

The Sky is Large and the Earth is Small by Chris Roberson

Water-Dragon year, 28th year of the Kangxi emperor

Cao Wen stood south of the Eastern Peace Gate of the Forbidden City, facing the entrance to the Eastern Depot. It was an unassuming building, dwarfed by the grandeur of the buildings on the opposite side of the concourse—the Six Ministries, the Court of State Ceremonial, and the Directorate of Astronomy, where the imperial astronomers studied the heavens, watchful of any signs or portents which might auger good or ill for the emperor. Only the Office of Transmission was less grand than the Eastern Depot, its function largely eliminated when the emperor had instituted the palace memorial system, requiring that each of his ministers and deputies communicate their reports to him directly in their own hand, for his eyes only.

At the Eastern Depot's large, unadorned entrance, two guards stood at the ready, sabers sheathed at their sides, poleaxes in their hands. Cao displayed his signs of authority, which marked him as an authorized representative of the Ministry of War. One of the guards studied the papers closely, and then turned and motioned for Cao to accompany him, leaving the other at his post.

Following the guard into the main hall of the Eastern Depot, Cao's eyes lit upon a plaque, on which a motto was engraved in simply crafted characters: "Heart and Bowels of the Court."

"Please wait here," the guard said with an abbreviated bow, "while this one fetches a superior." Then, Cao's papers still in hand, the guard disappeared through one of the many arches leading from the main hall.

Cao waited in silence, as agents of the Eastern Depot came and went, all about the emperor's business. Most were clad in plain gray robes, and would not merit a second glance, were he to pass them on the street. Only a few wore the elaborate mantles which gave the emperor's secret police their name—the Embroidered Guard.

After a few long moments, the guard reappeared, with an older man following close behind. In his simple cotton robes, this older newcomer could have easily passed for a fishmonger or merchant in textiles, thin wisps of mustaches drooping over his thick lips, his eyes half-lidded as though he were just waking from a long slumber. His face, frame, and hands displayed the softened edges that suggested he was a eunuch, one who had traded in his manhood for a life of imperial service.

"Return to your post," the older man said to the guard, who replied only with a rigid nod.

"You are Cao Wen?" the older man says to him, without preamble.

Cao allowed that he was, and bowed lower than the man's appearance would suggest was required. In such a setting, appearances could be deceiving.

"I am Director Fei Ren of the Eastern Depot." The older man brandished the papers Cao had brought with him, which bore the chop of the Minister of War. "I understand you wish to speak with one of our guests?"

"Yes, O Honorable Director," Cao said, bowing again, and lower this time, "it is the wish of his excellency the Minister of War that I should do so. It is believed that your... guest... has some intelligence that may be of use to the emperor, may-he-reign-ten-thousand-years."

“This individual has been temporarily housed with us for some considerable time,” Director Fei answered. “Since before our emperor reached his age of majority. And not all that time spent in the Outside Depot, but some months and years in the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing, as well.”

Cao suppressed a shudder. He had heard only whispered rumors about what went on in the private chambers of the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing, which the Embroidered Guard used to elicit confessions from the most recalcitrant suspects.

Director Fei continued. “Any intelligence this individual had to offer has been long since documented, I would venture to say. And had we been able to extract a confession from him on his many crimes, he would long ago have gone under the executioner’s blade. I think you will find this one a spent fruit, all juices long since dried up, leaving nothing more than a desiccated husk of a man.”

“You are obviously much wiser in such matters than I, Honorable Director,” Cao said, with the appropriate tone of humility, “but such is my office to fulfill, and it would displease my master the Minister of War if I were to shirk my responsibility.”

Director Fei shrugged. “Very well. It is your own time that you waste. Come along and I will have one of my agents escort you into the Outside Depot.”

Director Fei waved over another man dressed in plain robes, this one nearer Cao’s own age of twenty years.

“Agent Gu Xuesen will escort you, Cao Wen. Now you must excuse me, as more pressing matters demand my attention.”

Cao bowed low, and Director Fei disappeared back into the shadows beyond the main hall.

“This way, sir,” Gu said, inclining his head, and starting towards one of the larger arches.

Agent Gu led Cao through the winding labyrinth of passages within the Eastern Depot. The building was larger inside than its exterior would suggest, largely a function of the snaking passages and innumerable small chambers and rooms. Frequently passages opened onto open-air courtyards, and just as frequently onto sunless, dank chambers that had never seen the light of day. And as they went, Agent Gu provided the name and use of each chamber and room.

Cao was surprised to find so talkative a member of the Embroidered Guard, who were widely known as a circumspect, and some might even say taciturn lot. When Agent Gu explained that he was only in his first years with the Embroidered Guard, and that he was required to complete his long years of training before being allowed to go beyond the walls of the Eastern Depot, his talkative manner became much more understandable. He clearly hungered for dialogue with someone nearer his own age, and while his training likely prohibited providing information when it is unnecessary, and when there is no advantage to be gained, his youthful hunger for distraction, in this instance at least, was getting the better of his discretion.

“And now, Cao Wen,” Agent Gu was saying, “we pass into that section known as the Inside Depot. This is the place used to house the most dangerous and serious suspects brought in by the Embroidered Guard. It is the most closely guarded of all the sections of the Eastern Depot, and none who are not of the Embroidered Guard may enter unescorted.”

They passed by a tall doorway, the door lacquered matte black, the frame painted a red the color of blood.

“And beyond this point,” Gu said, pointing to the door, “rests the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing.”

Cao flinched, despite himself. He had, of course, heard of the Bureau, though he labored not to call to mind the stories he had heard.

“Even through the reinforced walls and doors of the Bureau,” Gu went on, “which have been designed to dampen sound, screams and hideous wailing can occasionally be heard.”

They passed by the jet-and-scarlet doorway, turning a corner to a long corridor, and Cao tried to put the door and what lay beyond it out of his thoughts.

Continuing on, they came at last to a broad, open-air courtyard, surrounded on all sides by narrow doorways leading to small chambers. Men and women milled around in the bright morning sun, shuffling under the gaze of guards who perched atop towers positioned on the opposite sides of the courtyard, surmounted by banners on tall posts.

“This, finally, is the Outside Depot,” Gu explained, “in which guests of the Embroidered Guard are temporarily housed. Some have confessed to minor crimes which merit no more severe punishment than imprisonment, while others await the decision of the emperor on their final sentencing. Some few have yet to confess, but have been deemed by the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing as not likely to confess at any point in the future. As no conviction can be achieved without a confession, these few are returned to the Outside Depot, assuming they are not violent enough to merit imprisonment in the Inside Depot, to wait.”

“Wait for what?” Cao asked, casting his gaze across the dispirited faces before him.

“Some wait for a reprieve from the emperor, some wait for further evidence to come to light, while some just wait. For death to take them, one supposes.”

Agent Gu pointed to an ancient man sitting at the center of the courtyard, his legs folded under him, his full attention on the passage across the ground of the shadows of the two towers.

“That is the man you seek,” Agent Gu said. “That is Ling Xuan.”

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Cao Wen sat opposite the ancient man in the interview chamber. Agent Gu waited beyond the door of iron-clad hardwood, which Cao doubted any sound could penetrate, short of a full-bodied bellow.

Cao had a sheaf of papers in front of him, while the old man sat with his shoulders slumped, his hands folded in his lap and the slack-jawed smile of an imbecile on his wrinkled face.

“Ling Xuan?” Cao repeated. The old man’s eyes rested on the simple wooden table between them, worn smooth by generations of hands. Cao could not help but wonder what other dialogues had played out across the table, over the long years since the Embroidered Guard was established in the days of the Yongle emperor, during the Bright Dynasty.

Still, though, the old man did not reply.

“Is that your name?”

The old man drew in a deep breath through his nostrils, blinked several times, and straightened up, all without lifting his eyes from the surface of the table. When he spoke, his voice was soft but with an

underlying strength, like the sound of distant thunder.

“The swirls and curves of the wood from which this table is constructed call to mind the heavens and clouds picked out in golden thread on the longpao dragon robes I wore in the service of the Shunzhi emperor. Strange to think that they follow me, here, after all of these long years. Perhaps they seek to remind me of days past, when my circumstances were more auspicious.”

The man had spoken slowly, but without any pause between words, a single, breathless oration.

Cao looked at the table, and saw nothing but meaningless swirls and knots. Was the old man mad, and his search already proven in vain?

“Need I remind you,” Cao replied, his tone moderated but forceful, “that I come here on the authority of the Minister of War, who speaks with the voice of the Dragon Throne itself? Now, I ask again, is your name...”

“Yes,” the old man said, not raising his eyes. “Ling Xuan is my name.”

Cao nodded, sharply. “Good. And are you the same Ling Xuan who is listed here?”

Cao slid a piece of paper across the table, a copy he had recently made of the fragmentary inventory of the imperial archives of the Chongzhen emperor, one of the last of the Bright Dynasty, who ruled before the Manchu came down from the north and established the Clear Dynasty.

On the inventory was highlighted one item: A Narrative Of A Journey Into The East, To The Lands Which Lay Across The Ocean, With Particular Attention to the Mexica, by Ling Xuan, Provincial Graduate.

Ling looked at the paper for a long time, as though puzzling out a complex mathematical equation in his head. After a long moment he spoke, his voice the sound of distant thunder. “Such a long time ago.” And then he fell silent once more.

After a lengthy silence, the old man nodded, slowly, and raised his eyes to meet Cao’s.

“Yes,” Ling said. “I am he.”

“Good,” Cao said impatiently. “Now, I am sorry to report that all that is known about your account is the title, as it was among those records lost in the transition of power from the Bright Dynasty to the Clear. My purpose for coming here to interview you is...”

“Such a long time ago, but I can remember it all, as though it were yesterday.”

Cao paused, waiting to see if the old man would speak further after his interruption. When Ling remained silence, Cao nodded again and continued, “That is good, because...”

“When we are young,” Ling said, the distant thunder growing somewhat closer, “the days crawl by. I remember summers of my youth which seemed to last for generations. But as we grow older, the months and years flit by like dragonflies, one after another in their dozens. But by the calendar, a day is still a day, is it not? Why is it, do you suppose, that the duration of a span of time should seem so different to us in one circumstance than another?”

Cao shuffled the papers before him, impatiently. “I’m sure that I don’t know. Now, as I was saying...”

“I have begun to suspect that time is, in some sense I don’t yet fully comprehend, subjective to the viewer. What a day signifies to me is quite different than what it signifies to you. How strange my day might seem, were I able to see it through your eyes.”

“Ling Xuan, I insist that you listen to, and then answer, my questions.”

“We shall see how our day looks tomorrow, shall we?” Ling Xuan rose slowly to his feet, crossed to the door, and rapped on the metal cladding with a gnarled knuckle. “Perhaps then we shall have more perspective on the subjectivity of time.”

Cao jumped to his feet, raising his voice in objection. “Ling Xuan, I insist that you return to your seat and answer my questions!”

Agent Gu opened the door, in response to the knocking sound.

Ling smiled beatifically, looking back over his shoulder at Cao. “And if I insist to the sun that it stop in its courses, and remain unmoving in the heavens, do you suppose that it will?”

With that Ling Xuan turned and walked out of the chamber, nodding slightly to Agent Gu as he passed.

Cao raced to the door, his cheeks flushed with anger. “Agent Gu, bring him to heel!”

Agent Gu glanced after the back of the retreating prisoner.

“That old man survived more than a year in the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing,” Gu answered, “and never confessed. What do you suppose that I could do that would make him talk?”

Gu walked out towards the courtyard, and Cao followed behind, his hands twisted into trembling fists at his sides.

Ling had walked out into the sunlit courtyard, and he glanced back at Cao as he sat, gracefully folds his legs under him.

“Tomorrow, don’t forget,” he called to Cao. “Perhaps that will be the day in which we find answers.”

###

Back at the Ministry of War, across the concourse from the Eastern Depot, Cao Wen sat in his small cubicle, surveying the mounds of paper before him, hundreds of notes and maps and charts, the product of months’ work.

“Cao?” an impatient voice called from behind him, startling him.

Cao turned, pulse racing, to find the imposing figure of the Deputy Minister of War standing behind him.

“Deputy Minister Wu,” Cao said breathlessly, rising to his feet and bowing.

Wu waved him to return to his seat, an annoyed expression on his bread face. “Is it too much to hope that you have completed your survey of the archives, and your report on the Mexica is finally ready to present to the Minister?”

Cao blanched, and shook his head. “Your pardon, O Honorable Deputy Minister, but while my researches are very nearly complete, I still have one final resource to investigate before my survey is ready for review.”

“I take it you refer to this prisoner of the Eastern Depot? Were you not scheduled to interview him today?”

“Yes,” Cao answered reluctantly. “But our initial meeting was not entirely... productive. It is my intention to return to the Eastern Depot tomorrow to complete his interrogation.”

“Was this Ling Xuan forthcoming with strategic details about the Mexica? The emperor is most desirous of a complete analysis of the possibilities for invasion of the Mexic isthmus, once our pacification of Fusang is complete, and the Minister of War is most eager to present the Ministry’s findings on the matter.”

“The urgency is well understood, Deputy Minister.” Cao shifted uneasily on his bench. “But I believe this final interview will provide much needed detail for the survey, and greatly improve the emperor’s understanding of the strategic possibilities.”

“I suppose you are well aware of the fact that a survey well received by the Dragon Throne will do much to enhance the estimation of a scholar so far unable to pass the juren level examinations, and would greatly aid one’s chances of advancement within the imperial bureaucracy.”

Cao brightened, and sat straighter. “Most certainly, Deputy Minister.”

“The converse, however, is also true,” Wu said, his eyes narrowed, “and a report which displeases the Minister, to say nothing of displeasing the emperor, Son of Heaven, may-he-reign-ten-thousand-years, could do irreparable damage to a young bureaucrat’s career prospects. Such a one might find himself assigned to the far provinces, inspecting grain yield and calculating annual tax levies for the rest of his life.”

Cao swallowed hard. “It is understood, Deputy Minister.”

The Deputy Minister nodded. “Good,” he said, turning and walking briskly away. “See that it is not forgotten.”

###

The next day, Cao Wen stood over Ling Xuan, who again sat in the middle of the concourse, his eyes on the shadows on the ground.

“Note the shadows of the two towers,” Ling said without looking up, before Cao had announced himself. “The spires atop each function like the points atop an equatorial sundial. If one views the many doorways opening off the central courtyard as marking the hours, the shadows indicate the time of day, with the southern tower indicating the time in the summer months, when the sun is high in the sky, and the northern tower indicating the time in the winter, when the sun is lower.”

Ling at last looked up at Cao.

“Tell me,” the old man said, “do you suppose the architects of the Eastern Depot intended the shadows for this purpose, or is this merely an auspicious happenstance, the result of nothing more than divine providence?”

Cao Wen glanced over at Agent Gu, who stood beside him, but Gu only shrugged, helplessly.

“I intend to complete our interview this morning, Ling Xuan,” Cao answered.

“Morning,” Ling Xuan replied with a smile. “Afternoon. Evening and night. Shadows measure the hours by day, and drips of water by night. But if the towers were to be moved, what would become of the hours? In the days of the Southern Song dynasty, a great astronomer named Guo Shoujing constructed at Linfen in Shanxi province a grand observatory, an intricate mechanism of bronze, perfectly aligned with the heavens. Later, in the Bright Dynasty, it was moved to Southern Capital. Though the instruments which constituted the observatory were no less intricate or precise after the move, they were intended for another geographic location and, after being relocated, no longer aligned with the heavens. The observatory no longer measured the movements of the celestial. What had been an invaluable tool became merely statuary. How many of us, removed from our proper position, likewise lose our usefulness?”

Cao tapped his foot, and scowled. He was convinced there was still meat to be found in amongst the mad offal of the old man’s ramblings, but he wasn’t sure he had the patience to find it.

“You will accompany me to the interview chamber,” Cao said, keeping his tone even, “where we can continue our conversation like civilized beings.”

“As you wish,” Ling said, smiling slightly, and rose to his feet on creaking joints.

###

“Before the establishment of the Clear Dynasty, before the Manchu rescued the Middle Kingdom from the corruption of the Bright Dynasty, you journeyed on one of the Treasure Fleet voyages to the far side of the world, traveling east to Khalifah, Mexica, and Fusang.”

It was a statement, not a question, but Cao Wen paused momentarily, nevertheless, to give Ling Xuan the opportunity to reply.

“I was a young scholar then,” Ling said, “not yet having passed my jinshi examinations and become a Presented Scholar. I traveled to the Northern Capital from my home in the south, to serve the Dragon Throne as best as I was able. My skills, apparently, were best served as chronicler aboard a Treasure Fleet dragon boat, and my skills with languages were likewise of some utility. The passage across the broad sea took long months, before landfall on the shores of Khalifah.”

“I want to ask you about Mexica. The title of your account suggests that...”

“When I served the Shunzhi emperor, I once received a legation from Khalifah. But when the Shunzhi emperor went to take his place in the heavens, and the Kangxi emperor took the Dragon Throne, Han bureaucrats such as I quickly fell from favor. The Regent Aobai reversed as many of the policies of Shunzhi as he could, attempting to reassert Manchu domination, feeling that the emperor had permitted too many Han to enter positions of authority. There were insufficient numbers of qualified Manchu to replace all of the Han serving in the bureaucracy, so Aobai had to console himself by replacing all the Han already in post with candidates more easily cowed by his authority.”

Cao sighed heavily. The old man rambled like a senile grandmother, but Cao had confirmed that he had indeed traveled among the Mexica, so he could well have the intelligence Cao needed to advance.

“To return to the subject of the Mexica...”

“I hated Aobai for years, you must understand.” The old man shook his head, sadly. “He had taken from me my life and my livelihood. When he found me too highly respected in the Office of Transmission to eliminate without scandal, he had me arraigned on trumped-up charges of treason and remanded to the

custody of the Embroidered Guard. Consider the irony, then, that eight years later, after Kangxi had reached his majority, the young emperor enlisted the aid of his uncle Songgotu in order to break free from the control of his regents, and had Aobai himself arrested on charges of usurping his authority. Aobai joined me here as a guest of the Embroidered Guard, and died soon after.”

This was all ancient history, done and buried long before Cao was born. He shifted on the bench, impatient, and tried once more to regain control of the flow of conversation.

“Ling Xuan,” Cao began, allowing the tone of his voice to raise slightly, “I must ask you to attend to my questions. I am on the urgent business of his supreme majesty, the Son of Heaven, and do not have time to waste in idle rambling.”

“But the affairs of men turn in their courses just like the tracks of the stars in the heavens above,” the old man continued, as though he hadn’t heard a word Cao had said. “I understand that in the nations of Europa they have a conception of destiny as a wheel, like that of a mill, upon which men ride up and down. Too often those who ride the wheel up fail to recall that they will someday be borne downwards again. Thirty-four years after Songgotu helped his nephew Kangxi rid himself of the influence of the Regent Aobai, Kangxi had Songgotu himself jailed, in part for his complicity in the Heir Apparent’s attempt to consolidate power. Songgotu joined us here, in the Outside Depot, for the briefest while, until Kangxi ordered him executed, without trial or confession.”

Cao Wen remembered the scandal from his youth, hearing his father and uncles talking about the purge of Songgotu and his associates from the court.

“Ling Xuan...,” Cao Wen began, but the old man went on before he could continue.

“The Heir Apparent himself, of course, is resident here now. Yinreng. We passed him in the courtyard, on our way into the interview chamber. A sad shell of a man he is, and perhaps not entirely sane. Of course, some say that the eldest prince Yinti employed Lamas to cast evil spells, the revelation of which resulted in Yinreng’s earlier pardon and release from imprisonment, and reinstatement as heir and successor to Kangxi. But when he returned to his old ways on his release, the emperor finally had him removed from the line of succession, degraded in position, and placed here in perpetual confinement. Still, he seems harmless to me, and I believe that he may have developed some lasting affection for another of the men imprisoned here, but as his leanings were the nettle which originally set his father on the path of disowning him, I suppose that isn’t to be unexpected.”

Cao Wen raised his hand, attempting again to wrestle back control of the discussion, but the old man continued, unabated.

“There are those who say that some men lie with other men as a result of an accident of birth, while others say that it is a degradation which sets upon us as we grow, an illness and not a defect. But was the Heir Apparent fated to prefer the company of men to women in the bedchamber? Did the movement of the stars through the lunar mansions in the heavens dictate the life he would lead, up to and including his end here, imprisoned behind these high, cold walls? Or did choices he made, through his life, in some sympathetic fashion affect the course of the stars through the heavens? We know that man’s destiny is linked with the heavens, but there remains the question of causation. Which is effected and which effects?”

“Ling Xuan, if you please...,” Cao said with a weary sigh. He found that he was almost willing to surrender in frustration, and simply complete his report with the information he already had to hand.

“During the Warring States period of antiquity, the philosopher Shih-shen tried to explain the non-uniform

movement of the moon as the result of man's actions. He said that, when a wise prince occupies the throne, the Moon follows the right way, and that when the prince is not wise and the ministers exercise power, the Moon loses its way. But if we presume that the ancients knew more than we do in all such matters, where would that leave the spirit of invention? The ancients, as praiseworthy as they were, could not have constructed a marvel like the Forbidden City. Can we not, then, assume that in the generations since we have likewise constructed concepts which they also could not have attempted? I like to believe that the world grows as a person does, maturing with the slow turning of years, becoming ever more knowledgeable and developed. But many would hold that such thoughts are an affront to the luminous ancestors who preceded us, and who lofty heights it is not given to us to reach. I suppose my thoughts were poisoned by the clerics of the Mexica. There, they believe that this is just the most recent of a series of worlds, and that each world increases in complexity and elegance."

Cao Wen leaned forward, cautiously optimistic. Was his patience is about to be rewarded?

But before he went on, the old man leaned back, and breathed a ragged sigh. "But perhaps these are discussions for another day. I find that my voice tires, and my thoughts run away from me. Perhaps we should continue our discussion tomorrow."

The old man rose, and went to knock on the metal-clad door.

As Agent Gu opened the door, Cao rocketed up off the bench, raising his hand to object.

"Tomorrow, then," Ling said, glancing over his shoulder as he shuffled down the passageway to the courtyard beyond.

Agent Gu just shrugged, as Cao's mouth worked, soundless and furious.

###

Back at the Ministry of War, Cao Wen looked over the paperwork he'd amassed. Spread before him were the notes he himself had taken by hand, long months before, which had led him to Ling Xuan in the first place.

Cao had been through everything in the imperial archives on the subject of the Mexica, but much of the early contact with the Mexica had occurred during the Bright Dynasty, and many of the records from those days had been lost when the Clear Dynasty took control. Worse, much of what remained was fragmentary at best. Cao had spent endless days combing through the archives, hungry for any mention of the Mexica, when he finally stumbled upon a simple inventory list of the archives from the reign of the Chongzhen emperor, the last of the Bright Dynasty. Among dozens of bureaucratic documents, in which no one had taken any interest in long years, was listed one item which caught Cao's eye, and sped the pace of his heart—a Ling Xuan's account of a Treasure Fleet voyage to Mexica.

In the weeks that followed, Cao searched unsuccessfully for the account, checking other archives and inventories, but quite by chance came across a communication from the eunuch director of the Embroidered Guard to the Office of Transmission, intended for the eyes of the Regent Aobai, listing all of the suspects temporarily housed in the Eastern Depot. The report dated from the early days of the reign of the Kangxi emperor, while the emperor had still been a child and the regency controlled the empire, before the introduction of the palace memorial. Cao very nearly returned the communication to its cubby hole without a second glance, and had he done so his researches would have been at an end. But instead he chanced to notice a name at the bottom of the communication, in amongst the hundreds of other names—Ling Xuan.

Cao had looked into the matter further, and found no burial record, nor record of any conviction, for a Ling Xuan. He had, however, discovered that Ling had once held a position of minor authority during the reign of the Shunzhi emperor.

Cao had petitioned the Deputy Minister of War for weeks to arrange the authorization to contact the Embroidered Guard in order to confirm that Ling Xuan was still imprisoned at the Eastern Depot, and once confirmation was received Cao labored another span of weeks to receive authorization to cross the concourse and interview the prisoner himself.

At the time, Cao Wen had considered it an almost unbelievable stroke of good fortune that he should chance to discover that the author of the missing account, so crucial to his survey of the Mexica, still lived. Now, having met and spent time with the old man, he was beginning to rethink that position.

###

Cao Wen stood over Ling Xuan, who sat in the middle of the courtyard.

“Why do you not move from that position, Ling Xuan?”

“But I am always moving, though I do not unfold my legs from beneath me.” The old man looked up at Cao with shaded eyes, and smiled. “I move because the Earth moves, and with it I go. As Lo-hsia-Hung of the Western Han Dynasty said, ‘The Earth moves constantly but people do not know it. They are as persons in a closed boat, and when it proceeds they do not perceive it.’”

“You speak a great deal of astronomy, and yet the records indicate that you served in the Office of Transmission. But the study of the heavens is forbidden to all but the imperial astronomers.”

“When I was first brought to the Eastern Depot,” Ling explained, a distant look in his eyes, “I was interred for some time in the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing. The days were long and full of pain, but the nights were largely my own. In my narrow, dank cell, I sat the long watches of the night, unable to see a patch of clear sky. However, there was a small hole cut high in the wall, for ventilation, and I learned that it opened onto the adjacent cell. In that cell was a dismissed minister, previously the head of the Directory of Astronomy. His name was Cui, high mountain. He had offended the Regent Aobai in the days after the death of the Shanzhi emperor.”

Ling drew a ragged sigh, and averted his eyes before continuing.

“We helped one another survive through those weeks and months. I told the astronomer tales of my travels across the oceans, and he told me everything he had ever learned about the heavens.”

Ling stood up on creaking joints, and faced Cao.

“One night, the cell next to mine was silent, and the night after that, another voice answered when I called through the vent. I never learned what became of my friend, but I remember every word he ever spoke to me.”

With that, the old man turned and started towards the interview chamber, where Agent Gu stood by the open door.

“Come along,” Ling called back over his shoulder to Cao, who lingered in the sunny yard. “You wanted to discuss the Mexica, did you not?”

###

Cao sat at the worn table, and pulled a leather tube from the folds of his robe. Removing a cap from the tube's end, he pulled out a rolled sheaf of paper and, setting the tube to one side, arranged the papers before him, meticulously. Ling Xuan looked on, dispassionately.

Finally, his notes arranged to his satisfaction, and with an inked brush in hand, Cao began to speak, impatiently. "I have already spent the better part of a year in my survey of the Mexica, Ling Xuan, and I would very much like to complete my report before another year begins."

"But which year, yes?" Ling asked, raising an eyebrow. "We in the Middle Kingdom know two. The twenty-four solar nodes of the farmer's calendar, and the twelve or thirteen lunar months of the lunisolar calendar. The Mexica had more than one calendar, too."

Cao sighed. He had little interest in a repeat of the previous days' performance, and yet here he was, about to assay the same role. "Ling Xuan..."

"The Mexica have a solar calendar, which like our own was made up of 365 days," the old man interrupted before Cao could continue. "Can you imagine it? Two cultures, so different and divided by history and geography, and yet we parcel out time in the same allotments. But unlike us, the Mexica divide their solar year into eighteen months of twenty days each, leaving aside five more, which they call 'empty days.' These are days of ill omen, when no work or ritual is to be performed."

"That's very interesting," Cao said, in a rush, "but to return to the subject at hand..."

"But like us, they are not satisfied with only one calendrical system," Ling continued, undaunted. "In addition to their solar year, they have a second calendar of 260 days, marked out by interlocking cycles of twenty day signs and thirteen numbers. Again, reminiscent of our own system of element and animal, wouldn't you say?"

"I suppose so," Cao agreed, weakly.

"But the Mexica have another calendar, on a scale even grander than the other two. In the capital city of the Mexica, Place of the Stone Cactus, there is a massive circular stone, thicker than a child is tall and wider than the height of two men. This is a calendar too, of a sort, but while the other calendars measure the passage of days, months, and years, this massive calendar of stone is used to measure the passage of worlds themselves. As I told you, the Mexica believe that this is the fifth and most recent world created by the gods. They believe that this world was constructed only a few hundred years ago, in the year 13-Reed, and that its peoples and cultures were put in place, fully formed and with their histories already in place, as a test of the Mexica's faith."

"You traveled to the capital of the Mexica?" Cao asked, sitting forward, readying his brush over a blank sheet of paper.

"Yes," the old man answered, a faraway look in his eyes, "a party of us, along with the commander of the Treasure Fleet, traveled overland for long days and weeks before we reached the heart of the Mexic empire. Their city of Place of the Stone Cactus was as large and grand as the Northern Capital itself, hundreds of thousands of men and women toiling away in the service of their emperor."

Ling Xuan's eyes fluttered close for a brief moment, and he swayed, momentarily lost in thought.

"The Mexica know when this world will end," he went on. "It will come in the year of 4-Movement, when the world's calendar has run its course. But which cycle, yes? In Place of the Stone Cactus, I saw steam-powered automatons of riveted bronze, which symbolically represented the jaguars, hurricanes,

fires, and rains which destroyed the previous worlds.”

Cao Wen brush raced down the page in precise movements, as he took careful notes. “Steam-powered, you say?”

Ling Xuan nodded. “Yes, and while the Mexica had never before seen a horse, they had steam-powered trolleys that could carry them back and forth across the breadth of their broad valley in a twinkling.”

“What of their military capacity?” Cao asked, eagerly. “Were you given any glimpse of their level of armament?”

Ling Xuan blinked slowly. “I did, in fact, spent considerable time with an officer of their army, an Eagle Knight of the first rank. I was one of the few to have learned the rudiments of Nahuatl, the Mexica’s tongue, and as such I was appointed to tour their city and report back what I’d learned, and Hummingbird Feather was to be my guide.”

Ling Xuan’s dropped his gaze, and his eyes came to rest on the leather tube at the edge of the table, in which Cao Wen had brought his notes.

“This reminds me of something,” the old man said, pointing at the tube.

“Something to do with the Mexica?”

The old man nodded, slowly, his eyes not leaving the tube. Then he shook his head, once, leaving Cao unsure whether the old man had meant to reply in the affirmative, in the negative, or if in fact he’d replied at all.

“I remember something my friend Cui told me. A metal tube capped on either end by ground glass lenses, used for far viewing. A Remote-Viewing Mirror, he called it. A tool employed by the Directorate of Astronomy. Have you heard of such a thing?”

Cao nodded, impatiently. “Yes, I believe I’ve seen them in operation. What of it?”

“I would very much like to see such a device for myself. My eyes are not as strong as they once were, and it would be a welcome sight to see the shapes upon the moon’s surface. If you could arrange such a thing, I would be happy to tell you all I saw of the Mexica’s armament and defenses.”

Then the old man rose, rapped on the door, and disappeared from view, leaving Cao in the room with his notes, his brush, and his questions.

###

It took Cao Wen several days to receive authorization from the Deputy Minister of War to requisition the far-seeing device from the Directorate of Astronomy, several more days to locate the bureaucrat within the Directorate who was responsible for materiel and equipment, and an additional week of wheedling and cajoling to get the astronomer to recognize the authority of the Deputy Minister’s order.

Cao tried on several occasions in the interval to renew his interview with Ling Xuan, but every attempt failed. Each time, the old man would look up at him, blink slowly, and ask whether Cao carried the far-seeing device. When he saw that Cao did not, Ling would turn his eyes back to the ground, watching the shadows in their slow course across the ground.

Finally, Cao managed to retrieve the device from the Directorate of Astronomy, and a short while later

sat in the interview room, carefully removing the device from its protective sheath. He present the object to Ling Xuan, with Agent Gu standing by as witness.

While Ling turned the device over in his hands, eyes glistening and mouth open in wonder, Cao read aloud from an official release document, signed with the chop of the Head Director of Astronomy, and countersigned by the Deputy Minister of War. “This far viewing device, the Remote-Viewing Mirror, remains the property of the Directorate of Astronomy, as decreed by his majesty the emperor, but by special order of the Deputy Minister of War, it is being loaned for a short time to one Ling Xuan, a temporary resident at the Outside Depot of the Embroidered Guard. Be it known that this Ling Xuan is not to allow the Remote-Viewing Mirror to pass into any hands other than his own, nor is he to reveal the details of its manufacture to any but those parties determined by imperial decree as worthy to hold such knowledge.”

Cao paused, and glanced up from the document at the old man, whose eyes were fixed on the device in his hands.

“Ling Xuan, do you understand these terms?”

The old man simply held the device up for a closer inspection, marveling.

“Temporary Resident Ling,” Agent Gu said, his tone martial, stepping forward incrementally and looming over the old man as menacingly as he was able. “Do you understand the terms as recited to you?”

Ling Xuan nodded, absently. “Yes, yes, of course.”

“Thank you for bearing witness, Agent Gu.” Cao nodded to Gu, and motioned him towards the door. “Now, with your permission, I would like at this point to continue my interview with Ling Xuan.”

Agent Gu bowed, crossed the floor, and closed the door behind him as he left.

“Now,” Cao said to the old man, his tone turning dark, “let us talk about the Mexica.”

Ling Xuan held the Remote-Viewing Mirror lovingly and, without lifting his eyes from the device, began to speak.

###

“Hummingbird Feather, who I like to think became my friend in the weeks we stayed in Place of the Stone Cactus, explained to me the structure of the army of the Mexica. He was an Eagle Knight, and a Quauhyahcatl, or a Great Captain of the Mexic army, meaning that he had taken five foreign captives in combat. When the Treasure Fleet arrived, though, the Mexica had not gone to war against their neighbors in almost a generation. And so they fought, instead, the War of the Flowers.

“The army of the Mexica is organized into Banners of twenty men each—and here, too, we hear echoes of our own culture, do we not? So like the Banners of our Manchu masters, yes? In any case, twenty of such banners make up a battalion of four hundred men, and twenty of these an army of eight thousand. The best warriors were inducted into the orders of the Jaguar and the Eagle, and advancement was measured by how many captives one took while in battle. In times of peace, though, there were no captives to be had, and how then to measure one’s worth?

“The Mexica challenge their neighbors to fight in a War of the Flowers. We were lucky enough to arrive in Place of the Stone Cactus during one of these ceremonial tournaments. The armies of the Mexica and those of their neighbors gather in the broad plains beyond the valley of the Stone Cactus, and meet in

mock combat. Though the blows are not killing blows, and no blood is spilled on the plains, the stakes are no less high than in warfare. The combatants in the War of the Flowers take prisoners, capturing their defeated foes, and when each side decides that it has taken enough prisoners, the battle is ended. The side which has captured the most of its enemy is declared the winner, and the two armies return home with their spoils. The captives are executed or enslaved, depending on the moods of their captors.

“In this way, the army of the Mexica are able to keep their martial skills honed and ready, even when there is no enemy to be bested.”

Cao scarcely looked up from his notes, his brush flying across the page.

“Yes, yes,” Cao said, eagerly. “Now, how do the generals of the armies communicate their orders to the officers of the banners, and how do the banners’ leaders communicate the orders on to their subordinates?”

###

Days passed, and Cao Wen returned again and again to the Outside Depot, filling page after page with notes on the Mexica, dictated by the old man. He’d originally hoped for one or two choice facts with which to spice his survey, and after long frustrated weeks, wrangling the incommunicative prisoner, he’d begun to doubt that he’d get even that much. Now, though, it seemed that flood gates had opened, and the old man was providing more detailed information than Cao had dreamed possible. Now, the thought of advancement within the ministry as reward for all his efforts, which he’d originally held as a slender hope, now seemed a very achievable goal.

This morning, the old man was waiting for him in the interview room, the Remote-Viewing Mirror in his lap.

“I think we near the end of our cycle of interviews, Ling Xuan,” Cao said, not bothering with pleasantries. He slid onto the bench across the table from the old man, and arranged his papers and brushes before him. “I need just one final bit of information, and my report will be complete. I’m not sure just what it is, yet, but I believe that you must have it within you. I want to hear more about the automation of the Mexica. From what you describe, it sounds as though their technological development has taken a different path than our own, but that they seem not far behind us.”

Ling looked up, smiling.

“I was able to spend long hours last night, watching the skies through this remarkable device. Agent Gu was kind enough to allow me to remain in the courtyard all hours, and so I had a much fuller view of the heavens than I am allowed from my small window.” The old man lifted the Remote-Viewing Mirror to his right eye and, squeezing his left eye shut, peered through the device at Cao, sitting across from him. Then he laughed, a soft, strong noise like distant peals of thunder, and continued. “I have been following the path of Fire Star across the heavens. In the last few months, it has risen in the early hours of the morning, rising earlier and earlier every day, tracking steadily eastward across the sky. Just a few week ago, it rose shortly after sunset, and the most remarkable thing occurred. Cui had told me about it, but until this occasion I had never had opportunity to see it for myself. Fire Star seemed to stop in the heavens, and then turned back, now moving westward across the skies. Now it rises at sunset, tracks westward across the sky, and sets by dawn. In another few weeks, if what Cui told me holds true, it will reverse course again, moving once more eastward across the sky, rising earlier and earlier until it once again rises at dawn and sets at dusk.”

“Fascinating,” Cao said, without feeling. “Now, to return to the Mexica...”

“There are shapes, shadows, and lines upon the surface of Fire Star, I have found. This most ingenious device allows me to see them with my own eye.”

“The automatons of the Mexica, Ling Xuan,” Cao repeated. “Now, you say that they are little more than parlor tricks, fixed in place and able to go through only rote motions. But did the Mexica display the capacity to develop these trinkets into something more. A siege engine of sorts, perhaps?”

“Cui told me that the best astronomers of his time felt that these wandering stars were worlds such as our own. Tell me, do you suppose if that is so, it might not be peopled with beings such as ourselves?”

“Ling Xuan...” Cao began, rubbing the bridge of his nose, his tone menacing.

The old man, his eyes half-lidded, sways on his bench, like a tall tree blown by a high wind. “I’m tired, Cao Wen. Too many late nights and early mornings, too little sleep. Let us continue tomorrow, yes? I am sure I will be in better spirits then, and better able to hear your questions.”

Ling stood, and knocked on the door.

“But...” Cao began, and then trailed off as the old man exited after Agent Gu swung open the door. Cao sighed, dramatically, and shrugged. He had waited this long. What harm could another day do? But if by then the end of the next day he did not have the answers he needed...?

Cao felt his patience was at an end. He gathered up his papers, and to the empty room he said, “Tomorrow, then.”

###

The next day found Cao Wen and Ling Xuan back in their accustomed places.

Ling seemed more lucid and animated today, and didn’t wait for Cao to initiate their discussion before returning to their perennial topic of conversation. “All of this talk of the Mexica has reminded me of something I’ve long since forgotten. A salient fact about the culture of the Mexica that I did not realize until years after my visit to their empire.”

“What is it?” Cao asked, warily.

“It is one final fact which you must have for your survey. It is something about the culture of the Mexica which I have realized only later in life, which is the reason that the Dragon Throne will prevail, if it should go to war against them. But in exchange for this final bit of information, I request one last favor.”

Cao glanced at the Remote-Viewing Mirror, clutched as always in the old man’s gnarled hands. What would the old man want this time?

“I would go, just once more, beyond the walls of the Eastern Depot. From my vantage point within the Outside Depot, there is only so much of the night sky I can see, and there is so, so much more to behold.”

Cao straightened, and folded his arms across his chest. “Absolutely not,” he said, sharply. “Out of the question.” Cao rubbed the bridge of his nose, and tried to compose an appropriate counter offer. “No. Instead, if you don’t tell me what I want to know, you will be punished. Yes, and I will have the Remote-Viewing Mirror taken from you.”

Ling shrugged, unmoved. “I have seen the heavens with my own eyes, from within my little box. If you

take away my vision, I will still have my memories, but if I am unable to venture beyond these walls, my memories will be all I have, anyway. What have I to lose?"

Cao jumped to his feet, and began furiously to pace the floor.

"This is unseemly, Ling Xuan. This is unacceptable."

"And yet it is happening," Ling said, his expression serene.

Cao Wen stormed to the door, and pounded loudly with the heel of his fist.

Gu opened the door, his expression curious.

"Agent Gu, remove this prisoner from my sight immediately!" Cao Wen said imperiously.

Gu looks from Cao to Ling and back, shrugged, and took the old man by the elbow, leading him slowly from the chamber. "This way, old man."

Cao collapsed back onto his seat, glowering.

###

Cao Wen sat on the hard, unforgiving bench, waiting while bureaucrats shuffled back and forth across the polished floors of the Ministry of War, about the business of the empire.

Cao didn't have to test the old man's resolve. He knew that Ling meant what he said. If Ling said he wouldn't answer any further questions without receiving his boon, he wouldn't speak another word. Not another useful word, at least.

"Deputy Minister Wu will see you now, Cao Wen," said a steward, appearing at the open door.

Cao swallowed hard, rose to his feet, and crossed the floor.

"O Honorable Deputy Minister," Cao said, bowing low.

The imposing figure of the Deputy Minister Wu was crowded into a spare, simply-made chair on the far side of the room. There was a low table at his side, covered with rolled maps, bound sheaves of paper, and small notebooks. At his elbow stood his secretary, a weasel-faced man with ink-stained fingers who recorded everything said in the room in exhaustive detail.

"Cao Wen," the Deputy Minister said, a faint smile on his thick lips. "I harbor hopes that you come to deliver your survey of the Mexica."

"Not quite yet, this one is afraid to report," Cao Wen answered, his voice tremulous.

"Why am I not surprised?"

"My interrogation of the prisoner Ling Xuan these last weeks has been exceedingly productive," Cao continued. "I believe that, with one final addition, it will be complete and ready to present to the Minister of War."

"And then on to the Dragon Throne itself?: Wu asked, eyes narrowed.

Cao Wen swelled with pride, but his voice wavered nervously when he answered. "Yes, Deputy

Minister. I believe it will not only summarize the strengths and weaknesses of the Mexic military, but the survey should further provide a sound justification for why the Middle Kingdom will inevitably defeat the Mexic militarily, should it come to open warfare.”

“And what is this last addition, one wonders, and what is it that the Ministry of War will be asked to authorize in its pursuit?”

With as little detail and as briefly as possible, Cao explained that the old man who was his primary source for the report had requested one night beyond the walls of the Eastern Depot, in exchange for his final testimony.

“For what purpose?” Wu asked, when Cao had completed his summation. “Some conjugal business, perhaps? A fine meal, or an evening of drunken revelry?”

“No,” Cao said simply. “Star-gazing.”

Wu looked at Cao, disbelieving. “And in return for this small privilege, we will get the secret to defeating the Mexica?”

“Yes,” Cao said.

The Deputy Minister steeped his fingers, and pursed his thick lips.

“Having paid quite a lot to get this far along in the game, Cao Wen, it seems a shame to withdraw when there is just one final wager to make. You will have your authorization. But return with this storied survey in hand, or don’t bother returning at all.”

Cao bowed, deeply, and scuttled away.

###

Three days later, approaching the middle watches of the night, Cao Wen arrived at the Eastern Depot, where he was met by Director Fei Ren.

“I am not happy with this development,” Director Fei said, as though his expression was not explanation enough, “but the Deputy Minister of War has managed to get the approval of the emperor himself for this little excursion, so there isn’t anything I can do about it.”

Before Cao could reply, Agent Gu arrived, escorting Ling Xuan.

“Temporary Resident Ling Xuan,” Director Fei said, turning to the old man. “Know that a great many bureaucrats have been put to a great deal of trouble on his behalf.”

The old man just smiled, clutching the Remote-Viewing Mirror to his chest.

“You have until sunrise, old man,” Director Fei said, and then turned his attentions to Agent Gu. “This is your first mission beyond the walls of the Eastern Depot, is it not, Gu?”

Agent Gu bowed, and stammered a reply in the affirmation.

“Such was my recollection.” Fei looked from the old man to Gu, and scowled. “If Ling Xuan attempts to escape, know that you are free to take whatever means are necessary to insure that our temporary resident returns home to the Eastern Depot.”

“Yes, sir, Director,” Agent Gu said, punctuated by a further bow.

With that, Director Fei turned on his heel, and disappeared back into the labyrinth of the Eastern Depot.

“Let’s get on with it,” Cao said, impatiently.

With Cao on one side, and Agent Gu on the other, Ling Xuan passed through the archway and into the concourse beyond, walking out of the Eastern Depot for the first time in more than fifty years.

###

They threaded through the boulevards and avenues of the Northern Capital, lined on all sides with the offices of the Six Ministries and countless imperial directorates and bureaus. They came at least to a public square, far from the palace, surrounded by low buildings, inns and residence of the meaner sort. Lamplights glowed warmly from within them, but the sky overhead was dark and moonless, the stars glittering like gems against black silk.

Ling Xuan paused, and took a deep breath through his nostrils, looking up at the skies with his naked eye. “I have been imprisoned behind four walls for more than half of my life, but I have come to realize that my mind has been imprisoned even longer. The noble truths that Cui taught me through that little vent, while we were guests of the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing, were far grander and broader than anything I’d previously imagined. I have seen more of the world than many, read more than most, and yet even I had only the most tenuous grasp of reality.”

Above them, the stars in the heavens seem to turn while they watched, and Cao found himself becoming dizzy, vertiginous.

“Do you know why my friend Cui was imprisoned in the Bureau of Suppression and Soothing?” the old man continued, glancing momentarily down from the stars to the two men at this side. “It was widely reported, so he said, that it was because he had provided readings of the heavens which were inauspicious for the regent’s reign. In fact, that was not his crime. Cui challenged the accepted wisdom. He devoted his life to studying the heavens, and made a frightening discovery. Our world is not, as we have always believed, the center of the universe, with the sun, moon, and stars twirling around us. Through a careful study of the heavens, Cui came to realize that, in fact, our world was just one of many, all of which circled around the sun. What is more, he claimed that the stars themselves might be other suns, out in the distant heavens. Perhaps a small fraction of those other suns might have worlds of their own, and some small fraction of those might be peopled. We might not be the only beings in creation able to look upon ourselves and wonder.” The old man paused, and smiled ruefully. “Of course, this offended the Regent Aobai, who was convinced Cui had concocted his theory only to insult the young Kangxi emperor.”

Agent Gu shook his head in disbelief, when the old man fell silent. “The earth circle around the sun? You might as well say that the Dragon Throne exists to serve me, and not the other way around.”

“You might indeed.” Ling smiled, his eyes twinkling.

Cao swayed on his feet. He felt unsteady, as though he stood on the edge of a precipice, about to fall into the abyss.

“Ling Xuan, you promised me one final fact about the Mexica,” Cao said, uneasily.

“So I did,” Ling said, nodding. “So I did. And I will tell you. It is this.”

The old man leaned closer to Cao, and spoke softly, like thunder more distant than ever before, as though he were communicating some secret in confidence which he didn't want the stars above to overhear.

"The Mexica, as clever and bright and ferocious as they may be, are still blinded by their faith. The most learned among them honestly believes that the world is but a few hundred years old, and all evidence to the contrary is merely a test of their faith. We of the Middle Kingdom, I would argue, cling with as much tenacity to beliefs and superstitions no more grounded in reality than that, but with one notable difference. Ours is a culture that can produce a mind like Cui's, a mind which challenges received wisdom, which questions the foundations of knowledge itself. If we manage to produce only one like him in every dozen generations, we will still manage, in the fullness of time, to conquer the universe. Like the fraction of worlds of the fraction of stars in the great immensity of the heavens, that ensure that we are not alone, just one small spark of genius in the vast sea of complacency will mean that history does not stand still."

Ling Xuan turned, and headed back the way they had come.

"I am ready to return home to my cell now, thank you," the old man said, calling back to Cao and Gu over his shoulder. "I have seen all I needed to see."

###

The next morning, as Cao Wen struggled to work out how to conclude his report, he received a visitor to his cubicle in the Ministry of War. It was Agent Gu, dressed in simple gray robes.

"Gu? What are you doing here?"

"At the request of Director Fei, I come to tell you that Ling Xuan, temporary resident of the Outside Depot, died in the night. From all signs, it was not a suicide, nor is there any indication of foul play."

Cao blinked, a confused expression spread across his face.

"The old man died?"

"Yes," Gu replied. "Of extreme old age, or so I am given to understand."

"And yet he waited long enough to walk once more under the stars as a free man," Cao observed.

"Perhaps he felt that it was important enough to live for," Gu said, unsure, "and having done so, his work was done."

Cao sighed, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Strange timing, and no doubt, but he was old, and the elderly have a habit of dying." Cao regarded Gu's plain gray robes. "But here you are, beyond the walls of the Eastern Depot yourself, and so adorned that you could pass for a simple merchant in the streets."

"Yes," Agent Gu said, with a smile that commingled embarrassment and pride. "It is the opinion of Director Fei that I have completed my training, and will be of better use to the Dragon Throne beyond the walls, rather than within." Gu paused, and shifted uncomfortably. "Cao Wen, I must ask you. What are your thoughts about the things that Ling Xuan said to us in the night, about the sun and the earth and the stars, about the Middle Kingdom and the Mexica and all?"

Cao Wen shrugged. "All I can say is that everything Ling reported to me these long weeks has been true,

as far as I have been able to determine, the intelligence on the Mexica and the facts the old man learned from Astronomer Cui alike. But who am I to judge?"

Agent Gu nodded, absently, and with a final bow, departed, leaving Cao with his work.

There remained only a few more characters to brush onto the final page, and then Cao's detailed report on the astronomer Cui was complete. This appended to his report about the Mexica, Cao rolled up the papers and slid them into a leather tube. Then he rose to his feet, arranged his robes around him, and headed towards the office of the Deputy Minister to hand in his survey.