

I

The sun beat down steadily on the vast grasslands. A single trail snaked gently between the tall weeds, covered in rocks and dust left by the many warriors that had passed by here, some never to return the way they came. Twenty shadows flew across the horizon – the bright gleam of their blades reflecting the fierce light of the sun, their horses' hooves trampling over the burning rocks – as the tall blades of grass surrounding them bowed down, as if to see them through their safe passage. Not one of the riders spoke, each intent only on spurring their mount on, eyes fixed on the one figure far in the distance, so far that it seemed only ghost-like, a ghost they had been chasing for days on end. With every step they seemed to get closer, yet never close enough. It wouldn't be long until they reached the border and then, the chase could no longer be continued, for the hunters would become the hunted. Only two more checkpoints to go now, and Xiahou Dun knew the men there would be no match for this evasive adversary.

Guan Yu, traitor, we are coming for you. I swear on my life that you will answer for the lives of my brothers. You will answer for the crimes you have committed against my cousin. You, who pretend to be so loyal, who parades himself around as a Lord, yet served the enemy of the Lord you claim to be so faithful to. You, who accepted the Prime Minister's gifts yet now spurn him and kill his loyal subjects. You, the symbol of strength, virtue and courage yet allowed himself to be taken captive. You, who claimed he would rather face death than submission, but look at you now, fleeing for your freedom not a month since you surrendered your life. You will not be fleeing for long.

With his one good eye, Xiahou Dun never took his eyes off the green ghost, his gaze and blade trained on that famous crescent moon blade. *If he dares cross me, I will take that blade from him. I have triumphed over far better men.* With his most trusted men around him, Dun had

no doubt of victory. If only they had some way of delaying the traitor's flight. Dun never understood what the Minister had seen in this man. Guan's martial prowess was by no means exceptional. He would not have survived even ten rounds with Lü Bu. Even in his own nation, he was no match for his brother Zhang Fei nor Zhao Zi Long. Nor did he possess remarkable strategic prowess. Xiahou Dun could pick any number of his commanders who could match the man in battle. So, what did his cousin see? What did his cousin see in this treacherous stranger that he did not see in his own men, his own family? What had he, Xiahou Dun, failed to accomplish? What battles had he ever lost? He had even crossed blades with Guan before, and certainly had not shown himself to be any less of a warrior.

II

The flames roared, cloaking the pitch black night in an ominous red as the city of Xiaopei lit up against the sky, the raging fire outshining the dimmed moon. The night raid had begun. The treacherous brothers of the Peach Garden would have hoped to catch Cao's troops unaware.

Not a chance.

Dun and the other generals had been waiting in ambush since daybreak. Every preparation had been made. The self-proclaimed man of Imperial blood would not stand a chance. Dun knew exactly what to expect, where the enemy would emerge. An explosion rang in the distance, piercing through the chaos, shaking the very land on which the city stood. But Cao's generals were unfazed. They were ready for anything, and nothing but total victory was assured. Almost on cue, Zhang Fei erupted onto the scene with a thunderous roar, his tiger whiskers bristling and his murderous glare striking fear into every man around. For a second, Xiahou Dun stood still, unable to move. That feeling of uncertainty that struck him the day he lost his left eye overwhelmed him all at once, and he could not control how he felt, nor how he moved. Almost unconsciously, he drew a spear

from his soldiers, and hurled it, piercing Zhang Fei's horse. A loud shriek tore through the world that had gone silent for a moment, stirring Dun from his shock. He immediately rushed into action, setting into motion the ambush that had been carefully planned. From all sides, eight of the Wei Kingdoms greatest generals flooded forwards. For a moment, they could sense the fear in Zhang Fei as well. He knew his plan had failed, and he would be lucky if he could now even escape the crushing victory he had imagined with his life. In a split second, a glorious night transformed into a nightmare, a fight for survival that would test every grain of mettle that he had. Without a shred of hesitation, the Tiger leapt into battle, facing his challengers with a recklessness few of Cao's generals had ever seen.

Welcoming this challenge, Xiahou Dun charged forwards. His great sword met Zhang Fei's blade with a crushing blow, both men recoiling from the force. *A True Hero*, Dun thought. In that one exchange, the famed tiger had earned his begrudging respect. It was not only his strength that Dun admired, but that in Zhang Fei he saw a toughness and resilience that he prided himself deeply on. It was that toughness that always allowed him to fight on, no matter the situation, no matter the cost. While many men, even worthy warriors, would have turned and attempted to flee upon encountering the ambush, concerned with only their own life, Zhang Fei was not going to be defeated quietly. He would not disappear with only a whisper. He was going to make them pay, pay for all lives of his comrades and brethren that this ambush would surely take. They would pay for the famous victory they were about to record in the annals of history: an ambush, a trap, a strategic gem that would be revered generations to come. But Xiahou Dun knew now that against Zhang Fei the victory would come at a cost. He was going to make them hurt. And even if defeat was assured, he would inflict as much damage as he could. He would make sure they remembered this night.

Knowing this, the two men met again. Zhang Fei thrust wildly with his pike, drawing blood as he dragged it against Xiahou Dun's leg. In the next exchange, Xiahou landed a heavy blow on Zhang Fei's helmet, leaving him staggering. Seizing this opportunity, he lunged forward again, drawing blood from Zhang Fei's waist. But his opponent was ready, returning with a jab that just grazed by Dun's shoulder. The next time he attacked, Dun would be ready. The spear would only strike once more. In the next exchange, Zhang Fei's pike struck again, this time lodging into Dun's leg. He did not flinch. Though the pain stung and overwhelmed his senses, he had long learned there was no battle without wounds.

III

Xiahou Dun couldn't remember most of his battles, much less count how many skirmishes he had taken part in or the lives that he had taken. But one moment had stayed with him in strikingly stark clarity, a memory firmly ingrained into his memory. While the others mixed together, and he often confused the order of events, or put together two battles into one, fusing moments from one to the next, hardly a day would go by when he didn't think of this one. It was his fourth battle. The first three had been relatively uneventful. Their force had been significantly stronger than any enemy they faced, and as an unexperienced young man, he had been sheltered from the worst of the fighting, barely facing any real danger – as safe as one could be in a battle, he supposed. He still remembered them well, although he had been afraid, there wasn't a moment that he had felt truly broken. Sure, no battle was ever comfortable, and many of the men that he was leading were young, green and inexperienced as well, and some couldn't take the horror and the bloodshed, even from a distance. But he was their commander. And he had always prided himself on his toughness. He held his conviction that he was made from different stuff, that he could persevere and fight through any situation that circumstance could ever place before him.

But this next one would be different. He didn't know it yet, but whatever confidence he had gained in the three battles before would be destroyed. Whatever he was, this battle and the wounds it would inflict would break him down, make him feel things he had never felt before and would never feel again, and force him to rebuild himself from what was left behind.

It was late autumn, he rode in the vanguard this time, the future prime minister to the left, Xiahou Yuan behind, and his older brother Xiahou Jian to the right. The four of them had spent their childhoods together, growing from boys to men. They had learned strategy together, dueled countless times – sometimes more seriously than others – and spent afternoons running in the hills. They had seen each other's best and each other's worst. And now they were riding into battle with the friends and brothers they trusted the most in the world. Cao Cao had always been the cleverest one, and they knew if any of them was destined for greatness, he was the one. Xiahou Jian was the oldest of the four, and at the time, the best warrior. Sure, he was older and bigger, but Xiahou Dun was quicker, and Xiahou Yuan was more skilled. It was something else. Since they were kids, Jian had always been Xiahou Dun's protector. If he ever got into a fight, Jian would be there to drive off whoever was bothering him. When they got into trouble, Jian would always assume responsibility, taking the lashings for Dun. To this day, he could remember seeing the scars burned into his brother's back. In the past battles, Jian had willingly taken on the most dangerous task, allowing his little brother to stay sheltered and safe from the brunt of the fighting.

They had reached the village where they expected to find a small enemy force. But not a soul was in sight. Something was up. An eerie silence hung in the air.

“Stand your ground and keep your guard up,” Cao Cao whispered through gritted teeth.

Quietly, the four vanguard commanders scanned the surroundings. Not a soul stirred. They could hear the birds chirping, see the livestock calmly grazing on the grassy hills not a mile away.

The sun had risen hours ago, yet the little hamlet was very much asleep. Several soldiers began to sit down, relieved that they had managed to avoid a battle. But the commanders were uneasy. If the enemy was not here, then they were somewhere else, and likely somewhere more dangerous.

Shrieks suddenly ripped through the calm air. Smoke began rising over the hill they had passed this morning. The smell of burnt grain drifted gently into the air.

“The supply lines! Get back, get back!”

The enemy had known their plans and attacked precisely the position they had left relatively defended to provide troops for their own ambush attack. A spy must have betrayed their secrets, but this was a problem few could worry about now. Spurring their troops on, the four young commanders rushed to the scene of the attack, cursing themselves for allowing such a simple mistake to happen. While Cao Cao and Xiahou Yuan moved to cut off the enemy’s retreat, Xiahou Dun and Xiahou Jian rode to repel the ambush.

Arriving onto the scene they found supply wagons turned onto their sides, grain and salt spilling onto the road, scrolls of parchment dancing in the wind, occasionally gliding into a roaring flame, swallowed up and never to be seen again. Dead bodies littered the ground. Limbs lay strewn about, recently detached from their owners. The smell of smoke and rotten flesh filled Xiahou Dun’s senses. Cries of anguish rang through the two brothers’ heads. Before they had time to react, a squad of enemy soldiers descended on them, eager to gain the honor of slaying an opposing general. Slashing left and right, the two brothers fought off the first wave, doing just enough to give the second wave a moment of hesitation before they charged on themselves.

One. Two. Three. Without too much thought, the two brothers began cutting through the ambushers. But there were too many. Before he realized, Xiahou Dun had suffered several cuts on his arms, but he was numbed to the stinging pain. Suddenly, a strong blow to the head and his

world began spinning. The air was knocked from his lungs as he found himself face down in the mud. As he rolled over, he saw from the corner of his eye a blade cutting through the air towards him.

Suddenly, a loud clash. Another blade quickly checked its movement. His brother had come to his rescue, warding off the man who almost killed him.

“Get up!” His head still throbbing, Xiahou Dun began to find his balance, only to fall again as he stumbled in a daze with his head still ringing. Xiahou Jian was now warding off two warriors simultaneously: the famous Deng twins, the enemy commanders. Xiahou Dun knew his brother was no match for these two legendary warriors. Alone they were nothing to be feared, but together, they understood each other so well and moved in such beautiful synchronization that a lone enemy could do nothing but delay the inevitable. Still dizzy and unable to stand, Dun struggled forwards, attempting to join his brother.

Just as he regained his senses, the younger Deng stuck a spear straight through Xiahou Jian’s back. His brother’s body collapsed without a sound. Lifeless in the ground laid the boy that had taught him how to wield a sword, the boy who had taught him how to ride a horse, the boy whose easy laugh always put him at ease. A laugh that he would never hear nor feel again. Numb, Xiahou Dun could not do anything but ride for his life, retreating back into the ranks.

That should have been me. I should be dead. But he is. He saved me and I couldn’t save him. I let this petty pain in my head kill my brother. I was weak. I am weak. Never again. I will not show weakness again. No matter what the pain. No matter what the cost. No physical wound can match the one I feel now. Nobody will harm my family again. I will protect Cao Cao and Xiahou Yuan with my life. For my brother who protected me, who protected us all.

Without a word, Xiahou Dun stopped in his tracks, turned his steed around, and rode back to avenge his fallen brother.

IV

Without hesitating, Dun grabbed the shaft of the weapon, snapping it in half. Bracing himself against the pain in his leg, he charged after Zhang Fei, again drawing blood from his arm as the fierce tiger now scrambled for a new weapon. At this moment, two of Zhang Fei's lieutenants charged into the skirmish, aiming for the wounded Xiahou Dun. With barely a glance in his direction, Xiahou Dun cut one down in one swift motion, so cleanly that no blood even stained his blade. Without hesitating, he yanked the head of Zhang Fei's spear from his leg and plunged it deep into the other, never slowing his advance towards Zhang Fei. With almost all his men slaughtered, the tiger scrambled onto a horse and fled for his life, with Xu Chu, Xu Huang, Xiahou Yuan and Xiahou Dun pursuing behind. As they chased him away from the battle, the four spotted another traitor, the royal pretender Xuande, leading his troops towards the ambush.

“Cousin Yuan, with me! Xu Chu and Xu Huang, make sure this traitor does not escape.” Xiahou Dun ordered. As he left Xu Chu and Xu Huang to finish the pursuit, the two cousins arranged their troops to ambush the unprepared Liu Bei. *Let's see how that supposed Han lineage helps you now.*

Emerging from the surrounding forest, Xiahou Dun and Xiahou Yuan sprang the ambush on Liu Bei. With Xiaopei destroyed, Zhang Fei put to flight, Guan Yu nowhere to be found and most of his soldiers routed, Liu Bei found himself surrounded by the enemy with only 30 men. Turning immediately to flee as his most loyal followers moved to cover his retreat, Xiahou Dun saw that Xuande had no other thought other than to escape with his life.

“How many of your men have died for you? How many brothers have fallen to save your life, coward? And you – you unworthy man – dare to call yourself the rightful ruler of this great nation? When have you served anyone but yourself? You lie, you feign humility to gain followers, to gain shelter and help when you need it and you abandon those who help you as soon as it becomes convenient. You will not escape so easily!” Slashing their way through his 30 men, the cousins followed in pursuit of the traitor. *So many times he has had his men die for him. And what does he do for them? Yet he pretends to be so honorable. What do his followers see in him?*

But Xuande’s mount was too fast. Knowing he could not win, he ditched whatever weight he could, focused only on escape. Xiahou Yuan attempted to catch him with a well-placed arrow, but failed to make the connection. Disappointed, the two cousins returned to the rest of the battle, swearing to bring the traitor to his knees one day.

V

“Not another step! Do not advance!” They had finally caught up. “You have killed our men and our commanders. You will pay for your crimes. I have come to arrest and deliver you to the prime minister.” Steadying his lance, Dun spurred his mount on and charged towards the rebel. The ground quickly vanished beneath his feet, the world faded away, and his singular focus laid on the green beast and the vengeance that was his. He thought of Qin Qi, the young man Cai Yang had entrusted to him that Guan Yu had slain. He thought of the time that he had failed to capture and defeat Liu Bei. He thought of how his comrades and defeated but also failed to capture Zhang Fei. He thought of his brother. He thought of the Deng twins. He thought of how this man had taken advantage of his cousins, accepted his many gifts and taken a place by his side. He thought of how Cao Cao had welcomed this unworthy warrior man into the command, into his trust. He couldn’t understand why his cousin didn’t think his own commanders were enough, but had to go

out of his way to recruit this foreign warrior. And now he was going to show Cao Cao and all of Wei exactly what they weren't missing.

Guan Yu was ready for the challenge. The two warriors clashed in thirty fierce bouts. Guan Yu landed three blows on Xiahou Dun, while Xiahou Dun managed to land two, drawing blood both times. *It's not going to be as easy as I thought.* The two men struggled on for a while, surrounded by Wei troops, neither giving any ground. *You think you're so much better than us, don't you. I'll show you you're just the same!* Though he felt himself tiring, and the pain creeping into his wounds, Xiahou Dun knew that Guan Yu was suffering too, and he would not let his own weakness get the better of him again. Just then, Guan Yu began a furious onslaught, hacking left and right with his crescent moon blade, each strike coming dangerously close to becoming a fatal hit. Dun parried and dodged for his life, barely escaping the onslaught, yet still attempting to launch a counterattack of his own. Just as he had found an opening and prepared to take advantage of it, a voice cried out in the distance.

“Do not harm Lord Guan. I have here the Prime Minister's decree!” The messenger was Zhang Liao. “How can I let this killer go?” Xiahou Dun cried. “Cai Yang entrusted his nephew Qin Qi to me.” “I will explain things to Cai Yang.” Zhang Liao replied. “The prime minister, in his generosity, grants Lord Guan the freedom to pass. Do not disregard his wishes.”

Begrudgingly, Xiahou Dun pulled back. He would get another chance, he knew it. Next time, he would be prepared. Obeying their orders, he ordered the force of 300 men to allow Guan Yu's passage, directing them instead to return with him to the capital.

As they began their march home, he stole one final glance at the shadow retreating into the distance. *We will meet again. And next time, you will not get away. I will be waiting for you.*