

仙一

xiān yī

a tale of the
house of 劉 (liú)

author's note

This short contains adult and objectionable themes. It is not suitable for the weak of heart, or those who are offended easily. Please do not read on if there is a chance you will find it so traumatic that you have nightmares, or weird fantasy dreams.

For everyone else, don't say you weren't warned ...

This is a semi-continuation, semi-spinoff from my previous short, [tiān](#). It's not essential, but it can't hurt to read that one first. I hope you enjoy.

Also, there are [bits of knowledge](#) at the end like usual.

zero

漢獻帝 (hàn xiàn dì) Emperor xiàn of hàn's 17th year of rule (205 CE.)

The autumn sun makes its daily descent towards the tree line, the golden rays coupling with a gentle breeze to create a bending, luminescent sea from a simple straw field.

An elderly man strolls through the field, holding a bamboo cane clasped behind his back, unused. He is dressed in simple robes, plainly coloured, with simple straw sandals. His long white hair is smooth and straight, matching his groomed beard perfectly. His tanned and wrinkled face shows a lifetime of both joy and sorrow: a fulfilled life.

Rushing to catch up to him, a younger man calls out. His style of dress is much the same, though the newer cloth is filled out by a younger body. A close crop of

black hair frames his face, set by serious eyes and a strong jawline. The older of the two men stops to turn.

“禱 (yī)? What is it, boy?”

“Grandfather, I made it all the way to 漢中 (hàn-zhōng)—and back!”

“Why, that’s ... over a thousand 里 (lǐ) away! That’s amazing yī, very well done! How are you feeling now, how much energy do you have left?”

“I’m alright, a bit hungry. Shall we go check on dinner?”

The two men make their way back as the sun begins to set. They chat about yī’s progress with his training, the fluctuating state of government, and life in general. Their manner of speech denotes a familial comfort, a relationship built upon years of interaction as master and disciple. Before long, they arrive at the wooden cottage, the warm sounds of life stirring within. Out the front, one of the wooden beams marks the house with a single branded character: 劉 (liú,) the family name.

Inside, a commotion takes place. Fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces; the whole family is present: some readying the meal, some setting the table, some running around and playing, generally being in the way.

As they sit down to dinner, yī sits next to his younger brother, 訖 (shén.) shén is only a year younger than yī, though the divide between them couldn't seem greater. If yī were a waterfall, shén would be a lake. Smaller in stature than his older brother, shén prefers to stay in, rather than take part in one of yī's adventures; to play friendly games of 圍棋 (wéiqí) at home, instead of 六博 (liù bó) at one of the gambling houses in town; read books on philosophy, over taking part in his training. Still, they love each other like good brothers should. shén looks up to yī, and yī protects shén fiercely.

They tell each other about their days, shén congratulating yī on his achievement, with yī attempting to coax shén into resuming his training also. The jovial chatter of the family melts away as the topic turns to politics, and obviously, to war. One of their second cousins, 備 (bèi,) is currently involved in battles throughout the land. They pray for his safety, but trust in his military abilities to see him home.

Once dinner ends, shén sits down to continue the game of wéiqí with their grandfather. yī excuses himself to do a little light training before bed, and promptly disappears. He reappears on the tile roof, before disappearing and reappearing in random places about the house, practicing his accuracy and pushing his stamina.

yī, soon to be the new head of the liú clan, has shown the most talent—both natural and practiced—for the family’s hereditary skills: instantaneous teleportation.

It is the middle of the night; everyone is long asleep by now. All except yī. He appears perched on the edge of the rooftop, almost teetering over, but managing to keep his balance. Sweat rolls down his forehead and neck, his breathing shallow and panting, his exhaustion evident.

He sits there for a few minutes, waiting to catch his breath, while he considers zipping to the nearby lake for a quick dip to freshen up before bed. The cool night air makes mist of his breath, as he forces deep, slow breaths to regulate his heartbeat. He closes his eyes for a few seconds, touching the sacred liú ring that was given to him upon birth, when a muffled crunch snaps them open.

He looks around but sees nothing. Then he hears it again; it’s coming from the storehouse. Who could be in there this late at night though? He begins to climb down, and then thinks better of it. In an instant, he is in the storeroom. He reaches out a hand to one of the many bookshelves, steadying himself. You are at your limit, he thinks.

It is dark in the storeroom, but ... near the other end, there appears to be light from a lantern. His brow turns down, his confusion and hesitation evident. Quietly, he makes his way towards the light. There, amongst the shadows, a man dressed entirely in black is rummaging through the pigeonholes filled with scrolls.

“What are you—” yī begins to call out, just as he is hit on the back of his head. He drops with a thud.

When his family check on yī, his sleeping quarters are empty. He wasn't present at breakfast, and while this is not entirely uncommon, usually he would zip in and out for a cup of tea, or some food to break up his training.

By nightfall, worry sees the liú men divided into search parties, but after hours of searching by lantern-light, they return without any sign of him. Word is sent out to the local law, as well as messages to all extended family members. Days pass, which turn into lunar cycles, and with no leads, the liú family are devastated.

Having little choice left, shén is forced to hastily learn all he can about becoming the next head of the liú family: lessons on political influence and family history drilled into him by his grandfather, from dawn until dusk. Within a month, shén has practiced his rusty and

temperamental skills enough to appear from one end of the field to the other, though there is little accuracy and grace involved: which end he will appear at is anyone's guess.

In addition to this upheaval, the liú house is forced to instate an archaic contract, written centuries ago—possibly longer—between the houses 吳 (wú) and liú. It (essentially) reads:

There will be no war between our two houses. From now and forevermore, we will be at peace with each other.

When absolutely necessary, either house may call upon the other for aid.

The special skills our two houses control is paramount. In the event of probable lineage destruction, one house will provide the other a suitable mate to continue the family line—but no more than one every three generations.

In the event of complete lineage destruction, the surviving house will continue to provide aid to the other house, in the hopes of possible lineage regeneration.

This contract seals the alliance between the houses wú and liú. May both our houses know longevity and prosperity forevermore.

shén and his grandfather make the trip to the main wú house, which is several days by land. shén is nervous and hesitant, but he must do this: he cannot deny his family, and put everyone into the state of turmoil that will surely occur if the liú family lose their gift.

one

漢獻帝 (hàn xiàn dì) Emperor xiàn of hàn's 17th year of rule (205 CE.)

The sun shines down outside; birds can be heard singing; it is generally a beautiful day. Inside, however, the study room is a little musty, though at least well lit. Scrolls are pigeonholed into any spot that can be found, almost littered about, while other knowledge-based accoutrements adorn the desks and floors. A young girl sits, quietly, in the middle of it all.

She is small, even for her age, with what can only be described as a delicate frame. Her fine black hair falls around her oval face, half-obscuring two large, black-abyss-coloured eyes, a perfect nose and rosy lips. She is wearing a white and gold silk robe, decorated with pink jasmine flowers, with her right sleeve clutched by her left hand, as she practices her calligraphy.

One of the family guard slips into the room. Dressed in black with a sword at his hip, his serious look is completed with a scar running across his cheek. He motions to the girl's caretaker—a plump and plain-looking, stern yet caring lady—who listens to his whispered message, nodding at him as he turns to wait outside.

“Enough study for now, you must attend the audience chamber; your father calls for you,” she says to the girl.

The girl gently places down her brush, pushes the work desk away and stands. Her caretaker checks the girl's sleeves for ink stains, and quickly fixes a jade clip into her hair. Then, with the caretaker following right behind, and the guard leading the way, the girl heads towards wherever she is lead.

—

As she enters the audience chamber, she sees her father: not imposing by sight alone, he has the same kind of small frame that she has inherited. No, it's the eyes: hard and piercing, they tell the world that he has seen much sorrow and darkness. Those severe, scrutinising eyes show he has been, and will be, a strong leader for the family for many years. She bows in deference.

Seated with him are two men: one older than her father, perhaps seventy; one younger, in his twenties. The first looks slightly grim, the bearer of bad news, but is barely showing emotion—a stoic face. The second is nervous and jumpy, perspiration on his forehead, blushing slightly. His eyes stare at her, wide with surprise.

The chamber is empty otherwise: a circular room made entirely of stone, from the floor to the roof, its sparseness creating a chilling atmosphere. With no other instruction, the girl stands, quietly, fidgeting a little with her hands in front of her. Her father stands and, indicating to the younger man, issues one order to her:

“蓮 (lián,) this is liú shén. He will be your husband.”

lián is twelve.

—

“She’s just a child!”

“She is the only female in the wú house, who has any skill, is unmarried, and is of age, shén. There is no other choice,” his grandfather reasons.

“She’s just ... a *child*!”

The two liú men are in one of the guest rooms the wú house has provided to them. It is warmly lit by lanterns, and filled with intricately carved wooden furniture.

shén paces the floor, while his grandfather sits on one of the stools, watching his grandson walk in circles. As he watches, he sighs and pours himself another cup of tea.

“Please try to understand, shén. We really have no choice. Without yī—”

“*Without yī*, we wouldn’t be here at all, because yī would have been such a better leader than the pale imitation that I am,” shén finishes.

“That’s not what I was going to say. I know you grieve for your brother. We all do. However, we must ensure the survival of the house. If the tables were turned and you were gone instead of yī, we would still be here, asking for the wús help to keep our bloodline alive. This is in no way a reflection of you, shén. You are both sons of the liú house; you are both great in your own ways.”

“Were.”

“Pardon?” his grandfather looks confused.

“In the past: we both *were*. Now, my brother is dead and we don’t even have his body with which to pay our respects,” shén remarks bitterly.

His grandfather looks at his tea in sullen silence. The wounds are too fresh for the young man; there is nothing that can be done to console him. shén’s pacing falters; he looks at his grandfather’s downcast expression, and feels

just that little bit worse. *If only time could be reversed*, he thinks.

“Grandfather, I’m sorry.”

“Mmm ... don’t bother yourself with that. We have many important things to plan, like your wedding,” his grandfather puts on a brave face with a smile.

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While the liús have their discussion in their room, lián’s caretaker is in another room, fussing over her mistress’ belongings: what to pack, what to throw away and replace, measurements for new clothing, jewellery, everything. Amidst the flurry of happenings, lián sits off to the side, completely still. The colour is drained from her pretty face; her eyes even wider; her lips trembling slightly. Her caretaker stops to notice something is wrong with her charge.

“Mistress? Are you ill?” she asks.

“I ... it ... I was ... but—” lián stammers.

“It will all be alright, dear. The news was a little unexpected. However, I’m sure wherever your life takes you, happiness will find you too. Come now, cheer up.”

They will only have a few days to prepare for lián’s wedding and married life: the ritual of the wedding cer-

emony, what is expected of her as a wife, what her new family is like. After her marriage, lián will have to say goodbye to her family, and cease to be a wú.

lián's caretaker runs her through wifely etiquette and the womanly changes she should expect, while her father teaches her about the history of the wú and liú families, and why it is important the bloodlines do not die—through stories that have been passed down from one generation to the next, for centuries.

“Centuries upon centuries ago, there was a young boy—younger than you are now—playing by a river. He was supposed to be home before dark, but the boy was fascinated by the crashing of the water against the rocky banks; they were becoming more and more turbulent as the evening wore on. The boy had no idea, but the reason for this would soon become clear: a storm upriver was forcing waves of water down, creating rapids ripe for flooding and destruction.

“The boy was swept into the river. He began to shout for help before his head was forced underwater, and he barely struggled to keep himself afloat and alive, paralysed with shock and fear as he was.

“Luckily, an old man happened to see the boy bobbing amongst the white water. Without a thought to his own safety, he dove in and not only managed to swim his

way to the drowning boy, but dragged them both out of the river, saving the boy's life.

“As the flooding waters receded, an enormous boom shook the earth, and suddenly before the pair stood a handsome man, smiling at them both. The two men saw the boy home, and then walked together a while, talking about a great many things. The young man commended the older one on his bravery and protection of the boy. He then bestowed upon the old man his favour, a very powerful favour.

“You see lián, that old man was ‘old man wú,’ and the young visitor was 天 (tiān)—the almighty god himself—bestowing the powers that would one day become ours: the power to protect.”

“What about the liús, how did they attain theirs? What can they do?” lián asks.

“Well—and this may be slightly incorrect, you'll have to ask shén for the full story—but this is how it was told to me,” her father begins.

“Centuries upon centuries ago ...”

—

In an unlit stone chamber, several hundred li away, a man lies on the mouldy and blood-smearred floor. Bound

by heavy iron chains, he struggles to breathe, every miniscule movement reopening his extensive wounds, causing him to wince in pain. A small pot continuously burns a strange smoke, keeping the man in a lolling, stupefied state. One knock, and the door opens a crack, letting a sharp shaft of light in. Someone steps inside.

“I just wanted to let you know: the script has been deciphered successfully, even without your help. Master says we no longer need you.”

He slides his sword from the sheath at his side, sets his feet into the ground, and takes a deep breath in. The sword gracefully rises, and swiftly falls. liú yī feels almost ashamed to breathe a sigh of absolution, as his head is relieved of his body.



lián and shén have spent the entire day on their feet, greeting guests, accepting congratulations and gifts, taking part in countless ceremonies. Once it is all over, they retire to a specially set up wedding bedchamber in the wú house. In the soft lanternlight, shén notices it is even more beautifully adorned than the room he was staying in before.

The couple look awkwardly at each other; lián, weighed down by red silken robes and all her jewellery,

barely managing to keep her slight frame upright; shén, fidgeting with his own wedding robes, standing so much taller than she. Alone in the room, their hesitation shows just how much they are strangers to one another.

With trembling fingers, lián begins to remove her clothes, layer by layer. shén starts to move towards her, but stops still a distance away, staring with concern. lián's hands begin to shake on the innermost robe, the hint of exposed skin a shadowy allusion to forbidden desire underneath. Her chest, still only the slightest of bumps, show through the light robe.

shén snaps out of his trance and closes the distance between them. He kneels down, holds her hands in his, and looks into her eyes. He then places her hands by her sides, lets go to take a hold of her last robe, and gently covers her back up. He exhales, eyes drawing to the point where her bare flesh was just visible, and reassuringly rubs her shoulders. He stands back up, and gives her a quick kiss on the top of her head.

“It’s been a long day, and we have to leave for the liú house early in the morning. We should ... get some rest.”

They get ready for bed without saying another word.

two

漢獻帝 (hàn xiàn dì) Emperor xiàn of hàn's 18th year of rule (206 CE.)

There is a stillness about the house, with barely a sound but the peeling of a taro. To combat this, lián begins to hum an old tune that her mother used to sing to her. She is alone, her husband attending to family matters with his grandfather. She and shén live by themselves, on a specially annexed portion of liú land just for them—upon which a beautiful wood cottage has been built, about a lǐ from the main estate. It gets lonely here sometimes though, being by herself a lot.

A familiar footfall lets lián know that shén is home. He never uses the door anymore; the constant practice of his abilities means he has the accuracy to arrive inside the house with ease. As usual, he walks up behind her, plants a kiss on the top of her head, and says, “I’m home,” before sitting down at the meals table.

“How was your day?”

“Not too bad. Grandfather will be calling upon us during his evening walk. What about yours?” shén asks.

“Is he coming to check up on me again?” lián ignores her husband’s question for one of her own.

“No, not at all, he just wants to continue our earlier discussion on this year’s crop harvest. He knows you’re a good girl.”

It has been nearly a year since they have been married. A year since lián moved into this house, and tried to make it a home; since she lost her name and family, and traded them for new ones; since she began trying to understand her husband, and to love him. Yet he still thinks of her as a girl, not as his wife. Not as a woman.

She puts down the knife and the taro, and wipes her hands dry. Closes her eyes and takes a deep breath in, and out. She walks up to him and leans down, only slightly, until their eyes are level. Her eyes are wide and fiery, but her mouth is quivering. shén looks taken aback, and just as he opens his mouth to ask her what’s wrong, she clamps her small hands onto his cheeks and steals a kiss, right on his lips.

When she releases him, he looks around frantically in case anybody saw, but they are alone. lián’s eyes stay closed, a small smile on her face, while her arms and

body stay frozen in the moment. When her eyes open, looking directly into shén's, her face turns a bright red. She whirls on the spot and hurriedly resumes peeling the taro.

“D-d-d-dinner will be ready soon!” she stammers.

shén says nothing, stunned. After a moment, he lightly puts his fingers to his lips. He can still feel the soft warmth, along with his own face blushing. A smile forms even though he doesn't want it to. He scolds himself: *she is just a girl*, he thinks, *and I must make her keep that childhood for as long as possible.*

lián's own powers have blossomed as she matures; another year has passed and she has discovered that not only can she increase the protection of any living or non-living thing, she can also take protection away. Already, she has the power to protect the entire liú croplands from insects and disease without even thinking about it, all day, every day—amazingly, even as she sleeps. Adding to this, she can remove protection from something, a small plant's naturally inbuilt immune system for instance, causing it to wither and die within a day.

Along with the developments of her special skills, lián's body has undergone a few changes as well. Her

first menses arrived, signalling her true ascent into womanhood. When it happened, shén looked at her with such worry, it was she that had to reassure him that she was okay. Thankfully, there was little pain, and the bleeding stopped within a couple of days.

The very day after this occurrence, as lián is preparing dinner, she hears shén arrive home. Like usual, he walks up behind her, quick kiss on the top of her head, and says, “I’m home”—but this time, he doesn’t take a seat at the table; he lingers close to her, leans down to the base of her neck, and breathes in.

Without warning, he embraces her from behind; lián emits a shocked squeak from the unexpected contact. This is the most that the pair has touched, ever. shén holds her tight around her waist and shoulders; lián puts down her knife, wipes her hands dry, and then places a hand over his, giving it a gentle squeeze.

He picks her up, so easily with how small she still is, and carries her to the bedchamber. He lays her down on the bed—the one they have shared for two years already, albeit only to sleep—and looks her up and down for a moment, lust in his eyes. As he leans down, she pushes herself upwards to meet him, and they kiss with a fierce intensity, borne from years of pent-up desire.

shén breaks away, impatiently pulling at her robes, to unwrap the beautiful body within. lián responds in kind by undoing shén's robes, with much greater skill and dexterity. Once lián's pale, lithe body is uncovered, shén stops, his breathing shallow, his eyes dark. Before him lies the body of his wife who is still a girl, her [REDACTED] still small and cute, barely any [REDACTED] on her [REDACTED]. He begins to step back, but for lián clutching his hands.

“What’s wrong, shén ... please ... it’s okay. I am your wife. I am very happy that you ... want me. So it’s okay. I want to be with you too. Please, don’t stop.”

“It’s not right. You shouldn’t be in this position, married at such a young age. You were just a child then, and you’re still a child now. I’m sorry, I ... I shouldn’t be doing this.”

lián pulls her husband down on top of her with a surprising strength. She holds him tight, bare skin on skin, the very touch sending sparks of electricity through her body. She kisses him on his neck, on his cheeks, even on his closed eyelids, before kissing him on his lips. When he stops resisting, she releases him slightly, letting her hands roam where they may, exploring shén’s honed arms and muscled torso. shén runs his hands from her neck down, to circle her [REDACTED] [REDACTED], and down her slender stomach to rest on the front of her hips.

lián [redacted] her husband [redacted] [redacted], hiding the [redacted] she [redacted] as he [redacted]. They hold each other tight, completely still, for what seems like forever, cheek pressed against cheek. She may not have had a choice in this marriage, to this person, but that didn't make it bad. *He is a good man, she thinks. He is my husband, and I love him.*

“I love you,” shén says, as if he could read her mind.

“I love you too,” she smiles back.

The time passes quickly. It is not long before the liú family prayers are answered, and the couple are blessed with child. In Emperor xiàn of hàn's 20th year of rule (208 CE,) a baby boy is born, a pleasantly successful birth with no complications to mother or child. They decide to name him 熙 (yí,) so his name is—in some way—partly dedicated to shén's older brother yī. The couple are truly happy.

three

漢獻帝 (hàn xiàn dì) Emperor xiàn of hàn's 20th year of rule (208 CE.)

One fine autumn day, lián and shén head over to the main estate with yí wrapped in a blanket. Apparently second cousin bèi has made the arduous trip home, with both sad news and disturbing suspicions. The growing incidents of war and outbreaks of lawlessness draws similar parallels to the Warring States period, just before the unification of 中國 (zhōngguó.)

They notice bèi's horse hastily tied outside the stable doors; overworked and sporting several shallow wounds, he is in bad shape. lián stops shén and walks over to the horse. Inspecting his wounds, lián uses her powers to calm the horse down, speeding up the healing process, while shén fetches him some water to drink.

When they arrive inside, they can clearly see that bèi is a mud- and blood-smearred mess. His unmatched, al-

most shabby armour has many scratches, dents and gaps. His aide rushes to and fro, carefully removing his armour, providing him with a hot washcloth to wipe down his face with. Even with how fatigued he looks, to lián he has the presence of a formidable warrior, as he sits with his back rigidly straight, elbows flared outwards, hands rolled into fists. As the mud is wiped away, lián can see a strong face, set into a frown, complemented with brooding, yet intelligent eyes. lián casts a look at shén, and he nods to her. She walks up to bèi, bows, and then concentrates on his wounds.

“You haven’t met lián before have you, bèi? She is my wife. She will take care of your wounds, if you’ll let her.”

bèi takes a closer look at lián when he hears the word ‘wife,’ but says nothing on the subject. He obediently moves when instructed to do so, watching with a half sceptical, half quizzical expression, which turns into a happy smile as he feels his wounds heat up, tighten, then relax: pain free, no bleeding, no scars. He bows with great deference to lián, and introduces himself properly. When everyone is seated and ready, bèi begins.

“We had to abandon the city of 樊城 (fánchéng) as the warlord 曹操 (cáo cāo) swept through; we were unprepared to take on his army. Unfortunately, with all our

soldiers and civilian refugees combined, our convoy moved slowly, much too slowly.

“His cavalry caught up to us by the time we’d reached 長坂 (chángbǎn,) and in the ensuing battle most of my soldiers, and all the civilians, have been captured by cáo. He even has my wife and children.”

bèi pauses for a moment, hopeless frustration evident on his face.

“After ‘uniting’ the north he’s taking his army south; he plans to rule over all the lands. I don’t believe he’s doing this all on his own though; something doesn’t feel right about it. I think maybe he’s found himself a little help ... which brings me to the reason I come before you today.

“I know the liú archive store holds a lot of powerful relics, collected over the years—wait!—before you believe me to be accusing someone in this house of aiding cáo, I know the liú family would not intentionally. However, you cannot tell me you do not see something odd about his reign in recent years, can you? Something that perhaps regular men should not know privy to?

“I believe he has stolen something that is giving him great power, and I believe it was stolen from the liús, within the last few years. All I ask is to be given the chance to check; or at least ask someone to check for me.”

shén nods and disappears, arriving at the storeroom instantaneously. He opens the door with force, causing a waft of dust to plume outwards. *When was the last time someone was in here to clean*, he thinks, as he breathes through his sleeve. With a little hesitation, he steps inside and begins to look for anything that could be out of the ordinary.

Both lián and grandfather liú catch up, and begin to help shén look. Half an hour passes, and then grandfather liú lets out a mortified gasp. The other two rush towards the sound, to find him standing by a pigeonhole case, filled with old scrolls. He's pointing at something. After a couple of seconds to focus on it, they understand what they are looking at. The spatter of old, dried blood. shén kneels down, to get a closer look, and spies something under the case: something shiny. He reaches underneath the case to pull out a dusty and slightly bloodied ring.



For hours, they search through every pigeonhole, cross-checking the scrolls against the ledger. As bèi had suspected, they find one missing. They return to the main house, to update bèi and the others. Grandfather liú appears to have aged years in the hours they were gone. shén, quiet and brooding, causes lián to worry, fre-

quently sneaking glances at her husband. As grandfather begins to speak, shén places the ring on the table.

“bèi appears to be correct: a scroll is missing from our archives. The Chaos manuscript. This is a very bad situation we find ourselves in; if cáo really is using this scroll, we should not only fear for our own lives ... we should fear for all of zhōngguó.

“This isn’t all. There was evidence of a struggle in the archives. This—” he indicates, “is yī’s ring. So, not only does somebody have possession of one of the most powerful relics in the world ... we believe yī was murdered during the theft of it.”

A collective gasp is followed by murmurs around the room. Questions fly at shén and his grandfather in rapid bursts. As they try to calm everyone down, bèi stands abruptly, and everyone stops talking to stare at him. His face is grim, though it appears he has regained his drive.

“I must depart; I will try to barter an alliance with the General 孫權 (sūn quán) ... cáo must be stopped at all costs. I am sorry to have been the bearer of bad news.”

The din of noise starts up again, before shén quells it.

“Wait, bèi. I will help. We must retrieve the scroll ... and get revenge, for yī.”

Long into the evening, shén and bèi discuss the beginnings of a plan, a way to do just that. They have little time, and only a very hazy, risky idea. Once nightfall pulls most people to their bedchambers, lián knocks on the door of the room shén and bèi are in. She enters when beckoned, though instead of what they expected—her to bid goodnight—she sits down on an empty stool.

“If you are doing this, I am coming with you. My powers are valuable. I can help. I cannot sit idly by, thinking that harm may come to you, and do nothing.”

shén looks at her, and a slightly melancholy smile comes to his face. He is in two minds: he would like her to stay home, as far from war as possible. However, he knows just how valuable her powers are, and how the difference between success and failure weighs upon them. In any event, he can see by the determination in her eyes that it wasn't a question, or a request. The best he hopes for is that they both come away from this unscathed.

After intense debate and utter refusal turns into resigned acceptance, a decent plan takes shape: one that is theoretically less dangerous than without lián's help, however, one that places lián directly in that danger.

While bèi leaves to forge an alliance with General sūn, shén and lián use what little time they have to train. First, lián puts up a protective shield, while family members strike at her with wooden planks wrapped in linen (in case her shield fails.) Second, lián also tries degenerating plants while under the simulated attack. Meanwhile, shén practices teleporting not himself, but large inanimate objects; moving up to animal carcasses; then, to live animals.

“That doesn’t look like me,” lián muses jokingly.

“Of course not, darling; it’s just a test. I need to move something alive, and make sure it stays alive on the other end,” shén explains, patting the dumpy, smelly pig by his feet.

“After I’m done, you need to use her instead of the plants for destroying. You need to practice on something alive too,” he adds.

With only one lunar cycle of preparation complete, word arrives from bèi: the time is now. He asks, assuming shén and lián are still willing to do this, if they could depart at once.

four

漢獻帝 (hàn xiàn dì) Emperor xiàn of hàn's 20th year of rule (208 CE.)

shén, lián and baby yí make the journey by horse-drawn cart, with a small contingent of bèi's soldiers to escort them. shén could have transported in literally no time at all, however they need to conserve as much energy as possible: the next step is going to take up most of it.

Soon enough, they meet up with bèi and General sūn on the southern banks of the 長江 (cháng jiāng.) The two, along with several military retainers, describe the situation and plan of action. The allied army is vastly outnumbered against cáo, however, the northerners know little about ships and naval warfare.

shén and lián go over their own plan with bèi separately, which if successful, should help tip the odds in their favour. bèi stations them in a large tent right by the cliff edge, as requested, with the closest view of the cáo

army. He then liaises with General sūn, to convince the others to give his two special 'consultants' enough time to prepare, a task in itself when he is unable to explain with any detail what the pair will be doing.

The series of lanterns being lit on both sides of the river signals the beginning of nightfall, and the commencement of shén and lián's operation. In the privacy of their tent, lián makes sure shén is ready before they share a kiss, for until he returns. He pats little yí on the head, and then smiles at lián. As lián smiles back, shén is gone.

He appears on the other side of the cháng jiāng, and immediately crouches down. Getting his bearings, he spots a lone guard on patrol, a distance away from everyone else. Readying himself again, he disappears and reappears behind the patrol guard. shén steps forward and bashes one hand to his brainstem, with the other hooking around to clamp the front of his face. In an instant they are both gone.

They reappear somewhere barren, uninhabited, and barely lit by the setting sun. The guard struggles to get free, while shén struggles to stop him from doing just that. shén concentrates once more, and only the guard disappears this time, all his clothing falling to the ground, emptied. He gathers everything up quickly, and disappears again.

The process takes only a few heartbeats, and shén appears before lián with a smile. He flings the dust off the guard's robe uniform, and holds it up to the lantern-light: a bit too big, but it'll have to do. Nodding to lián, he trades yí for the clothes, placing him in the cot, and she begins to undress her own white robes, shén looking on with a smile fixed to his face. She blushes, but stands in front of him completely naked for a moment—to satisfy her husband's craving eyes—before putting the guard's dark gray robes on. She nods at shén, and he takes one of her hands in his, giving it a gentle squeeze. In a moment, she is gone. A little blood trickles out of shén's nose; he wipes it away, not without it causing him a little worry. He can't fail now. He needs the strength to get her back. shén calls for the guard stationed nearby outside to find General liú. He will want an update.

lián finds herself at the edge of a group of soldiers, sitting down to their evening meal. A couple of them look up, startled to suddenly see her, but then think nothing else of it. After all, 'he' is wearing a uniform just like theirs. There wouldn't be an intruder this far inside camp. She nervously nods at her fellow soldiers, and then turns on her heel to walk away.

Collecting herself by a series of tents, she takes several deep breaths in and out. Her heart almost beats out of her chest; she is so terrified. She puts up a barrier of protection around her, and slowly, she begins to calm herself down. When her heart stops racing, and the feeling of throwing up subsides, she calmly walks through the unending tents, most lit by lanternlight. Those that are lit house groups of soldiers, some quiet, and some rowdy.

Trying to remember where she has already been through, lián quietly walks from tent to tent, hovering outside the occupied ones for a few moments. As she does, she concentrates on the soldiers within; one by one, she lowers their immune systems, and leaves them like that, none the wiser. They will succumb to natural diseases soon enough; interfering any more will tax her system too much, with how many soldiers she has to pay visit. By the looks of it, General cáo's forces outnumber the allied side's meagre 50,000 troops by perhaps a factor of five, maybe even more.

It is slow, tiring work. As more soldiers begin heading to their tent barracks for the night, lián begins to get disorientated. Somewhere along the way, when she is about half finished, she finds herself in front of the largest tent in the compound, right in the centre of everything. She senses that only one person is present inside. No guards surround the tent—there is relative seclusion

here. Steeling herself, she bravely parts the flap and walks inside.

Within, she sees the one man, sitting at a beautiful carved oak desk. He looks a little old, the strands of white hair and wrinkles on his face showing his age. Even so, he still retains the ruthless, chaotic aura that has made him famous throughout all of zhōngguó, and possibly beyond. He doesn't even acknowledge her presence, so caught up is he in poring over terrain maps and battle plans. lián cuts the silence.

“Did you kill a man named liú yī?”

“Who are you, and why are you in here?” A startled face looks up at her.

“Did you?” lián asks again.

“I have killed a lot of people, and have ordered a lot of people killed. How am I to remember?” he counters.

“Three years ago, someone broke into the liú storehouse and stole something. When liú yī went to investigate, he was killed. Do you remember now?”

He ponders for a moment, his brow furrowing, head leaning to the side so his right hand can massage the temples, trying to jog the memory. Then, a pang of realisation. Enough for lián to notice. He clears his throat and begins a propaganda spiel:

“It may sound familiar ... but no. I did not personally kill this man. As for whether or not I am indirectly responsible, that is hard to say. I seek to reunify zhōngguó: one cannot reunify a country without making any enemies. Why does this concern you?”

lián walks towards the man slowly, as he puts one hand on a dagger, ready and confident that he could kill this undersized person if necessary. When she is but an arm’s length away, she stops, and lowers herself to her knees. She bows forward until her head hits the floor. Mystified, but no longer wary, he smirks.

“It feels awful to think it, and even more so to say it ... but thank you. Not that you did a good thing; only that if you hadn’t, I would never have been wed to his brother whom I love so very dearly, and that kind of future ... I cannot bear thinking about,” lián says haltingly, hauntingly.

He hides the mild surprise that comes with discovering he is not conversing with a man, but with a woman. He doesn’t bother to say anything, only wondering what she will do next—also, how she managed to get a soldier’s uniform, and infiltrate his army to this degree. He affords her a small amount of silent respect: this one has quite some skill to manage that feat. lián abruptly stands up, brushes her knees, and makes to leave.

“One more thing,” she says, “do you still have it? The scroll you stole?”

He furrows his brow once more, but looks across the desk, shifts a few things, and picks up an ancient manuscript. He smiles at her, not threatening, not gloating, just amused. Humouring her. lián smiles back at him, and then looks at the yellowed, ageing scroll: one of the most powerful relics in the world. She concentrates on it briefly, and watches with a small smile as it crumbles to dust right in his hand, to his now obvious surprise and absolute horror.

“Goodbye, General cáo,” she says.

As soon as she leaves, the furious General raises the alarm. Within minutes, she is weaving through the tents at just as furious a pace, trying to find somewhere safe where she can make the signal to be picked up. She stops short as she sees soldiers heading her way; in fact, all around she can see soldiers looking directly at her, making their way to the spot she stands. Pretending to be a fellow soldier will not work anymore.

She kneels by the nearest tent, and pulls out the jar of coloured oil and flints. *I don't have enough time to make the signal lantern properly!* she thinks. She opens the lantern jar and throws the entire contents, wick and all, onto the tent. Building up her protective barrier as much as

possible, she sets it alight. *Please, shén, save me.* It erupts in a beautifully vivid green flame. Then, she waits.

From the other side of the river, shén struggles to hear the sounds of what he believes to be heated commotion. He becomes anxious; straining his eyes to see a sign of anything, he considers the possibility that something is very wrong. He readies himself to appear somewhere in the encampment, to make sure what exactly is happening, when bèi places a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Have faith in her, shén. Wait for the signal lantern to be lit. She will be okay,” bèi reassures.

That’s when they both hear it, unmistakably—the yelling, the sounds of metal clanging, the pound of thousands of feet mobilising. She’s been noticed. *Where is she?* shén thinks. *I can’t get her back without knowing where.* In a sudden mushroom-cloud inspired display, the vibrant green flame shoots into the sky, far too large for just one lantern. shén concentrates on the spot around the flame, but he can’t get there: there’s too much commotion going on.

He stops when his body convulses in a series of coughs, culminating in a spatter of blood in his hand. He

wipes it on his robe, ignoring the signs. Bearing with the pain, he tries a different tactic. Appearing mid-air above the green light, finally he can see what's going on. He can see lián, on one knee, palms outstretched, struggling to stay protected. As he begins to fall, he yells out: "lián, above you!"

lián, perfectly in tune with her lightning-quick reflexes, allows her barrier to weaken and extends it upwards, forming a chute for shén to fall in. He falls in a heap, scrambling back onto his feet to grab a firm hold of her. They are surrounded by soldiers as far as the eye can see; angry, murderous soldiers. The ones within reach hack at lián's shield, with every impact drawing a yelp of pain from her, as she fights to keep the shield from failing, from their certain death.

shén concentrates with everything he has, the strain causing veins to pop from his skin and blood to dribble from his ears and nose. All the teleporting is taking its toll on his body, a body that wasn't designed as well for the task, unlike his brother's. He lets out a frustrated roar as the pair go ... absolutely nowhere. They are grounded.

As shén heaves a sigh, his body slumps against lián's, inert. Her face pales, the panic rising to her throat, and she lets out a scream that pierces the air for many li, clutching her beloved husband's body. Her shield falls.

Meanwhile, bèi stands alone in the family's tent, save for the baby yí. He picks the small bundle up, and heads outside. From the distance, the green light appears to be smouldering out. shén and lián haven't made it back, and it seems as if the yelling is dying down. bèi is no longer sure that either shén or lián will be okay. He pats the baby's head to try to calm yí, and himself, down.

yí doesn't want to calm down though; as the green light burns out, the baby starts crying, and nothing bèi does matters. It's clear he wants his parents, but they haven't made it back. If they don't make it back soon, it seems as if they will never return. All of a sudden, yí stops crying. The quiet makes it all the more easy to hear shén yelling from inside the tent.

“Help! Somebody help us!”

bèi barks an order to summon a healer before rushing inside. lián lies on the floor, unconscious, eerily unscathed—physically at least. shén is crouching over her, blood drying on his face, panic in his wild eyes. His gaze drifts to bèi, pleading, fearful.

“What on earth happened?” bèi asks, stunned.

“I couldn't ... couldn't get back ... it wouldn't ... I couldn't ...”

bèi passes yí to his father, giving him something to concentrate on. After a closer look, it appears as if lián is breathing, but bèi dares not touch her; this sort of thing is best left to the healers. When the guard announces the healer's arrival, bèi yells at him to attend them at once. They've no time for stupid formalities.

The healer, a mystifyingly old man perhaps in his eighties, hobbles in on a bamboo cane, head stooped, long white hair tied up behind him. He wears many layers of purple robes, keeping the cold away from his aged bones. He gingerly sets himself down next to lián, and he too examines her breathing pattern. yí begins to start crying again.

He places a thin needle into each ear, and to her forehead, temples, and neck. After a minute he removes them, and places a few needles in other spots, with no discernible change. yí's crying gets louder and louder, and shén is unable to calm him down. Suddenly, lián stops breathing. No matter what the healer tries, he is unsuccessful in bringing her back. The area feels slightly colder, the world slightly darker.

"I am sorry ... I am sorry," he says, backing away.

shén says nothing, untrusting the words he might speak in anger. He desperately tries to hold back his tears; to quell the burning mass of despair growing in his

stomach; to force his ragged breathing to normal. By this stage, yí is howling, so shén sits down next to lián, and does what always calms yí down: places him on her chest, and arranges her hands to hold yí in a motherly embrace. He strokes lián's hair, and lets a tear fall.

yí quiets down immediately, and even lets out a happy gurgle. Nobody speaks. The healer is looking at the ground; bèi at shén; shén at lián. For a minute, there is a heavy, resigned silence. Then a scream. Everyone jolts a little from the sudden sound. Except for yí.

lián's eyes snap open, she inhales sharply, and her hands fly out, shielding herself from ... nothing. She isn't being attacked anymore. In fact, there's yí, smiling away. shén, to her side, unashamedly laughing and crying at the same time. Even bèi transforms from grim to relieved.

"I'm glad you're alright," shén says.

lián bolts upright and holds yí close with one arm, shén with the other.

"How ... did we get here? Did you ..." lián asks.

"No, it wasn't me. I think ... maybe yí is already better at this than I am. Maybe even the both of us."

By morning, shén and lián decide they should head home. They aren't soldiers; they would only get in the way. bèi offers them a small contingent of his men to see them home safely, but they decline. *You'll need all the men you can muster*, they say. bèi bows low with great respect for both of them, thanks them profusely, and promises to repay any favours they ask.

Within days of them reaching home, a soldier from bèi's army shows up with a message of good news: lián and shén's amazing help, coupled with a cunning ruse by General 黃蓋 (huáng gài,) they have won a stunning battle, which they have named “赤壁之戰” (chìbì zhī zhàn.) Most of cáo's soldiers are sick with typhoid fever, which hastens their defeat. bèi is confident their allied armies can drive back the northerners.

shén looks at lián, and lián at shén.

They smile. They kiss.

They are happy in love.

the epilogue of truth

While cáo cāo didn't manage to forcefully unite zhōngguó, by 216 CE he is proclaimed 魏王 (King of wèi,) having control over the northern domain, and posthumously named Emperor of wèi shortly after his death in 220 CE, aged 65.

liú bèi goes on to wrest control of hànzhōng from cáo cāo, and proclaims himself 漢中王 (King of hànzhōng) in 219 CE, and two years later, Emperor of 蜀漢 (shǔ hàn,) claiming not to be founding a new dynasty, but rather continuing the previous hàn dynasty (being a distant relative of the hàn imperial clan.) He died shortly after in 223 CE, aged 62.

sūn quán in turn takes control of the eastern domain, proclaiming himself Emperor of 東吳 (Eastern wú) in 229 CE, after cáo cāo and liú bèi are proclaimed emper-

ors of their domains. He remained Emperor until 252 CE, dying at the ripe old age of seventy.

These three figures were integral to what became the official fall of the hàn dynasty in 220 CE, and the beginning of the famous Three Kingdoms era, an era known to be one of the bloodiest in zhōngguó's history, as well as one of the most romanticised.

things you may already know

- i. 仙 (xiān) means “immortal”, “saint”, as well as “wizard” or “magician”. It is a term used in Taoism, Chinese alchemy, and mythology to name a few.
- ii. 禕 (yī) means “excellent” or “rare”. Not to be confused with 一 (also yī) which means “1”.
- iii. 訖 (shén) means “truth” or “sincere”.
- iv. 蓮 (lián) means “lotus” or “water lily”.
- v. 天 (tiān) means “heaven” or “god”, a term used as far back as 1,122 BCE.
- vi. 熙 (xī) means “bright”, “splendid”, or “glorious”.
- vii. 劉備 (liú bèi) was a warlord and military general during and leading up to the Three Kingdoms era (220 to 280 CE.)

- viii. 曹操 (cáo cāo) was a warlord during and leading up to the Three Kingdoms era, and posthumously named Emperor of Wei.
- ix. 孫權 (sūn quán) was a King, and later on, Emperor during the Three Kingdoms era.
- x. 黃蓋 (huáng gài) was a military general who served sūn quán during and leading up to the Three Kingdoms era.
- xi. This short's depictions of the real people: liú bèi, cáo cāo, sūn quán, and huáng gài, while somewhat factually accurate in terms of battles fought and general movements, is largely surrounded by fiction.
- xii. 漢中 (hànzhōng) is a city in China.
- xiii. 中國 (zhōngguó) means “central country”, the term used to describe China, as the Chinese believed it to be the centre of the world.
- xiv. 長江 (cháng jiāng) is the Yangtze river.
- xv. 赤壁之戰 (chìbì zhī zhàn) is known in English as the Battle of Red Cliffs, a famous decisive victory over cáo cāo by liú bèi and sūn quán.
- xvi. 里 (lǐ) is an archaic unit of distance that evolved throughout China's history, but during the hàn dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE) equated to about 416 metres.

- xvii. 圍棋 (wéiqí) is an ancient board game played in China documented as long ago as 300 BCE (but may be older.) It is popularly known in Japan as *Go*.
- xviii. 六博 (liù bó) is another ancient board game played in China, that declined in popularity possibly with the rise of wéiqí, and so became almost entirely forgotten after the hàn dynasty.
- xix. In Chinese custom, years are not calculated in reference to a singular epoch event, but by each year of rule by the current Emperor. With every new Emperor, the year clock resets. As this can be confusing, CE dates have been included also.
- xx. Furthermore, by the time a baby is born, its age is considered to already be one: time within the womb is taken into account. This means that when lián is twelve, she is only eleven according to the Gregorian calendar.
- xxi. Taro is a common name for the corms and tubers of several plants grown mostly as a root vegetable. Essentially ‘south-east Asian potato.’
- xxii. The reason why some characters are referred to by their given name (liú bèi as bèi,) while others are referred to by their family name (cáo cāo as cáo) is because of the lessened formality when speaking to/about family or people who are close and very familiar with one another.