Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction, based in part on actual people and events.

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel

CHAPTER ONE

The Opening Salvo

I.

March 9, 1839
The Foreigners' Factories
Canton, Guangdong Province
China

"Superintendent!" Emile Johnston burst into Elliot's dim office. "You're needed!"

Charles Elliot set down his mug of tea and frowned at his second-in-command. He'd drawn the bamboo window shade in a vain attempt to shut out the day's heat, but even in the poor light he saw his deputy's face was badly flushed.

"What's happening, Johnston?"

"I don't know…I…there's soldiers massing on the riverbank."

"Slow down and speak sense!" Elliot had not commanded a ship in years, but when his patience ran short, he still reverted to a captain's bellow.

Johnston gulped, and tried to obey. "Soldiers," he gasped. "I think the Governor-General's. At least two dozen, marching up the river bank toward the square."

Elliot jumped to his feet, pushed past Johnston, barreled through his clerk's front office and tore open the door to what was laughably called the "lane." Little more than an alleyway, it was crowded at the best of times. Just now, it was a solid wall of backs and shoulders.

"Make way!" Elliot roared. "Shift, damn you!"

But it was no good. The mass of Europeans, Americans and Chinese were packed so tight, they couldn't have moved aside, even if they wanted to.

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Damn. Had some fool, or, worse, some official closed the gates?

Foreigners wishing to trade in Canton were obliged to do so at the "foreigners' factories." Despite the name, these were not manufacturing sites. Nothing was made there. The name had been taken from the old word "factors," meaning a counting house. The Chinese allotted each outside nation exactly one building, one "factory." This was expected to serve as a combination of warehouse, trading depot, hostelry and clerks' office.

In Canton, the factories were all crammed into a single row on the Pearl River's bank like books on a shelf, and fenced off from the rest of the city by means of a stout stone wall.

This arrangement made sense only once one understood the cramped quarter had not been designed to facilitate the free flow of goods or persons. Quite the opposite, in fact. Its whole purpose was to constrain and isolate the foreigners as much as possible.

And turn us into sitting ducks.

Elliot craned his neck to try to see over the crowd, but it was useless. Cursing, he grabbed at the nearest man — a slender Chinese in blue tunic and black cap and wrenched him around.

"What's happening?" Elliot bawled.

"*Soldiers!*" stammered the man, in the trader's pidgin. "*Many, many soldiers!*"

"Hey! That's the superintendent!" shouted an English voice.

Damn. Someone had recognized him, or his uniform. Elliot released the man he'd been holding. The fellow immediately set about trying to squeeze himself through the crowd.

"Captain Elliot! Oi!" A fresh shout rose up. "What's happening, Captain?"

The question was echoed up and down the lane by dozens of English voices. Elliot stared at the crowd. How the hell could he answer?

Retreat was the only option. He slammed the door.

"Out through the yard." He shouldered past Johnston, cutting back through his offices. "We need to get to the veranda, get above this."

"But shouldn't we…?"

"We should find out what the hell is going on!"

With his deputy at his heels, Elliot strode down the British factory building's interior hallway, past store rooms, record rooms, sleeping quarters. All the while,

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the question from the alley rang in his ears.

What's happening?

It could be anything. That was what squeezed the breath out of Elliot's lungs. They were trapped in this single row of buildings. If the gates to the city were closed, there was no easy way out except along a river clogged with junks and sampans. The Chinese water forces might look like a joke beside the British navy, but their gun boats cruised the river, and the nearest English ship of the line was anchored a day away at Macao.

And the soldiers were marching up the river bank.

If the Emperor had finally had enough…if he'd ordered this new man he was sending to take serious action against the foreigners who flouted Chinese law…

Because whatever might be happening, there was no question at all as to what caused it. It was the same thing that had dogged Elliot ever since he'd agreed to accept the post of Superintendent of Trade at Canton.

Opium.

The drug was China's nightmare, and a thorn in Elliot's side the size of an officer's dress sword. According to British law, it was perfectly legal to buy the stuff in whatever quantity one wished. It was also perfectly legal to sell it for whatever price one could get, to whomever would buy.

Among the Chinese however, this same transaction was highly, lethally illegal. And, it just so happened, the men who had their hands on the spigot of the opium traffic along China's coast were right here in the factories.

The British factory building was the only one large enough to have an interior courtyard. Elliot cut directly across the shadowed yard and stormed back inside through the opposite entrance. Johnston panted behind him.

"Maybe next time you'll get some useful information before you come running to mummy!" Elliot growled as they strode through the larger clerks' office. Men milled about, jabbering in English, Parsee, Hindu and pidgin.

"Superintendent!" they called. "Sir!"

"Back to your desks!" he barked. "All of you! Back to work!"

Deputy Johnston said he counted at least two dozen soldiers. The man in the alley said *many-many*. Two dozen was not enough for an assault. But what if there were more on the way?

What are their orders?

Have they closed the gates?

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Elliot's mind raced between those questions and trying to enumerate the contents of the gun-room, even though he knew that to be pointless. If Canton's Governor and Governor-General were about to launch an attack on the foreigners, there would not be enough.

Soldiers massing outside. Why outside? Why not come in here?

Why no notice?

If his years in Canton had taught Charles Elliot one thing, it was that the Chinese were dedicated to procedure. No matter what their government planned, all action was preceded by a precisely written declaration, with the placement of each character dictated by custom and precedence. The British traders, and some of his fellow officials, dismissed the endless stream of paper as trivial twitterings. Elliot did not. Those notices, letters and petitions were the key to what others were pleased to call the mystery of China.

There is no mystery. Just ships and offices filled with fools who can't find their arses with both hands, no matter how many times you show them where to look.

There should have been a letter, a posting, a warning, something. It should have come straight from the Governor, or from this new man they had on the way — what was his name? Lin? Yes. High Commissioner Lin Zexu.

Word of High Commissioner Lin's coming had sent a ripple through the Chinese merchant families, the "Cohong" as they were called. The Cohong said this Commissioner Lin was being sent to deal with "the foreign trade." That meant that Lin, like the man before him, and the man before him, was being sent to try to stop the opium smuggling.

But this can't be his doing.

A high commissioner from the Celestial Court would not begin his work by breaking with tradition and procedure.

Would he?

Elliot took the narrow stairs to the veranda two at a time. At the top, he pushed through the double doors into the light and the heat, and another mass of men's bodies.

"Make way!" bellowed Elliot. "Shift, damn you!"

This time, the crowd yielded and Elliot forced his way to the iron railing.

The white veranda thrust out over the tiny garden some of Elliot's predecessors had managed to negotiate from the local government. The Chinese had

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a long list of things they did not want from foreigners, and it included any attempt at permanent residence. No personal houses could be built or bought in Canton, and no man was allowed to stay all year round. Also, no women, and no children on the mainland, and no gardens. Except for this one.

Below, the peddlers and porters, and the rest of the usual loiterers, had abandoned their thicket of rickety stalls and bunched together against the low river wall. A second crowd — this one mostly Chinese — filled the bank and the docks on the other side. Out on the river, where the bewildering mass of small boats packed together, people came out on the decks to stare at the spectacle.

Layers upon layers of humanity. Layers upon layers of crowd. And there was no knowing what they thought, or would do next.

At the moment, they seemed to be watching. In and amongst the flag poles that belonged to the various trading nations, a square of soldiers wearing the scarlet silks of the provincial Governor General cleared a spot.

"Should we get the guns?" breathed Deputy Johnston in Elliot's ear.

"Don't be an idiot," muttered Elliot in reply.

"But what if…" Johnston must have got a look at Elliot's face, because he let the question die.

Yes, what if we start firing our rifles? What if we kill a few of these men — the sons and brothers of prominent citizens — while we're sitting in a whitewashed cage in the middle of a city of a hundred thousand Chinese? What if we do that?

"Well, hullo, Elliot!" A familiar and loathed voice spoke at his shoulder. "Looks like something's got Johnny Chinaman into a twist again, doesn't it?"

Elliot's urgency had kept him from noticing he'd fetched up right next to Lancelot Dent.

A lean, weatherbeaten, stoop-shouldered, and expensively-tailored man, Lancelot Dent was one of the principal partners for Whiteman, Dent & Brightman. Rumor had it that Dent's company brought in half the opium sold at Canton. In his three years as Superintendent of Trade in Canton, Elliot had never reconciled himself to this man. His smile was eternally self-satisfied, and unless you looked carefully, it could still make you believe there was some sincerity left in the bottom of his merchant's soul.

"What d'ye think it is, then?" Dent's gray eyes twinkled merrily as he surveyed the scene. He gave every appearance of a man anticipating some excellent entertainment.

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Elliot could cheerfully have pitched him head-first over the railing.

Ignore him. You have important things to pay attention to. Like tallying the enemy. If they are the enemy.

Four soldiers flanked a miserable figure huddled on its knees. One solider to the side held up a gong and stick. One was reading from a paper.

There it is, Elliot thought a little dazedly. *Had to be a paper. Why is it out there and not in my hand?*

Count, idiot.

Six, eight, twelve, fifteen, twenty…

Twenty-two men with matchlocks, whips and spears. At the moment, they appeared to be mostly occupied with holding back the mostly-Chinese portion of the crowd that had collected on the banks. More importantly, these soldiers appeared to be the whole compliment. No others marched to join them from any direction, at least not that Elliot could see. He shaded his eyes and squinted past the mass of junks and sampans to the open water, but he could not see any of the water force's gun boats cruising the river.

So, not an attack. This time. And not the start of a barricade. Relief lifted a little of the anger from Elliot's mind.

But if not either of those, then what?

The soldiers had cleared their space around the flagpoles the trading nations had erected. In the middle — right at the base of the American's flag pole — four other Chinese in workmen's tunics and trousers were busy with ropes and mallets around a couple of wooden beams.

"Hey!" shouted someone from the English side of the crowd. "What're you up to with all that jaw-jaw? Speekee English, you yellow bastard!"

"What do you think you're staring at, Slope?" shouted another.

A Chinese voice shouted back. One of the soldiers pushed forward, just a step or two. Elliot's relief turned to smoke and blew away.

Years ago, when he was a young man in Guiana, he'd stumbled into a scene too much like this. Crowds had faced each other across the town square, with soldiers in the middle, intent on keeping them apart.

They failed. Shouts flew, and then stones. Then shots.

"Sir?" Johnston pointed down the promenade.

Elliot sighted along his deputy's arm. A pair of figures worked their way against the shift of the crowd. Both wore black Chinese caps. One flashed a button

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of rank, but from this distance it was impossible to tell what kind. That man wore elaborate tasseled silks, the other, plain black.

"That's Howqua," said Johnston. "I think. Might be Mowqua. No, Howqua. Old Mowqua can't move that fast."

The Imperial system of containment and control meant only thirteen families were permitted to trade with foreigners. Their head was a man called Howqua. He surely had a personal name, but Elliot had never heard it. He knew the trader only by his "courtesy" or public name.

"Whichever it is, get him up here!"

"Sir!" Johnston turned to shove his way between the gawkers who had closed in behind the superintendent.

Goddamn this crowd, goddamn this indiscipline. Goddamn…

Down among the flagpoles, workmen shifted and parted and now Elliot could make out what they'd been building.

No. This could not possibly be what it looked like. Not here, in front of the square, with the noise of the two opposing crowds growing more agitated and angry by the minute.

"Dear God!" cried someone on the veranda. "That's a cross-trees."

"Well, well," murmured Dent.

A cross-trees. A site of punishment. *Or execution*. And built, by accident or design, right under the American's flag.

The idiots! The Americans had a near-fanatic attachment to their ensign, and were even quicker than the English to take an insult. More shouts lifted up from the crowd below, and plenty of them had the distinctive Yankee twang and color.

"Who's that there?"

Dear Lord.

"The bastards!

Please, don't let that prisoner be a Yank.

"They's gonna kill 'im!"

Or a Brit.

"They's coming after us!"

Or any white man at all.

He had to do something.

Elliot swung around to the men on the veranda with him. "Who's here?" he demanded. "Varney! Prasanth! Collins! You! You! And you!" He stabbed his

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finger toward men as he recognized them. "Get down to the square! Get whoever's still left in the offices to follow with you and clear that mob away from that fucking wall!"

"Yah! Yellow bastards!" rose the fresh shout. "Come and try it, fucking cowards!"

The men Elliot called out protested, but they moved, breaking up the veranda's crowd just in time for Elliot to see Johnston stumbling up the stairs, with Howqua right behind.

The merchant Howqua was built slim and straight with a very round skull, pale skin and the whitest hands Elliot had ever seen on a man. He was rumored to have millions of pounds secreted in British and Swiss banks, entirely against Imperial law. Elliot had become familiar with Howqua's precise blend of caution and ambition, and could well believe it. Howqua's embroidered robes billowed around him, the hems flapping against a stout man in a black scholar's tunic who Elliot knew was Howqua's official translator. Howqua actually spoke English reasonably well. Learning foreign languages, however, went against the regulations the Chinese government imposed to keep a distance between their people and foreigners, so Howqua kept his knowledge under wraps.

The remaining men on the veranda fell back for the merchant in a way they had not bothered to do for the superintendent. Even Dent stepped aside so Howqua could sail straight up to Elliot. He was shaking with fear and fury, and his skin was drawn tight enough across his scalp that Elliot could see a vein throb above his brow.

Howqua did not bow to Elliot. He did not give a greeting or acknowledgement of title or welcome.

"We tried to warn you, *Yi Lu!*" Howqua spat out the Chinese rendering of Elliot's name. "You would not listen!"

Elliot could not miss the fact that Howqua's shout was actually aimed as much at Dent as it was at Elliot himself.

"Steady on," murmured Dent before Elliot could even open his mouth. "I'm sure…"

"Look!" shouted Howqua. "Look and see, if you are not blind! This is what High Commissioner Lin will make happen! His words create action, even when he is still four thousand *li* from Canton!"

Below, the voices swelled into an incomprehensible rush. The Chinese commander was still reading from his paper. Elliot strained to hear, even though he

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knew it was useless. Two other soldiers hauled the pathetic, huddled figure to his feet. He wore a loose blue tunic and his head was shaved in the Chinese fashion. *Not one of us, then. Thank you, dear God.*

"Is he being flogged?" Elliot instantly hated himself for the question, and the tremor of pointless hope in his voice.

"Flogged?" Howqua spat. "You are a fool!"

The soldiers pressed their prisoner up against the stake and set about lashing his wrists and chest so he would be held upright and spread-eagled, even as his knee buckled.

A ragged line of men trickled out of the British factory and threaded their way across the square. It was the party Elliot had sent down a minute ago.

"All right! All right!" one of them shouted. "Let's go! Get along there!"

Not one of the Europeans moved.

"They'll kill us all!"

"They'll fucking try!"

The prisoner spread-eagled on the cross-trees sagged as far as the ropes allowed. His head lolled.

Fainted?

The European crowd, too far gone with their own ugly emotion, shifted and pressed forward. Elliot knew they didn't see the preparations for execution, or they only barely saw them. They saw the crowd of Chinese on the banks and the boats. They imagined an enormous hatred gathered there, one equal to their fears. The Chinese soldiers shouted. The English traders shouted back. The prisoner hung motionless, his arms spread as if he was being crucified. His queue draped slantwise across his chest.

A soldier grabbed the prisoner's head and forced it back.

"Git outta here!" came the shout from below. "Go on! Git!"

"And stay out, you slant-eyed cowards!"

The soldier reading the declaration lowered the paper. Another pulled a cord from his belt, and moved behind the prisoner.

That was when some fool from the landward side threw a paving stone, and some other pulled out his knife and charged the assembled Chinese on the bank.

Then, the riot began in earnest.

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