

## THE BURIAL

The body was buried at dawn.

It was tradition, or at least that's what *they* said. Even Chia, the Emperor's shrunken nurse, secretly thought this ludicrous under the circumstances. Her services having already been rendered, she had barely brushed the illegal tears from her cheeks when *they* had hurried her to the secluded grove in the Imperial Gardens of Xanadu.

To her, the gardens had always been a paradise, lost to the elite. She had only been permitted entry once before, for the sacred burial of the Emperor Zodoc, and that was not an experience she had ever wanted to experience again. As Chia's escort abandoned her before a shrine, pearly white in the emerging light, she considered how much more beautiful, larger and purer Zodoc's tomb had been compared to the hole in the ground she could now glimpse between the low-hanging trees.

In the peace of the Imperial Gardens, Chia could even forget how the metropolis of Solapolis was coming to life beyond the white walls and deep moat that reserved Xanadu. She could have done, but she did not.

As Chia approached the still-empty grave, she recognised the Chief Reacher, stood at his enforced position beneath the orange glare of the oncoming dawn. She recognised few of the other mourners, even though there were few to recognise. She knew that, under the circumstances, the funeral would be secretive; but nothing had prepared her for such an atmosphere. Everyone was coated in sweat.

"Is my brother going to grace us with His presence?" Someone tutted to her right. The nurse lowered her head. It was General Zharko. "There is no need to bow, nurse," he caught her eye without looking at her. "We are like family. They say blood is thicker than water, which is correct, but milk is just as strong."

"That was duty, your Imperial Highness," Chia replied with a toad-like croak.

"Duty binds us all," Zharko said, "even The Emperor."

"Look up; beyond your left shoulder," the nurse whispered with caution, concealing her words from the rest of the congregation. Every man she saw was sworn to Him. If she misspoke but a single word, a second burial would be called for; one that would be even less generous.

"A mere silhouette upon His veranda," Zharko noted; "spectred upon the rising dawn."

Chia was about to reply when the small funeral procession appeared from around the nearest idyllic bush, weaving its way into the grove. From that moment, no one spoke. In the silence they watched as the tiny body, laid out beneath a purple sheet of velvet, was lowered into the pit.

The Chief Reacher moved around to the head of the grave and closed his eyes, sprinkling ochre onto the corpse. He pressed his lips together and began to sing. The melody was simple, but his voice refused to carry the sombre words he sang. There was no sense of loss. The faces around the grove betrayed the relief that each of them felt. It could have been far worse, under the circumstances.

However, the nurse did notice how a couple of the supposed mourners tried to join the song, but she also saw how their lips stopped moving as soon as Commander Cato glanced in their direction. It was that that struck a chord through her body as the full scale of this cold meeting became her. She had finally realised that she was surrounded by monsters. For the first time in years her loyalty was broken, and she considered discarding her silence to favour a shout of protest, but then Cato looked at her and all thoughts of treachery vanished. She had heard the stories about that one. She knew they were all true. Even his soldiers were scared of him, for

there was nothing to him. That one, she knew, was as icy as a shadow. As her spine quivered, he looked away with presumed distaste. The Reacher had stopped singing.

The Güne gravediggers stood to the attention and began to fill in the grave. She had once been scared by their deep groans and their milky-white eyes, but the nurse was bolder now. The congregation were dismissed, their duties fulfilled. She felt relief, and in that relief hatched a plan in her head; a chance for some retribution, however trivial, against her masters.

“Your Imperial Highness,” she turned to Zharko, “have you ever read the Juanji?”

“You read it to me as a child,” he said. “You taught me every story I know.”

“So you are not familiar, perhaps, with the parable of the sow?”

Zharko shook his head with good reason. Emperor Zodoc, when he was still alive, would have had her boiled if she’d told that particular tale.

“Long ago,” she whispered to him, only pausing for the scraping gravediggers, “an honest pig farmer and his wife plied their trade in Alryngaar when they were visited by a decadent lord and his lady, who had lost their way in a storm. The pig farmer and his wife, being modest and humble folk, allowed the lord and his lady to sleep in their bed while they made do with hay. The Lord and lady promised at first to take only what they needed. But their desires soon took heed and they took a shine to the fat pigs that were kept all around them. The Lord and his lady remained at the farm for weeks, dining on greasy pork as the farmer and his wife went hungry.

“Finally, the pig farmer stood up to the arrogant lord - but the lord became angry with what he saw as insolence, and killed the humble farmer and his wife. With the farm empty, the lord and his lady returned to their castle - engorged and lustful. On the first night back at their castle, the lord took his wife to bed and they mated bareback like a boar mounts a pig.

“Unsurprisingly, the lord soon realised that his lady was pregnant - and watched her swell during the year. However, as nine months came and went, the lord was surprised as his wife grew bigger and bigger. For two whole years she struggled and sweated until her water finally broke - and the best midwife in the whole of Alryngaar was called for. She stood and helped to relieve the lord's wife; but she was as shocked as he was when, instead of a baby emerging from the lady's womb - it was a fully grown sow - which immediately began to suck from her mother's breast.”

Zharko didn’t react at first. He had stood and nodded as he had listened to the tale, but the twisted ending had caused him to be still. Quite unexpectedly, his face stretched and Chia saw a wry smile. “Your story has reminded me of another tale from the Juanji: the parable of the snake.

“A snake was attacked by dogs and left for dead when a kindly nurse walked past. The kindly nurse, who always did as she was taught by God, picked him up, fed him and restored him to a full state of health, but then the snake bit her, injecting the nurse with deadly poison. As she lay dying, the nurse turned and asked ‘after all I did for you, why me?’ To which the snake replied, ‘you knew I was a snake when you picked me up.’ Chia felt Zharko’s dark eyes ponder her for a moment. “I'd be wary if I were you,” he said as he turned to leave, “for you are in a nest of reptiles; and this particular breed is very venomous.”

The nurse watched him go, and knew she was now marked for death. She turned and looked up to the veranda where The Emperor had been stood. He was gone. She knew she would have to leave now, but she wanted to wait in the garden a little longer, to watch the sun come up. She knew that, under the circumstances, it would be a Colder Sun than usual.