

The First Emperor's Sons

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Darkness. Waiting in darkness.

The clammy arms of a dozen young men, some only just out of boyhood, pressed against each other through the short sleeves of once-fine tunics, sitting side-by-side within the confined space of the grimy chamber. The ragged breathing of the remaining sons of Qin Shi Huang, first Emperor of unified China. The brothers of Huhai, Qin Er Shi, the second emperor, the usurper.

We can hear the pitter-patter of many light footsteps that ring on the floor, coming towards us. We stiffen as one. Perhaps this will be the time. Perhaps it will happen now. Perhaps now they will take us away. The footsteps are getting closer... nearly here. We can hear murmured voices, then the grating of the key in the wooden lock. The door seems as though it will never open; its creaking and groaning is a discordant sound in the silence.

The flickering light of lanterns illuminates several blank-faced servants and I let out the breath I hadn't realised I was holding in. It isn't time... not yet. The servants don't look at us as they file in, placing the trays of food and drink they carry on the floor in front of us. The guards outside close the door as they leave and lock it.

Scrambling eagerly forward, we consume the food in minutes, eating like starved wild animals. It feels like a week since we last ate, but it could just as easily have been a day. Each time is the same and so far each time has only ended in waiting. Waiting for them to come and take us away, as we know they will, eventually. Being given food or drink, or being led outside to relieve ourselves and get a breath of fresh air, then going back in and waiting, waiting in case the next footsteps aren't trivial, in case the next footsteps mean they've finally come. I have become afraid of the waiting, but I know I will be more afraid when it stops.

The food is good, warming my belly. Leaning back against the wall, I look around at the numb faces I know must mirror my own. In the early days of our imprisonment, we would talk and cry together, hoping and praying for rescue. Now we have no more we can

say, and merely let the grief smother us in its hard embrace, leaving the empty vessels of our bodies behind to wait... and wait. Always to wait.

Me and my brothers. Brothers most of whom I hardly knew before. The sons of some of the first Emperor's many concubines. Living quietly with our mothers away from the palace, with our own estates, our own servants, our own lives. Harmless, most of us.

But not to him. To him we're all a threat. Because of the father we share. Because we're eligible for the throne as much as he is. Because free, someday we might come and take it from him by force.

I didn't even know my father was dead until they came to take me away. I can still see my mother's face when they pulled us apart, her hair billowing around her as she struggled hopelessly before going limp and faint in her captor's grip. Her constricted breathing when they read out the charges. The tears she shed when we realised what Huhai had done.

'I'm a prince!' I yelled at them, again and again. It took me a long time to understand that that didn't help me anymore. That it only made things worse.

The second emperor cannot let us live. We are a danger to him while we breathe in this realm. He was touring the states with the first emperor when he died, he and Zhao Gao, the chief eunuch. They had time to make their move, to bring about Crown Prince Fusu's death and proclaim Huhai second Emperor. And then to come for us and take us so that none may threaten his claim. There are many more of our brothers and sisters across the state from all the different concubines. I wonder how many have died yet. I wonder how they died.

Suddenly, I find myself thinking of my mother's eyes, as I last saw them, wide, hopeless. In that moment, all I have ever known rushes through every fibre of my being and an involuntary cry escapes my lips, out into the silence, shivering and trembling.

My brothers look at me with empty eyes.

Next to me, one of my brothers suddenly speaks in a slow, toneless voice, enunciating each syllable as if trying to remember exactly how each word should sound. His voice is hoarse and rough from disuse but has an almost childlike expression to it.

‘He had thirty-six years to build his tomb, just in case his elixir of life failed him, as it did. Thirty-six years to ensure that he can continue in the afterlife as he did here. He has his concubines, servants and countless others buried there with him, and every worldly possession he might need. The terracotta warriors will guard him eternally. Our tomb will lie opposite. But we will have nothing -- no army to protect us, no possessions to help us. We are lost. How can we continue in the afterlife?’

The effects of his speech reverberate through the chamber. I cling to the last and only comfort that remains.

‘We will have each other,’ I say, trying to sound more certain than I feel. ‘Almost strangers though we may be, we are brothers and we will have each other.’

I draw my knees up to my chest, steadying myself against the wall, and study my hands. They look dirty and worn and my nails are long. They are the hands of a prisoner, not a prince.

I fall asleep just like that, with my head resting on my drawn up knees, thinking about what will be there for me in the afterlife.

The instant I awake I know something is different. There are many footsteps sounding outside, a heavy, booted tread. The voice that speaks with the guard is clear and crisp.. A jarringly familiar note rings through my mind and I am flooded with terror.

‘It’s time, isn’t it?’ someone says quietly. I don’t know who. I keep my eyes fixed on the blank grey wall in front of me.

‘The afterlife -- I hope it’s nice,’ says another. ‘Maybe then... maybe then all this won’t matter anymore.’

The man outside with the clear, crisp voice comes in and starts speaking to us in a formal voice, listing the petty crimes he claims we committed and ordering... our execution.

The wait is over.

I only half hear what he says. Glory has changed him much since we last met but now I recognise the man who brought this upon us in the first place.

‘Zhao Gao,’ I hiss, tears stinging my eyes. My brothers start violently as they catch on.

He acts like he doesn’t hear me and keeps talking in that clear, crisp voice but as he turns towards the door to lead us out he smiles vindictively at me over his shoulder.

And so we walk, our footsteps echoing on the stone floor, guided by many guards. I am walking like a drunk man, staggering and stumbling with every step, seeing nothing of what is around me except my brothers and their closed up trembling faces. We are isolated from the living world, destined to leave this fickle existence early.

‘The afterlife,’ I think desperately, pleading with myself. ‘It will be better there, I will be free of this existence, I will have peace.’

I feel feverish and unclear, but this thought sustains me.

‘I know it will be better, I know it will. I will have my reward for my suffering, this is for good.’

And I smile despite myself, I smile because I know that I will go to the land of the dead with my brothers and we will be free from this world.

‘In here,’ says the man with the crisp, clear voice leading the procession and I look around. We have come out of a side door of the palace and are in a small, out of the way courtyard I vaguely remember from my brief visits in my childhood. A small crowd is already assembled, waiting for us. They stare at us as we come in, boring into us with sharp, pitiless eyes. And then I see my brother.

He is dressed as grandly as our father used to dress, in luxurious dragon robes. It has been a long time since we met as children, but I recognise the little boy he used to be at once and I realise he hasn't changed one bit. At the sight of him, hot red anger bubbles up inside of me and my brothers and I watch the usurper who has ordered our death.

Standing a few paces behind him is Zhao Gao. His sharp eyes catch mine and his lip curls into a smile. Stepping forwards, he murmurs in Huhai's ear for a long time and Huhai listens as attentively as a pupil to his master.

There are other eunuchs further behind them, my brother's imperial servants. They aren't looking at us anymore: they are watching my brother and Zhao Gao with narrowed eyes.

We are told to form a row. Opposite us stands a man holding a heavy crossbow staring into the distance. All of a sudden, cold hard fear grips me, fear like I have never felt before, fear that tries to pull me away from all rationality, to return to the most basic primal urge to one in mortal danger...

... to run...

... to run away from it all and for it all to be over...

I shake violently as the impulses shudder through me, heels raised as though to do it, to run, no matter what would happen.

'The afterlife,' I say to myself. 'The afterlife, think of the afterlife, think of freedom, of being with your brothers in the afterlife, think of your mother!'

I look at my brothers and they look at me. Our hands clenched into fists, we who had once been princes stand straight and tall.

Zhao Gao comes and walks slowly past each one of us, leering with victory, at last coming to me at the end of the row.

‘This was you,’ I whisper to him in fury. ‘You manipulated Huhai to be your puppet. This is all so that me and my brothers can’t claim the throne you stole when you killed the rightful heir, Crown Prince Fusu!’

‘Oh really?’ he hisses back. ‘Why don’t you prove it?’

And he walks away before I can say another word. There is a chilling silence.

The crossbow goes off once and a body crumples on the floor. It goes off a second time -- then a third, then a fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth and finally, eleventh time. The man readies himself for the twelfth shot.

Fighting back tears of pain and fright, I look once at my brother the usurper and at Zhao Gao, and I know in my heart of hearts that they will only win in this world.

‘I’m going to the afterlife,’ I say to myself, squaring my jaw. ‘I don’t have an army to protect me but I have my brothers, we will be together in the afterlife!’

I repeat this thought to myself over and over as I watch the executioner pull back the string of the crossbow. and release the heavy metal bolt.