

THE STONE OF WAR AND THE NIGHTINGALE'S EGG

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If you ask me, an empire ought to act regal and not pretend to be his own jester. Jokes are proper or fitting for royalty-especially not when they're played on somebody smarter than the monarch.

And that Sun Zoo fellow, he was plenty smart. Never seen any smarter. It was because of him and his teachings that I was there to begin with-his last patron was a better pupil than my poor lady and with the help of Sun Zoo's teachings managed to conquer my people entirely, though we had Seen barons of the burren for some time.

Even I'd have to say we were always better at raw courage and combat than we were at cunning and treachery. Sun Zoo was the one who coined the phrase about all being fair in war-meaning he had no honor, which was practical of him, since honor is of very little use to the vanquished.

It's an out-and-out disability in a slave, which is why it's more a property of officers, who are ransom-able, than enlisted personnel, who are more likely to endure captivity of a more permanent nature, if they're not killed outright. Footsoldiers tend to be pragmatic, yours humbly, dishonorably, but viably included.

In some ways, harem life made a fine retirement for me. I was getting on in years for the rough stuff, toward the time when perhaps I ought to think about settling down and having a family it remained to me to have. Much past twenty-five and you start to lose your edge for battle.

I was lucky enough to be sold to the emperor himself, who was skeptical about the practice of keeping eunuchs to look after his ladies. And while it was true enough that the ladies had their jealousies and intrigues, I was used to being in an all-female outfit and catfights were nothing new to me. These women got to share one man among them, after all, whereas my comrades and I got none whatsoever until we were demobbed. The women among my people live and fight together in separate units from the men, you see, since we're bound to refrain from becoming mothers until we've ceased being warriors. Enemies have speculated that the practice is what made our warriors of both sexes so ferocious.

The emperor's newest concubine arrived the same day I did. We were both brought before the Tai-Tai, the number one wife. The concubine was a fourteen-year-old from the Caucasus with delicate coloring, masses of hair, and a body of the pneumatic type common in the emperor's harem, by which I took it that Himself preferred it. I fit the type, as well, and had always required special adjustments in my armor to keep my bosom out of my bowstring.

"So," said Tai-Tai, "a barbarian child, a barbarian hag-no doubt you will be good company for each other. You, woman, have you a name?" she asked me.

"Madame, I do, madame." I pulled myself upright and at attention in more ways than one. You didn't want to be inattentive around this one. She had about her the look of a lazy leopardess with all the world as her prey. She was also the mother of the emperor's eldest daughter. So far he had no sons, but he hadn't been emperor very long.

"Well, then, what is it?" she asked.

"If it please you, madame, Boadecia."

"A stupid name, and ugly," she said, evidently never having heard of the queen for whom many of my generation were named that we had to assign numbers and nicknames to keep ourselves straight. There was Big Boadecia and Blond Boadecia and Bloody Boadecia, who was our captain before her death. I myself was actually surnamed for those impediments to archery which had landed me my current position.

Tai-Tai seemed to be expecting an answer so I added, "As you say, madame." I tried to think of my captivity as just another change of command, you see, and her as just another officer.

"I do say, but it suits you. Boadecia, you will be maid to-excuse me, urchin, what is your name?" This was a deliberate insult, you see, that I, the slave, was asked to introduce myself before my superior. Fortunately for me the new girl wasn't the hoity-toity sort.

"Karoly, Tai-Tai," the Caucasian urchin said and, evidently mistaking her new overlady for the maternal type, ottered her one of the dimpled smiles that would soon endear her to the emperor.

"Another stupid name, unfit for a concubine of His Majesty. You shall be called lien-Lotus. She let it sink in and then said with a laugh that included every other woman there except Karoly/Lotus. "A lotus, after all, comes from the mud just as this person comes from nowhere of any consequence."

It wasn't much of a joke but the other women apparently knew better than to refrain from laughing, while the girl grinned foolishly.

Karoly/Lotus and I got on well enough considering that in my opinion she had been weaned too early and was eager to please to an extent that made her look more foolish than she was. She was frivolous enough that she was almost as foolish as she seemed. In her opinion, I was deficient in the arts of wardrobe maintenance and hair dressing.

"Bodie, His Majesty adores long hair. Why do you persist in wrapping mine around my head like some outlandish turban instead of making it look longer and fuller?"

"Mistress, loose hair is a weapon in the enemy's hand," I told her, repeating the aphorism I had learned at my mother's knee. "Women of my people cut ours when we begin our course and it is never longer than our helmets throughout our careers."

"We are not among your people," she reminded us, "and far from being an enemy, His Majesty is exceedingly friendly to me and I wish him to put his hands in my hair."

In the bath she would say, "Bodie, do not scrub so hard. I am so raw when you're done that when you splash on my perfume it stings my skin."

"Mistress, a good scrubbing eliminates fleas and lice and smells which would reveal you to your foes. It is bracing, or at least, my horse and I always found it so."

"Bodie, I have never had fleas or lice in my life and His Majesty says my essence is like unto the heady fragrance of a Persian garden. Besides, I trust my skin is more delicate than that of your horse-and certainly more so than your own."

I trusted she would in time overcome her objections, however, and benefit from the wisdom of my ministrations. Certainly she had objected loudly enough to the makeup and wardrobe I had selected for her.

"Bodie, you stupid woman! This looks like war paint! And all this black leather and netting look as if I have a date with a condemned man, not an emperor."

"But, mistress, leather is durable and easy to maintain and the net keeps it from being over-warm." I didn't even attempt to answer her slander about the

makeup. I had copied that pattern from the one I beheld on the face of the Queen herself before her fall.

"But I am chosen because of my youth and freshness and this makes me look like a, like a, well, not like the other ladies. Observe."

"Indeed, you do not look like those hussies," I whispered-but very carefully, as the walls had ears and I did not wish my own to join them, separated from my body. "They all look the same in their wafty silks and brocades and bright colors. I wonder that the emperor can tell who's in his bed so alike are they! But very well, I'll find you a change..."

"No time, no time!" she had said, and shooed me out as His Majesty came in.

Later, she reported that His Majesty found her countenance exciting and required that I invent some similarly unusual aspect for her every time he visited-which was more and more often. She acquired at this time a great deal of jewelry, and there, at least, she could not fault me. My armor always got the highest commendation from my officers and was an example

my subordinates. I polished the emerald collar he sent her, and the golden torque. I even shined up the bars on the cage of the mechanical gem-studded nightingale that came complete with a life-size ruby egg.

As you may surmise from his generosity, the emperor was so pleased with my mistress that he spent a great deal of his time with her and I heard, in passing, that the Tai-Tai was alarmed lest this newcomer who got herself up in such "masculine" array might have a son by His Majesty and gain favor above all of the other ladies.

Thus, the coming of Sun Zoo played right into her hands.

He swept into court one day, looking austere and dangerous, his black eyes dancing at the opulence surrounding him while his false smile showed many teeth and his voice held the hint of a sacrifice in wicker knickers on Midsummer Eve, which I wished he was, the bastard. "Your Majesty, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Court, I have come to present to your eminence my sublime new and improved, tried and tested and one hundred percent guaranteed method of conducting warfare. To prove to you how extraordinary my formula is, Your Majesty, I will offer a free demonstration with no obligation to yourself, turn any member of your court into a man or soldier within a week."

The emperor laughed. Unfortunately for him and for my poor lady, Sun Zoo's fame had not yet proceeded him. "A week! Impossible. Why, it took me years to train for the field myself, not to mention that I've ever had to use it."

"Nonetheless, a week."

Naturally, I knew when he said this, if not by his very aspect, that sorcery definitely had to be involved in such a promise. I burned to learn what his secret might be, since he was the cause of the downfall of my people and the cause for me being consigned to this stagnant backwater of femininity where preferred conversation was what one should eat to ensure that one would give birth to a male child rather than what one could wield to ensure the death of someone else's.

I was soon to get my chance, for once the emperor had had Sun Zoo settled in the Court Astrologer's wing, he could contain himself no longer and laughed aloud. "Imagine that fellow making a soldier of anyone in a week, he says! What does he think my guards are? Women?"

Before I had time to resent that, the Tai-Tai was leaning into his ear and whispering, giggling. He laughed uproariously at that. "Even so, my love! A perfect test! Put that fellow in his place!"

Some taunted me that it was the costume I devised for her that made His Majesty think of my poor Lady Lotus as Sun Zoo's impossible "test case" for his theories. I knew better, of course, that it was Tai-Tai, more afraid of Lotus than of all the other ladies and determined to put a

end to her.

That evening when the court was gathered for dinner, the guest at the empire's right hand Tai-Tai on the left, myself attending Lady Lotus as the other maids attended their own ladies, the emperor of the empire made his announcement with many a wink and barely controlled chuckle. "Master Sun, I've been considering your offer and I have decided that you may have a chance to demonstrate your skills."

"You will not be sorry, Your Majesty. Only show me who you wish me to train!"

"You're sitting next to her," the King replied. "The Lady Lotus will be your trainee. In one week you must turn her into such a fine soldier that she can best ten of my ablest guardsmen."

Sun Zoo cast a lascivious eye on Lotus. "Her? Come, come, Majesty, she looks to me as if she could take them on right now."

I should have poisoned his wine then and there.

Since I did not, the next morning the whole court turned out to watch Sun Zoo turn little Lotus into a soldier. I could have told him it was a lost cause.

He very much looked the part of the martial instructor-black leather armor, mack leather gauntlets and a helm with menacing nosepiece with a red stone set in it about the size and color of the egg in the nest of the jeweled nightingale His Majesty had given Lotus the week before. He exuded menace and authority but it was lost on Lotus.

She couldn't even lift the sword. Her breasts got in the way of the box, as I could have told him, and she blushed and dissolved in giggles when he tried to teach her hand-to-hand combat and cried when he dumped her on her shapely behind.

She was such a disgrace to womankind that even His Majesty began to feel disgusted with her, though it was on Sun Zoo that he vented his disgust. "Ban! Your claims are worthless. You can't make even a young girl follow your orders!"

"That is because she is undisciplined, Majesty. Such lack of discipline, as you know, can only be remedied by absolute authority."

"You have it."

"Did you hear that, Lady?"

She giggled.

In despair he tore off his gauntlets, and threw up his hands. "Very well, go to your quarters."

and consider your duty to your master, if not me. I will expect better of you on the morrow there will be dire consequences."

Poor little Lotus couldn't stop blushing or giggling. The Tai-Tai and the others looked surprised. I couldn't understand why, if Sun Zoo had the magic to do as he said, he would embarrass himself and her by not using it right away. Therefore, I resolved to find out because I could. This encounter was going very badly for Lady Lotus. She, who had heretofore faced nothing more unpleasant in her life than being given to a potentate for carnal tasks she was only too willing to perform, had little idea just how nasty some people could be. I blamed the Tai-Tai entirely and used her own weapons against her that night.

When my poor little lady was fast asleep in her chamber, exhausted by making such a poor showing throughout the day, I put to use all of the things I had learned from her and the other ladies that were pleasing to men of a certain type. I lined my eyes with Lotus's kohl cake and nibbed red berry juice into my lips and cheeks. I fluffed out my hair, by now grown to rather luxurious length, as she liked hers done and braided flowers into it. Then I borrowed one of the sheer silky robes she liked to wear around the harem. It cast a rosy glow over my flesh but little else to conceal it. Over all of this I drew one of the black capes the women use to protect their finery and their identities when abroad on the palace grounds. Thus attired, I made my way to the astrologer's tower, the location of which I had earlier ascertained while in conversation with one of the guards.

The sorcerer was in. "Ah, what is this, a little gift from the emperor to apologize for sending me such an inept pupil?" he asked when I presented myself, having left the cloak outside the door.

"Something like that," I said with the smile I reserve for wounded enemies. "I have come with a great one, on behalf of my mistress."

"That stupid girl! She's embarrassing me in front of the entire court. My methods have worked beautifully on entire armies but I have never before had an army that blushed and giggled or wept and refused to meet my gaze."

I let my fingers walk up his sword arm. "My lady is young and pampered and with strong female urges that only respond to a man of your power in one way, and that is not an appropriate way for her to respond, to you while her husband is looking on, if you take my meaning? But I'll meet your gaze, master. What exactly do you want me to look at?"

He laughed. "Bold piece, aren't you? Just a moment."

I pretended not to look while he found his magic implement-it seemed to be connected with the helmet he wore for training. "Meet my gaze then, wench," he ordered.

I carefully avoided looking at the red gem in the middle of the nosepiece, and gave him

sidelong glance first, and gasped. "Oh. Oh, my. Well, sir, I can certainly see my lady's problem. The sheer raw masculine power you exude when you put that on is just too much woman to withstand. However, if you can offer a girl a drink, I'll see if I can bear it long enough to convey your message."

He was more than willing to provide that drink and the next and the next. I'm a good drinker. He was not, particularly. "So, master," I cooed in the manner I had heard Lotus use with His Majesty, "I think I'm ready to gaze into your eyes now."

I wouldn't need to look up since his gaze was firmly locked on the bodice of my gown.

"Yes, my dear. I have much to teach you."

"I have learned much already," I said, and I had, though not from him. Prior to coming into Lotus's service I would never have thought to use such a subterfuge and could not have imagined it would work.

"Look into my eyes," he commanded, and as we locked gazes, he suggested that I assume a position most often assumed by small boys in the captivity of Creeks and Romans.

Magic implement or no magic implement, I had absolutely no wish to do so. "That's amazing," I said. "And naturally I can't wait to satisfy your every command." Then, while he licked his lips, I snatched the helm from his head and ducked playfully away from him, even him long enough to put it on my own head.

"Give that back, you vixen!" he demanded, but not angrily. I'm sure it looked rather fetching with the gauzy gown that was half-felling off me anyway.

"Certainly, my lord. But first you must look me in the eye and say 'please.'"

Still laughing, he looked me in the eye and I said, "You will recline on that couch and close your eyes and when you open them again, all your most exotic and depraved desires will have been fulfilled."

He went straight to the couch and lay down with a silly smile on his face and his eyes closed. I hit him over the head with the helmet.

I had to trust my own instinct, but I guessed that you had to use the gem to command he or she who looked into it to do or become something they wished to do or become anyway. Most men Sun Zoo faced would truly wish to become great warriors, so it worked well enough to give him both confidence and reputation. I had no wish to become a slave boy in addition to being a slave girl, so the gem had, no influence on me. I wasn't sure how it would work on Lotus if she dared look at it, so I'd have to try it out.

With the helm under my cloak, I hastened back to her chamber and woke her up. Placing helmet on my head, I said, "Do me the favor of looking into my eyes, my lady."

"Bodie, you look ridiculous. Have you no fashion sense whatsoever? That hat is absolutely the wrong accessory for that ensemble."

"But the jewel is nice, isn't it?" I asked. "Take a close look." She did and I said, "Now, kiss the Tai-Tai's behind."

"What?" she asked.

"Aha! I thought so. You don't really want to kiss the Tai-Tai's behind, do you?"

"Bodie, are you quite well?"

"Never better, my lady, never better. But tell me, seriously, have you ever had any desire to be a soldier at all?"

"None. I seek only to win the emperor's favor and bear him many sons."

"Commendable. Now then," and I looked her straight in the eye. "Go back to sleep."

Then I went to work on the helmet and the nightingale, slipping back up to the Chief Astrologer's chamber just before cockcrow to slip into the room of the still-sleeping Sun Zoo where I deposited both the helm and the dress I'd worn on my earlier visit.

The next morning the court assembled once more to observe the defeat of Sun Zoo and the humiliation of Lady Lotus. I was well dressed for the occasion in a tasteful collection of red handkerchief-sized veils, sheer trousers, and a little bolero concealing the jewel dangling from my bodice. If caught with it, I could be cut to pieces for stealing what would be assumed to be the nightingale's egg from my lady's trinket.

The activities of this day were no more satisfactory than before. "Lady Lotus, look into my eyes," Sun Zoo commanded.

"Tee hee."

"At once."

"Tee hee heh heh hee."

"I have absolute authority over you. You will look into my eyes."

She peeked up at him.

"March."

"I beg your pardon?"

"March."

"Tee hee. You must be joking!"

"I will tell you three more times and then you will face the consequences of a disobedient troop."

"It isn't nice to yell at people."

"March!"

"You're frightening me."

"March!"

"Your Majesty, this horrid man is being very mean to your little pomegranate."

"See here, Sun..."

"Your Majesty, by your own tongue you gave me authority over this woman. We mustn't set a bad example for others. Now. Lady Lotus, one last time, MARCH!"

At this she broke into tears, threw herself on the ground, and began screaming that she wouldn't, she wouldn't, she wouldn't and nobody could make her, so there!

"Your Majesty, this is not my failure to teach but this woman's failure to obey my instructions, despite your order that she do so. Thrice have I given Tier direct command and thrice has she failed to execute it, therefore I shall execute her, that she be an example to all others who would defy your wishes."

Lady Lotus wailed while the Tai-Tai and the other ladies looked gratified. His Majesty looked horrified and very sad, to give him credit, but I knew emperors and he would do what Sun Zoo instructed to preserve his own royal dominion.

The emperor was appealing directly to Lotus. "little Pomegranate, will you not do what the man commands or must I allow him to kill you."

"I can't, sire, I just can't. Please don't let him kill me, please please. You said..."

The time had come for me to attack.

Slithering out to comfort Lotus in the best harem style-my, I had absorbed a lot being around these ladies!-I turned to face the emperor and spoke. Normally, this would have been enough to cost me my life because slaves don't chat up the monarch any time they feel like it in the regular order of things. However, at the present time the emperor was so distraught he would be glad to hear a suggestion of how to save face and Lotus at the same time even if it came from her mechanical nightingale.

"Your Majesty, this man is a fraud and because he has not been able to prove his boast, he seeks to take the life of my lady. She is not disobedient to Your Majesty. Indeed, she worships you. It is simply that this man has no idea how to lead women."

"And you do, I suppose?" Sun Zoo asked with an arched eyebrow and a wink that implied he'd been leading me pretty well the night before.

"Not in a week-which is ridiculous for someone who has not hardened their thews and sinews, who has been kept sequestered throughout her life, who has no protective clothing, much less armor, and weapons too large for her stature. All of that can be improved in time and yes, I could lead not only Lady Lotus, but all of the ladies in the harem, given six months of freedom to requisition that which is necessary, and the same authority His Majesty has given to this would-be murderer of His adored concubine."

"I promised a week!" Sun Zoo said.

"You promised to train one lady, which you have failed to do. I offer to train the entire harem."

The Lady Lotus looked even more horrified at the idea of spending six months training a soldier than she had at being executed. Tai-Tai's nose went so far into the air that, had it eyes instead of nostrils, it would have been quite as useful as any hawk for aerial surveillance.

"Six weeks," the emperor said. "I shall give you six weeks. That is all."

"Of free rein to train these ladies as I see fit with the help of the armorer and stables and I shot a look at the disdainful nobles who were finding my performance almost as diverting as the senseless execution of a young girl, "-absolute privacy."

"She asks for everything, Your Majesty, and I asked for nothing but a pupil."

"Yes, and you failed." His Majesty beckoned me forward. "I do want it understood that if you fail, my dear, I will not be expected to execute my entire harem."

A most reasonable request. I began to appreciate His Majesty as a most reasonable man.

an emperor. I approached him and said in a voice too low for any to hear but himself, "The test, Your Majesty, though the ladies know it not, shall be a pitched battle between them and an equal number of your own palace guard. I do promise, unlike the learned gentleman, that in the event that any of the ladies fail and are slain, I shall be slain as well."

"I command it," the emperor said.

"Majesty!" exclaimed Number Two Wife, who was pregnant.

Tai-Tai was beside herself with anger. "How can you think of giving this barbarian slave hegemony over me, my lord?"

But the emperor gave her a balky look and simply repeated, "I command it."

First I approached my Lady Lotus, who was still in a groveling position. She shrank back from me as if I'd gone crazy but I said, "My lady, here is your chance not only to live, but to gain His Majesty's favor above all others and to be the first to bear him a son. Only do as I instruct and all will be well."

I did not order anyone around at that moment, but allowed all to see that there would be no more diversions that day; while I proceeded to the armorer's hall and the stable to make arrangements to equip my reluctant unit.

On returning to the harem, I found that everything had returned to normal and the ladies were practicing peeling grapes and being fanned with peacock feathers and working on their abdominal exercises for the dancing they would do to assist Number Two Wife when she gave birth in another five months.

My lady was resting, but I just had time to replace the ruby egg in the nightingale's nest before she awoke. "Oh, it's you, Bodie. I don't know what all that nonsense was about out there on the field, but you made that awful man spare my life. For that I owe you anything, anything at all, which I can give."

"My lady, your cooperation will be the most valuable gift you can give us both in the weeks to come, but I shall need the loan of one of your material possessions as well."

"It is yours."

"The egg of the mechanical nightingale-will you give it to me for now?"

"For now and always, and the nightingale as well. The emeralds and diamonds and gold work are worth far more than that ruby."

"Thank you, mistress, but the ruby will do nicely."

I spent that afternoon going visiting among the ladies of the harem. They were inclined to snub me, of course, until they saw my new bauble.

Tai-Tai was the toughest nut to crack, but I knew what she wanted. I also positioned the ruby so that the moment she looked at me, she saw it. "Tai-Tai, you will gain even greater influence over His Majesty if you are also commander of his elite guard. This is well within your abilities as a forceful and determined lady. By doing everything I say, you will achieve this power and will increase your chances of having a male child. However, that may not even be necessary. Once His Majesty sees how a woman may rule and defend her rule, he is quite likely to allow his daughter by you right of succession."

Now, this was utter and complete horse shit, as we both very well knew, but that was what the jewel really worked-because she wanted to believe that such goals were attainable, she wanted to believe what I said was true. When I added, as I did to them all, "Also, our maneuvers will give you the opportunity and the right to knock the smirk off the face of the lady..." She filled in the lady's name most hated by her.

To some I said that being tough and strong was a way to the empire's slightly perverted heart, to others that this was their chance to redress slights, to others that they might actually have a chance to defend themselves next time instead of watching helplessly while their homes were despoiled, their families killed, and themselves sold into bondage.

By the end of the day, with the jewel's assistance, I had the promise of each lady that she would do her utmost to learn what I had to teach her in the next six weeks.

The following day, to keep interest up, we went to the armorer's. There, each lady took turn at archery and her endowment was altered with special garments to maximum functionality. The armor itself was then tailored to the lady, and set with little jewels to make more attractive to each. Each lady was to be issued helm, breastplate, shield and leather gauntlets and sandals with shin guards, a similar costume to the one favored by the empire's elite guard.

I knew I would meet with resistance if I required the ladies to cut their hair, so we formed teams to braid it and had the helms made to fit over the braided mass, which formed extra cushioning. Swords and daggers were made short and lightweight, though strong, and both longbows and crossbows were tailored so that they were somewhat more than the ladies could manage presently.

This quickly changed as the ladies began sinew strengthening, endurance training, and unarmed hand-to-hand combat. Here their exercises varied from those of the men and of the women I had trained with, for while these women were not particularly strong or fit, they were quite agile, quick and slippery and from the harem dances knew well how to move one group of muscles in total isolation from others. Their hips and legs were also quite strong and we

adapted for bumping a taller, stronger opponent well below his center of balance, knocking him off his feet, and stomping a mudhole in his most sensitive and unarmored areas while he struggled to regain his feet.

We practiced these new tactics by first allowing each lady to spar with her most despised enemy, which quickly showed them the wisdom of restrained hairstyles and simplicity of line in costume.

It also got much of their personal rivalry out of their systems, which was good, since the next step was to tie the former-sparring partners together back-to-back and have them circle while defending themselves against two other similarly bound opponents, then single opponents free to move. Thus did each lady learn to work with each of the other ladies. The emperor's little daughters meanwhile had a wonderful time emulating their mothers.

We practiced riding, which some of the ladies already knew how to do in some measure, though others were accustomed only to being carried in palanquins.

Then we coupled weapons with hand-to-hand fighting, followed by weapons and hand-to-hand with riding, followed by riding with archery and spear throwing. The stone worked well in that they were highly motivated and kept trying until each was doing her utmost at all times—a much better percentage than you get in most outfits.

But was it enough? They were still gently bred ladies and six weeks could not harden them enough for them to face seasoned soldiers with any degree of success in the ordinary way of things. Their swords and daggers were suited to them and they used them well, their arrows the mark as well as the arrows of most troops, but their spear throwing was hopeless. Also, in the evening they ate too well despite some cooperation from the palace kitchens, and slept long on their silken sofas. The one concession I was able to acquire from His Majesty was that he visited none of them during this period.

"Absolute privacy, you promised, my lord," I reminded him at Lotus's threshold.

"But the poor girls will be lonely!" he protested.

"They'll be dead otherwise, sire. Besides, think of the privation they are enduring for your sake—is it not a noble thing for you to undergo a slight deprivation for theirs—and will it not make your reunion all the sweeter?"

"Well, I suppose I can find a few affairs of state to become involved in. Or perhaps I'll visit my vassal Lord Chuski of the Steppes. I understand he has triplet daughters who are just turning fifteen."

"Of course," I said, "if they should return with you, they would need to be included in the battle with your guards—and quite without the benefit of the training your other wives are

getting."

He sighed deeply. "Yes, I suppose that would be the only just thing to do and I am known as a just ruler."

As the end of the six weeks neared, and the ladies sat around the common table they liked to eat at now to tend each other's wounds of the day and supply each other with unguents and ointments guaranteed not to leave scars, I dreaded the battle to come on the morrow.

"Lotus," Tai-Tai said "The next time an opponent swings her spear toward you, slide from the saddle to the side as you did earlier today, and avoid the blow."

"I will, Tai-Tai. I am sorry for your split lip and loosened tooth; There is a remedy our village healer once taught me for loose teeth..."

"I must say, I feel better," Number Three Wife said. "It's been rather fun having something to do instead of just lying about all day. I shall miss our times together."

"Somehow, I feel, that we need a campfire," Number Four Wife said.

"Not in the middle of the fourth-century carpet," Tai-Tai said. "The brazier will have to do. A bit of music would be nice, however."

"I'll bring my flute, shall I?" asked Number Four Wife. "Back in a jiff."

"Oh, I wonder if she knows that old Mongolian song about the Valley of the Red River..." mused Number Two Wife.

"I have the strangest urge to write home to my mother," mused Number Fourteen Wife, "I can't see her every second Thursday and she can't read anyway."

For now that the ladies were at war during the daytime, evenings in the harem had become much more peaceful. Tai-Tai, far from being the bored and cynical, grasping autocrat she had appeared, was actually an aristocratic lady with great skill in commanding. Fighting with her co-wives had taught her their worth and somehow, knowing it, she was no longer afraid that they lessened her own. Even Lotus had begun to look up to her.

And Lotus herself, while possessing very little aggressive spirit, was quick and playful and mad in the way of many small and merry people whom the evils of war and the world never seem to penetrate very deeply. She was very fond of suddenly sinking to her knees and onto her back in battle and dealing damage to the underside of her foe. Those who thought she was showing her belly and making herself defenseless thus reckoned without her ability to twist herself round and bob up for a new attack.

Number Two Wife was probably the most ferocious of all, defending her belly.

I was almost sorry for the things I had to say the night before the test. "Ladies," I told them, "I have something disturbing to tell you. I know you all have felt these past few days have been simply to please your lord and gain various benefits for yourselves. But the fact is, the emperor only agreed to allow this experiment because your new skills will soon be needed. There has been revolt brewing among the Palace Guard, inspired by that brigand Sun Zoo, who has told them that they can overthrow His Majesty and throw the kingdom into chaos and yourselves into bondage and fates worse than death and I'm sure you all know what that's like and wouldn't care for it to happen now that you're on the verge of—you know," I said meaningfully to each one so that she would believe alone shared the secret of what she would become to the emperor when this little charade was over. "The point is, if the emperor and kingdom and your own positions are to be preserved, your honor and the lives and honor of your daughters saved from these upstart ruffians, you have to fight in earnest. Intelligence has informed His Majesty that there will be an attack on the harem on the morrow. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill. This is an actual attack of an impending battle, the only one you'll receive. Fight well, comrades, or all will be lost."

Tai-Tai said, "In that case, Bodie, I think we should post a guard."

"Excellent idea, Number One Lady. I'll stand first watch while you ladies get some sleep. I'll wake you, my Lady Lotus, for second watch..."

"I'll stand third myself," Tai-Tai said grimly.

That suited me very well.

I knew, of course, that the battle wouldn't take place until morning, so I felt safe in donning my cloak, and bundling myself out to the wall where the night watch was on duty.

No one recognized me. Not only was I well cloaked in a cloak, I was also well cloaked in darkness.

"Nice night," I said to the bloke on duty. It was only raining a little.

"In't it?" he replied, pulling his cloak close about him. "What're you doin' out so late the night, darling?"

"Couldn't sleep," I said. "I'm too worried about the outcome of the battle tomorrow."

"Battle?"

"You know, when the Palace Guard take on the emperor's harem."

He laughed. "Oh, that. I wouldn't go so far as to call that a battle. Not a proper battle. I mean, they're a bunch of the emperor's pampered houris for all their struttin' about in armor. More like a massacre, I should say."

"Yes," I said. "I know. That's what has me so worried. You see, I cherish a secret passion for the Captain of the Guard..."

When the conversation was over and I returned to the harem to wake Lotus, I felt rather ashamed of myself but then, I had to remember, my people had been tricked by cunning where courage alone wasn't enough. Honor is for those who have the wherewithal to survive defeat.

The ladies and I staged a preemptive strike the next morning.

"There's not a moment to lose!" I told them after a quick foray into the castle to make sure my ploy had worked. "Our foes have surrounded the emperor's bedchamber," I told them.

"Oh, my poor Papa Panda Bear!" Lotus cried. "We must save him!"

"Ladies," Tai-Tai said, "I think it best we use that strategy Bodie described to us where some of us come from the right, and some from the left, while some drop down on our foe from the rafters..."

The guards at first appeared absolutely bewildered, but when they realized the ladies in armor, fighting in earnest, dealing real cuts and blows, were then-appointed foes, they rallied somewhat.

His Majesty poked his head out of his chamber long enough to say, "Oh, it's begun, has it?" and ducked back in to get his own crowned helm, which provided him some protection during the fray.

Sun Zoo showed up too, and stood on the sidelines with folded arms and a smirk on his face, until he saw that the guards were not automatically winning.

In fact, they were on the point of being annihilated. Three had made the mistake of cornering Number Two Wife and she was parrying for all she was worth. Meanwhile, Lotus dropped down from the rafters onto the shoulders of one of the attackers, ripped off his helmet and began bashing him on the head with her shield. Tai-Tai and Number Two Concubine closed on the other two, fighting off their own attackers.

Blood was quite satisfyingly everywhere and none of it seemed to belong to my ladies.

Lotus's victim collapsed under her and she pounced upon another one, using the maneuver wherein she slid under his legs and...

"Majesty!" wailed the Captain of the Guard. "Can I kill her? She's about to unman-stop t you minx," he swore something less repeatable and tried to kick her away but she was like leech. "Me!"

"No, no!" the monarch cried. "Call it off, call it off. I can stand this no longer! All you m go away, stop looking at my harem. Surrender!"

"Hearing and obeying, Majesty. We'll turn ourselves in to the brig immediately," the Ca of the Guard said, laying his sword gingerly across Lotus's abdomen, which was still quive at floor level, though her dagger was no longer raised to endanger his future children.

The emperor meanwhile was jumping up and down, clapping his hands and crying, "All lovely ladies, attend me. Seeing you in all your sweating, sinewy glory after all this time without you has made me feel very excited. Enough of this bloody combat. I have a more congenial use for you all___"

It was lonely in the harem the rest of the day and that night.

I felt distinctly left out. Wandering the chambers alone, with no sound of the flute, the lu or the strains of "The Aura of Lady Lee" sung round the brazier, no one tending anyone else bruises or saddlesores, it was very lonely.

"A Pyhrric Victory, eh, Madame Spy?" said the voice of Sun Zoo. He wasn't sneering n however, or even leering.

"Not at all," I said. "My ladies are all alive, including the one I saved from your heavy-handed tactics, the emperor is happy-or so I imagine him to be-and the guards were of them seriously wounded and will live to guard again."

"And none of them will lose their retirement pay or be demoted after all, eh? In spite of rumor going around last night to the effect that any guard who actually maimed or killed one the emperor's ladies would not have much of a career left to him. I can't think where such a would have started."

I shrugged. "If it isn't exactly honorable to undermine the enemy's morale in any way you can, it's at least sensible. In another six months, or a year, perhaps, at the same level of training, the lames would have needed no edge. They were excellent. But your week's wort training is good only if you're talking about hotheaded pot boys who want to be soldiers an already have me muscles and are not with child, are fit, and have no womanly scruples."

"

"You should also see that the rumor was the simple truth. The emperor would have than no one, you least of all, for killing his ladies. Everyone is better off. Even the guards have b

put on their mettle-

"Well... yes. I don't think they expected quite such fierce resistance. But if the guards could have fought to wound..."

I shuddered. "But it is at least a draw, wouldn't you say?"

"At least. I saw some excellent fighting technique there and some of it from that hopeless little twit I attempted to teach. How did you?"

"Professional secret," I told him. I wasn't about to tell him I was already an experienced soldier when I began watching him teach Lotus and learned a tremendous amount from his pontificating.

When I returned to the harem, the ladies were already beginning to file back in, spent, smelly, and quite happy. In the bath they told me that the emperor was so taken with their performance-and his own, afterward-that he decided to form a special, very personal, bodyguard from their ranks, a guard to which it would be a very high honor to belong. The training, therefore, was to continue, on condition that His Majesty got to watch this time.

Sun Zoo was allowed to slink off, and graciously, I even captured his helm long enough to pry my lady's nightingale egg from it and replace it with the magic ruby.

The odd thing was, it turned out that all of the tales I told various people while I wore the red stone were reasonably true. The emperor did like his women a bit on the Amazonian side and so the ladies gained favor and power from it. Also, many of them had male babies, though I can claim no credit for that, nor can the stone, or can it? In addition, a guard who killed or maimed one of the ladies would certainly have lost His Majesty's favor, for as he proved, I was very fond indeed of his ladies. So fond, in fact, that he never again chose another wife. Which many said showed he was a wise and prudent man, if not a brave one.

One more thing proved true as well. When, for my services, I was offered my choice of any of the gentlemen of the court to be my husband, I chose the Captain of the Guard, for whose bulging sinews and reluctant gallantry I found I held all the admiration I had earlier confided in his subordinate. It is my intense pleasure to report that Lady Lotus's knife did him no damage whatsoever.