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THE GREAT LEAP OF SHIN

by

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THE BOY

Ten li from the Wall, we could hear a pulse coming up from the earth, even as our horses sped across it.

Five li from the Wall, the path beneath us began to rise. The cliffs beside us shrank away into a plain. We were assaulted by the force of the beats of the drums.

One li from the Wall, we could hear the march of the men and their chants making the air to tremble.

We crested the slope. We were struck with the full grandeur of the Wall as it marched towards its goal.

A great wall of men that swept from one end of view to the other, from Gao-Feng Mountain in the North down to the Purple River in the South. The chanting of the men, urged on by the phalanxes of drummers behind them, thundered before us.

“The Earthquake of 5,000 Years

“Is due and coming any day!

“But Men of Shin need not to fear!

“The earth our orders shall obey!”

The Great Wall of Men. 200 million men marching Westward shoulder to shoulder in a formation spreading 2,000 li.

“It is not quakes that kill and break,

“But structures falling onto men!

“We cannot make the earth not quake,

“But with our feet, we can choose when!”

A wall of men, advancing into position to perform the Great Leap of Shin, chanting as they march.

“Our Great Wall marches forth in lines

“Of twenty million men times ten,

“To stamp upon the Great Earth-Spine,

“And cleave it with the feet of men!”

So simple. Earthquakes did not kill people. Not knowing when they would happen and not knowing when to be outside of structures was what killed people.

Shin was ready to save their people by destroying their homes. Shin was also ready to save their people by destroying our home on the island of Pearl.

The Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen was just one man. Not even a whole man. But as the Chief Engineer of the Great Leap of Shin, he would have the power to destroy my home.

We stopped our horses to watch the march of the Wall. Though their endeavor was evil, the sight of a wall of men, spreading like lines of writing that flowed across the earth from one end of view to the other, impressed.

“You forget what we came here to do, Master Tian-Tai,” said Mistress Sho-Mei.

“And you forget your rank, Mistress Sho-Mei,” I said to her.

Sho-Mei believed I was given the role of Principal Dancer on this mission only because my father was governor of Pearl. But she did not have the character of a leader. A leader must consider all costs and bend so as not to break. Sho-Mei could only speed in one direction, like an arrow.

Mistress Yumi, however, was an excellent choice to accompany me. Yumi was talented and obedient. I would have promoted her from Second Principal Character Dancer to Sho-Mei’s position, even though she is younger than Sho-Mei, but it was not my decision.

“When we have audience before the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen, I forbid you to speak, Mistress Sho-Mei,” I said.

Sho-Mei glared at me but did not speak more protest. How did a fourteen year old girl get so hard? I laughed. I would not want her as an enemy.

“When we have audience with him,” said Sho-Mei, “do not forget what we came to do.”

THE EUNUCH

Final inspections of front lines of Great Wall almost complete. Six days until eighth day of eighth month, day of Great Leap of Shin.

Health of men in front layers of Great Wall concerned me. Men essentially in place, in position for Great Leap in three days. Front layers would suffer severe compaction, no guarantee of successful conveyance of food or water to majority of men in front layers. Calculations predicted loss of twenty of every thousand to water lack and an additional thirteen of every thousand to exposure, hunger, or illness. By last day before Great Leap, loss of additional twenty of every thousand to suffocation due to compaction.

Estimated total loss of 53 of every thousand. So close. If more than 61 of every thousand men lost, insufficient tonnage of men to perform Great Leap.

Building these calculations upon my father's work. He did not consider his map of Great Spine of the Earth complete at time of death. Hoped it was complete enough.

Force of average-sized man jumping was 40 dan. 40 dan times 200 million men was eight billion dan. Equivalent to pressure of 70,000 tsan explosive. Such explosive could destroy half of Imperial City.

Greatest faith in father's calculations of harmonic resonance margin of plates that formed Great Spine of the Earth. Father had supplemented work of great geologists since

beginning of Tsui Dynasty with own work testing inherent resonances of bedrock that formed plates.

Father's calculations predicted that explosive tonnage of each eight billion dan leap could be amplified by timing them all to occur 2.4 strokes of new standard clock. By 70th leap, force would be amplified to 35 times power of first leap. Simple concept. No child can climb tree and break branch by jumping once. But if child jumps repeatedly at correct frequency, jumps amplify and stack and eventually break branch.

Rode south along Great Wall of Men toward Imperial City and heart of command at Jade Palace. Felt great press of duties upon me. Did not want to meet with another emissary of children from provinces paying tribute. Too close to Great Leap. But emissary from island of Pearl. Seeking exception. Pearl. Always Pearl. Always special entreaties. Always different ideas. Always sabotaging Shin's efforts. Always verging on open war.

Pearlian children would plead to halt Great Leap of Shin, wail that Sea-Scream would wash over their island.

Advisors feared assassin. Pearl so much trouble. Other attempts to stop Great Leap wasted so much time, consumed so many resources. But only troupe of one boy and two girls. Requesting to perform Pearlian dance for me. Only granted audience because troupe was led by Master Lin Tian-Tai, son of Governor of Pearl.

THE BOY

We rode around the base of Nai-Long Mountain in a day. Yumi made camp that night from the rigs that our fourth horse carried. They were humble rigs because it was summer, but also because the fourth horse bore our cask of the pearl. We must let nothing befall the cask of the pearl, lest we have nothing to make our court to skate on for the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen.

“You can smell them coming down the hall because they reek of waste water. Because they have nothing to pass water with,” said Sho-Mei. She finished her meal and sent her eating sticks clattering into her bowl.

“Really?” said Yumi. Like a little bird. I knew that Sho-Mei found it annoying, but I thought it cute. As if everything were a wonder to Yumi. That openness manifested in Yumi’s skating as well. So free. So sincere. No wonder that she ranked so high in national competition.

“I heard that the eunuch summarily executed one man in every village in Shin to let people know that they shall enforce the decree and execute any deserters,” said Sho-Mei.

“How terrible.”

“That is the way of the world!” said Sho-Mei. “How did you get assigned to this mission? Always flinching. You shall be the cause of all our deaths!”

Poor Yumi buried her chin into her breast at the rebuke.

I took Sho-Mei aside.

“How does abusing Mistress Yumi help our mission, Mistress Sho-Mei?” I said.

“Someone has to teach her to be tough enough to do what we came to do. Someone has to lead this mission.”

My brow flushed with heat at the open disrespect. “One more insolent phrase and I shall send you back to Pearl to be tried for treason. Is that clear?”

Sho-Mei looked at the ground, sour-faced, then quickly bowed.

“I shall need you both when we have audience with the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen,” I said.

THE EUNUCH

Spent last two days inspecting Eastern ranks at bank of Great Wall of Men. Predicted desertion rate of five men in every thousand. Experienced desertion of only three men in every thousand. Of those, 870 of every thousand deserters found and executed. Acceptable compliance.

To warn other men, had them pass heads among themselves along ranks in Westward line towards vanguard. After being passed across several li of men, heads were usually in tatters, had to be abandoned. However, men seemed to pass heads dutifully. Gave them something to do besides march, chant, and think of hunger.

Watching sea of men from cliffside, debated whether water solution would have been more sage. Astrologers to Vermillion Emperor prophesied water destiny for Shin. Directing weight of Purple River onto plate near Great Spine of the Earth possibly sufficient tonnage to unleash Earthquake of 5,000 Years. However, water of Purple River so silty, layers accumulated so quickly on bottom that river flooded any contours other

than greatest natural contours of canyons, valleys, and mountains. River traced path through only features of landscape great enough to hold it. Secondary effect, masterpieces of landscape painting due to dramatic waterfront geography.

Also, water solution too imprecise in timing. Could cause plates to slip in five hours or five years. Populace of Shin could not stay outside structures waiting.

Riding south toward Jade Palace in Imperial City, did not stop to inspect brigades of Art Guard. Art Guard hurriedly trying to paint landscapes and monuments that formed 6,000 years of Shinian history and culture. Great Wu Men Temple in Codpeak Mountains would never survive Earthquake of 5,000 Years. No structure made of abalone scales could tolerate. Historic Gardens of Great Lilies in Tian-Shui prefecture with cottages built upon them would be washed away by swells of tributaries of Purple River after earthquake. Chen-Bu Kiln, whose fires had been burning in rotation without cease for 1,200 years, would have to be extinguished, fear of fire after earthquake. Bridge of Birds, built feather by feather by children of Shin over 800 years, gone in cloud of plumes. Could not bear to watch Art Guard trying to capture them. Pointless. Impossible to capture. Impossible to lessen loss of our culture.

Never wanted to make these decisions. Would have pursued education in Five Great Classics and sat for Imperial Examination. Would have written poetry. But destiny chose differently.

Thought of this boy, Master Lin Tian-Tai. Thought of his good fortune, boy born into powerful, wealthy family, allowed to devote his life to art he loved, who would grow into a man, have sons of his own. Thoughts turned dark and aching and venomous.

But then, rode into view of great cannons of fireworks, thought of work still to do, all thoughts of own misfortunes faded, no more of me, only work before me.

THE BOY

We rode North at a gallop the whole of the last ten li leading towards the Imperial City. We rode into the great fields of cannons of fireworks encircling the city.

I was shocked at the size of each cannon. Each was as large as a major millet storage silo. I understood that they had to be that large to shoot a firework so powerful that it would travel 300 li into the sky.

The Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen knew that he would need a system to tell all the men forming the 2,000 li of the Great Wall the moment to jump in harmony, and repeatedly to a specific rhythm. The precision would be critical. If the jumps did not occur with perfectly synchronized precision, no harmonies would be achieved, no resonances would begin to stack, no leveraging of frequencies could be attained, and the necessary pressure could not accumulate to cause the Great Spine of the Earth to crack into two plates.

No system of communication could instantly travel 2,000 li. Even if there were a sound that could travel 2,000 li, it would take almost three hours for the sound to travel from one end of the Wall to the other.

Even if there were a light that could travel from the deserts in the outer Riderlands in the North down to the tangled bayous of Yue-Hu province in the South, the curvature of the earth would block the passage of the light.

The Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen's solution was not to link the men forming the Great Wall laterally across the earth. It was to link them vertically up to the sky.

These cannons would launch fireworks into the night sky so high that they could be seen across the entirety of Shin. They would explode, one after another, in blooms the width of cities, and they would follow each other in a regular beat. All the men forming the Great Wall would jump to their rhythm in perfect precision and harmony.

"The genius of the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen staggers me!" I cried aloud. Sho-Mei turned around so sharply to glare back at me that she almost fell off her horse.

As we rode past the great fields of fireworks cannons outside of the Imperial City, weaving around them as if they were giant cups laid down by gods, I lamented that I would never see them fired.

THE EUNUCH

Rode South through fields of fireworks cannons towards Imperial City, watched musicians tending to cannons. Such waste of human talent. Suggested other solution, but Vermillion Emperor insisted. Each of two musicians tending to each of 100 cannons conservatory-trained. Chose them personally. From top of Imperial Examinations in music. Needed men with greatest skill in rhythmic precision in all of Shin to fire cannons precisely to beat. One cannon every 2.4 strokes of new standard clock. No margin for imprecision tolerable.

Musicians knew when chosen they would be killed in blast when they launched their cannon. 200 most talented musicians in Shin would be sacrificed for sake of 900

million countrymen. Songs would be written to immortalize them, but no one worth hearing left to perform them.

Musicians saw it was I who rode through fields, stopped work, bowed as I passed, and sang to me tune we sang as children. "Hail to the General, Savior of the State!"

"Ah, Mu Hai-Chen," I wept to myself. "You did not want these decisions. But who else was there to make them?"

THE BOY

As we rode North on the final few li to the Imperial City, I laid down my command again to Sho-Mei and Yumi. We would skate our performance. We would plead for the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen to spare our culture. If his heart remained hard to us, we knew what we had to do. But only after diplomacy had failed.

Sho-Mei began taunting Yumi again, saying that she would flinch when the time came. I silenced Sho-Mei with a hiss. "Mistress Yumi shall prove fiercest of us all, I am certain." Yumi smiled and averted her gaze. A good leader knows that faith in his troops is a prophecy that writes itself.

THE EUNUCH

Rode South final few li to Imperial City. Audience with Pearlian children so ill-timed. Another doomed Pearlian attempt to sabotage Great Leap? Best chance to stop Pearl renegade actions with final force. Take son of governor and keep as hostage.

THE BOY

The Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen would never expect that two girls and a boy coming to pay tribute by skating a performance for him would disrupt the Great Leap of Shin until the men forming the Wall begin to die of water-lack, starvation, and suffocation and began to desert in masses. He would be astonished. Perhaps he would even be impressed.

THE EUNUCH

Rode into Imperial City, entered Jade Palace. Ready to take boy from Pearl as hostage.

THE BOY

We rode into the Imperial City and entered the Jade Palace. We were ready to take as our hostage the Chief Engineer of the Great Leap of Shin, the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen.

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THE BOY

We approached the presence chamber of the Hall of Perfect Centrality. It was a courtyard open to the air. The blades of our skates crunched as we crossed the courtyard to bow before the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen where he sat behind a desk. I bowed to him and rose to deliver the hailings.

I did not expect him to look like he did. I thought that he would be grotesque and girlish. I did not expect him to look as great in bearing as his achievements.

I did not expect him to look like what an emperor should look like.

THE EUNUCH

Received Master Lin Tian-Tai and two girl companions. Boy began salutations. Let him run through traditional 88 Honorific Hailings, used time to study him. What boy of sixteen can grow so thick a beard? Already a man.

When boy finished hailings and bowed again at my feet, lifted face, eyes shone with eagerness.

Boy admired me. How notable.

THE BOY

When I had done with the hailings, I begged permission of the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen to allow us to demonstrate to him something of the culture of our island of Pearl. He granted it by extending his open palm to me. His eyes were intelligent and curious. He wanted to see this as much as we wanted to show him.

THE EUNUCH

Boy and girl companions brought out cask. Personal guard searched for weapons. Full eight holes inspection. Children hid nothing on their persons. Guard inspected cask for poisons or explosive oils. Reported cask contained liquid, looked like milk, smelled like brine. Children licked it to prove not poisoned.

Boy and girl companions asked guard to clear from courtyard. Poured thin layer of liquid from cask until spread evenly across entire courtyard floor. Looked like pools of smooth tofu or sheets of milky liquid silk.

Boy and companions began to skate across it. Heard liquid crisp into solid as skates ran over it. Reached to touch it. Not cold or wet. Smooth like glass. Or like firm white of an eye. Pressed long nail of small finger into it hard, drew line in it, smoothed and healed itself instantly behind run of my nail. Remarkable.

Boy explained that substance called “the pearl”, formed of spider silk made liquid then solid again. Surprised they expect me to believe explanation. They use it to skate upon on island of Pearl.

THE BOY

We told him that the pearl comes from spiders. We did not want him to know that it actually comes from the seas surrounding the island of Pearl because we did not want to give Shin one more reason to try to invade Pearl again.

We told him that we were going to perform a dance from Pearlian Opera for him. We told him that Pearlian Opera is like other opera except there is no singing. The skating serves as the singing.

THE EUNUCH

Children led me onto the pearl. The pearl felt alive under my slippers, bounced my foot up with each step I took off it. Delightful. Children began to skate around me, then commenced performance of wonders.

Flew about me on skates. Figures turned into forms like spinning blossoms, darting fish, dolphins spiraling out of water.

Leaps and coils begin to incorporate my own figure. Fluttered and soared overhead, met in mid-air over me, formed beautiful folded paper configurations above me.

For final display, split legs so one skate was on floor and one was above me, three skates joined together in pagoda over my head. Saw flash of blades of skates above me, imprisoned in cage of children, felt dread crawl up my spine. Made terrible miscalculation?

But then children ended performance. Prostrated themselves around me, lay hands on my feet.

Boy pleaded his island's plight. Implored me to advise Emperor to halt Great Leap. Implored me to spare his culture.

Boy's words pressed little dents into my heart. Not for beauty of performance. Not for urgency of cause. Not for sake of their people. Heart grew sore for innocence of people who thought they could send three children to skate a dance and stop Great Leap with it.

Pearl only one small island. Great Leap will save hundreds of millions.

Told boy, gently, sorrowfully, could not do what he begged of me.

THE BOY

When the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen first refused our plea, I was not disheartened, for I was only beginning my oratory to woo him. I began to speak again.

I was startled by a flurry of motion beside me as Yumi burst into the Mantis Assassin leap and ended with her skate blade threatening the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen's throat. Yumi, not Sho-Mei! How dare she subvert my command! Mutinous girl!

However, it was too late to turn back. Our advantage was revealed. Mistress Sho-Mei and I also erupted in the Mantis leap and ended with our skates all around the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen's neck. If we finished the move, our three skate blades would slice through his neck in one stroke.

He cried out for his guards who had already begun to run toward us on the pearl. However, they tried to move too quickly and their shoes were slick on the pearl.

I commanded the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen to tell them to hold, or we would cut off his head.

He complied and the guards held.

We heard the clatter of archers assembling in the back rows. I did not believe that the archers would shoot with the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen in the center of their target circle with us. However, we could not both hold him entrapped in the Mantis pose and fight against archers. We brought our skates down and turned our defense outward towards the guards and the archers.

THE EUNUCH

Children took blades away from my neck, turned outwards. Screamed for guards to attack them.

Children exploded at guards like bouquets of scuttling scissors. Looked for opening to form in combat around me to flee through but children everywhere at once. Marveled at their martial skating. Used greater flexibility and liveness of young bodies, especially young girls, to turn them into beautiful, vicious, living weapons. Channeled momentum of decorative skating spins and leaps into harrowing slicing motions. Used dance as combat. Turned art into war. Genius of Pearlians.

THE BOY

“Curb your strikes! Spill no blood of the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen or his men!” I commanded Yumi and Sho-Mei.

A pair of guards charged at Yumi from opposite directions with long swords directed at her heart. She dove onto her fingertips and split her legs above her in the Iron Parasol spin. The guards were not able to stop themselves in time on the slick of the pearl and they continued sliding toward the spinning blades at throat level. Yumi allowed her skates to cut the chin straps of their helms. She kicked the helms off of their heads with her toe-tips.

Sho-Mei was rushed on all sides by ten guards with spears. As the spears were about to pierce her from all sides, she leapt up. Their spears bounced off each others’

breastplates. Sho-Mei channeled the momentum of her chi from the spin and the downward fall into a seated crouch and completed the Spinning Scorpion, lashing out with one skate blade like a scorpion tail. Her precision was excellent and she managed to slice the straps of the boots of the guards. Their boots wobbled off, leaving them incapable of making any coordinated movements on the pearl.

I kept the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen from leaving the center of the skating court. Twenty guards advanced on me from all sides. My Wu-Liu skills were strong enough that I could take all of them, but I feared that the men would inadvertently harm the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen in the assault. Thus, I skated around and around him, gathering my chi. When it was at optimal centrality, I launched into the Leaping Earth-Pound. I spun into the air, kicked off one eave of the roof of the open courtyard and then the other, and came thundering down onto the pearl. When I impacted, the shock wave that the pearl was conditioned to carry and amplify sent everyone tumbling onto their rumps except for Yumi and Sho-Mei who knew to leap right before the moment of impact.

As the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen lay on the ground, I brought my skate to his throat and told him to call off his men.

THE EUNUCH

Boy threatened my throat with his skate. Face burned with outrage. Came into my chambers as my guest. Assaulted my person and my men! Typical Pearlian mentality. No respect. No gratitude. Exactly like unfilial son who blackmailed with tantrum when he did not win his way.

Thousand strains of my being cried out against encouraging boy and outrageous, disobedient ways.

Yet, saw what they could do. Two girls alone could have killed twelve of my men with skills they demonstrated. Yet, held back. Curbed strikes. Spared us.

Could not best them. Honor aflame with shame at admission, but could not best these children.

THE BOY

The Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen said that he would not negotiate with me from the floor. I took my skate from his throat. I bowed in apology. He was correct. I was ashamed that I dishonored this great man thus.

I extended my hand to help him, but then I regretted it. It was another offense to him. He hesitated and then took it. Poor man. Eunuchs have so many physical maladies. To be thrown to the floor like this by a boy and then have to be helped up from the floor by that boy. I could faintly smell waste water. He must have leaked a little when I threw him to the floor. I felt fully the shame of my crime against his dignity.

THE EUNUCH

Called out to guards to retreat off skating court.

Boy helped me up from floor. Stood, looked at him. Slapped him hard on the face. Two girls made to leap at me with skate blades aimed, boy shot out two palms to halt them.

THE BOY

“Tell your guards to lay down their arms.”

THE EUNUCH

“Tell your girls to take off their skates.”

THE BOY

“We hold you hostage.”

THE EUNUCH

“Shameless, imbecilic boy! You only hold the advantage while you are on the pearl. My men have you surrounded.”

THE BOY

“We shall hold you here until we have disrupted the Great Leap of Shin and the Great Wall of Men begins to die or desert.”

THE EUNUCH

“My guards shall hold you here until you starve.”

THE BOY

“You shall starve with us, then.”

THE EUNUCH

Told him we would discuss one to one. Told him guards would leave the courtyard and wait outside, if girls did same. Promised that guards would not harm girls if girls did not harm guards.

THE BOY

The girls would lose all combat advantage once they left the skating court. On regular floors, their powers were useless.

Could I trust this man?

Yes, I could. His integrity was renowned. He granted us audience as a courtesy during this most urgent time for his endeavor. He had done nothing dishonorable since our visit. It was only we who had acted dishonorably and assaulted his person.

I agreed.

THE EUNUCH

Guards exited courtyard to East. Girls exited courtyard to North. Boy and I stood face to face.

Boy could not wait to speak. Appeared a man already, but so like a boy. Talked about his island. Told me of capital city being rebuilt entirely with the pearl. Told me

when they were done, be able to skate across any surface, every rooftop, bridge, balcony. Told me the pearl was durable, cheap, plentiful, no man need be without a home in their city. All would live in beauty. Said because no friction, no shoes or wheels in entire city when finished building it. Everything would glide. Reduction in human toil, increase in productivity so great. Could understand that. Ingenious.

Told me they would build Academy devoted solely to teaching Wu-Liu, name for new martial art on skates. Told me that city of Pearl would be marvel of the world.

Asked me if now I understood why he could not let me complete my plan.

THE BOY

The Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen merely said that he could not let me stop the Great Leap of Shin. There were so many people in Shin that even a moderate earthquake killed vast numbers. The last great earthquake was measured at 400,000 tsan. It killed four million people. The Earthquake of 5,000 Years would have the power of 30 million tsan. He told me that nothing I said could convince him to halt the Great Leap of Shin.

THE EUNUCH

Struggled for many hours. Boy so impassioned, his powers of debate and logic formidable. Such capability. So young. Could not understand how governor of Pearl could send such treasure of a son on so dangerous a mission.

Yet, negotiations brought resolution no nearer. Grew weary. Not accustomed to standing such lengths. When man is castrated, fat around his belly grows large but limbs grow thin like bamboo stalks. Left with little control of functions of body.

Must pass water.

However, could not bear to lose control of functions. Not before such capable, strong boy.

THE BOY

I saw Mu Hai-Chen knead the floor in his shoes. He had to pass water. We had been negotiating a very long time. I told him to pass water straight onto the pearl. It absorbed most liquids swiftly.

THE EUNUCH

Heat spread across face as boy said to pass water standing there. Could not tell him that eunuchs cannot do so standing up. Something any man can do.

THE BOY

For the first time since we met, Mu Hai-Chen averted his gaze from me. He cast it down as he told me that he could not pass water standing up.

Ah, the poor man! I felt obscene to come in, assault him and his men, and cause him to have to share so private a thing. I told him that I would help him.

THE EUNUCH

Boy crouched down on hands and knees. Formed bench with his back for me to sit on. Such shame. Beautiful, upright boy had to crouch for me to use as seat to make waste! Told him when I passed water, must not only sit like a woman, must wipe like a woman as well.

Boy immediately stood up and tore sleeve off of his brocaded jacket. Saw that his arm was already covered in hair, already a man's arm. Folded silk tenderly into square, handed it to me with both hands, bowed. Then assumed crouching position again.

THE BOY

Mu Hai-Chen lowered himself onto my back, and positioned himself as if sitting on one edge of a bench so that he could pass clear of it. I could feel how imbalanced his chi was through the heat of his buttocks on me. The poor man. What pain he must daily endure.

When the waste water came, it came in a weak dribble. The puddle spread and touched my hand, but I did not move my hand.

THE EUNUCH

Saw pool of waste water spread and touch boy's hand. Boy did not move his hand. Ah, misery of my fate! What obscene creature would return kindness with defilement?

Finished, wiped, covered myself, stood. Eyes began to fill with tears of shame. However, boy merely wiped hand on his pants, smiled at me. Like a young prince.

Boy said, "It is a good thing that we are both male, or that would have been awkward."

He would make a magnificent man and leader one day. Did not want to harm this boy.

THE BOY

When Mu Hai-Chen was done passing, he turned to me. He asked me if I knew how he became a eunuch. I told him I did not.

He told me that he was born to a family of renowned geomancers. His father was Prefect of the Grand Scribes to the Vermillion Emperor. Among his duties was the research into logistics, geology, and pyromancy that formed the basis for the plan that would become the Great Leap of Shin.

His father died and passed the work on to Mu Hai-Chen. Mu Hai-Chen had wanted to take another course entirely. He was an artist at heart. However, he could not say no to his father's bidding. What lines of poetry, no matter how great, what achievements of culture, no matter how grand, could compare to saving the lives of hundreds of millions of people? So he assumed his father's role as Grand Engineer of the Great Leap of Shin under the Vermillion Emperor.

However, Mu Hai-Chen became embroiled in a prosecution that changed his destiny. A minor lieutenant who had been a friend of Mu Hai-Chen's father became

drunken and accused the Vermillion Emperor in public of taking children from the streets of the Imperial City for his own use. This was true. However, the man was brought to answer charges of treason. The man begged Mu Hai-Chen to testify as his character witness. To honor the man's friendship with his father, Mu Hai-Chen agreed.

The Vermillion Emperor found the man guilty of treason and had him beheaded. The Emperor imprisoned Mu Hai-Chen and sentenced him to castration for testifying on behalf of a traitor. He was left in a prison cell with a scythe.

The punishment was a mercy. Even an ordinary fellow is offended when he has to do business with or eat near a eunuch. The customary course of the condemned man who received the punishment of castration was to use the scythe not to castrate himself but to commit suicide with honor.

Mu Hai-Chen was then faced with an impossible decision. Would he commit suicide and die with honor and avoid having to continue life as a living grotesque? Or would he castrate himself and complete his father's work to save the people of Shin from the Earthquake of 5,000 Years? There was no guarantee that the Vermillion Emperor would allow Mu Hai-Chen to continue the work, but perhaps the castration would be sufficient pledge of Mu Hai-Chen's devotion.

In the end, Mu Hai-Chen decided to live to complete his father's work. He castrated himself in the cell with the scythe. His jailers had not expected him to castrate himself. Thus, they had not left him with a bamboo tube to place in the wound so that he could keep a hole open. If the wound closed over the hole, he would die, which he nearly did. The wound closed over the hole and after three days of not passing water, Mu Hai-

Chen finally cut open the wound again to form a hole for himself. After eight months of torment, he finally healed and re-entered life a monster.

The Vermillion Emperor was so impressed by the courage of Mu Hai-Chen that he pardoned him of his crime and welcomed him openly to complete his father's work on the Great Leap of Shin.

When he was done with his tale, Mu Hai-Chen asked me if now I understood why he could not let me complete my plan to stop the Great Leap of Shin.

THE EUNUCH

Finished telling boy my tale. Boy's face wet with tears. What friend cried for me after my castration as this boy did for me now?

THE BOY

However this played out, how could I bear to kill this man? This good, brave, ingenious man.

“May all under Heaven honor your sacrifice and talent, Sage Chief Engineer. Yet, I cannot let you leave this court. I must stop you from completing the Great Leap of Shin.”

THE EUNUCH

“I know, boy. And I must stop you from disrupting the Great Leap.”

THE BOY

“I know.”

THE EUNUCH

Did not want decision laid at my feet. Not this one. In each war, good men on each side kill good men on other side. But Heavens, have pity! Do not make me kill this boy.

THE BOY

“Stay,” said Mu Hai-Chen to me. He told me that Shin could use gentlemen of extraordinary skill and virtue such as myself. He told me that if I stayed, he would give me a brilliant career. I would study under him to do great things.

THE EUNUCH

“Come,” said boy to me. Told me to flee with him back to Pearl. Be received there as hero.

THE BOY AND THE EUNUCH

Neither of these could be our destiny.

Neither of us could betray our home.

It was our destiny to be enemies.

It was our destiny that only one of us would prevail.

THE EUNUCH

“May you prevail, noble boy.”

THE BOY

“May you prevail, great man.”

THE BOY

“Are you ready?”

THE EUNUCH

Nodded to boy to show I was ready.

“Guards!”

Cried out as fled from boy towards door leading out of courtyard.

THE BOY

I cried out for Yumi and Sho-Mei.

The girls flew onto the skating court like ghosts.

I blocked Mu Hai-Chen’s escape but did not touch his person.

THE EUNUCH

Guards entered, encircled skating court.

THE BOY

Yumi and Sho-Mei fell into position to take on the guards and protect me and leave me to take down Mu Hai-Chen.

THE EUNUCH

Guards tightened in around us on skating court. Flank of archers kneed into position to let fly.

THE BOY

Yumi and Sho-Mei each took two sides of the courtyard to defend against ten, then twenty, then thirty guards, trying to breach their perimeter and rescue Mu Hai-Chen. The girls could not hold forever. I had to choose to take down Mu Hai-Chen or wait for his guards to take down the girls then me.

THE EUNUCH

Boy would not let me leave but never touched me, skated around me, herding me.

THE BOY

“Strike, Master Tian-Tai!” cried Sho-Mei.

“Why do you not strike!” cried Yumi.

Because I could not harm this man. Yet, I could not betray our mission.

I could not choose. Yet a leader must choose.

Yumi could not bear it. She turned her back on the guards and flung her body into the Spinning Lathe, cutting a path of flashing blades towards Mu Hai-Chen.

I could not let her kill him. I tripped the forward momentum of her chi with a sweep of my leg and blocked her progress with both skates.

“Traitor of Pearl!” Yumi cried at me. I drew back as she cut a swiping blade at my face.

Sho-Mei left her defense against the guards and unleashed an Iron Fan sweep at me, but I blocked her as well. The girls knew that my Wu-Liu outmatched both of theirs even combined.

The guards poured in towards us.

Yumi and Sho-Mei joined hands. They used the forward momentum of their gathered chi to whip themselves over each other. The inertia of the flings carried them up onto the eaves of the open courtyard.

“Traitor of Pearl!” they spat down at me from the eaves. “You shall be beheaded for treason when you return home!”

THE EUNUCH

Skates clattered on tiles of roof like badgers through rubbish. Archers drew bows, aimed at girls on eaves, but girls too swift, gone.

Guards circled in around me and boy.

Lifted palm, guards held their strikes.

Guards watched, wondered at hesitation.

Could not let boy walk out of here. Not after attacking Chief Engineer within the Jade Palace. Not after attempt to sabotage Great Leap. Rule of law must be upheld.

Above all else, not a Pearlian. Would become impossible to control them if found out.

Could not decide what to do.

THE BOY

Mu Hai-Chen's tears showed his agony. He did not wish to kill me. Yet he could not let me live.

THE EUNUCH

How to decide? Heavens, have pity on fortuneless Mu Hai-Chen, how to decide?

THE BOY

I saw the only way forward for Mu Hai-Chen.

He could order his men to escort me back to Pearl. I would be tried for treason and executed.

He would not have to kill me.

He could let me walk out of here.

But he would not be permitting me to live.

THE EUNUCH

Boy offered third way. Terrible third way. But only way. Smiled when he offered it to me. As gift.

THE BOY

My father chose the wrong person to lead this mission. I could not kill a good man. But now that it was I who was in this position, I could only act by my own principles. Even if it meant that I failed.

THE EUNUCH

What a leader he would have made.

What a son.

Gestured with hand for guards to seize boy. He let them lay hands on him and take him away.

Said to his back, "You honor your homeland, my boy. Long live Pearl."

#

The drummer rested the head of the club to the skin of the great crater drum.

From the tower of command, the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen delivered the signal with a chop of his hand.

The drummer swung back and began the eight beat count.

Eight.

The Eunuch closed his eyes.

Seven.

The musicians raised their flint torches.

Six.

The Eunuch rested his hands on the balustrade.

Five.

The musicians opened the fuel hatches of the fireworks silos.

Four.

The Eunuch gripped the balustrade.

Three.

The musicians drew back their arms at the ready.

Two.

The Eunuch opened his eyes and did not turn away.

One.

The musicians plunged their torches into the fuel hatches of the rocket.

The rocket blasted a terrible hollow into the ground as it lifted, shrieking as it rose.

It cleaved the atmosphere as it flew up into the night sky.

The rocket rose higher and higher, its nose shivering but staying its course.

The Imperial City became a mote below it.

The vast Riderlands rolled into view in the North.

The dark jungles of Yue-Hu rolled into view in the South.

The rocket climbed 300 li into the night sky then burst into a garland of vermillion brilliance as wide as the Imperial City.

Below, the Great Wall of Men stretching 2,000 li across the vastness of Shin saw it as a small blossom of color.

Seven more rockets rose and burst in rhythm.

On the final burst, the Great Wall of Men jumped.

They continued to jump to each spray of color opening in the sky, to each beat upon the Great Spine of the Earth.

And behold, the 78th leap marked the moment that the Earth began to shudder and quake and crack and break.

The structures of Shin crumbled. 6,000 years of culture and history caved into dust. The people of Shin survived the trembling of the ground as their cities and villages flattened around them.

Where the plates of the Great Spine spread apart, the Earth sighed out clouds of poisonous gas in release that flashed with friction lightning from within. The Great Wall of Men flattened and died wherever the clouds passed over them. The winds carried the clouds down from the Great Spine and travelled out over the forests and then the farmlands and then the sites of the villages and then the sites of the great cities of Shin.

One hour after the Great Leap, the sea screamed and to the East, the island of Pearl was drowned by a tide such as history had never seen. The city of Pearl was lost, and the land beneath it wiped clean of structures of brick and wood and stone, leaving only the few structures that had been built of the pearl.

Two hours after the Great Leap, one fifth of Shin was covered in water, from the flooding of the Purple River and every other major water body due to the rearrangement of the plates forming the Earth and the back wash of the Sea-Scream as it rippled back from its initial strike against the island of Pearl.

Four days after the Great Leap, the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen, Chief Engineer of the Great Leap of Shin, was executed for the devastation caused by his plan.

Six months after the Great Leap, Master Lin Tian-Tai was executed for his treason against the island of Pearl.

One year after the Great Leap, the new Great Plan of Complete Centrality and Perfect Uprightness for the rebuilding of the city of Pearl was ratified. The Great Plan required all buildings in Pearl to be made of the pearl.

Five years after the Great Leap, the new city of Pearl was fully rebuilt on the grave of the old one with impossible swiftness for no suits to condemn, costs to raze, or campaigns to relocate were required. The Sea-Scream had dealt with all those elements. No one in Pearl foresaw that the Great Leap of Shin carried embedded inside it this gift at its center, so justly like a pearl itself!

Now, 200 years after the Great Leap, the once great Empire of Shin still remains plunged in doubt, chaos, shame.

Now, Pearl prospers, shines, prevails!

Now, the Eunuch Mu Hai-Chen and Master Lin Tian-Tai are cheered as heroes of Pearl!

May their names be sung for 10,000 generations!

All Hail! All Hail! All Hail!

END