

# AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



## CHAPTER FIVE The Emperor's Three Orders

### I.

*March 19, 1839*

*The City of Canton, Guangdong Province*

*China*

Sixty days before he arrived in Canton, Lin Zexu arrived at the gates of the Forbidden City. He rode a fresh horse with a rich saddle that he had purchased before he left his home, and was dressed in his finest robes. His summons wrapped in yellow silk and sealed with jade was handed to the captain of the guards at the gate. The man took a long and careful time reading the scroll, before he bowed, and gave the order that Lin was allowed to pass. He was not even required to dismount and walk. Instead, Lin was permitted to ride straight up to the palace steps.

It was a very great honor and demonstrated the singular trust the Emperor placed in him. Lin wished he could feel more gratitude and less fear.

An audience with the Emperor, even over a matter he considered of great importance was a matter of a few minutes. Honor was received, a question or two was answered, orders were bestowed, gratitude expressed, and a humble exit was made.

Lin had been called to the imperial palace, and the imperial presence before. Each time, it had made him aware of several things simultaneously.

The first was the heavy blessing of trust and confidence, leveled like a golden cap, or a sword, over his head. This intensified his awareness of the maze that was the Forbidden City itself — its layers of brick and silk and swords and gold, and all the endless ranks of men and women who separated the Emperor from the world outside — the cities and provinces that made up the land his grandfathers

had conquered.

These things were right and proper. He knew that. At the same time a feeling much like homesickness stole over him, along with the hardest, coldest awareness of all. That he came here to kneel before the throne of conquerors, as the son of those who were conquered. Each man, each woman, he passed looked strange to him. The shade of skin, the shape of eye, the style of hair and clothing, all these were wrong and unfamiliar. Foreign.

But of course, he was the foreigner, the subject, the supplicant here. It did not matter how many titles and permissions he carried. They were all gilding on dross. Here, he was entirely alone. He had no friend of childhood or school room in this maze of palaces. As he was Han, of course, so no relation of his could conceive of marrying into the families here. There was no one among those who turned their heads to watch him pass who would admit to knowing his father, or his grandfather.

Lin was brought here despite of his heritage, not because of it.

This was not the first time he had been summoned before the Son of Heaven. But this was the first time Lin had seen him so angry. Even as the Emperor spoke in glowing terms of the memorial Lin had written about the complexities and consequences of the opium trade, that anger strangled every word.

“How can I die and go to the shades of my imperial fathers and ancestors until these dire evils are removed!”

Was that anger against the drug itself? Or the continued defiance of this particular band of foreigners? Or perhaps it was their *ability* to defy that lay at the heart of the Imperial anger. Any could be true. All could.

“Go,” the Son of Heaven told Lin Zexu. “Examine. Act. These are your orders.”

With this, all was made clear. The Emperor feared he had disgraced his ancestors. Lin was to remove this anguish from him; remove the opium from the province, and remove the arrogance and presumption from this collection of unruly foreigners.

*Go. Examine. Act.*

Later, Lin tried to recall his glimpses of the Emperor’s face, searching for some hint as to what was really on his mind. Did he see then how the threat of the English lay far beyond their control of the flow of opium?

Lin did not know. He never would. He returned from the Forbidden City with his orders and edicts locked in iron boxes.

*Go. Examine. Act.*

There was of course, a great deal of other language contained in the sealed orders; authorizations for money, the ability to draft men and requisition buildings for his work, and most importantly the special plenipotentiary powers that gave him full command over the water forces.

But those three words uttered by the Son of Heaven remained the heart and root of all that was contained on those closely written pages.

*Go. Examine. Act.*

Lin closed his chests, said his farewells to his family, and he went.

#

Now, he was here, situated in the Yua Hu academy, having displaced the students, the faculty and the headmaster and filled their rooms instead with clerks, police, and soldiers, not to mention himself.

Eight days had passed since his arrival while he enacted the Emperor's second command; *Examine.*

According to the astrologists, eight was a good number. Strong. Auspicious. That was one of the reasons Lin Zexu chose it as his timeframe. For the eight days of his residence in the sprawling port city, Lin had examined the problem of opium. If exhaustion had weighed on him when he arrived, it had now settled so deeply into muscle and bone Lin did not believe he would ever be rid of it.

Lin had read the reports as he prepared for his journey. Along the way, he met and spoke with men who had recently been to Canton. Some were members of the Cohong merchant families and traded with the foreigners. Because of this, and because of his experience and success while he held the office of Governor-General in Hubei, he thought himself well-prepared for what he would find.

But the closer he got to Canton, the deeper the disaster appeared. The extent of the opium smoke and the tentacles of its profit beggared belief. By the time he arrived, Lin had half-convinced himself that what he read, and the conclusions it led him to, could not possibly be accurate.

Lin decided he must observe the situation as directly as possible. Dressed in his black scholar's tunic and plain cap, he began to walk the streets of Canton. Sometimes he was accompanied by Guang Xie, the commandant of police, and two or three of his men, also discretely clad. Sometimes he went by himself.

He had wanted so very badly to be wrong.

He was not wrong, and that too was exhausting.

Lin walked the trading districts, wandering in and out of the courtyards of shops and houses that sold food, tea and liquor. There, he recognized men from the official ceremonies and banquets that accompanied his arrival. He even noticed some he'd last seen in the Forbidden City. These men wore rich silks. They spoke pleasantly and at length with the landlords of the houses where opium was sold in the cellars and attics. Strings of cash passed back and forth. Chests and bags were taken through back doors and windows. These richly clad men spoke with the masters of the flower boats, and more chests were loaded into the holds.

Every single one of these locked up their strings of cash and left their countrymen to die.

Lin was no stranger to cities. He'd been down the narrow allies and dodged footpads on the wharfs. In his student days, he'd haunted the tea shops, the wine shops and the "flower shops." But never had he seen anything like this.

Men whining and begging outside tea shops until the owner cursed and kicked them away.

Men, and women too, shivering in the doorways, their skin clinging like old parchment to their bones.

And everywhere, the smell of the smoke. The tentacles spiraled out of every doorway, sweet, heavy, cloying in the throat and stinging the eyes. It numbed the senses and robbed a man of breath.

One alley, he was sure was lined with dead bodies, until one of them moaned.

He'd stood there, spell-bound, while over him the smoke of the city smeared together with the moonlight. Lin stared at the living corpses and breathed the thick sweetness of rotted poppy. For one sick, terrible moment, he forgot where he was, and how to get back to his house. It seemed to him that the correct action was to simply lie down here with the dead.

It seemed much simpler than what he must do now.

#

"High Commissioner? Sir?" Pao Tengzhou, stood uncertainly in the doorway.

Lin blinked. He was sitting at his desk in the academy examination room. The brush and paper waited in front of him, untouched. He'd been staring out the window, toward the garden, but seeing nothing beyond the darkness of his own mind.

Lin ruthlessly pulled his thoughts back to the present and beckoned Pao to enter.

The young man made his bow. “You asked me to come see you when I delivered the new reports I have compiled. Do you have any fresh instructions for me?”

“Yes. Report to Xia Nai. He has some more translation work for you to take back with you. And when you have those papers, please return. I will have a letter for your father.” The letter he’d been intending to write before he became so tangled in his thoughts.

“Father will be glad to receive word from you.”

Lin had any number of handicaps in his work, but the one he felt most strongly was the fact that he had few real friends in Canton, and no family at all. He did, however, have Pao Jian, Pao Tengzhou’s father. They had been friends and correspondents for many years. While Lin had travelled across the provinces, Pao Jian had stayed here, raising his sons, settling his roots deep into the soil of this city. When he received the Emperor’s orders, Pao was the first man Lin wrote to.

“How is your father doing?” When Lin had visited just a few days ago, he’d been disturbed to see how weak the older man had grown.

Pao Tengzhou hesitated just a little too long before answering. “Well, sir. He was up and about early this morning. I believe having you in Canton has revived his spirits.”

*You are concealing something.* Lin meant to question the young man more closely. He wanted to reassure Pao Tengzhou that he could speak freely and share the concerns of his house. But they were interrupted by the arrival of one of the junior clerks, a tiny, bony young man.

*What is his name?*

“High Commissioner, please forgive the interruption, but you asked to be told when Wu Bingjian arrived.”

Wu Bingjian. Howqua. The head of the Cohong merchants. Yes. This was a man he needed to speak with immediately. “Is Lu Guangheng with him?” Lin asked. Lu Guangheng — Mowqua — no longer held any official position among the merchant families, but even in retirement he wielded considerable influence. Therefore, he had considerable responsibility for how the Cohong conducted themselves.

“Lu Guangheng is just coming into the courtyard.”

“Very well.” Lin dismissed the clerk and turned to Pao Tengzhou. “I have to speak with these men. You may gather your work, but wait until I am finished with

these others. I will write that letter, and it will contain my promise to visit again as soon as I am able.” *My spirits also need reviving.*

The young man bowed and retreated. In his wake, Lin felt his thoughts stray to memories of Pao Jian’s courtyard. He thought of the sweetness in the air in that place. Of tea and smoke and the promise of plum blossoms —which seemed to be both the smallest and the greatest of the promises that had rained down on his head of late.

His head ached, but he had no time for self-indulgence. It was time to obey the third command he had been given.

*Act.*

He would begin with Howqua and Mowqua. His examinations completed, Lin had written out two edicts. The first, he had given to his senior clerk to carry directly to the foreigners and their *superintendent*, Elliot. Additional copies were taken to the printers for distribution to the general public. The second edict, written specifically for the Cohong families, waited face down on his desk. He would give that to the merchants to take with them after he had finished with them.

Not that he had any intention of summoning them immediately. A small wait would help them understand their position here.

Lin took his time reading a fresh report from Commandant Guang Xie on the state of the jails. He noted how much room there was to hold new prisoners, and how many men could currently assist in arrests of those who would not voluntarily comply with the new orders his clerks were currently casting into proper shape.

When Lin had finished the report, and written in his diary, and written, and read over his letter to Pao Jian, and cleaned his brush, and put away his inkstone, and added a stone to the problem laid out on the gridlines of the *weiqi* game board, and moved from his desk to the headmaster’s chair, and called a servant to ready a fresh pot of tea and clean cups, then he sent the servant to bring in Wu Bingjian and Lu Guangheng.

## II.

Wu Bingjian was a sharp faced man. His cheeks were hollow and his skin pressed tightly against his skull. He strode into the room with what Lin was sure was supposed to be an air of confidence, but in truth, he looked wary, as if he wanted to escape the reach of anyone who might be lurking beside the threshold. The

coral button of rank on his scarlet cap caught the light that poured in from the open window. The string of tiger's eye beads that hung from his neck had been ornamented with a scarlet tassel. His robe was black and scarlet, embroidered over with images of cranes. While this was impressive, it could not be comfortable on this warm day. In fact, a sheen of sweat already gleamed on Wu's rounded brow.

Lin carefully took in all the details of the man, including how Wu's eyes narrowed as he straightened up from his respectful bow.

Mowqua, Lu Guangheng, also entered the office and bowed, but more slowly and less deeply. Lu Guangheng was an old man. His hair and beard had turned snow white. He walked with a carved stick, but his back and shoulders remained straight and strong. Shorter, broader and rounder than Wu Bingjian, Lu had dressed more modestly, at least a little. His blue silks were decorated with white peonies and his beads were intricately carved carnelian.

Lu Guangheng had been the head of the Cohong merchants for many years. He had formally handed over that title, and that task to the younger man beside him. But every man to whom Lin had spoken said Lu kept a watchful eye over the Cohong, and Lu's influence was still felt by all its members. Including — and most importantly — by Wu Bingjian.

Lin had not told either man that the other would be invited to this audience. But from the way they carefully avoided each other's gaze, it was clear that they had spoken, if only during their little wait in the courtyard. Wu Bingjian seemed especially nervous. Lu Guangheng mostly seemed irritated. However, it was clear that neither felt at ease with the other in this room.

*Good.*

Because Lin was not only weary, he was deeply, profoundly angry.

Men blamed the foreigners for the opium trade, and the foreigners were heinously guilty. But the means by which the opium came to shore was clear. Foreign ships carried it to the river mouth but remained anchored off shore. It was the many-oared boats, the "fast crabs," that took the chests filled with opium pearls from the ships to the shore. There, those chests were handed off to landsmen who in turn distributed them to buyers.

The fast crab oar boats were not owned, or crewed, by foreigners. The landsmen who received and delivered the poison were not foreigners.

These facts burned inside Lin's mind as he faced Howqua and Mowqua.

"Thank you for coming so promptly," he said. "I am most anxious to speak

with you both, as you and your families are most closely concerned with the dealings of the foreigners in Canton. I wish to hear your report about them and their doings, and what measures the Cohong are currently taking to curtail the opium trade. We need to understand what has failed to work, so that we do not repeat past mistakes.”

Lin waited, but neither Wu Bingjian, nor Lu Guangheng seemed interested in volunteering any information. Indeed, Wu busied himself with pouring three cups of tea. He set one before Lin, and one before Lu before returning to his own chair, with the third cup cradled in his pale hands.

“You must understand, sir,” said Wu at last. “The foreigners have no understanding of order or method. They do nothing without long arguments and much shouting between themselves.” Wu waved one hand to indicate his helplessness. “Rational men must despair at trying to undo the tangle of their doings. Even now, when he knows you have arrived with Imperial powers, the English trading chief, the *superintendent*, Yi Lu, has just this morning left for Macao.”

“Why?” snapped Lin. “To what end?”

From the look on his face, Wu wanted to ask, “Why do foreigners do anything?” But he clearly thought the better of it. “It is believed he means to speak with the governor there, and possibly better communicate with the foreign fleet.”

Lin took most careful note of how Lu leveled his hard gaze against the younger man. Mowqua’s continued silence was well worth noting. Lu was senior here, and more experienced. All precedent was his.

*Why do you let Wu speak for you both?*

“Sir, when you have had a chance to look further into the problems, you will not fail to see that foreigners are most intractable, and their ways are entirely inscrutable,” Wu continued. “Indulgence must be granted, as to an untutored child.”

“Very well, Wu Bingjian,” said Lin. “We will not speak of the actions of these children. Instead, we will speak of the actions of rational, educated men. In obedience to the Emperor’s desire that I thoroughly examine all aspects of the vile opium trade, I searched the records and questioned the police and the water-forces about their interactions with the Cohong families. I also examined all previous edicts which related to opium.” Lin paused. Wu Bingjian drank his tea. Lu Guangheng frowned at his cup, as if he suspected the liquid to be unclean.

“During this time, I found, under date the twenty-first year of Keaking, an Imperial edict.” Lin lifted the paper off the stack. “It renders the Cohong responsible



for —” Lin began to read — “the ascertainment of the question whether or not any foreign vessel imports opium; and, in case of her so doing, for the rejection of all her cargo, for the refusal to let her trade, and for the driving of her back to her country.”

Lin laid the paper on the desk in front of him where it could plainly be seen. “Respect and obedience being paid hereto, this edict was duly recorded. That being so, I must ask you, have the Cohong failed to obey the imperial edict? Or are they simply incompetent?”

Lin made sure he delivered the insult mildly and concisely. Neither man answered him. Neither man looked to the other.

*Perhaps I have not made myself sufficiently clear.*

“Since opium floods the streets of Canton, and, as you confirm, that opium is brought in by foreign ships, *and* since the Cohong are by law responsible for inspecting those ships, it must be incompetence, or laziness that is at the root of this plague.” Lin paused again. “Unless either of you wishes to tell me Cohong have become corrupt?”

Wu Bingjian did not protest. He did not even blink. He just poured himself more tea.

“Our families accepted the responsibility for examining the foreign ships when we signed our bond,” Wu said. “But the foreigners are crafty, and they reap great profits by slipping their contraband into the hands of dishonest men. Rather than blaming honest houses with so much to lose, it would perhaps be more fruitful to examine those who have the duty to patrol the coast and make sure the boats of the traitors do not reach the shore.”

*Meaning I should question the Governor-General, who commands the water forces, not you.* “That is being done. You do us both a disservice by suggesting I would waste my time asking you about matters outside your sworn duty.”

“I apologize,” said Wu at once. “And if it is your will that our families renew their written bonds, or open our houses up to inspection, that will be done without delay.”

“Do you speak for your entire family? And for all your fellow merchants? You will swear to the honesty of all?”

Lin could feel Wu Bingjian choosing his next words with the care of a wife picking through fruit in the market stall.

“The Cohong will of course do all in our power to assist in carrying out the imperial edicts,” Wu said. “It may be there are individual traitors buried within the

Cohong families. They can surely be discovered, but that will take time, and patience.”

This mealy-mouthed answer did not sit well with Lu Guangheng. The old man’s silence spoke more clearly than all Wu’s words strung together.

“Well, we will set aside the matter of native traitors within the Cohong,” said Lin. “This matter is clearly so difficult and upsetting that you have entirely failed to consider it before now. I have a number of reports on this next point, but I wish to have your opinion. Which among the foreigners brings in the most opium?”

Lu Guangheng looked toward the younger man. No. He did not look. He glowered. But Wu Bingjian did not show any sign of noticing.

“As the foreigners have persisted in their efforts in spite of so many admonitions and the diligence of our...”

Finally, Lu had had enough. “As I am sure Howqua was about to inform you, sir, it is difficult to say. The criminals are many, and their ways are clever, and they are abetted by native traitors in the water forces, and elsewhere,” Lu added, although the words seemed difficult to form. “If I had to choose one name, however, it would be Dian Di. *Lancelot Dent*.”

Howqua drank his tea.

“Wu Bingjian, would you agree with Lu Guangheng’s assessment?”

Lin prompted.

Howqua set his cup down. He folded his hands.

Lin counted to four, and then to eight, and sixteen. With each heartbeat that passed in silence, he understood more clearly how little Wu Bingjian wished to name any foreigner at all.

Lin felt his stomach twist. He had wanted to be wrong about how far the corruption had spread in Canton. But he was not wrong.

He counted to twenty-four.

“There is no reason why we should not work well together, sir,” said Wu. “The families will do all we can to aid you in your efforts to remove this poison from the veins of our people. It is right that your task should center on the foreigners and their constant misbehavior. But, if you, sir, were to look closely at the water forces, which are now under your command, you will find that there is much collaboration between the two.” He paused and met Lin’s gaze. “If you wish, I can bring men who have seen this, and will speak to it.”

*Yes, I’m sure.* “Thank you for your offer, Wu Bingjian. I know what these

men have to say will be instructive.”

“I will write to your office as soon as they are assembled,” Wu said.

“I look forward to this,” replied Lin, bowing his head. “But you have not answered my question. Do you agree that this Dian Di is the worst of the English opium smugglers?”

Lin counted to four, to eight, to sixteen.

“Yes,” said Wu Bingjian. “I would agree that the foreigner *Lancelot Dent* is first and foremost among the smugglers.”

Lu Guangheng, it seemed, had nothing to add to this. Lin nodded. That would be enough for now.

“You may go,” Lin told them. “And you may take with you this edict.” He lifted the freshly sealed pages. “Be sure your families are made familiar with its contents.”

Wu received the paper respectfully, holding it in both his hands. He bowed over it.

“We all wish to do our duty and to satisfy your commands,” Wu said, and his voice had regained its silken tones. “To assist this, my sons have left a chest in the courtyard. It contains copies of our records, and other such items that might prove useful in your endeavors.”

Lin worked to keep his face still. “Thank you,” he said again.

He looked to Lu Guangheng, but Lu had once again lapsed into his silence, content to let Wu Bingjian speak for them both.

The merchants took their leave, and Lin found himself unable to move from his desk. Not even when Pao Tengzhou walked across the threshold. Lin had forgotten he’d asked the young man to return once the merchants had left.

“Sir, Wu Bingjian has left a chest in the courtyard. The others were uncertain what to do, but I thought it would be best if it were brought in at once.”

“Yes,” said Lin. “Let that be done.”

Pao Tengzhou gestured into the corridor. Two clerks staggered in. Between them, they carried a carved chest with iron handles. They set it down with a thump. Lin felt it vibrate up through the soles of his shoes.

“And what is inside that Wu Bingjian determines will be so helpful to our efforts?”

The clerks lifted the latch, and the lid. Silver gleamed like winter snow in the sunlight.

*And there I may see the answer to all my questions.*

“And so here we are.” He spoke to the window, and the garden beyond. “Yi Lu, *Captain Elliot*. You have gone to Macao? We will begin to make ready for your return.”

But not with the Governor-General’s men. That much he had determined on the first day, and Wu Bingjian’s willingness to throw him to the wolves only confirmed what he learned. Now, looking at this chest of silver, he could see that the Cohong merchants would be of no help either.

Lin strode across the room. With one gesture, he swept the chest lid shut. “Pao Tengzhou, go and fetch me Commandant Guang Xie.”

### III.

Guang Xie, the commandant of police in Canton, was a hard, bitter man. All the weariness that Lin felt in his bones Guang Xie carried in his eyes.

“You sent for me, sir?” He spoke awkwardly. The formal words and structures came slowly to him, and he paused to think after he heard Lin speak. Whether this was from a habit of careful consideration, or because Guang wanted to be sure he understood Lin’s unfamiliar dialect, Lin could not tell. But Guang Xie was not a stupid man, nor a weak one. He had just been constrained from doing his duty for far too long.

“I have completed my examinations. It is time to move forward.” Lin brought out the paper he had spent the better part of the morning preparing. “Your men will copy and post this notice throughout the city and see that it is distributed as widely as possible.” He passed the paper to the Chief. It detailed the collection points where opium pipes and bowls, and the drug itself should be turned in. It explained that after the eight-day period for voluntary collection, the police would begin their confiscations. It also listed the punishments for failing to comply.

Lin waited while Guang painstakingly read the notice. It took some time, but the more the commandant read, the brighter his tired eyes shone.

“Does that appear to you to be complete?” Lin asked.

“Yes, sir,” Guang replied with genuine relish. “I will inform my men immediately.”

“Will you need more men?”

Guang laughed a little. “We always need more men.”

“Draw up your lists. Be sure they are men you know and trust. There will be much difficult work for them in the coming days. If the drug is allowed to walk away after it is surrendered, all our efforts will be for nothing.”

“Many persons will attempt to hide their caches.” Guang spoke tentatively. He was feeling his way, as if he feared he walked on thin ice.

Again, Lin could not blame him. “Take that into account as you organize your patrols. Also, after confiscation begins in the city, we will have to take men to the coasts and root out the land smugglers and the fast crab men. Tell my treasurers how much money you will require. They are already instructed to advance you what you need.” He paused. “You may begin with what is in that chest.”

Guang lifted the lid and froze in place. He blinked. And he swallowed.

“How many men am I authorized to call to this duty?” he asked hoarsely.

“How many will you need?”

Guang swayed on his feet, and for a moment, Lin thought he might faint. Slowly, in small jerks and spasms, the commandant’s mouth bent into a smile. He closed the chest lid gently, almost reverently.

“I will begin work on that question immediately. Thank you, sir.”

Lin acknowledged his bow. “Before that question, there is one other. I require a list from you of all the men who hold official posts whom you believe to be abetting the illegal trade in opium.”

The smile that had taken so long to form fell away in an instant. “I regret, this is beyond me.”

“I do not accept that answer.”

“Sir, I will do everything in my power to assist you. I have suspicions, as any man must. But please understand, heavy curtains have been closed around us for a long time. I have failed to open those curtains and let in the sunlight. I acknowledge my failure and offer...”

Lin gestured impatiently, and the commandant fell silent. “That time is over. Once you have rebuilt your ranks, you will begin to draw up lists of the principle arrests to be made. Those who wish to acknowledge their faults, turn over their stocks, and the names of their confederates will be given time to do so.” The law offered reprieve and pardon for any official who voluntarily turned over a subordinate who was guilty of opium dealing. They should make sure this information was widely disseminated. “But after that...”

“After that, sir,” said Guang, “we will be ready.”

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“Very good. You will return within four hours, bringing with you your best men, and...”

Lin stared at the chest Wu Bingjian had left behind. He could feel the weight of it pressing against him as surely as if he carried it on his back.

“And, sir?” prompted the Chief.

“You will also bring two chains,” said Lin. “I need them for a pair of dogs.”



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