

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



CHAPTER NINE

An Offer

I.

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The City of Canton, Guangdong Province

China

“Let me render my most humble thanks for your gracious agreement to see me,” said Lu Guangheng, and he did not mean a single word.

Nonetheless, Lin inclined his head toward this show of humility, and gestured that the merchant should take the student’s stool that had been set out for him.

One night had passed since he’d sent Howqua and Mowqua to the Consoo House to deliver his orders to the foreigners. Guang Xie had returned word that the foreigners had argued among themselves until the early hours of the morning.

Now, the sun was well up, and Guang Xie brought Mowqua into Lin’s office. The old man moved carefully, arranging his chains and the hems of his plain black coat with equal care. The iron collar with its dragging chain would not be removed until Lin gave the order.

So far, Lin did not see any reason to do so.

Lin gestured for Guang Xie to leave. The commandant bowed and obeyed, but did not go far. In fact, he stationed himself right outside the threshold.

“You come to me alone,” Lin said to Lu Guangheng. He did not inquire if Lu had eaten or observe any other courtesy. There was no food or drink set out in the office. Lu Guangheng of the Cohong merchants was not here as a guest. “You were ordered to bring the foreign opium trader, Dian Di, *Lancelot Dent*.”

Lu Guangheng sighed deeply. “Dian Di is proving very slow to acknowledge his faults and deliver himself up for just admonishment. I have left Howqua at

the Consoo House to continue to plead with him. Howqua is far closer to the current cadre of foreigners than I. I hoped instead that you and I might talk, High Commissioner. We have not yet had that opportunity since you came to us.”

“I am glad to talk,” replied Lin. “Especially if it means I can hear how you will ensure that the dealers listed in the edict I gave to the Cohong will be delivered into Commandant Guang Xie’s safe hands.” Lin nodded toward the threshold.

Lu lifted a loop of chain from his knee and let it drop, clanking, to the floor. “You have decided to act rightly, High Commissioner. That is commendable of you. But grant an old man the privilege of asking a question — which right are you acting for?”

Lin felt his eyes narrow. He could not trust this man, but he could not discard him either. Lu Guangheng had successfully practiced his deceptions for years. But despite that, or perhaps because of it, Lu also wielded a great deal of power over the trading families. If this man decided to cooperate, Lin’s task of stopping the opium trade in Canton would suddenly be rendered infinitely easier.

“Let us ask, what do we really want?” Lu went on smoothly. “What instructions were you given when you were so graciously allowed to venture into the depths of the Forbidden City?” He paused, and gave a small smile. “In the same manner as I, humiliated and debased as I am, am allowed to venture here into your private room?”

Where are you going with this double-edged disrespect, Lu Guangheng?

Lu sighed, as if saddened by Lin’s stubbornness. “I know that I am a mere merchant, and as such, I am lower than a lofty scholar such as yourself. I am lower even than a peasant grubbing the soil, because his work produces something, and mine does not.” Lu waved the words away. *So much smoke.* “But, you, sir, wish to alter the flow of goods and cash. This flow, you will admit, is something that a merchant understands.”

“And aids,” said Lin. “No matter who drowns in that river.”

Lu took up a fresh length of his chain, rubbing it with his fingers as if to check its quality. “Then surely — immoral and worthless as I am — I am just as likely to move this river in a direction that benefits the High Commissioner, as I am to move it in any other. Because, of course, my only consideration is how my family and my fortune may be affected.”

“Do you mean to speak plainly, Lu Guangheng, or to smother us both in false piety?”

“Forgive me, sir. I am old and...well. Enough. I came here to ask the High Commissioner to consider. Many men have attempted to cut off the flow of opium that goes from the foreigners to us. All of them have failed. But, have any of them considered offering the foreigners something they prize in return for not bringing opium into the country?”

I have. My edict was full of this, as you know. “The foreigners do not prize anything above their profit.”

“In general, that is true. But there is one thing they do prize, sir. Their greed for this eclipses their greed for all other things in this world. Even silver.”

“What is that?”

“You know already. You wrote of it in your edict to them.” With these words, Lu’s humility fell away, and Lin saw the sharp, clear intelligence shining in his eyes.

“Tea.”

Lin said nothing.

“The foreigners, especially the English, are obsessed with tea,” said Lu. “Tea is why they ply men with silver and opium. Tea is why they break all Imperial law. Very well,” Lu spread his hands. “Let us give them tea.”

Lin shook his head. “That was tried. That indeed was what lead to our current problem. The English spent so much of their silver on our tea that their strong houses were emptied. They knew we had no need of any legal goods they could supply, and so they turned to the illegal.”

“Ah!” Lu held up one long, straight finger. “But that was because the price of tea remained so high. And the price remained so high because the Celestial Court restricted its export. A limit on supply will always drive up the price. But let us here consider what would happen if we removed this artificial limit.”

“The Grand Council will not agree to lift the export limits. Tea is too precious and the taxes on it are too important.” As was the desire to keep control of it. Like silk, tea was one of the treasures of the nation.

Lu was looking at the *weiqi* game board Lin had placed beside the garden window. Lin could feel him turning the problem over in his mind, considering this possibility and that, the placement of this stone and another. The merchant looked into the future. He claimed territory. Accepted sacrifice.

“We will not ask them,” Lu said.

II.

It took longer than it should have for Lin to find his voice. "You suggest we rob the country?"

"I suggest we stop the opium," Lu corrected him patiently. "And that we do so by reversing that network which has so efficiently brought this poison into our country. Instead of using it to bring opium in, we will use it to take the tea out. In this way, the land smugglers and the boat owners continue to make money. Therefore, they do not protest, or attempt to evade, the opium laws. What do they care what they carry as long as it brings them cash? And all the foreigners have to do to get the one thing they value more than silver is submit quietly to inspection and bond. These both will be administered, of course, by the Cohong. Who will be bringing them their tea."

The idea was so outrageous that for a moment Lin could not force his mind to move. It was as if he'd opened his eyes to find himself looking at an entirely foreign landscape.

Because Mowqua was perfectly serious. He sat there, already in chains, and spoke treason.

And I am listening.

"In your edict, sir, you speak most eloquently of right and wrong," said Lu calmly. "But right and wrong are never fixed points. Consider. It is wrong for a man to take a woman's hand in public. But if his sister-in-law is drowning, it is wrong for him not to take her hand."

I must say something.

"High Commissioner, you have been to the Forbidden City, the home of our conquerors." Lu's words were mild, and very soft. No one passing by doorway or window would hear a word that was said. Not even Guang Xie, who stood right outside. "You have struggled all your life to keep the Manchu's approval and to secure some place for your family. Oh, I do not judge you for this." Lu took up the chain again, letting the links run through his hands like beads. "After all, I have done the same thing, as did my father, and his. But our relative position does not change. The right proclaimed by the Son of Heaven and all Manchus is the right of conquest over the Han. The Manchus also poured over the borders and made slaves of our people. The only difference between them and the English is that the Manchu used horses and spears, while the English use opium. Now, the Manchus sit

as snugly in their palaces as the foreigners sit in their factories. They take the labor of our hands and our minds. In return, they say ‘bow down, accept our word as the word of Heaven, work harder, be more faithful, shave your heads...” Lu slipped his fingers free from the chain and passed his palm over his naked brow. “But it is their policies, and their greed that brought the poison here to destroy our brethren. Why should we consider the comfort or approval of our conquerors when trying to save our people?

Lin thought of all the people he had seen — the men and women; the young wasting away together with the old. All of them Han. Like him. He remembered the Forbidden City, the strange shades of skin, the elaborate and ridiculous robes, the language he struggled so hard to parrot and comprehend.

And how closely they watched him, like he might at any moment steal their caps from their heads.

Did something of this show in his face? Perhaps. Because Lu leaned forward and whispered. “In sending you here, the conquerors make you their executioner. You are supposed to devise punishments so dreadful that none will dare repeat the wrong that they have allowed to fester here. But as long as the desire for money remains, the wrong will be done. Not just by foreigners, but by our countrymen. So. Let us give our countrymen some other way to get their money.”

As wrong as it must be, Lu’s idea also made a crude and terrible sense. Lin’s mind struggled once more to regain its motion.

“Who will convince the tea growers?” he asked. “They will be putting themselves at risk.”

“I will convince them,” said Lu calmly. “And my family will. Only a few new steps will need to be created. Most of the road already exists. Our silver will pave the rest of the way.”

Lin wondered how long the roots of this plan had been growing inside Mowqua’s mind. Who had he spoken with? How much silver had already changed hands?

“Tell me, Lu Guangheng. When did you come to see the arrest of your grandsons as an opportunity for gain?”

“Forgive me, sir, I did not understand that. I am old and frail, and my hearing is not what it should be.” The man bowed his head, but there was no humility in his eyes. “My grandsons are imprisoned and awaiting trial because the opium trade has not stopped. Here is a way in which it may be stopped. However, for it to work, I

must be able to bring reassurance to those who will be most closely involved.”

“What reassurance?”

“That you will give us time. We must coax the foreigners in ways those men understand, and make the other changes required. We must know our fathers and sons and brothers will not be arrested while this is being done.”

Lu, his chain clinking, got to his feet. He moved slowly and stiffly as if his joints ached. Perhaps they did. Perhaps it was his soul that ached. Lin could not tell.

“You have taken my grandsons, sir. And my pride.” Lu draped his chain fussily across his arm. “But I trust in my fathers, and what they built, which is a road, between us and the foreigners. It is that road I offer you for your efforts.”

A road of men. A road of silver. A road built for a terrible wrong. And yet, and yet...

A road was just a tool. It was the journey that was right or wrong.

And all this time Lin remembered how it felt to be in the Forbidden City. He rode on horseback, honored and respected but always watched, as he made his way more deeply into that place that was not his own, not his family’s, not his people’s. Where he must speak a foreign tongue. Where he was told how much honor he had earned, but where he remained entirely alone.

“You may leave now,” he said.

Lu bowed wordlessly and climbed to his feet. Lin called for Guang Xie. He ordered that Lu be returned to the Consou House, where he was to stay until the foreign traders gave themselves up.

Lin did not watch them leave. Instead, he looked at the weiqi board. He thought of his friend Pao Jian, whom he’d promised to visit.

Now would be a very good time. I could use some sound advice.

Even as he thought this, he hesitated at the idea of running to his old friend, yet again. Pao Jian was not well, and Lin should not burden him. Especially with this. He should not even be considering Lu’s words, let alone repeating them to a friend.

And yet Lu’s offer shone in Lin’s mind. Tea, and English greed had begun this disaster. Why should those same things not end it?

It could work. Truly. It could.

III.

Lin had hoped to recover his balance in the home of his old friend. He hoped there would be tea to soothe his body, and the *weiqi* board to quiet his mind, and help him discover some way to explain the offer from Lu Guangheng.

That there would be a way to accept, or refuse, Lu's offer with clear mind and conscience. If he were honest with himself, Lin did not know which he wanted to do.

In the end it did not matter. For in the end, he found none of these things.

As Lin climbed down from his chair in front of Pao Jian's gate, he was startled by the sound of men shouting — no, screaming — behind the courtyard wall. A heartbeat later, a man in a plain blue tunic fell into the street, with Pao Tengzhou right behind. The bearers scrambled out of the way.

Pao aimed a series of ferocious kicks at the prostrated man, shouting so fiercely and so quickly that Lin could barely understand a word he said.

"Help me, master!" wailed the man on the ground. "He'll kill me! He'll kill me!"

"Like the dog you are!" bellowed Pao Tengzhou.

From over the wall came a new sound — a woman's high and heartbroken wail.

"Stop this!" thundered Lin. "Pao Tengzhou! Have you lost your senses!"

Pao Tengzhou looked at him, anger and hatred shining as clearly in his eyes as the tears did on his cheeks.

The man on the ground scrambled to his feet and ran.

Pao's jaw tightened but he stayed where he was. "You come at a bad time, sir," he told Lin. "My father is dead."

IV.

Dead? Lin's knees threatened to give way. Pao Jian? His oldest friend in Canton. His only friend in Canton. He was dead?

"How is this?" Lin whispered.

"His lungs failed him," said Pao Tengzhou. Beyond the wall, the high, terrible keening faded. "His heart stopped. His...his..." Again the keening rose. Pao turned his back and screamed. "Get inside, and be quiet, you worthless woman!" Without turning around, he hung his head. "I am sorry, sir. I am ashamed. Will you please

forgive me?”

Lin swallowed and struggled to remember himself. “I should ask forgiveness from you. Would you permit...may I come in and pay my respects?”

Pao could not refuse, although it was clear he wished to. “There is much to be done. The priests have not yet been sent for. I...there is much to be done.”

“A moment is all I ask.”

The young man bowed. “My father said that our house is yours. You must treat it as such. But forgive me again...”

Lin did not let him finish. “Go. Do what must be done.”

Pao Tengzhou bowed deeply. Then turned on his heel and vanished through the gate. Lin tried not to hear his shouts, or his wife’s despairing answer. Only when the courtyard fell silent did he follow Pao inside.

The house felt completely still. The family and the servants had both vanished into its depths. There was not even any incense burning at the shrine. Lin lit a fresh stick and made his bows. Then, as quietly as he could, Lin made his way to the courtyard where he had last sat with his friend.

Save for Pao’s absence, nothing had changed. The *weiqi* board still waited beside the divan, as if Pao Jian might return at any moment to solve the problem marked out in black and white stones. A few petals from the first plum blossoms scattered across the ground, and the board. Lin brushed them away.

As he did, a shadow fell across him. Lin looked up to see Chen Saizen, Pao Tengzhou’s wife, coming toward him. One of her eyes was blackened. Both shone bright red.

“I am sorry,” Lin said.

“So am I.” Her low voice was ragged from screaming. “For so many things.”

“Your husband might be angry if he finds you here speaking to me.”

“I do not care.”

She meant it. Something inside her had died, drowned in her bitterness. But she had something she wanted him to know. The only mercy Lin could offer was to ensure she did not have to speak the words.

“He smoked opium,” said Lin. “I smelled it on him when I first came here.”

“The doctor said it would ease the pain in his joints that came with winter. And it did, for a while. But it was too strong for him.” She bit both her lips, hard.

Lin made no answer. He could not look at her anymore — wounded and grieving as she was. He looked at the game board instead. Two stones here. Three

more there. A fight brewing, a chain building. Territory being claimed. Black and white stones alike being surrounded, smothered, and removed.

He had done nothing. Not for her. Not for his friend.

“He tried, sir,” said Chen Saizen. “When he got your letter saying you were coming to Canton, he said it would bring disgrace and suspicion on you if it was known your friend smoked. It might be thought that you yourself were likewise inclined. It might even be thought you would steal what you were supposed to destroy. So, he stopped.” She choked hard on the word. “His dreams all turned to nightmares. He begged. He *begged*...” She clapped her hands over her face. “He tried so hard to hold firm. But the men kept coming with their smiles and their little pearls of smoke. My husband threatened them, but there was always another. In the end, I paid for the stuff myself, in secret. I destroyed it all. I swear before all the gods and the shades of my ancestors I did. But they kept coming. I stole from my own family to pay them to stay away, and it was not enough.”

“It is certain that you did your duty in all ways,” Lin told her softly. “Go and do it now. I will not trouble you anymore.”

She bowed low and she left him. Lin turned his gaze back to the *weiqi* board. But he did not see it. He saw his friend, so thin and wizened, struggling against the poisoned smoke, and failing. He thought of the life and death of one he knew to the depths of his soul to be a good man, and of the many, many layers of right, and wrong. He also saw Chen Saizen’s anguish, her blackened eyes, and the man Pao Tengzhou kicked into the street.

Did she really destroy what she bought? The shame of the question fell lightly down, like petals. So did the far greater shame of the fact that he must consider it.

The foreigners would pay for the death of Pao Jian and the corruption of this house.

Wu Bingjian and Lu Guangheng, likewise would pay.

Lin felt sure that he also would pay, for being too slow, for listening to Lu’s honeyed words, for so many failures and inattentions.

But he did not care, not as long as he could see the Cohong punished first.

Lin left the house. He climbed back into his chair. The bearers raised him on their shoulders and began their swift, even walk to carry him away from the house of mourning. None of them noticed the slight clicking as the two stones he removed from the *weiqi* board knocked together in his sleeve.

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When Lin arrived in the courtyard of the academy, Commandant Guang Xie was there to greet him.

“Sir,” Guang said after the most perfunctory bow. “I wished to be the one to tell you. The *Louisa*, has been sighted in the harbor.”

Superintendent Elliot’s ship. The English captain was finished with whatever urgent and inscrutable foreign business had called him away to Macao. He was coming back to the factories, thinking to resume his station there, as usual.

“Good,” said Lin. “Assemble your men, Guang Xie. Go to the foreigners’ quarters. As soon as that ship lands, you will bar the gates.”



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