

## ***Prologue***

A drop of sweat trickled down the soldier's neck. It settled briefly atop her sun-warmed shoulder before a vigorous swing of her arm jostled it loose. She raised her staff. Kicked the air. Jumped. And brought her staff down with a yell.

A hundred quarterstaffs thudded on the dirt. A hundred voices shouted. The soldier smiled at their bright timbre, the lack of baritone and bass notes.

The women around her were red with exertion and covered in dust. Their braids hung damp and dark with sweat. Still, they blocked, punched, and kicked as one. Not a single soldier lowered her kicks or softened her blows as the sun climbed higher, its rays blazing hotter. On their tunics, the soldiers had embroidered names of women long gone—generals, soldiers, wrestlers, fencers. It was a homage to those heroes, and perhaps an attempt to summon their spirits, if the embroiderer herself proved worthy.

Their leader stood in front, shouting commands in a clear voice. Mulan, war hero of China, barely recognizable from the girl who'd run off a few years ago to join the army in her father's stead. Looking at Mulan, the soldier felt pride, but also compassion. Mulan had mastered the art of war, but there remained obstacles ahead, dangers more nuanced than a simple exchange of swords. She was close to fulfilling her destiny, but first, she'd have to learn the way of the spirits, to use their strength as her own. And she would know pain. Because the *fenghuang*, the phoenix, that guardian of imperial harmony, does not grant its blessing to everyone. Only the most honest, loyal, and selfless. The one who is brave against encroaching darkness.

## ***Chapter One***

The chessboard in front of Mulan was clearly made for men. The carved, rounded stones were slightly too large for a woman's hand to hold comfortably, slightly too heavy for Mulan to balance easily on her fingers. This awkwardness was familiar to Mulan from her days in the army—sword pommels that were too wide, saddles that were just a bit too long. It brought a strong sense of déjà vu.

She moved her cannon forward on the board. The piece had its name carved on its rounded top, and she ran her thumb across the imprint before putting it down. Mulan looked at her hand. Though her palms and fingers were calloused by years of sword and staff training, her bone structure was still too fine for a man's. She'd gotten out of the habit of hiding her hands from view. Silently chiding herself, she curled her fingers under her palm and lowered her fists into her lap.

Thankfully, her opponent was too engrossed in the game to notice. He was an older man, well dressed. There was a bit of white in his mustache, though he still sat straight and his shoulders

were sturdy with muscle. He had a scar over his right eye, and another one from his nose to the left edge of his face. Rich silk sleeves covered his arms, but once in a while, they rode up, and Mulan saw more scars in various stages of healing. If she peeked beneath the table, she'd see the sword he wore at his waist. Weapons of any kind weren't allowed in this chess teahouse, but Yang Dafan did what he wished.

Dafan finally moved, capturing one of her pawns with his elephant. "You're losing quite a few of your soldiers, young Master Chen," said Dafan. "Is this some new strategy I'm unfamiliar with?"

"I'm not a very skilled chess player. I'm sorry to say." She spoke from the bottom of her diaphragm to accentuate the lower registers of her voice.

"Why step foot into a chess house, then?"

"I used to play half-board chess with my father. I was feeling nostalgic on the road."

"Half-board chess?"

"Perhaps you call it blind chess. When you start with the pieces facedown and flip them, one by one."

"A child's variation."

"I did mention I played it with my father."

Dafan pushed the cuticle at the base of his thumbnail. Mulan noticed that the little fingernail on his left hand was groomed elegantly long. She wondered how he protected it when he fought.

"At some point," said Dafan, "one does have to grow up." "I know," said Mulan. "But the children's version appeals to me."

"I like the idea of keeping your soldiers disguised until they are right next to your enemy."

In fact, both Mulan and her chess partner were well practiced in hiding from the enemy. Just five days ago, Yang Dafan and his men had waylaid a traveling caravan. They'd killed half the guards and disappeared with a fortune in fine silk.

Dafan and his team of brigands had been the scourge of Mulan's region for close to a year. He was also very careful, much to the area magistrate's chagrin. Dafan stayed hidden most of the time. When he did move in public, usually to indulge in music, chess, and tea, he took bodyguards with him. He posted men to watch the roads whenever he entered a building, and his near-supernatural ability to disappear at the first sign of pursuit had stymied the magistrate on more than one occasion. After several failed attempts, the magistrate had scaled back his attempts to catch the criminal. Mulan suspected it was because he could no longer handle the humiliation.

Both Mulan and Dafan glanced up as a woman came by to fill their tea. Mulan nodded a thanks, though the woman barely glanced at her. Instead, she gazed up at Dafan in adoring invitation.

Liwen was exceptionally beautiful, with full lips, long lashes, a proud nose, and smooth olive skin. She was young, about the same age as Mulan, and deadly with just about any weapon known to man. Mulan had seen her split one arrow with another and disarm full-fledged soldiers with nothing but a scarf. But until today, she'd never seen Liwen flirt.

She was pretty good. At least, it seemed so to Mulan, the way her eyes flitted to sneak glances at Dafan, the amusing but decidedly effective sway in her hips as she circled the room. The swordsmen Dafan had stationed at the corners of the teahouse now spent their time watching Liwen instead of scanning for threats, though Mulan guessed they'd snap out if it quickly enough if a fight broke out. Unfortunately for Liwen, however, the target of her attentions

seemed far more interested in his chessboard than in her. Mulan cast another glance around the room. Besides the men in corners with forbidden swords, Dafan had other bandits scattered here and there, drinking tea and enjoying their own chess matches. Mulan counted at least ten. And though she had her own women spread throughout the shop—tea girls with daggers tucked in their sashes, kitchen maids with short swords stashed among the pots—she would rather it not come to an all-out fight. It would be better if Liwen could lure Dafan out into one of the upstairs rooms, as they had planned. Capture the general, win the game. Just like in chess. Mulan moved her cannon across the river, forcing Dafan to retreat one of his horses.

"Where do you travel from here?" Dafan asked.

"West a few days," said Mulan. "My father is looking to buy land suitable for vineyards. Our wine business has been growing steadily."

"I don't drink grape wine myself," said Dafan. "Is it any good?" "You'll find it sweeter than rice wine," said Mulan. "We've had the honor of shipping several barrels to the emperor." Dafan raised his eyebrows, a movement that pulled at his facial scars. "Really? That is a great honor indeed."

Mulan nodded modestly. "A bit of good fortune."

Liwen came again to refill their cups, though neither Mulan nor Dafan had taken a sip. "Master Yang," she said, laying a hand lightly on his shoulder. "You are such a skilled chess strategist." Dafan coughed low in his throat and waved her away. Liwen gave Mulan an exasperated glance over his shoulder as she retreated. Mulan worked hard to suppress her smile. Liwen was usually so good at everything she did that it would have been amusing to see her struggle if the stakes hadn't been so high. Mulan watched her go, and then made a quick decision. "Master Yang," she said. "Perhaps I may redeem myself from being such a poor adversary in our chess game today. I have several jugs from our winery in my room upstairs. I'd be honored

if you would have a taste yourself.” Dafan raised his head. “I would, indeed. Have the staff fetch some for us.”

“I don’t trust any of the staff with this batch,” said Mulan. “It’s a new blend of grapes from several different vineyards. I formulated it myself and wouldn’t want to see it sold to our competitors. What of this? I clearly have no hope of victory in our game today. Perhaps you can spare me the shame of actually living out my defeat and come upstairs with me.”

The bandit lord studied the chessboard, then shrugged and pushed his chair back. Mulan remembered to grab her cane as she stood, and to walk favoring her right leg. The robe she wore, suitably fine for a rich merchant’s son, reached her ankles and was gathered at the waist with a jade inlaid belt. Though it was loose enough that she might have tried hiding a sword under its folds, she’d deemed it too much of a risk. A cane was the second-best option. At least she had something other than her limbs with which to stop a sharp edge.

The bell sleeves of Mulan’s robe flapped distractingly as she waved at Liwen. “Bring some fresh wine cups to my room.” Dafan walked toward the stairs, motioning for his swordsmen to follow. Mulan fought down her frustration as one henchman ran up the stairs ahead of them, and no less than three fell in step behind. “I’m afraid I can’t offer a drink to your men,” she said. “Pay no attention to them,” he said. “They’re a necessary precaution in my line of work, but they do not expect to be treated to a sample.”

“You have not yet told me your line of work,” said Mulan. She allowed a hint of suspicion to enter her voice. Though the rich young traveler she impersonated was new to the area, he wasn’t naive enough to be oblivious in the face of five prohibited swords.

“I’m a businessman,” said Dafan. “But I don’t conduct business in my places of relaxation.”

The henchman that had gone ahead reappeared at the top of the stairs as Mulan and Dafan approached. He gave a quick nod and took his place behind the bandit lord.

The hallway upstairs was narrow, with closed doors to the establishment’s few guest rooms lining each wall. The group’s footsteps echoed on the wooden floor, more heavily than they should have. Everyone was weighed down with metal and armor. That knowledge wound Mulan’s nerves even tighter.

Mulan stopped at the first door and opened it wide enough for Dafan to see inside. It was a sparse room, with a small bed and a table equipped with pen and ink sticks. Two packed bags and a large clay jar lay on the ground next to the bed.

“As you can see,” she said. “There is nothing threatening inside my room. I must insist that your men stay outside.” Dafan nodded. The swordsmen stayed put as the bandit lord followed Mulan in. Mulan bent over the jar, which was as tall as her thigh, and untied the burlap cloth over the top.

"It's a freshly sealed jar," she said, moving aside for Dafan to see the fiber plug. She rummaged through her bag for a knife and brought it out without any reaction from Dafan. He had no reason to be worried. It wasn't as if she was going to fence him with it.

As she pried at the plug, footsteps shuffled in the hallway. Dafan tensed ever so slightly and moved his hand toward his sword. The swordsmen outside exchanged puzzled glances.

"Cups for Master Chen," came Liwen's voice. She and four other serving women edged their way in with polite smiles and apologetic shrugs. She carried cups and napkins, while the next woman held plates, and two others brought trays containing an assortment of dried fruits, nuts, dried fish, and roasted seeds.

Dafan lowered his hand.

"Thank you," said Mulan. She took the cups from Liwen, meeting her eye but not giving any kind of signal as she weighed her options. She'd hoped to get Dafan up here alone, or at most with one or two guards. Instead, there were four guards here, and four of her own women. She supposed Liwen could not have brought more maidservants without raising suspicions. As it was, Mulan was impressed that her second-in-command had thought of so many plausible refreshments to offer.

It would be an even fight then, five against five. Mulan was confident in her own skills, and Liwen was peerless with a sword. But could the other three take on seasoned bandits? Two of the girls had trained with Mulan for close to a year. They were good students, but they'd never seen real combat. The last one, Zhonglin, was a new recruit who'd spent a few months with them at most. In fact, she wasn't even supposed to be here. Mulan had assigned her to a backup post at the end of the road to cut off any escaping bandits.

Two veterans, two skilled but green fighters, and a new recruit, against five seasoned criminals. Liwen and Mulan could cover for the others to some extent, but Mulan still didn't like the odds. She hated the idea of aborting their mission when they were so close, but she didn't want these women's blood on her hands.

Zhonglin placed her tray down on the table. Her eyes widened, and she clutched at her dress. There was a clattering as a short sword landed at her feet. Mulan's heart landed on the floor with it.

"What's this?" Dafan asked. He crossed the room in two steps and snatched up the sword. "Why would a maid carry this?" Zhonglin's already-pale face turned completely white. Her rosebud lips quivered.

Mulan exchanged a panicked glance with Liwen. "She's just a maid. They cut things in the kitchens."

"Search the others," Dafan commanded his swordsmen. The first to enter grabbed Liwen by the arm, oblivious to the icy warning in the false maid's gaze.

It looked like Mulan had no choice.

“Yang Dafan, you’re under arrest,” she said. “Under order of the magistrate.” She really wished she’d had a chance to get her sword.

Dafan stared at the maids, puzzling them out. “Armed women?” he said. And then he took a closer look at Mulan. “You’re not what you said you were.”

“No, sir,” said Mulan, and she didn’t bother to lower her voice. “I am not.”

Liwen delivered a vicious kick to the kneecap of the swordsman holding her. He crumpled, screaming in pain, as a long dagger materialized in Liwen’s hand.

“Watch out!” Liwen shouted.

Mulan raised her cane just in time to keep Dafan’s sword from splitting her skull. The bandit lord’s face was red, his eyes wild, and he attacked with a ferocity that was hard to counter. Each of his blows vibrated down her cane, numbing her hands and arms. Mulan backed up slowly, uncomfortably aware that the wall was coming up fast behind her.

She saw an opening and thrust the end of her cane into Dafan’s solar plexus. As he bent over, wheezing, Mulan took another step backward. Her heel knocked against the bag by her bedside. She took a quick gamble and dropped her cane, tearing open the bag and pulling out a sword and a knife. She threw the knife at Zhonglin, who was backed against a wall, unarmed. The sword Mulan kept for herself. Screams and shouts sounded from downstairs. Her women had barricaded the stairway.

Dafan was no longer wheezing. He held his sword at the ready, though his other hand clutched his ribs. His eyes flicked from the doorway, to the injured swordsman on the ground, to his three remaining fighters, still locked in combat with Mulan’s women.

“We have the stairs blocked and more soldiers coming in,” said Mulan. “Surrender now and we’ll bring you before the magistrate unharmed.”

Shouts drifted in from outside. Through the window, Mulan saw women running for the entrance of the teahouse—more members of her militia, dressed as farmers and peasants. It gave her some satisfaction to know that Dafan had walked right past them on his way here and not realized what they were.

Dafan stared at them for a moment. Then he sheathed his sword and hoisted himself out the window.

Mulan suppressed a few choice words. She really should have seen that coming. Sticking her own sword through her belt, she followed him out. There was a creaky covered walkway on the other side, its carved floral railing dry with age. Dafan sprinted down its length and, when he reached the end, jumped up onto the balustrade and swung onto the roof.

This time, Mulan did curse. Gritting her teeth, she climbed onto the railing, grabbing on to a wooden column for balance. A bunch of persimmons, strung out to dry, hit her in the face. The roof stretched out above her, overhanging the balcony by one arm's length and supported by a crossbeam. Mulan was shorter than Dafan. The crossbeam was considerably more of a leap for her.

She jumped for it, catching the dry wood with her fingertips. The railing swung beneath her, as did the ground below. Funny how clearly she could see the jagged edge of every rock, the sharp ends of every tree branch. Mulan lifted her eyes. Swinging hand over hand, she worked her way to the end, and then swung her arm over the edge of the upturned black-tiled roof.

By the time Mulan clambered over the brittle tile, Dafan was running along the slanted roof, slipping and sliding, but somehow not falling off. Tiles knocked loose by his footfalls clattered down the slope, and Mulan hoped there was nobody standing below. The very end of their building abutted a grove of trees, and the bandit lord sprinted directly toward it.

Mulan stood, waving her arms for balance. Her shoes gave her some traction but not enough for peace of mind. The trick, she found after a while, was to put the next foot down quickly enough so that it didn't matter if the last one slipped.

Dafan stumbled and fell flat against the roof with a great crash. He threw his arms and legs out, sliding down spread-eagled, until his foot hit the lip of the roof. Mulan redoubled her speed and drew her sword.

He regained his footing just as she reached him. Somehow he'd managed to hold on to his sword, and as she neared, he charged her. Mulan skidded to a stop to avoid spitting herself on his sword, shifting her weight to parry his incoming blow. Tiles crumbled under her feet, shattering on distant ground below. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see a crowd gathering, their rapt faces distracting impressions she tried to ignore. This was dangerous. She needed to end things soon.

Dafan swung at her face. Instead of blocking this time, Mulan ducked and kicked out her leg, knocking his feet out from under him. The bandit landed on his side with a thud. His sword slid off the edge of the roof, and he clawed at the roof tiles to keep from following it over. Mulan slammed one foot down on his wrist and held the point of her sword to Dafan's throat.

"Enough. The magistrate's expecting you."

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Mulan didn't dare lower her guard as she tied Dafan up. Even unarmed, he was an extremely dangerous man, and the raw hate in his eyes was frightening. Add to that the fact that they were one slip away from breaking their necks. . . By the time Mulan had Dafan seated on the roof with his hands secured in front of him, every muscle in her body ached from tension.

She stepped away from the bandit lord. With her sword pointed at Dafan's back, Mulan finally allowed herself to look down at the courtyard. The fighting had slowed, and the few remaining of Dafan's men were outnumbered by Mulan's forces.

"Mulan!" Liwen called to her from below. The ribbons in her carefully braided hair hung ragged. "Are you safe?" "Bring me a ladder!" Mulan said.

A recent recruit ran up with a ladder balanced on her shoulder. Mulan worried that Dafan might throw himself off the roof rather than be captured, but he climbed carefully down, gripping the rungs with his bound hands. Three women with swords waited at the bottom. As soon as the bandit's foot touched the ground, they pushed him against the wall, patted him down, and chained his feet together.

Mulan followed him down, accepting Liwen's hand as she jumped off the third-to-last rung. The fighting had stopped completely now, and prisoners were lined up against one side of the courtyard. Dafan's men ranged from mere boys to graying men. Some looked defeated while others looked as if they required a close eye. Mulan scanned the groups, her gut tightening when she saw the handful of bodies strewn across the courtyard's flagstone pathways.

She braced herself. "Casualties?" she asked.

"None of those are ours," said Liwen, following Mulan's gaze. "We have several with cuts being treated. Jiayi has a broken arm." Liwen pursed her lips. "Fu Ning has a bad cut on her leg."

The knot in Mulan's stomach unfurled but not completely. Liwen would not refer to a cut as *bad* unless it was very serious. "Take me to her," said Mulan.

The main room of the chess house was unrecognizable as the room Mulan had left just a half hour earlier. Elegant lacquered tables were overturned. Chairs lay shattered. A large clay statue of a horseman had been toppled and broken in two. Chess-piece

sized dents marred the fine latticework of the windows, and blood darkened portions of the stone floor. Mulan's heart sank when she remembered the elderly husband and wife who owned the establishment. They'd shown immense trust in Mulan, first in coming to her about Dafan's activities, and then allowing her to spring this ambush. She'd have to think about how to make up for their loss. A portion of the floor had been cleared in the center of the room, where a cluster of women crouched around a supine figure. Mulan took a moment to gather herself, suppressing her own dismay and bringing up strength the others needed to see. Only then did she approach.

Fu Ning was one of Mulan's younger soldiers, a hard worker who never complained through even the most grueling of drills. Now, her face was pale, almost green, and a sheen of sweat covered her forehead. She gritted her teeth as another woman bound the gash across her thigh, but she didn't cry out.

The crowd parted for Mulan. Ning's expression became almost apologetic when she saw her leader. "I didn't keep my guard up," she said with an earnestness that broke Mulan's heart. "He got past my sword, just like you warned me about."

Mulan took Ning's hand, stopping her words with a squeeze. "You did well. None of us fight our best in the heat of battle. That's why we train so hard. You fought, and you stayed alive. You handled yourself far better than you would have if I'd sent you here a year ago."

Ning smiled. Six months ago, she hadn't known the difference between a sword and an ax. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm just meant to be a farmer's daughter."

"There's no shame in being a farmer's daughter. And no one says a farmer can't wield a sword. But don't let anyone tell you that just because you were born a farmer, that is the only thing you can be. Do you know you share a surname with a great warrior?"

Ning turned to look at her, curiosity unclouding her gaze. "Her name was Fu Hao," said Mulan. "She was a great general, and she led an army of three thousand."

Ning's eyes brightened. "A woman?"

Mulan nodded. "Greatness runs in your blood. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

One of the village herbal woman came with a bitter smelling brew. "To help her sleep," she said.

Mulan nodded, suppressing an irrational urge to send the herbal woman away and care for Fu Ning herself. "Take good care of her."

Neither Mulan nor Liwen said anything until they were well out of earshot.

"Do you think she can keep the leg?" Mulan finally asked. Even the act of asking threatened to invite misfortune, but she couldn't help herself.

"Maybe her ancestors will intercede for her," said Liwen. "Have you seen Ning at the festivals?" said Mulan. "She's an exuberant dancer." Mulan had a distinct memory of Fu Ning spinning to a quick drumbeat, her face radiant, a feathered fan in each hand.

"Let's not give up hope yet."

There wasn't much more to say beyond that, and they both fell silent. Outside, the courtyard was a bustle of activity. Women rushed back and forth along the stone path, tying up prisoners, lifting statues into place, rinsing off the flagstone with bucketfuls of water. A few clasped their hands and bowed to Mulan before returning to their tasks.

There was another concern pulling at Mulan, and it took her a moment to realize what it was. "Zhonglin wasn't supposed to be with you."

Liwen's lips tightened, and she gave a terse nod. "She was assigned to watch the roads. I didn't see her until I'd led the women upstairs and it was too late to send her down. I don't know how she managed to tail us like that. I'm sorry."

Mulan frowned, rubbing at a patch of dirt on her arm. It wasn't the first time they'd had trouble with Zhonglin. The girl was skilled. The fact that she'd slipped past Liwen's watch was evidence enough of that, but she didn't listen to orders. "I would have called off the raid if she hadn't dropped that knife. We salvaged the situation, but it could well have ended in disaster."

"Do you want me to discipline her?" said Liwen. "I mind these things much less than you do."

It was true. Mulan liked to call Liwen the most disciplined rebel she knew. The woman professed no respect for self-proclaimed authority, be it the nuns who raised her or the local governor. But as second-in-command of Mulan's militia, she ran a tighter ship than Mulan suspected any nun or governor would. Liwen saw no contradiction.

As tempting as Liwen's offer was, Mulan shook her head. "Thank you, but it's my responsibility. I'll speak with her tomorrow." Finally, all the prisoners were bound, and Mulan led the long march back to the village proper. They must have made quite a sight—a crowd of disheveled, bloody, and jubilant women helping their limping comrades down the road as their prisoners, roped together two by two, marched between them.

The magistrate was at the door of his whitewashed brick hut when they arrived. Mulan supposed her group's approach was hard to miss.

"Lady Fa," he said, his voice as stiff as his long, trailing mustache. Mulan joined her hands in front of her and bowed in greeting. "Magistrate Fong, I hope you are well." Conversations with him were always slightly awkward. Mulan didn't get the impression that Fong actively disliked her, but he always seemed slightly nervous when she was around. Perhaps she was too unpredictable for his taste. "We have Yang Dafan," she told him. "Along with fifteen of his men."

The magistrate, who'd been eyeing the prisoners behind her, did a double take. "I shouldn't have doubted you, Lady Fa. How did you capture him?"

His face was turned toward the prisoners, and Mulan wished she had a better view of his expression. What she had done was embarrassing for the magistrate, but she hoped he'd be big enough not to let that interfere with his duty.

"It was a matter of getting armed soldiers near him without his knowledge. I sent my women with hidden weapons." "Very clever, Lady Fa. Shall the bounty be delivered to your father's house?"

"You can give the bounty to the proprietors of the Bamboo River Chess House. They'll be needing considerable repairs." "Will you be available, should I have any questions?" "I'm here every morning in the outer fields. Training my soldiers."

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The women gathered before dawn the next day, as usual. No one complained outright, because any complaints would have meant extra laps around the untilled field they used as a training ground, but Mulan caught the occasional grimace as her soldiers stretched and yawned in the predawn chill. She was feeling the effects of the battle herself. Her legs and arms ached from climbing and rooftop running, and bruises bloomed across every single one of her limbs. Still, she put on her commander's face and took her place at the head of the field, surreptitiously rubbing a sore spot on her back and glaring at Liwen when she smirked.

"Take formation!" Mulan called. Her voice carried clearly across the cold. The women hurried into place, standing with feet shoulder-width apart, hands clasped behind them.

"You fought well yesterday," said Mulan. "You brought down a group of bandits that terrorized our region for close to a year. You succeeded where the magistrate failed."

The women stood straighter.

Mulan continued. "But wars don't end because you fight well for a day. Wars are won because you keep fighting, day after day, through pain, through hunger, through bone-crushing exhaustion, until the work is done." She took a moment to let the words sink in. "So we shall train as if we are at war. Give me a horse stance."

Foreheads wrinkled in consternation, but everybody dropped into a low crouch. Mulan didn't make them hold it very long before she launched them into their first drill. As her company kicked, punched, and jumped, Mulan walked through the lines, occasionally correcting someone's form.

"Men would have us think that we're not suited for battle, that swordsmanship and kung fu are their domain." A flock of crows took flight, and Mulan waited for their wingbeats to fade before speaking again. "But nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, it was a woman who gave us the foundation for swordsmanship. The Yue maiden taught herself to fence and wrote the first treatise on sword fighting. She forged a short sword to suit her needs, one that was sharp yet pliant, with a flexible core that responded to her commands.

"Many more women have followed in her footsteps. Generals, pirates, archers, horsewomen, wrestlers, fencers. We embroider their names on our tunics so we remember their bravery. We train every day so our descendants can sew our names onto their tunics when the day comes."

The women moved valiantly. Mulan watched them push through their soreness and discomfort, and she felt a deep pride well up within her. Despite her fancy words about persisting through pain, she ended their training a half hour early, pretending not to notice their relieved groans and sighs.

“Zhonglin,” she said. “I want to speak to you afterward.” Zhonglin was sitting on the ground, alternating gulps from her waterskin with bites of a rice ball. She’d tossed another rice ball in front of her for two sparrows to peck at and was currently coaxing a third to come near. She didn’t look surprised to be called, and her comrades, who showed no surprise either, quickly cleared out. Zhonglin put down her waterskin and dusted herself off before coming to stand in front of Mulan.

Mulan drew a deep breath. Might as well get it over with. “Zhonglin, what was your assigned post yesterday?” Zhonglin looked Mulan in the eye. “To watch the roads, Commander.”

“Why, then, were you in the teahouse?”

“I wanted to be in the middle of the fighting.”

Mulan looked for signs of remorse or shame in the girl’s large eyes and found none. “I assign posts for a reason, soldier. You’re a new recruit. You’re still learning how to use a sword. You don’t yet have the skill to be an asset on the front lines.”

Zhonglin’s chin lifted the slightest bit. “I disarmed a bandit.” “One defeated enemy means nothing. People win fights by luck all the time. An untrained soldier is not only ineffective, she’s a danger to her comrades. Have you forgotten that your dropped blade was what betrayed our hand in the first place?” The girl’s eyes flashed. “We won, didn’t we?”

“Because your comrades salvaged the situation. They bore the cost of it too. Fu Ning may never walk again.”

Zhonglin’s face fell at Ning’s name. For a moment, she cast her gaze down, uncertain, but then she marshaled her features back into a combative mask. “Why do you even call us soldiers? You tell us how strong we are, and then you do everything in your power to keep us from fighting. Would a general of the emperor’s army treat his soldiers this way?”

“Don’t lecture me about the imperial army,” snapped Mulan. “Only one of us has served within its ranks, and it’s not you. For disobeying orders yesterday, you’ll help the village herb woman for the next month instead of attending practices. See if you can make up for the suffering you caused your comrades. And for your insolence this morning, you’ll clean the practice armor.”

Zhonglin’s jaw tightened and her eyes sparked defiance. Mulan met her gaze with equal force, her own anger rising. For a moment, she wondered if Zhonglin would go so far as to disobey an order while Mulan was right there. But then Zhonglin turned away. Mulan watched the girl’s back as she took a long breath, then slowly and deliberately picked up a set of practice armor. As Zhonglin piled two more sets into her arms, Mulan walked off the field, nerves tingling.

Liwen met her at the edge. “Talk didn’t go well?”

Mulan glanced over her shoulder at Zhonglin, who was gathering the practice armor into a pile. She couldn't remember any soldier being this openly defiant, even in the imperial army. "She needs to learn discipline. I can't keep a soldier who doesn't listen to orders."

"She reminds me of when I was young," said Liwen. "I never took well to rules."

"Is that why the nuns kicked you out?"

"They didn't kick me out. I left."

"And you've been braiding your hair ever since."

Liwen ran a hand over her elaborate coiffure. Today she'd wound braids on either side of her head into two buns, then looped two smaller braids underneath. "You would take care of your hair too, if you had to go without it for so much of your childhood."

Mulan thought about her own days in the army, when she'd cut her hair short to blend in with the men. She hadn't really missed it. If anything, she'd found the new length much easier to take care of. But then, there was a big difference between trimming one's hair and shaving it off completely.

"Do you think I'm overprotective of the women?" Mulan asked abruptly.

Liwen's talent for quick rejoinders made the ensuing pause even more noticeable. "It's hard to know, from drills, how prepared a soldier is for battle."

"That was neither a yes nor a no," said Mulan.

Liwen shrugged. "If I wanted the headaches of being a commander, I would have started my own militia. But I joined yours."

The manner in which Liwen had joined Mulan's militia had been pure Liwen. Some local bandits had been harrying a farmer in Mulan's village, and Mulan had volunteered to patrol the lands with some of her senior fighters. Sure enough, a gang of five rogues showed up a few days later. They were in the midst of giving Mulan a healthy brawl when a stranger leapt into the fray.

She was a woman. Her clothing was tattered, but her sword was sharp. The stranger disarmed one bandit as easily as if she were performing a fencing exercise, then moved on to the next. When the dust settled, Mulan opened her mouth to speak, but Liwen beat her to it.

"You're Fa Mulan?" She asked with the same efficiency as her sword strokes.

"Yes," Mulan answered, taken aback.

"You lead a female militia?"

"I do."

With that, Liwen nodded and walked away.

The next morning, she showed up a quarter hour into morning practice and watched quietly from the side of the field. Liwen observed them an entire week, always arriving after they started and leaving right before they finished. Then she'd approached Mulan to offer her sword.

"I can't guarantee how long I'll stay," she said. "But I'll give you my best while I'm here."

Mulan had her doubts about this aloof swordswoman, but Liwen proved true to her word, dedicating herself to the militia with the same single-mindedness with which she'd approached that first fight. Over time, Mulan learned more of Liwen's past—her childhood as an orphan in a convent, how she left eventually to travel the country as an itinerant swordswoman. Despite Liwen's frequent reminders that she wouldn't stay for long, she seemed at home here. Mulan had given her more and more responsibilities, until Liwen became her de facto second-in-command.

Liwen dusted off her hands. "I'm finished here. Do you want to—" She squinted down the road. "Why are they coming back?" Mulan followed Liwen's gaze to where six women from the militia were sprinting toward the practice field. Mulan would have worried if not for their gleeful smiles.

Wenling, one of her younger recruits, windmilled her arms as she came to a stop. "Mulan, there's a rider coming down the road. He's from the Imperial City." She wiggled her eyebrows while the two women behind her giggled in a decidedly unsoldierly manner.

"I see. Why do you come to me?" Though Mulan had a guess, and the possibility kicked off a flip-flop in her chest. Wenling took her hand, pulling her away from an amused Liwen. "Come on!"

Mulan ran to keep up with the girls, weaving through streets of latticed windows and pitched tile roofs, kicking up dirt from the paths in their madcap rush. A dumpling vendor yanked his cart out of their way, and a stray dog darted out of a corner to howl after them. Finally, breathless, they reached the imperial road leading out of the village. A handful of others had gathered as well, and all had their eyes on a quickly approaching rider.

Mulan walked in front of the crowd to get a closer look. The rider had broad shoulders, and his ease and posture showed him to be an expert horseman. He wore the polished iron mail overcoat of a highly ranked military officer. As he rode closer, Mulan saw his high cheekbones and the strong line of his chin, the expressive mouth that so easily split into a grin. But by then she already knew who he was. Li Shang had come to her village.