of the court eunuchs, who had been dispossessed by Yunwen, stripped of their power and prestige. The court eunuchs, in exchange for a return to their previous positions, revealed to Di the secrets of the capital's defense, and Di's army took the city.

There are those who say the burned body found within the palace walls was not that of the emperor Yunwen, but that of a subordinate, and that the emperor himself escaped death, disguised in the garb of a woman. But these are the stories that washwomen and broken old eunuchs tell, and should not be heeded.

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By the end of the third day of his investigation, Xi felt close to a solution, though no nearer a full understanding of the forces at play. It was as though he were standing too close to an enormous mural, and able only to perceive small details, not the broad sweep of the work. In his best estimation, the palace was in the midst of a struggle between two factions, with the eunuchs on one side and the scholars on the other. From battles as simple as which scholar should be appointed to a low-level functionary position at court, to those as complex and wide-ranging as the costs incurred by the Treasure Fleets so favored by the eunuchs and the late emperor, the struggle between the eunuchs and the scholars was a war fought on many fronts.

Since times past, generations gone, Jurist Xi had learned, the Palace eunuchs and the Confucian scholar-advisors had struggled for supremacy within the empire. In some eras one side was in the ascendant, in some eras the star of the other side was on the rise, but always the struggle, always the shifting of alliances and strategies back and forth. With the death of the emperor Di, and the murder of his successor Gaozhi, these ancient enmities again came to the fore. It seemed that the eunuchs were eager to rush through any investigation and deliberation, and put the dead man's brother on the throne, while the Confucians were stalling for time, delaying matters at every turn, trying to devise some strategy.

On the morning of the fourth day, before any but women, eunuchs and the Imperial mothers were yet within the walls of the Forbidden City, Jurist Xi was called before the two men who had first met him within the Meridian Gate.

"You have been busy, we are told," said the eunuch of the Household Department, his gaze level.

“Yes, honored sir,” Xi answered.

“And have your questions yielded fruit?” asked the Confucian scholar-courtier.

“Meager fruit, honored sir,” Xi answered, “but sufficient to establish the taste.”

“And what have you determined?” the eunuch asked, after a considerable pause.

Jurist Xi looked from one man to the other, his eyes lingering on the round figure of the eunuch. He had struggled for the last hours on how best to couch his next response, how best to explain how he had determined the only ones who stood to benefit from the death of the heir apparent, without giving offense. Before he could open his mouth to frame a response, though, a court page appeared at the elbow of the eunuch, and hurriedly handed him a slip of yellow paper inscribed in black ink.

Xi could not see from his vantage point what the paper said, but the impact on the eunuch was written in bold relief across the round features. His eyes widened, showing white all around, and his mouth twisted in a grimace that suggested shock commingled with fury. The eunuch’s hands closed into claws around the paper, crumpling it.

“Your pardons,” he muttered, and turning on his heel, raced away. The crumpled paper he dropped behind, and it fluttered to the ground like a falling leaf.

The Confucian scholar bent to retrieve the slip of paper in a fluid motion, and straightening it, read it at a glance. A slight smirk peaked at the corners of his mouth, but only for an instant.

“Honored sir,” Xi said, after a long silence. “Is this one given to know what the message says?”

The scholar lifted his eyes, and looked on Xi with an expression of wearied humor.

“Come along, District Magistrate,” the scholar answered, turning. With measured steps, he began to walk after the eunuch. “You will need to know soon enough, I would imagine.”

#

Beneath the Gate of Divine Prowess, at the northern wall of the Forbidden City, lay a body cold and still, dressed in the dull orange hue called “golden yellow,” reserved for the exclusive use of the emperor’s sons. Though he had never seen the man before, Jurist Xi knew at a glance that this was the body of Zhu Gaoxu, eldest son of the late emperor.

No man but the emperor may spend the night within the palace walls, unless he should pay six silver taels to the knifeman and surrender his manhood as the eunuchs had done. Zhu Gaoxu had spent the night in his royal apartments, just beyond the palace walls, and had risen early to meet with palace officials about his role in the funereal rites that would occupy the Forbidden City for the next hundred days. He never made the meeting, but was found still and lifeless on the cold flagstones by a group of ministers in the early morning light.

Some in the court, in the hours that followed, began to point their fingers in accusation at the late emperor’s grandson, Zhanji the hunter, out on the western plains, though how he came to be responsible for the murders of his father and uncle from a distance of thousands of kilometers, none can say with certainty. The arguments were spirited, and divided factions internally. Members of the Household Department disagreed openly and vehemently about what next course of action should be taken, and the courtiers and Confucian advisors locked themselves away, consulting histories and books of law, searching for precedent and historical guidance.

That morning, on first waking, Jurist Xi had felt sure that he had determined who had murdered the heir apparent, though he scarcely understood the motive of the murderers. No, as the day grew nearer to dusk, Xi felt that he knew perfectly the motives of two murders, but had grown less certain about the identity of the murderers themselves. The one thing of which he remained convinced, though, a certainty that burned with crystal clarity in his thoughts, was that no one could learn what he had discovered.

Xi knew well the responsibilities of the District Magistrate. His was the task of preserving order, at any cost. Xi remembered what the ancient eunuch in the granary had told him about the ascension of Zhu Di to the throne, and he wept to think of his district of the Northern Capital in burning ruins.

#

That evening Xi returned to his home, and ate his meal in private contemplation. Later, he sat in his courtyard, his silver pipe in hand. At the sound of a cough from the courtyard's entrance, Xi turned, and waved dismissively.

"Not tonight!" Xi said, sharply. "Return to your studies, and we'll speak on some later occasion."

"Your pardons, honored uncle," the boy said, his voice quavering as he bowed low. "Has ... has this one displeased you in some fashion?"

Xi took a deep breath, and collected himself.

"No, sister's son." Xi forced himself to relax, incrementally, and smiled to the shaken boy at the entrance. "The anger conveyed in my tone is not with you, but with others more deserving of ire. You are dismissed this evening not for any fault of yours, but because I am expecting visitors which should arrive at any moment."

A household servant appeared at Fai's side, bowing low.

"Master Jurist, there are two men at the front gate who wish to speak with you."

"And there they are now," Xi said.

With a faint smile, Xi motioned the servant to escort the visitors in.

"You must excuse me, sister's son," Xi said to Fai, who lingered nervously at the entrance. "I must receive these guests in private. Continue with your studies, and we will speak again tomorrow evening."

Fai bowed to his uncle and, without another word, left.

Xi refilled his pipe and, when he turned again, standing uncomfortably side by side in the doorway were the eunuch of the Household Department, and the Confucian scholar-courtier. Neither knew that the other had been summoned, but likewise neither was able to refuse. Xi had made certain to include certain suggestive passages in the invitations his servants had delivered, to insure their prompt arrival.

"District Magistrate," the scholar began, attempting for bluster, "the manner of your invitation was most unseemly, and completely lacking in merit."

"Yes," the eunuch put in, stepping forward, "Most inauspicious. Etiquette demands..."

Jurist Xi raised his hand for silence, and shook his head with a slight smile on his face. He drew heavily on the silver pipe, and sent streams of smoke spilling up from the corners of his mouth.

"This one offers humblest apologies for any offense," Xi said, his voice laced with dark humor. "But on

consideration it seemed that civil war and the palace in flames would prove more inauspicious, and of the unseemly options which presented themselves this course was the most suitable.”

The eunuch and scholar regarded him through narrowed eyes.

“This one is pleased to report that the mysteries surrounding the death of the imperial princes have been solved,” Xi went on. “One is less pleased with the answers, but then these are trying days.”

Xi tapped out the spent tobacco from his silver pipe, and began to refill the bowl.

“In all things, there is a first cause,” he continued. “One might assume that the instigation of this current string of events was the discovery of the body in the Imperial Gardens, four days since. That would not, however, be true. In fact, it all began with fires in the northwest, out beyond Kunming Lake.” He paused, and then added, “From the direction of Mongolia.”

The Confucian looked at him, not comprehending, and then looked to the eunuch with dawning realization. The round man, for his part, kept his eyes on the ground.

“That was the means...” the Confucian began, then bit off the rest of his statement.

“One imagines there were a series of fires,” Xi went on, lighting his pipe from a taper. “Signal fires, stretching the hundreds of leagues between here and inner Mongolia. A way of passing information much faster than any horse and rider ever could. The content of the information would, perforce, be limited, but so long as your message was simple ...say, to alert another as to a significant occurrence—the outbreak of war, or the death of a king...”

Jurist Xi paused, and let his words hang in the air.

“Understand, first, that one speaks only in the hypothetical,” Xi went on. “Imagine, if you will, that a group desired to circumvent the will of their emperor, in the manner of succession. For the sake of argument, let us say that...for instance...the palace eunuchs felt that their power would be severely curtailed were the emperor’s chosen heir to come to the throne; they might even know for a certainty that the heir is the pawn of another faction within the palace...for example, the Confucian scholar-officials. These hypothetical eunuchs might be willing to go to any lengths, even murder, to secure their positions.”

Xi paused, taking a long draw off the pipe.

“However,” he said, continuing, “if the heir apparent were to die while the emperor still lived, the emperor might name a successor even less receptive to their cause. On the other hand, if the heir died *after* ascending to the throne, then the line of succession would next fall on the heir apparent’s own son. Suppose that the heir apparent’s son is an unknown, his allegiances not yet established. Let us say he prefers to hunt in the western wildernesses instead of playing court politics. Were he to take the throne, he might look favorably on the eunuchs’ cause, or he might favor some other faction...for example, again, the Confucian scholar-officials.”

Xi glanced between the two men, his manner serene. Neither of the visitors spoke, their eyes locked on Xi.

“If, however, the heir apparent were to die too late for the emperor to name a new successor, but before the emperor had passed on, then the throne would pass to the heir apparent’s brother.” Xi smiled, like an enlightened monk. “Suppose, further, that the heir apparent’s brother is, himself, the cat’s paw of the eunuchs, and with him on the throne, they know that they would be secure until another turn of the wheel.

Now, if we assume that the eunuchs are successful in their scheme, and work out some mechanism to alert their compatriots at the palace that the emperor is on his deathbed, before the news is made public...say, by ingenious use of secret signal fires...and eliminate the threat of the heir apparent, isn't it too much to assume that the Confucian scholars would not revenge. After all, if it is well known that the heir apparent's brother is the pawn of the eunuchs, the Confucian scholars have a vested interest in eliminating this new successor, as well."

Xi lowered his pipe from his lips, his expression hardening.

"I am merely a humble servant of the emperor," Xi said, his voice hard. "I took my examinations and earned my certifications, and have served at the emperor's pleasure from here to the western fastness these past long years. Now, mine is the role of District Magistrate of the Northern Capital, to maintain the safety and order of the city. What happens within the walls of the Forbidden City is beyond my ken and my control, but what happens beyond is my responsibility."

Xi stood, and crossed his arms over his chest. The eunuch made to speak, but Xi silenced him with a glare.

"Murder is not to be tolerated," he went on, "but if the prosecution of an offender leads to more bloodshed and violence, then who is to gain? Neither of your factions is guaranteed they will control the next emperor, whoever he will be. If the true facts of the last days is revealed, the only result will be civil war. Two men are now dead, and their father with them. Should more men now join them in death, or shall we consider things at an end, till the wheel should turn again?"

The eunuch and the scholar looked at one another, their expressions hard, their gazes smoldering. Then they looked back to Xi.

"The investigation of offenses and the meting out of punishments to the guilty is the purview of the Magistrate," the scholar said through clenched teeth.

"We will abide by your decision," the eunuch added, bowing slightly.

With that, both men turned, and walked back out into the night. Xi never saw either one of them again.

#

A month later, Zhu Zhanji, grandson of the late emperor, ascended to the imperial throne, and took up residence in the Forbidden City. Called the Xuande emperor, he seemed well disposed to the positions of the Palace eunuchs, but less so than was his predecessor. The new emperor seemed to listen with a more attentive ear to his Confucian advisors, but was reported to heed their counsel only when it suited him. In most ways, he was his own man, and his reign reflected that fact.

Some weeks after Zhanji took the throne, Jurist Xi's nephew Fai passed his xiucai-level examination, recognized now by the imperial bureaucracy as a "flourishing talent." Through his uncle's connections in the Northern Capital—there were always those in the bureaucracy who considered it auspicious and prudent to have favors owed them by a District Magistrate—Fai secured as a position as an assistant to the official scribe on a forthcoming Treasure Fleet expedition, bound for Nippon. He would continue his studies while onboard, and then take his juren-level examinations on his return to the Northern Capital, the following year.

The day before Fai was scheduled to depart with the Treasure Fleet, he joined his uncle in the courtyard at the appointed hour, as was their custom.

“Good evening, uncle.”

“Good evening, sister’s son.” Xi motioned the boy to the stool, but his nephew politely declined, too excited to sit still.

“I think it is safe to say that great things lie in your future,” Xi said, “but I am not afraid to admit that your presence will be missed in this house.”

Xi dipped his head, reverentially. “I thank you for making a place in your household for me, Uncle. And I can only hope that my contributions can be even a shadow of what your service has meant to the empire.”

“Graciously said.” Xi smiled, kindly. “My own contributions to the emperor, though, are humble offerings, and you would do better to set your ambitions somewhat higher. It is perhaps ironic, but my most significant contribution in the emperor’s service is likely one which no one knows, outside of myself and two other men, neither of whom are likely ever to speak of it.”

“But surely,” Fai says, “even a hidden contribution still aids the emperor. What would have happened differently had you not performed this service?”

Xi shook his head, a dark expression drifting momentarily across his features. That is not a topic fit for discussion and, besides, I would not want a new cloud to cast a shadow on my nephew’s proud day.”

“Thank you, Uncle.” Fai bowed again, and then straightened, his hands in constant motion at his sides, too full of nervous energy to stand still.

“Perhaps,” Xi said with a gentle smile, “you should go and prepare your things for the coming voyage?”

“Yes, of course.” Fai smiled broadly, his eyes flashing. “Thank you, Uncle.”

The boy hurried to the entrance, pausing only to give a perfunctory bow before rushing to his rooms, leaving the jurist alone in the courtyard.

Xi smoked his silver pipe, looking at the stars coming out overhead.

What had he contributed, in the broad view? The Xuande emperor would still likely have ascended to the throne in a few years time, had his father lived. But who knew how the fortunes of the Middle Kingdom might have changed, in those intervening years, if not for one fire, burning in the wilderness, out beyond Kunming Lake.