

Festival of Lanterns

by Ava Lee

Like clumsy bovine, their floating ships lumber towards us in rows of four, leaving buffalo chips of steam in their wake. Pregnant balloons, shaped like bullets, are tethered to their ships, proud flags bearing the print of their motherlands: the classic triad colors of Britain and America, the emblem of Portugal, and the familiar dragon poised to swallow China's tangerine sun.

Sixteen ships to our one? They brought double from our last encounter. Flattery puffs my chest.

As our own floating ship nears San Francisco, bronze cannons turn their mouths towards us, in salutation or warning I am unsure. A rumor travelled by pigeon's beak that the countries had exhausted all resources and wanted to draft a peace treaty with us. But pigeons will always have beaks, and besides, a peace treaty is not an option. The last time a pirate signed that sort of document...a shiver traces my spine. I offer a prayer to the gods for my didi, my little brother, but I am certain they plug their ears to the requests of a prostitute, no matter how reformed she may be. Though I doubt being the pirate captain of the globe's most formidable fleet is a stairway to heaven, considering morality.

I help myself into my battle robe, fastening the jade buttons. Embroidered in azure and marigold, a phoenix hatches in a burst of threaded flames. I clip on both of my saber sheaths, two fatal mandibles. Sharpened stilettos, long as chopsticks, weigh down my sleeves. Six throwing stars, trinkets from our raid in Japan, are stitched onto the robe, easy to tug off when needed.

Many raise their eyebrows at my whiskerless cheeks. None would expect a woman to be in command of such a fleet, the Red Flag Fleet nonetheless. But I cherish my silks as much as the empress indulges in her custards.

A knock sounds, and the door unlatches. My first mate, Li, bares teeth at me, flashing the message they gave Baobei, my messenger bat made of gears and repurposed metal. "Predictable as the number of pips rolled on weighed dice. 'Captain Ching alone may come aboard,'" she quotes, confidence in her stance.

"My thanks, Li." Gathering my hair in a bun, I pierce the coiffure with two ornamental pins, sticky xijugua poison coating the tips. Our blood relation merits Gege a fairly quick death, though pain is not as merciful.

A deep breathe inflating my lungs, I step outside, head angled towards the auspicious clouds. The Chinese believe luck is swaddled in those cotton bulbs, waiting to bless the destiny of few. But luck is fickle. Dragons are not.

Today I will break America.

In my presence, a dozen of my warriors thump synchronized fists to their hearts.

The shade of pagoda roofs shelters me from view, but soon as I step into the sun's spotlight, all weaponry preys on me. Men line their decks, armed with gilded energy guns, violet sparks fizzling from the muzzles. Bug-eye goggles train on us as Li escorts me into the horseless carriage.

I settle onto the cushioned throne. Li looks as if she has a word on her tongue, but I shake my head. No distractions. She gives me a grave smile before stepping back.

With that, I yank one of the Chinese knots hanging from the ceiling. The wings jet out, webbed like duck feet. Another knot evokes whines and growls from the thrusters.

I give a solemn nod to my warriors. Each bear their own heavy pasts, yet somehow the combined weight makes the cross a little easier to bear.

Visages of valor assure me they are primed for battle, but their hummingbird eyes recite a different poem. After all, the last time a pirate captain went aboard an American ship, a deal was devised in under five minutes: The position of Admiral of the United States Navy for the blood of his own crew.

Didi had just turned double digits. There was no body to bury. Sometimes I sense his lonely spirit still plodding along the earth, locked out of heaven or hell's second chances of reincarnation, seeking reprisal.

Brother dearest, once I am done with this traitor, you shall have your peace.

With the synergic forces of the gear shift and the lever, the carriage rises into the air and shoots forward. As usual, turbulence is a grouchy miser, but I do not mind the stomach drops, a much-needed distraction from all the energy guns. An itchy trigger finger is all Death needs to fill its belly. But I am counting on the admiral aboard the Bald Eagle wanting me alive.

In the time leaves must steep for mild tea, the carriage finally skids the surface of the American ship's deck. I compose myself, stroking the grips of my sabers, the only allies I have here. I survey the army of men clutching their guns. A coward's tool. The other floating ships do not point weapons at me in fear of accidentally blasting one of their own.

A man grips the rails, gazing down upon the bridge redder than its name suggests. The only one brave enough to turn his back to me. The admiral. My elder brother.

My robes flutter as I take rhythmic strides towards him. The currents evoke gooseflesh down my arms. I keep my hands clasped near the sabers, careful to preserve distance between us.

"Brother dear. Or do you prefer Admiral?" I spit out in our mother tongue. But the bait remains untouched.

He snorts. "Sister sweet. As ever, your voice delights the stars," he replies in English. I can recognize enough words to string together meaning.

“And yours kindled the death of hundreds.”

He draws out a low whistle. “And this is why the matchmaker said you’d be a lao chunu.” Much to my parents’ chagrin, the matchmaker proclaimed me a future spinster after equating my mouth to a bullfrog’s: twice the size of my head, and spewing remarks that would garner many enemies. “And don’t pretend like you bother with those hundreds. A pirate would never trouble herself with a stranger’s life.”

“Didi was family, not a stranger. Turning him over to the States was the same as putting a bullet through his brain, and all for a fancy title.” Anger simmers when he proffers no response.

He turns, facing me. “Matters aside, sister sweet, I had always imagined our reunion under different circumstances.”

A freckle punctuates the corner of his eye, teasing affinity to the boy I once tended seven years ago.

My sabers sing as I draw them from the sheathes. At the sign of danger, alarms blare, flashing. Commanders bark orders to their men.

Guns hum with fatal charge mere seconds before electricity withers towards me.

I whip my sabers into a figure-X. The electricity gets caught in the blade, though violet threads attempt escape. When the men move to recharge, I direct the electricity back at the originators. Animalistic howls pummel my eardrums. I wrinkle my nose at the signature stench of charring flesh. Withering bodies crumple.

Save for the occasional twitch, the deck is dead.

I must Xuebai thank for her latest invention.

A hammer cocks, a reminder that the victor’s honor is not yet won. I raise my sabers in to disarm him.

And disarm him I do.

He bellows, buckling to his knees. The gun rests in his detached hand. A hint of a bone protrudes from the stump, severed a few knots below his elbow, yet my stomach remains indifferent. Years of pirating have numbed me to the sight of gore.

A kick to his chest sends him sprawling. Crouching, I yank his head by his top knot. He groans. Blood sops down his gray uniform. The smell of rusty iron moseys into my nostrils.

I pluck the pins out of my bun, examining them with feigned interest. “These would be a pretty addition to your hairdo.” He recoils, recognizing the xijugua syrup coating the tips.

“Sister sweet.” Desperation hastens his words. His eyes plead for mercy.

“Goodbye, brother dear.”

I plunge the pins into the soft flesh of his throat.

But not before he rips off a pair of throwing star from my robe.

And aims.

I bound away, yanking my robe and its throwing stars away with me. Sailing past my earlobe, the throwing stars lodge themselves in the balloon keeping this ship airborne. By the time shock has tapered off and I’m left with a mouthful of fury, Gege is too dead to receive it.

A jolt runs through the keel as the heated air begins rushing out of the belly. The ship begins traveling backwards, set to crash into the others.

The signal for my crew to swoop in. I have but moments to reach the front of the ship and jump.

My feet act on instinct. I streak towards the Bald Eagle’s bow.

The other floating ships have been watching through their spyglasses. They could not risk shooting their own men, but I am now the sole survivor.

Touched by electricity, the deck ignites. I dodge between poles and ropes without slowing, certain that the violet threads need only my slightest hesitation to find their target. The Bald Eagle picks up pace as air rushes out. Wind forces me back, but I power forward.

A dragon made of metal writes cursive in the clouds, his long body a silk ribbon. It breathes fire, cooking the shooters on port side.

Only a measly few seconds before this ship tips backwards or rams into the other floating ships. Until gravity and collision gamble for my head, with me the sore loser no matter how well the cards are shuffled. Grinding my teeth to powder, I demand even more speed from my aching thighs.

At last the seascape is within sights. I grab hold of the taffrail and hurdle over, but my lagging foot catches. My stomach drops, and down I plummet, a novice acrobat tumbling midair, limbs windmilling. The energy guns halt their rampage in fear of electrocuting San Francisco.

Moments before the waves could frisk high enough to skim my nose, the dragon catches me in its saddle. My muscles spasm as if I was the rice-rattle in a child’s toy kit.

I sit up, kneading my neck. Gleaming scales shift beneath me, their colors camouflaging with the sea. The tail of this mechanical dragon sways back and forth, propelling me in an even line.

On his back sits a single scarlet lantern with my name in calligraphy. He growls his irritation, then bullets into the sky.

As I soar past the bovines, the men resume firing their energy guns.

We dart dangerously near the Bald Eagle. I flick a lantern's switch before releasing it. Soon as it leaves my fingers, I yank the dragon's whiskers and up I streak.

The explosion unleashes fumes of heat.

In seconds, the Bald Eagle is reduced to chunks of scorching wood. Ashes haze the air, accompanied by the familiar aroma of charring wood. The Pacific welcomes its descent.

Hundreds of dragons born of painted metal emerge from the clouds, crafted by Xuebai and her division's callused hands. My crew ride upon these beasts, each armed with a lantern, their own names scrawled on the brilliant fabrics. The men regain awareness and resume strafing, their gunfire more aggressive even without the succor of sixteen ships.

A parade of lanterns gravitates toward the floating ships, soon becoming a parade of flares. The few smart ships attempt a retreat, but even real cows could best their sluggish pace.

In under ten minutes, each bovine is charbroiling. Medium or rare, America?

San Francisco ignites in lucky colors, though they are anything but.

Familial sentimentality still tugs at my heart strings. Brother dear is now dead as a doormat. Didi's murder has finally been repaid. Hell awaits both my brothers with open arms. I smile grimly.

Family is always messy.