

## The Sea's Song

I believe that the sea can sing.

Sitting on the shore, I put my hand out into the water. The water tugs at my fingers, as if trying to pull me into the ocean's welcoming arms. The waves ripple, breaking the smooth surface of the ocean, crested with white foam that sparkles in the setting sun. The golden rays of light dance on them, caressing my cheeks gently.

I close my eyes, and everything recedes. The sea whispers, speaks in its haunting tongue; the ripples of the waves playing out its tune on its own silken strings. The notes rise and crash at my feet, and I am home.

~

"What do you think it is saying?" my father asked me once, when I was eight.

"I don't speak Ocean," I protested.

"One day you'll understand what it's saying."

"How do you know?" I asked without opening my eyes.

My father's hand ruffled my hair. "You were named after the great Mohamed, son," he said, "and you will discover Allah's greatest gift."

I can taste the salty sea spray on my tongue as the gulls swoop around me. "Tell me again about your last voyage," I said.

"Again?"

"It's my favorite story."

I could feel him heave a laugh, though there is something deeper, a reluctance to it.

"The day I went to Mecca was a fine summer day," he said. "The stars were my only guide, but they were enough - enough to guarantee a map in the skies, veiled by the clouds, wreathed by moonlight. Such beauty!"

"What did you do with that map?"

My father's smile waned. "With sheer power of memory I committed the map of the stars to paper. It will guide any seafarer who is of my blood. It tells of the routes of conquest - and even more. It guarantees victory in battle to whoever can read it. If that map is in your hand, if you are worthy enough to decipher its wisdom - there is no war you cannot win. You have no idea - the map of the stars has power none can withstand; all men would flee before the wielder's face, for his wrath would then become terrible to behold."

"Where is it?" I asked, entranced.

"Gone," said my father. "The new emperor of the Ming dynasty tried to take away my creation. He wanted conquest - he wanted to use it to conquer the lands beyond China. I told him that a wise warrior always avoids the battle but he didn't listen. So, to keep it out of their reach - I placed it in the protection of Tianfei."

"Where?" I said.

My father smiled. "The map tells of a treasure, a secret even deeper than the road to conquest written in the stars. A secret very few have ever come to possess," he said. He paused. "I destroyed the map."

"*What?*"

"Yes, son - I tore it into pieces - seven pieces. In that way, only a great seafarer of my blood will be able to find it, for it is protected by the power of the oceans. Scattered all over the seas, it awaits the day be put together again."

~

TWO YEARS LATER

He is gone.

I try to smell the salty sea air that is miles away, try to feel the tremor of the ocean waters that is world away, try to see the rays of golden sunshine dancing on the waves. I am Ma He. I am the son of Ma Hajji. I am ten years old.

I am a son with no father.

Hands bound, eyes darkened, I keep reliving those last, terrible moments of my father.

I remember the clash of the Mongol and Ming armies. The shouts, the cold rings of steel in the air, the blood flowing - the rising of the red sun.

I remember glimpsing my father as he shouted aloud, his face glowing in the light of the rising sun, the fading stars wheeling above him, crowning his brow.

I remember the cold Ming blade that went into him, the blood that spilled from his stomach to the floor.

I remember my cry of anguish to the heavens.

And I know, in that instant, that the moment will always be branded into my mind. I can't see the ocean waters. But I can hear them, whispering in my mind, a lament of torturing, a grief of no ends.

~

His name is Zhu Di. And I am his slave, named anew, by the name of Zheng He.

They told me what I was, why I was brought here. I remember the cold eyes of the Hongwu Emperor as he gazed down at me with hungry eyes - eyes that had no interest in me, only in the key I hold to obtaining my father's treasure.

They told me what my father was: a traitor and a fool. He refused to serve the Ming dynasty, hid from them his creation when it could have served so many great purposes. For that he must die. And there is a reason they left me alive - because I alone have the greatest potential to uncover my father's map.

I am a slave who gained my enemy's trust, became Zhu Di's confidant through a honeyed tongue. I repeated the respectful words, letting them flow like bitter cud from my mechanical lips, while underneath my heart seethed in fury.

I am a long way from the sea. Yet the waters still lash at my heart, the salty water against the wounds left behind my father's death. I can still hear the furious waves, sending blood throbbing through my veins, roaring in my ears, filling my mind with only one word discernible.

Revenge.

~

"Well, what do you think, my friend?" says Zhu Di, gesturing proudly to the magnificent structures that line the harbor.

My eyes rove over the great ships that bob gently on the seas, and they take my breath away. The oars are golden and the timber gleaming white, the sails as pale as the argent moon. They are larger than any ship I have ever seen; nine masts, what I would judge to be about a hundred and thirty meters long.

"You have done well, my liege," I say.

"What you see before you is only the tip of the iceberg," he says. "There're also troop transports, fuchuan warships, even more. This treasure ship, of course, is the best of them all - upon this boat you will be commander." He glances at me and a manic gleam seems to come to his eyes. "You will set foot upon the lands and the deeps untrodden, discover the towering mountains, green shores and the never-ending deserts wreathed in mists and shadows. You will be my hand, stretching out from China, to bring my rule to the world."

He steps closer to me, and I flinch as that hated breath caresses my face.

“You will find your father’s greatest creation. Do you consent?” he whispers.

Unbidden, into my mind comes my father’s last words to me, and I am transported back in time.

*I am holding my father’s limp body in my arms, and from my father’s lips comes his last desire.*

*“I will avenge you,” I vowed. “Tell me how.”*

*“Revenge,” he sighed, “is that what you want?”*

*“More than anything,” I said.*

*“To take your revenge you must go...” he said.*

*“Go where?” I hear my ten-year-old voice from far away, a wandering phantom inside my soul, as the ocean waves rage inside me.*

*“The seven pieces of the map,” he gasped. “The greatest treasure in history that lies in the depths of the sea.”*

*He seized my hand with a force too strong for a dying man. “Find it,” he whispered.*

*His grip slackened. His eyes softened. And I saw a trace of the father who told me the tale of the seas, told me that I would one day understand its strange tongue.*

*“Ma He,” he whispered. “You are my greatest creation.”*

“Zheng He,” says Zhu Di, drawing me back to the present. “Do you consent?”

*Seven pieces of the map, scattered over the seas...*

My father’s dying wish.

I look into the eyes I loathe and answer, “I do.”

~

They call me Zheng He. I am admiral, conqueror, and explorer. I am the hand of the emperor, roaming far to the corners of the world no one has seen. Yet the water of the seas does not satisfy my thirst - I thirst for blood.

I stand on the prow of my ship, journeying back to China. I refuse to call it *home*; home lies only on the seas.

Within the eyes of my crew I see the awe as they behold me, a seafarer with power in my hand and wisdom upon my brow, a lord of dignity and glory, eyes bright and keen as a dagger blade. I put my hand back in the water, feeling the tides turn.

Six pieces of the map are complete.

I can feel the ragged parchment beneath my armor. The first I found in Ceylon, the second in Java when we defeated the Majapahit king. The third was guarded by the Sinhalese until our troops defeated them. The fourth I extracted from Sekandar at Sumatra before his execution, the fifth from East Africa, the sixth from Malacca.

Six voyages, six pieces.

The waves have raged on my every voyage, rearing and leaping like a wild stallion: the white foam its streaming mane; the thunderous echoes of the waves are its pounding hooves striking the seabed, beating out a

nightly rhythm that never ceases; the sea is my tireless steed that carries me, caught in the frenzy of my revenge

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One more to go.

“Sir?” calls a voice.

We’ve already arrived at the harbor. Looking down, I see a messenger.

“Sir, the emperor demands that you return to Nanjing immediately,” he says.

I am seized with a sudden fear. Has he found out?

“Why?” I ask.

“Haven’t you heard, sir?” The messenger’s face is drawn with sadness. “The Yongle Emperor is dead.”

~

They call me Zheng He.

I am no longer a seafarer. I fell before the prime of my glory. Why did my father tell me to wait, to seek the secret, before I killed Zhu Di? Why had I hesitated, why had I stayed my hand? I could have delivered the killing blow.

There’s a new emperor. I’m appointed defender of Nanjing, forbidden to return to the seas. I hear the sea’s song, mournful and frustrated, hammering against a locked door, unable to break the chain -

Of course. The chain of a slave. I was one when I came to the household of the son of the man who killed my father. I thought that when I was upon the seas, I was free. How ridiculous. Here I am, after the deaths of two emperors, serving a new one, but still - no matter how much I fight - I remained as a slave.

The Hongxi Emperor has made further treasure voyages forbidden. And here I stand, looking helplessly at the ocean I cannot reach, thirsting for revenge that is now impossible, now that Zhu Di is dead. I try to summon the ocean’s song in my heart, but it has gone silent.

~

“Zheng He?”

I turn at the approach of the new emperor. “Yes, my liege?”

“I would like you to return to the seas,” says the Xuande Emperor. “I wish to resurrect what my grandfather has done.”

The old hatred instantly returns.

“This is an order, Zheng He,” he says, perhaps seeing the momentary anger flash in my face. “Do you accept?”

I think of the six pieces of the map. My father’s last words to me. *Find it*. Dare I go beyond the horizon to seek for the seventh and last piece of the legendary map, although the one I swore to take revenge on is gone?

“I do,” I say, and am instantly reminded of the same words I said to Zhu Di, what seems like a lifetime ago.

~

This will be my last voyage. I can feel it as I set sail.

The legendary map will tell me how my revenge shall be taken.

I can feel it as I discover the last piece, at last, upon the great plains of Kenya. I trekked through the endless grasslands for over three days to find it at last, wedged in the hollow of a weather-beaten tree.

Panting with exhaustion, I slide down against the tree trunk. For a moment, I suppress the overwhelming triumph that fills my heart and threatens to make it explode. The joy, the ecstasy, the pure jubilation of it all! Allah, Tianfei, they have granted it all to me. I feel the urge to laugh, to run barefoot on the plains, suddenly dizzy with giddiness of victory.

From underneath my tunic, I draw out the other six pieces of the map and arrange them, like a puzzle. My heart throbs, pounding furiously, and I wait with bated breath as I put them all together.

When the final piece is in place, silvery lines begin to snake across the yellowed parchment. They crisscross and interweave, and I recognize my father's handwriting. Stars, silvery stars, mapped out in great detail, fanning out to every corner of the map, and in the center of the parchment characters begin to ripple and float before my eyes.

*Forgiveness is Allah's greatest gift.*

I'm dumbfounded. Five words... five words! All my life I've sought the completion of this map, and all it contains is five words! Five words, with completely no meaning! I sought revenge. I thought this map would tell me what to do, how to avenge my father upon the death of the ones I meant to take revenge on.

All is truly lost.

I dive for the pieces of the map, wring them into even smaller pieces, tearing them apart with a ferociousness I have never felt in all my life. The rage, the undying thirst, I curse my father's soft-heartedness -

My father. He seems like a lifetime away, and at that moment I yearn for him, to hear his gentle voice, to hear his laughter like music in my ears.

Suddenly I am eight years old again, sitting beside the sea, listening to its song.

"One day you'll understand what it's saying," my father said.

All my life I had been misguided. Staring at a goal far upon the horizon that had only ever been a mirage. Looking at death full in the face and trying to bring it upon the one person who had trusted me in my captivity, even though it was his people who had murdered my father.

Zhu Di.

He thought me a brother to him, true in heart. All my life I have detested him for spilling my father's blood. Now I have lost all those times I could have stood shoulder to shoulder with him, free from my thirst for vengeance.

I should have forgiven him long ago.

I throw myself on the ground and weep for all that I have lost, and my tears fall like rain upon stones.

~

The seas are smooth today. My ship glides peacefully on the waters. We are sailing home. Back to China.

I lie, delirious, in bed, and I know that I am on my deathbed. As the ship bobs up and down on smooth waters, I think I hear an old lullaby. Soothing me to sleep.

The sea is singing its song.

"Sir?" comes a voice.

A sailor comes into my cabin, he looks frightened. I know what a state I must look, a dying man of sixty-two, weakened by the seven voyages of my life.

I reach beneath my tunic and draw out a small bag. I hold it out to the sailor.

"There is little chance that I will survive the journey back," I say.

“Don’t say that, sir,” whispers the sailor. I look at the young face, and I know it well. This boy has served me well on my voyages, been most faithful. As he comes towards me I see in his gaze the haunted look that I experienced when I was ten years old.

“Do one thing for me,” I say. “when I die, I wish for my body to return to the ocean. My blood shall become the waters of the sea. The sea has been my life – and my body shall be my last tribute.”

The sailor is trembling, but I continue, holding out the bag which contains the last remnants of the map.

“When I die,” I say, “throw this into the sea with my body.”

The sailor takes it with shaking hands.

“What is it, sir?” he whispers.

I look at the sailor, smiling.

“A great treasure,” I answer, “with a magnificent tale behind it. My father forged it with knowledge that came from his time on the seas. It could serve great purposes – but it must return to the sea, where it belongs.”

The song of the sea fills my ears, lonely and haunting, but to me it is no longer that eerie, mysterious tongue. I can hear it, transporting me to the world beyond, one that even the greatest emperor cannot conquer.

“One day you will understand what it’s saying,” my father whispers.

I can hear it clearly now, it’s the only thing my age-weakened mind can comprehend.

*Forgiveness is Allah’s greatest gift.*

Before my eyes I can see the faces of my father, my brother and sisters, Zhu Di, growing ever closer.

I am named after Mohamed. I am my father’s greatest creation.

They call me Zheng He.