



AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel

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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.

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,

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?

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

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.

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 soldier 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

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

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

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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CHAPTER TWO

The Arrival

I.

March 11, 1839

*The City of Canton, Guangdong Province
China*

“Welcome, High Commissioner Lin Zexu! Welcome, sir!”
Lin Zexu climbed from his sedan chair. Deng Tingzhen, Governor General of Guangdong Province stood on the steps of the academy and bowed. Beside him, Governor Yi Ling bowed, and all the people lined up with them did the same. The young-looking man in the scholar’s robe was doubtlessly the headmaster of the Yua Hu Academy who had been displaced from his quarter by Lin’s mission, along with all his students. It was all correct, gracious and beautiful. The sun shone on the greening yard as if to bless it and Canton’s officials, who waited in long lines to honor his arrival.

But all Lin Zexu felt was exhausted.

They had made the journey of almost forty-thousand *li* from Peking to Canton in just sixty days — despite the storms, despite the boat losing its mast on the Yellow River. While the men struggled their utmost to keep in motion, Lin struggled to begin the task he had been set. It was his work to do what no one had, and he could not idle away his time while he travelled. He read letters, edicts and dispatches and dictated more at each inn and house where they stopped. The most important declarations, Lin wrote himself to send ahead in faster boats and on faster horses. He tried his best to stay out of the men’s way and allow them to do the work of ensuring he, his papers, and his mission arrived at Canton in one piece.

For Lin Zexu was now High Commissioner Lin, and it was his work to end the trade in foreign opium.

Now that he was finally here to catch up to the words he'd sent on from the river banks, all he wanted to do was drop onto a bed — any bed — and not move for forty days.

This, however, was not allowed for a man under orders from the Emperor.

So instead, he raised his voice and mustered his manners. "I thank you for this gracious welcome, Governor-General Deng Tingzhen. Will you do me the favor of showing me your excellent preparations?"

"Thank you, sir. I would be honored to guide you."

The Governor-General led Lin inside the main building. Lin followed, and looked over all he was shown, as well as the man who showed it to him. He murmured polite comments when appropriate, but his tired mind could not attend, and kept straying from what he saw to what he knew.

And what he knew was not at all appropriate to say out loud. Yet.

"The whole of the academy is open for your use, High Commissioner," The Governor-General told him. Deng was an aging man and yet he breezed lightly ahead of Lin. The ruby button of rank on his cap flashed in the sun, distracting Lin's tired eyes.

"The students will continue their studies at the Wei Shi academy..."

Will they study the number of foreign ships anchored off the coast you oversee? Or only the number of your boats that scuttle out to meet them after dark?

Lin had never met Deng Tingzhen before today. He'd read his official letters, though. They were stiff and correct. In person, Deng was expansive, and clearly pleased with all that had been done. He clearly expected Lin to be the same.

"...these are the classrooms. They were deemed most suitable for the clerks. Already, sir, you see we have begun to compile the records you asked for..."

Do these include the records that say the importation of opium has tripled since you became Governor-General?

"...these are the examination rooms, sir. Our commandant of police, Guang Xie, has said they will be most suitable for writing warrants and recording arrests. Here, this office can be used for questioning the most important of the vile, native traitors..."

Did you consult the commandant as to which opium dealer was best to execute right in front of the foreigners and drive them to riot?

“...this humble house, sir, has been set aside for your private use...”

Are you even once in all this praise of your preparations and condemnation of traitors going to speak of opium?

Inside the “humble house,” — which probably belonged to the silent headmaster who did not even cross the threshold with them — there was food on the table, along with a jar of wine. A tea pot warmed on the brazier. Deng watched Lin take all this in.

You wish me to acknowledge that all is correct and as it should be. Except nothing is as it should be, or I would not be here.

“Will you sit with me, sir?” Lin asked, even though his eyes swerved greedily toward the passageway leading to the bedroom. “There is much to discuss. We should begin at once.”

He did not want to talk with Deng Tingzhen. He really wanted to talk to the trader, Wu Bingjian, head of the Cohong families whose public name was Howqua. The Cohong merchants were the ones who dealt directly with the foreigners. Everything the foreigners bought or sold, all the servants and assistants they hired, all varieties of business they conducted in Canton were done through the Cohong. But for Lin to speak with merchants before he spoke with the province’s highest official would be a gross upending of precedent and privilege. For now, at least, it was prudent that he follow the steps dictated by protocol.

“Of course, sir. Thank you.” Deng bowed. “The tea is ready. Or would you prefer wine?”

Lin settled onto the bench beside the table and let the Governor direct the servant to pour him tea.

The men ate and drank. Lin asked after Deng’s family, his parents, and his sons, making certain he observed the expected courtesies. He also watched the Governor-General — how he ate greedily and drank even more so. Deng had chosen the sturdy rice wine rather than the delicate tea, and drank off each cup almost as soon as it was filled. Either he was very thirsty or it was very good wine, or both.

Or, perhaps, he is only very nervous.

Lin set his cup down and waved back the servant who came to fill it.

“You must know, Governor-General, I understand the difficulty of your position. I have held your office.” Before his appointment as High Commissioner, Lin had served as Governor-General of Hunan and Hubei. “As well, my family is from Fujian and any man who has lived along the coast must despair at the shifting

and conniving ways of foreigners.”

The Governor-General bowed his head in respectful acknowledgement, but Lin could feel the waves of relief coming off the man. Deng signaled for more wine.

The tiger withholds his claws. We must drink to that.

“But you have observed the foreigners much more closely than I,” Lin went on. “And much more recently. I would like your opinion of them, particularly the English and this man, this Yi Lu, *Captain Elliot*, who the English have placed at the head of their people.”

Deng appeared to consider as he drank. “Allowing always for the defects of the foreigners, Yi Lu, who bears their title of *superintendent* —” he waded carefully across the strange string of syllables “— He is a diligent man. He also seems to be mostly honest, although angry.”

This was the first time since they sat down that Deng said something to surprise Lin. “Why is *Superintendent* Yi Lu angry?”

“It is believed he has had some misfortunes in his own land, and that it is his failures which caused him to leave.”

This did not make sense. “If his failure was severe enough to send him into exile, why would his government give him a position of such responsibility at the center of the world?”

“That is difficult to ascertain. It always is with the English. They are unlike any other tribe. They are here, there, everywhere.” Deng stabbed his finger at the air to punctuate each word. “There is the company, the army, the king, the governors, all tangled together. Then come these ships that seem to have no master whatsoever but wander the world at will. At any moment, we might hear from any one of these by any means, through any mouth, or,” he added quickly, “through any mouth that *claims* to speak for them. We cannot know what is true.” “So, you say we know this man is in charge of the English, but have not yet ascertained exactly which English.”

“You misunderstand me, sir. Of course we know that. He is an official of their government. We know this. We do. I only meant it was difficult to trace the chains and branches of the English government. Of course that is what I meant.”

Lin nodded once to acknowledge this, and move Deng along before he began to babble in earnest.

“Perhaps we have a clearer understanding of what Yi Lu’s position is in relation to the English smuggling opium?”

Here, Deng seemed to be on a more certain footing. “Yi Lu’s orders, as far as we have been able to ascertain, are to make sure there is no interference with the English traders, no matter what their cargoes.”

“And no matter what the law may be?”

“Yes, sir.”

Lin maintained his silence until he could be certain of his voice. “And how well does this diligent, honest, angry man carry out these orders?”

This time, Deng remembered to pause and consider before he spoke.

“I think Yi Lu does what he must, and no more. Unlike his predecessor, Lord Napier, however, Yi Lu displays respect for custom and protocol.”

“But Yi Lu accompanied that predecessor when he forced his way up the river without regard to law or custom.” Some years ago, the English had actually fired on ships of the water forces while they made an unsanctioned voyage up the Pearl River from the Bogue. Then, they barged into the antechamber of the governing palace, without so much as a letter sent beforehand to announce themselves, let alone petition for an audience with the governor’s representatives.

But when the soldiers confronted them like the intruders they were, the English appeared entirely surprised. They also resisted. It did not go well for them, something that also surprised them.

The English were always difficult to comprehend.

“Yi Lu does not speak of the incident, but it may be what taught him something of the importance of correct behavior.” Deng shrugged. “Despite their slippery nature, the Englishmen remain merchants. Their desire is the same as merchants of any tribe. They want to make as much money as they can.”

A sad and common failing. “Then you believe we may safely disregard any larger question of what drives the English? There are those who believe more lies behind their particular arrogance and absurdity than just greed.”

Those who have spoken to men who come from Calcutta, and Katmandu, and Crimea.

But Deng just signaled for the wine. “Sometimes the wise wander too deep into the forest of their own ideas.”

It was a labored allusion, but Lin smiled anyway. “Then you and I will keep on the straight and sunlit way. We will talk only of English trade as it touches this province. We will start with their trade in opium.”

There it was. The flicker in his eyes. The hesitation in his manner as he

raised his cup to his lips.

“Governor-General, it is possible you may not yet have had time to read the letter I wrote to you from the Forbidden City,” Lin went on. *Sixty days ago*. “I know there have been persistent rumors that the opium trade is on the cusp of becoming legal. But despite the efforts of some at court, opium remains illegal now and will remain so in the future. The Emperor is entirely unmoved by other arguments.”

The Emperor in fact, nearly choked on his anger when he spoke of the matter.

Deng’s answer flowed as quickly as the wine into his cup. “Good, good. I knew it would be so.”

“And so knowing, you have of course already taken many measures to cut off the trade,” said Lin. “You will, I’m sure, be able to produce many detailed memorials about them. It is only bad luck that has increased the number of chests brought into this country.”

By tens of thousands each year.

“Oh, it is more than bad luck,” replied Deng, and for the second time, Lin was surprised. “The foreign smugglers have bribed many of our countrymen to aid them. The complexity of the coastline itself aids them. Our water forces patrol diligently, but the foreign smugglers are aided too much by pirates and traitors, who know every cave and grotto. You have seen my reports?” A hint of anxiety crept into the governor’s voice.

Irritation bubbled up inside Lin. “I have seen them. You make much of the inscrutability and duplicity of foreigners.” *Especially for a man who just told me how essentially simple they are. Which is it, Governor-General?*

Deng leaned forward, his eyes shining with an eagerness much brightened by the wine. “The English have shown they neither respect nor understand the law, let alone the concept of right behavior. They must be clearly shown the consequences of their contempt and ignorance.”

“With an execution on their doorstep?” suggested Lin.

Deng pulled back. “Sir, you will have heard that was a demonstration of...”

“I heard about the riot that followed your demonstration. The foreigners were gravely upset.”

“The foreigners are *always* upset. Especially the English. They go to bed dreaming of new complaints.”

“And new ways to evade the Emperor’s law,” Lin gave him another smile. “For all their simplicity, they also appear to be very clever, and constant in their

disobedience to the Emperor's officers in this province. It is quite remarkable how they can be so little and so much at the same time."

Deng hesitated, clearly uncertain whether Lin was truly sympathizing with him this time or not. "As you so rightly remark, sir..."

"*You* remarked on bribes, just this moment. I would ask you to expand on this remark. Do the Cohong merchants take bribes to assist the smugglers?"

Deng stared, as startled by this shift as if Lin had slapped him.

"Do they?" asked Lin. "Does the Governor, Yi Ling?"

"Sir..."

"Do you, Governor-General?"

Deng closed his mouth.

"That question does not come only from me," Lin said. "It is also from the Emperor. He has been wondering this for some time."

This was an exaggeration, but Lin judged it necessary. It was certainly effective. Deng had turned as white as any Englishman.

Lin kept his face still and his voice steady. "The Emperor understands that the opium trade flourishes because some men in power are more concerned about profiting from their offices than executing their duties. Such men write reports that minimize or obfuscate the most serious problems, even when there is a genuine crisis in front of them. They do this in the hope that the Grand Council may pass the matter by and leave them free to administer their responsibilities without interference. The Emperor understands this as well, and he communicated his extreme displeasure when he issued me my orders."

Deng's gaze flickered to his empty cup, but, belatedly, decided taking another drink was not a good idea.

Instead, he asked, "Is this particular message for my ears only?"

"No. You may be sure it is for Governor Yi Ling, and Brigade General Han Zhao Ch'ing of the Water Forces, and all his captains as well. The Cohong families, I will address separately." *And this English Superintendent, Captain, Whatever-He-May-Be, Yi Lu as well.*

"I see." Deng let his head wobble as he bowed. "Thank you, sir, for allowing me to be the first to receive your most exalted address."

Lin ignored his tone. *I will be hearing worse soon.* "The formal edicts will be given to your secretaries as soon as they are copied and sealed. I trust you will give your utmost attention to this matter."

Deng assured him he would, with many repetitions, each more sour than the last. The appropriate bows were made and the Governor General left. His step, Lin noted, was no longer so light as it had once been.

With a sigh, Lin got to his feet, and finally, *finally* he walked into the plain, but comfortable sleeping chamber. The servants removed his outer robes, shoes and cap and at long last, he cast himself onto the bed.

“Wake me in one hour,” he muttered to whoever might be nearest. His first day in Canton was far from finished, but he could not so much think of another word without sleep.

As soon as sleep closed over him, though, Lin plunged into dreams. He was back aboard the river boat, the distant sounds of the street turned to the shouts of the men and the roar of the current in the storm. He sat, clinging to the rail of his bench, aware that the boat would tip, it must tip, that he was already lost. He could spring to his feet and run, he must run, must get out. But there was nowhere to go.

Lin woke before the hour was over and stared at the ceiling for a very long time.

II.

He should not have drunk so much wine. Deng knew that. He had known as he guzzled it. *Guzzled*. In front of the high commissioner.

But Lin Zexu’s eyes were like daggers. No, arrows. His words, his looks, were a constant rain of arrows. Deng had needed to give himself somewhere to hide, and like a fool, he chose the wine. Now, he was half drunk and returning to his house with his head adrift in a private fog.

If he’d had any choice, he would have concealed himself in his private rooms until the fog lifted. But fool that he was, he had commanded the chief Cohong merchant, Howqua, to come to his house. He had wanted the two of them to confer as quickly as possible once he’d taken Lin’s measure.

But what had happened was that Lin had taken his.

Howqua, whose personal name was Wu Bingjian, stood in Deng’s entrance hall, his hands neatly folded, his face quietly expectant.

The sight of Wu Bingjian’s calm twisted the fog in Deng’s mind. He did not dare let himself speak until Wu had followed him through to his private offices, and all the servants had left them.

Wu did not bother with even the least of courtesies. "How bad is it?"

"As bad as it could be." There was tea and Deng poured himself a cup. He must rise above this fog, and his fear as well as Lin's silent arrows and pointed words.

But reason slipped away and all Deng could grasp was anger.

"When I took up my office, Howqua, I allowed the management of the foreigners and their trade to remain in your hands," he said, and the words grated against his throat. "You swore you understood these English, and the others. You swore you could contain their illegal activity. You have failed your responsibilities in every way!"

Wu Bingjian remained perfectly calm. "The expansion of foreign crimes is not the fault of the Cohong families. It is the fault of the English company. It lost its hold on the trade of the coast — its *monopoly* in their language. Without that *monopoly* there is no limit on the number or kind of English traders who pour in. The lure of our riches has meant they are now joined by the Dutch, Portuguese, these new Americans..."

Deng cut him off. "It has been five years since the influx began. It is four since you came to me, begging and whining to be left in your position as the head of the merchant families. Why have you not stabilized the situation?"

"With respect, sir, there was no need. The trade was to become legal shortly. Am I to take it...?"

Oh, yes, Wu Bingjian. Now we come to the one thing that can reach you. "High Commissioner Lin brings us word from the Celestial Court. Opium will remain illegal. The trade in it will remain a crime punishable by death."

The weight of Deng's declaration settled onto Wu's shoulders. Slowly, inexorably, it bent his stiff neck.

"What will you do?" Wu asked.

"What will I do!" Deng stabbed a finger at him. "I will remind the commissioner it is *your* business to control the foreigners!"

"Again, with so very much respect, sir, it is your business. I am but a humble merchant. You control the police, and the land forces, and the water patrols."

It was the sneer in the merchant's voice that undid him. Deng stalked forward. The floor tipped under his feet, but he could not tell whether it was the wine or his anger, or his fear that caused the shift. All he knew was that this man had sworn that he could keep the opium trade under control until the reasonable men at court had time to change the law.

But those reasonable men had failed and there was no control on the trade at all.

“Understand this,” Deng said, the words falling crookedly from his mouth. “We are all in danger now. I will not let your failures give Lin an excuse to take my head!”

Wu Bingjian bowed his own head in a show of humility, but there was no contrition at all in his voice. “Sir, my family has spent generations maintaining the balance between our natural duties and the ways of the foreigner. If the high commissioner is a sagacious man interested in his future and reputation, as he is reported to be, he will be anxious to fit into that balance as well. Some chests of opium may be sacrificed to this end. Some silver will doubtlessly be contributed toward his continued success. Please be assured, sir, that the Cohong will work closely with the high commissioner, and do all that is necessary to satisfy his inquiries.”

“I trust this is so. Otherwise it will go very badly for you, and your sons.”

Again, the merchant bowed his head humbly. Deng meant to dismiss him then, but Wu spoke before he could.

“Sir, may I be permitted to speak one more word?”

“And the word is?”

“My sons and nephews — who are usually so lazy and disrespectful — have been stirred to unusual activity by the commissioner’s arrival. Of late, they have spent much time conferring with friends who sail the coast.”

Pirates, thought Deng. Smugglers.

“They came to me with reports of a gross and scurrilous rumor.” Wu’s sigh was as theatrical and meaningless as his show of respect. “It seems there are people abroad — liars and scandal-mongers and traitors, all of them — who say that the boats placed at the mouth of the Pearl River to deter the native smugglers carrying opium from foreign ships do not attend their duties. In fact, they take bribes to look the other way. Even in broad daylight.”

Deng said nothing.

“And, though it makes me sick to speak the words, I must also report these scurrilous men say that the bribe money somehow finds its way to this house.”

Deng said nothing.

“Of course this is a terrible lie,” Wu went on. “Only the irresponsible and ignorant repeat it. Our problem is that Commissioner Lin comes from many *li*’s

distance. He knows but a few of our families, and has no connections of blood or marriage with any of us. He will be forced to spend so much time wrestling with the intractable English that he might not have time left to separate truth from such lies.” Wu bowed. “I thank you, Governor-General, for your courteous attention to this matter.”

Wu bowed one more time and left the governor alone, with the fog settling more deeply across his thoughts.

“Well, Wu Bingjian,” Deng whispered. “We have both made ourselves clear. Now, we will see who can make himself safe from the storm that is Lin Zexu.”

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



CHAPTER THREE

A Conversation Between Old Friends

I.

March 11, 1839

*The City of Canton, Guangdong Province
China*

“Lin Zexu! Welcome to this house!”

Pao Jian was settled in the courtyard beneath the plum tree. Everything had been done to make the scene a casual one. There was even a *weiqi* game board, with a pattern of black and white stones set on its grid, making a problem for contemplation. Overhead, the tree’s black and crooked branches looked like slashes of ink against the blue sky, but the swelling buds could be discerned beneath the bark.

High Commissioner Lin had known and corresponded with Pao Jian for years. When he received his post to Canton, he’d immediately written to let Pao know he would soon arrive to take up the duty, and the difficulty, of ending the trade in foreign opium in Canton. Pao was an old man, and Lin knew his health to be failing, but even so Lin had difficulty concealing his shock as he moved forward to greet his friend.

Pao Jian had withered. His skin was seamed and sallow. His white hair and beard were uncombed and wispy. Despite the warmth of the day, he had been wrapped in quilted silks.

“Sit, honored sir, sit.” Pao Jian gestured Lin toward the stool that had been positioned beside his sofa. His voice was as light and frail as his body. His hand shook as he extended it, and Lin dropped his gaze so that he would not see the sheen of sweat on his friend’s brow. Only Pao’s lively eyes held something of his former

strength. "Have you eaten? There is wine warming. My son and his wife will bring it to us shortly."

"Thank you, sir."

They sat in the shade and chatted about their families and their sons, as well as the potential of the students in the civil service exams that Lin would be overseeing as part of his duties in Canton. Pao's son, Pao Tengzhou, and his wife came into the courtyard with the servants to bring the table, tea, and the jar of warmed wine, cups and dishes of snacks. They both bowed respectfully. Lin spoke to Pao Tengzhou of his own sons, and to his wife, Chen Saizen, of her poetry.

Many men had compiled arguments about the propriety of women writing poetry, or writing at all. But Chen Saizen's efforts were balanced in theme and classical in form. Lin found himself of the mind that the fact that some women produced bad or silly poetry was no reason to condemn it all. Men had, after all, produced bad poetry for centuries. From what he read, and what he saw now in her comportment and her reasoned and respectful answers, Pao Tengzhou's wife was not at all silly.

Indeed, Chen Saizen, was taking careful note of all she saw. Something worried her. In fact, it angered her.

What is it?

It could well be the same thing that concerned her husband. Although Pao Tengzhou tried to conceal the fact, his attention kept straying to his father.

Pao Jian noticed this as well, and he smiled.

"Now then, now then. You have both seen me. I am not going to depart this earth in the next hour. Go see to your own business, and let an old man talk with his friend."

Breeze blew, filling the air with a thick, sweet, and painfully familiar scent. Lin's unease increased. He should not have come. He should have pursued his worries and his task, without attempting to involve his old friend.

But except for Pao Jian, Lin was alone in this province. He had no family here, and very few friends. He did not know who he could trust, or how far. He needed his friend.

Lin said nothing and was sure his face betrayed nothing, but Pao Jian still smiled at him with something of the same indulgence he had just shown his son and daughter-in-law.

"Well, now, my friend Lin. You have been set a difficult problem. What will

you do?"

Instead of answering, Lin studied the *weiqi* board. *Weiqi* was a game played by laying stones on a grid. On the surface, it was very simple. Even children played. The object was to surround the stones of the opponent while claiming the largest portion of the board for oneself. Each stone was worth the same as any other, but once placed, no stone could be moved, unless it was captured. Therefore, it was not the initial placement of the stone that determined whether a player won or lost the game. It was whether one had the patience to look ahead and understand exactly what that placement meant.

Games between masters could stretch on for days.

"I will do as I have been instructed," said Lin finally. "The Emperor was very clear. I am to go, examine and act in regard to the opium trade."

"Well, you have gone and are here. What will you examine first?"

Lin plucked a black *weiqi* stone out of the dish and turned it over slowly in his fingers. "I think I must begin with the *English*."

"Ah, the famous *English*!" Pao sighed. "There are those who say they are an enigma, and must remain so. After all, what is there to be known about men from a country so many thousands of *li* away who let themselves be ruled by a young girl?"

"But their country is not thousands of *li* away." Lin returned the black stone to its dish and picked up a white one instead. "It is directly to the south of us, in Hindustan and Calcutta."

"You call Calcutta their country?"

"I do not have to. They call it that. As do the men who live there."

"And what do you say to those who suggest that how they deal with the men of Hindustan must necessarily be different than how they deal with the Celestial Kingdom? Like all barbarians the English are naturally drawn toward the Celestial Kingdom, this being the center of Heaven and Earth and the source of all good things."

"But do the barbarians know that, I wonder? They seem to see it only as the source of all tea." He laid the stone back down in the dish, not ready to disturb the pattern on the board. "And we have failed to lead them toward correct behavior, which is supposed to be the duty of men of superior vision, understanding and education."

Pao cocked his head. "Have you read the essays written by the Autumnal Literature Society?"

“The ones that say the exploits of the foreigners called *Pelig* in Tibet and Nepal twenty years ago were only a foretaste of the actions of the foreigners called the *Yinquil* in Calcutta?”

“And illustrating that the *Pelig* and the *Yinquil* are not separate tribes, as had been thought. They are all *English*,” Pao went on. “All from one place, and all gathered under one ruler.”

They are here, there and everywhere. Deng’s words echoed through his thoughts. *There is the company, the army, the king, the governors, all tangled together. Then come these ships that seem to have no master whatsoever but wander the world at will.*

“Those essays have been very much on my mind. They also suggest that the English, in all their many varieties and regions, have no intention of ever fully and correctly participating in the tributary system that was created for those with lands directly bordering the Celestial Kingdom. Their ships, it is suggested, seek more than trade.”

Ask the men of Calcutta.

“Has the Emperor read these writings?” asked Pao quietly.

“He did not say so to me. And none of the secretaries or council members mentioned them.” This did not surprise Lin. The Autumnal Literature Society had the taint of the radical about it. Members of the Grand Council would only approach its ideas with extreme caution.

Pao Jian seemed to understand this. “Well, now that you are a little further from the capitol, you might wish to read over some of those writings again, especially where the history and nature of the *English* expansion out of Calcutta is considered. They have some...illuminating suggestions for how the English might be brought to better understanding. You may also wish to consider the writings of Yao Ying. The booksellers will have copies.”

Lin smiled ruefully. “The piles of paper in my new office are already knee high.”

“And they will get higher. You have come to the attention of important men, Lin Zexu. Papers will shower on your head like autumn leaves.”

Lin picked a white stone up in his fingertips. This time, he placed it on the board beside a pair of black stones, capping their short line.

“Perhaps the *English*, can be considered in the light of a student new to learning,” Lin said. “The student cannot grasp forty thousand characters, or even

forty, on the first day. Is this his fault? No. It is the responsibility of the teacher to first examine the student, and understand the limits of *his* understanding."

Pao looked at the board, and the new arrangement. He took a black stone from the dish, and with a shaking hand, set it down, changing the problem, the game, and the vision of the future that troubled Lin's mind.

"Neither is it the student's fault if he has had ignorant teachers," said Pao. "But if the student is stubborn and resists the exhortations of that teacher? That is his fault."

"But what if the teacher is greedy? What if the teacher is a fool?"

"Then that teacher must be dismissed, and other teachers found."

Lin made himself turn away from the board. The allure of the game was strong. He wanted to sit here with his friend, drinking wine and speaking in allegories, as if the problems of opium and foreigners were thousands of years and thousands of *li* away. But Lin had already stayed too long. Pao Jian struggled to hold his head up and he was dragging his quilts more tightly around his thin frame to conceal his tremors. The thick, sweet fragrance hung in the air around them, inviting sleep, and tears together.

"I have some letters to leave with you," said Lin. "There are men I wish to contact about my mandate, both formally and informally."

"I am glad to help however I can."

"My plan is to enlist this province's scholars and land owners to my cause. I want them persuaded that stopping the opium trade is to their long-term benefit, and not only because they will be viewed most favorably when they come forward to expose who buys and sells the poison. But I want your opinion of these men before I approach them."

"A good opening. Will you make similar appeals to the Governor and Governor-General?"

"I have already held my first conversation with Governor-General Deng Tingzhen. I had hoped that he would be the first to hear my plans, but..." Lin shrugged. "It has become clear that another route must be taken."

"I believe that you are correct, and I am sorry for it. What of the Cohong merchants?"

"I don't know. Yet. I must speak with Howqua and Mowqua next."

"Then I will keep you here no longer." Lin did not wish to see the relief in his friend's expression. "I will look over these letters and send my son with my opinions."

He is a sound young man and you may trust him. You will let me know at once if there is any other thing this house can do to assist you?"

"I will."

Lin stood, and they spoke their thanks and all the other courtesies. Lin left that sweet scented courtyard much depressed in his mind. His earlier nap had eased his exhaustion, but now it had returned, and doubled.

He also found he was not at all surprised to see Pao's daughter-in-law, Chen Saizen, waiting for him beside the outer courtyard gate.

"Sir."

Lin acknowledged Chen Saizen's bow. "I thank you for your hospitality today. Your home is a calm and restorative place."

"Thank you, Sir. May I speak with you?"

"Certainly."

She lifted her gaze, briefly, and Lin was stunned by the depths of the bitterness that darkened her eyes. Despite that, her voice remained calm and her tone humble.

"My father-in-law is very ill. My husband wishes to stay home and look after him during this time. But my father-in-law wishes his son to work with you, for the good of his family and his grandsons. This has placed my husband in a hard position."

So much waited behind those sharp eyes — an infinity of worry honed into anger by the unforgiving filial duty of silence. But this was honest feeling. Lin understood it. Indeed, Lin felt certain he understood this woman very well.

"There will be many documents that must be examined in the coming days," he said, striving to match her resolute calm. "Their information must be compiled, copied and distributed. Some of that work can be done here. I know that Pao Jian's son has passed his examinations and writes with an excellent hand. The senior clerks will contact him."

"Thank you, Sir." Chen Saizen bowed with studied correctness, and Lin left her there. But the burn of her silent, honest anger remained with him for a long time.

II.

March 12, 1839

Aboard the Golden Peony, on the Pearl River

Guangdong Province

China

“Well now, Howqua,” Lancelot Dent paced the lacquered and gilded ship’s cabin. Sunlight and river breezes streamed through the carved screens. “I take it you’ve had a chance to meet this legendary High Commissioner Lin. What do you think of him?”

“I have not yet met him myself,” Howqua replied coolly. “But I have spoken with friends who have. It is with deep regret I must tell you he lives up to his reputation.”

Howqua was the current head of Canton’s Cohong merchants — the cadre of trading families exclusively licensed by the Emperor of China to do business with foreigners. Since Lancelot Dent represented one of the largest British trading houses, the two men met frequently. A magnificent “flower boat” was hardly their usual venue to do business, however. These luxurious vessels were hired by wealthy men to cruise the river and entertain their friends, usually with a good old-fashioned debauch involving wine, women, and song.

And opium, of course. Some of which might even have come in on Dent’s ships. In fact, considering the amount of opium Whiteman, Dent & Brightman brought in each season, odds were it had.

Dent paused beside the cabin screen, to stare across the muddy river. It was a good day to be out on the water. The river was smooth, the oarsmen steady. Like the rest of the boat’s crew, their job was to create a maximum amount of comfort for the men who’d hired it for the day. The screens allowed for a dramatic view of the passing banks. They also let in the men’s raucous laughter, and the answering lilt of women’s voices. Sometimes a group would break into song, or suggest new riddles and puns built around the guests’ names and presumed attributes.

Dent would have liked to be allowed to enjoy himself. His time in the China trade had given him a taste for their sophisticated women, and the ones aboard the boat were really quite pretty. But the fact of the matter was, Dent should not be here. He was *fan qui* — foreign. That meant these boats were off-limits, like the rest

of Canton. Dent was supposed to remain meekly confined in the factory compound, venturing out only as far as the Consou House.

But the crowded factories were a bad place for private conversation, and anyway, merchant or no, as a man of rank, Howqua wasn't supposed to condescend to enter the foreigner's territory except in cases of extreme emergency.

Like impending death, or riot.

However, the factories were actually fairly easy to escape. They might be walled off from the city, but they sat right on the banks of the Pearl River. A small fee paid to a cooperative sampan owner got Dent out onto the water to meet this particular boat. And he had no worries about the passengers gossiping to their highly placed friends. Once the men settled in for their smoke, no one would remember that a foreigner had ever come aboard.

"The good news is that High Commissioner Lin's time here is short," Howqua was seated on a padded divan. Teakwood racks held jars of wine and porcelain cups within reach. Neither of them had yet moved to drink. The servant had been sent away, so they could speak freely in their usual mix of the Cantonese dialect and English. They both knew more of each other's language than the Emperor's edicts allowed, so neither descended into the pidgin used for common trade.

"Lin Zexu has been promised a further posting as a Governor-General once he is finished with us here," Howqua went on. "That, however is also the bad news."

"Why?" asked Dent impatiently. Dent had come here expecting a report on how much the bribes were going to run. Normally, that was Howqua's own business, but rumors about Lin were starting to unnerve some of the other men on the Canton Board of Trade, and Dent wanted to be able to spoon them some reassurance. "If Lin's just passing through, we can wait him out like we've done all the others."

The Emperor declared his intention to eradicate the opium trade at fairly regular intervals. He'd send a new official with a new title into Canton. Howqua would meet with the fellow over cups of tea. A price and some token enforcement measures would be agreed to. They'd all go along until the official got caught, and then everything would return to normal.

"If Lin has only a short time to complete his mission, he will implement stern measures," said Howqua. "Rumors are already flying. Men who were once eager to take their deliveries are instead piling up pipes and bowls to hand over to the police when they come calling. Some even express relief that the trade is ending."

"A few nervous little shopkeepers."

Everybody was overreacting to the presence of this one man. Dent wandered across to the rack of cups. That was no good. The merchants knew the ways of Peking's officials as well as the Cohong did. One fresh arrival shouldn't make any of them so much as blink.

He picked up the wine jar and turned it around in his hands, admiring its pure white sides and sapphire blue mandala. *Lovely thing. Take some doing to get it home in one piece...*

A spasm of annoyance spread across Howqua's face. "While I waste my time here trying to convince you that our trade is in danger, Commissioner Lin is meeting with Guang Xie, our Commandant of Police. He is also gathering together the first among our landowners. I am to make my appearance before him shortly, *and*, I am told by men I trust that he has also summoned Mowqua."

"That just tells us Lin's information's out of date. Mowqua's retired." Mowqua — Lu Guangheng — was one of the highest men among the Cohong merchants. At least, he had been until a few years ago. In fact, Lu Guangheng had held Howqua's office.

"Retired, yes, but he remains senior to me and immensely respected," Howqua reminded Dent curtly. "And he is the head of his family. That family is large and old, with ties in Canton and throughout the province. *Dian Di* —" Howqua used the Chinese formulation of Dent's name. "— Unblock your ears. Hear what is being said. Lin's orders are written in the Emperor's own hand. His freedom is complete. His power regarding the opium trade is absolute. The calls for legalization are all finished. The Emperor does not want the trade slowed. He does not want it taxed. He wants it *stopped*."

Good God, the man's turning yellow. Dent covered his mouth to hide his snicker. This wasn't funny. There was far too much money at stake.

"You saw for yourself how Governor-General Deng was driven to kill a man in front of the factories before Lin even arrived," Howqua went on. "Now Lin is here. He met with Deng in the first hour of his entering Canton, and Deng all but crawled to me on his knees in fear."

"Wait, Howqua. This — Lin can't possibly touch the Governor-General?"

Lin was a jumped-up little inspector, just like all the others. They came in with bluster and moralizing. They'd make a few arrests — a few slow shopkeepers, a pirate or two if they were lucky. Once in a while, they'd toss in the owner of a "fast crab" boat of the kind that took the opium from the sailing vessels to the shore.

But that was it. The price of the bribes could get steep, but not one of the inspectors or commissioners, or whatnot, lasted longer than a few months. And not one of them had required they make any real change in the flow of goods.

“Lin has already begun to roam the streets in plain clothes, counting the opium houses,” said Howqua. “He has hand selected men to go to the ports at night and watch who comes and goes. *Everyone* who comes and goes.”

The skin on Dent’s neck crawled. For one of the very few times in his life, he had the urge to retreat behind the factory wall. Bolt himself in his room. Not that it would do any good. If the city’s troops mustered against them, nothing would do any good.

Heavens help us. The legend of Commissioner Lin was starting to get to *him*. He set the graceful jar back into its place on the rack.

“But still, if he’s on his way to a Governor-General’s palace, we’ll be all right. All we have to do is keep our heads and...”

“That may prove difficult,” said Howqua drily. “Many sharp axes can fall in a short time. How many of my sons should I get ready to lose do you think?”

“You don’t think he’d arrest any of your people?” No one ever went near the Cohong trading families. Ever. They were too good at what they did. That included determining the weakness, or the asking price, of the men they dealt with.

“I do think it,” Howqua snapped. “And I am not the only one. What do you think the execution in front of your people was about? Governor-General Deng is not a timid man, but he has become anxious to prove his diligence, in the hope that Commissioner Lin will not decide to arrest *him*.”

Good God.

This was a genuine problem. As long as opium remained technically illegal, the smooth flow of their goods required a sound network of understanding and cooperation. Among his other duties, Governor Deng oversaw Canton’s water forces. That meant Deng was the one who kept the patrol boats off their backs.

If Deng got scared enough to actually start enforcing the law...

“All right. All right. But what do you want me to do about it? Everything outside the factory walls is your business.” Dent wished he hadn’t said that. Sounded too much like whining.

Not in front of the little fellow, murmured his brother Tom from the back of his mind.

Tom had founded their company and brought Lance in. There wasn’t

anything Tom didn't know about trade, and about foreigners, whatever their shade or business. Lancelot would have loved to have his brother's steady advice right about now. But Tom was half a world away, and it was Lancelot who was here, with this little fellow.

No disrespect of course. Howqua was a good man, after his kind, and he understood what he was about. But Howqua remained a Chinaman, which meant you could only trust him when you could see both hands.

Just now Howqua had his hands folded inside his sleeves.

"What do I want you to do?" Howqua deliberately mimicked Dent's flat, rigid inflections, and Dent felt the blood rush to his cheeks. "I need to know what your head man, Yi Lu — *Captain Elliot* —" Howqua pronounced the name and title carefully. "— will do if Commissioner Lin directly orders the foreigners to stop bringing us opium?"

Dent wanted to laugh, but he couldn't. Not quite. Captain Charles Elliot, the current superintendent of trade in Canton, was a little man in every sense of the word. That made him easy to ridicule. After all, superintendents changed places almost as fast as Imperial Commissioners. The last fellow, Robinson, had lasted exactly a year, and the fellow before him, Lord Napier had both burned and fizzled in spectacular fashion after two.

But Elliot was different. He toed the line, not just with the English traders but with the Chinese. Unlike Lord Napier with his bluster, or Robinson with his blinkered laziness, Elliot tried to work according to the Chinese system. He obeyed Imperial protocol as much as he could. He got his translators — and every expert he could find — to brief him on custom and procedure, and he actually followed what they told him.

Which got him laughed at, and berated by his superiors in every dispatch. The British did not *kowtow* to anyone. The British did not pay attention to the odd ways of foreigners. The British came, they set up a system to get what they wanted, and the natives were taught to follow it, kindly if possible, harshly if necessary.

That was the way it worked in India. That was the way they were determined to make it work in China.

And yet, it was Elliot who managed to get official permission to take up station in Canton itself when the others who held his post couldn't get any further up river than Macao. Not only that, but during Elliot's tenure, trade had not only flowed smoothly, it had increased.

Because despite argument, and ridicule, and all British precedent, the fussy bureaucrat with his short fuse had consistently tried to play China's game according to China's rules.

If Commissioner Lin started quoting those rules...if he started making demands about British property, or — no, unthinkable, not possible — British lives, what would Elliot do?

Dent found he had no idea.

"The trading companies won't put up with any interference with the opium business," Dent said out loud. *That, at least, I'm sure of.* "They'll raise a ruckus. Agitate to get Elliot removed."

"And how long would it take such a petition to get to Elliot's superiors?"

A year. And another to get it back. Elliot could do an untold amount of damage in two years.

Probably best not to stoke that particular fear just now.

Don't lie, murmured Tom from memory. *Always comes back to bite you. Just give 'em the best version of the truth you can.*

What was the best version of the truth about Charles Elliot?

"I don't think we need to worry about the superintendent. He just wants to make his pile and get out."

"Even though he brings his wife and children with him to live in Macao? That is not the action of a man planning to *get out.*"

Every now and then, the extent of Howqua's information network could still surprise Dent. "Well, a bit like your Mr. Lin, Elliot's strictly passing through. Once he's cleared his debt and got his stake, he's moving on. Tasmania, I think. Easier to do if the family's already here with you." Dent picked up the wine jar again, and this time he poured out two cups. "So, you see? No matter which way you look at it, this is strictly a temporary problem. We are patient men, Howqua. We can out wait kings and emperors, never mind, commissioners and captains." He smiled at his own neat turn of phrase and held out one of the wine cups.

Howqua did not smile, or take the cup. Dent set it back in the rack. Above them, a woman laughed and clapped. A man began to sing, loudly. Dent's Chinese was good enough to know the subject matter was nothing the man would repeat in front of his mother.

"Yi Lu — *Captain Elliot* — does not approve of the trade in opium," said Howqua. "You have told me this yourself. He may make common cause with

Commissioner Lin.”

And he’s made things work by playing the game according to the Chinese rules...

No.

Elliot would not even consider putting British property at risk, never mind British citizens. The man was a lot of things, but he was a loyal naval officer. Elliot would never turn traitor. Dent knew that for sure.

It’s not about what you know Lance, old boy, Tom’s memory reminded him. It’s about who you know, and who knows you. Most of all, it’s about who likes you.

Elliot did not like him. *Now that could become a problem.* Dent gulped his wine.

“Dian Di, you say Yi Lu has debt. He needs money. Can he be bribed?” asked Howqua.

“I wish he could,” said Dent. “I’ve made...a few overtures. Got nowhere, I’m afraid.” The truth was, Elliot had almost taken a swing at him. Come to think of it, that was where things had begun to go wrong between him and the little captain.

“Can he be persuaded to go away until we understand what demands Commissioner Lin will make of the foreigners? If communication can be delayed, or letters misplaced or destroyed, the confusion will help us and frustrate them both.”

Above decks, things had quieted down. Probably everyone was settling into their smoke. Dent sauntered back over to the carved screen and looked out for a long moment. The river was never empty, not during daylight. Trading ships with their huge white sails loomed over the sampans. Long oar boats — some of them surely “fast crabs” — shot between the bulkier vessels. The junks and houseboats with their round cabins and long tillers bobbed along, placidly minding their own business.

It was a whole world in motion, as busy and varied as any city street. It fascinated him and always had. Maybe because he’d seen it before, on the Thames, and in the port of Calcutta.

It’s the same the whole world over... the line from the music hall song flitted through his mind.

It’s also a bad time to turn philosopher Lance, old boy. You’ve got a problem. Howqua’s angry, and he’s scared. He wants Elliot out of the way for a bit. Might help, might not. But if you can work it, though, that will reassure him that you’re still on his side.

In his mind’s eye, Tom nodded his approval.

“At bottom, Elliot’s a straightforward man,” Dent mused. “Got all the British virtues and a good dose of ambition to go with them. So, our best shot is to appeal to his sense of duty.”

“His duty will be to stop the opium.”

“That’s *Lin’s* duty. *Elliot’s* duty is to protect British life and property.” Dent stopped. He had it. “It’s also to establish a direct line of communication between our government and yours.”

“You English keep saying such things. It is incomprehensible. The means of communication exists. It is clearly drawn and perfectly understood. A petition is written in the proper form and submitted...”

Dent cut him off. “I’m not going to argue protocol with you now. Just try to understand that the way you do things is not the way we *want* to do things. We want to meet face-to-face with men who have the power to make things happen. Elliot wants to actually meet Commissioner Lin personally. Stand in front of him. In the same room,” he added, because of the confusion on Howqua’s face.

“Lin would never do such a thing.”

“I know that. But if we could make Elliot think there was just a chance — any chance at all — he could get into a room with Lin, he’d go haring off to the ends of the earth.”

“*Why?*”

“Because Lin is carrying the Emperor’s writing and meets with the Emperor face-to-face. If Elliot meets Lin, that means he’s gotten closer to the Emperor than any Englishman, ever.”

But how to convince Elliot that chance was real? Any ruse would have to hinge on something a Chinaman of Lin’s rank would actually *do*. Elliot, damn him, had made a study of their protocols.

“You say there are rumors that Lin’s prowling the streets, right? Well, he has to have heard there’s drop off points all up and down the coast where fast crab boats meet the land smugglers to unload the opium. Suppose we tell Elliot that Lin wants to make some kind of tour of inspection? Your fellows do that, don’t they? I might be able to make Elliot think they could bump into each other while Lin’s traveling up the coast...”

Howqua’s eyes sparked, and Dent saw he grasped the idea. “What if we could say Commissioner Lin means to go to Macao and Yi Lu might be able to find him there? I have a copy of a letter from a friend of the commissioner’s.” There was that

network again. "It speaks of the possibility that Lin will only stop temporarily in Canton and will move onto Macao for the duration of his business in the province."

"Yes. That will do nicely. Can you get me that copy?"

"I will send it by my oldest son,"

"Excellent. Leave the rest in my hands. I'll have word for you by tomorrow night."

Howqua nodded, and looked through the screen, judging the river bank and the angle of the sunlight. "You should go now. I will have a servant rouse your boatman."

Unfortunately, the boatman had been enjoying a little of what was on offer to the paying customers. At least it was the wine and not the opium. So, instead of leaving Dent stranded while he slept it off, the ragged man just insisted on singing the same obscene song Dent had heard earlier. Apparently, he thought it was the height of wit, because he kept stopping between couplets for a long, wheezing laugh.

No matter. They'd get where they were going soon enough. In fact, by the end of the first hour, Dent had thrown back his head and begun to sing along. The pair of them had a jolly time of it, braying like idiots and laughing at themselves as they bobbed and weaved back up the Pearl River in the sunset.

That was the difference between him and Elliot, Dent mused. Elliot resented things. Always raging against what couldn't be helped. Where did that kind of thing lead a man? To apoplexy and an early grave. Too bad he couldn't learn to take things as he found them. Made things so much easier. As it was, Elliot was as bad as that holier-than-thou American Puritan, Mr. Charles King.

Well, no not quite that bad. Elliot at least had some care for his own family and his own future. And, if push came to shove, he could be counted to act for them.

Dent chuckled. *Have to take my own advice. Take Elliot as I find him.*

Take him, and leave him, suggested his memory of Tom. *High and dry.*

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



CHAPTER FOUR

The Consequences of a Chance Conversation

I.

March 13, 1839

The City of Canton, Guangdong Province

China

Captain Charles Elliot, Superintendent of British Trade in Canton, began the morning as he did so many — by walking along a wall.

Around him, the factories of the foreign section were all just starting to open up for the day. The slap of opening shutters mixed with shouting voices. Men recognized him as he passed, and — depending on their rank and nationality — called out their greetings, or simply bowed. The river breeze blew through the narrow alleys, clearing out some of the stagnant air that had settled during the night.

Elliot passed the first gate and found it had already been thrown open. A line of Chinese men with barrows and bundles streamed through, each of them earning a bored nod from the guards.

He'd made this walk a morning habit since he'd first gained permission to make his headquarters in Canton. Just to check that all was well, that the gates were still open, and the guards were still bored.

The factories were not truly unpleasant. They were narrow, but still airy. Their gaily painted fronts and neat tile roofs were a sight to lift the heart of the tired man sailing into harbor. During the day, the riverbank and the adjoining square was alive with persons of all descriptions. They streamed in and out of the arched entrances of the two hotels. Human shouts, the bawling from the livestock, and the cries of the river birds all blended together into an invigorating cacophony that rose up with the smoke from the braziers and cook fires.

Such lively surroundings were perfectly familiar to Elliot. He'd walked through market districts very much like this in Haiti, and Guiana, and Bombay. One could even see the likeness to Covent Garden, or wherever else men gathered to do business with one another. Only the colors and goods were different. The crowds, the bargaining, the banter, the need to know the man in front of you, that all stayed the same.

The only real difference between China, and St. Croix, and Covent Garden, was this blasted wall.

Elliot passed the second gate. The soldiers were talking with a man who carried a series of bamboo cages on a long pole. Small brown chickens clucked and squabbled inside. The man said something Elliot couldn't catch and all the soldiers laughed, and the man passed through.

All as it should be. Elliot walked on.

He was as familiar with city walls as he was with city squares. By now, he'd spent half his life in port towns. Every one of them was bounded by walls and gates and studded with watchtowers. He'd stolen his first kiss from his wife Clara in the shadow of that rough stone wall in St. Croix. The wind filled with the scents of sea and spices, and the tropical air wrapped around them like a blanket.

But all those other walls had been intended to keep invaders out. This one — stoutly built, neatly whitewashed — was built to keep him in. His very existence had been deemed dangerous to the men on the other side. That nagged at him, and he could not even have explained why. He supposed it outraged the school boy in him — the little chap who wanted to leave simply because he'd been told to stay put. But there was more to it than that. That wall had been created before anyone knew a thing about him. He'd been judged by this place before he'd even been born.

That was a grudge as familiar as the bustle in this square and the scream of the gulls overhead.

He understood the prejudices of the men who built this wall weren't on the same level as those belonging to the fat fools in London who kept him and Clara out of their parlors and their clubs. Those men didn't care for Elliot's parents. They cared less for Clara's. That was personal. The segregation of foreigners was simply a part of the Chinese Imperial protocol. Elliot knew a thing or three about ridiculous protocol. After all, he'd gone into His Majesty's (*Her* Majesty's now, he reminded himself), navy at fourteen years of age. When it came to convoluted rules and traditions, the Chinese couldn't begin to match the admiralty. Or Whitehall.

What mattered was not whether the rule made sense, but that it represented a *system*. As long as there was a system, it could be worked. It was as natural for the Chinese to insist on their protocols as it was for the British to insist on theirs. This was, after all, their country. And it was actually fairly easy to learn their ways, if you bothered to pay attention.

Of course, Elliot's opinion was not shared by the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, much less by men like that blasted nuisance of a trader, Lancelot Dent. All they saw was goods to be acquired — primarily tea, silk and porcelain. The fact that the Chinese were in no great hurry to hand the stuff over to whatever Englishman showed up on their coast seemed the height of unreason to all these men.

That, and the fact that unlike India, China had a centralized government, and an Emperor who had control of a single, well-coordinated, and very large, army. There was no possibility of playing one petty prince against another here, much less picking provinces off piecemeal. That seemed to confuse and irritate Whitehall, endlessly. Palmerston and his ilk took the position that if the heathens wouldn't hand over what was wanted, then good Christian Englishmen were within their rights to take it.

Which, if you stopped to think about it, was the kind of behavior that made the factory wall not only reasonable, but a positive necessity.

There had to be a way to get past it. Some way to win the trust of the men on the other side. Whitehall, not to mention the East India Company, called that "opening" China. It was the holy grail of trade. The man who "opened" China... such a man wouldn't need family or connections to rise in society. People would be clamoring to know him, to lend his sons a helping hand, and to marry his daughters.

The man who pried open the gates of China wouldn't need to drag his family to the bottom of the world to try to make some kind of future.

Stop it, Charles, you fool. You're not going back there. The debts are cleared, and as soon as you've made your nut, it's off to Tasmania with you. That's a place where a man can rise on his own merit, and there won't be any toffee-nosed bitches to look down on Clara and the children.

But that thought trailed him as he turned down the little alley called Hog Lane. Elliot dodged shopkeepers and their children, and their goats, and the old women with baskets and brooms. At the end of the alley, he came out into the square, but that was hardly less crowded than the lane. Stalls and raree-shows

had been set up wherever there was an inch of ground. Porters, sailors and traders bustled back and forth with boxes and bundles and more cages. The smell of charcoal fires and cooking rose to compete with the less savory odors that came from too many people and animals jammed into too small a space.

To be the man who pried open the gates of China...

Aye. And wasn't that who our late, lamented Lord Napier thought he was going to be?

Napier had been superintendent before Elliot got the job. Well, all right, before Robinson got the job, but Robinson hardly counted. Napier had also decided he was going to open China by force of will. When he got word the provincial Governor was having a celebratory banquet in his palace, he was dead certain his time had come.

Elliot had been a junior secretary at the time. Feeling like an absolute fool, he'd put on his evening clothes and piled aboard the ship along with a cadre of other excited, bewildered men. They'd all waited below decks, smoking cigarettes until the close hold filled with blue smoke. Napier didn't linger with them. Oh, no. His lordship stood on the quarterdeck, pretending to be in command while they barged up the river, in broad daylight, flying their colors right under the hillside forts.

Napier wasn't having any nonsense.

Napier was going to show the Chinese that an English lord would not be fobbed off on underlings. An English lord would not bow, or humbly submit petitions to a bunch of jumped-up shopkeepers. He would deal with his equals, and only then on terms of absolute equality.

It had not gone well.

Elliot's chest and his knees still hurt when he remembered the blows the soldiers dealt. Those were dull, hard aches compared with the bright pain that flashed through him when he hit the tiles, biting his tongue so hard his mouth filled with blood. Or the humiliation that flashed just as sharply when the soldier's foot came down in the small of his back.

They'd all been tossed down the steps and had to run for the boats. Napier raged while his personal aides tried to hustle him aboard. The whole way, his lordship screamed threats and demanded apologies from men who couldn't understand a single word he said.

This was the man they put in charge. Ignorant to the end. Napier had died trying to get home, and no matter how many times Elliot's wife Clara reminded him

of Christian charity and duty, Elliot couldn't muster up any feeling of regret.

"Captain Elliot!"

A nasal, and unmistakable American accent cut through the crowd's babble. Elliot swallowed a groan and turned to see Charles King emerging from Hog Lane.

"Can I walk with you a second?" King asked. "I got some news."

"What is it?"

"I've just been talking with some of the outside traders." King gestured back up the alley. The shopkeepers who operated their businesses inside the factory's alleyways were called "outside traders" because they functioned outside the system ruled by Canton's Cohong families, in a small way at least.

The Cohong made sure it stayed in a very small way.

"They're real excited," King went on. "They say this new High Commissioner, Mr. Lin is already starting to shake up the city."

"Already?" It wasn't possible. Commissioner Lin had only arrived, what was it, two days ago? He should still be greeting dignitaries and choosing his headquarters. The others had taken weeks to settle in.

"You heard me. Our Mr. Lin is wasting no time!" King cried delightedly.

"Seems the rumors about the guy are all gold-plated, one hundred percent truth."

King's air of happy superiority slid underneath Elliot's skin. King worked for Olyphant & Co. Not only were they one of the few firms that never dealt in opium, King himself was a fanatic on the subject and wrote pamphlets excoriating the trade.

"Seems Mr. Lin's already got the Governor and the Cohong running around like chickens with their heads cut off," King went on. "My guys say he's absolutely incorruptible. And —" here King paused dramatically — "he's been sent with special Imperial powers to stop the opium trade dead in its tracks."

"Yes." Elliot made sure his tone stayed bland and bored. "I've heard something about it. Is there a point?"

"Are you going to help him?"

Now Elliot was the one who stopped dead in his tracks. "What did you say?"

"Are you going to help him? I mean, after all, you're the man at the helm, aren't you? You know who's bringing the damned stuff in. You could hand Lin a list of names and..."

"And I might as well hand him the head of every English trader on a silver platter!" Elliot shot back. The penalty for buying or selling opium was death.

Elliot remembered the cross-trees in the square, the soldiers, and the freshly

strangled man with his head lolling against his chest. Oh, yes. Mr. Lin and the Governor, and the Governor-General, would all love to get their hands on the English merchants who actually brought the opium into China.

He remembered the feel of the soldier's boot coming down hard on the small of his back.

King sighed impatiently. "Elliot, you're a good Christian. I've heard you speak out against the practice of slavery, and I know you hate the opium trade as much as I do." This much King had absolutely correct. Elliot had seen what opium did to men. It was a vile, pernicious trade, and the sooner the British washed their hands of it, the better.

"Look," said King. "The Emperor wants the opium stopped. This man Lin wants it stopped. You and I want it stopped. Why can't we all work together?"

It was a good question, which only made it all the more irritating.

"You forget, Mr. King, unlike yourself, I am not a private individual. I may hate what I choose, but I must carry out my orders, and my orders are to see that nothing interferes with British citizens and British trade."

"Not even Chinese law?"

"Especially not Chinese law."

King was clearly getting ready to argue the point. Elliot felt his temper crack. Then, it all got worse.

"Hello, Mr. King, Superintendent!" Lancelot Dent's cheery cry rose over the square's chaos. "I was just coming to find you both. You've heard the news, I suppose? About Mr. Lin?"

"What news is that, Mr. Dent?" asked King.

King and Dent faced each other, smiling brightly, but glaring daggers. King was a crusader against opium. Dent was one of the largest smugglers of the drug, if not the largest. Surely, the men must be natural enemies, but Dent just seemed to find King as amusing as he found everything, and everybody, else.

In this moment, with the heat of the day rising around them, Elliot wasn't sure which of the men he hated worse.

"It's bad news for you and your little anti-smoke crusade, I'm afraid, Mr. King. I've been talking with Howqua. Seems Mr. Lin's not planning on staying in town after all. This is strictly a courtesy stop to hobnob with the Governor-General and his men. A little bird has told him Lin's going to be working his mischief from Macao."

"Is Howqua sure?"

“Sure as sure,” replied Dent easily. “You know he’s got all sorts of clever ways, does our friend Howqua. Apparently they include the occasional interference with the mails. And he’s not above sharing the results.” Dent reached into his pocket and flashed a folded letter.

Elliot’s mind raced. Macao was a day’s sail away. It might be firmly in the hands of the Portuguese, but it was also a mandatory stop for any trading ship bound for Canton. If Lin was looking to shake up the system — say, institute an inspection of all trading ships, or insist that cargo be unloaded into native boats at Macao rather than being allowed to sail directly into Canton — he’d go there to get things done.

It’d take Portuguese cooperation of course, but that wouldn’t be hard to get, especially if they could wrangle some concessions for their own boats...

“Captain? Did you hear what I said?”

“Gentlemen, you’ll forgive me, I’ve got work to do.”

Elliot strode away without looking back. He had to get to the office. Now.

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The facades of the factories might look like any you’d find in England or at least Europe, but the insides were pure Chinese in their conception. They were airy and plain. The floors were matted and the windows screened with the rattan and bamboo that seemed to be turned to every purpose. Elliot was not inclined to fault this arrangement, especially when the heat beat down like a hammer and the only relief was the river breeze.

Elliot dropped behind his desk and tossed his hat on the corner. “Mr. Johnston!” he roared for his deputy. “Johnston!”

Johnston poked his head in from the back room. “Sir?”

“Get me Mr. Morrison. Now.”

Elliot tried to lose himself in his paperwork, but he soon gave it up. Instead he paced to the window and back again.

If Lin was in Macao. If Elliot could get to him...talk with him. Convince him they could work together. Get him to see that he, Charles Elliot, was not like the others. He wasn’t blind. He wasn’t a fool. He was better than those arrogant, titled gents.

To be the man who pried open the gates of China...

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

Elliot startled. This was no good. He hadn’t even heard Morrison come in.

Eyebrows lifted when Elliot took Morrison on as a secretary and translator.

He was a permanently sunburnt young man with dark hair that he wore slicked back on his head. He'd been brought to Canton by his missionary parents and hadn't set foot on British soil since he was twelve or so. Even in the factories, he wore the native costume of black tunic and trousers. *More a Chinaman than an Englishman*, said the ones who dismissed him. They seemed to forget that that was exactly what made him useful.

It was Morrison who'd explained to Elliot why the Cohong, and the rest of the Chinese bureaucrats were so insistent on their petitions. China, Morrison pointed out, was not one great solid block. It was a hundred different cultures stacked on top of each other, and those hundred cultures had a hundred languages. More, especially when you counted all the countries on their borders: Tibet and Russia and Mongolia, not to mention Japan and India and all the other places that came to do business here. Even the language of the court was different from the dialects spoken in the cities, never mind the countryside.

But there was only one system of writing.

The Chinese might not be able to understand each other when they spoke, but every man could understand the other when they *wrote*. So writing was the chief form of official communication, and it was important that it be clear, so that orders, edicts, deeds, and all the daily business of life would be uniformly understood.

A misplaced pen stroke meant a mistaken character, meant a misread order, or petition.

"Close the door, Mr. Morrison."

Morrison did, and came to stand in front of Elliot's desk.

"What do you know about this new commissioner, Mr. Lin? Have you heard anything about him possibly going to Macao?" Morrison was soft spoken, and mild, but he was deep, and those large, soft eyes missed very little. If something was going on among the Cohong, Morrison would know.

"As a matter of fact, sir, I have. I saw Howqua at the Consou House yesterday afternoon." The Consou House was a kind of meeting hall for the traders of the various nations in the factories. The name came from a kind of bastardization of the Chinese *kungtse*, as well as the English "council." It stood just outside the factory wall, so that meant it was a place where the Cohong could go without sacrificing any stand on ceremony.

"Howqua was saying that Commissioner Lin plans to sail for Macao before the week's out. Apparently Governor-General Deng can't wait for him to get gone,"

Morrison added.

“Has anyone said why Macao?”

“Well...you understand, he wasn’t talking directly to me...”

Elliot gestured for Morrison to go on. This was the real reason to keep Morrison on staff. He spoke like a native, and that made him one of the very few reliable eavesdroppers in the whole of Canton.

“Howqua seemed to think Lin wants to find out if the Portuguese will cooperate with the new measures he’s planning against the opium trade.” He paused, and added. “Apparently, he also wants to get a closer look at the size of the fleet.”

Elliot let out a long, slow breath. “Thank you, Mr. Morrison. That will be all.”

Once Morrison left, Elliot started drumming his fingers against the desk. A breeze blew through the window, rattling the blinds and ruffling the papers. A fly circled low, looking for somewhere to land.

Elliot had never met Prime Minister Palmerston, but he’d met plenty like him. He thought of the men who smiled and shook his hand and congratulated him back when he shipped out as a new junior secretary. All that, and all the time they knew he was being shipped off to the end of the world.

And how those same men knew that he’d got his current job because he represented a cost savings.

Not that any of them told him that straight out. Oh, no. It wasn’t until after he’d signed on that Elliot found out that he was making half what Lord Napier did.

The blinds rattled again. The papers curled and rustled. The fly landed on the inkwell and began nosing about. Not so long ago, this office had represented progress. Elliot had been able to get official sanction to stay on the mainland, when Napier’d been relegated to Macao. But once again, Palmerston hadn’t seen this as enough. Palmerston wanted him to talk to the Emperor. Face-to-face. Palmerston insisted. This was the most important thing. This was what Elliot was supposed to make happen. Everything else was secondary.

But Palmerston was two years away as the mail flew. Elliot was the one in charge here.

Maybe this once, Elliot could get something out of this situation that would be genuinely useful, and that Lord Palmerston be able to appreciate.

How many times now had Elliot heard that Lin was different? That Lin was energetic, and honest. If that were true, here, finally, might be a man Elliot could

deal with. If Lin really had the Emperor's ear, if he had permission to enter the Forbidden City, then the line between the coast and the court might just have gotten much shorter, and much straighter.

That is, if matters could be handled properly by someone who understood the way the Chinese worked. If Elliot could insert himself into a moment where protocol had a crack. Say in Macao, where there was no wall. Where there was a European governor who might be convinced to get Elliot into the right room at the right time.

To be the man who pried open the gates of China...

To be the man who did what no one else had done in a hundred years of trying. To prove once and for all he was a better man than all the ones who lied to his face. The same ones who cut him from their guest lists and blackballed him from their clubs after he had the poor taste to go and marry a Creole woman.

"Right then," Elliot murmured. "Macao it is. Mr. Lin, I'll see you there."

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.”

“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.”

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



CHAPTER SIX

A Moment's Deceptive Peace

I.

March 20, 1839

Macao

Charles Elliot had come home.

At least, he had come to the low white house that was home for now. Home enough, because Clara and the children were there.

“Father! Father!”

No trouble from his work, no threat from High Commissioner or Chinese Emperor could wipe away the delight that lifted Elliot’s heart as Harriet and little Hugh came barreling down the garden path. Hetty’s ribboned pigtails flew behind her. Hugh’s blue sailor jacket flapped open and crooked.

“Why what’s this?” Elliot crouched down, arms out, and let his children slam against him. “These are not children! They are much too sweet! It’s a couple of sugar plums come to greet me at my gate! I must eat them up at once!” He hoisted them both up in his arms, and rained kisses down on the tops of their sun-warmed heads, reveling in their squeals of delight.

“No! No! It’s us, Father! It’s us!”

“Is it? Oh, bless my soul, so it is. How are you my dears?” He hugged them both close and set them down. “And where is your mother?”

Together, they grabbed his hands. Both shouted about a dozen different, terribly important, entirely disjointed things that had happened since he’d last seen them. They also pulled, pushed and generally bundled him into the front parlor.

And there was Clara. Dressed in a modest, dark gown in the European fashion with a lace collar and round crinoline skirts. She heard the children’s

boisterous arrival, and was standing up, laying aside her embroidery. Her raven hair was pulled into a tidy knot, her warm skin clean and smooth. Her black eyes shone in quiet welcome.

“You little mischief makers!” Elliot gently shook himself free of the children. “You’ve hidden away your mother and left a fairy queen in her place! Your Majesty!” He swept off his hat in an elaborate bow.

“Oh, stop it, Charles!” As always, Clara’s low voice sent a thrill through him.

“Her Majesty refuses the supplication of her humble servant! He is crest-fallen! Heartbroken! But surely, he may beg a dance nonetheless? For are not all fairies fond of dance?”

He seized her around the waist in a spirited waltz, humming some air that sounded Viennese, if one listened close enough. She smelled of vanilla and lavender and salt air and he breathed deeply. The children laughed, delighted at this chance to, quite literally, run rings around the roses, or in this case, the parents.

“All right! All right!” Clara laughed, putting her hands on Elliot’s shoulders to still them both. “That’s quite enough. Children, run along and find Señora Almeida. It’s time for your tea and I want to talk with your father. Go!”

The children galloped straight down the tiled passage toward the kitchen. The possibility of tea and buns far outweighed any delight there could ever be in an extra moment with their father. Clara watched them go, shaking her head in loving despair.

“They look so beautiful, Clara. You’ve done wonders with them.” Charles took her hand and kissed it. “You look beautiful too.”

“Thank you, my dear.” She drew him to sit beside her on the sofa. “You are just in time. Manuelo will have our tea shortly.” Of course she’d had word brought as soon as his ship had been sighted. Clara attended to details like that. “Now, what is it that brings you home to us so suddenly?”

“That can wait. I want to hear all your news first.”

Clara returned one of her quiet, knowing looks, but did not protest. Instead, she began a cheerful stream of chatter, about the visits from Señora de Guadalupe, and Mevrouw Aikenvuld, and Frau van Stresse.

Do not interrupt, Charles admonished himself. *Let her talk and tell me how all is well.*

Manuelo brought in the tea, and Charles noted this time the tray was much more neatly laid out than last. Although he preferred to take his tea fresh and green

as the natives generally did, all the rest was arranged in the proper English fashion. Last time, Clara had noted his disapproval, and had clearly worked to correct the boy. Manuelo glanced at her nervously as he made his bow before retreating.

Very good. I will not interrupt.

Clara filled the cups, and passed Charles his tea, along with a plate of sandwiches — not little finger triangles, but heartier fare for a man just come from sea. There was pie as well, and cheese.

Thank you, my dear. You've arranged it all beautifully. I will not interrupt.

Clara told him how Harriet was taking drawing lessons from Senora Delgado who had come just this month from Almeda aboard her husband's ship. She talked about the dinner party that went so splendidly, with the artist from Castile, and the painter from London, and the historian, Mr. Finlay. Although there was some little worry when Mr. Finlay and Mr. Kingston got into an argument...

"And Lady Davenport?" Elliot asked abruptly. "Does she invite you yet?"

Clara laughed. "Oh, Charles, you know how I hate those crushes she plans. Twenty people to sit down to dinner, and another twenty-five coming in afterwards to stand about drinking and arguing about people I don't know and places I've never been. I'd much rather dine at home."

No, then. "Or Lady Winston?"

Clara's cheeks flushed. She set her cup down and folded her hands in her lap. "Please stop, Charles. You promised me you would not badger me about society."

He did promise. He should apologize. But the words would not come. "They have no business snubbing my wife when..."

"Your wife, Charles, is Catholic and Creole." Her voice was soft, almost a whisper. "That has not changed, and will not. M'Lord and M'Lady have no reason to look past these facts. I accept this. I am happy to be in the company of those who are glad to see me. The children, as you have seen, do very well among good, educated people. It is enough, Charles."

M'Lord and M'Lady have no reason to look past these facts. Because her husband had no fortune, and no influence.

You are worth a thousand of those fine ladies, and I am still powerless to raise you to the place where you belong.

"It doesn't matter, Charles," she told him, as she always did. "We're not staying here. We're going to Tasmania and start again. That is your plan."

Yes, of course. His plan. That was why he had brought Clara and the children

here. So he could take them yet further away. It had seemed such a good idea, back in England, with the walls of debt closing in. Out here at the end of the world they could live on next to nothing, save whatever salary the lords deigned to grant him, pay off the bankers, and save what was left, all so they could run further away.

It really had seemed like a good idea.

“You’re right, of course,” he said as brightly as he could. “And it’s not as if we don’t have many more pleasant things to discuss.” He took her hand, delighting, as he always did, in the feel of her long, slender fingers as they twined around his. Clara smiled up into his eyes, and he turned her hand over to kiss her wrist.

#

Much later, Charles stood in his shirtsleeves at their bedroom window. Clara slept in their bed, curled into a tidy bundle. The habit, she said, came from sharing a bed with her three sisters as a child. Night was settling over the world, clear and dark and magnificent. The house was still. The children were safe and sound, tucked in their own beds. Outside, the crescent moon grazed the edge of the silver ocean.

And he could see none of it. Feel none of it. All he could feel was the endless, creeping parade of slights crawling across his skin.

He did not want to be this man. He wanted to be strong and content. He prayed to be made grateful for what he had, like Clara was. What did it matter what a few fat men back in London, or their puppets here in Macao thought of him? What mattered was that he had work, a chance to make his way and was able to provide decently for his family.

And yet it did matter. No matter how far he went, there’d be one of those fat men frowning at him, or worse, laughing, and not just at him, but at his sons, and his daughters.

And Clara.

All because he had no power.

But if Superintendent Charles Elliot became the man who opened the gates of China, the man who *controlled* the gates of China...that would change. He would have power, and influence. And money.

Let us not forget the money. Elliot leaned both hands on the windowsill. A salt breeze stung his cheeks. *We can never forget about all the money.*

He looked back at Clara, curled in around herself, her black hair spilling across her naked shoulders. There was a swell to her stomach that hadn’t been there a month ago. She hadn’t said anything yet, and he didn’t ask, but something in her

scent, in her skin and the shine of her eyes told him the truth. She was with child again.

Another child. Another life to protect and provide for. Charles's heart squeezed with love and fear.

Tomorrow he had an appointment with Lord Ramsey, a member of the East India Company's Board of Control, newly arrived from Calcutta on his way back to London. The invitation had met him at the docks as soon as Charles had debarked from the *Louisa*. Ramsey had stopped in Macao to look over what he was pleased to call the "rising difficulties" in the China Trade. He'd be happy, the note said, to hear Superintendent Elliot's views on the subject, as soon as he was available.

Charles had had this conversation before, with the steady parade of company officials, all blundering men who couldn't see over the edge of their own ledger books. Ramsey would be no different.

What was different was that this time Charles would offer Ramsey a solution to those "rising difficulties." And the real irony was, they'd both have High Commissioner Lin to thank. Commissioner Lin, who according to Morrison's intelligence should be arriving at Macao soon himself, which put him as far away from his own turf as a man of his rank would come.

Out here, it was the Europeans who controlled the houses of business and bureaucracy, and the invitations, and the meetings. Once Elliot secured Lord Ramsey's agreement with his plan, Ramsey could help Elliot with the governor and the other officials, both Portuguese and Dutch. Elliot would be able to thread the needle between the worlds, and get himself in front of High Commissioner Lin. He could break the wall the Emperor set up to protect the purity and power of the mandarins.

This was Elliot's chance to open the gates.

Even if it was only a crack, it would make all the difference. All he needed was for Lord Ramsey to understand. Fortunately, such men thought with their pocketbooks, which was exactly the place he meant to appeal. All he needed was time and opportunity.

And just a little help from the legend of High Commissioner Lin.

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



CHAPTER SEVEN Edicts & Admonishments

I.

March 20, 1839

The Foreigners' Factories

Canton, Guangdong Province

China

“...with this thing you have seduced and deluded the people of China for tens of years past; and countless are the unjust hoards that you have thus acquired.”

Mr. Thom read the paper carefully, running his calloused and ink-stained finger down the columns of closely written characters.

Lancelot Dent stood beside the slanted clerk's desk and listened, his hands folded behind his back.

“...Such conduct rouses indignation in every human heart, and is utterly inexcusable in the eye of celestial reason...”

They were in one of the side offices of the Consou House. Not an official part of the factories, the house nonetheless served as a meeting place for the foreign traders, especially when the various “boards of trade” needed to discuss, or argue, matters of mutual concern. Such as the doings of High Commissioner Lin.

The Consou House was not a grand building. It had been built rough and plain, with whitewashed walls. Its offices were all bare as a whore's backside. The main hall was furnished with nothing beyond plain benches and a podium. *Bit like a Quaker meeting house*, Dent thought. Although, the language used there would surely make any good Quaker blush for shame.

Dent smiled at the idea, and realized that the translator had paused.

“The eye of celestial reason,” repeated Dent, so Thom would know he had been listening. Mr. Thom was using the high desk by the window where the light was the best, and the flies came and went with the breezes. “I like that. Do continue, Mr. Thom.”

Robert Thom, known universally as “Old Mr. Thom,” was very nearly the best translator they had in the factories. Second only to John Morrison who’d lived in China since he was twelve. But Morrison was not the man for this job. He was on Superintendent Elliot’s payroll now, and worse, he was good friends with that so-very-righteous American representative of Olyphant & Co., Mr. Charles King.

Mr. King is going to love this little missive from the High Commissioner.

“...Should I search closely into the offenses of these foreigners, in forcing for a number of years the sale of opium, they would be found already beyond the bounds of indulgence...”

The edicts — beautifully written orders direct from Lin Zexu, Canton’s new High Commissioner — had arrived with the dawn. Along with a fondness for grand language, Mr. Lin was also clearly fond of early hours. Thankfully, Dent had gotten word that the edict was on its way, so he had been on watch. Otherwise, the deputy superintendent, Emile Johnston, might have gotten the papers first, and sent them straight on to his boss in Macao by the next boat. Dent would have had to stand rubbernecking by the gates while the Chinese soldiers pasted copies on the wall, or wait even longer until whatever clerks the commissioner had in his employ distributed more copies through the bookshops.

Dent found himself wondering what Elliot was doing away in Macao, and if he’d yet realized he was on a wild goose chase. Elliot thought Lin was headed to Macao. He thought he stood a chance of getting to see the great man. But Lin was staying right here in Canton, where any word of his plans would reach Dent before they’d reach Elliot. Which meant Dent would be able to act before Elliot could. Possibly days before.

So far, it was all going according to plan.

If Elliot found out Dent had tricked him, Elliot was going to be furious. Well, if he got suspicious, Dent could always blame Howqua, or Howqua’s informants, for having gotten the wrong end of the stick.

Better blame the informants. Dent didn’t need the head of the Cohong merchants getting any angrier than he already was.

Old Mr. Thom adjusted his spectacles.

“...But, reflecting that they are men from distant lands, and that they have not before been aware that the prohibition of opium is so severe, I cannot bear, in the present plain enforcement of the laws and restrictions, to cut them off without instructive monition...”

“So very kind of you, dear chap. Thank you,” Dent murmured. Old Thom glanced at him, but Dent just gestured for the man to continue. He probably could have puzzled the whole thing out himself, of course, but time might be short.

“...I proceed to issue my commands. When these commands reach the said foreign merchants, let them with all haste pay obedience thereto. Let them deliver up to government every particle of the opium on board their store-ships...”

Why, of course, Mr. Lin. Dent smiled. *All you had to do was ask.*

“...As to those crafty foreigners, who, residing in the foreign factories, have been in the habit of dealing in opium, I, the high commissioner, have early been provided with a list of them by name...”

“Wait. Stop. Read that bit again.”

Old Mr. Thom did. For the first time, Dent felt a prickle of sweat under his collar. He remembered Howqua’s warnings when they last sat together, and how the trader had been in genuine fear of Mr. Lin.

Old Thom continued. “...those good foreigners who have not sold opium must also not fail to be distinguished. Such of them as will point out their depraved fellow-foreigners, will compel them to deliver up their opium...”

Oh, this is not good at all.

As soon as Charles King heard this little tid-bit he’d be turning cartwheels. King’s firm, Olyphant & Co. did not deal in opium. They pretended their refusal made them morally superior to those who were ready to make use of whatever openings they could find.

But let Mr. Puritan King see a chance for advantage and all those fancy morals will go right over the side, even if it means selling out his fellow white men.

“...these shall be regarded as the good foreigners. And I, the high commissioner, will at once for their encouragement reward them liberally...”

Oh, yes. Mr. King would be all too ready to give Dent over, and collect the rewards, no matter whose hand held them out.

“Damn.”

“Shall I continue, Sir?”

Dent sighed. “Yes, yes, Mr. Thom. We might as well have all of it.”

Old Mr. Thom kept on reading, and kept on, and on. An endless stream of proclamations of mercy, whereases, buts, and repeated flowery reminders of how much the foreigners owed to the grace and mercy of the Celestial Throne, and how Commissioner Lin was perfectly familiar with all their shifts and crafty ways and would not be fooled.

“...I am now about to command the Cohong merchants to proceed to your factories to instruct and admonish you...”

Howqua's going to love that bit. Probably should let him address the board of trade. That'll give him some cover with Mr. Lin. We can work out something for him to say.

Tonight, the hall's bare benches would fill with members of the Canton Board of Trade. The very grand name was given to a few score of British ship owners and the East India Company. These men's business involved bringing whatever they could into China and hauling out as much tea, silk, and porcelain as they could convince the Chinese to part with.

Dent would have to work out just what to tell them, before and after Howqua said his piece.

“...Do not indulge in idle expectations, or seek to postpone matters, deferring to repent until its lateness render it ineffectual.” With this, Old Mr. Thom began reading the signature and all its attendant titles.

“All right, we're clearly done,” said Dent. “Thank you for your help, Mr. Thom.”

“Happy to oblige, Mr. Dent.” Old Thom folded his specs and tucked them into his coat pocket. “If there's nothing else, Mr. Leeds was asking for help with a letter.”

“Of course. Mustn't keep Mr. Leeds waiting.”

Old Mr. Thom gathered his books and papers and bid him good-day. Dent returned his bow absently.

Normally Dent enjoyed Board of Trade meetings. He liked the give and take, the salty, energetic language, even the barking arguments. Here was a place where all types and conditions of men mixed — men from Dover to Hindustan and everywhere in between. He enjoyed the show provided by the varieties of character and temperament. No play in the music halls could hold a candle to the drama provided by real life.

But this time, everyone was on edge. He'd run into Mr. Paratha just last night.

“My man Kihsien says people are just tossing their opium pipes into the streets,” Paratha told Dent. “He says Lin’s already collected thousands of bowls and shut up a hundred houses. Opium confiscation to begin in less than eight days. He’s digging these massive trenches to pour the stuff into once he gets his hands on it. People are practically lining up to turn each other in.”

Stanislav Mier told a similar story. “He’s drawing up lists of who to purge from the water-forces. They say the admiral is next to be hauled in.”

So did William Williamson. “The commandant of police has whole new squadrons turning out. They even say Lin’s asking the students taking the civil service exams to make up lists of who’s buying and selling. He’s turning the whole city upside down and shaking it to see what falls out.”

With all this hurricane wind of rumor blowing through the factory, Dent was going to have to tread very, very carefully during the Board of Trade meeting.

Remind them that these commissioners all start out energetic. That we are not as alone as we seem. The Cohong merchants depend on us as much as we depend on them. They do not want any upset. We need to give Howqua and his people time to work. If the trade gets shut down for a few days or a week, it’s nothing we haven’t seen before. Mr. Lin will soon get tired. He’s only passing through. We can keep the cargo on the ships until he’s written Peking about all his progress. Howqua will give us the all clear, and business will continue. Just like always. I promise.

Best to do some work before he stood up in the meeting, though. Smooth the way a bit. He’d sideline Paratha first. He’d be willing to listen. Then, tackle Williamson. He had a hard head and always kept one eye on his ledger book. If Williamson went along, the rest would follow.

Not what you know but who. But that’s just the beginning, isn’t it? You have to know who leads, who follows, and who talks. So very useful to know who talks.

But the most important thing was to make sure the Board of Trade was settled down and seeing things in the correct light before Elliot found out he’d been rooked about where Mr. Lin was going to be headquartered and came roaring back from Macao.

“Beg your pardon, Mr. Dent?”

Old Thom was standing in the doorway, his sunburnt face positively ashen.

“What on earth’s the matter?”

“The Cohong, Howqua and Mowqua, they’re coming up the street now.

I think they're coming here."

"That's hardly extraordinary."

"Sir, they...they're in chains."

II.

Impossible.

Dent could not be seeing this. Howqua and Mowqua, on foot, stumbling up the street toward the Consoo house with a full escort of men wearing the caps and sashes of the Canton police. In front of them all marched that idiot commissioner of police, Guang Xie with his hands folded and chin up, proud as any Mandarin on parade.

And just like Mr. Thom said, both merchants wore chains. Long, iron chains looped around their hands and attached to iron collars around their throats. The ends dragged in the dust.

And all the world came out to stare. And laugh. And cheer.

This can't be.

No one touched the Cohong. Their families had ruled the foreign trade for generations. Governors and Governor-Generals dined at their tables, married their daughters, and took their cash.

A clod of pig dirt flew through the air. Howqua ducked and tripped over his chain, almost falling. Mowqua kept his eyes rigidly ahead, refusing to see, as if willful blindness could allow him to keep some kind of dignity.

Guang Xie marched both men up to the door of the Consoo house. He cuffed Mowqua on the shoulder and spoke in a rapid dialect that Dent couldn't make heads nor tails of. But he did understand Mowqua's trembling reply.

"We will not attempt to leave. I give my word."

Guang Xie nodded once and stood back.

Dent looked automatically to Howqua, and the glare he received in return was so filled with hate, he felt it like a slap in the face.

Lin's edict said the Cohong would be sent, to instruct and admonish. And now here they were.

"Well, well," Dent croaked. "I guess you'd better come in."

III.

Have to get them out of sight.

That was all Dent could think of as he led the men into the office where he'd just finished up with Old Mr. Thom.

Old Mr. Thom, who was trailing after them, with his mouth hanging open.

"All right, Thom. I'll take it from here." Dent patted the translator's shoulder, he hoped reassuringly. "And look, no need to say anything about this all right? Let me find out what's going on first."

But of course it was too late. The scene in the street had been too raucous to be missed. Everyone in the factories must know by now that something was up.

Howqua in chains. Old Mowqua paraded like a criminal through the streets.

...As to those crafty foreigners, who have been in the habit of dealing in opium, I have been provided with a list of them by name...

Dent closed the door.

"I tried to warn you Dian Di!" shouted Howqua. "You would not listen. I tried to protect you. This is what has happened!" Howqua shook his length of chain. Only his neck had been shackled. His hands were just looped together. "Now there are no more choices. You will hand over the opium. All the others will do the same."

Mowqua said nothing. He looked around in distaste, and finally circled the desk and sat in the room's only chair with a back and arms. The chain coiled like a snake below his feet, black and dangerous on the floor.

"All right, all right, it's very bad," said Dent. "Yes, I should have listened before. But the important thing is to keep the others from panic..."

"The important thing is to give over your opium and keep my sons heads on their shoulders!"

"They've arrested your sons?"

It was Mowqua who answered.

"Yes, Dian Di." Mowqua turned the Chinese formulation of Dent's name into a sneer. "Two of Howqua's sons are in Guang Xie's jail even now, along with two of my grandsons. They are not even to be allowed the dignity of being held at the academy to await their interrogations."

Dent felt his mouth go dry. The Canton police were fond of very direct, very forceful interrogations. Sometimes prisoners did not survive long past making their confessions.

...As to those crafty foreigners, who have been in the habit of dealing in opium, I have been provided with a list of them by name...

"You must come with us!" cried Howqua. "You must explain to Lin that you have read his edict, that you voluntarily surrender and admit your wrong!"

"Wait, wait! His edict said we had three days!" *He did say that, didn't he? I'm sure Mr. Thom read something about that.*

"Yes," said Mowqua. "But his excellency has sent us to illustrate to you the advantages of acting quickly."

Even though his head was spinning, Dent found a moment to admire the old man. He sat there, in the best chair in the room, cool as a cucumber, while Howqua hunched on the stool in the corner, clutching the iron collar around his neck, looking for all the world like a rabbit in a snare.

...I have been provided with a list of them by name...

"Well, your commissioner has to understand how we do things here," he said. God, was that him talking? Was his voice that clipped, and shaking that badly? *Calm down, Lancelot. Not in front of the little fellow. Never in front of the little fellow.* "We have to hold a meeting to discuss our response to this...edict. And we'll have to take a vote. That takes time."

"We are under orders from the High Commissioner now. We must stay until you are ready to return with us."

"You can't! If the board sees you like this...they'll panic. We'll never get anything done."

...my sons...my grandsons...not even to be allowed the dignity of being held at the academy to await their interrogations...

...I have been provided with a list of them by name...

They'd arrest him. The second he stepped outside the walls. They'd arrest him and stuff him head first into Guang Xie's jail.

Mowqua said something in Chinese to Howqua, so rapidly and softly that Dent could barely make it out.

"This is what you put your trust in? You are a fool."

It's who you know, Lance, whispered Tom again. And who likes you. Somehow, I don't think those two like you anymore.

Before Dent could force an answer from his dry throat, a hard step fell outside the door, and the door swung open.

"Knock, damn you...!" shouted Dent as he swung around

And found himself face-to-face with the deputy superintendent, Emile Johnston, and Mr. Morrison right behind him.

“Mr. Dent,” said Johnston, but his attention was all on Howqua and Mowqua. “Mr. Morrison told me there was some kind of ruckus out here.”

Damn. Johnston was Elliot’s second-in-command, and with Elliot in Macao, Johnston was in charge of the British factory. Dent had always found him a slow, dull, man, but he was still capable of making a lot of trouble.

“Yes, well,” Dent spread his hands. “It seems our Commissioner Lin has decided to make a bit of a show. Nothing to worry about, really.”

But Morrison slipped past Johnston to bow to the traders, and all three of them began talking, so quickly that Dent couldn’t catch more than one word in three.

Damn.

He threw an arm around Johnston’s skinny shoulders and steered him into a corner of the office. “Look, Johnston, I know you’re a level-headed man.” Dent tried to force some measure of confidence into his voice. “Things are all very bad at the moment. Lin’s making a hue and cry, and it’s got people on edge. It’s up to us to keep cool heads, and do what’s best for everybody’s business, right?”

Behind him, Mowqua was saying something to Morrison. But Dent couldn’t turn enough of his attention to them to understand. He had to keep Johnston focused on him.

“Elliot’s relying on you to keep things calm and moving smoothly while he’s gone. We all need your leadership now.”

“The trials will begin as soon as Lin has the names of the men in the water-forces,” Mowqua was saying.

Thank God, Johnston had never bothered to learn the local language. The deputy relied on pidgin to communicate with the Chinese. Pidgin and Morrison.

Johnston liked the easy route. He always preferred it if someone else could do the heavy lifting. This was something Dent could work with.

“We’re old China hands, you and me, Johnston. We both know how the Emperor works. He puts men in, he takes them out again. Nothing changes. No one wants it to. The Cohong are doing very well and are pleased to have things continue. They’ve already told me not to worry, no matter what gets said next. They will find a way to work around Mr. Lin. We just need to give them a little time.”

But Johnston was not quite ready to be reassured. “Have you had a chance to read this edict yet, Mr. Dent? They’re going to search the ships! If they find any

opium at all, that ship's banned from Chinese waters for good!"

"And I'll get the board to gin up a sternly worded response at the meeting. And we'll hand that right over to Howqua to take to Lin. But we might have to put up a bit of a show of our own. Maybe hand over a few hundred chests so Mr. Lin has something to write home about."

"Have you heard about Lin's black list, Mr. Dent? Your name's on it. Right at the top."

"Yes, I know." Dent made himself smile. "And if I'm not worried, why should you be? Obviously, nobody's going to let a bunch of foreigners threaten British lives and property, are they?"

Are they?

"Listen, Johnston, you understand it's important we avoid panic. Let me get the Board of Trade settled. As soon as our response is on its way to Lin, you can write to Captain Elliot in Macao and fill him in on the whole picture."

Including how neatly you handled the whole thing. Come on, Johnston. I know you're angling for Elliot's job. Here's a chance to prove you can handle yourself without him. Might even get your name mentioned in the dispatches.

Johnston's eyes strayed back to Morrison and the traders. His gaze traced the links of the chain trailing down Howqua's chest to his hands, to the floor.

Dent held his breath.

"You're right," said Johnston. "We mustn't panic. Must we?"

"No, indeed." Dent smiled. "So glad we can see eye to eye on this, Mr. Johnston."

IV.

Charles King stood in the shadow of Hsien Di's lopsided stall and watched the little parade that emerged from the Consou House. Deputy Superintendent Johnston came first, followed by Mr. Morrison. If he had to make his guess, King would have said that Johnston's double-time march was a deliberate effort to keep from having to actually speak with the translator.

Or perhaps Mr. Johnston was just trying to avoid the cadre of police stationed outside the Consou House.

King waited, and waited a little longer.

Ah, there you are. Mr. Dent strode out. He lifted his hat to Commandant

Guang Xie, who gazed back, stone-faced. Dent all but ran inside the gates.

Well, goodness, gracious me. Is it possible you're actually worried this time, Mr. Dent?

King pushed himself away from the stall and strolled back through the gates. The guard on the gates had been doubled while he'd kept his little watch. There were usually four men. Now there were eight. And he didn't recognize one of them.

Goodness, gracious me.

King took his time walking down Hog Lane. He made sure he was well back from the British factory's door, so he had a good view of when it opened, and Deputy Johnston emerged in the middle of a small group of traders. Not one of them looked back to see as King slid through the door and into the superintendent's front office.

Mr. Morrison sat at his secretarial desk beneath a portrait of the old king, staring at nothing at all.

"Mr. Morrison," said King. Morrison jumped.

"Mr. King." The translator scrabbled at his desk, his fingers looking for something, but finding nothing.

"Busy day," said King. "I hear Mr. Dent has managed to delay the posts."

Dent doesn't want Elliot to know how bad things have gotten. Doesn't want him to see it's out of control this time. Doesn't want anything to interfere with trade.

But you and I, Mr. Morrison, both know that Dent's trade is corrupting and killing a whole nation.

"That's not really my business." Morrison spoke the words through clenched teeth.

"Nor mine, I suppose." King took a step into the office. "And yet, there is a great deal happening."

A whole set of papers lay scattered on Morrison's desk, including the copy of the Commissioner's edict. King could see the red seal clearly.

"I can't help thinking that if he was given the choice, Captain Elliot would want to know about it all as soon as possible."

"Probably." Morrison saw where King's gaze had landed. The secretary very deliberately set a ledger book on top of the paper.

King took another gentle step closer, approaching Morrison like he might approach a skittish horse. Morrison lived here. China was his home, but China neither liked nor trusted him because he was too English. And the English neither

liked nor trusted him because he was too Chinese.

So here the man was, uncomfortably straddling two worlds. He knew all about what opium did, and yet he made his living from the men who poured it into the country.

"It's mighty inconvenient Elliot's not here just now," King remarked. "Just when there's so much being decided by Mr. Dent and his cronies. Pity nobody's going to write to Macao and warn him."

Morrison gave up his fruitless shuffling of papers and pens. "Mr. King, what do you want?"

King shrugged. "I don't want anything. Except to let you know, that Mr. Johnston needs to talk to you." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"About what?"

"I didn't ask."

They stayed like that for a minute; King halfway across the office, Morrison at his desk, with all the papers spread out in front of him. King would have given his right hand to know what was going on inside Morrison's head just then, which loyalties tugged against each other, which hopes, which fears.

"Mr. Johnston told me not to send the edicts, or the news to Captain Elliot," said Morrison. "He said my job depended on helping him keep things calm."

"And that's just plain sense," agreed King. "Not that I was even talking about it. What goes on in this office ain't no nevermind to me. Heck, I'm not even English. I'm just a little ol' Yankee errand boy. And I'm here to tell you, Johnston's in the square and wants to talk to you."

The silence stretched out between them. Finally, Mr. Morrison made his decision.

"Then I'd better go see what he wants." He stood, folding his hands into his tunic sleeves. "Thank you, Mr. King."

"Thank you, Mr. Morrison." Mr. King bowed as Morrison walked past him, and did not look back.

But he did close the door.

That was why no one passing in the hall saw King cross quickly to the desk, move the ledger, and fold a specific pile of papers with a huge red seal on them into a single packet, easily tucked into a gentleman's coat pocket before he left the empty office and walked away.

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



CHAPTER EIGHT

The Demands of Trade

I.

March 21, 1839

Macao

“Captain Elliot! Pleased to make your acquaintance, sir!”

Lord Ramsey conformed exactly with Elliot’s worst ideas of his type. Red-faced and portly, he heaved himself out of his chair to make his bow and plopped down again at once. Sweat gleamed on his speckled brow, even though he’d unbuttoned both coat and waistcoat. For all that, his little eyes glittered sharply as Elliot took his own seat.

We must be careful, my dear, Clara’s voice whispered from the back of his mind. *We may not like them, but we cannot anger them. Not while we still depend on them for our family’s living.*

She’d said that to him when he’d found out that his rate of pay as Superintendent of Trade in Canton would be half his predecessor’s. He’d been set to curse them all and throw the appointment back in their faces.

Now he clung hard to the memory of Clara’s admonishment, along with the strength of his own plan.

“Cup of tea?” Lord Ramsey asked. “Or something stronger?”

“Tea would be most welcome, thank you.”

Ramsey rang his bell, gave his orders and settled back in his chair, his hands folded across his paunch. His house was large and airy, being built in the Spanish style like many of the European-occupied homes in Macao. But Ramsey’d filled the place with English furnishings and carpets. The result was fussy, and stuffy, even though the French doors were open to the garden and the sea breeze.

“I’ve always read your dispatches with great interest, you know.” Ramsey shifted his enormous backside in an attempt to get more comfortable. “We can rely on Elliot, I’ve told the board. He’s a man of understanding. Said that once, said it a hundred times. Elliot’s not like that idiot Robinson, or poor Napier. Good man, Lord Napier, of course. Best of men. But not exactly...large minded if you see what I mean.”

Elliot bowed.

The dark-coated Chinese houseboy brought the tea tray. Of course Lord Ramsey took his tea like an Englishman with a handled cup and a saucer. And like a good Englishman, his lordship preferred the cured stuff to the green, and took it strong. Elliot, who’d grown used to the gentler mainland brew, made himself drink the harsh beverage and smile.

Ramsey slurped his tea, and smacked his lips in satisfaction. “Now. I heard this new man in Canton’s really kicking up the dust.”

Wait for your opening, Elliot.

“I’m afraid so, Sir.” Elliot set the cup down. “And the situation has become slightly delicate. As you know, the court at Peking is...” *Carefully, Elliot, carefully.* “...in one of its periodic moods about the opium trade.”

“Moods? Ha! Very good! Excellent description! May steal it from you! What’s in the wind, then? Probably means to stop trade, I shouldn’t wonder. Well, I’ll talk to the governor here, and get word to Calcutta. Make sure everybody knows what’s coming. It’ll be a nuisance, of course, but it’s nothing we haven’t dealt with before.”

Ah. Now.

“Sir,” said Elliot. “What if I told you I know how to make sure trade not only continues uninterrupted, but expands? I’m talking about new opportunities, new ports, a whole new landscape of trade. Nothing less than a historic shift.”

“Well, you’ve certainly got my attention, Elliot. How do you propose to work this miracle?”

“Stop the opium trade.”

Ramsey blinked. “Eh?”

“Stop the opium trade,” Elliot repeated eagerly. “Cut it right off at the source. The Company may have lost its monopoly on the China trade, but the opium comes in from India, and the Company controls the provinces where most of the production happens. The Company can stop the traffic at any time.”

Lord Ramsey shook his head in good-natured dismay. “Not quite that simple, I’m afraid.”

Elliot leaned forward. “But it is just that simple. We make China out to be a great deal more complicated than she is. She wants one thing.” Elliot paused for effect, and to make sure he had Ramsey’s full attention. Ramsey gestured for him to continue.

“China,” said Elliot, “wants stability. That’s all. We see the Chinese as a great solid block. They’re not. They’re a conquered nation, and those on top live in fear of an uprising of those on the bottom. Of *instability*.” Ramsey said nothing, so Elliot plunged on. “The Emperor has come to see opium as increasing the amount of instability he has to manage, and us as the agents of instability. *That’s* what makes us the enemy. It’s not the fact that we’ve got white skin and round eyes, or are Christians, or any other damn thing the righteous and the ignorant prattle about. If we stop the opium, and point out those who are continuing the trade — the Americans, for instance, and the Portuguese and the Dutch — we separate ourselves from the rest. We go from increasing instability to helping ensure complete stability. We become trusted. Reliable. Other trade gets stopped, but not the Company’s. *We* may come and go as we please.”

Ramsey slurped his tea.

Come on. You can see it. I know you can, you fat, old...

“You know what Palmerston and his friends will say,” Ramsey gestured toward the open doors. “He’ll say that trying to stop the opium trade is tantamount to *kowtowing* to the Chinese emperor.”

Because Palmerston’s another aristocratic fool desperate for the dividends his Company shares bring in.

“It’ll be a year before Palmerston even finds out what’s happening,” said Elliot. “By then, the new agreements will be in place.”

“What agreements in particular?”

“New ports for the British. An increase in tea exports.” Elliot picked up his cup as if he meant to toast his lordship with tea. “Pretty much anything we want.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because Commissioner Lin’s been given free rein to do whatever it takes to stop the opium trade. His whole future hangs on getting this done.” Probably. Given the way things tended to work. Elliot knew he was hanging his argument on a slender thread, and saying more than he strictly knew to be the truth. But it didn’t

matter. What mattered was getting Ramsey to believe him. “Now, I’ve had word that Lin is coming to Macao in a couple of days. If I can get to him with a letter saying that you as the Company representative are willing to negotiate a halt to the opium trade, he will agree to just about anything we ask. And!” Elliot plunged on before Ramsey could interrupt. “Palmerston will finally have what he’s always wanted. A representative of the British government will meet with a man who has the Emperor’s ear.”

Come on, come on. There’s no way to lose here. Doing things the same old way hasn’t worked. This can work. If you’ll just listen.

“New ports are only good if we can sell as well as buy,” said Ramsey. “The Chinese say they’ve no need for our — whatdidtheycall’em — ‘curious goods.’”

Elliot waved this away. “The Emperor and his representatives said that. Not the people themselves. Once our traders reach the interior and start setting up shop, I guarantee you, the common man will buy all the goods British manufacturing can turn out.”

Lord Ramsey beckoned the houseboy who’d been standing by the fireplace. The boy came to refill his lordships cup from the silver teapot. Ramsey slurped, and studied the depths of the cup.

“My aunt claims she can tell the future from the dregs of a cup of tea,” he said. “Says an old gypsy woman taught her, or some such rubbish.”

“Sir...”

“Makes a great game of it at parties. Sets the ladies all in a fine twitter I can tell you. Can’t count the number of times one of ‘em’s believed her and gone off and done something absolutely dim-witted.” He swirled his cup. “But it makes one think, doesn’t it? How the future can be set by the smallest of events. The fall of two leaves, the discovery of the use of two weedy flowers — the tea bush and the poppy.” He raised his cup. “The words of two men in private.”

Elliot’s breath caught in his throat. *I’ve got you.*

“It’s got merit, this idea of yours. Even, dare I say it, a certain elegance.”

Come on, you old fool. Come on. Think about the shareholders. The revenues for the government. The new ports, a whole new country of people waiting to buy and sell, all with the great and glorious British East India Company. They’ll be singing your praises in Parliament.

“You’ve thought it through, and no one is going to argue but that you’ve demonstrated a unique understanding of Johnny Chinaman and his little ways.”

Got you. Got you. Got you.

Lord Ramsey drained the cup, turned it over on the saucer, picked the whole thing up and shook. "This is how my aunt does it."

Elliot had never worked so hard to keep himself from moving.

Lord Ramsey lifted the cup and looked at the formation of leaves on the porcelain saucer. He chuckled and shook his head. "No idea. Perhaps she should turn novelist. Perhaps I should." He set cup and saucer aside.

"Well, Elliot. I have to say. I like your scheme. I like it a great deal."

Got you!

"But it won't work."

A roar of disbelief rose up in Elliot's throat like bile. He swallowed it in one hard, painful lump.

"Forgive me sir, but it will. All we need to do..."

Lord Ramsey raised his hand. "As far as it goes, it's an excellent scheme. If we'd tried it fifteen years ago, even ten, or I dare say even five, it would have worked a treat.

"But since the Company lost its monopoly, everybody and his uncle's had a chance to see that opium is the one reliable way to get goods, and silver, out of China. So we have the Portuguese, and the Dutch, and the Americans plying the waters, and every last one of them has a stake in Indian poppy and Indian opium."

"But I've accounted for that! All we have to do is turn them in. We garner favor with the Chinese *and* we reduce competition..."

"Yes, yes." Ramsey waved his words away. "And as I say, if we'd tried it earlier, it might have worked. But after all that competition, and years of low prices, the Company's in some serious trouble, isn't it? India's proving devilishly expensive to keep pacified. While the Company could keep a hand on the tiller to keep prices up, it was all fine, but now, well, it's not."

"But in time...!"

"Nobody's interested in time, Elliot. They're interested in right now. And right now the Company can't figure out how it's going to pay the bills for the soldiers who are keeping India in line. So, our clever gents came up with a solution of their own."

"I don't...I don't understand."

"Oh, I expect you do, Elliot. You're a smart man. You just haven't had a chance to think this part of it through. Look. Where in India are most of the opium

poppies grown?”

“Malwa,” answered Elliot at once.

“Correct.” Lord Ramsey beamed like a proud headmaster. “And where are most of those opium poppies processed and packaged?”

“Calcutta,” said Elliot. “But...”

“And who controls the roads between Malwa and Calcutta?”

“The Company.”

And with that, all the jagged pieces dropped into place.

“My God,” whispered Elliot. “This disaster is about *road tolls*?”

Now the look Ramsey turned on him was positively pitying.

“Elliot, you’ve knocked about enough to know that no matter what you’re looking at, there’s always something else in back of it.” Ramsey sighed. “We thought that Indian cotton would keep the Company afloat, but those damned Americans with their slave plantations and their clipper ships can get their cotton from New Orleans to Manchester cheaper than we can get ours in from Calcutta. So, that was no help. But tolls! Now, there’s a reliable source of income.” Ramsey tapped the side of his red nose. “Move twenty thousand chests a year, valued at about six million pounds, comes out to something like a million pounds per annum in usage fees that we get from the Americans, and again from the Dutch, and again from the Portuguese. That’s not to mention that the value of the opium the Company shifted itself is something like sixteen million pounds. Per year, mark you, per *year*.” Lord Ramsey grinned. “That’s a lot of guns for India, and a lot of revenue for Whitehall, and a bit leftover for the rest of us.

“So you see, Elliot, I’d like your scheme to work, but it can’t. The Company’s not abandoning opium. Not for all the tea in China.”

II.

“Charles. These arrived while you were gone.” Clara held out a bundle of papers tied in string.

Elliot stood in the doorway of his front parlor and stared at his wife.

We’re leaving.

That’s what he’d meant to say to her. He’d dismissed the carriage from Lord Ramsey’s door, and walked the whole long way down the hill. He didn’t remember anything about the route he took. All he remembered was the red haze of anger.

I will not prop up these men any more. Pack the children's things. I will write out my resignation letter and visit the bank.

But now that he faced her, he couldn't move any further. He couldn't speak the words he'd intended. Because what he'd really be telling her was that he'd failed. Again. This had been his last chance, and he'd failed her, and their children. And himself.

But here now she stood here with yet more business for him to do. It never stopped. It never would.

We're leaving.

Confusion creased her clear brow. Clara came forward with the packet in both hands. Elliot received it with numb hands. His eyes — as dazed by his failure as the rest of him — made out the direction only slowly. Even more slowly, he realized something strange.

The direction wasn't in Mr. Johnston's writing as it should have been. Or even in Morrison's.

Clara covered his hands with hers. "Charles, will you tell me what's happened?"

Elliot did not answer. Instead, he moved to undo the string. Clara's hands fell down to her sides.

Apologize, he told himself. At least say something, damn it!

He unfolded the papers and scanned the first page.

The first thing he saw was Lin's name, and his full title, right at the top in Old Mr. Thom's tidy handwriting.

It was the edict. The one Elliot had known must come. The one that would indicate how serious the high commissioner really was. It was long and it was flowery, and he skimmed, looking for the pertinent phrases. Phrases like:

...Let our ports once be closed against you, and for what profits can your several nations any longer look?

"Damn," he breathed.

"What is it?" asked Clara.

"I don't...I'm sorry. I have to read these through..." he was already heading to his study.

...Such conduct rouses indignation in every human heart, and is utterly inexcusable in the eye of celestial reason...

He kicked the door shut behind him and shuffled the papers.

...I proceed to issue my commands...Let them deliver up to government every particle of the opium on board their store-ships...

Someone was knocking on the door. "Charles?"

Clara.

"Charles, tell me what's happened."

He did not answer her. He just kept reading.

...As to those crafty foreigners, who, residing in the foreign factories, have been in the habit of dealing in opium, I, the high commissioner, have early been provided with a list of them by name...

In the margins beside this, someone had scrawled: *Howqua and Mowqua in chains. Morrison says Lin has warrants ready. Guang Xie bringing in more men. Dent's head first for the block.*

Dear God.

It was happening. The exact thing he'd always feared. The Chinese were out of patience. Canton was being mustered against the foreign invader.

There were two hundred or more men in the factories right now, trapped between a wall and a mile-wide river.

They'll be sitting ducks.

"Charles!"

Have to get back. Elliot dropped the papers, crossed the study and threw open the door. Clara was standing right on the other side, her fist raised to knock again, her face flushed and frightened.

"What's wrong?" she demanded. "What's happening?"

"I have to get back. ...I have to write Palmerston, copy out this edict...damn, damn, damn!" He held up both hands. "It's nothing to fret yourself or the children over. Just...I just have to get back."

"Is it another execution?"

Elliot stopped. "You know...?"

"Of course I know!" Clara threw up her hands, appealing to heaven in the face of her husband's blindness. "I read about it, and the riot, in the *Quarterly Review*. I had hoped you would tell me about it yourself."

"I meant to keep you and keep the children from worrying."

Clara strode across the threshold and Charles fell back. She shut the study door and locked it. When she turned again, she spoke low and sharp.

"I am a daughter of islands, Charles. You will not soil some imagined

innocence in me by telling me danger lies off my shore. Neither do you protect me, or our children with silence!"

He looked at her and saw her as she was, not as the ballroom lady or modest matron. She was his Clara, the strong, straightforward, beautiful woman he married.

He loved her for herself.

But he wanted her to be all those other things, and he could not stop trying to make her that way. Just as surely as she could not stop being who she was.

What the hell have I done to us?

He swallowed. "Lin's going to try to arrest Dent, and probably some others. I have to get back before anybody tries anything drastic."

Her jaw trembled, and somehow that was more devastating than any burst of temper could have been. "Don't do this, Charles. If the Chinese force their way into the factories..."

"I'm sure that's not going to happen," he said, even though that was the fear at the front of his mind. "It's only Dent and his lot I'm worried about."

She stared at him, knowing how badly he had just lied and letting him see how badly that hurt her.

"I'm sorry, Clara."

She did not forgive him. Her silence told him that. Maybe she never would. He could not let that matter.

"There are hundreds of men in the factories," he reminded her. "I can't abandon them. This isn't about trade or the Company." *Or my pride.* "No one else can give the orders to evacuate, if it does come to that, or bring in the navy. This is my command."

Down by her waist, Clara's fingers brushed restlessly against her skirts, working at nothing. He used to think it was a random, nervous motion, but across the years he'd come to realize what she was doing.

She was telling her rosary.

"Of course," she said. Because along with all the other things Clara might be, she was an officer's wife. "But if this is what it's come to...Charles, we have to send the children back to England."

"What?"

Her eyes were closed off. Her face hard. "If you go back to Canton, the children go to England. I want them away from whatever is about to be unleashed."

"Clara..."

“Do not try to tell me it will be all right, Charles. Do not treat me as a fool. You do not know what will happen next and neither do I, and that is why they must go.”

“Very well. I must get a dispatch about this on the next packet ship back to England. Can you make the children’s arrangements?”

“I will begin at once.”

He kissed her cheek and felt it was cold. He stepped away and saw her standing there, her hand pressed against the swell of her belly. She was with child. He was sure. She had not told him. She did not tell him now. She would not wield the one weapon that might have kept him from leaving her. She just stared over his shoulder, out the window, toward the ocean, and the mainland and whatever waited there. She looked like a statue of marble and onyx and in that moment, Elliot did not know her at all.

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



CHAPTER NINE

An Offer

I.

March 22, 1839

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.

#

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.”

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



CHAPTER TEN

At the Gates

I.

March 22, 1839

The Foreigners' Factories

Canton, Guangdong Province

China

"Something's wrong," whispered Elliot. "Where are the boats?"

Elliot stood at the rail of the *Louisa* with the boatswain, Mr. Henderson.

Overhead, the ropes creaked as the sails strained to allow the ship to make headway against the Pearl River's current.

Elliot had gone to Macao thinking he would finally sever the Gordian knot of the opium trade in China. He'd had an answer, one that would please the Imperial commissioner, Lin Zexu, and the British lords of the East India Company.

But he'd failed. Ramsey was intractable. The Company needed the opium money, and that was that. His smile and his shrug at Chinese law were more intractable than any fury could have been.

So, here they were now, beating up channel, on their way back to Canton and the factories. Elliot normally passed this voyage below decks trying to read some of the endless paperwork that his office accumulated. This time, though, he'd been too restless for anything but pacing the foredecks, smoking cigarettes and watching the water.

Watching for gun boats. Watching for smoke rising from the shore. Watching for any sign that the high commissioner had carried out his threats to try to arrest the English traders who continued to defy Chinese law and pour opium into the country.

But now that Canton's low hills spread out before them, all Elliot saw was...absence.

The docks should have been invisible behind a black mass of junks, sampans, oar boats, dows, row boats — anything and everything small enough to maneuver up to the shore. Instead, he had a clear view of the waterline, and the docks, and the white and blue factory buildings beyond.

He'd never seen the docks empty. Not once.

"Bring me a glass," he ordered Henderson. At the same time, he shaded his eyes with his hands and squinted at the approaching shore. The flags all flew on their poles. He couldn't make out any rising smoke. No quick flashes from gunfire. Henderson brought the spyglass and Elliot put it at once to his eye.

The square and promenade in front of the factories was as empty as the docks.

This is bad.

And he was not the only one who thought so.

"Should I order the mate to turn her about, sir?" asked Henderson.

"Turn tail and run?" Elliot snapped. "Tell the mate to bring us straight in, Mr. Henderson."

To his credit, Henderson's salute was crisp and unhesitating. "Aye, sir."

"And, Henderson? Tell him to ready the guns."

II.

But the *Louisa* met no resistance as she anchored, and none as her boat put into the dock. The shore and the square remained eerily quiet. Elliot felt his guts tightening the whole way. Ridiculous thoughts flickered through his head.

What if they're already dead? What if Lin's men have already taken them all? What if there are soldiers just inside, waiting for us to land?

Elliot glanced again at the rifles resting under the gunwales, loaded and ready. He remembered the last time he'd been with a man who tried to take the Chinese on headfirst. He remembered the fist in his gut. The boot on his back.

He remembered the opening salvo of this latest episode; the neat square of soldiers, the silken cord, the spasms of the dying man. The shouts and the riot and the terrible uncertainty as to what would happen next.

At last, he saw a uniformed man run from the factory and down the dock. Elliot slapped the glass back against his eye.

It was Johnston.

Emile Johnston, his deputy, whole and unhurt. Elliot shifted the glass to take in the veranda, and the factory windows. He saw men at the rail, and men behind the windows.

Safe.

Johnston waved his cap at them, without breaking stride. Elliot lifted his hand in answer. His bowels loosened, and for a minute he thought he was going to embarrass himself. And he didn't care.

Lin hadn't moved yet. He was in time.

The oarsman maneuvered them up to the dock. The mate tossed Johnston the line so he could help them make fast.

"What's happened?" Elliot jumped over the gunwale. "Where're the boats...?"

"Still trying to find out, sir," said Johnston. "The whole place has been cleared of Chinese. Servants, porters, the shopkeepers. Everybody. It's because of this new edict from Commissioner Lin. I've got it on your desk..."

"Yes, yes, I've seen it."

"You've seen it?" Johnston repeated.

Elliot drew himself up. "Yes, Mr. Johnston. Somebody sent it to me while I was at Macao. I take it that somebody wasn't you."

From the look on Johnston's face, he was belatedly realizing this little oversight might have been a mistake. "I wanted to make sure we had a good grip on the situation before..."

"A grip!" Elliot bellowed. "You goddamned incompetent! You should have called me back at once! Have you even got a man watching the gates? Any lookout at all!"

"I...sir...that is...Mr. Dent thought..."

Which was the last bloody straw.

"IS MR. DENT IN CHARGE HERE OR ARE YOU?" Elliot didn't wait for his answer. "You're bloody useless, Johnston! Get out of my sight! Get up to the gates and find out what the hell's happening, *if* you can handle that much!"

"Yes, sir!" Johnston turned on his heel and ran.

Finally doing something right. Elliot set his jaw and strode across the square to his office. Men were streaming out of the building now, all of them shouting questions.

"I don't know!" he shouted back, even though he hadn't understood a single

one of them. "I don't know, damn it!"

He stormed into the office. "Get me Morrison!" he shouted as he passed... someone. He did not know who. He did not care. What mattered was that shortly after he had gotten into his office and thrown his cap onto the desk, Mr. Morrison appeared in the doorway and bowed.

"Shut the door and tell me what the hell's been going on."

Morrison obeyed both commands. Elliot listened while the translator told him about how Lancelot Dent had been Johnny-on-the-spot to take the delivery of Lin's edicts as they came in. How Dent had asked specifically for Old Mr. Thom to be his translator, and heard them read out, alone, in the Consou house.

How Howqua and Mowqua had been paraded through the street in chains.

How the Board of Trade had met in near hysteria, and how Dent had spent the entire time telling them it meant nothing. Nothing at all. A little show on the part of the latest mandarin bigwig.

The Board of Trade had written a letter all on their own and sent it to Mr. Lin.

"I don't suppose you've got a copy of this letter, have you Mr. Morrison?" asked Elliot through clenched teeth.

"I can get you one, sir."

"Do that."

But before he could move, a single knock sounded on the door, and Johnston walked in. Morrison fell back into the corner.

"Well?" Elliot barked to his deputy. But he already knew. He could see it in how pale Johnston had turned, and the way his hand shook as he took off his cap.

"Sir. They've done it. They've closed the gates."

Closed the gates. The words echoed around Elliot's skull. Closed the gates.

Closed the gates, trapped us here. Two hundred sitting ducks, and only the Louisa within hail.

Of course he'd sent word to the *Lady Charlotte* when he'd left Macao, asking for her master to bring her in, just in case. Lin's edict had been beyond anything he'd yet seen from an Imperial official, and they needed to be ready. No matter what Lord Ramsey, or Mr. Dent might try to say.

But *Lady Charlotte* was not here yet. Elliot didn't even know for sure she was on the way. Lord Ramsey could have countermanded him.

"You helped bring us to this, you blasted idiot!" he bellowed at Johnston. "You listened to that goddamned merchant instead of carrying out your sworn duty!"

“Sir, I thought...”

“You thought!” It was laughable. One hundred thousand Chinese held back by a wall that might as well have been made of tissue paper. And, oh, yes, *they* held the keys to the gates. “You thought, Mr. Johnston or Mr. Dent thought? Hmmm? You don’t answer me, Mr. Johnston. Cat got that idiot tongue of yours?”

“You’ll want to start an evacuation,” said Johnston stiffly. “I’ll draft an order...”

“The hell you will,” said Elliot. “Despite Mr. Dent’s best efforts, I’ve already seen the high commissioner’s edict. Lin wants Mr. Dent? Very well. Lin can have him.”

Johnston went dead white. Johnston stared.

“Sir,” he said, and that one word had more force and energy than any he’d spoken yet. “You can’t mean that.”

“And why the hell not! I am not going to risk two hundred lives not to mention my own neck for Lancelot Dent!”

“Sir, please. I know I was wrong. I accept your reprimand. Cashier me if you want. But you have to listen to me now. You cannot give a British citizen up to the Chinese! You’ll be branded a traitor!”

Elliot felt his face flush. Johnston held his hands up.

“Yes, I know. I know! Whitehall’s a world away, but the Company isn’t. The Company’s on our doorstep in Macao. If Lord Ramsey hears that you’ve just up and handed an Englishman over, that the Chinese arrested, jailed and *killed* an Englishman, what’s he going to do?”

Send the war ships in. The navy wasn’t a world away either. The navy was a day away. And getting closer all the time. Elliot’s racing, furious thoughts slammed to a halt.

Never mind what Lord Ramsey would do. What would the captain of the *Lady Charlotte* do when he arrived and heard that Elliot had permitted an Englishman to be taken?

“Your sworn duty is to protect British life and property,” said Johnston urgently. “You *cannot* do this.”

His ears were ringing. His throat was raw. He could hear them coming, all those Chinese soldiers. Massing outside the wall. All because of Lancelot Dent.

All because of the opium.

The opium the Company was too stupid to give up, even though every man in

the factories could be slaughtered the minute Lin gave the order. And Lin would give the order if he felt like that was what it would take to placate the Emperor.

Well.

A cold and terrible calm settled over Elliot's mind.

Lin's sworn duty was to carry out the orders of his Emperor. Elliot's sworn duty was to protect British lives, and property.

Lin would do his duty, that much was clear. So, Elliot had better bloody well do his.

Elliot made himself let out a long breath. He folded his hands behind his back so Johnston couldn't see how tightly he clenched his fists. He even managed a smile.

"You're right, Mr. Johnston. I don't know what came over me." He laughed. "Just another boycott, isn't it? We've been through it all before."

"Yes, sir." Johnston looked like he was about to faint with relief, or maybe just piss himself. Elliot felt a perverse sympathy.

"Still, that was a good idea you had. We should draft an evacuation order. Probably we won't need anything so drastic, but best to have it ready, just in case."

"Yes, sir. I'll get right on that."

"Thank you, Mr. Johnston. And just close the door on your way out, will you?"

Johnston's retreat was a hasty one. The door slammed behind him. He'd probably forgotten that Morrison was still in the office, standing quietly in a corner, not saying a single word to call attention to himself.

Smart man, Morrison.

"Mr. Morrison," said Elliot. Morrison bowed, not in the English style, but in the Chinese, hands folded just so, back straight as an iron rod. "I believe I am in need of your help."

III.

March 24, 1839

The Foreigners' Factories

Canton, Guangdong Province

China

That last thing Lancelot Dent expected to get out of Mr. Lin's dramatic little

quarantine was a night of fun.

But here he was scrambling over the rooftops under the light of a full moon, just like when he was a boy back home with his brother Tom. He felt like any minute now, Father would lean out the window and holler at them to come down before they broke their fool necks!

Out by the gates, the soldiers were starting up their noise again. This had become part of the drama. As soon as the sun went down, they set about an hourly beating gongs and blowing of conchs. Apparently, the idea was that if they disturbed the foreigners' sleep, it would increase their desperation, and thus their willingness to hand over their own to Lin's gentle ministrations.

But what that noise actually accomplished was to let Dent know that the soldiers were all busy by the gate, and that for the next fifteen minutes or so, this portion of the wall was unguarded.

The boats might be gone, but the factories still had a series of escape routes, if a man knew where to look. For instance, the gap between the Dutch factory roof and the wall wasn't more than a yard. And only another yard separated the wall from the roof of the Consou House.

All easy enough for a tall fellow still in his prime and perfectly used to ship ladders and country houses.

And Dent had an appointment. In fact, he had an invitation. He'd found it tucked underneath his door just this morning. A tiny scrap of paper. He'd almost missed it.

Consou House. Midnight, it read, along with two Chinese characters that served as a signature.

Howqua.

Dent smiled as he slid down the roof. His boot-heels caught the gutter, stopping his fall.

He listened. No noise in the alley, just the endless banging and honking away by the gates. Nobody up and about that he could see. Which was a bit of a surprise. Elliot had spent the whole of last night prowling the grounds.

Probably he thought he was being a diligent officer. Actually, Elliot was turning from a minor irritant to a full-fledged impediment. One would think a man used to command would spend his energy keeping people's spirits up and making sure they all stayed calm and collected. A united front, that was what was called for, until this whole thing blew over.

But Elliot? Call for calm? Oh, no. That old woman was spending all his time in a mad scramble designed to panic everybody. He seemed convinced that the Chinese were going to swoop down and murder all the foreigners in their beds. He was spending every waking minute writing letters, answering edicts, and making plans to evacuate the factories as soon as possible. Evacuate!

Idiot.

Dent gathered his knees under him. He measured the distance between the roof and the wall, and he jumped. He hit the wall hard. The edge dug into his ribs, forcing out all the air. Dent clutched the edge, and waited.

Nothing. Overhead, the clouds shifted. Lovely full moon tonight. Plenty of light. He gauged his distance again, and jumped, and landed, not quite cat-footed on the Consoo House roof.

Of course he was scrambling into a trap.

It could not have been more bloody obvious if they'd tried. A mysterious note purporting to be from Howqua? He and the rest of the world knew Howqua had been removed, in his chains, to house arrest as soon as the gates had shut. And setting the meeting at midnight, *outside* the factory wall? What else could this be but an attempt to draw Dent out to where he could be arrested. He'd have to be a bigger fool than Elliot not to see that.

Of course, he was acting a little bit like a fool. A truly smart man would have stayed in bed.

The problem was, this whole ridiculous ploy left him with a nagging question. Exactly who was behind this?

If it really was Howqua trying to lure him out, that was bad enough. But what if someone inside the factories was behind this farce? Say Mr. Morrison whose loyalty was more than a little murky? Or perhaps it was Charles King trying to curry favor with the Chinese? After all, Lin's edict promised favor and riches to any foreign trader who handed his fellows to the Chinese.

Or what if it was Elliot himself? King he could handle. Morrison he could ignore. Elliot, now. Elliot could make real trouble.

He had to find out, and there was nobody he could trust to do the job for him. But that didn't mean he had to walk in whistling. The pistol in his coat pocket thumped reassuringly against his chest as he slid and scrambled along the roof to the rear of the Consoo House.

He'd already kept whoever was here waiting for a good long hour. They had

to be getting impatient. Pretty soon, their fellow conspirators would come along, demanding to know what the hell was going on. Either that, or they'd up and leave.

All Dent had to do was hunker down in the shades, watch the show and count the noses.

Dent hooked his fingers around the edge of the roof tiles and let himself dangle. His shoulders protested. God, this was harder than it used to be.

He let himself drop. An exhilarating heartbeat later, he hit the street's hard-packed dirt. Pain shot up through his ankles and knees, but he kept his balance and held his breath. Out by the gates, the conchs sounded, the gongs rattled. Dent straightened, and checked his pistol.

"Nice night for a stroll," murmured a man behind him.

Dent turned, and there was Charles King. The puritanical trader also had a pistol. Only his was out, and pointed right at Dent's chest.

So. Dent felt himself smile. He also raised both hands. Because despite current evidence to the contrary, he really wasn't a fool.

"Thought it might be you, King. Plan to hand me in for Lin's reward, do you?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Dent. It ain't me that's gonna hand you in."

King stepped to one side. A man's shape moved forward from the shadows. Charles Elliot.

IV.

"Thank you, Mr. King. You're dismissed," said Elliot crisply. "I'll take it from here."

Unfortunately, King was not ready to leave. *No discipline*, thought Elliot irritably.

"Are you sure?" said King. "I could..."

"No, thank you," replied Elliot. "You get inside. Won't do to have the patrols catch you out here." Elliot held out his hand, but kept his eyes on Dent. Dent, because he was vile, but not stupid, stayed where he was, hands up, idiot grin in place.

King handed his pistol over to Elliot, raised his hat, and left them there, vanishing back up the alley, and into whatever bolt hole he'd found for himself.

"Inside, Mr. Dent." Elliot gestured toward the Consou House's side door.

"Gladly," Dent nudged the door with his toe and found it open. "Wouldn't do

for us both to get arrested now, would it.”

Elliot didn’t answer. He just followed Dent into the main hall. He’d left a lamp lit in there, but turned down low so the light wouldn’t attract anybody’s attention.

Dent walked over to the front bench, giving himself plenty of sea room.

Elliot kept the pistol trained on him. He also locked the door.

“Should I be saying my prayers, Captain?” Dent asked.

“All for your own protection, Mr. Dent.” Elliot tucked the key into his breast pocket. “Can’t have those heathen Chinese sneaking in and spiriting you off, can we? Must protect English lives and property!”

I’ll have one of you, Elliot thought, and the surge of satisfaction surprised him. This one. This man who moved heaven and earth to pour a river of poison into a country, and just because it was his poison and he made money from it.

This once, he’d have to listen to Elliot and do what he said.

“You’ll forgive me for saying, Elliot...”

Dent’s hand moved. Elliot didn’t shoot. He charged. He swung the pistol and clouted Dent along-side the head. Dent dropped to the floor and Elliot aimed a kick at Dent’s back. The man screamed, and Elliot kicked him again, this time in the ribs, hard enough to flip him onto his back. While Dent gasped, Elliot knelt down and grabbed the gun out of his breast pocket.

“Now,” Elliot, a pistol in each hand, backed away and sat on the nearest bench. “You can say whatever you want, Mr. Dent.” He tucked his pistol into his pocket and took Dent’s in both hands. “The whole reason I brought you here was so we could have a chat, just the two of us. Man to man.”

Elliot cracked Dent’s revolver open and started emptying out the bullets.

Dent got slowly to his knees. Blood dripped from his temple, and the corner of his mouth.

“Bite your tongue?” Elliot asked. “Painful. I know.”

Dent grinned. God help them both. Was there nothing that could wipe the grin off this man’s face? “You must have a very low opinion of me, Elliot to think I’d fall for this scheme.”

“But you did fall for it. Not because you’re a fool, though. But because you love a show. You always have to see what’s going on for yourself. That’s why I knew you’d come. And over the roofs. Obvious route. I tried it myself once, just in case it was needed.”

“What commendable foresight.” Dent tried, and failed to get to his feet. He tried again, and this time he managed it. He groped for the nearest bench and sat. He also winced. Elliot watched impassively. “So, what am I to expect now?”

“I told you. A private little chat. You see, I’ve got a choice to make, Mr. Dent, and I very much need your help making it.”

“Of course, superintendent.” Dent spat onto the floor. “All you had to do was ask.”

A thousand images flashed before Elliot’s mind.

Clara in the moonlight, declaring the children must leave. Clara’s restless fingers telling the beads she never wore openly.

The upside-down cup, the mass of leaves, cotton blossoms, poppy blossoms, tea leaves. Notes and coins showering down and disappearing into the ocean.

Letters — dozens of them, hundreds — passing back and forth like flocks of birds.

Dent laughing. Dent scheming. Dent seeing no further than his next pay day. Dent responsible for penning them all in this cage and refusing to acknowledge what he had done.

Clara.

His children, her children, sent away, back to England, a country that would turn away from them as it had turned away from him.

“I don’t...” began Dent.

“You do. Because you’ve already read the edicts while I was...called away to Macao.”

Dent’s mouth twitched. He took a deep breath and his whole face spasmed. “I don’t know what King told you.” He coughed. More blood flecked his chin.

“And I don’t care what you have to say about it now. I want to talk about my choice, Dent. It’s from Mr. Lin. He says if I want to save all the lives of the people in our factories, I can either hand him over all the opium currently aboard the English ships, or I can hand him you.

“Now, here’s where I need your help, Mr. Dent,” Elliot said. “I need you to decide. Which will it be?”

Dent’s bloody smile faltered. In his mind, Elliot saw a coin turning in the air, turning and tumbling. No destiny. No hand of God reaching down to save lives, the world, the whole long future, just chance, luck, and desperation, all spinning together.

For the first time, Elliot saw fear, real fear, leech into Dent's gaze.

"You wouldn't dare give me to Lin."

"Wouldn't I?" Elliot lifted his eyebrows. "It's just you and me here, Dent. Outside the wall. Exactly where you should not be when there's a whole host of police crawling through the streets looking for you quite specifically. I can blame the Chinese for *everything* and no one will blink an eye." Elliot smiled. "Well, there might be a little grumbling. Here and there. But if you're even still alive, you'll be in Lin's dungeon, and it'll just be too late, won't it?"

"You've lost your mind," breathed Dent.

"And what will the rest of the factories do when they learn you are the reason I was in Macao when this began? Hmm?" Elliot set the empty pistol on the bench beside him.

Finally, Dent's eternal grin dropped away. But it was too late.

"I could have stopped this," Elliot told him. "Entered into negotiations with the Cohong. But you conspired with a Chinaman, a *Chinaman*, Dent, just so you could see your way clear to undercutting the lot of them."

"It's a lie!" Dent shouted, and immediately doubled-over from the pain in his ribs.

"Yes, it's a lie, but it's one all your stout fellows on that farcical Board of Trade will believe. I could throw you into the street right this second," Elliot nodded toward the door. "And they'd take a vote of censure and paint your name off your door. And your partner would step in and take your profits and might remember to write a note of condolence to your widow. I am *all* you've got, Dent. I can hand Lin the opium, Mr. Dent, or I can hand him you. I leave the matter entirely in your hands. Tell me, sir. Which is it going to be?"

He would open China. If he could do it by handing over the opium, he'd do it that way. If he could do it by bringing in the entire fleet to shoot out the smuggling boats, or the pathetic Chinese forts, or Commissioner Lin himself, he'd do it that way. Either way. Any way.

But he wouldn't do it for Palmerston, or Queen and Country, and especially not for this man or any of the others trapped in here with them.

He'd do it for his children, out on the ocean, holding onto each other and not knowing who would be there to help them when the night got dark.

He'd do it for Clara.

He'd do it for the humiliations and the deaf ears turned toward one Captain

Charles Elliot. First and last. Forever and ever, amen.

To hell with clinging to honor for men who knew none. To hell with pride in front of those who demanded he crawl. To hell with right and wrong and all the rest of it. What mattered was this moment, now.

Elliot's heart thundered in his chest. This was it. This was what it felt like to be truly alive and know his own power. This was the feeling of being shot at and missed. Of being able to shout, I'm still here. I'm alive and I'm stronger than all of you.

You should be proud, Mr. Dent. The fate of nations in your hands. Everything depends on what you want to save. Why, it's just like in the magazines. Your money or your life, Mr. Dent? Which is it?

Elliot watched his man struggle, watched him look in every direction for escape. But there was no escape.

But let him try. Oh, please, let him try.

Dent wiped at the blood staining his mouth. He spat straight at Elliot's boots, but he winced again. Elliot didn't flinch.

"The opium," whispered Dent. "Take the opium."

EPILOGUE

July 25, 1839

The Cliffs Over Canton

China

High Commissioner Lin stood alone on the cliffs above the harbor. A small shrine had been set up at the cliff's edge, dedicated to the Goddess of the Sea. He'd lit the incense himself. The brisk wind carried its small thread of white smoke inland.

Down below, the great trenches were already filled with bags of opium confiscated from the foreigners. Commandant Guang Xie did well in his choice of men to guard the wagons and the warehouses. Now they worked with axes and shovels, breaking open the chests and tossing all the poison into a stew of lime and seawater. More of that corrosive brew would be poured over the top once the trenches were filled.

And this was just the beginning. Thousands of chests still waited in the

warehouse. Tens of thousands of pearls. Tens of thousands of lives.

The wind blew, carrying with it the tang of lime and the thick, sweet scent of rot.

Men waited in jail. Men waited in their houses for the warrants that had yet to be written. Away in the Forbidden City, the Emperor waited for his reports.

He will be pleased.

None of the foreign traders had been arrested, but that had turned out not to be necessary. They had all opened their holds to Guang Xie's careful men. Every ship in the harbor had been inspected. Every chest, every bag was in those rotting piles. Every foreign captain would now sign their bond and pledge that their ship carried not one pearl of opium.

Wu Bingjian had been right about one thing. In the end, the English Captain Elliot had proved a reasonable man and open to being persuaded toward correct behavior.

Reverently, because he knew he was being watched, Lin Zexu took an enamel case from his sleeve. It was wrapped in red silk and hung with a golden seal. Inside the case lay the petition to the Goddess of the Sea that he had written yesterday with his finest and most careful calligraphic hand. It most humbly implored her to move the fish and the other of her creatures out of the way, for he must soon wash the poison from the trenches down into her realm.

He explained the necessity of his action and begged her forgiveness. He prayed that what he did now was right.

Lin drew back his arm and threw the case as far as he could. The sunlight glinted on gold and silk as it spun and tumbled through the air like a dropped coin.

While one man stood above the ocean, another stood on his veranda, watching the smoke rise.

Lin's petition broke the foam for a heartbeat, and was gone.

Also in that case were two *weiqi* stones, one black and one white. At the bottom of the ocean they were once again in play, each of equal worth, each in their place to shape the game and the long, slow sweep of the future.

And now all that men and stones and gods could do was wait and see.

SUGGESTED READING

A great deal has been written about how tea came to the West, and about the First Opium War. People can and do spend a lifetime researching the subject. I'm listing just a few of the more readily available English sources here for those who are interested in reading more about this historical period.

I hope you enjoy.

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AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS



MEET THE AUTHOR: *Sarah Zettel*

A woman who wears many hats, and many names, Sarah Zettel has never met a genre she doesn't like. A bestselling and award-winning author, she's won critical acclaim for her mystery, young adult and historical fiction. Sarah also writes elegant, and bestselling, Regency-era mystery and romance under the name of Darcie Wilde. With her newest book, *The Other Sister* (available August 28), Sarah enters the realm of suspense, bringing with her a unique fairy tale flare.

A self-confessed stone-cold history geek, Sarah has always loved deep dives into the details that brought us to where we are now. So, she was delighted with the chance to explore the connection between tea and the

rise of empires for the 2018 Summer Reading Series: *An Exchange of Two Flowers*.

Sarah currently lives and writes in Ypsilanti, Michigan, where she keeps a husband, a son, and more old books and embroidery floss than any one person really ought to own. Her favorite tea is second-flush Darjeeling. Except when it's Irish Breakfast. Except when it's a nice herbal mint.



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