

Toward the end of Xianqing 顯慶 reign period
Xiaoshu 小暑 Jieqi, Slight Heat,
Sixth Lunar Month,
New Moon

OUTSIDE HUAZHOU TOWN,
140 LI EAST OF CHANG'AN

Ling flung herself into the murky, cold water. The water engulfed her. She opened her mouth and forced herself to swallow, despite her instincts. *This must be what dying is like, she thought, no longer aware of having a body, no longer separate from everything else.*

As the torrent of water rushed into her lungs, she heard the voice admonish her, *No, you mustn't die.* Her mother came to her, the blood gash across her neck a clotted scar. She wrapped her arms around Ling who welcomed the embrace and smiled. Just before she lost consciousness, she felt her body surge upwards.

When she came to, she was back on the barge, tied up. Her captor scowled, "Foolish girl, why did you do that? If I hadn't noticed your beautiful eyes ..." He grasped her chin with his grimy fingers and jerked her face up. He made her kneel on the rough and uneven boards of the barge. She looked past him and saw the other bandits huddled at the back of the barge, smoking. She counted, *one, two, three, four, five.*

"Eyes like that, you're not quite normal, are you? I want to know what it's like, to be taken by such a creature," he mumbled as he

loosened his pants and lifted his member toward her mouth. She felt his hands' rough, greedy taking.

She choked and coughed. Nothing she could do. Kept glancing at the shadows in the back. Kept counting. *One, two, three, four, five.*

That admonition yet again, *No, you mustn't die.*

She disagreed. Dying would have been better. She stared at the tattoo on his arm—a blue mountain with a few jagged crags, but within it the face of a tiger with jaws open, revealing teeth. Moments later, she heard the others utter his name, fear in their throats. Shan Hu. So that was what the tattoo was about, 山虎, Tiger in the Mountain.

There were two carts close to the edge of the canal. The goods from the barge were loaded into one, then the other, leaving a tiny space in the second where she was shoved, just another piece of stolen property. Ling crouched in the cart, crammed in with crates of jade vessels and rattan cylinders of tea. Her body hurt from cuts and bruises, her fine clothes were soiled and torn. The only window in the cart was a hole as wide as her face. Crates sat between her and that tiny gap, but she managed to catch glimpses of the passing landscape as the team of horses galloped away from the barge toward the centre of town.

As the cart rattled over the rough road, her body tossed back and forth, Ling grew numb to the physical pain, gripped instead by memories of the raid. She and her parents had started out from their tea farm in Hubei outside of the city of Jingzhou, and after travelling by land, took the Grand Canal northward on the Yangzi River to Shaanxi province. They finally arrived a few li outside of Huazhou town just at sunset. Her father had decided they would transport their goods via the canal the next day. They were all tired, especially the horses and men. A trip along the canal would be a welcome change after weeks of travelling overland. They would rest overnight before their final journey to the Western Capital.

That night, sleeping between her parents, Ling felt excited at the prospect of visiting Chang'an for the first time. She was lulled to sleep by the soft slapping sounds of water against the sides of the barge.

A few hours before daybreak, mayhem ensued when their barge was invaded by bandits. Ling glimpsed her father's terror-filled eyes as he was stabbed in the back. She and her mother were dragged from their sleeping cabin up to the bow of the barge. They were forced to watch all the slain men being thrown overboard. Her mother tried to shield her as they huddled on the deck, but Shan Hu dragged her mother away while one of his henchman held on to Ling.

She could never forget how her mother looked when she was brought back, her clothes torn, her hair dishevelled. Shan Hu laughed and threw her down next to Ling. Her mother, sobbing, whispered to Ling, "Forgive me." She grabbed the knife from Shan Hu's belt and slit her own neck.

In the cart, body racked with pain, Ling sobbed at the memory. There was no more reason to live. Where was Shan Hu taking her? What would he do with her? A life enslaved to someone so vile was not a life she wanted to live.

When they entered Huazhou, the sunlight came through the tiny window of the cart at an angle. Ling glimpsed streets with people moving about, unaware of her captivity.

Had she imagined it—her mother coming to her in the water and embracing her? Did her mother bring her to the surface, willing her to return back to the land of the living? *No, you mustn't die.*

The butterfly was minuscule, its wings a creamy white. The tips of its forewings seemed razor sharp. The butterfly flitted through the dusty haze of the town's public square. Ling imagined that the creature must have come from some other world, far purer than this

tainted place she was in. It had navigated rough terrain, slipped past thorny branches in some distant forest.

The market was unbearably loud. Ling wished she could shrink down to the size of that butterfly and fly away. Her face and arms hurt from bruises and cuts. But the worst pain was inside her throat and in her chest. Even if she escaped, where could she go? She sighed heavily, noticing that her mouth was dry and tasted like metal.

It was still scorching hot, even though the sun was past its peak. She guessed, judging from the angle of the shadows, that it must be around mid-afternoon. The rays of sunlight slanted in, striking faces and bodies with merciless intent. Men's bellowing voices competed with one another, jostling for the attention of onlookers, their shouts a constant hammering inside her skull. She'd been brought here early in the morning, when the air was still cool. It seemed interminable, being inundated with this barrage of sound, waiting for hours on end, not knowing what her fate might be.

Among the buyers and sellers at the auction, there didn't seem to be any taking of turns or orderliness, merely the chaos that came with the momentum of greed. Men yelled out prices as the children for sale were paraded on the platform, one by one.

The smell of others' fear engulfed her; the older boys, the women, and the rest of the children all reeked of panic. But she couldn't smell her own fear. Although it was hot, her teeth clattered against one another. Ling curled her hands into fists, determined to show an unwavering dignity.

She looked down at her feet. There was a cut on her right big toe that stung. Her captor had poured some wine over it earlier, joking that spirits cured every ailment. She ached from hours of being forced to stand with her hands tied behind her back, her body bound by ropes. Ling hated the loose brown trousers and sleeveless top she had been made to wear. She felt dirty, inside and out.

Ling looked up to see where the butterfly was. It had disappeared. She closed her eyes, imagining how its sharp-tipped wings could cut through the ropes that bound her. When she opened her eyes again, it was as if the butterfly had heard her longing and materialized, this time flitting behind the head of the oily-skinned tavern owner. The unsavory man had taken time out from bossing his servants around and stood in front of the entrance of Prosperity Tavern, legs planted solidly on the ground, soft, doughy fingers perched on his generous hips. His eyes scanned the auction merchandise. An uneven patch of grease marred his chin. Behind him, the three-storey tavern was packed full of rowdy customers. Ling noticed a few on the upper floor leaning against the railing, wine cups in hand, surveying the action below.

The tavern owner rested his foot atop one paw of the tavern's stone guardian, opened his mouth wide, and used a blade of straw to dislodge the detritus between his two remaining top front teeth.

"Oily Face", mumbled Ling under her breath. Her stomach growled. Occasionally, Oily Face shouted out an amount of money that he was willing to pay. He was cheap and had yet to win a bid.

A servant cradling a clay basin was about to feed chicken bones with shreds of meat to the stray dogs, but Oily Face stretched his arm out in a gesture of warning and shouted, "Stinking wastrel, save those bones! For the soup!"

Interspersed with boys and girls and the occasional labourer being auctioned off were beautiful birds that Ling had never seen before. They had large hooked claws and brightly alluring green, red, blue, and yellow feathers. There was even a stunning-looking horse with a slate-grey coat speckled with chalk-white markings; its appearance was met with shouts of approval and head nodding. After much yelling between the auctioneer and interested buyers, it was sold for a high price.

Shan Hu soon took over the proceedings. Stacked along one side

of the market were large crates of goods. Ling winced; the crates were marked “Tribute Tea” with the insignia of her father’s business. Other crates were being opened as Shan Hu called out the items to be sold. Raw turquoise, garnets, and rocks with gold veins—goods that her parents had brought with them from their county in Hubei. Ling hated that Shan Hu’s filthy hands were scooping up the precious stones to show off to the bidders. All the goods sold quickly. Then there was only Ling left.

“How much for this rare specimen?” shouted her captor, pulling her closer to the centre of the market with the rope that wound around her torso. He sniggered suggestively. “She’s not going to bite! Come on, get closer for a look-see.”

Ling bit her lower lip. Only dead things were specimens.

“When has anyone in these parts ever seen such a pair of eyes?”

Ling shuddered. What a fake, sweet tone. She gritted her teeth. Maybe it was good that she hadn’t died. If she managed to escape, she vowed that she would return someday and avenge her parents’ deaths.

Oily Face stepped toward her and unabashedly stared. Ling pulled away, mustering as much saliva as she could, aimed at Oily Face’s forehead right between his bushy, unkempt eyebrows. His face took on an even more disagreeable countenance as he grimaced and wiped off the offending gob with the back of his hand.

Ling felt the hard slap of Shan Hu’s hand against the side of her head. “Good-for-nothing turd! This what I get, keeping you alive?”

Even though her body was confined, she refused to be cowed. She spun around and clamped her teeth down hard on his arm. Shan Hu let out a loud yelp of pain and, with his other arm, yanked hard at the rope.

Ling was pulled backward, and her body smashed against the opened crate of precious stones. She struggled to get up, but didn’t see the planks and tripped. She felt a sharp pain at her right ankle. Shan

Hu stood over her, waving a blade close to her throat. He snarled, “Behave, or I will have to slice up that tongue of yours and make a pickled delicacy out of it.”

A few men in the public square laughed. But an elderly woman called out in a quivering voice, “Don’t hurt her! She’s a child.”

Waves of tremors overcame Ling. She choked back tears, which pooled in her eyes and blurred her vision. Her hands were tied behind her back, but they discovered the edges of a stone on the ground. She closed a fist over it.

She looked past the auctioneer and saw a strange mist appear. It shimmered a light yellowish-gold. A slight movement of air stirred across the reddish-brown earth.

“Arrgh!!” Shan Hu screamed, his eyes widening as he clutched his belly and groaned. Pushed back by some mysterious power, he flew past Ling until he hit his head against some crates. Shan Hu moaned, pressing a palm against his left ear. Blood trickled from his ear down his neck.

“Sir, how much for this creature?” The voice seemed to have come out of nowhere. It carried silence within it, shattering the rowdy atmosphere. The hairs on the back of Ling’s neck stood up. She turned her head to look in the direction of the voice.

Her serene face beamed down at Ling. The woman had a long mane of thick black hair that she wore in an unusual fashion, partly braided, partly coiled like a snake at the back of her head. She wore white robes with a thin purple border, black trousers underneath, and hemp sandals. She wasn’t tall, but her body seemed to radiate an intense strength. It was hard to guess how old she might be. Her skin was a honeyed brown—it made Ling think of certain kinds of amber, the ones that were a darker shade. The woman wore a pendant that hung in front of her heart, a yin-yang symbol.

Shan Hu dusted himself off and turned to face the woman. "Where did you come from?" he asked. "What in Heaven's name are you talking about?"

The woman raised her tone, her eyes suddenly wide and fierce. "I said, how much for this creature?" Ling shivered when the woman's lips flared back to bare her teeth.

"I'll give her to you for a thousand strings of cash," he replied, eyeing the woman suspiciously. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the blood away from his face and neck.

"Aren't you conducting an illegal sale? She looks like a Chinese to me, not a foreigner or an aboriginal from the South. You know very well that's a capital offence."

Oily Face was grinning and nodding his head. "That's right. Execution by strangulation."

"How dare you!" Shan Hu snarled.

"How about we settle the sale with this? I promise I won't report you to my friends in the Tang court." She pulled out a silver ingot from within her left sleeve without hesitation.

Shan Hu's eyes widened in surprise. He stared at the yin-yang pendant on the woman's chest. "Aren't you clergy? Some kind of nun? Must be, dressed like that. You religious folk have peculiar habits. None of my business how you spend your money."

The woman said nothing but looked firmly at him.

"A holy person like you comes to a dirty, polluted market offering so much money for a young girl?" Shan Hu leered at the nun with a sly, suggestive look. He lost no time in reaching out for the ingot in the woman's open palm, but she pulled her hand away too quickly.

"Is that meant to be a yes?" The nun's eyes flashed brightly at him. He grunted.

She opened her palm again, the silver ingot catching a gleam of

sunlight. “Either you take this, or we’ll be standing here all day playing stupid games, Insult-the-Nun or Snatch-the-Emptiness.”

“Good one, good one!” came a voice from the crowd. A few onlookers laughed loudly.

Shan Hu snorted, his face puffy and red. Oily Face, watching from a safe distance, yelled out, “She’s right. Those eyes are too weird. Maybe she’s possessed. Do you want to risk getting caught for banditry? You know the punishment. Strangulation, huh?” He scurried back into the inn as soon as he shouted this out.

Shan Hu pursed his lips together tightly. He should take the silver. He was no fool, but he didn’t like being insulted. And who in this town would dare report him anyway? But this dark-skinned woman was an outsider. Was she lying when she said she would report him?

The square became hushed as people waited to see what Shan Hu would do. He scowled and fumed in silence. Oily Face had a point. The girl had been nothing but trouble from the moment she was captured. He wasn’t going to risk dragging her around to the next town.

He stretched out his hand and nodded. “All right, uh ... your ... Your Reverence.”

The nun threw the silver up into the air, and Shan Hu caught it in his mud-caked hand, then bit into it, just to make sure. He sliced the ropes off Ling’s hands and feet with his knife. The woman didn’t lose a moment and grasped Ling’s arm firmly to guide her away as Shan Hu tucked the ingot into the purse on his belt.

“Oww, oww!” Ling cringed. A sharp pain travelled up her right heel, along the outside of her calf. She lifted her foot off the ground. It hung down at an awkward angle, as if unhinged.

The nun squatted down, and gestured to Ling to climb atop her back. Ling hobbled forward. Still clutching the small stone in one hand, she wrapped her arms around the nun’s neck. She was hoisted

up, her legs firmly held against the nun's hips, and swiftly taken away from the auction. Ling looked back, wondering what had happened to that Heaven-sent butterfly. It had vanished, almost as suddenly as it had appeared.

When they reached a quiet alley, the nun paused at a water pump. She bent low so that Ling could climb off. Ling did not put much weight on her injured foot and limped toward the water pump. Her mysterious rescuer cupped some water in her hands and offered it to Ling who took a tentative sip then quickly drained all of it. She hadn't realized until then how thirsty she was. She drank two more offerings of water in the same manner.

The nun sat on a rock and wiped her forehead with a handkerchief. She picked up a stick and with it wrote two characters in the reddish-brown earth, 奇蘭, saying as she did, "My name is Qilan, Rare Orchid. You may call me by this name only when we're alone. But in front of others, please call me Sister Orchid."

Ling simply nodded, aware of an inexplicable feeling welling up in her chest. What was it? It was soft and tender, that sensation. She looked at the characters written on the ground. Without a doubt, there was only one meaning for Lan, which was Orchid. But the first character was an entirely different thing altogether; it could mean either rare or strange. Wasn't it sometimes the case that a strange thing was also rare, rising above the ordinary, making it much more noticeable? But not all strange things were rare, surely.

Qilan passed the stick to Ling. "Now, show me your name."

"Ling," the girl replied in a brisk tone and shook her head in refusal. She withdrew her hand and clasped the small stone more tightly in her fist behind her back.

"Yes ... but which one?" Qilan politely insisted.

More head shaking. Ling gingerly passed the stone to her other

hand but was still unsure. She cast her gaze toward the ground and thought of her mother admonishing her never to reveal the actual word behind the sound of her name. Her mother had told her to let others assume which character it was. *To let others know your true name is to let them have power over you.*

She looked at Qilan's face, which seemed to radiate irresistible warmth. It was hard to say no to that.

"I ... I ..." Ling blushed, feeling awkward. Her hand reached out and took the stick. She finally wrote her name next to Qilan's, 靈.

"Ah ... Spirit or Soul."

Head still lowered, Ling felt a slight smile come to her face, despite her nervousness. She would leave it at that. Let the nun think whichever one was right.

"Come on, hop back on. I'm going to take you to a quiet inn where I will tend to your injury. Then we must eat." Qilan bent down so that Ling could climb up.

As Qilan walked, Ling closed her eyes and leaned into Qilan's back. She was dizzy with hunger and pain.

Behind them, a light movement of air passed over the ground and erased their names, lifting the hem of the nun's robes ever so imperceptibly.

They wound their way through what felt like a dizzying maze of alleys. Only an occasional breeze provided relief from the heat. Ling felt buoyed along, as if the nun was not so much walking as floating. A light, sweet scent wafted from Qilan's hair. It made Ling think of apricots.

Ling looked at the long shadows cast against the wall by the last rays of the sun. She and Qilan formed a silhouette of a beast with two heads and a large curved hump on its back.

By the time they reached a teahouse off the main path, Ling's face felt hot, and she wheezed a bit from the heat and dust. Unlike Prosperity Tavern, the teahouse was a modest affair, its thatched roof in disrepair. A rough piece of wood for a sign above the entrance read Idle Tea 閒暇茶.

The innkeeper rushed out from behind his counter and greeted Qilan with several bows in quick succession, his hands clasped together in deference in front of his heart. The man looked pronouncedly desiccated and reed-like, and his bows were so vigorous that Ling thought he just might break into two at any moment.

"Sister Orchid, it's been a while since you passed through! So honoured. How auspicious. Please give my greetings to Abbess Si."

This zealous deference intrigued Ling. *You'd think she was some kind of royalty*, she mused, *the way the old fellow was bowing*.

The teahouse had five tables, but only one was taken up by a couple of elderly men. Dried Reed seated Qilan and Ling at the back near the windows that looked onto an inner courtyard. Ling gazed out at a young boy who was picking at his nose with relish, while half-heartedly minding his charge of two chickens and a pig. Behind him was a stable. Through its open doors, Ling spied a donkey and two horses—one chestnut-coloured, the other a soft grey—and an old man with a sparse goatee tending to the horses. He caught Qilan's gaze and nodded at her.

Qilan addressed Dried Reed in a firm tone. "We will leave immediately after our meal." She licked her lips and furrowed her brow. "Let me think ... bring chicken fried with leeks, steamed salted fish with egg, green beans with fermented soybeans, three bowls of millet. Any summer garlic? Add a dish of your house pickles." The innkeeper nodded then scurried off to the kitchen.

Ling placed the unpolished turquoise on the table.

“Your pet?”

Ling didn't answer. The intimate tone made her uneasy.

“Place your foot here,” gestured Qilan, patting her lap. “I warn you, this will hurt, but I must fix your ankle.”

Ling cautiously lifted her right foot onto Qilan's lap. She gripped the sides of the stool in preparation. Qilan cradled the heel with one hand then rotated the foot with the other, at first gently, then swiftly, resulting in a sharp clunking sound. Ling gasped loudly. The room began to spin. She steadied her hand against the table, sat up straight, and took a deep breath. She felt her heart speed up. She looked away from Qilan, trying to distract herself with the antics of the boy in the dusty courtyard. He was scattering millet husks and clucking, as if he too were a chicken.

Dried Reed approached their table with a tray holding a large clay teapot and two cups. Ling's nose picked up the strong smell of the tea as it was poured. It was not the same tea as the one she'd lived with all her life, but it was close enough. It had hints of pine, slightly smoky. It reminded her of home.

Ling shook her head vigorously. “I can't ... the smell ...” She threw up a watery mess into the spittoon beneath the table.

Dried Reed snarled disapprovingly. “Your friend has no tongue to wag, but look how well she retches.” He bent down cautiously and extricated the filled spittoon.

“Quite the aim.”

Ling wiped her mouth on her sleeve. She lowered her forehead onto her hands on the table.

The innkeeper returned with a large tray filled with dishes of food along with three bowls of steaming millet.

She raised her head off the table and stared at the food. Her stomach rumbled loudly. “Nuns eat meat?”

“Why, that’s the most you’ve spoken so far!”

Ling’s lips quivered. She tried to stop herself, but the sorrow rose up to her throat, and she began to heave in long, loud gasps. She bent forward and covered her face with her hands, then gave herself up to unrestrained sobbing.

“Merciful Heaven.” Qilan pulled out a mala from inside one of her sleeves and began to chant. Satisfied after doing a round of repetitions, she smiled and stood up and sniffed the array of food loudly.

Next, she scooped portions of food and millet into a bowl and beckoned to Dried Reed. “Give this to my trusty assistant.” Then she turned back to address Ling. “About the meat—let’s just say that I’m not the usual kind of nun. I do indulge occasionally. Especially when I’m away from the temple on some errands.” Qilan’s eyes gleamed as she dipped a finger into the sauce and licked it clean.

Ling wiped off her tears and stared intently at the speed at which Qilan picked up pieces of chicken dripping with sauce and stuffed them into her mouth, grunting as she chomped.

The tiniest soft crease formed on Ling’s forehead, just between her eyes. She stammered, “Wh-where are you from?”

Qilan, mouth full, replied, “Da Fa Temple in Chang’an. And you?”

Ling turned her head away to look out at the courtyard. “Far from here.” She shuddered as the flood of memories welled up.

“Come, drink this cup of hot water before you feel the urge to throw up again.”

Ling took a sip of the hot water. A tremor passed through her.

Qilan put her bowl and chopsticks down and sipped some tea. “Ah, I feel better now.” She burped twice. Loudly. “What happened to you? Where is your family?”

“Gone.” Ling stared into the cup of water.

Qilan waited. The silence stretched on.

“Attacked. Father ... murdered. My, my m–m–mother, she ... the bandit, he ... and then ... she slashed ...” Ling brought her hand up to her throat and gestured to Qilan what had happened. She felt an ache press against her chest. For an instant, she was her mother, and the pain of dying overtook her.

She coughed uneasily and stared at the darkening sky outside the inn. The centre of her being felt hollowed out, as if she was no longer there physically, no more than an unfettered spirit. Ling reached for the piece of turquoise on the table and clutched it in her right palm. It was the only thing she had that reminded her of life with her parents.

“No other family?”

Ling shook her head. “What’s next? Where ...” Words had deserted her.

“Give me your hand.” Qilan pointed to Ling’s left hand.

Qilan lightly pressed the fingers of her own hand at Ling’s wrist. Then she released and waited while Ling transferred her pet turquoise to the left hand. Qilan took Ling’s pulses on the right wrist.

Qilan gently gathered both of Ling’s hands, cupping them between her own, so that their hands closed in together, the turquoise securely in the centre of Ling’s palms. Ling felt a vibrating pulse travel up both arms.

“Now, keep your hands closed.” Qilan used her thumb to press a spot halfway up between the wrist and elbow on the inside of both of Ling’s arms. Qilan burped three times in succession, then stood up, went behind Ling, and placed her thumbs on either side of her neck at the base of her skull.

Ling closed her eyes and felt her breath grow deeper. The nausea slowly subsided. “More water. More. Thirsty,” she mumbled.

The donkey in the courtyard brayed. The boy nattered on to his chickens. Up and down in pitch went his voice, the boy imparting

the most important details in soft, round sounds. Ling drank all the water. She looked out to the courtyard and saw that the old man was now sitting on a wood stump and eating.

“Feel better?”

She did feel better, but she didn’t want to look at Qilan or answer her. She looked down at the cup nestled between her palms. She was nervous, all kinds of thoughts racing through her mind. “Why did you save me?”

Qilan smiled. “If someone needs help and I can assist, I don’t hesitate to act.”

Ling’s voice wavered with emotion. “I ... don’t know ... how I could repay you.”

“No need to repay.”

“Where will I go?”

“I’ll take care of you. I didn’t rescue you from the auction to then abandon you,” Qilan assured her. “Eat up now. Before the food gets cold. Then we’ll start our journey toward Chang’an.”

Ling blurted out, “I must return here some day. To kill ... ”

“Kill?”

“The murderer.”

“Was it that foul man I took you away from?”

Ling nodded.

“Your thirst for revenge might not remain this compelling as time passes.” Qilan took a slow, loud sip of tea.

“I must.”

“If you still feel so insistent in a few years’ time, I promise you, I’ll bring you back to Huazhou.”

“Help me kill him?”

“Didn’t say that. I’ll bring you back to ferret out that despicable lout. Then you’ll have a chance to decide what you want to do.”

Ling was dumbfounded. The only reason she would seek him out would be to kill him. Or at least die an honourable death while trying to do so.

“Your parents would want you to be happy, rather than be poisoned by your sorrow and anger.”

Her body quaked. *How would you know what my parents want?*

“Your task now is to get strong.”

“Will you help me become strong?”

“Yes.”

Ling put the cup of water down on the table because her hands were shaking too much. All that she had known was now lost to her. She resolved that, with Qilan’s help, she would get strong, so strong she would be able to slay Shan Hu one day.

THE INNER PALACE AT TAIJIGONG,
NORTH CENTRAL CHANG’AN

Your Majesty,” the Empress coyly whispered as she sidled up to Li Zhi on the couch, “you know how hard it’s been, since those awful women ...” She took a quick breath in and held it for a few moments.

The Emperor grimaced. He did not like to see Wu Zhao unhappy. She could be so lovely when she was in a good mood, but when she was displeased she was capable of the worst rages. He shuddered at the memory of her last episode.

He dismissed the maids-in-waiting and turned his attention to placating her. He carefully repositioned a sable cushion behind Wu Zhao’s head and stroked her left hand. “My dear, what else do you wish me to do? After all, I let you have your way with them.”

The sides of Wu Zhao’s rouged mouth turned downward in a dramatic show of displeasure. “There’s something else you haven’t done! You know what it is, surely?”