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A bamboo bowl flew through the air, aimed at the slave girl's head. She ducked out of the way. She was very experienced at dodging flying objects—from ink stones to chicken bones.

Her master slumped back onto his bed, exhausted by the effort of throwing the bowl. "Feed the beasts, wretch."

"Yes, Master Lan," the girl replied.

Lan scowled at her with the distaste he reserved for rats, spiders and maggoty meat. The only time he smiled was when he was laughing at her stupidity.



“Don’t take all day either.”

“No, Master Lan.”

She slipped out of her master’s house as an empty wine jar flew towards the door.

It was a bitterly cold day. Snow crunched beneath the slave girl’s straw shoes as she hurried towards the animal pens. The sky was the colour of ashes. It looked like it would soon snow again.

The slave girl didn’t have a name; she didn’t know how old she was. She had lived at Huangling Palace since her parents had sold her to Lan when she was a small child. The previous summer, Lan had shouted that she was thickheaded for a girl of ten years. As she could only count to ten, she didn’t know how old that made her now.

Huangling Mountain was a barren hill in a range of many barren hills that marked the western boundary of the Han empire. Throughout winter it was waist deep in snow and blasted by freezing winds. In the summer the air was so hot it was like breathing in flames. The Emperor’s father had built a palace in this faraway place so that the world would know how vast his empire was. Unfortunately it was so far from anywhere that few people ever saw it.

The palace was surrounded by a high wall of rammed earth. In the eastern wall was the entrance gate. The Emperor’s residence occupied more than three-quarters



of the palace grounds. The animal pens, the stores and the servants’ houses were squashed together in the remaining quarter. In all the slave girl’s time at Huangling, there had never been an imperial visit. The palace’s graceful halls and sitting rooms, its gardens and pavilions were always empty. Slaves weren’t allowed in the palace. Master Lan said he would beat her if she ever went in there. He went into the palace from time to time, but he always came back angry. He grumbled about the wasted space, the unused bed chambers, the cloth-draped furniture, while he had to sleep in his humble house with one room and a roof that leaked.

Compared to the corner of the ox shed, where the slave girl slept on a pile of straw, Master Lan’s house was luxurious. There was a rug on the earth floor and on the wall hung a painting of a dragon on a length of blue silk. The fire burned all through winter and a clever system of pipes carried the heat to warm his bed. Even the goat had a better home than the slave girl.

It wasn’t the goat that she was going to feed though. It wasn’t the oxen, mooing sadly in their stalls. It wasn’t the pigs or even the chickens. In the farthest corner of the farthest palace in the empire, behind the servants’ quarters, at the back of the stables and sheds, there was another animal enclosure. It was a pit in the ground, a dungeon hewn from the raw rock of Huangling. The only entrance to this pit was a hinged grate, not made of

bamboo, like the other animal enclosures, but of bronze.

The slave girl wore trousers that were patched on the knees and too short for her, and a threadbare jacket with many mends. These were her only clothes. An icy wind blew across the courtyard and straight through the worn fabric—even at the front where the edges overlapped and wrapped around her. She looked into the pit, but could see nothing in the darkness below. She slid a latch across, lifted the grate and went down a staircase cut into the rock. The girl shivered. Not because of the cold. Not because of the darkness. Not because of the smell of stale air that came up to meet her from the dungeon. There was something else that she couldn't put a name to that made her uneasy. The pit always had that effect on her, as if there were something waiting in the darkness—something dangerous and frightening. It wasn't the creatures that lived in the pit that unsettled her. Even though they were big and had sharp teeth and claws, she wasn't afraid of them. They were an unnatural sort of beast. Different to the farm animals she cared for and, as far as she could see, of no use to anyone. They were dragons.

It was dark and smelt of urine and rotting straw. It had been a long time since the pit had been cleaned. The girl moved out of the square of pale, banded light beneath the grate and into the darkness. She shuffled forward, wishing she could bring a lamp. Master Lan

had forbidden such a waste of lamp oil. Her eyes grew used to the darkness. The patch of light beneath the grate now seemed bright.

The dragons slept in the darkest corner of the pit. There were only two of them now. The girl could just remember when there had been four. Lao Ma, the old woman who kept the palace clean, could remember the day the dragons first arrived. She had been no more than a girl herself. Lao Ma said there were a dozen or more of the creatures then. The slave girl wondered what had happened to all the others.

The creatures didn't move as she approached. They had never tried to hurt her, but she had a feeling that they were hiding their true nature. The painting of the dragon in Master Lan's house showed a magnificent golden creature, snaking and shimmering among clouds. In the dim light of the pit it was hard to make out exactly what the two imperial dragons looked like. They certainly weren't magnificent. They looked dull and grey. Their scales did not shimmer. They did not fly. Their long scaly bodies lay all day, curled up like piles of thick rope in the dirty straw.

Master Lan was the Imperial Dragonkeeper. His seal of office hung from his waist by a length of greasy ribbon. It was a rectangle of white jade with characters cut into one end and a carving of a dragon on the other. It was Master Lan's job to feed and care for the imperial

dragons. The girl was just supposed to feed the farm animals and take care of Master Lan's personal needs—cooking his meals, mending his worn silk robes, keeping his house clean. But the Dragonkeeper was lazy. As the girl had grown older, he'd given her more and more of his duties. He spent more and more of his days lying on his bed, eating, drinking wine and complaining.

It was the Emperor's fault, he said. The imperial dragons really belonged at the imperial palace in Chang'an. That's how it had been for thousands of years. A shaman should examine them daily, divining the Emperor's future from the dragons' behaviour. If the dragons frolicked happily in the pleasure gardens, it was a good sign for the empire. If they sulked and didn't eat, it was a bad omen. Many years ago, one of the dragons had bitten an emperor, the father of the current emperor, when he was a child. He was scared of the beasts. As soon as he came to power, he had sent the dragons as far away as possible—to Huangling Mountain. There wasn't a day went by that Master Lan didn't complain that he should have been at Chang'an.

The slave girl put down the bowl of mashed taro and millet she had prepared for the dragons.

"Dinner time," she said.

One dragon stirred. She could barely make out its shape. It lifted its snout to sniff the food, then turned its head away.

"Ungrateful beast," she muttered.

The bowl of food she had left that morning was still there, untouched apart from where rats had nibbled around the edge.

The slave girl had been feeding the dragons since Master Lan had decided he had bad knees and couldn't climb up and down the dungeon stairs every day. That must have been nearly a year ago. The oxen moored whenever she went near their shed. The goat wagged its tail when she fed it. Even the chickens fluttered expectantly when she brought them food. The dragons had barely glanced at her in all that time.

"I was going to change your straw," she grumbled. "But now you can wait."

She picked up the bowl of fresh food. No point in wasting it on such surly beasts. They could finish the morning's mash first.

There was a rustle in the straw. A nose poked out. It sniffed the air. Beneath the nose were two large yellow teeth. The nose was followed by a grey head, a fat, furry body and finally a long tail.

The girl's frown turned to a smile. "Is that you, Hua?"

It was a large rat. She picked it up and hugged it, holding it up to her face and feeling its soft fur on her cheek.

"We'll have a good meal tonight," she told the rat.

“I’ve got taro and millet, if I can steal a little ginger from Master Lan’s dinner, it’ll be a feast.”

The rat glanced nervously at the dragons.

“Don’t worry about them,” the girl said. “They won’t hurt you.”

The girl tucked Hua inside her jacket next to the square of bamboo that hung around her neck. It had a worn character carved on it. Lao Ma had told her she was wearing it the day she arrived at Huangling. The girl didn’t know the meaning of the character. She couldn’t read and neither could Lao Ma. She hurried back up the stone steps.

The slave girl was cooking her master’s evening meal in the servants’ kitchen, when he crept up behind her, startling her.

“I found rat droppings in my bed,” the Dragonkeeper shouted. “I told you to kill that pest.”

“I did, Master Lan,” the girl said, hoping Hua stayed still inside her jacket. “Just as you ordered.”

“You’re lying,” her master snarled. “If I ever find it, I’ll boil it alive.”

He picked up the bowl of lentils that were soaking ready for the girl’s own dinner and hurled it out into the courtyard. The lentils scattered in the snow.

He sniffed the stew. “If there’s no onion in my dinner, you’ll get a beating!”

The girl hadn’t put an onion in her master’s stew. There were none left in Lao Ma’s food store.

The slave girl ran to the gate. Not the big wooden gates with the bronze hinges which were always locked, but a small gate made of bamboo poles behind the goat shed. Outside the palace walls were the orchard (some stunted apple trees and half-dead cherry trees), the vegetable garden and the rest of the world. Most of the garden was covered with snow, but there was one corner that the gardener kept clear. Underneath a pile of straw, the girl found a few frostbitten onion plants sticking out of the soil. She hacked at the frozen earth with her blade, but it was as hard as stone. She cut off the limp leaves and hoped they would provide enough flavour.

She sat back on her heels. There was a dark orange blot on the horizon. Somewhere beyond the clouds the sun was setting. She wondered what she would have been doing right now if she hadn’t been sold as a slave. Would she be happy? Would she be sitting in a cosy house with her parents? Brothers and sisters? Would she have a full stomach?

She’d thought about running away from Huangling many times. It would be easy enough. But where would she go? She scanned the horizon in every direction. There was nothing but snow-covered mountains gradually fading from white to grey in the twilight.

There were no villages, no remote garrisons, not so much as a tree in sight. She watched a lone snow eagle glide into the distance and came to the same conclusion as she had all the other times she'd thought about running away. Unless she grew wings, she'd have to stay at Huangling. She got to her feet and went back to finish preparing her master's meal.

After she had served the stew to Master Lan, she retrieved her own dinner from the snow. It took more than an hour of kneeling in the cold and dark to find even half the lentils. She was glad she'd stolen the dragons' taro and millet. Without them, her dinner would have been very meagre. She added the lentils to a pot of boiling water.

A leather pouch hung from her waist, suspended from a length of frayed hemp rope. As well as her rusty iron blade, it contained her secret possessions—a hairpin given to her by the man who delivered the stores twice a year, a piece of weathered wood shaped just like a fish and a white eagle feather. She took out the blade and chopped up the piece of ginger she'd saved from her master's dinner. She added that to the pot with the taro and millet.

She went to collect the dirty dishes from Master Lan's house. He was sprawled on the bed snoring. As well as the upturned bowl and wine cup, she took a bronze lamp shaped like a ram from beside her sleeping

master's bed. Back in the kitchen she pulled a small clay jar from behind the stove. It was full of lamp oil. She filled up the lamp.

"Come on, Hua," said the slave girl, picking up the rat and tucking him into her jacket. "While we're waiting for our dinner to cook, let's go and explore the world."

Master Lan would have beat her if he found out that every time she lit a lamp for him, she saved a little of the oil for herself. She took no more than a drop or two each night, but slowly she collected enough to fill a lamp.

Outside she shielded the lamp with her jacket, just in case any of the other palace staff were around. It was very unlikely. The men were all as old as Lao Ma. They liked to be tucked in bed early. The girl ducked through a hole in the tangled vine that shielded the palace from the servants' quarters, the animal sheds and other unsightly buildings. It also hid her secret visits to the palace from the other servants. She glanced up at the dark sky. She hoped the clouds would hide her from the gods. She walked through the dark gardens and opened the door of the Jade Flower Hall. The lamp lit a small circle of light on the floor. She followed a dark corridor. This was her secret pleasure, exploring the palace while everyone else was sleeping.

Master Lan was always saying that Huangling was

tiny compared to the Palaces in Chang'an, but to the slave girl it seemed huge. Each time she went on one of her night-time excursions to the palace, she visited a different room. Once she had gone into the Emperor's own chamber. She had even dared to sit on his bed which was as big as a wheat field. This time she went to a small hall where the palace women, if there had been any, would normally spend their days. It was one of her favourite rooms. She held up the lamp. The circle of light moved from the floor to the wall. It lit a painting of a mountain with a tiny building on its peak. The mountain loomed above a flat plain, impossibly high, its slopes scattered with tiny trees which were twisted and gnarled, but still looked beautiful.

She held up the rat so that he could see the painting.

"Do you think this is what the world looks like, Hua?" she whispered.

The rat twitched his whiskers.

She shone the lamp further along the wall where it fell on a silk wall hanging. This had a painting of a garden. In the garden there was a lake with a bridge zigzagging across it. The garden was bursting with flowers: pink, blue, pale purple, bright yellow. The girl didn't know the names of the flowers. She had never seen anything growing on Huangling that had such bright colours.

"Do you think there really are such flowers?"

In summer a few peonies struggled into flower in the

neglected gardens of Huangling, but they looked limp and pale alongside the gorgeous flowers in the painted garden. She liked to think that somewhere in the world there were things so bright and beautiful, but she doubted that they really existed.

"It's how painters would like the world to be," she whispered to the rat. "There aren't real places like these."

Her stomach rumbled.

"Let's go and eat," she said.

Back in the kitchen, the girl made sure that the oil in the lamp was exactly the same level as it was before. Master Lan had a habit of checking. She spooned her dinner into a wooden bowl. Then she tiptoed into her master's house to sit by the fire. Hua came out from his hiding place inside her jacket.

"Here you are, Hua," the girl said, setting down a second smaller bowl of food on the hearth.

The rat ate greedily.

Hua hadn't always been the girl's pet. She had first made his acquaintance when she found him stealing a chicken leg (which she had stolen from Master Lan). She was furious and tried to hit the rat with a piece of firewood. He was quick and escaped easily. Then she woke one night to find him nibbling her fingers. She determined to catch the pest and built a trap out of thin



bamboo canes. Once she'd caught the rat though, she couldn't bring herself to kill it. She decided that he was quite a pretty creature with his glossy grey fur, pink ears and whippy tail. She called him Hua, which meant blossom. She started to train him. The rat responded well. Before long he had become quite tame and was the girl's best and only friend.

When Master Lan discovered she was keeping a rat as a pet, he ordered her to kill it. She had to keep Hua out of his sight. That's when she'd got the idea of keeping him hidden in the folds of her jacket.

She settled by the fire to enjoy the food and warmth in peace. This was her favourite time of day.

"Life's not so bad, is it Hua?" The rat was lying contentedly in front of the fire. "We've been out to see the world, we've got a meal inside us and we can warm our toes by the fire." The rat rolled over so that she could scratch his full stomach. "And we've got each other."